

“Stereotype Threat” and Recommendations for Overcoming It: A Teaching Case Study
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Preface

The following report was written by a sophomore Korean American college student to illustrate the concept of anxiety in an Abnormal Psychology class. She had never read or heard about the social psychology concept of stereotype threat.

Case

Attending college has caused me to develop a social guard on the basis of my status as a minority. Throughout my lifetime I have always attended diverse schools in which there was a significant population of minorities. College is the first school in which I am a prominent minority among the student body. In a sense, I have never been more aware of my identity until I came here. It is not to say that it is full of racists, but attending this school has definitely been an eye opening experience.

Example 1

It was a Saturday evening when my friends and I arrived at a very crowded party. People could barely squeeze by each other to get through the room. Everyone seemed to be having a good time. I had lost a bunch of my friends in the crowd of people but I still had my friend by my side.

My friend said, “Come with me to the bathroom...I really have to go.”

I laughed and said, “Hey no problem, lets go.” My friend and I made our way towards the stairs to go to the bathroom. As we were walking up I accidentally bumped into a girl. I turned to apologize, “Oh I’m so sorry, it’s just so crowded...”

The girl rudely interrupted me saying, “What the fuck Chinese girl? Watch where you’re going!”

1. Do you think Asian students on your campus would have had things like this said to them?

2. Can you think other groups or individuals who might be subjected to similar things, in like circumstances? Blacks? Chicanos? Homosexuals? Individuals of Middle Eastern heritage? Females? “Geeks?”

2. Who on your campus might have better information about this than you? Other Professors? Dean of Students? Residence hall staff? Minority Affairs Advisor? Students?

Example 2-the student continues:

It was fall quarter of my freshman year here at College. I was enrolled in Professor Peterson's anthropology class (professors name and class subject has been changed). This particular anthropology class was extremely difficult for me. I spent most of my time studying just for this class. However, regardless of the amount of time and effort I spent studying, I continued to get C's on the assignments and exams. It was difficult for me to accept this because I was used to earning A's in my classes throughout high school.

In preparation for the mid-term exam I started studying a week in advance, devoting at least two hours a night to studying. The night before the mid-term exam, I stayed up the entire night studying from 8PM until 8:30AM the next morning when I had to take the exam. I was determined to do well on the mid-term and prove to myself that I was capable of getting an A on the exam.

I completed the exam feeling confident. The following week, Professor Peterson returned the exams. I stared blankly at the marked C on my returned exam. I just didn't understand why my efforts weren't paying off. I didn't understand what I was doing wrong. I was so upset because I felt like a failure. I decided to meet with Professor Peterson to discuss possible ways to improve my grade in the class.

I walked into Professor Peterson's office. "Hello Professor, I wanted to discuss some problems that I'm having in the class. I'm having a difficult time grasping some of the concepts from the lecture...and no matter how much I study I can only manage to get C's on all of the assignments and exams...I spent so much time studying for the mid-term...I just don't understand what I did wrong." I was so upset that I began to get emotional. I felt worthless. I felt as if I couldn't do anything to improve my grades because I simply wasn't capable.

Professor Peterson proceeded to ask me several questions. Then she said something that took me by surprise. "Maybe you're having a difficult time grasping the material that we are learning in class because you are of a different background. How long have your parents been in the United States?"

3. What do you think was professor Peterson's intent?

I didn't know how to react. I couldn't perceive the idea that professor Peterson attributed my inability to do well in the class, to my ethnicity. My parent had been here more than 20 years now. I was so overwhelmed by anger and confusion that I began to cry in the office. It seemed as if professor Peterson was basically implying that I wasn't capable of understanding the material because of the fact that I am Asian. I was born and raised in the United States, but at that moment in time I felt like I didn't belong and that I had to question my identity.

From the experience with professor Peterson, I began to wonder what professors think of me as a student. Do they think I'm incapable of doing well in their class *because* I am Asian? Are they going to be biased when grading my tests and assignments because of my ethnicity? If I get a bad grade on an assignment, do they attribute it to the fact that I'm a minority? What will they think if I do well on an exam? How does my ethnicity influence their thoughts about me as a student? Does the professor think of me on an equal level with the other students in the class?

4. Have you ever wondered whether you are being judged based on a stereotype? If so when?

Sometimes I think that I am more nervous when taking an exam because I pressure myself to do better for the sake of the professor's perception. This constant worry and anxiety may actually cause me to do worse in terms of academics because it interferes with my ability to concentrate on actually comprehending the subject matter. One time in a math class, while taking a test I was so preoccupied with the thought of what my professor might think of me as a student I failed the exam. I couldn't concentrate on actually solving the math problems. Though I realized that my thoughts were irrational, I couldn't help but think, "Well, professor Peterson thought this way about me...what's to say that this professor doesn't think the same way?"

5. Can you ever remember a time when you felt this way? If so give details.

Let's continue the process of case analysis by talking about what you think is going on here? Write a sentence or two, in your own words; what you think is happening here.

Some ideas from Social Psychology:

A. Stereotype Threat

Claude M. Steele (1999) and his associates have studied a concept he calls "stereotype threat." In a 1995 Stanford study (Steele & Aronson) they gave a 30-minute verbal test made up of some of the most difficult items from the Graduate Record Exam. When one group told it was a "**genuine test of your verbal abilities,**" black participants scored significantly lower than whites. Another group was presented the same test as "**a laboratory task that was used to study how certain problems are generally solved,**" this group of black students scored higher than the first group and their performance on the test rose to match that of whites. In subsequent studies they found similar results in studies with females (in mathematics), lower social class and even white males (Aronson, Lustina, Keough, Brown, & Steele, 1999). This led them to conclude that stereotype threat can affect the members of just about any group if the members fear being reduced to a stereotype. It is professor Steele's position that "stereotype threat" comes from the environment not from some defect inside the person and that their research shows it can be corrected by an environmental change.

Stereotype threat arises when one is in a situation where there is the threat of being judged or treated stereotypically, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype. It is cued by the mere recognition that a negative groups stereotype could apply to oneself in a given situation. It is important to understand that the person whose group is targeted by a negative stereotype need not believe it in order to experience threat. Simply, in the frustration of the context, the person may perceive that the stereotype is a more plausible self-characterization in his or her own eyes or in the eyes of others. As a result, the stereotype serves to threaten the person's definition of self (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

6. In the case above cite the phrases that show the cues that alerted our student that stereotypes may be operating in the college environment?

7. What cued her that they may be operating in this particular course?

According to Steele stereotype threat turns on “spotlight anxiety,” which “causes emotional distress and pressure that may undermine performance.” Students under this threat “pay an extra tax--vigilant worry that their future will be compromised by society’s perception and treatment of their group. It activates more self-doubt.” For example, “black students taking the test under stereotype threat seemed to be trying too hard rather than not hard enough. They reread the questions, reread the multiple choices, and rechecked their answers, more than when not under stereotype threat. The threat made them inefficient on the test. It also induces “attributional ambiguity”—a person does not return a phone call and the person is left to questions, “Is it something about me or because of my race?”

8. Cite the phrases that indicate that she is experiencing distress, vigilant worry, self-doubt, and extra pressure.

9. Is there any evidence that she was having trouble because she was trying too hard and was working inefficiently on a test?

10. Cite evidence of “attributional ambiguity.”

Steele also points out that, “It is important to note that the most achievement oriented students were the most impaired by stereotype threat.”

11. Cite the evidence that this student has a high achievement orientation.

12. Can you see why the student with a high achievement orientation would be the most affected?

B. “Wise Schooling”-- How can a white mentor convey feedback to a student in a situation where there is stereotype threat in the air and have that feedback be trusted? Some ideas from research by Cohen, G., Steele, C. M., & Ross, L. D. (1999). The mentor's dilemma: Providing critical feedback across the racial divide. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 1302-1318. <http://psp.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/25/10/1302.pdf>. In this study Cohen, Steele, and Ross asked black students to write essays about their favorite teachers, for possible publication in a journal on teaching. They found that neither straight feedback nor feedback preceded by the “niceness” of a cushioning statement was trusted by black students. They saw these criticisms as probably biased, and they were less motivated than white students to improve their essays.

But this experiment also revealed a way to be critical across the racial divide: 1) tell the students that you are using high standards”--“**Your letter needs work in several areas before it can be considered for publication...**” (this signals that the criticism reflects standards rather than race), and that 2) “**A close reading of you work leads me to believe that you can meet these standards**” (this signals that you do not view them stereotypically). In a real sense, the challenge for the mentor of minority students...is to make explicit the message that is apt to be implicit for at least the more privileged of non-minority students. This message of belonging, and of still untapped intellectual potential is vital.

The good news of this study is that when both of these are made explicit, the students trusted and responded to criticism, saw it as unbiased and were more motivated to take their essays home and work on them than any other groups of students in the study. Cohen, Steele and Ross reported, “This combination of high standards and assurance was like water on parched land, a much needed but seldom received balm.”

The need to combat the effects of racial stigmatization does not oblige the educator to withhold critical feedback, to lavish praise, or to otherwise lower performance standards in the hope of sustaining student motivation. Motivation was sustained not by diluting the criticism offered or by softening its tone. What proved effective was providing the relevant criticism in a context in which its critical nature could be readily attributed to the existence of high and consistent standards and a belief in the student’s capacity to reach them. The authors go on to say, “We suspect that the effectiveness...depends on the provision of rigorous feedback. Had the feedback been cursory rather than critical, students might have doubted the sincerity of the...high standards...What is more, it is likely that the rigor of the feedback also communicated the critic’s interest in helping the student to reach the higher standard. Many students remarked in the debriefing session that they had been impressed by the rigor of the criticism and that seldom in their undergraduate careers had a ...professor taken their efforts so seriously.” *[I had an illustration of this when a black student who had received several instances of negative feedback, coupled with clear communication that I knew she could meet the high standards expected in my class came in to discuss a paper. At the end of the conversation she said to me, with a sigh, as if she had finally found a safe place, “Would you be my advisor? I really need someone who will be straight with me.” note from R.W. Grossman]*

7. How might the instructor have better framed his criticism of our student’s work?

8. How can you apply this to your mentoring?

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