

“STEREOTYPE THREAT”

(Student Summary/Response follows)

What if just before you went into a job interview, someone told you that you were not qualified and would never get the job? Do you think this would impact your performance during the interview? This is the idea of stereotype threat. Essentially, a stereotype threat is when (1) a person is a member of the group being stereotyped, (2) in a situation in which the stereotype is relevant, and (3) the person is engaging in an activity that can be judged/evaluated (Betz, Ramsey, & Sekaquaptewa, 2014).

The first main researcher on stereotype threat was Claude Steele, who focused on how it impacted African American university students. He began to notice racial minorities and women sometimes performed lower than their abilities. He hypothesized that simply knowing about a stereotype (e.g., women aren't as good at math, racial minorities are not high achieving, etc.) could hinder performance. In groundbreaking research, he revealed his hypothesis to be true (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In this study, Steele and Aronson (1995) conducted a series of tests in which they manipulated the presence of a stereotype threat, the context of testing, etc. For example, they had groups of Black and White college students take the GRE, a test for graduate admissions. In one condition, the participants were told it would measure their intellectual capacities while other participants were told the test was simply a problem-solving task that did not directly relate to intellectual ability. When students were told that it measured intelligence, Black participants tended to be more aware of stereotypes, have increased concerns about their ability, show reluctance to have their racial identity somehow linked to performance, and even begin to make excuses for their performance. However, Black students who were not reminded of negative stereotypes, they did much better. Thus, this study provided significant support for stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In other words, simply knowing that others had a negative stereotype about them made students perform less well (Betz, Ramsey, & Sekaquaptewa, 2014). Spencer, Steele and Quinn (1999) expanded this research from racial minorities to women, particularly as it relates to math performance. Similar to Steele and Aronson's 1995 study, Spencer, Steele, and Quinn (1999) conducted several studies to measure stereotype threat. For example, in one of the studies, students took a GRE math test. In one condition, participants were told that gender differences had been found in the test whereas in the other condition, participants were told that there had not been a gender difference found in the test. The overall results of the study showed that when women experienced stereotype threat, their test scores were lower (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999).

Just because people are affected by stereotype threat, it does not mean that they believe the stereotype about their group or about their own abilities. Not believing the stereotype, but being aware that *others* believe it, is enough to create a stereotype threat outcome (Huguet & Regner, 2007; Wheeler & Petty, 2001).

As you may have gathered from the description of Spencer, Steele, and Quinn's 1999 study, girls frequently experience stereotyped threats in school. It appears that around ages 7 to 8, both girls and boys become aware of the stereotype that girls are worse at math (Galdi, Cadinu, & Tomasetto, 2014).

Research has shown that females perform worse in math when under stereotype threat, but perform equivalently to males when the threat is removed. Stereotype threats have been shown to reduce test performance, but these threats can also impact a female's ability to incorporate and receive helpful feedback if they are overly focused on whether they are confirming negative stereotypes. For example, if a woman is overly worried about behavior or performing in such a way so as not to confirm a negative stereotype (e.g., women are bad in math), the student may not treat teacher feedback as a useful chance to learn. When overly worried about confirming negative stereotypes, individuals may also pull away and avoid class discussions at school, etc. (Betz, Ramsey, & Sekaquaptewa, 2014).

But why does the stereotype threat impact test performance? There are various theories, but one of the most commonly accepted is that by Toni Schmader. Schmader theorized that when one is overly worried about a stereotype threat (e.g., reminded that because she is a woman, she is likely to do poorly on the math test she is about to take), the worry distracts her attention from the test. As a result, she is unable to fully focus on the activity leading to lower performance.

However, some have argued against the actual validity of the idea of stereotype threats. Early on, a common argument was that most of these studies were conducted in labs and not natural settings, and thus, could not be generalized. Some researchers, such as Paul Sackett, believed that there would be a small effect in a natural setting. This began to spark an interest in conducting more natural setting studies. Naturalistic research has confirmed that stereotype threats indeed have negative impacts on academic experiences, performance, and career goals. Moreover, these negative impacts are accumulating.

With planning, educators can reduce the impacts of stereotype threats. For example, educators can be careful not to frame tests as measures of ability. Even more importantly, they should make sure that their classrooms do not trigger stereotypes by

showing the accomplishments of only certain groups. Lastly, teaching students about stereotype threat can help the students to resist it.

STUDENT SUMMARY/RESPONSE ESSAY #1

Did you know that what others assume about you can affect how well you perform on a test? This is just one of the findings reported by Kristy McRaney and her colleagues in “Stereotype Threat,” a chapter in the textbook *The Psychology of Gender*. In this chapter, McRaney and her colleagues discuss a number of studies that examine the phenomenon known as stereotype threat: a situation in which someone is stereotyped, is aware of the stereotype, and is taking part in an activity related to the stereotype (par. 1). According to research reported by McRaney et al., “Being aware that others believe [the stereotype], is enough to create a stereotype threat outcome” of poorer performance (par. 5). McRaney and her colleagues also look at research exploring why stereotype threat impacts test performance, including the commonly-accepted theory by Toni Schmader that preoccupation with a stereotype threat means that the test-taker “ties up valuable cognitive resources” which “impacts the capacity that one has to draw on their memory and to attend and focus on the task before them” (par. 8). Finally, their article acknowledges and responds to criticism of the idea of stereotype threat (McRaney et al. par 9). Overall, McRaney and her colleagues make an understandable and compelling argument for the existence of stereotype threat; the information they present is engaging, seems balanced, and helped me make sense of my own experiences.

While McRaney and her colleagues draw on many academic studies, they still manage to present the information in a way that is both interesting and understandable to readers without a specialized academic background. For example, they begin the chapter with a series of personal questions for readers to think about as a way to prepare them for the content (McRaney et al. par 1). They also use a fairly conversational tone throughout, which gives readers a sense that the authors are talking to them directly. One example of this is the use of second person, which can be seen in the following sentence: “As you may have gathered from the description of Spencer, Steele, and Quinn’s 1999 study, girls frequently experience stereotyped threats in school” (McRaney et al. par. 5). Another way the authors make the reading accessible is by paraphrasing and summarizing the studies they cite rather than directly quoting what would likely be information presented in a vocabulary specialized to the discipline of social science. In fact, while the authors cite many studies to illustrate the phenomenon of stereotype threat, there are no direct quotations used in the chapter at all.

The authors also address counterarguments and criticism of the research they present, which makes them seem balanced and increases the credibility of their ideas. For example, one early criticism of the idea of stereotype threat they cite has to do with the conditions of these studies. Critics pointed out “that most of these studies were conducted in labs and not natural settings, and thus, could not be generalized” (McRaney et al. par 9). McRaney and her colleagues report that in response to this critique, more naturalistic research was conducted which, in fact, confirmed earlier lab-based studies (par. 9). By including these criticisms, the authors provide a rounded view of the phenomenon of stereotype threat and strengthen the argument that stereotype threat not only exists but is detrimental to stereotyped groups.

Finally, in reading the chapter, I realized that stereotype threat has had an impact on me personally. At the beginning of the chapter, McRaney and her colleagues write that “[stereotype] threats can also impact a female’s ability to incorporate and receive helpful feedback if they are overly focused and worried about providing confirmation of negative stereotypes” (par. 5). When I was in high school, this was true in my freshman math class. My class was made up of mostly male students. I didn’t ask questions in class because I didn’t want the other students to think I was bad at math. Ironically, not asking questions led me to perform worse on my tests, and I never excelled in the subject in school. I never attributed my poor performance to stereotype threat before reading the chapter; I just thought I was bad at math. But I understand now that the dynamics described in the definition of stereotype were all present in my class.

In “Stereotype Threat,” McRaney and her colleagues clearly and evenhandedly explain the phenomenon of stereotype threat. Their choice of language makes the chapter interesting and accessible to students who may not have training in the social sciences, even as the authors cite many academic sources. The authors also spend time addressing and responding to some common criticisms of and doubts about the existence of stereotype threat, which makes the ideas they discuss more credible. Furthermore, the content is relatable: the examples provided in the text helped me identify an instance of stereotype threat in my own life and made me think about other situations where stereotype threat may have been at play. Their chapter highlights an important phenomenon and, with this knowledge, institutions and individuals can take steps to create environments in and out of the classroom that lessen the chance stereotype threat will negatively (and needlessly) affect performance.