

Recognize Stereotype Threat and the Impact on Students

Stereotype threat is a phenomenon in which a person's concern about confirming a negative stereotype leads them to perform below their potential (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Essentially, stereotypes create a fear so strong that it impacts the behavior of those affected. Stereotype threat is particularly dangerous because people are at risk simply by being aware of a stereotype, which is to say that the fear of being judged by an existing stereotype is enough to disrupt performance even if the person doesn't actually believe the stereotype (Spencer et al., 1999).

At their core, stereotypes communicate to students that they are not valued or appreciated as individuals and that they do not belong in their current academic environment (Center for Teaching & Learning, n.d.). While stereotype threat can affect anyone, students whose identities are underrepresented in a field or at an institution and students whose identities are associated with negative stereotypes may be especially vulnerable to its effects (Center for Teaching and Learning Administration [CTL Admin], 2016).

Examples of the Impact of Stereotype Threat

Multiple studies have shown the impact of stereotype threat, including one which demonstrated that African American participants underperformed on a verbal reasoning test when it was presented as a diagnostic indicator of intellectual ability. Conversely, when the same test was presented as nondiagnostic of intellectual ability, African American participants performed equivalently to their Caucasian peers. This indicates that the mere suggestion of negative societal stereotypes can impede performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Another study observed differences between the performance of men and women on a math test. When the test was described as having been specifically designed to reduce gender differences, women performed equivalently to their male peers. When the same exam was presented as producing gender difference, stereotype threat was high and women performed more poorly than their male peers (Spencer et al., 1999).

Students with marginalized identities that have been given negative stereotypes are at risk of experiencing stereotype threat. The list below is not inclusive of identities experiencing stereotype threat but represents a sample of the identities that have been studied for the impact of stereotype threat:

- race
- gender
- ethnicity
- socioeconomic class

Reactions to Stereotype Threat

Research demonstrates that students exposed to negative stereotypes about their identities before a performance evaluation or exam experience a wide range of impact, including

- increased stress,
- reduced working memory,
- reduced sense of belonging,
- impaired performance (Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, 2021),
- increased test anxiety,
- decreased identification with academic subjects or disciplines (Harrison et al., 2006), and
- hindered development of valuable relationships in an academic environment (Center for Teaching & Learning, n.d.).

Practices to Reduce Stereotype Threat

The long-term solution to reducing stereotype threat is to reduce negative stereotypes in general. While this is a societal endeavor that will not likely yield immediate results, there are practices that can be implemented in the classroom or online to help reduce the impact of stereotype threat.

- **Explain the purpose of assessments and growth mindset.** Explain to students that tests and assignments are only an assessment of students' current skill levels and not a measure of their ability and future performance. Remind students that skills and abilities are always evolving and can be improved upon with practice (Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, 2021).
- **Break stereotypes.** Stay aware and informed of existing negative stereotypes, especially toward underrepresented student populations. In this way, you can intentionally create curricula, course materials, examples, references, and more that disprove negative stereotypes. Include and celebrate the contributions of diverse members of the field (Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, 2021).
- **Communicate confidence in students' ability to succeed.** Keep in mind the level of influence you have as an instructor and use it to motivate students. Studies suggest that instructor–student communication is one of the greatest influences on student performance (Nilson & Goodson, 2017). For instance, instead of assigning an exam and saying, “We’ll see who really knows their stuff,” you can say, “You know more than you think you do.”
- **Be compassionate.** Recognize that stereotype threat means students may freeze on the final exam or other high-stakes assignment. If a student has been obviously trying and submitting high-quality work throughout the term and then suddenly chokes on the midterm, consider giving them an opportunity to make up some of the points. Invite them to office hours and discuss the impact of stereotype threat. Additionally, when offering feedback, focus on the growth or progress they are making by referring to the specific improvements you have seen in their work (Nilson & Goodson, 2017).

References

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