

Stereotype Threat in America

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Abstract

Stereotype threat refers to being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). It is important to understand and continually study stereotype threat considering that every single person is at risk. The effects of stereotype threat can lead to many consequences; both short term and long-term. Research has shown that stereotype threat can lead to poorer academic performance in any individual where the stereotype is of low expectations. Therefore, why is stereotype threat so common among labeled groups? Why is it that there is more conformity to such expectations and less outliers striving to rise above the negative anticipations? There are three different topics in order to better understand what stereotype threat is as well as the effects it can produce. Firstly, there is a stereotype threat seen in academic environments, mainly at a college level. Secondly, research will go on to point out stereotype threat amongst Southerners in the United States in hopes to better understand the fact that stereotype threat can affect close to everyone. Lastly, containing the overview of the consequences and effects stereotype threat can lead to. Future implications will then be discussed in hopes to instill a new point of view as well as bring about social change.

Keywords: stereotype, threat, consequences, everyone, social change

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According to Steele and Aronson (1995) “Stereotype threat refers to being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group”. Stereotype threat is a relatively new research that not until recently has been researched. Throughout this research, many interesting issues and explanations have been discovered. Stereotype threat is a silent menace for the fact that every single person is vulnerable to its numerous harmful effects without even the slightest awareness of its presence. The threat can not only be seen in academic scenarios but in real life situations as well. Awareness is encouraged to be the first way to prevent such effects. If everyone were mindful of the consequences produced from stereotype threat then perhaps there would be no threat at all. Perhaps there would be more outliers, more individuals seeking achievement in areas that weren't considered before because of an unconscious mental block.

Stereotype threat, although having many effects, seems to yet be more commonly linked to poorer performance in academics. No matter how hard people manage to focus on a task everyone has times when their mind will wander preventing them from reaching their full potential. Studies have shown that stereotype threat has been directly linked to an increase in mind wandering, which leads to a lack of performance. “Study 1 demonstrated that participants anticipating a stereotype-laden test mind-wandered more during the Sustained Attention to Response Task. Study 2 assessed mind-wandering directly using thought sampling procedures during a demanding math test. Results revealed that individuals experiencing stereotype threat experienced more off-task thoughts, which accounted for their poorer test performance compared to a control condition” (Mrazek et al, 2011). “The current research integrates the methods for assessing mind-wandering with the theoretical framework for how negative stereotypes can

systematically undermine performance in a way that could contribute to educational and economic disparities based on gender, ethnicity, race, and social class” (Mrazek et al, 2011). This effect can be found in all ages as well. At the college level research on stereotype threat can help better understand the poorer performances of minority students. Minority students’ differences in capital, is one factor suggested to play a significant part in explaining the “Stereotype threat theory states that minority students underperform because of pressures created by negative stereotypes about their racial group” (Owens & Massey, 2011). Evidence from both articles suggests that stereotype threat can significantly harm a person’s performance academically. Academic performance could in fact be one of the worst effects of stereotype threat. Along with that there are several factors influencing this particular threat. Furthermore, “Findings additionally support the view that social stigma can indeed have strong negative effects on the academic performance of pejoratively stereotyped racial-minority group members, not only in laboratory settings, but also in the real world (Owens & Massey, 2011).

To better understand how stereotype threat impacts the real world an article pertaining to this threat seen in Southerners in the United States will be discussed. In the article written by Clark, Eno & Guadagno it is said “Compared to other regions of the United States, the “Deep South” has long lagged behind in terms of the quality of education and student performance on standardized tests” (2011). Why is this? Also, what role does stereotype threat play on every person labeled a US Southerner? To answer these questions Clark, Eno, & Guadagno all conducted studies. “In four studies, southern US college students took a test consisting of difficult mathematical and verbal questions. When negative stereotypes about their group were activated, performance was lower compared to conditions in which stereotypes were not made salient. In addition, performance decrements associated with stereotype activation were found to

be linked with individual differences in group identification. Results showed that higher levels of identification as a southerner predicted lower levels of test performance” (Clark et al., 2011). As seen by the results stereotype threat can have a significant effect on performance and individual differences in group identification can have an effect on stereotype threat as well.

There are many effects and consequences to stereotype threat. The main and most important effect of the stereotype is impaired performance among many people. Despite the depth of the research, long-term consequences have been given little attention to. The most thought of and researched are the short- term reactions to the threat. It is hypothesized throughout many areas that when an individual is exposed to stereotype threat, the first response is disidentification of the subject; meaning that individual identifies the subject in a different way than before. Following the disidentification, the individual then, over a short amount of time, initiates complete abandonment of the subject. It is thought to be moderated by race and/or ethnicity, but further research may verify other influences that promote these short term effects. “Beyond the immediate impairment of performance, C. M. Steele (1997) posited that a long-term psychological consequence of stereotype threat is domain disidentification, whereby members of negatively stereotyped groups progressively place less importance on their performance in the stereotyped domain. For instance, as a consequence of numerous stereotype-threatening experiences, women may lose interest in doing well in math and science, or Black and Hispanic students may cease to care about their grades” (Woodcock et al., 2012). Yet again it is important to be aware of this threat in order to prevent both short term and long term effects.

In contrast to the negative effect of poorer performance, the Social Identity Theory states that some people are motivated to feel good about themselves and being a part of a certain social group is a way to fulfill this motivation. Although in order to be under the influence of stereotype

threat the effects and consequences produced will be negative, there are situations where being labeled or stereotyped as a part of a group can actually improve performance. The Social Identity Theory offers a different solution or outlook in order to help prevent stereotype threat amongst social groups

For future research on stereotype threat studies should be conducted all throughout the world in several different real life situations in order to further understand where it can be found as well as discover the many effects that are associated with the subject. Also, awareness of the threat should be step one in preventing individuals from becoming victims to it. If people understand the effects then they are less likely to conform to negative implications. Although it will never be permanently gone, as research continues and more people become responsive to stereotype threat the more it can be controlled.

In conclusion, stereotype threat can be seen everywhere, every single day, in any person. The threat is real and is displayed in a variety of ways which create several consequences that are unhealthy for anyone. Stereotype threat is important to be aware of because of the consequences that individuals may not necessarily be consciously thinking about. The effects and consequences of stereotype threat are not widely known, therefore they are easily overlooked. Along with being not widely known, the effects and consequences of it are more severe than thought to be. Future implications consist of the progression of research on stereotype threat and of worldwide awareness. If more individuals in society were exposed to the information correlating with stereotype threat, there would ultimately be less of an issue on the subject. If enough individuals were exposed then there would be fewer stereotypes throughout the world.

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