

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

Robert W. Grossman, Selena Kim, and Siu-Lan Tan
Psychology Department, Kalamazoo College

Thomas E. Ford
Department of Psychology, Western Carolina University



The following report, written by a Korean American college student, describes her first term experiences in college to illustrate the concept of anxiety for an abnormal psychology class.

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 this school is full of racists, but attending it 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 one 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, let’s 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 f____, Chinese girl? Watch where you’re going!”

Question 1—Do you think Asian students on your campus would have had things like this said to them? Have you seen or heard about any incidents similar to this?

Question 2—Would experiences like this serve as cues for you to look for the existence of stereotype and racism in other aspects of the environment?

Question 3—Can you think of others who might be subjected to similar things, in similar circumstances? African-Americans? Hispanics? Homosexuals? Middle Easterners? Females? “Geeks?” Athletes? Feminists? Jews? Particular majors?

Question 4—Who on your campus might have better information about this than you? Professors? Dean of Students? Residence hall staff? Minority Affairs Advisor? Students? Others?

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 [the professor's name and course have been changed]. This particular 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. 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 C marked 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.

Question 5—What would you say to this student? What kind of questions might you ask?

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?"

Question 6—Might Professor Peterson have been trying to be culturally sensitive and attempting to avoid any sign that lack of ability might be the problem?

Question 7—What are three different ways the student might interpret Professor Peterson's remarks?

Example 2 Continued

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 parents 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.

After the experience with Professor Peterson, I began to wonder what other professors thought of me as a student. Did they think I was incapable of doing well in their class because I was Asian? Were they going to be biased when grading my tests and assignments because of my ethnicity? If I got a bad grade on an assignment, would they attribute it to the fact that I was a minority? What would they think if I did well on an exam? How did my ethnicity influence their thoughts about me as a student? Did the professor think of me on an equal level with the other students in the class?

Sometimes I think that I am more nervous when taking an exam because I pressure myself to do better to avoid confirming a professor's stereotype of me. 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 the stereotype my professor might have 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 have the same stereotype?"

Question 8—Can you ever remember a time when you felt you were being stereotyped? If not, can you imagine what it might feel like? Can you see what Professor Peterson said that cued the student into thinking that stereotypes might be operating in this course in particular?

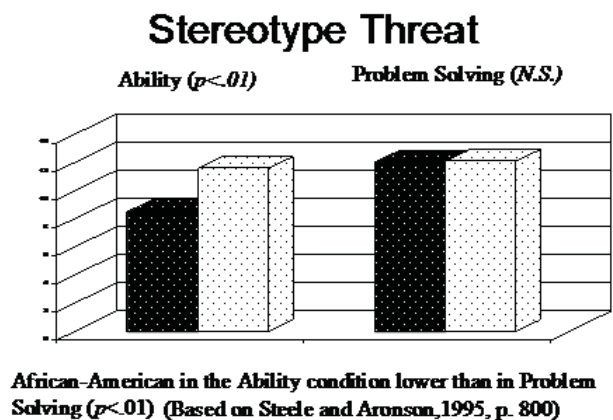
Question 9—Have you ever felt any pressure to fight a negative stereotype of you? If so, did it affect your performance?

Stereotype Threat

A stereotype is a widely held mental picture that represents an oversimplified, prejudiced, or uncritical judgment. A “stereotype threat” arises when one is in a situation where one has the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype. It is cued by the mere recognition that a negative group stereotype could apply to you in a given situation. It is important to understand that the person may experience a threat even if he or she does not believe the stereotype. Simply, in the context, the person perceives that the stereotype is a plausible characterization of himself or herself by others (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Claude M. Steele and his associates have studied stereotype threat. In their 1995 Stanford study they gave a 30-minute verbal test made up of some of the most difficult items from the Graduate Record Exam. When one group was told it was a “genuine test of your verbal abilities” (p. 799), African-American participants scored significantly lower than Caucasian students. Another group was presented the same test and told it was given “to better understand the ‘psychological factors involved in solving verbal problems...’” (p. 799). This group of African-American students *scored higher than the first group and their performance on the test rose to match that of the Caucasian students*. These effects held with much more subtle indications that stereotypes were operating than in our case study. In some studies, just asking the students to indicate their race on a questionnaire presented before the test was enough to generate these effects.

Subsequent studies found similar results with students from lower social classes, females [in mathematics], and even white males [told Asians do better on a math test] (Aronson, Lustina, Keough, Brown, & Steele, 1999). Sapna Cheryan and Galen Bodenhausen showed that stereotypes interfered with the intellectual performance of Asian-American women (2000) when they were trying to live up to a positive stereotype (model minority; see [Appendix A](#) for more on this topic). These studies led to the conclusion that stereotype threat can affect the members of just about any group if the members fear confirming or not living up to a stereotype. Note that in our case an Asian-American student is faced with a negative stereotype (that her background may be causing her academically difficulty) so it fits Steele’s concept of stereotype threat even though she is not African-American. It is Professor Steele’s position that “stereotype threat” comes from the environment, not from some defect inside the person. His research shows that it can be corrected by a change in the environment (altering the test instructions from an emphasis on ability to one on problem solving).



Question 10—Go back to Question 2 and highlight the phrases that show the cues that alerted our student that stereotypes might be operating in her college environment.

Question 11—Go back to Question 8 and note what cued her that stereotypes might be operating in her particular course. [Note that Steele’s research indicates that the cues don’t need to be as explicit as described in this case to cause the negative effects on performance. In some studies, just asking the students to indicate their race on a questionnaire presented before the test was enough to generate these effects (Steele, 1999).]

Question 12—Do you notice that the student does not have to believe the stereotype for this phenomenon to affect her performance?

Spotlight Anxiety / Attributional Ambiguity

According to Steele, stereotype threat generates “spotlight anxiety” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 809), which causes emotional distress and “vigilant worry” that may undermine performance. Students worry that their future may be compromised by society’s perception and treatment of their group so they do not focus their full attention on the test questions. Students taking the test under stereotype threat might also become inefficient on the test by rereading the questions and the answer choices, as well as rechecking their answers, more than when not under stereotype threat. It also can induce “attributional ambiguity” (p. 810)—a person gets a low grade and asks, “Is it something about me or because of my race?”

Question 13—Go back to Example 2 Continued. From that section, cite the phrases that indicate that the student is experiencing spotlight anxiety.

- Distress and/or pressure
- Vigilant worry
- Inability to focus on the test questions

Question 14—Go back and highlight 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” (Steele, 1999, p.50).

Question 15—Go back and highlight or cite the evidence that this student has a high achievement orientation.

Question 16—Why would students with a high achievement orientation be the most affected?

Wise Schooling

How can a Caucasian mentor convey feedback to an African American student and have that feedback be trusted?

In a study by Cohen, Steele, & Ross (1999), African American and Caucasian students were asked to write essays about their favorite teachers for possible publication in a journal on teaching. There were three conditions in this study. All groups received critical feedback on their essays. In Group A, they received this feedback “unbuffered.” Group B received the same type of critical feedback, but it was “cushioned” by a generally positive feedback statement. Group C received similar critical feedback, but it was preceded by an anti-stereotype threat statement consisting of two parts: (1) that the critic was using high standards and (2) that there was evidence that the student had the ability to meet these standards.

They found that neither straight feedback nor feedback “cushioned” by niceness was trusted by African American students. Under both of these conditions, African American students saw these criticisms as probably biased, and they were less motivated than Caucasian students to improve their essays. In the anti-stereotype threat condition (Group C), the African American students were more motivated than Caucasian students and saw the criticism as less biased than in either of the other conditions.

To be able to precisely apply the results of this study, let’s look closely at the cushioning and anti-stereotype threat statements.

The Generally Positive “Cushioned” Statement:

Overall, nice job. Your enthusiasm for your teacher really shows through, and it’s clear that you must have valued her [him] a great deal. You have some interesting ideas in your letter and make some good points. In the pages that follow, I’ve provided some more specific feedback and suggested several areas that could be improved.

The Anti-Stereotype Threat Statement:

(1) It’s obvious to me that you’ve taken your task seriously and I’m going to do likewise by giving you some straightforward, honest feedback. The letter itself is okay as far as it goes—you’ve followed the instructions, listed your teacher’s merits, given evidence in support of them, and importantly, produced an articulate letter. On the other hand, judged by a higher standard, the one that really counts, that is, whether your letter will be published in our journal, I have serious reservations. The comments I provide in the following pages are quite critical, but I hope helpful.

(2) Remember, I wouldn’t go to the trouble of giving you this feedback if I didn’t think, based on what I’ve read in your letter, that you are capable of meeting the higher standard I mentioned (p. 1307).

The first section was designed to clearly signal that the criticism reflected higher standards rather than race. The second part was aimed to indicate that the critic did not view students stereotypically. A second study showed that this message of belonging, and of still untapped intellectual potential, was vital. When both of these were made explicit, the students trusted the criticism, saw it as unbiased, and were more motivated to take their essays home and work on them than the other students in the study. Steele (1999, p. 51) 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 lavish praise or lower performance standards. Motivation was improved not by diluting the criticism offered or by softening its tone. What proved effective was providing criticism in an anti-stereotype threat context. Cohen, Steele, & Ross (1999) 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 ... 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 ... 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” (p. 1316).

Question 17—Go back to Example 2—The Student Continues. How might Professor Peterson have better framed her criticism of the student’s work using the “wise schooling” idea?

Question 18—How can you apply this to your mentoring?

- To phrasing assignments?
- To framing criticism and debriefing assignments?
- To designing syllabi?
- To advising students?
- To in-class discussions?

Question 19—Think about and note examples where you could point out to students evidence that shows they have the ability to meet the high standards you demand.

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