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Beyond test performance: a broader view of stereotype threat

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Stereotype threat is the ‘social psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies’ [1]. Although much of the research on stereotype threat has focused on how stereotype threat affects test performance, its original conception described a broader and more general phenomenon. In this article we review stereotype threat research, taking a broader view on threat beyond the realm of test performance, focusing on its antecedents (e.g., environmental stereotype cues) and consequences (e.g., effects on interracial interaction). Interventions have also focused primarily on improving or preserving test performance, indicating the need for interventions that address the broader consequences of threat.

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In the mid-1990s, Steele and Aronson [2] introduced the concept of stereotype threat to the psychological literature, which provided a framework to understand the experience of being the target of a negative stereotype. Since that time, a large body of research has accumulated on this topic, describing both antecedent factors and consequences of experiencing stereotype threat. As defined by Steele and colleagues [1], see also [3], stereotype threat is:

‘the social psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies. This predicament threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype ... And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening.’

Most early stereotype threat research focused on the negative consequences of this experience on performance,

particularly on test scores [for a meta-analytic review, see [4]]. Work has also focused on identifying the conditions that induce stereotype threat, as well as identifying variables that moderate and mediate effects of threat on test performance [5,6]. The primary focus on test scores made sense, given that test scores (particularly on standardized tests) are often used as gateways to opportunities such as admissions to educational programs or employment [7]. Yet such a sharp focus on the influence of threat on test performance provides too narrow a view on a psychological experience that was clearly considered a broader phenomenon, as captured by Steele’s initial theorizing. Therefore, more recent work has broadened the view on threat to focus on antecedents and consequences beyond the realm of test performance. This more recent research documents that stereotype threat has implications for other important outcomes including doctor–patient interactions, workplace well-being, and intergroup relations. In this article, we begin by describing research on the influence of stereotype threat on test performance as a basis for understanding the phenomenon, then synthesize stereotype threat research from other domains to provide a broader framework for understanding the antecedents and consequences of threat.

When and why stereotype threat undermines test performance

Stereotype threat is induced by being in a situation in which negative stereotypes about one’s group are activated or ‘in the air’ [1]. This situational threat can lead to diminished test performance for targets of the stereotype. This effect is well documented, particularly on written academic tests. In more than three hundred demonstrations, stereotype threat has been shown to reduce test performance among negatively stereotyped groups such as racial/ethnic minority students and women in male-dominated fields [4,5]. For example, African American students, who are stereotyped as poor academic performers, scored worse than Whites on a test when it was described as an assessment of intellectual ability. However, when the same test was described as non-diagnostic of intellectual ability, African American students performed equally to White students, as the alternative test description reduced concerns about the implications of poor performance for African American students [2]. Similar results emerge among women in mathematics [e.g., [8]] and science fields [9], given stereotypes about women’s lower ability and interest in these fields compared to men. In addition to academic performance decrements, stereotype threat also diminishes performance on other tests. One study in particular demonstrated that having the elderly think of themselves as older (vs. younger) and reminding them of the stereotype that

memory declines with age lowered their performance on a memory test [10]. Importantly, these studies indicate that members of stereotyped groups have ability equal to that of majority groups, as no group differences in test scores emerge in situations in which stereotype threat is reduced.

In addition to demonstrations of the effect, research has also uncovered information about the conditions necessary for stereotype threat to occur, and the mechanisms by which it influences performance. There are three main criteria for stereotype threat to occur. The first criterion, *stereotype awareness*, requires that the stereotype exist and the target be aware of it [11,12]. That is, people within a society must have a shared schema or belief about members of a particular group, and members of those groups must be aware that people may apply those stereotypes to them. The second criterion, *domain identification*, requires that the target be invested in the domain [13]. In other words, it is those who care most about doing well, or for whom being a part of the domain is an important part of their self-concept, that experience the worst outcomes related to stereotype threat. The third criterion, *task difficulty*, requires that the task at hand be difficult [8]; without difficulty, one need not be threatened. When all of these factors combine, a person can experience stereotype threat and its deleterious consequences.

With respect to mechanism, stereotype threat operates by triggering a sequence of negative thoughts, negative appraisals, and negative emotions in the target of the stereotype [14]. These processes can lead to decrements in working memory, a necessary capacity for optimal task performance. When working memory becomes depleted, targets of stereotype threat underperform on stereotype relevant tests [14].

Antecedents of stereotype threat: a broader view

In many laboratory experiments, researchers have used a variety of manipulations to induce or reduce stereotype threat, typically by changing the relevance of the stereotype to the performance task. For example, to induce threat, the test may be described as diagnostic of an ability in which one's group is stereotyped as lacking [e.g., [2]]. To reduce threat, the test may be described as being diagnostic of a stereotype-irrelevant ability [e.g., problem solving [2]], or as being non-diagnostic of any ability [e.g., [15]]. These manipulations were critical to documenting the effects of stereotype threat in a controlled setting. They demonstrated that for stereotype threat effects to occur, some aspect of the situation needs to activate a negative stereotype about one's group, and that *threat cue* produces the negative downstream consequences.

Research then focused on a broadened conception of these threat cues, leading to the development of a 'cues hypothesis' [16]. The cues hypothesis proposes that the

way environments are organized has important impacts on groups who may be vulnerable to stereotype threat. When settings contain threatening cues, they increase the chance for stereotype threat to occur. The presence of these cues prompts states of heightened cognitive and physiological vigilance, decreased feelings of belonging, and decreased desire to participate in a setting [16]. Three categories of cues that often produce threat outcomes are: (1) situations in which members of one's group are underrepresented in a domain [16–18]; (2) situations in which physical objects suggest that members of one's group do not belong in a domain [e.g., [19]]; and (3) situations in which members of one's group are treated negatively; this could manifest as overt discrimination or as microaggressions in which people subtly derogate members of one's group [20,21]. The existence of these types of cues can create climates that produce negative outcomes including underperformance, but also broader outcomes such as a decreased sense of belonging in a field, and lowered motivation to persist in that domain [22].

It appears then that many elements of the environments in which we live and work may trigger stereotypes [16,19]. Given this, it is important to recognize and examine the influences our environments may have, as environmental interventions may be a promising endeavor for stereotype threat reduction [22]. We may not have much control over our deep-seated stereotypic beliefs, which are notoriously difficult to change [23]. We do however have more control over our environments, and thus have the potential to shape them to be less threat-inducing.

Consequences of stereotype threat: a broader view

Research on the cues hypothesis not only demonstrated the effects of stereotype threat cues on performance, but also on other important outcomes. For example, stereotype threat cues can diminish sense of belonging in and identification with an academic field [19,25], and lower performance expectancies on an upcoming test [18,24]. These outcomes may not only undermine performance [17,18], but also interest and persistence in stereotype relevant domains [16,24,25].

Effects of stereotype threat also extend to a variety of non-academic domains. Stereotype threat has been shown to undermine the quality of doctor–patient interactions leading to worse health outcomes for patients [26]. It has also been shown to undermine athletic performance [27,28], driving performance [29,30], and workplace success and well-being [[31,32], see also [33**]]. Perhaps most interesting, stereotype threat can influence the quality of intergroup relations, particularly interracial interactions in the United States [34,35**,36]. For example, during Black–White interracial interactions, members of each race become aware of the stereotypes about their own race, and the awareness of these stereotypes can

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