

The Curse of Stereotype Threat on African-American Students

Do you remember taking that standardized test – the one that would determine your future – and the amount of pressure you put on yourself to perform? Did you do as well as you had hoped for or thought you could? If you're like most people with test anxiety, your performance suffered by your incapacity to relax and be confident in your abilities. Had you not been so stressed about your future, it's possible you could have answered a few more questions and picked up a couple of extra points along the way. Now imagine if every time a standardized test had been placed in front of you, from third grade through the end of twelfth, you had felt this same pressure to perform as you had on the one. What do you think would have happened to your desire to succeed in school? And now, compound all of those thoughts and feelings you may have had about the pressure of your future with the pressure of succeeding for your race as well. Would your confidence waiver because of this huge weight on your shoulders and how would your mental state during the test be affected? Welcome to the life of the average African-American student in today's public education system.

The technical term for what I've just described above is *stereotype threat* and while it can affect anyone placed in a situation where they feel threatened by failure or are scared of being upstaged by other individuals, it most commonly and harshly affects young African-Americans. Psychologists have suggested that stereotype threat, the social stigma of intellectual inferiority borne by certain cultural minorities, can undermine the standardized test performance and school outcomes of members of these groups. In order to make standardized testing fair and equal across all students, a psychological change must take place to limit the impact of social stigma to the best of our abilities and a new form of standardized testing that reduces the effect of stereotype threat must be developed. The social stigma of African-Americans being portrayed as "stupid" and intellectually inferior has developed throughout history; beginning with slavery and

brought to a head with the segregated schooling system. This undermining of their intellectual capacity has had a negative impact on their standardized test performance and greatly affects their ability to pursue higher education.

In fact, stereotype threat has such a strong psychological impact that majorities can be made to feel intellectually inferior within certain skill sets. A study performed in 1998 by Stanford University and the University of Texas, Austin showed that freshmen Caucasian males who consider math a defining criteria of their individuality and were enrolled in an advanced mathematics class at the University of Texas performed drastically worse on a standardized test when a stereotype threat was created. Prior to taking the test, both groups of students were given a short paragraph to read. Those who read that the standardized math test was for researching the mental processes underlying math ability performed consistent with their in-class test average, while those students whom also read that a growing academic performance gap in math was apparent between Asians and Caucasians performed far below their in-class average. If results such as these occur when a fresh case of stereotype threat is created, one must wonder just how drastically stereotype threat that has been developed over generations of intellectual inferiority alters the academic outcomes of African-American students.¹

No Child Left Behind

Though standardized testing has always been used to a certain extent in public schooling systems, it wasn't until the No Child Left Behind Act was brought in during 2001 that standardized testing became obligatory across the country. The act was *designed to help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers,*² by ensuring that schools and their teachers would be held accountable

for the progress of their students. No Child Left Behind issued mandatory standardized testing every year for every child across the country between the grades of three and eight, with repercussions for schools that did not make the pre-determined adequate yearly progress. For the first time in the history of the public education system of the United States, the yearly progress and performance of students was to be federally monitored and statistic reports on schools were to be publicized. It was hoped that by setting academic standards and curriculum guidelines for classes such as Math and English, the education students were receiving would improve. On top of setting academic standards and providing yearly progress expectancies, No Child Left Behind would allow parents to make a more informed decision on their child's education by providing parents with a school "report card." This report card would provide information on the school's academic achievement and yearly progress by getting either a passing or needs improvement grade. Under the rules of NCLB, when a school is given a grade of NI for more than one year parents are given the choice of using district funds to send their child to a better public school or for after-school programs and tutoring sessions.³ Because of the failed or dismal yearly progress of the schools labeled as NI and the use of district funding for after-school programs or transportation to other schools, government funding is redirected from within the school to programs taking place outside of school hours. Schools classified as needing improvement are often urban public schools and while the idea of using district funds is an excellent one, for most minority parents and students the cost of transportation to better public schools is still too significant and after-school programs are seen as untimely inconveniences. Therefore, economically disadvantaged minority students, often those in need of the greatest amount of help to develop academic

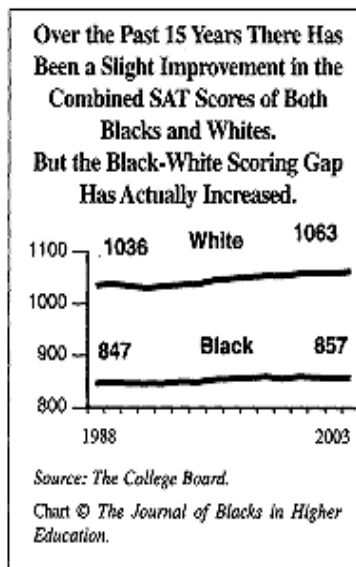
success, are those left behind at needs improvement schools where government funding gets taken out of the classroom.

Threats to Academic Performance

The NCLB all students encompassing act was established to ensure inequality would become history. Yet, in the last six years since the implementation of No Child Left Behind the achievement gap has continued to grow between African-American students and Caucasian students, which shows inequality is not being overcome in the classroom. A vicious cycle, created by stereotype threat and the continued use of standardized testing, engulfs African-American students on their path to higher education. This vicious cycle, caused by a history of repression and inequality, has created a very difficult and tarnished reputation for African-American students to overcome. The stereotype of unintelligent and daft has had severe consequences on the aspiring hopes of African-Americans and on their mental state while taking tests in pressure situations. This stereotype serves as a collective threat on African-American students where they fear their test results will serve to reinforce the daft and dumb stereotype already present within society today.⁴

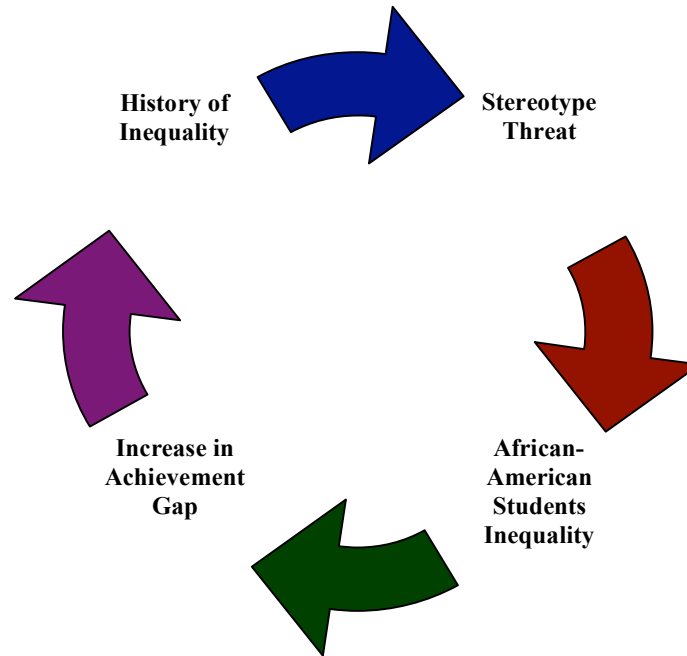
Beginning in elementary school, differences in test results are already present between African-American students and the majority students in the classroom. Compounding poor test results serve to reinforce the stereotype threat and hurt the students' mental ability and confidence which explains why the achievement gap becomes greater by the time the students are in high school.⁵ The vicious cycle continues on and on, with the history of the African-American race creating inequality inside and outside the classroom which then feeds into stereotype threat development. Due to the

negative impact stereotype threat has on standardized test scores, African-American students don't have the same opportunities to pursue upper-level mathematics classes, such as trigonometry and calculus, or upper level English classes, such as composition, because of their test results.⁶ These limitations serve to increase the achievement gap, especially on college entrance exams.



In largely African-American urban schools, achievement goals are not reached, resulting in a dispersal of funding to outside programs after several years of coming up short on the adequate yearly progress goal set by government officials. This shifting of funding takes away opportunities for the students to learn inside the classroom and can possibly increase the student to teacher ratio because of teacher layoffs. Since it has been shown that students who attend smaller classes at an early age increase their likelihood of taking a college entrance exam and score higher on standardized tests, when changes in funding leads to layoffs it enhances the history of discrimination and classroom inequality, leading to the structuring of a stronger stereotype threat.⁷ Consequently, it is

very difficult for African-American students in public schools to get out of the vicious cycle.



Solving the Vicious Cycle

The problem of the increasing achievement gap remains an issue in the public education system, yet there are ways to undue the vicious cycle African-American students are caught in. Research has shown that by targeting the psychological factors of stereotype threat and increasing mental awareness of that threat, African-American students score higher on standardized tests. Studies also show that the way an individual thinks about and perceives intelligence at an early age can have an affect on the achievement gap. Introducing Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, naturalistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal) allows the students more freedom to find a definition of intelligence that

suits their personality and career aspirations. This added leeway in the definition of intelligence reduces the pressure on students to perform in an educational setting and therefore lessens the affect of stereotype threat, closing the achievement gap.⁸ Further studies have shown that African-American students who are trained to think of intelligence as malleable and learn to treat academic difficulties as part of their education process and educational setting are more likely to score higher on standardized tests because of their positive attitude towards the testing process.⁹

In addition to incorporating what has been found in previous studies on reducing stereotype threat, in order to fully combat the problem, African-American students must be made aware that stereotype threat exists. School psychologists are often an under-utilized resource available to African-American students and could play an important role in closing the education achievement gap between African-American students and majority students if trained properly in the field. Training for urban public school psychologists in minority inequality, psychological implications of low economic status, and stereotype threat is a start to fighting the psychological aspects of stereotype threat. As well, preparing psychologists to teach African-American students on how to cope in pressure situations such as standardized tests could go a long way towards reducing the achievement gap.

Testing students on their creativity, critical thinking and problem solving is another way in which to reduce the effect of stereotype threat on African-American students' educational performance. There is less prevalence of an achievement gap in tests that measure critical thinking and creativity over those which use cognitive multiple-choice questions. Having students answer questions with no right or wrong answers

creates a less stressful testing environment for African-American students and they are more likely to perform better because of this reduced anxiety and evaluation apprehension.

Two more possibilities for fighting stereotype threat are through blurring inter-group boundaries and increasing the number of African-American or minority teachers in minority schools. Firstly, diminishing boundaries between different cultural and racial groups in public schools by creating extracurricular activities and increasing pluralistic association could teach students to identify with more than one group within the school. With students' pluralistic association, the social stigma of unintelligent will matter less to African-American students because they will see themselves defined not solely as African-Americans but by several other criteria as well. Secondly, minority students learn best when being taught by a relatable individual. Therefore, it is important for teachers in schools that possess a large percentage of minority students to be from a minority background. Also, it has been shown that majority teachers often unconsciously teach down to minority students and therefore, the students don't receive the same level of education advocated for by the NCLB curriculum.¹⁰ Reducing tuition costs for African-American or minority individuals who desire to become teachers but can't afford the college expenses could impact the achievement gap and thus reduce stereotype threat. Perhaps some of the federal funding provided for NCLB could be reverted into a minority teacher fund by having NCLB lower the testing requirements for schools from every year for every grade to every second year. Reducing NCLB's testing requirements would still allow for the progress of schools and the skills of teachers to be monitored – one of the

main goals of NCLB and would allow the extra funding to be used in a progressive manner towards closing the African-American education achievement gap.

What Needs To Be Done

Stereotype threat has a severe negative impact on African-American students. With the increased use of standardized testing in public schooling systems, changes must be made to combat the African-American social stigma of daft and dumb. These changes, both psychological and political, will only be made once government officials have been made more aware of the implications of the dire situation African-American students are currently in. I urge you to take on the responsibility of notifying the appropriate individuals of the implications stereotype threat has on African-American students. Together, we can provide every student, regardless of background or race, an equal opportunity to succeed.

The Furious Boy

Toi Derricotte

*In the classroom, the furious boy--a heavy star.
The unhappiness in the room finds his heart,
enters it;
The sheet of paper flapping in his face.
Who takes something takes it from him.*

*The rejections look for him.
The inflicted pain finds him.
He cannot say no. The hole in his heart deepens,
pain has no way out. A light too heavy
to escape, a presence more concentrated,
warmth is everywhere except where he sits at the center
holding the world in place.
The children touch him gently; the teacher lets him be.
Such a weight!
One black child in a perfect town;
there is no reason for sadness.*

We Wear the Mask
Paul Laurence Dunbar

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,--
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.*

*Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.*

*We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!*

¹ Aronson, J., & Steele, C. M. (1999). When White Men Can't Do Math: Necessary and Sufficient Factors in Stereotype Threat. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **35**, 29-46.

Shows that situational pressures alone are enough to induce stereotype threat in white, college aged, mathematically inclined men through two experiments. White men feel pressured to perform because of planted notion prior to test that Asian students are stronger at math. Results of study show that even reading several sentences on a “growing gap of academic performance between Asian and White students”, psychologically impacts White students mental thoughts enough to lower their test scores by 25%.

² <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/ayp/testingforresults.html>
Official No Child Left Behind government website with details on testing procedures and regulations for schools to follow for academic standards.

³ <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/ayp/yearly.html>
Official No Child Left Behind government website on accountability for schools and adequate yearly progress expectations.

⁴ Cohen, GL., & Garcia, J (2005). “I am us”: Negative stereotypes as collective threats. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **89**(4), 566-582.

⁵ Gross, Susan (1993). Early Mathematics Performance and Achievement: Results of a Study Within a Large Suburban School System. *The Journal of Negro Education*, **62**(3), 269-287.

Study takes a look at mathematics test results within schools through relationships with race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Shows negative academic trends continue to worsen for students who are stereotyped as being inferior to their majority student counterparts.

⁶ Special Report: Confronting the Widening Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT (2003). *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, **41**, 84-89.

Article concludes that the SAT achievement gap is not caused by an intellectual inferiority but by the makeup of the test itself. They found the lower level of courses taken by African-Americans hurt them in college entrance exams such as the ACT and SAT.

⁷ Krueger, A., & Whitmore, D (2001). The Effect of Attending a Small Class in the Early Grades on College-Test taking and middle school test results: evidence from project star. *The Economic Journal*, **111**(468), 1-28.

⁸ Aronson, J, Fried, CB, Good, C (2002). Reducing the effects of stereotype threat on African American college students by shaping theories of intelligence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **38**(2), 113-125.

⁹ Good, C, Aronson, J, & Inslight, M (2003). Improving adolescents' standardized test performance: An intervention to reduce the effects of stereotype threat. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, **24**(6), 645-662.

Experiment was conducted to help female, minority, and low-income students to see if positive thinking could overcome test taking anxiety associated with stereotype threat, thereby reducing the achievement gap between them and majority students. Significantly higher test scores were achieved for all groups.

¹⁰ Polinard, J.L., Wrinkle, D., Meier, K (1995). The Influence of Educational and Political Resources on Minority Students' Success. *The Journal of Negro Education*, **64**(4), 463-474.

Both the presence of a high percentage of minority teachers and the number of high school minority graduates living within the community had a positive impact on high school students' exit exams and success in the state of Texas.