



| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Journal: | Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education |
| Article Title: | <i>Stereotype Threat: An Introduction and Case for Discussion in Social Work Education</i> |
| Author(s): | <i>Garcia</i> |
| Volume and Issue Number: | <i>Vol.24 No.2</i> |
| Manuscript ID: | <i>242047</i> |
| Page Number: | <i>47</i> |
| Year: | <i>2021</i> |

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work or its Center for Social and Behavioral Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published two times a year (Spring and Winter) by the Center for Social and Behavioral Research at 1923 San Jacinto, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

Copyright © by The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work's Center for Social and Behavioral Research. All rights reserved. Printed in the U.S.A.

ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

Stereotype Threat: An Introduction and Case for Discussion In Social Work Education

Garcia

Abstract

This article provides a description of the phenomenon of stereotype threat. The term is defined and supported with situational case examples. Research on this subject is briefly reviewed and attempts to explain the impact of stereotype threat when experienced by People of Color (POC). This article outlines specific areas of stereotype threat research that are of particular concern to social worker education and practice. Theoretical frameworks that outline responses to stereotype threat are also presented. Two fictional case studies are offered as material to engage social work students in discussion about stereotype threat and implications for practice. Case study discussion questions, which align with the Social Work Competencies outlined by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), are also provided to prompt exploration and discussion among social work students.

“The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story”
Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche

Stereotype Threat

Felicia is employed as a social worker for a non-profit agency that helps families locate housing. Felicia enjoys the work that she does and gets along great with her colleagues. The agency acknowledges cultural holidays by holding staff celebrations and events. Every year in celebration of Black History Month, there is an agency soul food potluck luncheon. Although soul food serves as a very important part of African American history, Felicia feels as though fried chicken, collard greens, and macaroni and cheese limits her fellow White colleagues’ appreciation for the Black experience.

Also, it is assumed that Felicia can cook a soul food meal, which quite frankly she detests as she has been vegan for years. She’s attempted multiple times to suggest other types of Black History Month events, however her suggestions were ignored by both White and Non-White staff. So, this

year she chose to sit out of the Black History month luncheon planning. She is tired of partaking in stereotypical celebrations that assume she and the few other Black employees possess soul food chef abilities. Meanwhile she understands that she will be viewed as defiant and uncooperative if she doesn’t participate.

Steele and Aronson (1995) defined stereotype threat as a situation in which a person is at risk of conforming to a stereotype that applies to their identity group. This can be applied not only to demographics such as race, but also age, class, culture, physical or cognitive ability, and gender identity. There are many stereotypes that exist in the United States and globally about People of Color (POC). Most stereotypes about POC in the Western hemisphere are negative and degrading. Examples of negative stereotypes include Black people are loud, unintelligent, chronically late, criminals, and always looking for a handout. Thus, the social role to avoid, especially in White spaces, is acting stereotypically “Black.” Attempts to change this Western narrative of Blackness and POC have been overshadowed by the power and authority of social institutions that continue to be dictated by a Western and White power structure.

Conversely, when stereotypes have positive connotations, like all people of Asian descent are intelligent, White men are good leaders, or all Black men are good at sports, the impact is not as harmful as those stereotypes that are negative. Although any stereotype is damaging to its target, positive stereotypes serve as a significant source of unearned privilege.

As a result, POC are tainted by negative stereotypes and bear the burden (especially in White spaces) to thwart those inaccurate labels. This unspoken burden is present in business, media, politics, the criminal justice system, schools and universities, health care facilities, and in the arts such as music, film, and design. Just the thought of POC knowing they may be judged according to a label or stereotype can have damaging effects. Herein lies the essence of the *threat*. There is no room for error when one’s competence is automatically in question. There aren’t enough awards, credentials, or even PhDs to fix it. How-

Arlene M. Garcia, EdD, MSW, is a Program Director, MSW Program in The Department of Social Sciences, University of the Virgin Islands

ever, social workers can help by unveiling and normalizing using the terms that identify it.

Research on Stereotype Threat

The earliest studies on the impact of stereotype threat on performance were conducted by Steele and Aronson (1995). These researchers conducted a series of studies that explored the vulnerability to stereotype threat and its effects on test performance. For example, they found that when African American students are subjected to negative stereotypes, they performed lower on standardized tests than their White counterparts. There are multiple reasons why students may feel more exposed to stereotype threat. They include being the one or few students of color in a class, being a high achieving student of color, or being seen as a token or voice for the entire race. Although there are many contributors to the longstanding problem of the racial achievement gap in the United States, it has been hypothesized that stereotype threat as a contributor is “sufficiently influential” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2006, para. 5).

Stereotype threat has also been studied in relation to health indicators such as high blood pressure (Blascovich et al., 2001). Anxiety, high blood pressure, and lower test performance have been linked to stereotype threat. African Americans who were given cognitive tasks were found to have more advanced blood pressure increases than their White counterparts. It was hypothesized that African Americans who are chronically exposed to stereotype threat are at risk of chronic conditions such as hypertension. The fear of conforming to a negative stereotype may have serious health consequences. Shapiro & Aronson (2013) proposed that interactions with healthcare professionals may generate stereotype threat and possibly contribute to disparate health problems among POC (Theard et al., 2021).

Also related to stereotype threat is an emotional response called *inferiority anxiety* or more commonly called inferiority complex. It’s described as anxiety or fear about not measuring up to expectations or standards. This type of anxiety can lead to avoidance, blame, and not taking advantage of opportunities among POC. Self-doubt is a major component of inferiority anxiety. For POC it’s likened to consciously or unconsciously having a person in your ear whispering all the

reasons why you are incompetent. In response to inferiority anxiety, growth mindset theory has been identified as a mechanism to counteract the negative impacts of stereotype threat for the recipient, as well as to address the existence of systemic racism as a fixed mindset in the culture of medical practice.

If we apply a perspective, such as a critical race theory, that acknowledges power and the need for oppression to exist to perpetuate inequality, we will see inferiority anxiety as a result of the system's design. It is then easy to understand why a person who belongs to a group that is heavily and negatively stereotyped would avoid voluntarily exposing themselves to further stress.

Avoidance or disengaging is a defense mechanism used against stereotype threat, but it can have grave consequences socially, professionally, and personally.

Jones (1997) wrote,

When I go to the ATM machine and a woman is making a transaction, I think about whether she will fear I may rob her. Since I have no such intention, how do I put her at ease? Maybe I can't . . . and maybe she has no such expectation. But it goes through my mind. (p. 262)

Personally, it can be very taxing and unhealthy for one’s psyche to have to think about how others think about you. An additional layer of stress is knowing that society has already typecast POC as dangerous, as is illustrated in Jones’ (1997) example. It is not just White people who may subscribe to negative stereotypes about POC. POC also judge themselves in stereotypical ways.

Self-fulfilling Prophecy

When the stereotypes are internalized by POC, self-fulfilling prophecy may be an unconscious and unfortunate result. Self-fulfilling prophecy was first defined by Merton (1948) as “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true” (p. 477). The influence of negative stereotypes, if or when internalized, can result in the stereotype becoming true for a person or group. The target of the stereotype fulfills these widely held false beliefs and expectations, thus imitating the stereotype. This connection between stereotypes and self-fulfilling prophecies are reinforced in social exchanges. Though intriguing, Merton’s self-fulfilling prophecy does not account for the-

power dynamics, inequity, and oppression that occur on the macro level. It has been criticized as a theory that blames the victim versus holding the larger society accountable for inequity.

Responses to Stereotype Threat

So how may POC respond to the discomfort of stereotype threat? Block et al. (2011) proposed a model to describe various reactions to stereotypes that range from defense, discouragement, and resilience.

Fighting or Fending Off

- Overcompensation – *If I talk about my multiple degrees, they will see me as worthy.*
- Attributing failure to personal faults – *Of course I didn't get the job, I'm not that good of an employee anyway.*
- Distancing from the identity group – *I can't always be seen with my Black coworkers, they'll ruin my chances of getting the promotion.*
- Assimilating to a more acceptable group – *Maybe I should mention my affiliation with the honors society in college.*
- Discouragement – *Nobody in this office really appreciates me as an individual.*
- Disengagement – *I'm just not going to attend these functions anymore, too much pressure.*
- Attributing failure to external forces (i.e., discrimination) – *People of Color never get a promotion in this company.*
- Anger – *Sometimes I feel like exploding when they make those assumptions about me.*
- Withdrawal – *I don't even talk to anyone around here anymore unless it's work related.*

Resilience

- Challenging stereotypes – *Why would you assume I know how to cook soul food?*
- Seek change through collective action – *As Black employees, let's change the Black History Month celebration from being soul food focused.*
- Redefine indicators of success – *My movement up the ladder in this organization doesn't define me or my skills.*

Similarly, Tuitt and Carter (2008) identified four responses of high achieving African American students in primarily White colleges and universities employ in response to stereotype threat:

Self-censorship

- Avoiding talking or commenting in class discussions
- Not raising one's hand to volunteer an answer
- Toning down responses
- Disengagement
- Hyper vigilance or constant alertness
-

Proving Them Wrong

- Maintaining high academic performance
- Using this strategy as a tool of psychological resistance to dispel stereotype
- Stereotype threat is used as motivation to dispel myth

Reframing Intellectualism

- Readjusting concept of intelligence
- Being more positive about personal abilities

Challenging

- Confronting perpetrator of racism
- Mental preparation

Impact on People of Color

Regardless of the strategy employed to fight off stereotype threat, the fact remains that stereotype threat is real and is psychologically harmful to those who bear its burden. What does the literature tell us about stereotype threat? How do we acknowledge and address a phenomenon that is so embedded in our culture? How does racism extend itself through the vessel of stereotype threat? What meaning does it have for the recipient of the threat and their decisions?

POC who unconsciously fear they may conform to stereotypes as they engage with the world are at risk. The result can be an increased risk of underperforming, incurring health issues, blaming themselves, and disengaging from or fighting with the world. Many individuals, however, show resilience in the face of stereotype threat. Being knowledgeable about the phenomenon of stereo-

type threat as it is occurring serves as a major advantage. Possessing the framework and words to define this phenomenon, in real time, can lighten the burden and hypervigilance felt by POC.

During an explanation of various hermeneutic thinkers, Smith (1991) proposed that “good interpretation shows the connection between experience and expression” (p. 191). Another example of stereotype threat is illustrated in the following case.

Case of Tina

Tina is a 34-year-old African American female who works as a project assistant for a large-scale organization. She was born and raised in a small mostly White town in Tennessee. After high school, Tina moved to Memphis in search of opportunity and a more diverse social environment. She felt that the small town was limiting for her. There were still sentiments of racism and oppression evident in the town. She was very aware that POC rarely occupied positions of power. Since her move over 15 years ago, Tina has worked very hard to prove to her employer that she is dedicated and worthy of a promotion when the opportunity presents itself.

Recently there was a job posting for a project manager in Tina’s department. There are currently no POC in leadership. Even though her performance over the years has been stellar, Tina has doubts that she is capable of doing the job. Since the manager position was posted, Tina has been overcompensating, more than usual, in an attempt to convince others that she is worthy of a promotion. But deep down she can’t help but think about that one time she overslept and was late for work. Or the spelling error she made on a project brochure two years ago. Tina just hasn’t been feeling confident about her ability to be successful in a higher position. She feels vulnerable and fears that people may perceive her as unintelligent, lazy, and incapable of being a leader. She is considering whether applying for the position is worth the anxiety it’s causing her.

Group Discussion Questions for Social Work Students

The following discussion questions are designed to engage students in critical thinking about stereotype threat in relation to social work practice and competencies. Specifically, these

questions offer opportunities to converse about engaging diversity and difference in practice, demonstrating ethical and professional behavior, assessing individuals and communities, and advancing human rights and social justice (CSWE, 2015).

- Discuss how stereotypes about POC may impact a person such as Tina and her self-efficacy.
- Identify and discuss various messages or images present in our environment that may reinforce stereotypes about POC. Explore the nature of these messages. Is their presence in social media, music, politics, film, and business explicit or implicit?
- Discuss the case of Tina in terms of the following:
 - Evidence of stereotype threat
 - Stereotypes about POC
 - Emotional and behavioral reactions to stereotype threat
- Is Tina experiencing low self-confidence or the effects of stereotype threat? Are they different? If so, how?
- Stereotype threat can alter a person’s performance and pursuit of professional goals. What emotions may a person express in response to stereotype threat? Is avoidance a healthy coping behavior? Why or why not?
- As a POC or an ally, how can you address stereotype threat on micro, mezzo, and macro levels?
- Gather in small groups to design a workplace plan that supports individuals such as Tina who are impacted by stereotype threat. Your plan should include interventions such as training, advocacy, and policy development that aim to address the macro level issue of stereotype threat.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2006, July 15). *Stereotype threat widens achievement gap*. <https://www.apa.org/research/action/stereotype>
- Blascovich, J., Spencer, S. J., Quinn D., & Steele, C. (2001). African americans and high blood pressure: The role of stereotype threat. *Psychological Science* 12(3), 225–290. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40063583>.
- Block, C. J., Koch, S. M., Liberman, B. E., Merriweather, T. J., & Roberson, L. (2011). Contending with stereotype threat at work: A model of long-term responses. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 39(4), 570–600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000010382459>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Educational policies and accreditation standards*. https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Accreditation-Process/2015-EPAS/2015EPAS_Web_FINAL.pdf.aspx
- Jones, J. (1997). *Prejudice and racism* (2nd ed). McGraw-Hill.
- Merton, R. K. (1948). The self-fulfilling prophecy. *The Antioch Review*, 8(2), 193–210.
- Shapiro, J. R., & Aronson, J. (2013). Stereotype threat. In Stangor, C., & Crandall, C. S. (Ed.), *Stereotype and prejudice*, 95-118. Psychology Press.
- Theard, M. A., Marr, M. C., & Harrison, R. (2021). The growth mindset for changing medical education culture. *EClinicalMedicine*, 17(37), para 4.
- Tuitt, F. A., & Carter, D. J. (2008). Negotiating atmospheric threats and racial assaults in predominantly white educational institutions. *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*, 14(2), 51-68.
- Smith, D. G. (1991). Hermeneutic inquiry: The hermeneutic imagination and the pedagogic text. *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry*, 1(3), 1-21.
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 797–811. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797>