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## STIGMA

### Implications for student achievement and mentoring

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Academic achievement disparities as a function of group membership remain a pervasive problem in education. These disparities are observed in educational systems around the world, and they share an important common feature that provides a clue to their etiology. The clue is this: where there are group-based disparities, the lower-performing group is almost universally a societally stigmatized and historically low-status group in that particular cultural context (Martinez and Mendoza-Denton 2011; Ogbu 1978; Walton and Spencer 2009). The fact that group differences in academic performance are so strongly tied to the relative status differences within a given cultural setting argues strongly against biological accounts or explanations for achievement differences, as some scholars have contended (e.g. Herrnstein and Murray 1994). Rather, these patterns suggest a *causal* effect of status and stigmatization on academic performance.

This chapter provides a brief introduction into some ways through which the experience of being a member of a stigmatized societal group can affect academic outcomes. Crocker *et al.* (1998: 504–5) define stigma as being, ‘in essence . . . a devaluing social identity’, further noting that ‘the person who is stigmatized is a person whose social identity, or membership in some social category, calls into question his or her full humanity – the person is devalued, flawed, or spoiled in the eyes of others’. As this quotation makes clear, processes relating to prejudice – the attitudes, feelings, or evaluations that people have about others based on their perceived group membership (Dovidio and Gaertner 2010) – often go hand in hand with those relating to stigma. Indeed, prejudice and stigma can be thought of as reflecting different vantage points of the same phenomenon. Nevertheless, we note from the outset that this chapter focuses on processes related to stigma, rather than prejudice – that is, the psychological implications of being the *target* of others’ prejudices, and not of being the perpetrator of prejudice. We focus on two processes in particular: stereotype threat and status-based rejection sensitivity. We discuss each in turn, subsequently turning to a discussion of the importance of mentoring relationships in promoting academic achievement among stigmatized minority students.

#### **Research background and empirical findings**

##### ***Stereotype threat***

Research on stereotype threat (see Steele 1997; Steele and Aronson 1995) has provided compelling evidence that the negative stereotypes that are often associated with stigmatized group membership

can influence academic performance through a disruptive process of worry or concern that one may be viewed or treated through the lens of that stereotype. Stereotypes – and by extension stereotype threat – are highly sensitive to both content and context. An elderly woman behind the wheel, for example, may grow concerned that other drivers assume she cannot park, and this preoccupation itself may lead her to make mistakes, have to realign the car for parking, and become flustered – thus confirming the stereotype.

Latino and African American students in the United States context are particularly vulnerable to stereotype threat in the domain of academics, because the stereotype of these students centers on a presumption of low intelligence or ability. In the classic demonstration of this effect, Steele and Aronson (1995) presented African American and European American college students with the same ‘test’, yet this test was framed in different ways. In one condition (the ‘ability-diagnostic’ condition), the students were told that the researchers were interested in measuring their verbal ability, and were thus being tested with items diagnostic of that ability. In the other condition, the students were told that these (same) questions were being used to understand the psychological processes associated with problem solving, but that the researchers would not be evaluating the participants’ ability. The researchers expected that the former manipulation, which stresses ability, would automatically prime the African American students with the already highly accessible stereotype of low ability pertinent to their group, making it highly applicable within this context. The latter manipulation, by contrast, was intended to lift the students’ concern that ability was under suspicion or scrutiny, thereby situationally lifting stereotype threat.

The results showed that the African American students underperformed relative to White students in the ‘ability-diagnostic’ condition, yet performed as well as the White students in the ‘non-diagnostic’ condition when controlling for prior levels of performance (i.e. SAT scores). In other words, African American participants’ performance on the same set of questions was affected by a small, but psychologically critical, framing of the test.

Stereotype threat effects have been widely replicated for a wide range of stigmatized groups. Hoff and Pandey (2004) found that lower-caste individuals in India performed more poorly on a problem-solving task simply as a function of a public roll-call by surname, which reveals a person’s caste in this setting. Croizet and Claire (1998) as well as John-Henderson and colleagues (2013) found that framing a test as ability diagnostic versus nondiagnostic among participants of low and high socioeconomic status led to stereotype threat effects that were analogous to the effects found by Steele and Aronson (1995). Quinn *et al.* (2004) have shown that revealing a mental health diagnosis depresses cognitive performance in ‘reasoning ability’ tasks. Across all of these studies, performance differences are attenuated when the threat of the stereotype is lifted, providing evidence for stereotype threat as an important contributing factor to achievement differentials.

It is important to note that while stereotype threat processes are robust in experimental studies, they have not been demonstrated as conclusively in real-world educational settings (e.g. see Sackett *et al.* 2004, 2008). This is to be expected, given that school performance is multiply determined and reflects both psychological and structural influences (e.g. socioeconomic status, educational access; see Fryer and Levitt 2004). Nonetheless, Walton and Spencer (2009) have argued that an important portion of variance in summary performance indicators, such as classroom grades and standardized test scores, can be attributed to the threat of confirming stereotypes. These researchers reasoned that if stereotype threat in fact undermines the real-world achievement of stigmatized minorities, then students’ prior achievement indicators should *underestimate* these students’ performance specifically in contexts where the stereotype threat is removed. To test this hypothesis, the researchers meta-analyzed findings examining the performance of stigmatized students in contexts that manipulated the presence or absence of stereotype threat (‘threat’ versus ‘safe’ conditions). The findings demonstrated that, in conditions where stereotype threat had been situationally removed (e.g. by explicitly invalidating

the stereotype for achievement in the tested domain, or by refuting its relevance to the testing situation), students' prior performance was indeed biased towards underprediction in post-manipulation performance by approximately a fifth of a standard deviation. This effect was evident across all levels of prior performance. These findings provide evidence that the group-level achievement gaps reflected in performance indicators such as grades or standardized test scores are attributable, in part, to stereotype threat effects.

### ***Status-based rejection sensitivity***

A program of research on status-based rejection sensitivity provides a complementary yet alternative explanation to stereotype threat effects. Stemming from a literature on human attachment processes (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1981), the status-based rejection sensitivity model emphasizes that, quite independently of worrying about one's own behavior, people are concerned about their level of acceptance and rejection in groups that they can potentially belong to, such as a classroom, a school community, or a broader community of scholars. Within this framework, then, the active psychological ingredient that can affect academic achievement is not an assessment of one's performance relative to a stereotype, but rather one's assessment of the tenor and temperature of the relationships in the academic spaces one navigates.

The status-based rejection sensitivity model (Mendoza-Denton *et al.* 2002) postulates that discrimination – rejection, exclusion, mistreatment, or marginalization – on the basis of status characteristics (such as race, class, sexual orientation, or gender) leads people to develop anxious expectations that they will be treated similarly in future contexts that afford the possibility of such rejection. Importantly, given that the source of the rejection is a personal characteristic that is nevertheless shared by a group of people, one does not need to personally have experienced discrimination to realize that one might be targeted in the future (Mendoza-Denton *et al.* 2002). Anxious expectations, once activated in the system, elicit anticipatory anxiety and physiological stress responses in the face of potential discrimination (e.g. increases in cortisol; Page-Gould *et al.* 2008), and dispose people to have strong, affect-laden reactions to the rejection once it is perceived (Mendoza-Denton *et al.* 2002).

In contrast to research on stereotype threat, status-based rejection sensitivity research focuses on *within-group* variability – that is, individual differences – to test the psychological processes that mediate the link between the threat of discrimination and achievement outcomes. The approach provides an alternative to group-level comparisons in outcomes (e.g. among men versus women, White students versus Black students, and so on) and serves as a reminder that far from being monolithic, cultural groups themselves exhibit variability that is important to recognize and work with in educational settings (Mendoza-Denton 2010).

Given the centrality of race as an enduring source of stigma in the United States context, the first empirical demonstration of status-based rejection sensitivity focused on the effects of race-based rejection sensitivity (*RS-race*) on the academic achievement of college students (Mendoza-Denton *et al.* 2002). This research showed that race-based rejection sensitivity among first-year, African American college students was related to how students experienced the first few weeks of college. More specifically, over the first 21 days of college, race-based rejection sensitivity was related to a muted sense of enthusiasm at being in the university, as well as a reduced sense of closeness with students' professors. These differences were relatively subtle over the first 21 days of college, yet they mediated differences in the sense of legitimacy students afforded towards the university at the end of the first year of college. Over time, individual differences in race-based rejection sensitivity negatively predicted students' academic trajectories over their first five semesters of college.

Importantly, individual differences in status-based rejection sensitivity interact with other intra-individual as well as contextual variables in ways that uncover when and how these processing dynamics are expressed. Mendoza-Denton and colleagues (2009), for example, conducted a study in which women were asked to complete an academic task in one of three offices, each of which was decorated differently. The first office contained an empty case of 'Big Daddy IPA' beer, pictures of bikini-clad models on motorcycles, and books suggesting that the occupant (the purported evaluator of the academic task) was chauvinist. The second office included a 'Race for the Cure' banner (associated in the United States with breast cancer awareness) and a certificate from a coeducational fraternity promoting equality across gender; the decor was meant to suggest that the evaluator held progressive attitudes. Finally, the 'ambiguous' office included an empty case of iced tea and a certificate from 'Volunteers of America, Ivy League Undergraduate Division'. Although there were no cues in the office that explicitly revealed the occupant's attitudes towards women, his gender and his position as an evaluator of participants' aptitude were expected to activate discrimination concerns specifically among women high in gender-based rejection sensitivity (*RS-gender*).

The results showed that among participants in the 'progressive' office, no differences emerged as a function of gender-based rejection sensitivity, suggesting that the rejection-sensitivity dynamic is only activated in contexts where the threat of discrimination is relevant. However, in the 'ambiguous' office, women high in *RS-gender* were especially likely to underperform. Moreover, consistent with the 'ironic effects' of prejudice (Shelton *et al.* 2005), when cues of chauvinism were clear, women high in *RS-gender* were, in a way, liberated from ambiguity, and their performance did not suffer. The context manipulation did not significantly affect the performance of women low in *RS-gender* because they are, overall, not as vigilant about gender-based rejection cues in the environment.

Status-based rejection sensitivity also interacts with identity processes to predict academic achievement in ways that underscore how a sense of acceptance and trust is integral to the educational enterprise. Some prior research suggests that being strongly identified with one's ethnic group, for example, prevents the development of affiliative ties with academic institutions. In contrast, Mendoza-Denton *et al.* (2008) showed that this is the case only among students who feel that the institution is likely to devalue or exclude members of their ethnic group – in other words, students high in race-based rejection sensitivity. In contrast, for students low in race-based rejection sensitivity, ethnic identity was not only unrelated to institutional identification, but it was related to *increased* academic achievement over time.

Mendoza-Denton *et al.* (2010) tackled the well-established observation that minority students sometimes disengage their self-esteem from academic endeavors, a coping strategy enacted in response to perceived discrimination (Crocker *et al.* 1998). Mendoza-Denton *et al.* randomly assigned African American students to receive either positive or negative feedback, with their race being either known or unknown by their evaluator. The results revealed that participants higher in race-based rejection sensitivity who thought their race was known tended to mistrust the academic feedback they were given, regardless of whether such feedback was positive or negative. By contrast, participants who were low in race-based rejection sensitivity tended to trust in the fairness of their evaluators, and thus their self-esteem rose or fell depending on the valence of feedback. Importantly, the engagement of these minority students occurred *even* when they thought that their evaluators knew their race, suggesting that knowledge of race in and of itself does not have to be a hindrance to student engagement. The research highlights the importance of creating and maintaining learning environments in which all students can experience a sense that they are valued and accepted within the institution. How can institutions foster a sense among students that they are valued and accepted?

### **Challenges and future directions: Role of mentorship**

At the heart of our analysis is the idea that, beyond the 'three R's' that have been the historical pillars of a sound education – 'reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic' – a fourth R is of critical importance to people's intellectual development. This fourth R is *relationships*, and reflects an acknowledgment of acceptance and trust as critical components in the educational enterprise. When students are mindful of a history of stigmatization and rejection against groups they belong to, this fourth R may be of magnified importance to their success.

Research on wise feedback (Cohen *et al.* 1999; see also Yaeger and Walton 2011) illustrates this point. Cohen and colleagues invited African American and European American students to write an essay that participants thought would be considered for publication in a university-wide outlet, and were given feedback on the essay by a European American university professor (the purported editor of the magazine). In the 'criticism only' condition, students received critical feedback on their essay in the form of red markings along the margins (e.g. 'unclear', 'awkward'), two checkmarks for good points, plus specific suggestions, not unlike the emotion-free, 'objective' feedback that is highly valued within academic circles. In the 'criticism plus high standards' condition, students received the same critical feedback as in the 'criticism only' condition, but the professor also wrote, 'Remember, I wouldn't go through the trouble of giving you this feedback if I weren't committed to the quality of this journal. I want to uphold the highest standards for what I consider a suitable entry'. Finally, in a 'criticism plus high standards plus assurance' condition, the professor additionally wrote, 'Remember, I wouldn't go through 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'.

The results from this study showed that African American students' motivation to revise the essay, based on the professor's feedback, was strongest in the 'wise' feedback condition – that is, criticism plus high standards plus assurance. By contrast, the 'criticism only' condition led to the lowest task motivation, lack of identification with the writing task, and the greatest ratings of perceived bias among the African American students. These results suggest that there may be negative motivational consequences, particularly for stigmatized students, in the face of the affectively neutral, 'objective' feedback that is prized within the United States educational context. Indeed, the African American students found motivation from learning that the professor believed in them. Cohen and Steele (2002) reported generalizability of these findings to other stigmatized groups, such as women working in the natural sciences.

Although mentoring relationships in academic contexts can take many forms, both formal and informal (Jacobi 1991), they are differentiated from strictly academic relationships in that they include psychosocial support, career-related support, and role modeling (Berk *et al.* 2005; Wang *et al.* 2010). As such, mentoring relationships are centrally characterized by a socioemotional component. A common thread that emerges in research on mentorship is the importance of the quality of the relationship between mentors and their protégées and/or mentees (Eby *et al.* 2010; Jacobi 1991; Kram 1985).

At the same time, the literature suggests that the formation of high-quality close relationships in the mentor–protégé dynamic can be elusive in intergroup contexts. In a study assigning 476 minority adolescents to either same race or cross-race mentors, for example, Rhodes and colleagues (2002) found that male students in cross-race mentorship pairs experienced a diminished scholastic identity while their female cross-race paired counterparts reported a diminished valuation of both schooling and their own self-worth. These patterns were not present in the same-race mentorship conditions. In an analysis of focus group and survey data exploring career mentoring, Thomas (1989) uncovered patterns of unspoken race and gender taboos. These taboos underlay cross-group avoidance and thus hindered the development of cross-racial professional mentorship relationships.

These discouraging findings mirror a much broader literature showing that intergroup interactions are marked by anxiety and negative affect (Goff *et al.* 2008; Plant and Devine 1998; Mendes *et al.* 2002). As such, intergroup contexts generate high levels of self-regulation, expressive concerns, and threat (Dovidio and Gaertner 1998; Fazio *et al.* 1995; Mendes *et al.* 2003).

But does this mean that intergroup mentoring relationships are doomed to fail? Not necessarily. Campbell and Campbell (1997) found compelling results when they compared 339 undergraduate students assigned mentors with a control group of 339 undergraduates who were not assigned mentors and subsequently matched on several demographic and performance measures. The mentor pool comprised 126 faculty, professors, administrators, academic deans, and staff members who volunteered and agreed to meet with their assigned students throughout the year. The results of this study suggested that the mentored students achieved higher GPAs than their un-mentored counterparts (2.45 vs. 2.29) and were 55 percent more likely to matriculate to the next academic year.

An encouraging association was discovered by Rhodes and colleagues (2002) such that cross-race mentor and student pairs who were matched with regards to shared interests or geographical identity did not show the same deleterious effects of other cross-race pairs. Work by Ensher and Murphy (1997) found corroborating evidence for this dynamic in their investigation of the effects of perceived similarities on mentor–mentee relationships within a summer internship program. Mentorship pairings were either same-race or cross-race with mostly American European mentors coupled with minority mentees in the cross-race pairings. Within the cross-race pairs, they found the closeness, social support, and task-oriented benefits of mentorship in instances where the mentor–protégé pairs identified points of commonality. This highlights Trompenaars and Wooliams' (2004) assertion that individuals within a given cultural framework vary greatly from each other on their personal preferences, ideas, and identities. Cultures have central tendencies around which individuals personal tendencies are distributed. This variation allows the opportunity and potential for individuals from differing cultures and ideologies to find overlapping similarities with others. In other words, as we are all different, we are also simultaneously similar, and thus finding ways to discover and explore our similarities, while making room for and respecting each other's differences, could help build the necessary bridges to form meaningful cross-cultural and cross-racial mentorship bonds.

This approach to thinking about mentorship is consistent with research using the Teacher Student Response Quality paradigm (Boykin and Noguera 2011). Through an analysis of several studies, Boykin and Noguera established that African American and Latino students glean especially positive and achievement-gap closing benefits when they perceive their teachers as being sincere, empathetic, and caring about their success and personal well-being. If we switch our focus to one that builds upon the assets that students bring to the learning environment, we should know the students' assets and thus know the students. These assets whether defined as social, motivational, experiential, cultural, or ideological provide bridges to both relational and academic understanding.

The above patterns support Aron and McLaughlin-Volpe's (2001) conception that cross-group relationships can be facilitated when individuals find overlapping identities and interests with an out-group member. This constructive contact can be the catalyst for the process of *self-expansion* among individuals who are dissimilar in one salient quality. The idea of self-expansion was originally proposed within the domain of romantic relationships to describe how people come to incorporate the attributes of their romantic partners into their own self-concepts, even when those attributes are not necessarily descriptive of the self. In the domain of cross-group friendships, Page-Gould *et al.* (2010) hypothesized and found that when someone has a close friend of another ethnicity, the closer that relationship, the longer it took participants in a reaction-time task to say that their friend's ethnicity did not in fact describe them. This suggests greater overlap between the self-concept and the attributes of one's friend. In subsequent studies, the researchers found that the latency of participants' responses in this task helped explain the degree of comfort experienced by participants in a novel

intergroup situation (both an imagined one and a real-live interaction). Such self-expansion and contact can also generalize more broadly in the development of warmer feelings towards the group to which the out-group member belongs. Importantly, if the self-expansion model is correct, in the context of a mentoring relationship, a protégé may slowly grow to incorporate the most salient of a mentor's identities – the professional or academic identity – providing a pathway to continued academic engagement.

## Conclusions

Many of us are familiar with the 'golden rule', the axiom that states that we should treat others the way that we would like to be treated. While noble in intent, the golden rule nevertheless assumes that others wish to be treated the way *we* want to be treated, and that they share our wants, needs, and values. Maltbia and Power (2011) have introduced an alternative 'platinum rule' to the lexicon of intercultural work. The 'platinum rule' states that you should treat others the way they would like to be treated. As such, the platinum rule respects variability in perspective and calls individuals to understand the needs and wants of others. A sense of understanding the wants, needs, and values of protégés could help to strengthen the essential relational component represented in the fourth 'R' we have proposed in this chapter.

With this in mind, mentors should be willing to leverage their status to give voice to mentees who are less willing to engage. This does not imply pushiness or creating an environment where mentees feel coerced into speaking, but it does mean taking an interest in understanding what engagement style works best for mentees. Even a conversation about how they most prefer to engage in the context of the mentorship could add value to the engagement. Relationships are co-constructions with negotiable rules of engagement. The very act of negotiating the rules of engagement gives insight into ideas, needs, and values of mentees on which trust and understanding can be built. Our point here is to highlight that both individual level differences and the cultural environment in which they were reared impact behavior in significant ways. Environment, individual differences, and behaviors are related in ways we must make room for within relationships among students and educators from many different groups.

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