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Stereotype Threat and Law Librarianship*

Ronald Wheeler**

Mr. Wheeler looks at the concept of stereotype threat and discusses ways to confront and combat it in a diverse society. He proposes some simple solutions within the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) and the law librarianship profession to help diminish the effects of this psychological barrier.

Introduction

¶1 The importance of diversity in law librarianship has been discussed in previous installments of *Diversity Dialogues*.¹ Efforts being made toward achieving more diversity and efforts to measure our progress have also been considered.² However, we have not yet taken a step back to examine some of the phenomena that exist in a diverse society. We have not yet pondered the ways in which living in a diverse society may require effort. The fact of diversity and the historical context that brought us to this place as a society combine to create pressures and stresses that affect many of our daily lives. One of these stresses is called stereotype threat. I would like, therefore, to scrutinize the concept of stereotype threat both to better understand its effects and to figure out how best to deal with it in our personal and professional lives.

Definition

¶2 What is this stereotype threat? Stereotype threat is the concern one feels about confirming a negative stereotype about one's ability-stigmatized group.³ It is the psychological barrier that "occurs whenever one fears confirming a negative expectation about one's group or role, and it often results in decrements in performance."⁴ It is rooted in identity contingencies or "the things [we all] have to

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1. See Raquel J. Gabriel, *Diversity in the Profession*, 102 LAW LIBR. J. 147, 2010 LAW LIBR. J. 8.

2. See Ronald Wheeler, *AALL Diversity Redelineated*, 106 LAW LIBR. J. 135, 2014 LAW LIBR. J. 8; Raquel J. Gabriel, *Challenging the Status Quo*, 105 L. LIBR. J. 263, 2013 LAW LIBR. J. 13.

3. Claude M. Steele & Joshua Aronson, *Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans*, 69 J. PERSONALITY & SOCIAL PSYCHOL. 797, 797 (1995).

4. ADAM GALINSKY ET AL., *TAKING STEREOTYPES OUT OF STEREOTYPE THREAT: THE EFFECT OF ROLE-BASED EXPECTATIONS* (2003), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=399620>.

deal with in a situation because [we] have a given social identity, because [we] are old, young, gay, a white male, a woman, black, Latino, politically conservative or liberal, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a cancer patient, and so on.”⁵ Stereotype threat can affect all of us. Its victims know no particular race, age, nationality, color, gender, or sexual orientation. It is a universal phenomenon that can at times affect each one of us. Stereotype threat cues psychological responses and “also prompts more subtle changes in how one processes information.”⁶ It can affect academic performance, job performance, social interaction, and athletic ability.⁷ Claude M. Steele’s 2010 book *Whistling Vivaldi* was one of the first mainstream examinations of stereotype threat written for the nonpsychologist.⁸ Since that time, there have been numerous writings that examine both how and why stereotype threat manifests itself in various contexts. These examinations help to illuminate and define it more clearly. Let’s consider a few of these examples.

Examples

¶3 An experiment first run by Steele revealed how “being surrounded by male test-takers can lead women to do worse on a math test.”⁹ The experiment involved men and women with proven math abilities who were given math tests for different purposes and in different contexts. The pressure the women felt not to confirm or reinforce the stereotype that men are innately better at math led them to underperform on these tests. The same women outperformed men on similar tests in sex-segregated or other environments.

¶4 An experiment involving race provides us with another example. Craemer and Orey conducted an experiment of black undergraduate students and presented the results in 2010.¹⁰ In preparation for the experiment, the students were polled to ensure that they did, indeed, have a black identification, pro-black political opinions, and some level of political participation.¹¹ The students were then surveyed using civics questions and questions regarding their own recent political activities.¹² The questions were designed to test both general knowledge and memory. At the beginning of each survey, participants were presented “with either a picture of an all-white research team, a picture of an all-black research team or with no picture.”¹³ The result was that the students answered significantly fewer questions

5. CLAUDE M. STEELE, *WHISTLING VIVALDI AND OTHER CLUES TO HOW STEREOTYPES AFFECT US* 3 (2010).

6. MICHAEL INZLICHT & TONI SCHMADER, *STEREOTYPE THREAT THEORY, PROCESS, AND APPLICATION* 35 (2013).

7. See generally STEELE, *supra* note 5.

8. *Id.*

9. See INZLICHT & SCHMADER, *supra* note 6, at 34; STEELE, *supra* note 5, at 40 (for an in-depth discussion of this experiment).

10. See generally THOMAS CRAEMER & BYRON D’ANDRA OREY, *PRO-BLACK POLITICAL OPINIONS, PARTICIPATION, AND STEREOTYPE THREAT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS* (2010), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1642953>.

11. *Id.* at 1.

12. *Id.* at 12.

13. *Id.*

correctly when the research team was all white compared to when it was all black or when no picture was presented at all.¹⁴

¶5 Similar experiments have been conducted on racially mixed groups of men and women with equivalent athletic abilities playing golf. These experiments revealed that “natural athletic ability represents a negative stereotype about white athletes, and when made salient in a sports performance context, induces the self-doubt theorized to drive” stereotype threat, self-handicapping behavior, and underperformance.¹⁵ The threatening stereotype that whites are somehow less athletically able than people of color caused underperformance by the white athletes.

¶6 I include these real-world examples not to prove the validity or accuracy of the tests conducted, but to illustrate the concept of stereotype threat and how the research has shown that it can affect performance in numerous contexts. Indeed, stereotype threat can explain many well-known phenomena in our society. Steele looked at grade records at the University of Michigan in the late 1980s. He studied the psychology of black students attending college in a majority-white environment where there were very few blacks and where black students felt pressure to perform, to fit in, and to prove their academic worth. He discovered black student underperformance across the curriculum, “everywhere from English to math to psychology.”¹⁶ He asserts that this phenomenon of underperformance “happens to more groups than just blacks. It happens to Latinos, Native Americans, and to women in advanced college math classes, law schools, medical schools, and business schools.”¹⁷

¶7 Other research has uncovered the effects of stereotype threat on workplace performance.¹⁸ This “research on stereotype threat has shown that societal stereotypes can have a negative effect” on feelings and behavior, “making it difficult for an employee to perform.”¹⁹ Moreover, “stereotype threat can raise stress, deplete mental resources, and undermine performance. It can erode people’s sense of comfort, belonging, and trust, as well as lower their career aspirations.”²⁰

¶8 The most alarming facet of stereotype threat is that it has no relationship to the existence of malice, rancor, malevolence, hostility or the lack thereof. It exists without regard to intent. “It can occur regardless of the objective prejudice in an environment. The mere possibility that one could be seen negatively can prove threatening.”²¹ Furthermore, “it can depress cognitive functioning and emotional well-being especially when chronic and experienced in a domain, like school or work, where outcomes have material and symbolic consequences.”²²

14. *Id.* at 1.

15. Jeff Stone, *Battling Doubt by Avoiding Practice: The Effects of Stereotype Threat on Self-Handicapping in White Athletes*, 28 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 1667, 1673 (2002). See also Jeff Stone & Mike Sjomeling, *Stereotype Threat Effects on Black and White Athletic Performance*, 77 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 1213 (1999).

16. STEELE, *supra* note 5, at 22.

17. *Id.*

18. See generally Loriann Robertson & Carol T. Kulik, *Stereotype Threat at Work*, 21 ACAD. MGMT. PERSP. 24 (2007).

19. *Id.* at 25.

20. INZLICHT & SCHMADER, *supra* note 6, at 281.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.* at 281–82.

Application to Libraries

¶9 Although no studies of stereotype threat yet appear in the library literature, one can easily extrapolate this phenomenon to the library context. Whether in library schools where students may be impacted, in libraries where library employees may be impacted, or in librarians' interactions with patrons, the issue of stereotype threat is likely to be a factor throughout the library profession.

¶10 Given the far-reaching scope of stereotype threat in all facets of higher education,²³ we can almost certainly infer that it is also present in library and information science schools. Library school attendance rates and the graduation rates of people of color are surely affected.²⁴ Unwillingness to apply to library school, underperformance on the Graduate Record Examinations,²⁵ underperformance in library school classrooms, and a general lack of confidence in the ability to be a part of our profession may all be attributable in part to stereotype threat. Thus, discussions of diversity in our profession that do not factor in stereotype threat almost certainly overestimate other factors. Perhaps we have been too quick to fault our efforts to achieve diversity as being insufficient? We may need to look at ways to mitigate stereotype threat as a means to achieving greater diversity.

¶11 Although I have no memories of feeling stereotype threat in library school, I do recall those feelings being present for me in law school at the University of Michigan in the late 1980s. Not only were most of my classmates white, many came from relative economic privilege and held degrees from Ivy League or other elite institutions.²⁶ I distinctly remember the paralyzing fear I felt in every class, which stemmed in part from my acute awareness that I was the only son of a Detroit autoworker at my law school.²⁷ Even the few other black students I found were children of doctors and lawyers. The feeling that I could never compete, that others expected me to fail academically, and that my race and economic background made me somehow less-than was crippling. I recall the extreme effort it took to banish those thoughts of inferiority from my head enough to get down to the business of studying. I have experienced these things firsthand.

¶12 In the employment context, the effects of stereotype threat are well documented.²⁸ Given the comparatively small percentage of minority law librarians

23. STEELE, *supra* note 5, at 22; see also JOSHUA ARONSON, IMPROVING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ON EDUCATION (J. Aronson ed. 2002); Joshua Aronson et al., *Stereotype Threat and the Academic Underperformance of Minorities and Women*, in PREJUDICE: THE TARGET'S PERSPECTIVE (J.K. Swim ed. 1998).

24. For acceptance and graduation rates of people of color from library schools, see ASS'N FOR LIBRARY & INFO. SCI. EDUC., LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE EDUCATION STATISTICAL REPORT 2012.

25. See *Frontline: Secrets of the SAT* (Public Broadcasting Service broadcast Oct. 4, 1999) (transcript available through PBS Video) (documentary concluding that stereotype threat impedes standardized test performance of African American students).

26. I clearly recall a conversation with two white classmates (who were children of lawyers) expressing some dismay that I had attended a "state school" for my undergraduate education. I later learned that racial minorities, especially those from state schools, were assumed to be affirmative action admits and therefore somehow less deserving of admission.

27. I recall befriending the Puerto Rican daughter of a New York City taxi driver and feeling relief and a sense of connection for the first time in law school.

28. See, e.g., Robertson & Kulik, *supra* note 18; Mara Cadinu et al., *Stereotype Threat: The Effect of Expectancy on Performance*, 33 EUR. J. SOC. PSYCHOL. 267 (2003); Beth Chung-Harrera & M.J. Lankau,

working in our profession today,²⁹ stereotype threat certainly affects minority job performance in law libraries. As living proof, in the academic law library context, I personally struggle with the constant fear of confirming the stereotype that blacks are inarticulate and are therefore poor writers. This struggle persists even as I write this piece for the *Law Library Journal*. Working in a majority white profession, on a majority white library staff, and with majority white patrons can take its toll on law librarians of color in all the ways that the literature on stereotype threat suggests. Hence, the existence of underperformance or the fear of underperformance, no matter one's position in a law library, is not at all surprising.

Solutions

¶13 There are concrete ways that employers, teachers, and others can reduce the effects of stereotype threat. Actively pursuing these remedies can help our employees, students, and library patrons succeed and thrive in our increasingly diverse world. One of the best ways to reduce stereotype threat is with role models. Exposure “to role models who disconfirm the stereotype through their competence” provides a tangible and undeniable diametric that contradicts the stereotypical and threatening psychological belief.³⁰ In the library professional context, mentors from stereotyped groups who serve as role models for students or librarians early in their careers serve exactly this purpose. Through the AALL mentor program³¹ and similar programs at the chapter level, we can all help to combat stereotype threat and improve minority and other out-group achievement in library schools and in entry-level employment situations.

¶14 Fortunately for me, the presence of role models of color was evident throughout my career. These role models have most certainly helped me to feel competent and deserving of a place in our profession. Carol Avery Nicholson and her numerous achievements in our profession, including being the first African American president of AALL, is just one example.³² Also, hearing of the outstanding achievements of Alan Holoch³³ through the Social Responsibilities Special Interest Section Standing Committee on Lesbian and Gay Issues gave me confidence that I could succeed in this profession as an openly gay man.

¶15 The existence of active and visible role models within our profession and in AALL is sometimes just not enough. Sometimes when struggling with the effects of stereotype threat one needs more. A phone call, an e-mail, or a conversation with a

Are We There Yet? An Assessment of Fit Between Stereotypes of Minority Managers and the Successful-Manager Prototype, 35 J. APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 2029 (2005).

29. See Ronald Wheeler, *Let's Talk About Race*, 106 LAW LIBR. J. 267, 2014 LAW LIBR. J. 16 (for a discussion of interpreting the statistics on racial diversity in law librarianship).

30. INZLICHT & SCHMADER, *supra* note 6, at 282.

31. See AM. ASS'N L. LIBR., *Mentor Program*, available at <http://www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Member-Resources/Mentoring> (last visited Sept. 28, 2014).

32. See AM. ASS'N L. LIBR., *Long-Time Member Profile—Carol Avery Nicholson—Technical Services Special Interest Section* (Oct. 4, 2006), <http://www.aallnet.org/sis/tssis/history/profiles/nicholson-carol.htm>.

33. See Laura N. Gasaway, *Memorial Dedication: Alan Holoch, 1947–1991*, 52 OHIO ST. L.J. 3 (1991).

mentor can sometimes be the most effective remedy for stereotype threat. However, for people of color or others in need of mentoring, it can sometimes be difficult to connect with mentors who share a common background and a common understanding of stereotype-driven pressures. In addition to the AALL Mentoring Program and its user-driven Mentor Match resource,³⁴ there are other ways for law librarians to secure meaningful mentors. Attending caucus or Special Interest Section (SIS) meetings are great ways to meet active and engaged law librarians from across the country. Caucuses focusing on the unique needs of black law librarians, Asian American law librarians, Jewish law librarians, Latino law librarians, Native American law librarians, and students all exist within AALL.³⁵ Additionally, SISs that focus on possible group identifications may also be good places to meet and connect with possible mentors. SISs like Gen X/Gen Y and Social Responsibilities, the latter of which houses the Standing Committee on Lesbian and Gay Issues, are two such places that come to mind. Establishing mentoring relationships does not have to be a formal process. Meeting people, establishing a rapport, and then following up with a friendly e-mail can help cultivate mentor-like relationships.

¶16 Another way to combat stereotype threat is to openly discuss performance gaps wherever they may exist. Through open and frank discussion and dialogue, we can frame the issue of performance gaps in a way that acknowledges social realities and at the same time resists stereotyping. We can “encourage people to see performance gaps between groups as [a product of] social realities rather than genetic factors.”³⁶ In this way we can help our students, employees, and others get past the psychological barriers imposed by stereotyping and more effectively focus on performance. In the library employment context, supervisors having frank and open conversations about underperformance that encourage employees, offer training or other ways of improving, and emphasize confidence in the employee’s ability is one simple example of how to frame such discussions.

¶17 “Having people call to mind an alternative, positively stereotyped identity that they hold” is yet another way to negate stereotype threat. Most of us have multiple identities and multiple ways in which we see ourselves in relation to others. We exist as a part of numerous simultaneous group identities that correspond to identity groups imposed by society, by culture, and by ourselves. I’ve seen this strategy used with underperforming law students as part of the Academic Support Program at the University of San Francisco School of Law. One example is reminding students that although they may have done poorly on an exam, they are still part of an elite group of high-achieving college graduates that earned acceptance to a highly competitive professional school program. In spite of any one grade on a test, or any negative stereotype, they are still extremely bright and accomplished students capable of greatness. Suggesting that they focus on a positive identifica-

34. See MY COMMUNITIES: AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF LAW LIBRARIES, *About Mentor Match*, <http://community.aallnet.org/mentoring/aboutmentormatch> (last visited Sept. 28, 2014).

35. For a list of the current AALL caucuses, see AM. ASS’N L. LIBR., *Caucus Websites*, <http://www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Member-Communities/caucuses/caucus-websites> (last visited Sept. 28, 2014).

36. INZLICHT & SCHMADER, *supra* note 6, at 282.

tion can often erode the effects of any negative identification. This technique can be used in both library school and library employment contexts.

Conclusion

¶18 Although stereotype threat is a pervasive component of living in a diverse society, there are ways to confront and combat it. Knowing it exists and knowing its characteristics goes a long way toward aiding both those who feel it and those who witness its effects. Simple and easily implemented solutions, many of which exist within AALL or within our profession more generally, can help diminish stereotype threat and eliminate this barrier to improved diversity in law librarianship.