

Small interventions can alleviate underperformance caused by stereotype threat

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Picture black and white students at an Ivy League college learning about black students who are a year or so ahead of them in that school. They're told that the older black students were anxious about fitting in and how they would be viewed in college when they first arrived. But as the older black students got more involved in campus life, they began to find the school rewarding, even exciting as their life course took shape.

"For the black kids who were given this narrative, their [grade point] averages in the next semester were a third of a letter grade higher than those of black students not given this information," according to social psychologist Claude M. Steele, PhD, reporting recent research by Gregory Walton, PhD, and Geoffrey Cohen, PhD. "And these better grades, in comparison to the control group, persisted for three years, a follow-up study showed—a big and lasting effect on real-life grades resulting from a single exposure to information that allowed these students to develop a personal narrative about their college as a place where they belonged and felt safe."

This is the type of scenario Steele planned to discuss in his keynote address at the American Psychological Association's 119th Annual Convention on Aug. 4. Steele, who was recently named dean of the School of Education at Stanford University, has spent decades studying a phenomenon he calls [stereotype threat](#)—the surprisingly strong effect that being the target of negative stereotypes can have on important

performances, such as tests and school performance -- as well as ways that these effects can be prevented and reduced.

Steele, the outgoing provost of Columbia University, has published groundbreaking research showing the undermining effect that stereotype threat can have on the test and school performance of groups whose abilities in these areas are negatively stereotyped. (Other researchers have shown that stereotype threat can also undermine athletic performance.)

One classic experiment by Steele & Aronson, published in 1995 in *APA's Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, (Vol. 65, No. 5) found that black students' performance deteriorated on a variety of tests when they believed that the tests measured their intellectual abilities. This put them at risk of confirming the negative stereotype about their group's abilities. But the students' performance on the same tests rebounded dramatically when they were told the tests were merely laboratory tasks unrelated to abilities. The reason for this effect, Steele found, is that the first condition caused [black students](#) to spend brainpower suppressing worry about confirming or being seen to confirm the negative group stereotype.

As part of his APA keynote, Steele planned to talk about "small interventions that have big effects in reducing the impact of stereotype threat in our personal lives and in schools and work places."

"I'm going to argue that effective interventions have the common effect of helping people sustain a realistic but hopeful narrative about their life, their world, their situation, that is less threatening," he said in an interview. "What these interventions do is reduce the performance-interfering anxiety and vigilance that goes with living under the pressure of negative stereotypes.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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