The ironic power of caricature

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Brent Staples is an editorial writer for the *New York Times* and a University of Chicago-trained psychologist. He is also African-American, and back in the 70s, when he was doing his graduate studies, he discovered that he could threaten white people simply by walking down the streets of his Hyde Park neighborhood. When white couples saw him coming, especially at night, they would lock arms, stop all conversation, and stare straight ahead. Sometimes they would cross to the other side of the street.

The white Chicagoans were obviously being influenced by the stereotype of the dangerous young black man. But the more sinister effects of the stereotype were on Staples himself. At first he played with this new-found power, deliberately using it to "scatter the pigeons." But he also felt guilty about discomfiting innocent strangers, and ultimately he figured out a way to defuse his own potent symbolism. He did this simply by whistling—whistling Vivaldi. Somehow, whistling the sweet refrains of the Venetian composer's *Four Seasons* was enough to trump the stereotype and put the neighbors at ease.

But Staples wasn't at ease. Whether he was exploiting the stereotype or resenting it or actively countering it, it was on his mind, distracting him from other matters. Social psychologist Claude Steele borrows from Staples's experience for the title and central metaphor of his new book, (W.W. Norton), an illuminating summary of many years work on stereotypes and "stereotype threat." Stereotypes are rampant in society, Steele argues, but his purpose here is not to whine about the unfairness of these caricatured views. Instead, he takes us inside his and others' labs to show precisely how stereotypes commandeer the mind and do their psychological damage.

Steele, who is also African-American, is especially interested in performance—in school, sports and the workplace—and indeed his work began with his curiosity about the sub-par performance of even the best African-American university students. He had a theory, which basically goes like this: Even in the absence of overt racism, stereotypes about unintelligent African-Americans are always "in the air." That is, African-American students are aware of these common caricatures, and this awareness makes them anxious—anxious about reinforcing the group stereotype, contributing to its legitimacy. This anxiety, through a variety of physiological pathways, actually depletes the students' cognitive reserves—leading, ironically, to exactly the poor academic performance that the stereotype predicts.

Steele marshals study after study to demonstrate the power of such stereotype threat. In a typical experiment, for example, he had both white and African-American students take a rigorous test, but beforehand he told only some of the students that it was a test of intelligence; the others believed it was a test of no particular importance. The African-American students who thought their intelligence was being assessed, and compared to white intelligence, did much worse on the exam—worse than the whites and worse than the African-Americans who were under no stereotype threat.

And it's not just African-Americans who suffer under stereotype threat. If women believe they are being compared to men in math, they indeed perform worse on math tests. If white men are told that their natural athletic ability is being measured, they choke in a golf contest, losing to African-American golfers; but if they're told that their golf acumen is being tested, they outperform African-Americans. Indeed, fifteen years of such studies has demonstrated the effects of stereotype threat in Latinos, third-grade schoolgirls, Asian American students, U.S. soldiers, female business students, older Americans, German and French students, aspiring psychologists. The list goes on.

Steele's unique contribution is taking us inside the mind of the stereotype victim, and it's not a pretty sight. When we're unnerved by an unsavory caricature, our minds race: We're vigilant; we're arguing internally against the stereotype; denying its relevance; disparaging anyone who would use such a stereotype; pitying ourselves; trying to be stoic. In short, we're doing everything except high level thinking—the kind that leads to academic excellence. We've channeled our limited cognitive power into dealing with the threatening caricature.

Steele ends *Whistling Vivaldi* with prescriptions for countering the effects of stereotype threat—creating self-affirming narratives, for example, and mind-sets that emphasize growth and change rather than fixed abilities. These are proven strategies for creating "identity safety," but they need to begin early in children's lives. Ignoring the perils of stereotypes is just another way of whistling in the dark.