

Up-and-Coming Voices: Combating Stereotypes and Bias

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As part of the recent 2021 APS Virtual Convention, researchers had the opportunity to connect with colleagues and present their work to the broader scientific community in a new format-15-minute Flash Talks. In this collection, we highlight talks by students and early-career researchers related to combating stereotypes and bias.

[Are Iranian Immigrants in the U.S. Happy? Social Support as a Buffer for Discriminatory Behavior's Impact on Well-Being in Iranian Immigrants in the U.S.](#)

Tina Badakhshan (*Claremont Graduate University*), **Afarin Rajaei** (*Alliant International University*), **Ozlem Kose** (*independent researcher*), and **Saeideh Heshmati** (*Claremont Graduate University*)

What did your research reveal that you didn't know before?

Although I was aware of, and experienced, discrimination as an Iranian living in the United States, I did not know it made such a large impact on the well-being of so many Iranian immigrants in this country. I was surprised to learn, based on our study, that about 30% of Iranian immigrants in the United States have below-average satisfaction with their lives, and another 30% have just average satisfaction. For comparison, in the United States overall, the percentage of those with below-average satisfaction has been a steady 10% to 15% over the last few decades.

How might your findings contribute to combating bias?

The issue of discrimination is quite profound for Iranians in the United States because of the hostility between the Iranian and U.S. governments and the subsequent demonization of Iranians and Muslims, which led to the justification of harassment of Iranians in the United States. Iranians are assumed to be Muslim in the United States and are often subjected to a kind of nationwide perception that identifies all members of this religion as violent fanatics or terrorists. Moreover, the U.S. government has often reinforced the stereotype that Iranians are potential terrorists. Some Muslims from various countries in the Middle East blame the American media and popular culture for propagating negative stereotypes about their culture and religion. Given that many other groups of people in the United States also fall victim to harassment because of stereotypes and bias, these findings demonstrating the harmful impact of experiencing such discrimination on well-being should move the academic community to continue looking for solutions to reduce bias. Our findings also reiterate the importance of leveraging social support to combat the harmful impact of discrimination in daily life.

[Conversations About Race in Black and White U.S. Families: Before and After George Floyd's Death](#)

J. Nicky Sullivan, Jennifer L. Eberhardt, and Steven O. Roberts (Stanford University)

What did your research reveal that you didn't know before?

When this project started, we were hoping to get a deeper understanding of how Black and White parents socialize their children around race. But after George Floyd was murdered in May 2020, we realized we were positioned to gain insight into how Floyd's death and the ensuing protests impacted parental socialization. We were surprised to find that despite all the media coverage of Floyd's death, White parents basically didn't change post-Floyd (if anything, their conversations about race decreased), even as popular articles encouraged them to talk with their children about race. Most strikingly, we found that White parents, unlike Black parents, remained relatively unconcerned that their children might be racially biased, despite the mainstream discussion on systemic racism in the United States and a highly visible act of brutal racism by a White man.

How might your findings contribute to combating bias?

Our findings highlight the need for more research exploring not just how White parents can effectively talk about race with their children but also what will motivate them to do so. Prior work has documented the pitfalls of color-blind strategies commonly used by White parents, and scholars have rightfully pointed out the need for experimental work testing what strategies parents could use instead. But relatively little attention has been paid to the question of how to motivate White parents to have conversations in the first place, which will be critical for reducing racial bias. Our research suggests that one avenue worth exploring might be increasing White parents' worry that their children might be biased, or at least conveying to them the downsides of not talking with their children about race. Doing so might motivate parents to have more conversations, and more effective conversations, which would be an important step in raising a generation of anti-racist children who can confront bias in themselves and in society.

[Informal Mentors: A Critical Source of Support for Underrepresented Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Elizabeth Raposa, Kate Bartolotta, Jasmine Cosby, Nicola Forbes (Fordham University), and Ida Salusky (DePaul University)

What did your research reveal that you didn't know before?

Our study examined the protective effects of supportive relationships that college students have with nonparental adults called "informal mentors." Informal mentors can include faculty or staff on campus, as well as other adults from students' social networks, such as family friends, neighbors, or high school teachers. We were particularly interested in exploring the role of informal mentors in buffering psychosocial risk for first- and second-year underrepresented students attending college during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We were surprised to see that fewer than half (43%) of all first-generation college students in our sample reported having an informal mentor in fall 2019, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. And among those students who reported having an informal mentor in fall 2019,

more than two-thirds (68.9%) no longer reported having this relationship by the end of the spring 2020 term. However, underrepresented students who *did* have an informal mentor in the fall reported less severe COVID-19-related life disruptions during the spring semester, as well as less dramatic increases in perceived stress in response to life disruptions caused by the pandemic.

How might your findings contribute to combating bias?

Historically marginalized groups of students—including students of color, first-generation students, and low-income students—are enrolling in college at higher rates but continue to struggle with worse college outcomes (e.g., more psychological distress, substantially lower graduation rates) than their more privileged peers. With our research, we hope to shed light on naturally occurring protective factors, such as relationships with informal mentors, that may help promote the academic and psychosocial success of college students from underrepresented groups. These findings help to identify ways that institutions can reduce biases in access to social resources on campus—including relationships with faculty and staff—with the ultimate goal of redressing social and economic inequalities among students from diverse backgrounds.

[Perceptions of Women Who Confront Hostile and Benevolent Sexism](#)

Jordana E. Schiralli and Alison L. Chasteen (University of Toronto, Canada)

What did your research reveal that you didn't know before?

The motivation for conducting this research was to assess the role of sexism type (hostile vs. benevolent) in perceptions of women who confront sexism. We predicted that confronters would face significantly greater consequences when challenging benevolent sexism because of its subtle and subjectively positive nature. For example, we expected that women would have greater support when confronting hostile views suggesting that women seek special treatment compared to benevolent views suggesting that women should be protected and cherished.

We found that confronters were generally well liked across all studies, particularly by participants who were women. We were surprised to see that the penalties for confronting benevolent sexism were not as high as we anticipated, with two notable exceptions: (a) when perceivers were men and (b) when benevolent sexism was expressed in a way that endorsed gender essentialism, such as by stating that men and women fundamentally and naturally differ.

How might your findings contribute to combating bias?

Although explicit forms of discrimination and sexism may be on the decline, experiencing benevolent sexism is common for many women. This research contributes to our understanding of how women can expect to be perceived when confronting different sexism types, especially when sexism is disguised as a compliment to reinforce gender roles (e.g., suggesting that men should protect and provide for women).

Based on results from our research, women can expect support when confronting patronizing and condescending attitudes toward women. In comparison, confronting attitudes that embrace fundamental and natural differences between men and women may be met with a mixed response, suggesting greater education and awareness are needed when it comes to harms associated with essentialist attitudes about gender. Altogether, this research provides a generally positive outlook for women who choose to confront benevolent sexism, particularly when it takes the form of paternalistic attitudes.

[The Relationship Between Genetic Attributions, Genetic Essentialist Biases, and Stigma of Schizophrenia](#)

Jordan Sparks Waldron (University of Indianapolis)

What did your research reveal that you didn't know before?

Before this study, I knew that disorders like schizophrenia were highly stigmatized and that past research has shown that genetic explanations for schizophrenia can actually increase some forms of stigma. The thinking is that genetic explanations can activate what we call “essentialist biases” (e.g., if a behavior is genetically linked, it’s “natural”). However, the research has been somewhat inconsistent, and it is important to understand why that might be and look for potential moderators that could explain when genetic attributions are most likely to be associated with stigma. In this research study, I learned how people’s general tendency to engage in different types of essentialist thinking about genetic causes moderates the relationship between prognostic pessimism (e.g., the degree to which you think schizophrenia will be persistent and permanent) and genetic explanations. In other words, for people higher in some forms of essentialist thinking, the belief that schizophrenia was genetically influenced was a better predictor of prognostic pessimism surrounding schizophrenia than it was for people who demonstrated less essentialist thinking.

How might your findings contribute to combating bias?

For so long, many people have been pessimistic about recovery from schizophrenia, leading to really negative stereotypes surrounding the ability of these individuals to function well in society. Happily, the recovery model of schizophrenia is more well-known now, and there is more optimism surrounding different types of recovery, although we still have work to do. People frequently encounter information about genetic influences on mental health in the media, and it is common to make genetic attributions about schizophrenia—so I think that understanding any factors that might lead a person to be less optimistic about recovery in the face of genetic explanations, such as whether or not they engage in essentialist thinking, represents an interesting target for future interventions on stigma.

[Weight Stigma by Association Among Parents of Children With Obesity](#)

Kristen M. Lee, Lauren Arriola-Sanchez (University of California, Los Angeles), Julie C. Lumeng, Ashley N. Gearhardt (University of Michigan), and A. Janet Tomiyama (University of California, Los Angeles)

What did your research reveal that you didn't know before?

Weight stigma is pervasive and highly prevalent among children, adolescents, and adults. However, few studies have examined how weight stigma may impact the parent-child dyad, and none have tested this relationship using an experimental design. In our study, we found that parents of children with obesity were evaluated more negatively than parents of children without obesity, even when identical descriptions of positive parenting practices (based on American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations) were presented. Specifically, parents of children with obesity were viewed as less effective parents. Moreover, parents with obesity were viewed as less effective and less helpful compared to parents without obesity. Our results offer causal evidence that parents with higher weight experience weight stigma, and parents of higher-weight children experience weight stigma by association.

How might your findings contribute to combating bias?

Our findings suggest that individuals may overlook indicators of good parenting when a parent has a child with higher weight status. The weight stigma by association may lead to inaccurate perceptions of parenting practices, which may be most consequential in pediatric health care, where effective parent-provider communication is a key contributor to optimal outcomes. If parent-child dyads with obesity are experiencing weight stigma, pediatricians may need to monitor for this bias in their own interactions with these dyads and consider that information about children from outside agencies (e.g., schools, therapists) could be tainted by bias and therefore should be interpreted in this context.