

Steele and Markus on 'Stereotype Threat and Black College Students'

January 03, 2004

APS Fellow and former Board Member Claude Steele expounded on the relationship between stereotype and environment, and where he left off APS Fellow Hazel Rose Markus picked up. Their talk, "Stereotype Threat and Black College Students," was given on November 14, 2003 at a gathering of the Stanford Alumni Association.

Steele

Steele, a social psychologist who has specialized in race relations and its effects on standardized test performance for over 25 years, coupled this career research with another pertinent issue, which he hesitantly labeled the "diversity problem."

"We're trying to grapple with two basic problems: The underperformance in school of certain groups whose intellectual abilities are negatively stereotyped in larger society ... [and] the diversity problem," Steele said.

Though he cautioned that the latter term carried excess baggage, somewhat obscuring a cut-and-dry meaning, Steele admitted he had yet to think of a better one. "It's one thing to numerically integrate a setting, like a school," he said of the problem. "It's another to make that setting a setting where everyone feels comfortable."

He then set forth the stream of argument he would follow throughout the course of the discussion, namely, the concept of a social environment eliciting a more intense identification with a certain stereotype, specifically in times of stress or threat.

"At the center of our research is the simple concept of social identity," Steele said, referring to the certain social groups into which people are invariably placed based on race, ethnicity, or proximity. "The heart of our analysis is that the meaning a social identity has for us is rooted in the particular circumstances of our lives. It is something that we carry around with us that affects our psychological function.

"I'm going to argue that the context of our lives stir these identities up in us," he set forth boldly.

"Environments respond to people who have different social identities differently," Steele continued. "You can walk into the same classroom if you're a girl and that classroom will respond to you differently than if you're a boy. ... The different ways that environments respond to us based on our social identities we're calling contingencies."

Steele, a man of palpable equanimity, used the timely example of Anatole Broyard, inspiration for the 2003 movie *The Human Stain* and the Philip Roth novel that preceded it, to support this point. Broyard was a New York Times book reviewer of influential clout for over 30 years before revealing, on his deathbed, that he was an African American. An African American himself, Steele admitted that he had always taken Broyard for a Jew.

“In order to see what I mean by contingencies you just have to ask yourself the question, ‘What was [Broyard] trying to escape? What’s the advantage of being white over being black,’ ” Steele posed rhetorically. If Broyard had exposed his race, Steele surmised the writer “would have had to have been a Negro writer. He would have had completely different friendships. Those are what we mean by contingencies. In a country like ours a race is an identity that has a lot tied to it.”

Steele continually stressed the importance of contingencies throughout the talk, calling it a requisite precursor to the psychological understanding of any human identity. However, once psychologists have a better sense of a person’s foundational contingencies, Steele cautioned against broad, hasty generalizations, reiterating his original concern for the classroom’s diversity problem.

“[Especially as social psychologists], when we do things like compare groups of people, what we tend to forget about are the roles that those contingencies play. We tend to reduce it to: ‘There’s something about this group that’s different about that group.’ And what that verbal economy does is repress the fact that those groups have very different contingencies in a given society tied to their identity. This group may be living in a very different world than that group, even if they’re in the same classroom.”

Steele then touched briefly on several scenarios supporting the emergence of identity in a stressful, threatening environment.

“People often see themselves in terms of whichever one of their identities is under attack,” Steele said. He told a story of when he became psychology department chairman and had to report to the dean, who was a chemist. “I found myself representing psychology as a hard-nosed science. It’s in part because I know there’s a certain stereotype among the sciences that psychology is more soft, fuzzy.”

One of Steele’s relevant research studies gave groups of men and women the same math test and told each that the other would be taking it. The women became distracted knowing they would be compared to the men, and soon felt frustration. As a result, the women dramatically underperformed on a 30-minute section of the exam, though they came in with the same skills as the men.

“That kind of ruminating consciousness is psychological work, can make a person feel tired, alienated, frustrated, and it can happen every day, and make a person just want to get out.”

This anxiety is not elusive to white culture, either. “The anxiety of white in interracial interactions is ‘I’m going to slip up and say something and the person’s going to think I’m racist,’ ” Steele said.

He ended with a generous segue to Markus’ talk, explaining that suppressing the presence of different racial identities is just as dangerous as calling too much attention to them. “When you have a setting with a small number in it, when there’s a minority in that setting, don’t say ‘colorblindness,’ because it won’t be trusted. A leader saying I’m colorblind just doesn’t strike a minority in that situation as

plausible, believable.”

With this, Markus, whose research has traditionally focused on the sociocultural shaping of mind and self, tilted the discussion to interracial groups and models of diversity.

She highlighted two major thoughts on the issue: “[Colorblindness] says we’re all the same, our differences are probably superficial, they should probably be ignored or minimized, and we can get to the point where it just doesn’t matter. Kind of a very nice ideal, an American ideal, ... although there are real problems.

“The other is an awareness and inclusion of differences model,” said Markus, who clearly seemed to favor this model. “This one says that people differ in positive and interesting and important ways, and that these should be acknowledged.”

Her study probed magazine ads to see how each explored the interaction of race in the workplace, in a sense to find an answer to the question: “What is the American conversation on race right now?”

Full page ads from fifteen prominent American magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Ebony*, and *Seventeen* were examined over a 60-month period. Over 5,000 total ads were scrutinized first for the image and then for the message to find whether they suggested colorblindness or awareness as a solution for the pervasive American diversity problem.

When the dust cleared, 25 percent of the ads were coded as diverse, at least in the image, meaning there was graphic portrayal of people of different ethnic and/or racial background. However, the vast plurality – 37 percent – embraced the colorblind mindset. Only 10 percent attempted to say “difference brings something positive, we want to celebrate it, we want to recognize it.” This percentage doubled, however, in magazines geared toward a black audience.

GTE showed perhaps the most impressive attempt at difference awareness, displaying a variegated quilt and claiming, “Each new idea inspires us to work and grow within the diverse fabric called community.” Ernst and Young, Wendy’s, and La Salle tended more toward a colorblind cliché, paraphrased: “It’s what’s inside that counts.”

Markus, who practiced what she preached by running a rainbow template down the left column of her PowerPoint presentation, remained hopeful while critical: “In America, we like to believe it doesn’t matter where you come from or who you are or who your father was,” she said. “The idea that you’re a hero on your own, or that working hard is all that matters – that’s just a myth.”

That we have come a long way only raises the bar of where we need to eventually arrive and the expected speed of such an arrival. However, Steele offered a pragmatic solution, for the time being. “A few experiences that make a person feel safe in their environment can disarm them,” he said.