



Unmasking Stereotype Threat & Impostor Syndrome

Facilitators:

Pamela Nolan Young - pyoung3@nd.edu

Dominique Vargas - dvargas2@nd.edu

Goals

Upon successful completion of this workshop, you will:

- Learn the definitions of Stereotype Threat and Impostor Syndrome
- Identify the signs and symptoms of Stereotype Threat and Impostor Syndrome in students and in ourselves
- Build a repertoire of strategies to help mitigate Stereotype Threat and combat Impostor Syndrome for students and ourselves

Exercise 1: *What does a competent, successful undergraduate student in your discipline look and act like? A graduate student? A faculty member?*

Stereotype Threat

According to Claude Steele and Jeffrey Aronson (1995), stereotype threat is a situational predicament in which people are or feel themselves to be at risk of confirming, as a

self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's social group/identity. Stereotype threat can be a contributing factor to long-standing racial and gender gaps in academic performance. It is important to note that anyone can be vulnerable to stereotype threat in specific circumstances

What leads to Stereotype Threat?

- **Group identity salience:** When one's stereotyped group status is made relevant or conspicuous by situational features, stereotype threat and performance decrements are more likely. Because stereotype threat arises from negative performance expectations in a specific domain, any group can show evidence of underperformance if the situation brings attention to the threatened identity. In other words, although stereotype threat tends to be experienced by members of some groups more than others, it would be inappropriate to conclude that it is only experienced by members of traditionally stigmatized or stereotyped groups. A stereotyped social identity can be highlighted in several ways in social situations.
- **Solo or Numerical Minority Status:** Situations where one is or even just expects to be the single representative of a stereotyped group or a numerical minority can create heightened group identity and stereotype threat.
- **Stereotype Salience:** Identities can become threatened when stereotypes are invoked in the performance environment, either blatantly or subtly. Such stereotype endorsement tends to reduce performance in those individuals who are members of the supposedly lower performing groups.
- **Evaluative scrutiny:** Situations in which an individual believes that his or her ability in a stereotypic domain will be evaluated can create a strong sense of group identity and stereotype threat. When a test is described as being able to provide reliable and valid information about one's ability in a stereotyped domain, feelings of anxiety and intrusive thoughts of failure can arise, harming performance.

Consequences of Stereotype Threat

In situations in which the stereotype is relevant, potential consequences may include:

- **Underachievement on classroom exams, standardized tests, and other academic tasks:** Students may underachieve on classroom exams, standardized tests, and tasks that have previously been suggested to be "culture free" and relatively "pure" measures of cognitive ability
- **Increased use of self-defeating strategies:** Individuals under stereotype threat might reduce preparation, exhibit less effort, or invoke factors to create

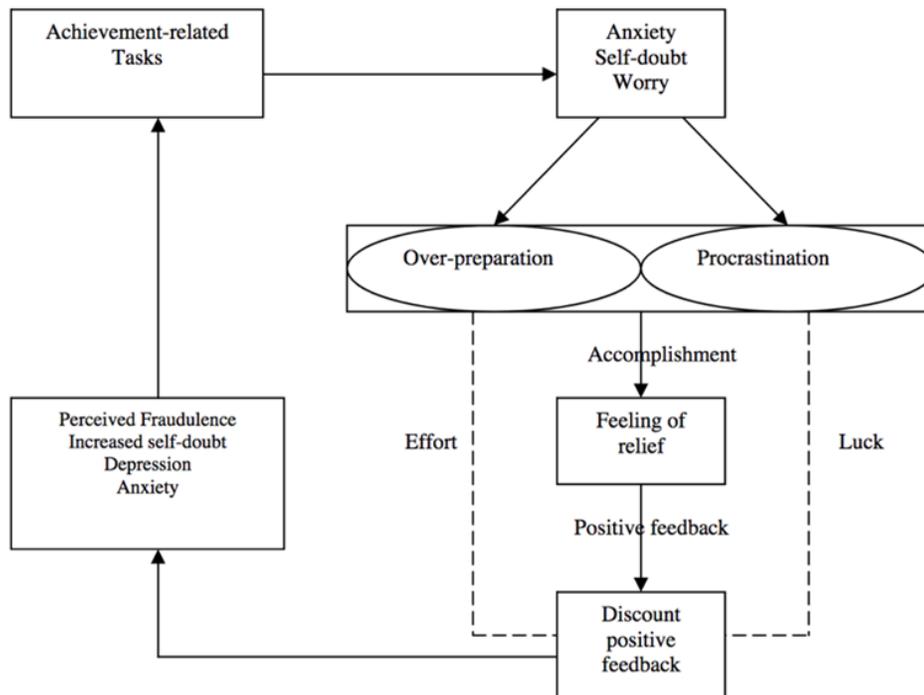
attributional ambiguity for potential failure. To the degree that individuals engage in self-defeating behavior however, actual performance can suffer. Individuals may also question the validity of the task or even the importance of the trait being tested.

- **Disengagement and disidentification:** Disengagement occurs when stereotype threat leads individuals to distance themselves from a threatening domain or to suggest that performance in a domain is unrelated to self-worth. Disengagement can also produce "disidentification" if an individual copes with long-term threat by avoiding the domain or detaching one's identity from a domain.
- **Altered identity and/or goals:** Recent research has shown that stereotype threat can alter stereotyped students' professional identities by redirecting their aspirations and career paths.

Impostor Syndrome

The term Impostor Syndrome or Impostor Phenomenon, introduced by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes (1978), refers to an individual's belief that he or she is an intellectual fraud who will soon be exposed. This phenomenon tends to affect highly successful or highly capable individuals in many disciplines and fields.

Impostor Syndrome Cycle



Consequences of Impostor Syndrome:

- Compulsion to be the very best
- Superhuman expectations
- Fear of failure and exposure
- Denial of abilities
- A habitual discount of praise
- Fear of or guilt about success

Links and Differences

Both Impostor Syndrome and Stereotype threat can cause students to feel like frauds, negatively affecting success, retention, and wellbeing. Though stereotype threat relies on broad generalizations, impostor syndrome describes secret feelings of personal inadequacy. However, the two phenomena share some important links. In Clance and Imes' original article on Impostor Phenomena, the authors posit that the women in their study "tend to attribute their success to temporary causes such as luck or effort," and that this misattribution of credit can be understood in the context of social stereotypes about women. These negative stereotypes induce women to "find explanation for their accomplishments other than their own intelligence--such as fooling other people." In short, Stereotype Threat can compound Impostor Syndrome and both can negatively impact the learning environment.

Exercise 2: *Can the ideal qualities you discussed earlier feed into Stereotype Threat and Impostor Syndrome? How can we redefine success?*

Mitigate Stereotype Threat

Steps to help mitigate Stereotype Threat in the classroom:

- **Give feedback in a way that inspires trust and motivates students:** Stress that you used high standards in evaluating the work AND that you believe student can meet those standards
- **Be attentive to the cues you send (language, environment):** Create a welcoming atmosphere, include diversity statements on your syllabus, use inclusive language, reinforce positive images, and diversify your syllabus.
- **Establish trust through rigorous but supportive relationships:** Instructor/student work when they are calm, work-focused, straightforward, demanding but supportive. Eventually these sorts of relationships can lessen anxiety and can motivate students, both of which leads to better performance
- **Foster informal cross-identity group conversations or formal cross-cultural study/project groups:** Carefully curating discussion/ project groups to include a variety of majors, classes, and student interests can help to reveal that one's identity is not the sole cause of one's struggles or negative experiences in the setting; they can also discourage ineffective a single student doing the work of others.
- **Frame tests, discussions, and assignments in ways that do not trigger stereotype threat:** Consider what you tell students a test is testing (e.g. a particular skill vs. general intelligence) and whether that triggers anxieties for particular groups. You can reassure students that no particular groups of students do better than others on this particular test. Frame difficult conversations as learning experiences (in which it is natural to be tense).
- **Allow students to affirm their most valued sense of self:** Writing/reflection about important values brings a sense of competence and worth back into view and makes early performance and other threatening cues less important; could interrupt a negative recursive process.
- **Facilitate the existence of a "critical mass" of various identity groups:** How much is enough for "critical mass" is yet undetermined (and might be beyond your capacity to control) but critical mass of a group improves its members' trust, comfort and performance in a setting.

Implicit: Know what works to facilitate learning in your discipline; be explicit about it and share it with all students; scaffold assignments to maximize chances of success.

Note: none of these strategies will work unless it is true that there is a safe environment for all – i.e. that in fact there are no negative contingencies for members of particular groups based on their identities.

Combat Impostor Syndrome

Steps to help combat Impostor Syndrome:

- **Acknowledge your feelings and know that everyone can feel this way:** According to the American Psychological Association, approximately 70% of people will experience Impostor Syndrome at some point in their lives.
- **Talk to your mentors:** Seek support from your mentors. Sometimes just talking out loud about impostor feelings can help you realize how these feelings might be holding you back.
- **Engage with your community:** You may wish to seek support from trusted friends and peers. Remember that you can also give support to members of your affinity groups.
- **Try not to compare yourself to others:** All ND graduate students have different backgrounds, experiences, and talents. Try to remember the unique and special contributions that you make to your field and this community.
- **Track your success:** Keep a log or journal of the things that you have achieved and what you're good at. That can help you recognize your accomplishments.
- **Don't hide:** Though these feelings can be intense, don't hold yourself back from participating in class, asking questions, or having conversations with professors.
- **Advocate for yourself:** Don't use words like "just" or "only" when discussing your work or accomplishments. Try not to apologize for yourself and seek the resources you need.
- **Practice daily affirmations:** Once you recognize your accomplishments, think about the skills, characteristics, values, and roles, that help you to achieve these things. Think and write about what you're good at. Affirming your self-worth can help you to protect yourself.

Growth Mindset

Carol Dweck differentiates between "fixed" and "growth" mindsets: Individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset. They tend to achieve more than those with a fixed mindset (those who believe their talents are innate gifts). Students' mindsets play a key role in their motivation and achievement.

Fixed Mindset: Students believe their skills, talents and overall intelligence are fixed traits. They may resist learning and trying to improve, typically feeling embarrassed when not understanding something.

Growth Mindset: Students know they can develop their skills and talents through effort and persistence, as well as being receptive to lessons and feedback. They generally believe they can improve through hard work and trying new learning methods.

Cultivating a Growth Mindset

Cultivating a growth mindset can also help to mitigate Stereotype Threat and combat Impostor Syndrome.

- **Change the tone of the conversation:**
- **Represent critical abilities and discipline specific skills as learnable:** Stress the expandability of intelligence in general and the learnability of skills in your field
- **Avoid praising intelligence and sheer effort:** You risk discouraging growth by primarily praising intelligence and sheer effort, instead of acknowledging the importance of planning and trying new approaches. Complimenting intelligence can reinforce it as a fixed trait, and although effort is aligned with a growth mindset, explicitly praising it can backfire. For example, if you tell students to “just keep trying” when their hard work doesn’t pay off, they may feel incompetent.

Give feedback that highlights the values of planning and trying different learning strategies:

Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
You tried your hardest, and that’s all you can do	Don’t worry if you don’t understand something right away. Focus on your next steps. What should they be?
You’ll eventually get these types of questions if you just keep trying	If you don’t understand these types of questions, try using a different perspective. You may be able to draw or write them out.
Great job! You’re so smart!	Great job! The study plan you made helped a lot. You should make another for the next test.

- **Use differentiated instruction tactics and principles:** Exposing students to different instructional methods and strategies will help build a repertoire of learning skills to handle diverse challenges. Vary the content you present and how students process it, as well as how they demonstrate knowledge:

- a. Content — When applicable, use videos, audio clips, presentations and physical manipulatives such as blocks in your lessons. Learning stations can help you deliver this content in a single class.
- b. Processes — Give students chances to not only work individually, but also in pairs, small groups and big groups.
- c. Products — Let students demonstrate understanding of content in a variety of ways on tests, projects and assignments. For example, you can create an open project that students can complete as an essay, presentation or artistic production.

By expanding your teaching tactics, students should sharpen a range of skills to help them approach different learning obstacles.

- **Reinforce the value of experimentation, challenge, and failure:** Explaining the inherent benefits of overcoming obstacles can help students develop a growth mindset.
- **Encourage students to expand their answers:** Asking students to elaborate on their thoughts during discussion reveals what they do and don't understand, encouraging them to process content at a deeper level as they reflect on their responses. This demonstrates a core aspect of growth mindset — subject matter expertise isn't inherent, but developed.
- **Explain the purpose behind abstract skills and concepts:** If you're teaching abstract concepts, students may struggle with determining the real-world applications, and may not see the purpose in improving their knowledge of that concept. Should you feel this is the case with a given skill or topic, explore and explain:
 - a. Why it is significant
 - b. What its uses are outside of class
 - c. How it will help students in the future

By doing so, most students should grow interested in the once-abstract concept and want to understand it at a deeper level.

- **Make time for self-reflection:** Giving students time for written and verbal self-reflection serves different purposes, including encouraging students to build a growth mindset through goal setting. For example, students could begin with setting learning goals for themselves and through regular conferencing in office hours, discuss their progression toward these goals.

Exercise 3: *Brainstorm some ways you might implement these strategies into your teaching practice*

References and Resources

- Aronson, Joshua, Michael J Lustina, Catherine Good, Kelli Keough, Claude M Steele, and Joseph Brown. "When White Men Can't Do Math: Necessary and Sufficient Factors in Stereotype Threat." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 35, no. 1 (1999): 29-46.
- Brown, Ryan P, and Elizabeth C Pinel. "Stigma on My Mind: Individual Differences in the Experience of Stereotype Threat." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 39, no. 6 (2003): 626-33.
- Castro, Janice. "Fearing the Mask May Slip; Victims of the Imposter Phenomenon Doubt Their Achievements." *Time* 126 (1985): 60.
- Cisco, Jonathan. "Using Academic Skill Set Interventions to Reduce Impostor Phenomenon Feelings in Postgraduate Students." *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 2019, 1-15.
- Clance, Pauline R., and Suzanne A. Imes. "The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention." *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 15, no. 3 (1978): 241-47.
- Dweck, Carol S. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2008.
- Ewing, Kimberly M, Tina Q Richardson, Linda James-Myers, and Richard K Russell. "The Relationship between Racial Identity Attitudes, Worldview, and African American Graduate Students' Experience of the Imposter Phenomenon." *Journal of Black Psychology* 22, no. 1 (1996): 53-66.
- Marx, David M., Diederik A. Stapel, and Dominique Muller. "We Can Do It: The Interplay of Construal Orientation and Social Comparisons Under Threat." *Journal of Personality*

- and Social Psychology* 88, no. 3 (2005): 432-46.
- Murphy, Mary C, Claude M Steele, and James J Gross. "Signaling Threat: How Situational Cues Affect Women in Math, Science, and Engineering Settings." *Psychological Science* 18, no. 10 (2007): 879-85.
- Onwuegbuzie, Anthony J. "Statistics Anxiety among African American Graduate Students: An Affective Filter?" *Journal of Black Psychology* 25, no. 2 (1999): 189-209.
- Sekaquaptewa, Denise, Andrew Waldman, and Mischa Thompson. "Solo Status and Self-Construal: Being Distinctive Influences Racial Self-Construal and Performance Apprehension in African American Women." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 13, no. 4 (2007): 321-27.
- Smith, Jessi, and L. White. "An Examination of Implicitly Activated, Explicitly Activated, and Nullified Stereotypes on Mathematical Performance: It's Not Just a Woman's Issue." *Sex Roles* 47, no. 3 (2002): 179-91.
- Spencer, Steven J, Claude M Steele, and Diane M Quinn. "Stereotype Threat and Women's Math Performance." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 35, no. 1 (1999): 4-28.
- Steele, Claude. *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- Steele, Claude M., and Joshua Aronson. "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5 (1995): 797-811.
- Steinberg, Jill A. "Clinical Interventions With Women Experiencing the Impostor Phenomenon." *Women & Therapy* 5, no. 4 (1987): 19-26.