

An Interview with Joshua Aronson

Distinguished NYU Professor Discusses His Research

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Joshua Aronson is an associate professor of Applied Psychology at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education. He is a leading scholar in the area of understanding psychological processes that contribute to achievement gaps. His research on "stereotype threat," which is explored in the following interview, was groundbreaking. For the past year Dr. Aronson has been a Visiting Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation.

Briefly explain to our readers your research on stereotype threat and also address some of the practical implications and applications.

Stereotype threat is an experience that everyone has from time to time—an unpleasant feeling in your gut that you might do something that could confirm a bad stereotype about your group. In my research I study stereotypes about people's intelligence, which are widely spread throughout the culture. We all know them: girls can't do math, Asians can do math, Jews are generally smart, and black and Latino students are slower academically. So when a black student walks into a classroom or interacts with a white teacher, he has reason to wonder if his teacher assumes he lacks intellectual ability. Stereotype threat is the uncomfortable realization that he has about living down that expectation, saying the wrong thing, sounding ignorant, and so on, so that the teacher will think "he is a dumb African-American, just as I

suspected." The bad news is that stereotype threat can actually bring about a self-fulfilling fear—the worry can make students tense, and this can impair performance on standardized tests, public speaking, or any other aspect of achievement where psychological stress is disruptive. This turns out to include everything from test performance, to engagement, to actual learning. The good news is that since stereotype threat is partly a product of relationships and situations, there's a lot we can do to limit its negative effects.

Is a consensus forming around this theory in different educational and policy circles?

It's actually been quite a great success story in the research community. By last count there were over a hundred published replications of the original stereotype threat experiments that I performed in collaboration with Claude Steele in the mid 90s. It has

now been confirmed that stereotype threat can seriously undermine the performance of students on IQ tests. And we've shown this with just about every social group, from white males, to women, to Asian females. It's also been confirmed by a number of researchers that students who are prone to stereotype threat perform less well on important standardized tests and in college. The research has been central to two Supreme Court cases surrounding affirmative action, and school systems around the country are designing programs to reduce its influence in the classroom and on standardized tests. Quite simply, the research has penetrated policy and educational practice beyond our wildest dreams.

Is stereotype threat something that you have concluded is self imposed or does it come from the outside, from teachers and administrators and peers and parents...or is it a little bit of both?

It's both. For example it is true that if you ask white people with no black people around if they think blacks are less intelligent, statistics say that about 36-37 percent will agree. So there's a reality of low expectations out there. But if you ask African-Americans what percentage of white people assume blacks to be less intelligent, their estimate is about 75 percent, so is that self-imposed? Is that imposed from the outside? It's both. One of my lines is that there is still a good deal of what George Bush calls "soft bigotry," white teachers expecting less of blacks. However, soft bigotry is a two-way street: a lot of black students walk in thinking that the teacher must hold these negative opinions simply because she's white and it is just simply not true.

How do we take this research and translate it into specific recommendations that AVID teachers can implement in the classroom?

To a large extent it validates what they are already doing. First of all AVID starts with the assumption that students are a lot brighter than they may be able to demonstrate in the typical arrangement. The other way that AVID is incredibly smart about this is that it says, "Look, the way you deal with struggling students is to challenge and support them rather than to do things that reinforce the notion that they lack ability." AVID says, "You have lots of potential and here's how we are going to bring it out of you." Contrast that with what the typical remedial program says, "Yep, you do lack ability and we are going to have to spoon feed you the information and go really s-l-o-w-l-y, so that you can understand." This just reinforces the doubts that the school has for these students, along with the insecurities these students have about themselves. This is personally very important to me,

since, between the 4th grade and the 12th grade, I was placed in the low track in the schools I attended. This had disastrous effects on my learning and self-concept—and the way it felt to come to school. I'm still trying to undo the damage.

Something that AVID teachers might try with their students is to directly confront the stereotypes, which we have found is surprisingly effective. What we found is that when we teach kids directly about their own vulnerability or their potential vulnerability, it magically almost releases them from the negative effects. When we taught kids about stereotype threat they did better on standardized tests.

I know you are particularly interested in the spirit of collaboration that occurs in an AVID classroom.

Stereotype threat has a number of effects and one is that it sort of isolates kids. A lot of black students, particularly on college campuses, don't want to do the kind of group study that AVID does because they worry that it's going to expose their weaknesses: "See, I told you that guy just doesn't get it." The emphasis on group work in AVID really changes that; it forces these kids to expose themselves and it teaches them that that's part of the process. One of the big epiphanies for these students occurs when they come into contact with other students who are also struggling. You put a student into AP English and there's going to be some struggle; it is supposed to be challenging—the whole idea is to stretch yourself. But the black student who studies alone and struggles with the material and operates within this stereotype threat framework...he is more likely to say to himself, "God, maybe it is hard because people like me are not good at this stuff."

Whereas the kid who engages with peers of different backgrounds and races and discusses the difficulty of the work together is more likely to say, "This is difficult but it is difficult for my peers too; it's not me, it's not my race— it's just hard material." This de-racializes the difficulty, and normalizes academic struggle—in addition to making it more enjoyable.

That is a very powerful phenomenon.

The thing that I think is so powerful about the AVID story is a sub theme: you don't get into that program without becoming known to the other members of the group. I can't imagine that those students could maintain a view of their AVID teachers as just a teacher. They became human beings. This is one of the under-emphasized things in school. I am writing about this process now in my book, and I call it "getting behind the veil." When I walk into a class for the first day, I see all the kids and have the normal response: "Okay, that guy over there with the backwards baseball cap slouched in his seat—I am not going to like him very much and that black guy over there looks pretty hostile. I'm going to have trouble with the girl popping her gum..." But then I do things in the class, for example, I make sure that every student comes to meet with me in office hours and I find out five things about him that he wouldn't normally share in the context of a classroom or with a professor. I learn about what they are going through. So the way they look to me changes—the guy with the baseball cap becomes a real person with real problems. And I share things with him about me so that he sees me as more than a "professor;" he sees me as a human being. 🐾