

Do Their Stereotypes Affect Your Teaching?

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“Stereotype threat” is a [well-known social psychological construct](#) in which people live down or up to the expectations others have of them based their gender, race, age, or other such characteristics. As professors we are careful — or we should be — not to translate our personal beliefs about students’ capabilities into our expectations of how they will perform academically, but we rarely think about how students’ expectations of us affect *our* performance.

In particular, faculty who are women and/or members of racial minority groups run the risk of becoming stereotype threatened: feeling anxiety about whether they will either confirm or disprove students’ stereotypical beliefs.

If you don’t think students — or all people — have ideas about what a professor looks and sounds like, try this exercise: Ask a few people who don’t know you’re an academic to describe the “average” professor. Undoubtedly they will paint a picture of an older white male who may or may not be wearing a tweed jacket.

That description is true for only some of the 58 percent of full-time faculty who are white males. And it’s utterly false for the remaining 42 percent of us, who must do our jobs knowing that at least some of our students are surprised to see someone who looks like us standing in front of them. We are always competing with students’ expectations of what we should be teaching, saying, doing, and assigning. And when we don’t perform according to their (usually) unspoken expectations, we pay the price in our course evaluations.

To complicate matters, students have different expectations for faculty of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Asian professors, for example, are supposed to be meek but very intelligent while black professors are expected to be loud and aggressive. Males and females also face far different challenges in the classroom. Men are stereotyped as smarter than women so it’s no wonder that students often challenge women about their qualifications, and

evaluate them more harshly than men.

Faculty of color, female faculty, and especially female faculty of color often choose to respond in one of two ways:

- **Confirm students' stereotypes.** Most professors want to build strong relationships with students and it's much simpler to do that within existing frameworks than to start anew. Challenging students' beliefs can create tension, and sometimes that tension can cause students to disengage. Consequently, some faculty perform a certain "act" that aligns with what students expect of them. I've seen this most often in black female colleagues who embrace the stereotype of the loud, sexualized black woman who is always ready to argue. These women leverage the archetypes of Jezebel and Sapphire as a point of entry into the white imagination. From there, they can construct relationships with nonblack students from a position of familiarity.
- **Disprove their beliefs.** This response is more common, albeit less intentional. I don't think female and nonwhite faculty are enumerating all the expectations students have of them and then trying to do the exact opposite. Marginalized professors usually are just vigilantly being themselves. In other words, they aren't actively trying to disprove stereotypes, but they are aware of how they counter students' expectations. Women who are stereotyped as less intelligent might begin class by citing their pedigree. Black men who are stereotyped as aggressive or hostile avoid standing too close, speaking too loudly, or using harsh language. Asian faculty who are stereotyped as "naturally smart" might make self-deprecating jokes.

I find both approaches troubling but understandable. Students will perceive you the way you present yourself. Your style of dress, your language, your gender, your height, your skin color — all contribute to students' perceptions of you. People evaluate others based upon their proximity to their own in-group. The more you are like me, the more I understand you, and the more I like you. The less you are like me, the less I understand you, and the more I have to rely on heuristics to make sense of you.

I advocate a third option. Instead of confirming or disapproving their stereotypes, I just present my real self. I acknowledge that I am black, young, female, Southern, and a football fan. I tell my outdoor-enthusiast students that I don't like going outside and have no interest in skiing, climbing, hiking, or anything else of the sort. I am honest in expressing my feelings about living in a very white, very conservative city. Importantly, I don't recite that autobiography on the first day of class, but weave it into my pedagogy throughout the course. I share pieces of myself as they are relevant.

Students tend to take the pieces they want and leave the rest — which is fine by me. They take the pieces to which they can relate, and that connection becomes the foundation of our relationship. Those points of overlap allow me to comfortably say things like, "Just because I'm Southern doesn't mean ...," or, more commonly, "Just because I'm black doesn't mean ..."

Those introductory clauses are my attempts to clarify who I am, likely in response to a student comment or question about urban families and contexts (I teach about social and political issues in education). I use myself as a model of contradiction to their stereotypical beliefs about Southerners, black people, and women. That approach has two benefits: First, it allows me to personalize what students sometimes view as impersonal issues. Second, it allows me to negate stereotypes without explicitly making students feel bad for having stereotypical beliefs (I do my best to avoid the rabbit hole of white guilt).

That is not to say that I avoid conversations about difference. It's actually quite the contrary. Soft entries like these facilitate in-depth discussions of the intersection of self-identity, cognitive processing, and life experiences. Students aren't horrified that I've acknowledged I'm black and presented an alternate form of blackness from what they expected. They are willing and excited to step up and ask themselves why they thought I'd be something I'm not.

While they engage in self-analysis, I engage in self-regulation. I must be careful not to express my anger, hurt, or incredulity when they reveal their stereotypical beliefs. Most of the time, those beliefs are the result of a lack of exposure rather than willful ignorance. It is my responsibility to provide both exposure and opportunities for

reflection.

Bias is always present, and nothing I can do will erase the racialized, gendered, and classist structures in which we exist, but I can work toward erasing the racialized, gendered, and classist beliefs that bolster such structures.

By not engaging in a war on stereotypes and instead focusing my energy on cultivating genuine teacher-student relationships, I do indeed force students to confront themselves. When I don't adhere to their notions of femininity or blackness, I am prepared to push back against their pushback. When I do happen to confirm their expectations of black womanhood, I am quick to ask them why that might be the case. In offering students my whole self without cautionary tape restricting our interactions, students begin to understand me beyond my social markers, and thus, begin to understand themselves in relation to their social contexts.

It is not my job to tell students what to believe; it is my job to challenge their beliefs. I've found that the best way to enhance their thinking is to complicate it with real-life evidence. I am that evidence.