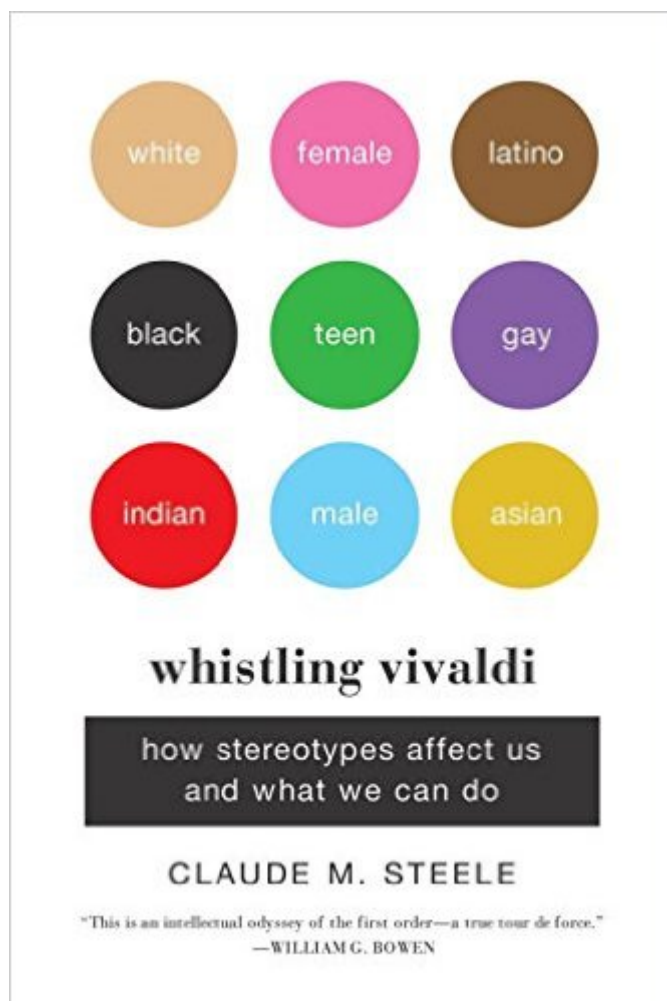


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# Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us And What We Can Do (Issues Of Our Time)



## Synopsis

The acclaimed social psychologist offers an insider's look at his research and groundbreaking findings on stereotypes and identity. Claude M. Steele, who has been called "one of the few great social psychologists," offers a vivid first-person account of the research that supports his groundbreaking conclusions on stereotypes and identity. He sheds new light on American social phenomena from racial and gender gaps in test scores to the belief in the superior athletic prowess of black men, and lays out a plan for mitigating these "stereotype threats" and reshaping American identities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book by social psychologist and Columbia University provost, Claude Steele, is a splendid example of how psychologists can make valuable contributions to society. In the book, Steele writes about the work he and his colleagues have done on a phenomenon called stereotype threat, the tendency to expect, perceive, and be influenced by negative stereotypes about one's social category, such as one's age, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, profession, nationality, political affiliation, mental health status, and so on. Experiments demonstrating the impact of stereotype threat When trying to understand certain performance gaps between groups, Steele and his colleagues did not focus on internal psychological factors. Instead, they tried to understand the possible causal role of identity contingencies, the things you have to deal with in a situation because

you have a given social identity. Over the years they carried out a series of creative experiments\* in which there was a control condition in which a task was given under normal conditions of life. In the experimental condition, the identity contingency was either cleverly removed or it was deliberately induced. Here are three examples of experiments to clarify how they worked.

**Experiment 1: Steele and Aronson (1995)** In this experiment the researchers had African American and white college students take a very challenging standardized test. In the control condition, the test was presented as these tests are always presented - as a measure of intellectual ability. This condition contained the stereotype that African Americans would be less intelligent. In the experimental condition the test was presented in a non-evaluative way. The test takers were told that the researchers were not interested in measuring their ability with the test but that they just wanted to use the test to examine the psychology of verbal problem solving. In the control condition, the African American test takers, on average, scored much lower than the white test takers. For the white test takers there was no difference in their scores between the control condition and the experimental condition. For the African American test takers there was a big difference between the control condition and the experimental condition. They solved about twice as many problems on the test in the experimental condition. Moreover, there was no difference between the performance of the black test takers and the white test takers.

**Experiment 2: Aronson, Lustina, Good, Keough, Steele & Brown (1999)** In this experiment, the researchers asked highly competent white males to take a difficult math test. In the control condition the test was taken normally. In the experimental condition, the researchers told the test takers that one of their reasons for doing the research was to understand why Asians seemed to perform better on these tests. Thus, they artificially created a stereotype threat. In the experimental condition, the test takers solved significantly fewer of the problems on the test and felt less confident about their performance.

**Experiment 3: Shih, Pittinsky & Ambady (1999)** In this experiment, a difficult math test was given to Asian women under three conditions. In condition one, they were subtly reminded of their Asian identity, in condition 2 they were subtly reminded of their female identity. In the control condition they were not reminded of their identity. The women reminded of their Asianness performed better than the control group, whereas those reminded of their female identity performed worse than the control group.

**How does stereotype threat harm performance?** Today, research on stereotype threat effects is done throughout the world by many researchers. Much insight has been gained into what it is and how it works. Briefly, you know your group identity and you know how society views it. You are aware that you are doing a task for which that view is relevant. You know, at some level, that you are in a predicament: your performance could confirm a bad view of your group and of yourself as a member of that group. You may not

consciously feel anxious but your blood pressure rises and you begin to sweat. Your thinking changes. Your mind starts to race: you become vigilant to all things relevant to the threat and to what your chances of avoiding it are. The book title comes from an observed behavior: an African American whistling Vivaldi to make clear that certain stereotypes attached to the group don't apply. You get some self-doubts and start to worry about how warranted the stereotype may be. You start to constantly monitor how well you are doing. You try hard to suppress threatening thoughts about not doing well or about the negative consequences of possibly failing. While you are having all of these thoughts you are distracted from the task at hand and your concentration and working memory suffer. Does it always happen? No. There is only one prerequisite for stereotype threat to happen: the person in question must care about the performance in question. The fear of confirming the negative stereotype then becomes upsetting enough to interfere with performance. It is now known that stereotype has the strongest negative impact when people are highly motivated and performing at the frontier of their skills. Solutions: bridging performance gaps through small interventions Can something be done about it? Yes. The promising news is that there are some rather small interventions which can help a lot. Experiments have shown that subtly removing or preventing stereotype threats can completely or largely eliminate performance gaps between stereotyped groups and non-stereotyped groups. Examples of helpful interventions are:- Make it clear in the way you give critical feedback that you use high standards and let the person know that you expect him or her to be able to eventually succeed.- Improve the number of people from the social category in the setting so that a critical mass is reached.- Make it clear that you value diversity.- Foster inter-group conversations and frame these as a learning experience.- Allow the stereotyped individuals to use self-affirmations.- Help the stereotyped individuals to develop a narrative about the setting that explains their frustrations while projecting positive engagement and success in the setting. Conclusion The tone of the book is informal, friendly, and personal, and the content is profound. The topic is highly relevant both to the development of social psychology and to the development of our educational systems and societies at large. Of course it also can inspire positive psychology research: how have certain individuals managed to overcome stereotype threat, how do certain organizations manage to bridge performance gaps, how do societies manage to do the same? This review was published on Positive Psychology News Daily

"Whistling Vivaldi," a new study of cultural stereotypes by Claude M. Steele, is a surprising book. Within its pages, the highly thought-of social psychologist shows us how, even in the absence of explicit racism, negative stereotypes can continue to pervade American life, and have far-reaching

influences on our behavior. Before writing it, Steele did more than two decades of systematic research of minority student performance, as well as a wide range of experiments on other situations where stereotypes can come into play. He also cites, in the book, many other experiments in social psychology that explored this and related subjects: many of which he apparently inspired. Within these pages, Steele reveals the powerful, hidden "stereotype threat" that can lie within most competitive situations. He defines it as the great, but invisible pressure created by our fear of confirming negative cultural stereotypes about ourselves. He shows how it can affect white men racing against blacks, or playing basketball against them, when blacks are thought to be fleet of foot. It can also affect white men competing against Asians in university settings. It can also be shown to affect highly-achieving women studying mathematics or sciences, who have internalized our culture's belief that women are naturally inferior to men in these areas. He also shows that it affects higher-ranking black students in our nation's elite colleges, and even its better-ranking high schools. And he proves that, while you might think the poorer performance of black students in these situations is due to racism, or to the 'usual suspects' often cited in discussions of poorly-achieving black and other minority students: broken families, lack of good role models, a background suffused with violence that denigrates education, their poor achievements can be shown to be due, also, to stereotype threat. Steele was appointed provost of Columbia University in 2009. He had been teaching at Stanford University since 1991; while there he served both as chair of the psychology department and as director of Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. He has also taught at the University of Michigan, the University of Washington, and the University of Utah. He earned his doctorate in social psychology from Ohio State University, and holds honorary doctorates from Princeton, Yale, and the University of Chicago. "Whistling Vivaldi," however, goes beyond merely identifying and proving the problem of "stereotype threat." Yet it is written in easy to follow English, rather than dense academia, and is a fast, and not difficult, read. Its author shows that interventions are possible in this negative process that can show positive results for years, maybe even entire college careers. And these interventions are neither costly, nor difficult, to implement. Let's hope the book reaches, and influences, the audience it deserves.

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