Stereotype threat is a theory of discrimination response behavior that was first coined by Steele and Aronson (1995). The theory posits that under specific conditions involving explicitly revealed stereotypes, people will subconsciously act to fulfill those stereotypes, even when the outcome is detrimental. In order for the conditions of stereotype threat to be met, three elements must be in place:

1. The individual must face a situation where there is a stereotype-based expectation of performance
2. The individual must self-identify with the stereotyped group
3. The individual must believe that the “others” (observers, evaluators, etc) in the situation perceive the individual as a member of the stereotyped group

The classic example of stereotype threat that Steele and Aronson first observed was in the academic performance of African-American undergraduates. When race was emphasized in the testing conditions, African-American students performed more poorly on standardized tests than their White counterparts. When race was eliminated from the conditions, the African-American students performed equivalently or better than the White students. This initial study showed that performance can be inhibited by the awareness that others are viewing the individual’s behavior through the lens of stereotypes.

Since it was first identified, over three hundred experiments on stereotype threat have been performed and published in peer-reviewed journals (Reducing Stereotype Threat , 2008). The majority of these experiments have continued to tie stereotype threat to academic performance and race, and the results are remarkably consistent. A select group of researchers have applied the concept of stereotype threat to the experience of older adults facing ageism. As with the tome of racially motivated experiments, the findings from the ageism-relevant tests provide profound insight to obstacles older adults face but often cannot see clearly enough to address.

Examples of Stereotype Threat and Ageism:

A 2003 study found that older adults’ performance on memory tests could be manipulated by the activation of age-related stereotype threat (Hess, Auman, Colcombe, & Rahhal, 2003). The test also determined that the more greatly the older adult valued memory performance, the worse the individual performed when faced with stereotype threat. A subsequent study in 2004 revealed that even stereotypes presented in terms of positive ageism resulted in poor memory performance (Hess, Hinson, & Statham, 2004). The implications of these findings are profound,

especially when considering that dementia assessments are, by their very nature, loaded with stereotype threat. It is a commonly held assumption that dementia is an inevitable aspect of aging. This myth is so pervasive in society that it requires a tremendous presence of mind to look at moments of small memory loss as just that – moments. Langer proposes that memory challenges are often bracketed as chronic aspects of aging when they could really be just the normal result of stress, poor sleep or a busy lifestyle (Langer, 2009). Studies in stereotype threat give insight into conditions that can lead older adults to perform more poorly on cognition tests, creating a falsely dramatic sense of memory limitations that may not actually be reflected in every day life.

Further Reading:

Stereotype Embodiment

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