

NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier
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New study suggests stereotypes impact academic self assessments *Perceived prejudice influences how black students viewed their skills and performance*

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WATERLOO – Studies by researchers at Wilfrid Laurier University and New York University (NYU) have found that students who feel they are being racially stereotyped are more likely to have difficulty assessing their academic skills and performance than those who did not feel stigmatized.

Two studies involving over 100 students at NYU found a correlation between the amount of prejudice black participants perceived and a lack of self-knowledge. The findings are outlined in an article, entitled *The Ups and Downs of Attributional Ambiguity: Stereotype Vulnerability and the Academic Self-Knowledge of African American College Students*, published in the December issue of *Psychological Science*.

“Research has shown that black students sometimes demonstrate high aspirations, even when past performance should call those aspirations into question,” said Michael Inzlicht, an assistant professor at Laurier and former research scientist with NYU’s Steinhardt School of Education. “These unrealistic expectations can demoralize students and may even contribute to the high attrition rates of black students – something the Toronto District School Board is grappling with at the moment. Our research suggests a strong link between unrealistic optimism and students’ expectations of prejudice, real or otherwise.”

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Inzlicht and his co-researcher, NYU applied psychology professor Joshua Aronson, conclude that the study demonstrates the fragility of academic perceptions. Stereotype-vulnerable students experience a roller-coaster ride of self-confidence.

In one of the studies, the researchers measured students' confidence levels over a two-week period. Black students with high levels of stereotype vulnerability expressed both extreme overconfidence and extreme underconfidence, depending on when their confidence was measured. Black students who weren't stereotype vulnerable showed the same stability of confidence as white students in the study.

The researchers link the difference to the fact that accurate academic self-knowledge helps people maintain stable confidence in their abilities. Previous research has shown that self-views and assessments of people's strengths and weaknesses are critical in the pursuit of future opportunities.

"You have to know where you stand so you know what goals to set and can decide what to pursue," said Inzlicht. "People who know themselves are anchored, but the black stereotype vulnerable group was off the charts – they were miscalibrated with reality and couldn't properly assess their performance on these tests."

While this study focuses on blacks, the study authors say the theory could be applied to any group feeling stereotype vulnerability. "Anyone who experiences stereotype vulnerability may be robbed of opportunities to learn from feedback and performance, and thus from developing a clear and stable academic self-concept," said Aronson.

This research adds to the body of work on stereotype threat, a performance-debilitating anxiety about conforming to the stereotypes that individuals believe others have about them when taking standardized tests. Stanford University psychology professor Claude Steele and Aronson introduced the concept in 1995. Data from that study suggested that achievement gaps on standardized tests and academic performance may be partly due to stereotypes that impugn the intellectual abilities of black, Hispanic and low-income students.

To obtain a copy of the journal article, please e-mail mstrickl@wlu.ca