Stereotype Threat and Self-Perceptions: The Impact on College Students

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According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), "development involves an ability to update our self-concept based on information from others. In college, students weave together the feedback from grades and test scores, coaches and directors, and friends and loved ones and form a fairly accurate picture of how others see them" (p. 199). Accordingly, college students' self-perceptions affect their performance positively and negatively both inside and outside of the classroom. The following article is based on the assertions: 1) identity development is important for college students, 2) self-perceptions affect development, 3) stereotype effects influence self-perceptions, and 4) awareness of stereotype effects as well as the implications of self-perception maintenance (i.e., the process of maintaining a positive self-concept) are beneficial to student affairs professionals and other educators.

First, self-perceptions are framed within the context of psycho-social development theory. Select theories are outlined to provide support for the initial assertion: identity development is important for college students. Second, two concepts of self-perceptions are defined and the broader concept of self-perceptions is linked to the development process. Third, explanations and examples of stereotype effects are highlighted to illustrate the additional nuances and implications of stereotype effects on students' self-perceptions and development. In closing, limitations of the research and suggestions for informed practice are provided.

Self-Perceptions and Development

The development and maintenance of self-perceptions correspond with college students' identity development. Psycho-social development theory is presented due to its interrelation with identity formation. Examples include the work of Erickson and his eight stages (or crises) development model and Chickering and Reisser's seven vector model (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Erickson's adolescent stage of identity versus identity diffusion and his young adult stage of intimacy versus isolation both include a need for "stabilization of identity" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993,

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p. 22). Springing from these stages is Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model, built upon Chickering's earlier model, which also focuses on identity development among college students. The seven vector model encompasses the following: 1) Developing Competence, 2) Managing Emotions, 3) Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence, 4) Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, 5) Establishing Identity, 6) Developing Purpose, and 7) Developing Integrity. They explain that it is likely the college experience will move students along the first four vectors with growth in each area assisting in the construction of identity (1993). Utilizing knowledge of development theory, educators have a framework to understand and potentially shape the student development process.

Inherent in identity development is the desire for a positive self-concept or self-perception. The stated desire is a factor in students' progression, stagnation, or regression within various stages or vectors of development and educators should acknowledge their impact on performance and development progression. For the purposes of this paper, self-perceptions are described within the framework of self-esteem and self-efficacy, two concepts that occasionally overlap yet remain distinct.

Self-Efficacy

According to Albert Bandura, self-efficacy is described as individuals' "beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (as cited in Stage, Muller, Kinzie, & Simmons, 1998, p. 24). Reflected within their third vector, Chickering and Reisser (1993) corroborate that "self-sufficiency," taking responsibility for pursuing "self-chosen goals," and a loss of obligation to others' opinions are all vital developmental steps for students (p. 47). Elaborating further, Stage et al. (1998) explain:

> Beliefs about self-efficacy are formed using information from a variety of sources. For the college student, prior conceptions of ability (often based on experiences in previous educational settings), social comparisons (comparative evaluations within classes, living environments, and co-curricular contexts), framing of feedback (the social evaluation of achieved progress or shortfalls), and perceived controllability (locus of control) all combine for the development of self-efficacy. (p. 26)

Therefore, college students' beliefs about their self-efficacy build upon prior experiences and will continue to develop throughout their time at college. With reference given to Bandura, Stage et. al (1998) also explain

that self-efficacy affects academic achievement from the initial cognition and emotional approach to the actual selection of and perseverance toward chosen objectives. Substantial research on self-efficacy exists with some demonstrating its tight coupling with task motivation as well as its significance as a predictor for student grade point averages (Stage et. al, 1998).

Self-Esteem

Contrasted with self-efficacy, self-esteem is defined as "people's evaluations of their own worth – that is, the extent to which they view themselves as good, competent, and decent" (Aronson & Aronson, 2007, p. 436). Self-esteem has influence in a broad range of situations, including those involving conformity, attraction, persuasion, and education (2007). According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), "self-esteem involves a generalized judgment about personal value or merit" (p. 199). They also contend that intrinsic, personal standards, contrasted with external comparisons, promote a more positive sense of academic and social competence as well as a stronger sense of self-worth (1993).

Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat is based on a need to represent oneself and one's group in a positive manner. The effect emerges when individuals from a minority group are placed in a situation where they have the possibility to confirm or be judged according to negative cultural stereotypes. The result is often decreased performance outcomes (Aronson & Aronson, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

It is clear such stereotypes pervade campuses today. In recent years, both an Ivy League president and third-year law student from the same institution have captured media attention with one suggesting that women possess less 'intrinsic aptitude' for science than men, and the other insinuating that African-Americans may be 'on average, genetically predisposed to be less intelligent' (Jan, 2010). Accordingly, Fries-Britt (2000) explains that many are influenced by social images of the intellectual elite and have subsequently dismissed minorities outright.

As an illustration of the impact, consider the following example: Black and White college students were administered the verbal portion of the Graduate Record Exam (GRE).

- Scenario 1: Students were led to believe the experimenter was measuring intellectual ability.

- Scenario 2: No intentions of evaluation were expressed.

The data concluded that White students performed equally well in both conditions. However, the Black students in the evaluative condition scored about half as well as those in the non-evaluative condition (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

The preceding study presents findings that are both disturbing and revealing. This is only one example by which an intrinsic desire for positive self-perceptions and stereotype threat significantly influences performance. In one condition, Black students scored equally as well as their White counterparts; however in the experimental condition, the scores of Black students were significantly lower.

According to Stage et al. (1998), both effort and ability are often cited as causes for academic outcomes. As presented earlier, such outcomes can influence self-perceptions. Within the study, the Black students' abilities were initially demonstrated, yet a significant drop in scores resulted in the experimental group. It is unlikely that innate ability changed, thus effort or other variables impacted performance. Fries-Britt's (2000) study on high-ability black collegians found that ability and racial affiliation were students' two essential components for establishing a sense of self. Regarding student development, a combination of all three factors is likely: effort, ability, and race are components of academic outcomes and for establishing a sense of self.

Pajares explains that beliefs about the self-concept enter in a cyclical process in which "individuals interpret performance and adjust self-beliefs, which in turn inform and alter subsequent performance" (as cited in Stage, 1998, p. 24). From this model, the importance of self-perceptions and performance are evident as fluctuations of either could have reverberating effects on a student's development. Therefore, educators' knowledge about the interplay and cognizance of external influences is essential.

These external influences are not limited to racial stereotypes. Research has demonstrated the effects of stereotype threat within the contexts of various social identities including gender, race, age, and other social groups. For example, in a telephone survey study, McGlone, Aronson, and Kobrynowicz (2006) found that women scored lower on a political knowledge survey if it was allegedly diagnostic and if the interviewer was male. No significant effects existed on male respondents, suggesting that some women were placed into an environment conducive to stereotype threat (i.e., they had the potential to be judged or to possibly confirm a negative stereotype, that women are not knowledgeable in politics).

Stereotype threat effects are not limited to target (i.e., culturally subordinate) groups; they also affect agent (i.e., culturally dominant) groups. Aronson et al. (1999) demonstrated that "neither a history of stigmatization nor internalized feelings of intellectual inferiority" (p. 29) are required for stereotype threat to disrupt performance. In the study, math-proficient White males were asked to take the GRE Math Subject test. When the exam was portrayed to investigate the superiority of Asians' math ability compared to Whites, the participants scored significantly lower than when no stereotype threat was present.

To broaden the scope further, stereotype effects are not domain locked. In other words, the positive or negative effects emerging in one domain can carry over to an unrelated domain. In a golf task framed as diagnostic of 'sports intelligence,' Black participants performed significantly worse than control group participants. A negative stereotype about the cognitive domain impeded performance in the kinesthetic domain. In comparison, White participants performed worse than did control participants when the task was presented as diagnostic of 'natural athletic ability' (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999, p. 1225) demonstrating a transferred effect contingent upon domain specific prowess or identity stigmatization.

Stereotype Susceptibility and Stereotype Lift

Stereotype susceptibility involves the acknowledgement of multiple identities to which individuals might identify and the susceptibility of the individual to associated stereotypes. Until this point the presented studies have focused on downward effects related to stereotypes about one social identity (i.e., race, gender). However, in a society composed of complex identities, Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) framed their research accordingly focusing on individuals embodying different and possibly conflicting stereotypes. They found "when a particular social identity [is] made salient at an implicit level, performance [is] altered in the direction predicted by the stereotype associated with the identity" (p. 80). In the study, Asian-American undergraduate women were administered a questionnaire followed by a math exam. The questionnaire provided three conditions: female-identity salient, Asian-identity salient, and control condition. When gender identity was made salient, performance dwindled compared to the control group. However, when racial identity was made salient, the participants performed better than the control group (1999). The results demonstrate that stereotypes can both hinder and boost performance.

Similarly, McGlone and Aronson (2006) manipulated the identity salience of females taking a spatial reasoning test. They found that women

asked to contemplate about their achieved identities (e.g., students at an elite private college) performed better than those who contemplated about their sex or test-irrelevant identity (e.g., Northeasterners). Thus social identity appears to be "not only a vector for stereotype threat phenomena, but also a potential antidote for their ill effects" (p. 492).

Unfortunately, within stereotype effects, the result can be a win-win and lose-lose situation. Walton & Cohen (2003) explicate a phenomenon similar in outcome to the identity salience manipulation studies, but contrasted in process. They assert that stereotype lift occurs when an out-group is negatively stereotyped and, through downward social comparison, the in-group benefits. It is also presumed to produce increases in self-efficacy or perceived social acceptance for the in-group (2003).

Contrasted with stereotype susceptibility stereotype lift is triggered by negative stereotypes of another group instead of positive stereotypes about one's own group; thus, it affects the non-stereotyped dominant group in a specific domain. "Stereotype lift particularly benefits people who believe either in the validity of negative stereotypes, or in the legitimacy of group-based hierarchy" (Walton & Cohen, 2003, p. 464) and provides some explanation for the aforementioned Ivy League representatives.

Self-Perceptions and College Students

In addition to holding stereotypes about target group members, many have stereotypes about college students in general, which broadens and perpetuates the effects. Baird (2003) provides us with an example of the stereotypical college student as portrayed in classic movies: young, White, middle-class, usually male, full-time, supported by parents, and concerned with ideas of success. This stereotypical conception of college students still exists within educational institutions and as indicated by this article, has influence well beyond internal prejudices. Navigating these stereotypes and acknowledging the interplay between student development, self-perceptions, and stereotype effects is imperative for work in higher education. If educators want to provide effective and inclusive support they must educate themselves not only on the salient issues, but also on the underlying processes. Illustrating one target group's challenge, Fries-Britt (2000) explains:

> High-achieving Black students must master a baffling balancing act that they experience as they manage their intellectual ability. On the one hand, they find it necessary to conceal their intelligence, yet on the other hand, they feel that they have to go out of their way to prove

that they are smart. Often the pressure to prove that they are capable is not just for personal reasons; as members of the extended black community, they feel a responsibility to prove that blacks in general are intelligent. (p. 57)

Adding to the portrayed struggle, McGlone, Kobrynowicz, and Aronson (2006) explain that stereotype threat is "keenly experienced among those who strive to excel in evaluative contexts" (McGlone et al., 2006). Such a profile includes the high achieving Black students. Therefore, it is imperative that educators incorporate knowledge of stereotype effects when working with students and promoting positive self-perceptions.

Self-Perception Maintenance

A positive self-concept is significant enough to the developmental process that substantial effort is exerted to either boost or maintain it, though it is not always at the conscious level. Self-serving bias and self-handicapping are two instances of self-perception maintenance, or ego-defensive behavior, that are typically utilized subconsciously. With self-serving bias, individuals often take personal credit for successes but attribute failures to external factors (e.g., an avid sports fan exclaims "we" won but "they" lost) (Aronson & Aronson, 2008). As Hastie explains, upon failure, a causal search is employed to alleviate "unexpected outcomes, nonattainment of goals, [and] situations that have important personal implications" (as cited in Stage et al., 1998, p. 10).

Self-handicapping involves individuals intentionally selecting performance locales, which "render performance feedback ambiguous" (Jones & Berglas, 1978, p. 201). Examples include a student's extreme procrastination, an athlete's undertraining, or a leader's over-commitment (Stage et al., 1998). Students want to prove they are a success and not a failure, especially in domains to which their self-perceptions are dependent. Hence, when the chances of success are dubious, they often withdraw from the task to prevent a loss of self-esteem that would accompany a failure in a relevant domain (Crocker & Knight, 2005).

Limitations and Best Practices

As outlined, stereotype effects are neither locked within one domain nor are they specific to target or agent groups (Aronson et al., 1999; Stone et al., 1999). The effects can either inhibit or boost performance and may be empowering to one group at the expense of another (Shih et al., 1999; Walton & Cohen 2003). Additionally, stereotype effects are more prominent in domains of more value to one's self-perceptions, in

which individuals highly identify (Aronson et al., 1999). Otherwise, if a particular performance is not meaningful for one's self-perceptions, a negative stereotype should not have an associated negative impact (Stone, et al., 1999).

Therefore, if advising students, by refocusing the foundation of self-esteem (e.g., focusing on the value of learning or internal factors such as virtue) one could attenuate stereotype effects in a previously relevant domain. Escaping the cycle altogether does not require apathy about performance appraisal; it merely disconnects the contingent relationship between a student's self-esteem and academic performance (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Crocker & Knight, 2005).

The nuances of stereotype effects are many, so one should not expect to locate and either prevent or ameliorate every instance. Student affairs professionals should also consider how these effects could emerge in their work. How might these studies apply to leadership? To dialogue? Transgender students? Multi-heritage students (i.e., biracial, multiracial, transracial adoptees)? Consider the question proposed by Chickering and Reisser (1993): "which reference group does an Asian American student identify with – parents who may value conformity, humility, obligation, and emotional restraint, or peers who value individuality, autonomy, and expressiveness?" (p. 188). We no longer live in a society where identity is a given, tucked neatly within prescribed roles and lifestyles (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Research has demonstrated that positive and negative effects can result by influencing self-perceptions. The experiment by Aronson and Mettee (as cited in Aronson & Aronson, 2007) found that students who received information designed to lower their self-esteem cheated at an assigned task more often than those who received high self-esteem information. Moreover, Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master (2006) found that African American students received significantly higher grades if their self-esteem was raised by providing affirmation exercises and focusing some assignments on their personal strengths and values. It should be noted, however, that educators must be careful not to foster unrealistic or narcissistic self-esteem because studies have shown this type of self-esteem can produce numerous negative effects (e.g. Kernis, 2001).

Therefore, self-esteem should be approached "as one of a cluster of factors to promote positive outcomes. It should not be an end in itself" (Baumeister et al., 2003, p. 39). Self-esteem, like a stereotype, refers to a "perception rather than reality. . . a person's belief about whether he or

she is intelligent and attractive, for example . . . does not necessarily say anything about whether the person actually is intelligent and attractive" (p. 2). Graham adds that we should avoid expressing sympathy for sub-par performance and extending unsolicited offers of help (as cited in Stage et al., 1998).

Although many student affairs professionals may desire to be continually encouraging, providing indiscriminate boosts of self-esteem not linked to positive behavior can be detrimental (Baumeister et al., 2003). Furthermore, the relationship between self-esteem and other measurements (e.g., academic performance, leadership) is still debated. For example, correlation between self-esteem and academic performance does not distinguish between cause, result, or other variable such as a privileged background attributing to both outcomes (2003). Nevertheless, Baumeister et al. (2003) state, "people's beliefs shape their actions in many important ways, and these actions in turn shape their social reality and the social realities of the people around them" (p. 2). They also refer to the classic study Pygmalion in the Classroom, by Rosenthal and Jacobson, in which teachers' "false, unfounded beliefs about their students later became objective, verifiable realities in the performance of those students" (p. 2).

Conclusion

Like those of student development, theories of stereotype threat, self-esteem, and self-efficacy remain only theories and not absolutes. However, also in a similar fashion, the theoretical research provides another lens to view and explain complex phenomenon – phenomenon that is illustrated in statistical disparities from academia to the workforce and lived by individuals of various identity groups. In attempt to further understand those disparities, there is growing research on stereotype threat, along with critiques. One such critique notes the reliance on college student samples for research studies (Stroessner, Good, & Webster, n.d.). However, for student affairs practitioners who work with a college student demographic, the sample is ideal. Nevertheless, providing set protocol surrounding stereotype threat prevention or suggesting whether one should focus efforts on increasing performance or increasing positive self-perceptions is not within the possibilities of this article. Rather, the intention of this article is to introduce research that has implications for student development, outline results and limitations, and encourage educators to use the knowledge or lens accordingly. Gordon Allport observed that "being the target of a negative stereotype about an important social identity is distressing and promotes a number of defensive reactions" (as cited in Stone et al., 1999, p.

1213). His statement supports this article by emphasizing the interweaving of development, self-perceptions, and stereotype effects experienced by college students. Crocker and Knight (2004) explain:

> The emotional boosts associated with success in domains of contingency are pleasant but do not satisfy fundamental human needs for learning, relatedness, and autonomy. Rather, we think of boosts to self-esteem as analogous to sugar: tasty but not nutritious. Indeed, the boosts to self-esteem that accompany success in contingent domains can, we think, become addictive, and pursuing self-esteem by attempting to validate one's abilities has costs for learning, relatedness, autonomy, self-regulation, and, over time, physical and mental health. (p. 201)

An example is Cedric Jennings, the main character of *A Hope in the Unseen*. The book chronicles Cedric's survival and escape from inner city Washington, D.C. to eventually enroll at Brown University. A follow-up article in the Washington Post explained that Cedric is now feeling pressure when people ask him what he is doing now. Since Brown, he has acquired Masters degrees from Harvard and Michigan, but "he so fears not living up to his potential – a potential advertised to the world in a best-selling book – that he sometimes works to the point of sickness" (Oppenheim, 2008).

As a solution, Crocker and Knight (2005) suggest "the importance of self-esteem lies less in whether it is high or low, and more in what people believe they need to be or do to have value and worth as a person..." (p. 200) and as presented previously, educators should work to retrain students to build positive self-perceptions based on processes (e.g., learning or improvement) or internal factors (e.g., virtue) rather than performance (Baumeister et al., 2003).

With the knowledge of stereotype effects, student affairs professionals and other educators can more effectively support student development. Some of the presented research was troubling, yet one may find comfort in knowing that many of these issues are not internal to the individuals, but resultant from the social situation. In his classic and still widely accepted theory, Lewin (1939) asserted that behavior is a function of the person and the environment – a simple yet profound concept that embodies the core of this article. Although the research surrounding stereotype effects adds complexity to his assertion, educators should intentionally be aware of potentially threatening situations, the individuals involved, and acknowledge the cyclical connections between self-perceptions, performance, and identity development.

When possible, educators should emphasize self-worth and positive self-perceptions apart from performance. Otherwise, a student's self-concept may remain unstable. Another suggestion is to focus on achieved identities rather than those perceived as inherent; this focus can diminish negative stereotype effects. Additionally, when working with college students, educators should remember that the college environment, due to self-selection and/or self-determination, is an environment likely to induce stereotype effect situations. This holds particular importance to work with target group members. Finally, student affairs professionals cannot fully regulate students' self-perceptions, nor prevent stereotype effects. However, by remaining aware and making small adjustments according to the research and suggestions presented, they can leave a lasting impact on students' development.

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