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Label Me Proud Not Damaged

An eighteen-year-old young boy decides to leave home to pick up a rifle and defend his country. When that boy comes back a man from the journey, a lot of people don’t understand how he became this new man. They give him a new label called “veteran” and at first he’s proud, telling everyone who asks about this new label. But then he starts to realize everyone’s frightened faces and hushed tones when he replies to the label, consequently, this makes him feel like not even telling anyone about his past. As that veteran I have felt this threatening feeling that Claude Steele has dubbed “stereotype threat” in his book “*Whistling Vivaldi.”* This “stereotype threat” is what I feel when others, who’s identity differs from mine, ask me who I am. My mind starts to race while I’m trying to figure out what everyone in the conversation is thinking about. Do they think I’m some killer? Or, are they wondering if I’ve been shot at and how I’m handling such a traumatic event? In any case, I try to steer the conversation toward a different subject to avoid that terrible feeling that is always there when I say the words “I am a veteran.” I’m proud to have served but I also want to show everyone that I’m not some damaged person that came back from a battlefield. I’m someone that made a big life decision at a young age and now that I am a civilian again I know that I’m better than I used to be. Society should realize that not all veterans are suffering from a mental illness; this mindset is affecting our social interactions. Everyone thinks of us as crazed lunatics, when in fact, we have been nurtured in a different culture that had different social rules.

To understand that feeling you must know what “stereotype threat” even is. According to Claude Steele, “stereotype threat” is defined in his book “*Whistling Vivaldi”* as “whenever we’re in a situation where a bad stereotype about one of our own identities could be applied to us-such as those about being old, poor, rich, or female-we know it. We know what “people could think.” We know that anything we do that fits the stereotype could be taken as confirming it. And we know that, for that reason, we could be judged and treated accordingly” (Steele, 5). In my personal experience, this threat has affected me in several ways. To understand why it has affected me I have to explain the identity contingencies.

“Over-efforting” is over performing when a stereotype a person cares about looms over them. Another description being “No special susceptibility is required to experience this pressure. Research has found but one prerequisite; the person must care about the performance in question” (Steele, 98). A common behavior would be to try extra hard because a person doesn’t want to confirm the stereotype. For instance, I don’t wear clothing that shows that I am a veteran even though there are days that I really want too. At school I am a part of the veteran’s club but I don’t like to vocalize this fact for I fear that I will be immediately judged. I also have joined other clubs, thinking that this action will look like I don’t only associate with that identity.

That immediate judgment evolves in my mind in a form called “racing mind” that I combat on a daily basis. As Steele put it “racing mind” is when “increased vigilance toward possible threat and bad consequences in the social environment, which diverts attention and mental capacity away from the task at hand, which worsens performance and general functioning, all of which further exacerbates anxiety, which further intensifies the vigilance for threat and the diversion of attention. A full-scale vicious cycle ensues, with great cost to performance and general functioning” (Steele,126). This contingency has taking over me so many times that I started to notice it even before I learned about what it actually was. As soon as I notice the threat, it takes over, which in turn breaks any concentration I have on anything that requires my attention. Furthermore, I sometimes want to shut down and not speak at all, which has happened on numerous occasions. My mind goes into a contemplative downfall, thinking everyone is contemplating my psychological status. Do they think I’m damaged goods, that will curl up into a ball and cry out for mommy whenever I hear loud noises? Why are they suddenly distant and somewhat afraid? These and so many more questions start to run through my head at such a fast rate that I wish I never even mentioned that fact about me.

A lot of this wasted mental energy seems to come into fruition when I’m the only veteran in a group. “Critical mass cues” is a contingency threat which Claude Steele defines as “the point at which there are enough minorities in a setting, like a school or workplace, that individual minorities no longer feel uncomfortable there because they are minorities-in our terms, they no longer feel an interfering level of identity threat” (Steele, 135). I do my best to show that I’m not to be feared but I have also been in situations that sometimes confirms my own fears of what everyone is thinking, “he’s dangerous.” A night out with friends, who are not veterans, has turned the wrong way before. With everyone being intoxicated and having their liquid courage running through their veins; I have been known to be very protective of my group. If anyone tries anything I perceive as threatening with the group, I am the first to step in and can get what is perceived to be as over protective and aggressive. This is in turn, causes me to think that everyone I associate with or meet for the first time, cognitively breaks it down as my time in the military has taken over me. After whatever altercation ensued is over, I try to explain that I’m just a protective person. The only relief of the mental nightmare I get is when a veteran outside the group joins; shows or explains that I don’t have PTSD, but that I have been nurtured into someone who is very protective. That relief is followed by a sense calmness as that other veteran goes into detail of how we are raised in boot camp. Explaining the many type of personalities and pre-career training that our brothers and sisters have gone through. That veteran enlightens my group in a way I couldn’t but I’m so appreciative that someone could break the stereotype for just a moment.

Questions have loomed over me, though, I have never found answers until I read *Whistling Vivaldi.* Survival mode being alleviated as I read through the final pages of the book; the words slowly culling my fear as the book shepherds me towards words like “incremental theory,” “self-affirmation theory,” and “Inter-group partnerships.” “Incremental theory, which frames the ability required to meet a challenge as learnable and incrementally expandable” (Steele,168). Reminds me of what’s called the growth mindset, seeing everything as an empowering lesson instead of letting it bring you down. This is how I’ve recently learned to view life instead of always blaming the military for my problems on stereotypes. Seeing the “lesson” has become extremely important to me as a veteran who feels he is constantly judged because of this identity.

As stated before, I go through the threat of “over-efforting” on a daily basis. “Self-affirmation theory” has giving me a sort of weapon to fight this threat; it being “a basic human motive to perceive oneself as good and competent-in a phrase, as “morally and adaptively adequate.” When that perception is threatened-by events, by how others judge us, or even by our own actions that fail to meet our standards-we struggle to repair that good image. If actual redress fails or isn’t possible, we rationalize, we reexplain our actions and other events so as to produce a self-image of competence and morality” (Steele,172). A mental battlefield like “over-efforting” is won with this new found knowledge; mine being won by talking myself through the situation. When a sudden rush of questions starts flowing through my mind I combat it with a quick statement “You may be perceived in this way but remember that you served for seven long and arduous years. You have gone on three tours and have seen more of the world than most of the people you currently interact with on a daily basis. It’s okay if they don’t understand you as long as you understand yourself. Don’t let their ideas alter who you are just because of what the media or propaganda has showed them.” Hence, the threat goes away and critical thinking takes its place.

What I have found on my journey of wearing a uniform and carrying that rifle is the understanding of people and how we are all the same in some shape or form; these “contingency threats” are only affecting us because we lost sight of that fact. But, with this new found understanding that Claude Steele has scripted in his book, we may find a way back to this view of a veteran as being a symbol. As a result, the social construct can be altered from lunatic or having PTSD to someone who represented America. That boy didn’t go pick up a rifle, miss all the family holidays, birthdays, write all those letters, and make time for video calls just to come home to stereotypical comments or gestures. Nor, did that boy who saw some of his friends go a little too early from this life come back to be mentally persecuted by the media, which in turn caused his new label to be stereotyped. That boy came back a man and decided that if he’s going to be labeled, it’s going to be proud not damaged.

Works Cited

Steele, Claude “*Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*” W.W. Norton & Company. April 12, 2010. Print.