Stereotype Threat

Key Concepts

- Stereotype threat:
  - The risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group.
- Stereotype vulnerability:
  - The awareness of a stereotype can make individuals feel at risk of being judged by it, which can generate anxiety and impair performance.
- Disidentification:
  - Over time, to protect self-esteem, people may disidentify from domains where they face constant threat (e.g., school or academics), reducing motivation and engagement.

- Think about your own learning experience, when did you feel most seen or unseen in the classroom?
- Which parts of your or your peers' identity (gender, language, ethnicity, class, ability, appearance, etc.) did an educator focus on, overlook, or make assumptions about?
- Can you recall a moment when a teacher acted differently toward you or a peer based on identity?
- How did that action, even if unintentional, affect your or their confidence, motivation, or participation?

Steele & Aronson (1995)

- Conducted several experiments with Black and White college students to test whether the diagnosticity of a test (i.e., whether it was described as measuring ability) affected performance.
- Study 1
- Design: Students took a difficult verbal test (GRE items).
  - Condition 1: Test described as diagnostic of intellectual ability.
  - Condition 2: Nondiagnostic — a problem-solving task.
- Condition 3: Nondiagnostic + challenge — framed as a fun challenge.
- Results:
  - Black students performed significantly worse than White students only when the test was described as measuring ability.
  - When the test was framed as nondiagnostic, Black students' performance matched that of White students.

Steele & Aronson (1995)

- Study 2
- Design: Measured anxiety (using the Spielberger State Anxiety Inventory).
- Results:
    - Black students in the “ability-diagnostic” condition showed higher anxiety and completed fewer items, indicating that stereotype threat induces evaluative stress that interferes with test-taking.

Steele (1997)

- Design
  - Participants: Male and female university students with strong math backgrounds (to ensure domain identification).
  - Task: All students took a challenging math test with questions taken from the Advanced Graduate Record Examination (GRE) — the same test across all conditions.
    - Stereotype-relevant condition: The test was said to measure mathematical ability, where men and women sometimes differ.
    - Stereotype-neutral condition: The test was said to be gender-fair and had shown no gender differences in performance.
- Results
  - When the test was described as diagnostic of ability (i.e., the stereotype-relevant condition), women performed significantly worse than men.
  - When the same test was described as gender-fair (stereotype-neutral), the gender difference disappeared, women's performance matched men's.

Key Takeaways

- Stereotype threat is situational and does not require belief in the stereotype.
- It can impair intellectual performance through anxiety, self-consciousness, or distraction.
- Chronic exposure can lead to disidentification from academics, contributing to long-term racial achievement gaps.
- Implications extend to any group stereotyped negatively in a valued domain
- Academic success requires identification with school (seeing achievement as part of one's self-definition). Barriers such as structural inequalities and stereotypes can prevent or erode this identification.

Your Task

You are part of the Sindh Education and Literacy Department team responsible for teacher training. Your task is to design and deliver a session that helps teachers:

- Recognize their own biases and stereotypes.
- Understand how these affect students' learning, participation, and self-belief.
- Identify and practice ways to create safe classrooms.

Prompts:

- What key concepts would you include?
- How will you make teachers experience and reflect on bias rather than just hear about it?
- What local examples or classroom situations could you use to make it relatable?
- What follow-up support or tools would help teachers apply this learning in practice?