
**The
Jacqueline P. Danzberger
Memorial Lecture**

Seventh Annual

**MAKING SCHOOL A
PLACE WHERE
EVERYONE SUCCEEDS:
Belonging Is Necessary
For Learning**

*Presented by
Claude Steele, Ph.D.*

*Lucie Stern Professor in the
Social Sciences,
Stanford University, and
Director of the Center for
Advanced Study in the
Behavioral Sciences*

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September 2007

Dear Colleague:

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) and the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) are pleased to provide these excerpted comments from the seventh annual Jacqueline (Jackie) P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture. It was given by Claude Steele, Ph.D., the Lucie Stern Professor in the Social Sciences at Stanford University and the Director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, at NSBA's Annual Conference (April 2007).

Steele's discussion brought a perspective to this annual address that differed from prior lectures: the importance of social context and social identity to learning and development. His presentation explored the implications of his (and other's) research on the achievement gap and suggested possible solutions. Steele's lecture stressed that "belonging is necessary for learning." Although his perspective on the issues challenging public education was different, his message was a familiar one: school boards can and must play an important leadership role. In this case, school boards must take the lead in creating and supporting learning environments in which all students are successful.

The Danzberger Memorial Lecture is a tribute to someone who left an indelible mark on the world of school governance. Equally important, it is a forum for exploring the obstacles facing school boards today. The Steele lecture was an important reminder of our leadership responsibility to the next generation. We hope you will share this discussion with your school board colleagues as well as with others in your network who are interested in improving learning and development for all young people. Additional copies of the report can be downloaded from our Web sites: www.nsba.org or www.iel.org.

The NSBA-IEL partnership is an important part of the tribute to Jackie Danzberger. We remain grateful to the many donors whose financial support helped to establish the Lecture and, in the process, gave us a platform for a non-partisan discourse about the vital leadership work of school boards.

Anne L. Bryant
Executive Director, NSBA

Elizabeth L. Hale
President, IEL

Excerpted and edited remarks from Claude Steele, Ph.D...

Belonging is Necessary for Learning

I am a social psychologist, a person who studies how society affects the psychology of the individual. My research has been variously labeled in the psychology literature as “stereotype threat,” and in the popular literature as stereotype threat or social identity threat. I have always been interested in applying that perspective to educational issues and that is one of the reasons I welcomed this opportunity.

I want to impress on you two major ideas. The first is the importance of the social context on learning: Learning is not something that happens in a vacuum or something that can happen under any circumstance. If there is one theme I want to stress it is that belonging is necessary for learning. People have to have a sense of belonging in a setting in order to learn. In ways that will not surprise you, our identities—our race, our gender, our age, and the like—can interfere with a sense of belonging and thereby interfere with learning.

The second idea is the importance of our social identities. These are not fictions, and it will not quite do to say, “I see everybody the same way,” even though that comes often from good and noble intentions. But, it can miss the realities that go with the identities that we have in everyday classroom situations.

Social Identity

Social identity is the part of our personal identity—the sense of what we are—that comes from group memberships and the social categories to which we belong. Every human being has a ton of social identities: our age, our sex, our race, our religion, our profession, our ethnicity. No two people on the earth have exactly the same combination of social identities, and that may be in part where we get our individuality.

Social identity is significant. Its significance derives from the things in our life that we have to contend with, due to a given identity, and its effects on how we function. For example, if I can go through my life and not have to contend with anything based on my professional identity, then that identity does not become very important to me. But, I [personally] have to contend with all kinds of things—some positive, some not so positive—based on that identity. My whole life is organized around that identity from the beginning of the day to the end of the day. So, that identity is hugely important to me, and as important as other identities such as race or age or sex. Social identities are not things that people can just pick up and put down, or decide to emphasize or not.

The dramatic story of Anatole Broyard, *The New York Times* book reviewer for a number of years, makes this point clear.

Anatole Broyard's Story: I read Broyard's reviews and was much impressed, but had not given any thought to his identities. Because he used certain terms that I associated with a certain New York psychoanalytic school, I might have thought he was Jewish, or with a name like Anatole Broyard, I might have thought maybe he was French.

When he died in 1994, Anatole Broyard revealed to his adult children that he was black and that he had been passing essentially all of his adult life. He grew up black in the Bronx. His family migrated from New Orleans, a sort of “high yellow” family, as they might have been referred to at the time. His father was a carpenter who passed during the day in order to get work, but went home at night and, by all accounts, lived comfortably black. And so did Anatole, or Buddy as he was called.

He was married to an African-American woman. They had a child and lived black. He went into the Army at the end of World War II,

and something happened. He decided that if they do not ask, he is not going to tell. He came out of the Army white, divorced his wife, separated from the family, the parents, the sisters, the child, and everything that would be involved in that decision. He moved to New York, became a raconteur and an essayist. He bought a bookstore, did all sorts of fascinating things and got a huge book contract to write his autobiography, which, as you can imagine, never actually got written. As time goes by, he got a job as the daily book reviewer for *The New York Times*. Eventually, he moved to the suburbs of Connecticut and finished out his life there.¹

Ask yourself what would Anatole's life have been like if he had come out of the Army and stayed black versus what his life was like coming out of the Army with the white identity? This gives you a sense of the contingencies, the real things—limitations, in this case—that he would have had to contend with because he was black. He would never have gotten the loan to buy the bookstore. He would never have been able to live in the West Village; he would have had to live Uptown or in Bed-Sty because the city was segregated. He would have met a completely different friendship network. A completely different set of opportunities would have been distributed his way—and not his way. He would never have gotten the job writing for *The New York Times*. If he was going to be a writer at all, he would have had to have been a writer who wrote about the “Negro experience.”

These are the contingencies that make an identity significant. If those contingencies go away, then the significance of that identity goes away.

¹ Henry Louis Gates first revealed this story in a *New Yorker* piece, but then Philip Roth read the piece and Broyard became the model for the central character in his novel, “The Human Stain,” which became a movie of the same title.

Stereotype Threat

Among the contingencies that make an identity significant to us is a sense of being threatened on the basis of having that particular identity, or of being obstructed in some course of life, or in physical danger because we have that identity:

“People often see themselves in terms of whichever one of their allegiances, i.e., identities, is under attack. Whether he accepts or conceals it, proclaims it discreetly, or flaunts it, it is with that allegiance that the person identifies.”

We have a kind of power to threaten each other on the basis of a given social identity—age, race, sex, profession, region of the country, ethnicity, language, dialect, and the list goes on. If you are in a situation or a setting where you feel people could devalue you based on one of your identities, it makes that identity come on full force and take over, in a psychologist's terms, your “psychological functioning.” You start to see the world through the lens of that identity, and you start to connect to other people who have that identity. The social identity starts to be something that you use to organize yourself and to set how you orient toward life. It becomes significant. We are very alert as human beings to any subtle cues to being “threatened” on the basis of identity.

The Research Base

One area that really started this line of thinking and line of research is the phenomenon of stereotype threat, when you are in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one of your identities is relevant. You could be all alone, but you recognize that a stereotype about a particular identity is relevant to what you are doing. As soon as that happens, you know that you are at risk of being judged in terms of that stereotype, or treated in terms of that stereotype.

We wanted to know if this form of threat could be a factor in the underperformance in school of groups whose intellectual abilities are negatively

stereotyped? That is the connection that got us launched. We started with women in math, a group in that context that is negatively stereotyped in our society.

We did a very simple experiment. We brought women and men who were strong math students at the University of Michigan into the lab, one at a time. We selected them because they were very good math students and very committed to math—equally so, the men and the women. We gave them a really difficult math test, a half-hour section of the Graduate Record Exam—not the general quantitative section of the GRE, but the section for math majors. This is a really hard math test, but these are really good math students.

We gave the students one-half an hour all alone. While the situation looks fair, our theory was that for women this would be a fundamentally different situation than it would be for men. As soon as the woman experiences frustration in that test, as a member of this society, she knows at some level, often semi-consciously, that the stereotype about women's math ability is relevant. I do not think this is consciously articulated, but she may be thinking that what they say about women is true. "I have always been good at this, and it has been important to me. But, maybe with this test, I am meeting my Waterloo, and meeting the limits of my abilities based on the kind of person I am, and based on being a woman, and based on this category." She comes out of that test completely not believing the stereotype is true, but during the test she spent a lot of time worrying about it. Our prediction: her performance would go down.

In the same situation, men take the test and they, too, could worry about whether they are any good at math. They will have the same frustration, but it will not signal that there is a category-based, a group-based, or an identity-based limitation as is signaled in the case of the woman. They will not have that extra thing to worry about. Over the years of doing this research, I have come to think people would rather take personal blame in most

of these situations, rather than believe that something about their group is the problem. That is very upsetting to people. And that is the upset that women have to deal with in that situation. The result: men and women equally skilled in math take a test at the frontier of their ability—and women under-perform in relation to men. (I can tell you, just to jump ahead in my story a little bit, if you go to Poland and you do these tests where women are equally distributed in quantitatively-based fields—like the sciences, the mathematicians and the engineers are half women—you don't get these effects. China and some other Asian countries, same thing. But in Britain, France, Italy, United States, there is this stereotype.)

But to prove our point, we need more data. What we have to do is have the men and women take the same test, but this time in a situation where the stereotype about women is not relevant to the test, and is not relevant to interpreting their experience on the test. Once again, we bring women and men who were strong math students into the lab, one at a time. Just as they sat down to take the test, we told them they may have heard that women do not do as well as men on difficult math tests, but "that was not true for this particular test. On this test, women always do as well as men. This test cannot discriminate between men and women." In the middle of this experiment, when the frustration starts to happen, the women are assured that this is not about them as a woman.

What happened to the women under this instruction? Their math performance went up dramatically on the difficult test and matched that of the men. In fact, the men's scores came down a little bit. If you are on the "upside" of somebody else's negative stereotype, then the frustration you have trying to perform in that area does not mean you do not belong in the area. It is just irrelevant, and the frustration is not as upsetting.

In a study done at the University of Oklahoma, people took the gold standard of IQ tests: the Raven's Progressive Matrices, a non-verbal IQ test. There is a big design and five little designs; and, you have to pick the one little design that continues the big design. The beauty of this experiment is that you can tell people who are taking this test that it is either an IQ test, like people interpret it to be, or you can tell them it is a puzzle. If you tell them it is a puzzle, to the black students taking the test, it is now irrelevant to that nasty stereotype out there about African Americans' intellectual ability. This is not an "ability test"; this is a puzzle.

When the test is given with its standard instructions or if it is explicitly stated that it is an IQ test, black students dramatically underperform in relation to the white students about a standard deviation, which is about the size of the difference in IQ between these two sectors of the population. You tell them that this same test is a puzzle—boom!—Blacks' scores go up. I could go over this forever, but I wanted to give you a strong impression about testing and performance and how much it is tied to the contingencies that are bearing on people's identities. In particular, I wanted to demonstrate these stereotypes.

All of the studies that I have described are studies that use people who are very committed to performing well in the domain. So you might say, "Well, can't you just buckle down and overpower these stereotypes? That is what I would do." This is a strong message in the African American community. These stereotypes motivate me and they do motivate people. But when you are talking about somebody performing at the limit of their skills, at the frontier of their skills, and they are trying that hard, it is difficult to sustain that kind of effort. It is difficult, for example, for a woman in a graduate level math class to continue to persist in that area knowing or feeling that she has to work twice as hard.

When you are working under timed performances, that kind of an effort actually interferes. It is like too much effort. You need to relax and be more engaged with the material in a responsive way. So, it is really important to stress that these underperformances are not happening because of people not trying hard enough; they are happening because people are trying too hard.

When you think about something like the racial achievement gap in the schools, there are two groups that we are talking about. One is the classic group that is not identified with school, does not care about school, has maybe had enough stereotype threat by the time of, let us say, the fifth grade. They are sitting there, waiting to get out of there. That is an under-motivated, "dis-identified" group. From the research we have done, that group does not show stereotype threat effects.

Reducing Stereotype Threat in Schools

What makes stereotype threat a big deal in school? We first thought it must be some internalized, low self-esteem on the part of the participants in this research, but that is not true. It is happening in the biggest way for the students with the most confidence and the most commitment to performing well. They are trying to function at the frontier of their skills, which is always where you are if you are moving up and getting better and better in a domain. If your group is negatively stereotyped, you have to deal with this identity pressure. Our question was, how can we start to reduce this? Where is it coming from? The answer: it is coming from cues in the environment that signal threatening contingencies, foster vigilance, and hamper a sense of belonging in the setting. In turn, this impairs learning and performance in the setting. There are also cues that signal non-threatening contingencies and foster belonging in the setting, and thus, promote learning.

Some level of salience of identity "safety cues" in a setting can foster trust, even when other cues in the setting might suggest otherwise. The goal of

identity safety is something that I think we have to do first in American schooling before we can expect equal learning by all groups to happen. When enough cues, implicit or explicit, signal that identity-based threats are not normative in the setting, or that genuine acceptance in the setting is possible, a sense of identity safety results, performance and trust are then less tied to group identity. That is the danger of something like a Don Imus remark. It is incredibly subjugating. It makes some portions of the population feel identity-threatened all the time. And that puts them under tremendous functional disadvantage in a society. Names do hurt.

One thing I think I have learned more than anything else going through this research for all these years is that the way we Americans think about ability—as genetically limited—is extremely injurious to huge portions of our population. You go to a typical high school math class or a junior high school math class or science class, and the “ideology” (I am going to call it that) behind instruction is often that some people have more ability in this area than other people. And we track kids accordingly. We structure a school world whereby we have institutionalized the ideology that ability is a limiting thing. Students who come into that situation as a member of a group whose abilities are negatively stereotyped feel constantly under some kind of threat, constantly vulnerable to some sense of being, of confirming those stereotypes and those doubts.

Summary

My work is concerned with two real and related problems. The first is the underperformance in school and on tests of groups whose intellectual abilities are negatively stereotyped. That has been the touchstone problem that has oriented my research. The second is, for lack of a better term, the diversity problem or the diversity phenomenon. It is one thing to numerically integrate a school or a classroom or a workplace, but it is another thing to make that school, classroom, or workplace a place where everybody can flourish.

Identity threat is intrinsic to most diverse settings, the default state of affairs unless something is done to reduce it. I think this is a reality of American life and probably life in many places in the world that we seem reluctant to think about. We tend to think of it being a matter of being a good person—and our will and commitment to being a good person as being the only thing necessary in order to make a diverse situation function effectively. It requires more than that.

What are the barriers to creating places where everybody feels comfortable, where relationships are sort of positive and facilitate learning, as opposed to possibly interfering with learning? Leadership is a lot more important than people think, and this is where my remarks are directly relevant to your interests [as school board members]. When leaders value diversity, it becomes the norm for how the whole organization and the whole school function. It becomes normative when a leader stands behind that.

For a full copy of the unedited transcript of Dr. Steele's lecture, visit either <http://www.iel.org/pubs/steele07.html> or www.nsba.org.



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- 2001 Richard W. Riley, U.S. Secretary of Education, 1992-2000
- 2002 Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education, 2001-2004
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