The Performance Gap
Stereotype Threat, Assessment, and the Education of African American Children

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The current state of Negro education can only be understood by studying the forces effective in the development of Negro education.

—CARTER G. WOODSON

The Problem

The performance gap between Black and white Americans on academic assessments of all types has been the focus of such a volume and consistency of scholarship, policy, fiscal expenditure, news, and other discourse that, were it not so important an issue, it might rightly be considered "overdone." Indeed there are people whose lives are personally touched in one way or another, who find it boring, rightly or not. Here then are a few statistics that the reader may find boring, troubling, or both. In the most recent data for which they were available in time for this publication, the Black-white gap in mathematics and reading achievement appeared at every grade studied (1-12) (NCES 2006). In 2001, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that African American students at the ages of nine, thirteen, and seventeen had scored lower than their white counterparts on standardized tests of mathematics consistently for three decades. Similar long-term gaps between Black and white students were reported for reading scores as well. Such an accounting of these trends could go on and on. Further, I can think of no more compelling illustration of their repercussions than the fact that in this country fourth-grade reading scores are used to project the number...
of prisons that should be constructed in preparation for those children's eighteenth birthdays (Edelman 2007).

In Historic Context

Black social scientists have weighed in on issues in Black education from the beginning—literally. Francis Cecil Sumner, who became the first Black Ph.D. in psychology in 1920, published several papers in which he sought to address difficulties in the education (Sumner 1926, 1927a) and test performance (Sumner 1927b) of African American students. Indeed fourteen of the first twenty-five Black authored doctoral dissertations in psychology (1920–1946) concerned pedagogical or testing issues in the education of African Americans (Guthrie 1986).

At one time it was widely believed that segregation and the concurrent inequality of resources were the primary impediments to Black progress broadly and especially in education. That is to say, at one time it was widely if not universally acknowledged that underachievement among African American students is but one symptom of the diseases that are racial prejudice, discrimination, and oppression in the United States.

Psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, both trained at Howard and Columbia universities, were key figures in the fight to end segregation in education. It is unfortunate that, in service of their noble work helping to dismantle Jim Crow, the Clarks also participated in psychology's long-standing tradition of "proving" that there is something wrong with African American people. In their case a pathological self-hatred supposedly manifested in small children's preference for a doll that looked white rather than like themselves (Clark and Clark 1947, 1950). Subsequent research has rethought the appropriateness of those kinds of conclusions being drawn from those kinds of data (Baldwin 1979; Garfinkle 1959; Spencer 1999). However, the legacy of that scholarship lives on in their original conclusions, not in the critiques. First, in that Brown v. the Topeka Kansas Board of Education was decided significantly on the psychological evidence provided by the Clarks (1954) and secondly, in that their "doll studies" endure in the public mind even today as "evidence" that there is something pathologically wrong with African American people. As recently as late 2006, teen Kiri Davis generated nationwide attention with her documentary A Girl Like Me in which she imitated the Clark and Clark doll studies before a video camera. The footage made national news, was widely distributed on the Internet and in theaters, and reignited debate over the Black self-hatred thesis.

The Brown decision outlawed segregated schools and though no dream of integration was ever fully realized and what progress was made has not been sustained (Orfleld, Frankenberg, and Lee 2003), the end of legal discrimination and the introduction of related policies were seen by many as the full extent to which white America could be held responsible for the educational difficulties facing Black Americans. When those difficulties did not disappear during the next several decades, an explanatory vacuum opened up. In the time since, a wide and contentious array of explanations have been cast into that vacuum from social science laboratories, but also from armchairs, and every possible fount of ideas in-between.

During and in the midst of the commotion, the mental testing movement, which had been building momentum since Louis Terman's 1916 publication of the portable IQ test, reached a fever pitch. Among its first orders of business was to dutifully quantify Black underperformance in a way that lent the appearance of objectivity to claims that—given universal access to public education—Blacks themselves are responsible for their difficulties in education as in society (Jensen 1973). It was on IQ tests that a Black-white performance gap was first evident as a stable phenomenon and where it was first vigorously debated. Indeed the arguments made by Black psychologist Martin David Jenkins disputing the validity of IQ testing (Jenkins 1943; Witty and Jenkins 1936) are very much the same ones made today. Its manifestation on other kinds of standardized tests have more recently come to the fore and the search for explanations and solutions has been ongoing.

It is worth noting that standardized testing, and mental measurement in general, is problematic in its own right but as related specifically to race is troubling mainly in that the performance gap reflects the alarming disparity between groups in U.S. public education.

The Stereotype Threat Model of Underperformance

From the beginning, Black psychologists were quick to wade into the discussion and debate about the performance gap. They have proposed a variety of influential explanations, which are often debated as if in competition. Among them the oppositional culture (Ogbu 1987), cultural integrity (Boykin 1986), and, of interest here, stereotype threat models are distinguished, if only for having captured the attention of scholars, policy-makers, and the general public. A relative newcomer, Claude Steele's stereotype threat model joins the long heritage of Black thought and debates
concerning the education of African American children. Though new in some important ways, the model also has much in common with other work in that tradition.

A Stanford University psychologist, Steele (2003) has written that he and Joshua Aronson were seeking a way to explain the persistent racial gap in grades among students who were equally well prepared for college. A series of seminal studies published in 1995 laid the foundation for the model, set in motion one of the most well-known and well-researched trends of the ensuing decade (Steele and Aronson 1995), and propelled Steele to iconic status among psychologists and among Black scholars in a variety of fields. Termed stereotype threat, the phenomenon, now considered a basic social psychological process, goes like this: among people who are capable at and ego-identified with a skill, and if there is an existing (or fabricated in the experiment) negative stereotype about their group’s ability on that skill relative to some other group, then, if you describe a difficult test of the skill as diagnostic of natural ability they will perform less well than they would if the same test were described as non-diagnostic.

The associated theoretical model suggests that the threat of confirming negative stereotypes about the intellectual ability of African Americans somehow undermines the testing performance of African American students (Steele and Aronson 1995). The phenomenon has been commonly, though controversially, associated with the performance gap and efforts to close it, in the popular media (Chandler 1999; Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master 2006; Wax 2004) and academic press (Brown and Day 2006; Helms 2005; Jencks and Phillips 1998). The controversy generally revolves around how much of the performance gap the stereotype threat may account for, with some suggesting that stereotype threat may be a/the key factor. Others suggest that while it may exacerbate the problem, stereotype threat should be viewed as a separate phenomenon from the performance gap. Critical to linking stereotype threat with the performance gap is the assertion that negative stereotypes about the intellectual abilities of African Americans are so pervasively available that Black test takers are automatically primed to ponder and feel threatened by them in testing situations (Steele and Aronson 1995).

This chapter analyses the stereotype threat model in order to examine its strengths and weaknesses in describing and as a guide for efforts to close the achievement gap, and more broadly for its contribution to the discourse on what it means to be Black in the United States. The analysis considers the theoretical, scientific, and practical merit of the stereotype threat proposal. The analysis also contemplates sociopolitical factors that would come into play should the nation earnestly pursue strategies for closing the performance gap that are premised on the reasoning of the stereotype threat model. Toward making this analysis, the chapter is organized around discussion of the following critical questions: (1) Why exactly do Black children underperform on standardized tests (proximal mechanisms)?; (2) Who/what is held responsible for the conditions that engender Black children’s poor performance (distal mechanisms)?; (3) What are the empirical evidence supporting the theoretical model?; (4) What types of solutions does the nature of the model suggest?; (5) How plausible/realistic are the solutions proposed?; (6) What does the model contribute to the broader and popular discourse on Blackness and race relations in the United States? Without asserting that these are the only ones worthy of consideration, I wish to suggest at the outset that any description of, or prescription for, issues in Black education should be vetted against at least these six critical questions. By framing the analysis of this model around these six questions I hope to bring readers to a deeper and more critical understanding of the nature and scope of stereotype threat than is available in the popular discourse. I also hope to persuade the reader that our failure to consider such questions has repeatedly and will continue to undermine any efforts to alleviate the educational difficulties facing Black children. The question review is followed by a commentary and conclusion.

Exactly Why Do Black Children Underperform on Standardized Tests and Other Assessments?

This first question means to assess the models’ description of mechanisms in the immediate schooling and testing environments that lead to children’s underperformance. Contrary to the commonly held view that African American children and their families have negative attitudes toward learning and high achievement, the stereotype threat model suggests that many African Americans do in fact value learning and education and that many do significantly define their identities based on academic competence. It locates the mechanism of underperformance neither in children’s failure to engage the learning process nor in their failure to learn. The stereotype threat model instead asserts that poor performance among African American students is either cognitively or motivationally associated with pervasive negative stereotypes about the intellectual abilities of African American people. Cognitive explanations suggest that thinking about such stereotypes, and about the possibility that their performance might confirm
them, occupies some portion of a student's mental capacity. This is said to leave fewer cognitive resources for the problem solving needed to succeed on the assessment at hand (Stangor, Carr, and Kiang 1998). Another explanation suggests that anxiety over the same issues reduces students' accuracy and efficiency in problem solving (Osborne 2001). Others have suggested that stereotype threat causes Black students to actually doubt their own abilities and that this doubt (rather than anxiety or preoccupation) is what undermines their problem solving efforts (Steele and Aronson 1995). Motivational interpretations include that the fear of confirming stereotypes leads students to reduce their efforts because they perceive their efforts as unlikely to be fruitful (Baumeister 1995) and/or as a protective mechanism, in order to create plausible deniability (Croizet and Claire 1998; Stone, Lynch, and Sjomeling 1999).

The debate over which specific process(es) is/are responsible continues unresolved, yet all have in common the notion that whatever skill-level students arrive possessing, their reaction to their perception of threat undermines their ability to demonstrate those skills during standardized assessments of various types.

Who/What Is Held Responsible for Black Children's Poor Performance?

On this second question some writers and laypeople cling to the fatigued notion that Black children are either innately unable to meet the demands of schooling (Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Rushton and Jensen 2005) or develop an inability to do so as a result of their pathological home and community environments (Cosby and Poussaint 2007; Ferguson 2005; McWhorter 2000). Both perspectives have been widely and repeatedly discredited but linger nonetheless (see Boykin 1986; Kozol 1991, 2000; Ryan 1971; and White 1970).

Like others emerging from a more egalitarian perspective, the stereotype threat model identifies the current and historical occurrence of political and structural violence in U.S. Black-white relations as the main distal cause of underperformance among African American students. It holds that African Americans are aware of stereotypes describing them as less capable on an array of academic and other mental tasks. The model suggests that African American students cannot help but acknowledge that their performance on such tasks will be judged in relationship to these stereotypes, either singling them out if they do well or confirming negative stereotypes if they do not. As a result, Black students find themselves (at a highly inopportune moment) in a troubling identity conflict. This is a conflict that compels them to reexamine their relationship with an important in-group, in order to either distance themselves from, or bear the burden of uplifting, or suffer the guilt of bringing-down the race. The additional pressure is said to have a negative impact on their performance through one or more of the mechanisms described above.

What Empirical Evidence Supports the Model?

Stereotype threat presents an intuitively compelling and evocative narrative describing the mechanisms that lead to underperformance among African American children. Like several other explanations that have been offered, the model describes ways in which, even in school, children are not exempt from the tensions that contaminate adult inter-group relations in the broader United States (contrary to what the optimists among us might like to hope). The foci of the related empirical work help to clarify that the model is otherwise distinct from others. The third question asks for an assessment of the empirical evidence supporting the model. I will not attempt a comprehensive summary, but will highlight studies that are representative of the available evidence and that are most germane to the discussion at hand.

Stereotype threat has from its introduction been an empirically demonstrated phenomenon. Indeed the empirical evidence of the phenomenon has consistently outpaced psychologists' ability to explain it. The basic research paradigm is well illustrated by the original studies. High ability Black and white college students were given a difficult verbal test. Half of the Black and half of the white participants were lead to believe that the test was diagnostic of intellectual ability and the other half were told that the test was being used to examine problem solving but was not diagnostic of intellectual ability. Black students who believed that the test was diagnostic performed significantly worse than did those who believed the test was non-diagnostic and worse than white students in both conditions. Black and white participants for whom the test was presented as non-diagnostic scored equally well. Whites students scored equally well in both conditions.

The phenomenon has been replicated many times among African Americans (see Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002, for a review) and extended to other groups including Latinos on tests of intellectual ability (Gonzales, Blanton, and Williams 2002), women on tests of math ability.
observed among white men on tests of intellectual ability, where the comparison group is Asians—presumably there exists a stereotype that white men's math abilities are poor relative to those of Asian people (Aronson, Lustina, and Good 1999), and even advantaging Blacks relative to whites on an athletic task (golf putting) framed as indicative of natural athletic ability, but disadvantaging them when the same task was presented as related to intelligence (Stone, Lynch, and Sjomeling 1999). A fascinating study by Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) found that female Asian participants experienced stereotype threat on a difficult math task, or did not, depending on whether their gender or ethnic identity was made salient in the experimental procedures. Although the phenomenon was discovered and much of the data has been collected among college-age students, several studies have observed stereotype threat in middle-childhood (Ambady, Shih, Kim and Pittinsky 2001; Aronson, Lustina, and Good 1999; McKowan and Weinstein 2003; Muzzatti and Agnoli 2007), around the ages at which children are likely to become aware of negative stereotypes about their groups.

That the experimental phenomenon known as stereotype threat is real and relevant to school children is at this point beyond debate. Indeed it has achieved status as a general social psychological phenomenon that transcends its discovery among high ability African American college students. Particular to its origins though, it is widely believed that unlike contrived-for-research stereotypes, those relating to African Americans and intellectual ability permeate the conditions in which Black students are assessed at the various stages of their academic lives. It is in part because of this assumption that stereotype threat is commonly considered relevant to the performance gap. The narrative that connects them proposes that Black students, constantly aware of negative stereotypes about their abilities, are threatened on the variety of assessments that they undertake throughout their education. The original Steele and Aronson studies provided some evidence in support of this contention (1995), reporting that no explicit stereotype cues were needed to generate the effect among African Americans (study 1) and that Black students distanced themselves from stereotypically Black activities such as basketball, hip-hop, and jazz in the face of a relevant and threatening assessment (study 3).

Aside from the obvious parallel between the stereotype threat experimental procedures and those widely used in standardized test administration, there is relatively little evidence of a connection to educational assessment in real settings. Stricker and Ward (2004), seeking to test the generalizability of Steele and Aronson's (1995, study 4) finding that a simple inquiry about students' ethnicity evoked a performance decrement for African American participants, manipulated whether students were asked to report their race prior to taking actual standardized advanced placement tests. They reported no significant differential effects. Similarly, Cullen, Hardison, and Sackett reported that an analysis of the relationships between standardized tests scores and performance indicators (SAT scores and course grades, Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery scores and technical proficiency, e.g., loading a machine gun) did not find evidence that stereotype threat exerted a systematic effect on the task performance of groups subject to the relevant stereotype (2004). Other studies have similarly failed to find evidence of stereotype threat in real-life situations (Cullen, Walters, and Sackett 2006; Mayer and Hanges 2003; McFarland, Lev-Arey, and Ziegert 2003; Nguyen, O'Neal, and Ryan 2003). The failure of a few studies to find evidence that stereotype threat explains racial group differences in real-world settings does not prove that stereotype threat plays no part in the performance gap. Indeed, that Stricker and Ward (for example) found no difference between groups might be because participants in the threat manipulation did not suffer from stereotype threat, but could also be because students in both conditions suffered from stereotype threat due to environmental factors outside the researchers' control, rendering their manipulation redundant. The price of better ecological validity in field studies is that there is a parallel increase in the risk that factors outside of researchers' control will affect the outcome of a study. Other researchers have tried to examine the relevance of stereotype threat in general to K-12 classroom environments.

Work concerning gender-based stereotypes for example has found some evidence that stereotype threat is relevant to classroom settings. Lummis and Stevenson (1990) found that as early as the first grade children start believing that boys are better at math than girls. In research by Huguet and Regner (2007), middle-school girls suffered a performance deficit in quasi-ordinary classroom circumstances on a test described as a measure of math ability. Ambady, Shih, Kim, and Pittinsky (2001) also found evidence of stereotype threat susceptibility among elementary and middle-school Asian American girls. Whether the findings of these studies can be generalized to race-based stereotype threat depends on how similarly gender and race dynamics may play out in classrooms. One potentially important difference is that the overwhelming majority of American classrooms are gender mixed but largely race homogenous. Thus girls are more likely confronted with the relevant stereotypes on a daily basis in school. The
fact that there are more female than African American teachers in those classrooms is also likely to be relevant though it is difficult to predict just what impact it would have.

Another important question is whether stereotype threat can be linked with everyday activities in school. Indeed the model purports to explain underperformance only among the comparatively small population of high ability, high identified Blacks but makes no assertions that nationally Black and white students arrive at assessment situations equally well prepared. Since the students who are known to be vulnerable to stereotype threat cannot be assumed to represent the bulk of the performance gap, evidence that the same or similar mechanisms affect a broader range of students is needed. It stands to reason that some students not considered academically identified nor previously high achieving may attain that status due to stereotype threat-like insults to their progress in classrooms and on learning (rather than assessment) tasks all along. Along those lines, Ployhart, Ziegler, and McFarland (2003) distinguished stereotype threat-specific, that which occurs in and is restricted to testing environments and which undermines students’ performance on those assessments, from stereotype threat-general, which is as a global sense of threat that individuals carry across situations and which may undermine African Americans’ efforts on a variety of testing and non-testing activities. Stereotype threat-general is not thought to depend on students identifying with the relevant domain in the way the stereotype threat-specific does. Mayer and Hanges (2003) assessed each stereotype model using a questionnaire and found that both were predictive of performance but that they appeared to operate though different mechanisms. Threat-specific was associated with evaluation apprehension while threat-general was related to anxiety. However, the same study failed to find stereotype threat effects using an experimental manipulation that simulated a real-life employment testing situation.

It remains to be seen whether stereotype threat-general or something similar can help explain how Black children’s learning is affected in day-to-day classroom activities and whether that line of explanations can help to explain portions of the gap that remains after accounting for resource and other inequities. For the time being, the evidence supports the recommendation by Cullen, Hardison, and Sackett (2004) for caution in generalizing laboratory findings to applied settings. More evidence linking stereotype threat with assessments relevant to the performance gap and/or explicitly linking stereotype threat with day-to-day classroom activities is still needed to justify claims that stereotype threat is a significant factor in the Black-white achievement gap.

What Types of Solutions Does the Nature of the Model Suggest or Imply?

Before addressing the fourth question I would draw the reader’s attention to an important sub-question in this section, which is: on whom does the model, and related prescriptions for closing the performance gap, place the onus of change? For better or worse this question is separable from the issues of mechanism and responsibility discussed above and may be the determining factor in our discussions of practicality and contribution to the broader discourse on Blackness to be discussed later.

The prescriptions of the stereotype threat model share some similarities with other models, especially in implying that the best solution would be for the United States to eradicate racism, in this case the racism-driven myths about African American intellectual inferiority. Were those to disappear, so quickly would the threat they pose to African American test taking youth. Predictably, this grand solution is never meaningfully on the table. Regarded as straightforward and practical is the proposal to solve the problem by changing Black students’ perceptions of the threat posed by these stereotypes. Stereotype threat researchers have theorized and confirmed in empirical research that stereotype threat effects can be reduced using any of several stereotype alleviation methods. These include simply warning students that they may be susceptible to stereotype threat (McGlone and Aronson 2007) or telling students that the task showed no racial differences on past administrations (Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn, and Steele 2001). Another type of strategy involves minimizing the salience of the negative stereotypes by having students reaffirm their self-integrity via a short writing assignment (Cohen, Garcia, and Apfel 2006). Presenting or having students self-generate/ponder positive role models prior to the assessment has also been found to alleviate stereotype threat (McIntyre, Paulson, and Lord 2003). A study by Rusty McIntyre and colleagues, for example, found that having participants read short biographies of positive role models prior to the assessment has also been found to alleviate stereotype threat (McIntyre, Paulson, and Lord 2003). A study by Rusty McIntyre and colleagues, for example, found that having participants read short biographies of positive role models prior to the assessment has also been found to alleviate stereotype threat and that the effects were cumulative (McIntyre, Lord, Gresky, Ten Eyck, and Bond 2003). Participants who read four such biographies performed better on a subsequent test than those who read three. Those who read three outperformed those who read two and so on. Another strategy for combating stereotype threat involves calling a student’s attention to their other non-stereotyped identities (Gresky, Ten Eyck, Lord, and McIntyre 2005; Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady 1999).

Yet another involves influencing students’ beliefs about the nature of ability. A few studies have found that students who believe or have been
convinced by an intervention that cognitive ability is expandable (versus fixed) are less susceptible to stereotype threat (Aronson, Fried, and Good 2002). Field studies have reported that such interventions lead to long-term improvements in GPA (Aronson, Fried, and Good 2002; Good, Aronson, and Inzlicht 2003).

Overall, the stereotype threat model and research implies that freeing students' from their perception of threat in various ways will allow them to live up to their potential on assessments (and otherwise). Educators are held responsible for creating the conditions for this change, however, responsibility for the critical change is placed on the students themselves.

Preface to Questions Five and Six
The remaining questions to be considered are different in kind from those that have preceded them. On the question of whether the implied or proposed solutions could be scaled up and would it help if they were, the relevant facts are considerably more disputable than those considered for the previous sections. The same is especially true on the question of what the model contributes to the broader discourse on Blackness, and as a result, analysis of both questions involves significantly more judgment and likely more controversy. These questions are of tremendous importance, however, despite that they are habitually overlooked in discussions about various difficulties facing Black America. They are dangerously absent from discussions about the performance gap as well. With those disclaimers and no pretense of objectivity, I offer the proceeding analysis of the two questions as they are related to stereotype threat.

Are the Proposed Solutions Achievable on the Scale Needed? If so, How Much Would They Likely Help to Close the Achievement Gap?
That the solution strategies from the stereotype threat model have been shown to benefit Black students in small-scale boutique interventions is only a first step. Since the performance gap is a national phenomenon, proposed solutions need to be judged in terms of their feasibility and likely effectiveness on a national scale. A "national scale" is one so large that it can be difficult to think about. I came closer to understanding how large a "national scale" is when I participated in a statewide evaluation of Texas schools several years ago. In the process I interacted with standardized test data from the nearly 9,000 elementary schools operating in Texas in 2001 (Hurley, Chamberlain, and Slavin 2000). Imagine. Using a very conservative estimate of 6 teachers per school each with 10 African American students, trying to permanently modify the activities of 54,000 teachers in those schools or of over half a million children. If you managed to close the performance gap in the 9,000 Texas schools (which would be a prizeworthy victory) you still would not have made a dent in the national problem. In 2006, Standard and Poor's (2006) issued a press release congratulating the eight Texas schools that managed to narrow and the one Texas school that managed to close the achievement gap between their Black and white students.

It should be clear that the question of whether a solution strategy could be reasonably implemented on a national scale is an important one. Equally important is the related question of whether, if you did manage to scale-up, the proposed solutions would definitely and meaningfully help to close the performance gap on that large scale. Answering that question necessitates consideration of factors not typically regarded as germane to education.

Evaluation of the practical utility of stereotype threat proposals depends significantly on one's estimation of one such factor, the state of Black-white relations in the United States today. Suppose for a moment that the "stereotype threat" Black children perceive is only a remnant of times when non-Black Americans commonly believed that African Americans were intellectually inferior, but that the "playing field" is considered level by Americans today. If this were true, students' fears, based on a misperception of the world around them, might be the main remaining reason that Black students do not perform up to their potential. Moreover, if those fears are based on misperception, their misperception may be correctable. In that scenario, scaling up the implementation of stereotype threat alleviation strategies that change the attitudes of African American students from "threatened" to "secure" would likely change large numbers of Black children's experiences during important assessments. In that scenarios as well, alleviating the "imagined" threat would perhaps have a significant positive impact on the performance gap, at least among students for whom stereotype threat is relevant.

Much of the discussion around the performance gap seems premised on this optimistic view of the societal level backdrop against which we seek to solve this serious problem. However, if the playing field is not level in today's United States, other issues demand consideration.

For example, scholars of the model credit Black children with correctly identifying negative stereotypes about their abilities. A variety of other
scholars have argued that racism is still pervasive in the United States and in U.S. education (Kozol 2000; Mickelson 2003, to name just two) and that negative stereotypes about African Americans remain prevalent among members of the dominant and other groups (Devine and Elliot 1995; Wittenbrink, Judd, and Park 1997). There is evidence for example that white Americans tend to believe that individual failings are the primary cause for African Americans’ difficulties but blame structural barriers for similar problems faced by other ethnic groups. A recent study found that white Americans relied on “lack of motivation” to explain Black inequality but were more likely to offer “no chance for education” in explaining Hispanic inequality, despite the similar socioeconomic circumstances of the two groups (McDonald 2001). Another study reported that in a sample of predominantly white (89 percent) math teachers, respondents were more likely to attribute the minority-white achievement gap to student characteristics such as differences intellectual ability, motivational levels, and work ethic, than to explanations related to politics and policy or to curriculum factors (Bol and Berry 2005). Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) reported that white and Black teachers perceive the performance gap itself differently. White teachers tended to name students, parents, and home environments as the largest contributing factors, while Black teachers tended to cite teachers, schools, and the educational system. These are a few among various indications that African American students suffer from stereotype threat because they correctly identify the stereotypes by which they will be judged. We should acknowledge these truths even if we regard students’ reactions as self-defeating.

Acknowledging that Black students may be correct in their assessment of the conditions under which they are expected to perform casts an unflattering light on attempts to change their perception. It hardly seems reasonable to trick them into false beliefs about their situation or to disarm their defensive coping strategies while leaving the threat for which they developed them intact. Moreover it seems doubtful that any such effort, no matter how well designed or well funded, could compete on a national scale with the accurate information students receive continuously in their everyday experience of being Black in America. It is here that William Ryan’s (1971) classic analysis of universalistic and exceptionalist depictions of social problems can aid our own analysis of the performance gap.

Ryan defines exceptionalist problems as those that occur unpredictably as the result of individual defects, accidents, or uniquely unfortunate circumstances. Exceptionalist problems, because they are unpredictable, must be addressed via interventions directed at those who suffer them. By contrast, universalistic problems, though they affect individuals, are the byproduct of imperfect and inequitable social arrangements that systematically create unfortunate circumstances among particular segments of a population. Because they are systematically created, they are predictable and preventable and are best ameliorated via interventions directed at their causes, that is, those imperfect and inequitable social arrangements. Thirty-five years ago, Ryan accused American academic scholars and policymakers of habitually and effortfully framing the universalistic problems faced by various disenfranchised groups in exceptionalist terms. Doing so encourages solution proposals that minimize discomfort for anyone with some say in the level of discomfort they will feel in the process of dealing with social issues. Using the case at hand as an example, framing problems in education this way justifies prescribing and promoting “resilience” among “at-risk” students. It is more comfortable to endorse resilience strategies if one is not responsible for the harmful conditions that put students at risk and against that which they need to be resilient. Stereotype threat alleviation strategies offer an exceptionalist prescription for what is pretty certainly a universalistic problem.

A secondary benefit of assigning responsibility for the performance gap to student characteristics rather than infrastructural factors is that students who do succeed despite their expected shortcomings can then reasonably be described as exceptional. It is definitely possible to convince some students that they are (or can become) exceptional in this sense; that they can transcend the problems that hinder African Americans as a group. This is the thinking behind resilience-oriented educational interventions. It is not entirely misdirection, even the most willfully oppressive social structures make room for exceptions, so there is certainly room in a society that at least pretends equal opportunity. Students who can take advantage of those opportunities should. Again using the case at hand as an example, changing some Black student’s attitudes from threatened to trusting is akin to cultivating resilience and would likely advantage those few students. It is important to keep in mind, however, that, by definition, such exceptionalist solutions cannot meaningfully impact the overall problem, which is universalistic in nature. Further, such strategies may ultimately do more to maintain the larger problem of our national performance gap, by reifying myths about equal opportunity, than they do to close it.
What Does the Model Contribute to the Broader and Popular Discourse on Blackness and Race Relations?

The final question, the question of what the model and associated solution proposals contribute to the broader discourse on Blackness is one that has too often been overlooked in the African American struggle for social justice. At the beginning of this chapter I referenced the role Kenneth and Mamie Clark played in the fight against Jim Crow. Though it is beyond the purview of this chapter to make a detailed analysis, the Clarks’ research can be criticized for what it contributed to the broader discourse on Blackness in the United States. The famous doll studies, which helped to dismantle legalized segregation, did so by “demonstrating” that African American children suffer from a pathological self-hatred (said to be the result of the evils of segregation). That this was a pyrrhic victory would have been true even if the dream of integration had actually been realized (and if it was a good idea). This self-hatred myth has haunted the discourse on Blackness ever since reappearing in academic (Cokley 2002; Cross 1991) and popular discussions (Kimberley 2005; Page 2003) despite, as mentioned earlier, being widely criticized and reevaluated (Spencer and Markstrom-Adams 1990; Spencer 1999).

There are many other examples of well-meaning interventions that do more to undermine society’s image of African Americans than they do to help the particular problem, which, with genuine humanitarian zeal, they seek to solve. In my courses related to these issues I have become fond of telling students that genuinely humanitarian actions, when paired with a presumption of Black inferiority of any kind, will always amount to racist oppression cloaked in pity. Another early example of this is the “talented tenth” thesis which, while trying to give the most resourced among us a sense of responsibility, also implies the untaledent 90 percent. In the 1960s and 1970s there were programs that shipped Black children out to the suburbs to live with white families during the school week and/or brought nice white ladies into the homes of Black families with infants several days a week. Both of these worked toward ameliorating so-called cultural deprivation among African Americans, but mostly serving to etch the image of “culturally deprived Black families” into the American mind. More recently, an array of Black and white public figures, apparently certain that Black language is something shameful and deficient, spoke out against and ultimately caused the repeal of the Oakland, California, resolution to acknowledge the integrity of Ebonics in their language curriculum (Crochan 2000). This despite that the Linguistic Society of America, among other bodies, issued statements affirming the integrity of African American language traditions and affirming the linguistic and pedagogical soundness of the school board’s plan (1997).

In a nation whose public discourse habitually portrays African Americans as the root of their own and many of society’s other problems, we should not ourselves sign-off on any idea that helps to maintain and extend the inferiority myth that is the foundation of American racism. For that reason it is important to consider what any model that purports to explain the behavior of African American people and any strategy that hopes to address problems faced by Black Americans contributes to this broader discourse.

An especially toxic contribution to the discourse on Blackness came with the introduction of two terms to the mental health lexicon. Drapetomania and Dysaethesia Aethiopica, often cited as examples of scientific racism, are terms for mental disorders said to be particular to enslaved Blacks (Cartwright 1851). They are of another era, but nicely illustrate the point at hand. The symptoms of Drapetomania include the uncontrollable urge to escape bondage and those for Dysaethesia Aethiopica include a tendency to destroy (master’s) property, create disturbances, and resist work. Because it seems obvious in retrospect that the people “suffering” from these “disorders” were in fact defending their very humanity in those actions, it sounds outrageous to problematize, much less to pathologize, their behavior. Concerning the discourse on Blackness, however, defining the resistance behavior of enslaved people as mental illness contributed justification for a range of Draconian interventions under the banner of prevention and rehabilitation. Today we instantly recognize that if anyone in that situation was suffering from mental illness (and in need of prevention and rehabilitation), it was the oppressors. We can accuse or excuse those among the enslaved who did not much resist, but we must certainly acknowledge that given the circumstances those who resisted had exactly the right idea and that there was no need, nor justification, for any attempt to change their attitudes (though perhaps their methods could have used some improvement). Unto today, where the popular and academic discourse problematizes, pathologizes, or otherwise blames African American children for their own dire predicaments, it justifies a range of inappropriate, impotent, and even destructive preventative and remedial interventions while excluding others that might actually help. Framing the problem in exceptionalist terms also grants educators, policymakers, and philanthropists license to the identity “trying to close the achievement
gap" without requiring them to earnestly pursue the kinds of solutions that might actually close the achievement gap but which would definitely make them and a lot of other people uncomfortable in the process.  

Perhaps worst of all, victim blame becomes self-affirming as the time and resources spent on impotent exceptionalist solutions accumulate to the point where negative characterizations of Black culture offered by the likes of Cosby (Cosby and Poussaint 2007), McWhorter (2000), and Ferguson (2005), and accusations of genetic inferiority leveled by Social Darwinists Herrnstein and Murray (1994), Rushton and Jensen (2005), and others appear to gain credibility.  

So what does the candidate model contribute? Like most other proposals the stereotype threat model identifies universalistic structural factors that help to produce the performance gap, but because the solutions that have emerged from stereotype threat scholarship ultimately portray African American children as that which is in need of (or most expedient to) change, this acknowledgement is inconsequential. In placing the primary burden of change on Black children, in problematizing their perceptions, attitudes, or reactions, the model ultimately contributes to the broader discourse on Blackness in America yet another version of the myth that there is something wrong with African American people.  

In identifying this key shortcoming, I do not in any way mean to suggest that the stereotype threat model or any earnest attempt to explain the plight of Black school children is without value. Instead I mean it as a caution. Invested parties must learn to see this and other conceptual models for the value they bring in documenting the effects of inequality, but must not get distracted by the empty promises of what seem to be expedient solutions based on them. Indeed in the case of stereotype threat, this shortcoming is not even native to the model but is in the timidity of those of us who seek to address the problems that the model alerts us to.  

Commentary and Conclusion  
What we learn from the stereotype threat model adds another element to our understanding of the performance gap and its causes. The model alerts us to the fact that high identified, high-achieving students, whom we might have believed were immune, are also vulnerable to the toxic effects of structural racism in education and society. Stereotype threat vulnerability may be best interpreted as a latent cost of the disassociation, assimilation, or code switching strategies that many high-achieving African American students adopt in order to succeed under the circumstances in which they find themselves. This contribution helps us to appreciate the breadth of the problem and highlights the need for systemic change. It raises the question of whether so-called at-risk students might be better described as canaries in the coalmine, signaling the more general threat.  

Even in this brief explication we begin to see that neither the stereotype threat nor any other single model can or should expect to adequately explain or solve the entire problem of underachievement among African American children. We should realize that such models contribute most when they bring us closer to a critical mass of evidence that the issues behind the performance gap are not separable from the broader issue of inequity in the United States and will never be addressed until and unless we address those. We must recognize that each of the dollars and each hour that policymakers, educators, and the general public contribute in the millions toward "solutions" that are misguided, piecemeal, and otherwise predictably doomed to failure, moves the nation closer to concluding that these problems are unsolvable. When African American scholars and leaders, by our participation, lend the appearance of credibility and objectivity to those same wrongheaded efforts, we may inadvertently contribute to what will seem like a critical mass of evidence that African American children are ultimately unreachable through education and thus principally unable to ever fully meet the demands of citizenship. I am pretty sure that is not a contribution we mean to make.  

This chapter analyses the stereotype threat model order to examine its strengths and weaknesses in describing and prescribing remedy for the performance gap. The focus here has been on that one influential model as an important case in point, but I hoped also to make an argument, by demonstration, that all such proposals should be vetted against the kinds of difficult but key questions posed here. Perhaps less to determine their value or lack thereof, and more because such examination stands, while we harvest what is of value from them, to help us remain grounded in a clearheaded awareness of their limits.  

Especially in the last twenty years, efforts to address Black children’s educational difficulties have become increasingly systematic and comprehensive, both theoretically and in their emphasis on scientific research as the benchmark for validity. This development is heartening. In a growing climate of evidence-based reform, it is critical that Black social scientists and educators take leadership in the discourse on how best to improve the educational futures of Black children. The growing body of evidence from this and other influential models demonstrates the kind of willful self-determination called for by Carter G. Woodson (1933), Joseph White...
(1970), and other leading Black thinkers who understood that by definition, African Americans are best equipped to provide the information and insight needed to guide school reform efforts directed toward African American children. In that regard Claude Steele and the many others who have dedicated their energy to these issues are to be commended.

I close with a final caution. Black educational scholars (and others) have known all along that the climate in many schools that serve African American communities is and has been noxious and undermining to Black children. This and other models have merit in that they enrich our documentation of race-based structural violence and its effects. However, if they fail to challenge pervasive negative views of what it means to be African American, or if they fail to insist that real causes of the performance gap be addressed, and when they lead us to accept the false compromise of exceptionalist solutions, they in fact add not so much that is new to the discussion.

Notes
1. See, Woodson (1933).
2. Eighteen is the age of criminal responsibility in most U.S. states.
3. In that era there were also those who believed that African descended people were racially oppressed because they occupy a lower step on the evolutionary ladder and that this lesser evolution also made them principally incapable of taking on the responsibilities of citizenship, including academic success. Nonetheless, most understood that racism and oppression were critical contributors to the difficulties facing Black Americans.
4. Scores in the original studies were adjusted to account for differences on the SAT for all Black-white comparisons. However, subsequent studies have employed samples with similar scores and found the same pattern (Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn, and Steele 2001; Croizet and Claire 1998; Good, Aronson, and Inzlicht 2003).
5. The wisdom of integration as a strategy for guaranteeing Blacks equal access to the resources and opportunities for social mobility is debatable, however in characterizing Black communities as inherently inferior and to be escaped, the strategy set in motion a tremendous brain and resource drain on Black business, social, educational, and other institutions. The effects of that drain on the overall status of predominantly Black communities are well documented. Kunjufu has made these arguments in detail.
6. I feel obliged to comment on the distinction there is to be made between blame and responsibility as related to this discussion. The arguments presented herein do not mean to imply that African Americans bear no responsibility for improving their own life (or educational) conditions. All humans have that responsibility. Nor do they imply that no African Americans undermine their own prospects by engaging in negative behavior. Humans from all groups do that as well. Yet I would argue that in general, African Americans already bear their share and more of responsibility for improving their prospects and would, as they have historically, respond to conditions that genuinely favor striving with impressive industry. This brings us to the critical distinction between blame and responsibility. Focusing blame on African Americans for problems in their current circumstances has the effect of freeing everyone and everything else from any sense of their own culpability. Since victims, if I can be allowed that term for a moment, are the only group that retains responsibility for remedy whether they are at fault or not, freeing everyone else from blame has the effect of shifting all of the responsibility for change to African Americans. Moreover, released from blame, everyone else is free to take no responsibility, and worse to feel philanthropic when they do lift a finger in aid. Philanthropist is not, in my view, the right term for a person who helps to solve a problem they helped to create.

Works Cited


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