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## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PREJUDICE

Negative stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies that could undercut the performance of those in the stereotyped group.

Michael Inzlicht, professor of psychology at UTSC, is teasing out the subtle psychological mechanisms behind this effect. His work could help explain why women are under-represented in math and sciences, why blacks often struggle academically—and perhaps what can be done about it.



He is interested in the *stereotype threat* phenomenon, in which the worry that a negative group stereotype will be confirmed causes anxiety. For example, when women are reminded just before a test about the stereotype that women are worse at math than men, those women tend to do more poorly on the test.

According to Inzlicht, it's the mental effort of trying to cope with anxiety that's the real problem. Thinking about the stereotype causes people anxiety. They then strive to suppress the anxiety. The result: fewer resources left over to concentrate on the test itself. This effect manifests itself in women worried about the math stereotype and in black Canadians who have been reminded of the stereotype that they don't do as well academically as whites and Asians. Coping with the stereotype can also affect the ability to manage anger, eat well, exercise adequately and even make sound financial decisions. Notes Inzlicht, *Stereotype threat can spill over into your life much more broadly.*

**Related Links:** [More on Inzlicht, prejudice and his research](#)

How to sidestep stereotype threat

1. Be aware of the problem. By simply realizing how stereotype threat works, you can cope better. When women are told about stereotype threat before a math test, they tend to perform better on the test.
2. Don't take it personally. Distancing yourself emotionally from the threat helps. For instance, encouraging test takers to view the test objectively—almost as if they are judging the test themselves—reduces the effect of stereotype threat.
3. Normalize your emotions. Try to see the anxiety as normal or even helpful. Black students entering university adjust better when counselled that most new students feel nervous. And when women are told that feeling anxious during a test isn't necessarily negative, it helps them do better on the test.

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