Issues of Our Time

WHISTLING VIVALDI

AND OTHER CLUES TO HOW STEREOTYPES AFFECT US

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Whistling Vivaldi

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction: At the Root of Identity

1.

I have a memory of the first time I realized I was black. It was when, at seven or eight, I was walking home from school with neighborhood kids on the last day of the school year—the whole summer in front of us—and I learned that we "black" kids couldn't swim at the pool in our area park, except on Wednesday afternoons. And then on those summer Wednesdays, with our swimming suits wrapped tightly in our towels, we filed, caravan-style, out of our neighborhood toward the hallowed pool in the adjoining white neighborhood. It was a strange weekly pilgrimage. It marked the racial order of the time and place—Chicagoland, the 1950s and early 1960s. For me it was what the psychologist William Cross calls an "encounter"—with the very fact that there was a racial

order. The implications of this order for my life seemed massive—a life of swimming only on Wednesday afternoons? Why? Moreover, it turned out to be a portent of things to come. I next found out that we black kids—who, by the way, lived in my neighborhood and who had been, until these encounters, just kids—couldn't go to the roller rink, except on Thursday nights. We could be regular people but only in the middle of the week? These segregations were hard to ignore. And mistakes were costly, as when, at thirteen, after arriving at six in the morning, I waited all day to be hired as a caddy at an area golf course, only to be told at the end of the day that they didn't hire Negroes. This is how I became aware I was black. I didn't know what being black meant, but I was getting the idea that it was a big deal.

With decades of hindsight, I now think I know what was going on. I was recognizing nothing less than a condition of life—most important, a condition of life tied to my race, to my being black in that time and place. The condition was simple enough: *if* I joined the caravan and went to the pool on Wednesday afternoons *then* I got in; *if* I went to the pool any other time, *then* I didn't get in. To my seven- or eight-year-old self, this was a bad condition of life. But the condition itself wasn't the worst of it. For example, had my parents imposed it on me for not taking out the garbage, I wouldn't have been so upset. What got me was that it was imposed on me because I was black. There was nothing I could do about that, and if being black was reason enough to restrict my swimming, then what else would happen because of it?

In an interview many years later, a college student, whom you will meet later in this book, would describe for me an experience that took a similar form. He was one of only two whites in an African American political science class composed of mostly black and other minority students. He, too, described a condition of life: if he said something that revealed an ignorance of African American

experience, or a confusion about how to think about it, then he could well be seen as racially insensitive, or . . . worse; if he said nothing in class, then he could largely escape the suspicion of his fellow students. His condition, like my swimming pool condition, made him feel his racial identity, his whiteness, in that time and place—something he hadn't thought much about before.

From experiences like these, troubling questions arise. Will there be other conditions? How many? In how many areas of life? Will they be about important things? Can you avoid them? Do you have to stay on the lookout for them?

When I encountered my swimming pool restriction, it mystified me. Where did it come from? Conditions of life tied to identity like that still mystify me. But now I have a working idea about where they come from. They come from the way a society, at a given time, is organized around an identity like race. That organization reflects the history of a place, as well as the ongoing individual and group competition for opportunity and the good life. The way Chicagoland was organized around race in the late 1950s and early 1960s—the rigid housing segregation, the de facto school segregation, the employment discrimination, and so on—meant that black people in that time and place had many restrictive conditions of life tied to their identity, perhaps the least of which was the Wednesday afternoon swimming restriction that so worried my seven- or eight-year-old self.

This book is about what my colleagues and I call *identity contingencies*—the things you have to deal with in a situation because you have a given social identity, because you are old, young, gay, a white male, a woman, black, Latino, politically conservative or liberal, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a cancer patient, and so on. Generally speaking, contingencies are circumstances you have to deal with in order to get what you want or need in a situation. In the Chicagoland of my youth, in order to go swimming I had to

restrict my pool going to Wednesday afternoons. That's a contingency. In his African American political science class, my interviewee had the added pressure that his ignorance could cause him serious disapproval. That, too, is a contingency. What makes both of these contingencies identity contingencies is that the people involved had to deal with them because they had a particular social identity in the situation. Other people in the situation didn't have to deal with them, just the people who had the same identity he had. This book examines the role these *identity contingencies* play in our lives, in the broader society, and in some of society's most tenacious problems.

Now, of course, ours is an individualistic society. We don't like to think that conditions tied to our social identities have much say in our lives, especially if we don't want them to. We have a creed. When barriers arise, we're supposed to march through the storm, picking ourselves up by our bootstraps. I have to count myself a subscriber to this creed. But this book offers an important qualification to this creed: that by imposing on us certain conditions of life, our social identities can strongly affect things as important as our performances in the classroom and on standardized tests, our memory capacity, our athletic performance, the pressure we feel to prove ourselves, even the comfort level we have with people of different groups—all things we typically think of as being determined by individual talents, motivations, and preferences.

The purpose of this book is nothing less than to bring this poorly understood part of social reality into view. I hope to convince you that ignoring it—allowing our creed of individualism, for example, to push it into the shadows—is costly, to our own personal success and development, to the quality of life in an identity-diverse society and world, and to our ability to fix some of the bad ways that identity still influences the distribution of outcomes in society.

How do identity contingencies influence us? Some constrain our behavior down on the ground, like restricted access to a public swimming pool. Others, just as powerful, influence us more subtly, not by constraining behavior on the ground but by putting a threat in the air.

2.

At the center of this book is a particular kind of identity contingency, that of stereotype threat. I believe stereotype threat is a standard predicament of life. It springs from our human powers of intersubjectivity—the fact that as members of society we have a pretty good idea of what other members of our society think about lots of things, including the major groups and identities in society. We could all take out a piece of paper, write down the major stereotypes of these identities, and show a high degree of agreement in what we wrote. This means that 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. That's why I think it's a standard human predicament. In one form or another—be it through the threat of a stereotype about having lost memory capacity or being cold in relations with others—it happens to us all, perhaps several times a day.

It is also a threat that, like the swimming pool restriction, is tied to an identity. It is present in any situation to which the stereotype is relevant. And this means that it follows members of the stereotyped group into these situations like a balloon over their heads. It can be very hard to shake.

Consider the experience of Brent Staples, now a columnist for the *New York Times*, but then a psychology graduate student at the University of Chicago, a young African American male dressed in informal student clothing walking down the streets of Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. In his own words:

> I became an expert in the language of fear. Couples locked arms or reached for each other's hand when they saw me. Some crossed to the other side of the street. People who were carrying on conversations went mute and stared straight ahead, as though avoiding my eyes would save them. . . .
>
> I'd been a fool. I'd been walking the streets grinning good evening at people who were frightened to death of me. I did violence to them by just being. How had I missed this . . .
>
> I tried to be innocuous but didn't know how. . . . I began to avoid people. I turned out of my way into side streets to spare them the sense that they were being stalked. . . . Out of nervousness I began to whistle and discovered I was good at it. My whistle was pure and sweet—and also in tune. On the street at night I whistled popular tunes from the Beatles and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. The tension drained from people's bodies when they heard me. A few even smiled as they passed me in the dark. (pp. 202–3)

Staples was dealing with a phantom, a bad stereotype about his race that was in the air on the streets of Hyde Park—the stereotype that young African American males in this neighborhood are violence prone. People from other groups in other situations might face very different stereotypes—about lacking math ability rather than being violence prone for example—but their predicaments would be the same. When they were in situations where

those stereotypes could apply to them, they understood that one false move could cause them to be reduced to that stereotype, to be seen and treated in terms of it. That's stereotype threat, a contingency of their identity in these situations.

Unless, as Staples discovered, they devised a way to deflect it. Staples whistled Vivaldi, by his own account a very good version of it. What would that do for him? Would it improve his attitude toward others on the street, make him more understanding? Probably not. What it did for sure was change the situation he was dealing with. And how it did this illustrates nicely the nature of stereotype threat. In a single stroke, he made the stereotype about violence-prone African American males less applicable to him personally. He displayed knowledge of white culture, even "high white culture." People on the street may not have recognized the Vivaldi he was whistling, but they could tell he was whistling classical music. This caused him to be seen differently, as an educated, refined person, not as a violence-prone African American youth. Such youths don't typically walk down the street whistling classical music. While hardly being aware of it, people drop the stereotype of violence-proneness as the lens through which they see him. He seems less threatening. People don't know who he is; but they know he isn't someone to fear. Fear fades from their demeanor. Staples himself relaxes. The stereotype in the air that threatened him is fended off. And the change in the behavior of those on the street, and in his own behavior, reveals the power that a mere stereotype—floating in the air like a cloud gathering the nation's history—was having on everyone all along.

Whistling Vivaldi is about the experience of living under such a cloud—an experience we all have—and the role such clouds play in shaping our lives and society.

3.

Suppose you are invited into a psychology laboratory and asked to play ten holes of golf on a miniature course that has been set up in a small room. Suppose also that you are a white college student, reasonably athletically inclined. Now suppose that just as you are getting the feel of the golf clubs, you are told that the golf task is part of a standardized sports psychology measure called the Michigan Athletic Aptitude Test (MAAT), which measures "natural athletic ability." How well do you think you'd do? Would being told that the golf task measures natural athletic ability make a difference?

A group of social psychologists at Princeton University led by Jeff Stone did exactly this experiment several years ago. They found something very interesting: white students who were told the golf task measured natural athletic ability golfed a lot worse than white students who were told nothing about the task. They tried just as hard. But it took them, on average, three strokes more to get through the course.

What was it about thinking of the task as a measure of natural athletic ability that so strikingly undermined their performance?

Jeff and his colleagues reasoned that it had something to do with their being white. In the terms I have been using, it had to do with a contingency of white identity that comes to bear in situations where natural athletic ability is being evaluated. This contingency comes from a broadly known stereotype in this society that, compared with blacks at least, whites may have less natural athletic ability. Participants in Jeff's experiment would know this stereotype simply by being members of this society. They might not believe it. But being told that the golfing task measured the very trait their group was stereotyped as lacking, just before they began the task, could put them in a quandary: their frustration on

the task could be seen as confirming the stereotype, as a characterization both of themselves and of their group. And this, in turn, might be upsetting and distracting enough to add an average of three strokes to their scores.

The stereotype about their group, and the threatening interpretation of their golf frustration that it posed, is not a contingency like the swimming pool restriction of my youth that directly affected behavior. It imposed no extra restrictions on their golfing, or any material impediments. But it was nonetheless a contingency of their identity during the golf task. If they experienced frustration at golf, *then* they could be confirming, or be seen to be confirming, the unsavory stereotype. If they didn't experience frustration at golf, *then* they didn't confirm the racial stereotype. This was an extra pressure they had to deal with during the golfing task, for no other reason than that they were white. It hung over them as a threat in the air, implying that one false move could get them judged and treated as a white kid with no natural athletic ability. (You will learn later in the book how my colleagues and I came to call this kind of threat in the air simply *stereotype threat*.)

With this reasoning in tow, Jeff and colleagues started asking more questions.

If the mere act of telling white Princeton students that their golfing measured natural athletic ability had caused them to golf poorly by distracting them with the risk of being stereotyped, then telling black Princeton students the same thing should have no effect on their golfing, since their group isn't stereotyped in that way. And it didn't. Jeff and his colleagues had put a group of black Princeton students through the same procedure they'd put the white students through. And, lo and behold, their golfing was unaffected. They golfed the same whether or not they'd been told the task measured natural athletic ability.

Here was more evidence that what had interfered with white students' golfing, when it was seen to measure natural athletic

ability, was a distracting sense of threat arising from how whites are stereotyped in the larger society.

But Jeff and his research team weren't satisfied. They devised a still cleverer way to make their argument.

They reasoned that if group stereotypes can really set up threats in the air that are capable of interfering with actions as concrete as golfing for entire groups of people—like the stereotype threat Staples had to contend with on the streets of Hyde Park—then it should be possible to set up a stereotype threat that would interfere with black students' golfing as well. All they'd have to do was represent the golfing task as measuring something related to a bad stereotype of blacks. Then, as black participants golfed, they'd have to fend off, like whites in the earlier experiment, the bad stereotype about their group. This added pressure might hurt their golfing.

They tested this idea in a simple way. They told new groups of black and white Princeton students that the golf task they were about to begin was a measure of "sports strategic intelligence." This simple change of phrase had a powerful effect. It now put black students at risk, through their golfing, of confirming or being seen to confirm the ancient and very bad stereotype of blacks as less intelligent. Now, as they tried to sink their putts, any mistake could make them feel vulnerable to being judged and treated like a less intelligent black kid. That was a heavy contingency of identity in this situation indeed, which might well cause enough distraction to interfere with their golfing. Importantly, this same instruction freed white students of stereotype threat in this situation, since whites aren't stereotyped as less intelligent.

The results were dramatic. Now the black students, suffering their form of stereotype threat during the golfing task, golfed dramatically worse than the white students, for whom this instruction had lifted stereotype threat. They took, on average, four strokes more to get through the course.

Neither whites, when the golfing task was represented as a test of natural athletic ability, nor blacks, when it was represented as a test of sports strategic intelligence, confronted a directly interfering contingency of identity in these experiments—nothing that directly affected their behavior like a swimming pool restriction. The contingencies they faced were threats in the air—the threat that their golfing could confirm or be seen to confirm a bad group stereotype as a characterization of their group and of themselves. Still, it was a threat with a big effect. On a course that typically took between twenty-two and twenty-four strokes to complete, it led whites to take three more strokes to complete it, and blacks to take five more strokes to complete it.

At first glance, one might dismiss the importance of something "in the air" like stereotype threat. At second glance, however, it's clear that this threat can be a tenacious force in our lives. Staples had to contend with it every time he walked down the streets of his own neighborhood. White athletes have to contend with it in each competition, especially against black athletes. Think of the white athlete in a sport with heavy black competition. To reach a high level of performance, say, to make it into the National Basketball Association, which is dominated by black players, the white athlete would have to survive and prosper against a lifelong gauntlet of performance situations loaded with this extra race-linked threat. No single good athletic performance would put the stereotype to rest. The effort to disprove it would be Sisyphean, reemergent at each important new performance.

The aim of this book is not to show that stereotype threat is so powerful and persistent that it can't be overcome. Quite the contrary. Its goal is to show how, as an unrecognized factor in our lives, it can contribute to some of our most vexing personal and societal problems, but that doing quite feasible things to reduce this threat can lead to dramatic improvements in these problems.

4.

Now suppose it wasn't miniature golf that you were asked to perform when you arrived at a psychology experiment, and suppose it wasn't your group's athletic ability that was negatively stereotyped in the larger society. Suppose it was difficult math problems that you were asked to solve on a timed standardized test, and suppose that it was your group's math ability that was negatively stereotyped in the larger society. In other words, suppose you were an American woman showing up for an experiment involving difficult math.

Would the stereotype threat that is a contingency of your gender identity in math-related settings be enough to interfere with your performance on the test? Would you be able to just push through this threat of being seen stereotypically and perform well anyway? Or would the very effort to push hard on a timed test be distracting enough to impair your performance despite the extra effort? Would you experience this threat, this contingency of identity, every time you tried difficult math in settings with males around? Would this contingency of identity in math settings become frustrating enough to make you avoid math-related college majors and careers? Would women living in a society where women's math ability is not negatively stereotyped experience this threat? Would their scores be better?

Or suppose the test you were asked to take wasn't the Michigan Athletic Aptitude Test but was the SAT, and suppose the negative stereotype about your group wasn't about athletic ability, or even about math ability, alone, but about scholastic ability in general. Again, would the stereotype threat you experience as a contingency of your identity in scholastic settings be enough to interfere with your performance on this test? Does the threat cause this

interference by diverting mental resources away from the test and onto your worries? Would the stereotype threat you experience in scholastic settings affect other experiences as well, such as your classroom performance and your comfort interacting with teachers, professors, teaching assistants, and even other students not in your group? Would this contingency of identity make these settings so frustrating for you that you might try to avoid them in choosing a walk of life?

The purpose of this book is to describe the journey that my colleagues and I have taken in formulating these and related questions and then in systematically trying to answer them over the past twenty years. The experience has been like trying to solve a mystery. And the approach of the book is to give you an over-the-shoulder view of how that mystery has unfolded, of the progression of ideas and revelations, often from the research itself, about the surprising ways that stereotypes affect us—our intellectual functioning, our stress reactions, the tension that can exist between people from different groups, and the sometimes very surprising strategies that alleviate these effects and thereby help solve some of society's worst problems. And because science is rarely a solitary activity anymore—something long true for me—the story also describes many of the people who have done this research, as well as how they work. You will also meet many interesting people who have experienced this threat—including a famous journalist, an African American expatriate in Paris, a person who rose from sharecropping to wealth in rural North Carolina, students at some of America's most elite universities, and students in some of America's most wanting K through 12 schools.

Although the book deals with issues that can have a political charge, neither it nor the work it reports is propelled by an ideological orientation—to the best of my and my colleagues' ability. One of the first things one learns as a social psychologist is that

everyone is capable of bias. We simply are not, and cannot be, all knowing and completely objective. Our understandings and views of the world are partial, and reflect the circumstances of our particular lives. This is where a discipline like science comes in. It doesn't purge us of bias. But it extends what we can see and understand, while constraining bias. That is where I would stake my claim, at any rate. The constant back-and-forth between ideas and research results hammers away at bias and, just as important, often reveals aspects of reality that surpass our original ideas and insights. When that has happened—and it has—that is the direction our research goes in. I would like to see my strongest convictions as arising from that kind of revelation, not from prior belief, and I hope you will get a view of that experience as you read along.

Arising this way, several general patterns of findings have persistently emerged in this research. Seeing these patterns, more than any ideas or hunches I began this research with, has convinced me of the importance of identity contingencies and identity threat in our lives.

The first pattern is that despite the strong sense we have of ourselves as autonomous individuals, evidence consistently shows that contingencies tied to our social identities do make a difference in shaping our lives, from the way we perform in certain situations to the careers and friends we choose. As the white world-class sprinter takes the starting blocks in the 100-meter dash at the Olympic trials, he is as autonomous an individual as the black sprinters next to him. And they all face precisely the same 100 meters of free and open track. Nonetheless, in order to do well in that situation, research suggests that he may have to surmount a pressure tied to his racial identity that the black sprinters don't face.

The second dimension of reality, long evident in our research,

is that identity threats—and the damage they can do to our functioning—play an important role in some of society's most important social problems. These range from the racial, social class, and gender achievement gaps that persistently plague and distort our society to the equally persistent intergroup tensions that often trouble our social relations.

Third, also coming to light in this research is a general process—involving the allocation of mental resources and even a precise pattern of brain activation—by which these threats impair a broad range of human functioning. Something like a unifying understanding of how these threats have their effect is emerging.

Finally, a set of things we can do as individuals to reduce the impact of these threats in our own lives, as well as what we as a society can do to reduce their impact in important places like schools and workplaces, has come to light. There is truly inspirational news here: evidence that often small, feasible things done to reduce these threats in schools and classrooms can dramatically reduce the racial and gender achievement gaps that so discouragingly characterize our society.

These findings have convinced me of the importance of understanding identity threat to our personal progress, in areas of great concern like achievement and better group relations, and to societal progress, in achieving the identity-integrated civil life and equal opportunity that is a founding dream of this society. This book presents the journey that my colleagues and I have taken in getting to this conviction.

Let's begin the journey where it began—Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1987.