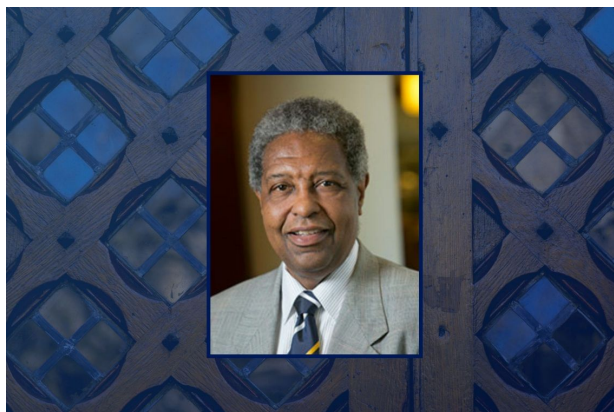


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Research: Stereotypes Might Do Less Damage at HBCUs

Lucas Hubbard : 5-6 minutes

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Professor Sandy Darity studied the effect of racial stereotypes on test scores at HBCUs

DURHAM, N.C. – One of the leading explanations for the Black-white academic achievement gap might need updating.

Stereotype threat, the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about the group to which one belongs, has long been identified as a contributing factor, with [past research](#) indicating that Black students do worse on tests when they are first reminded of their race.

But a new study co-authored by William A. "Sandy" Darity Jr., a professor of public policy and economics at Duke, found that threat to have no effect on a previously underexamined cohort: HBCU students.

"The results of this study, although based solely on experimental findings at a single Historically Black College and University (HBCU), lead us to ask whether the HBCU experience insulates Black students from susceptibility to stereotype threat," said Darity, a co-author and founding director of the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity.

The article is available [online](#) in the Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization as well as in the journal's February issue.

Experimental studies have found the prejudice that Black people are less intelligent than white people can have detrimental effects on the performance of Black subjects. When reminded of their racial identity before taking a test -- and put under the lens of this negative stereotype -- Black students have significantly [higher blood pressure rates, are more cognizant of their racial identity, and perform worse on the test when it is framed as a measure of intelligence](#), studies have shown.

However, these prior investigations almost exclusively occurred at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

"Our study, in contrast, relies upon students from a historically Black university," said lead author Mackenzie Alston, assistant professor of economics at Florida State University.

"These students specifically chose to go to a school with a large Black student population, and HBCUs, generally, provide a different learning environment than predominantly white institutions. We thought that either of these factors could affect how Black students respond to subtle reminders of the negative stereotypes about Black people's intelligence."

Conducting their research at an HBCU in Texas, the authors asked students to answer a set of 18 verbal Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) questions. Those in the treatment group were asked about their race or ethnicity prior to taking the test, and they were told the test was a measure of their intelligence.

Contrary to the findings in the prior experiments, the authors found no significant difference in the number of questions answered correctly by the subjects in the control and treatment groups -- that is, the students who weren't reminded of their race and those who were reminded performed equally well on the test.

The authors also explored whether the identity of the researcher administering the test would affect the magnitude of the threat. There was no significant difference in the number of correct answers given in the high-threat treatment (with a white male researcher) versus the low-threat treatment (with a Black female researcher).

One explanation for these findings is the unique environment that HBCUs provide for students. Evidence suggests both [diverse faculty](#) and [greater exposure to success of individuals in one's identity group](#) -- two distinguishing characteristics of the HBCU experience -- help diminish the deleterious effects of stereotype threat.

However, the particular mechanism through which HBCUs accomplish this is currently unknown. Future study in this area, the authors wrote, "may help reduce America's persistent Black-white achievement gap."

"I would love to see future research on how specific features of HBCUs like Black instructors, inclusive curriculum, and strong community help defuse the effects of stereotype threat -- and if those features can be replicated at PWIs to make a difference there," said Alston.

[Click here](#) to download a PDF of the full research report.

CITATION: "The effect of stereotypes on black college test scores at a historically Black university." Mackenzie Alston, William A. Darity, Catherine C. Eckel, Lawrence McNeil, Rhonda Sharpe. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 194, (2022), 408-424.

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