Providing Supportive Feedback

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Negatively stereotyped students, such as African Americans and Latinos, are more likely than other students to perceive that they are being treated unfairly by their teachers. This perception, which can occur regardless of the actual level of bias that exists in the classroom, reinforces disparities in performance between different racial-ethnic groups. My colleagues and I call this subjective inequality. Group members' perceptions that they are being treated unequally can reinforce objective inequalities between those groups.

Trust is key in the subjective experience of classroom settings. Aware of the reality of prejudice, members of negatively stereotyped groups may mistrust feedback on academic work that they receive from teachers and mentors. They may worry that critical feedback issues from the teacher's belief in a negative stereotype about their group as less intellectually able. This concern can arise even in interactions with teachers who share students' racial-ethnic group membership, if these teachers are perceived as having advanced in the academic system by downplaying their group membership and identifying with the majority group.

In one series of studies we conducted, African American and European American college students received critical feedback on essays that they wrote. As part of the experiment, each student attached a photograph of himself or herself to the essay. Participants were thus made aware that anyone who subsequently evaluated their essay would be able to identify them racially. One week later, students returned to the laboratory and received two pages of critical feedback on their essay, ostensibly from a European American, white professor. This feedback pointed out areas of weakness in the essay and suggested strategies for improvement. Although the feedback that the two racial groups received was standardized, African American students mistrusted the feedback more than did European American students. They rated the evaluator as more biased and were less likely than European American students to take the feedback at face value.

This trust gap translated into subsequent differences in motivation. African American students expressed less interest in revising their essays than did European American students. Our later research found that, upon receiving critical feedback from a professor on a research presentation, members of another negatively stereotyped group, female science and engineering students, performed worse on a revision of their presentation than did their non-stereotyped peers.

These results challenge a "colorblind" and "gender-blind" approach to pedagogy. Students do not necessarily experience interactions with educators as non-racialized or non-gendered. Objectively equal treatment, in the form of equivalent feedback, did not translate into subjectively equal experience for members of different groups. Members of negatively stereotyped racial and gender groups had grounds to wonder about the intentions motivating the critical feedback they had received. This uncertainty made the students experience the feedback as potentially critical not just of their specific performance but also of their academic ability and overall intelligence. These differences in subjective experience can have important academic consequences.

How can teachers and mentors bridge racial divides in perception and generate trust? Good intentions alone do not necessarily lead to positive outcomes. For example, previous research suggests that some teachers and evaluators over-praise African American and Latino American students in an effort to be encouraging and establish rapport. They may do so even when presented with a mediocre performance on the part of the student. Excessive praise can backfire. Minority students may detect it and believe that they are being held to lower expectations, undermining their motivation. Being over-praised can lead students to doubt the sincerity of their teachers, blunting the impact of positive feedback that is merited. Consistently positive feedback—if unmerited—also provides little information about how to improve.

One effective intervention is to continue to provide critical feedback but to accompany it with an explicit, two-step message: a reference to high performance standards and a personal assurance of students' capacity to reach those standards. In our research, we found that African American college students trusted critical feedback as much as their European American peers when that feedback was accompanied by (1) an explicit statement on the part of the teacher that the critical nature of the feedback was motivated by high performance standards (e.g., "The essay itself is okay—you've followed the instructions and produced an articulate paper. On the other hand, judged by a higher standard, the one that really counts, I have serious reservations . . ."); and by (2) an equally explicit statement that the student in question has the capacity to reach those standards (e.g., "Remember, I wouldn't go to the trouble of giving you this critical feedback if I didn't think, based on what I read in your essay, that you are capable of meeting the higher standard I mentioned.").

When given critical feedback in this manner, African American students were even slightly more motivated to revise their essays than were European American students.
The intervention proposed here may prove ineffective or even counterproductive if an assurance of faith in the student's ability is provided when the student requires no such assurance (this might convey that the student in question is perceived as needing encouragement); or (2) if the same message of high standards and assurance were provided in a rote, repetitive, or unpersuasive manner (its sincerity might be doubted); or (3) if the intervention is unaccompanied by the resources (for example, instructional materials) needed to support and sustain positive student outcomes.

Reducing the racial achievement gap in the United States will require expenditures of resources to improve the objective conditions of racial-ethnic minority groups both in school and in society. However, even when objective conditions are equalized, a subjective gap in perception of everyday treatment may persist for students from different groups. Decades of psychological research suggest that human motivation is fragile.21 Seemingly small moves that we make in the classroom can thus produce large effects for our students, both for good and for ill.22

RESOURCES


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** Why might the moment of giving feedback on an assignment be a key antiracist moment?

2. **Strategy:** How have your students responded to your feedback on their assignments? Do you have any indication that your students' racial group membership or your own might play a role in their level of trust as Cohen suggests might occur?

3. **Try tomorrow:** Imagine putting Cohen's suggestions about critical feedback into action as you turn back your next assignment. In your own words, how might you emphasize high standards and assert your belief in students' ability to reach them?

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