

Pedagogy that Purifies the Air: Recognizing and Reducing ‘Stereotype Threat’ in the Preaching Classroom

Jared E. Alcántara, PhD, Associate Professor of Preaching
George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University

Abstract: *In this article, I commend a homiletical pedagogy that ‘purifies the air’ by recognizing and reducing “stereotype threat” in preaching classrooms. In the first section, I outline how to recognize stereotype threat in dialogue with social psychologist Claude M. Steele, a thought leader in the field. Then, in the second section, I propose three pedagogical interventions for how to reduce stereotype threat: identity seeing, intelligence shifting, and imaginative shaping. The end goal is simple: homileticians who are trained to recognize and reduce stereotype threat both inside and outside their classrooms.*

Introduction

Before Brent Staples worked as a columnist at *The New York Times* and long before he won the Pulitzer Prize (2019), he studied psychology at the University of Chicago. Born in 1951 in Chester, Pennsylvania, he moved to Chicago in the mid 1970s to pursue a master’s degree in psychology, which he received in 1976. He went on to receive his PhD in psychology from the same university in 1982. Now imagine a young Black male wearing street clothes and walking down the streets of a Hyde Park neighborhood (where the university is located) late at night in the 1970s and early 1980s. Staples writes: “I became an expert in the language of fear. Couples locked arms or they reached for each other’s hand when they saw me. Some crossed to the other side of the street.” Others would stop their conversation and remain silent. Others would avoid eye contact at all costs. Staples did not know what to do. “I began to avoid people. I turned out of my way into side streets to spare them the sense that they were being stalked.”¹ In these concrete situations, it did not matter that he lived in the same neighborhood; neither did it matter where he went to school nor how many degrees he had on his wall. Based on his appearance, the strangers stereotyped him as a violence-prone African American youth, a threat to their safety.

Those who read Staples’ story already have a sense of why the strangers’ initial assumptions were both wrong and racist. But, what do we make of the story from *his* perspective? How do we account for the *experience* of being stereotyped? The short answer is this: Staples experienced what social psychologists refer to as “stereotype threat,” a situational context that brought about psychological stress due to an existing stereotype, a toxicity in the air, if you will. The long answer – a broad description of what stereotype threat is, why it matters, its relevance to homiletical pedagogy, and how to reduce it – will come in the pages that follow.

In this article, I call for a pedagogy that purifies the air through recognition and reduction: recognizing stereotype threat for what it is and reducing its toxic influence in the preaching classroom. To accomplish this aim, I define and describe stereotype threat in dialogue with Claude M. Steele, a thought leader in the field, and I recommend three interventions for how to reduce it; what I call identity seeing, intelligence shifting, and imaginative shaping. I use the words *recognition* and *reduction* with intentionality here since teachers of preaching do not have the power to do the work of *removal*. Stereotype threat occurs when *individuals* experience

¹ Brent Staples, “Black Men and Public Space,” *Harper’s Magazine*, December 1986, 202–3, as cited in Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 6.

psychological stress in situational contexts – their experiences fall outside of our control since theirs are theirs and ours are ours. However, as teachers, we *do* have agency over the situational contexts we seek to cultivate. We cannot remove all toxicity, but we can make the air less toxic.

Recognizing Stereotype Threat

I define stereotype threat as *added pressure experienced by individuals arising from stereotypes and resulting in diminishment in a manner that nonstereotyped counterparts do not experience*. Let me use two imperfect analogies to illustrate what I mean, especially as it pertains to the connection between pressure and diminishment. Imagine that you own a home but that you have to pay double to triple the property taxes on it despite all your neighbors' houses being around the same size and the household incomes being somewhat commensurate. On top of the extra financial burden, you notice that your neighbors are sending you messages, whether discursive or non-discursive, conscious or unconscious, that you do not belong in their neighborhood. On a variety of levels – financial, relational, emotional, familial – you come to the realization that you are paying “taxes” that none of your neighbors have to pay.

Now consider a different situation: various allergens or toxicities in the air impact your ability to breathe normally and function at your job. These same allergens and toxicities do not seem to impact other people around you in the same way despite the fact that they impact *you* in a disproportionate way. You feel like you are choking on the air whereas those around you feel like nothing is wrong at all. In fact, they seem like they can thrive and flourish while breathing this air. Perhaps they feel like the problem is with you rather than the air that harms you.

These scenarios highlight the various environmental obstacles faced by those who are stereotyped, by which is meant here people of color in general and seminarians of color in particular who deal with stereotype threat on a semi-regular basis. It also illustrates the connection between added pressure and diminishment. In an environment where stereotype threat is present, the stereotyped person experiences a situational threat, an additional tax or toxin, that a nonstereotyped person does not also experience. If the conditions were different, perhaps the person would be able to function fine, enjoying the neighborhood, breathing clean air just as others breathe it. But the challenges in the environment itself introduce impediments that others do not have to overcome, obstacles that have an adverse impact on the individual experiencing stress in the situational context, obstacles that in and of themselves suppress and even sabotage the individual's desired outcomes within the system.

Over the last three-plus decades, a growing body of research has emerged on the psychological stress that stereotyped individuals experience and the harmful outcomes that it produces as a result of the stress itself. Most scholars agree that the leading thinker, researcher, and problem solver on stereotype threat is Dr. Claude M. Steele, a well-known and widely respected African American social psychologist. Steele spent the majority of his more than three-decade career (1985-2016) focused on three overlapping areas of research: addictive behaviors, self-affirmation, and stereotype threat. He made noteworthy contributions in the first two domains of research, especially early in his career, and he also highlighted important interrelationships that existed among the three domains. But people know him best for his work on stereotype threat.

In 1986, the University of Michigan offered Steele one job with two roles, one part teaching and research and the other part administration. He was teaching full-time at the University of Washington in Seattle at the time, but considered accepting the two-part job from

the University Michigan because it was a nationally recognized graduate program in social psychology. However, the administrative request gave him pause. The university wanted him to direct an academic support program for minoritized students designed to close the achievement gap on campus. After assessing the program and interviewing cohorts of minoritized students on the campus at the University of Michigan, he knew right away that he should decline the job offer. Although he cared deeply about improving the educational experiences of minoritized students in higher education, he also knew that he could not maintain a productive research agenda while overseeing a program that “served the advising, tutoring, and financial management needs of over 400 students, and it did so within a large bureaucracy, the kind that it takes to run a university of 36,000 students.”²

The University of Michigan did not give up its recruiting efforts. One year later, in 1987, Steele joined the faculty when he received an offer to teach and conduct research full-time as a regular faculty member. Shortly after he arrived on campus, the university selected him to be part of a task force designed to improve recruitment, retention, and academic success for minoritized students. This allowed him to focus on these areas of passion and interest without having to manage the demands of directing an academic support program.

An important shift took place in Steele’s thinking and research when he interviewed students and studied data sets initially in the spring of 1986 when he declined the first job offer and later in the fall of 1987 after accepting the second job offer. He already knew an achievement gap existed between White majority students and minoritized students at the university, and he also knew that dropout rates were much higher for students of color than for their White peers, but he wanted to go deeper in order to get at the root cause of the problem.³

The epiphanic moment came when he discovered that many of the students that were struggling at his university had been high achievers in high school with strong SAT scores, good grades, and high levels of intrinsic motivation. He could detect this in interviews which functioned as soft evidence. He could also detect it through data analysis which functioned as hard evidence. When he studied the students’ SAT scores in high school and compared them with the academic grades that they received in college, he realized:

At every level of entering SATs, even the highest level, black students got lower grades than other students. If we assume that the SAT is a rough measure of preparation for college, this meant something dramatic: *that among students with comparable academic skills, as measured by the SAT, black students got less of a return on those skills than other students.* Something was suppressing the yield they got from their skills.⁴

In other words, the achievement gap had little to nothing to do with past performance, deficiency in academic skill, motivation, or self-destructive patterns. Both the soft evidence and the hard

² Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*, 17.

³ I use the phrase “minoritized students” here for a strategic reason. Steele worked primarily with African American students in his earliest research, but his studies were replicated with other cohorts of minoritized students soon after he published his work, and his thesis was empirically verified. For instance, to learn more about the adverse effects of stereotype threat on Latinx students, see Patricia M. Gonzales, Hart Blanton, and Kevin J. Williams, “The Effects of Stereotype Threat and Double-Minority Status on the Test Performance of Latino Women,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, no. 5 (2002): 659–70; Toni Schmader, Michael Johns, and Chad Forbes, “An Integrated Process Model of Stereotype Threat Effects on Performance,” *Psychological Review* 115, no. 2 (2008): 336–56.

⁴ Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*, 20. Italics in original.

evidence revealed that the context in which the learning was taking place was somehow suppressing the yield. Over and over, Steele and his collaborators could demonstrate a strong connection between underachievement by minoritized students in college and their experiences of college itself. He writes: “Something was causing their strengths to let them down consistently – even the strongest among them. Something in the air on campus seemed part of their problems.”⁵ Steele gave a name to the “something in the air” when he started presenting his work on achievement gaps at other universities and later publishing it.⁶ The name that he gave was “stereotype threat.” Leaders at Stanford University saw the potential significance of his work along with his proposed interventions, and thus recruited him onto the faculty there in 1991.

In the interviews especially, Steele could see the connections that were emerging between stereotype threat, academic underachievement, diminished wellbeing, and suppression of yield. The students that he interviewed did everything right. They prepared well; they worked hard; and they told him that they were proud to be students at the University of Michigan. But these same students also reported being isolated from others, being marginalized and ostracized, being constantly made aware of their otherness inside and outside of class, and being “worried that teaching assistants, fellow students, and even faculty might see their academic abilities as less than those of other students.”⁷ Many of the student interviewees worked harder and prepared better than many of their nonstereotyped counterparts, but it seemed like those who worked the hardest and prepared the best were the ones who struggled the most with tests and grades. Ironically, some of the most capable students in the cohort, what Steele would describe as the “academic vanguard of their group,” struggled the most with the debilitating effects of stereotype threat.⁸ These students had not internalized negative stereotypes about their academic proficiency especially because of their past successes, but they also seemed like they were the *most* likely candidates to expend disproportionate amounts of energy proving that they belonged in academics and disproving the stereotype about their group before others. According to social psychologists Steven J. Spencer, Christine Logel, and Paul Davies, “one ironic and unfortunate aspect of stereotype threat is that the very people who tend to be the highest achieving and care the most are those most affected by negative stereotypes.”⁹ The added pressure, the psychological stress associated with proving their legitimacy as students on campus and disproving stereotypes concerning their skill, intellect, or motivation, impeded their ability to succeed.¹⁰

⁵ Steele, 23.

⁶ Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson, “Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5 (1995): 797–811; Claude M. Steele, “A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance,” *American Psychologist* 52, no. 6 (1997): 613–29; Claude M. Steele, “Thin Ice: ‘Stereotype Threat’ and Black College Students,” *The Atlantic* 284, no. 2 (August 1999): 44–45, 50–54; Steven J. Spencer, Claude M. Steele, and Dianne M. Quinn, “Stereotype Threat and Women’s Math Performance,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 35, no. 1 (1999): 4–28; Claude M. Steele, Steven J. Spencer, and Joshua Aronson, “Contending with Group Image: The Psychology of Stereotype and Social Identity Threat,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 34 (2002): 379–440.

⁷ Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*, 19.

⁸ Steele, “A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance,” 617.

⁹ Steven J. Spencer, Christine Logel, and Paul G. Davies, “Stereotype Threat,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 67 (2016): 423.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Spencer, Logel, and Davies argue that the extra pressure to succeed due to stereotype threat has an adverse impact on performance through “at least three main mechanisms: mere effort, working memory depletion, and conscious attention to automatic processes” (419). Mere effort means the extra energy that a person spends on disproving the stereotype, energy that distracts one from the task at hand and impedes performance. Working

In the years after these initial studies, Steele and his co-researchers took their ideas on stereotype threat and academic underperformance in minoritized communities and they tested these ideas in other areas in which stereotype threat might be present including areas beyond academic performance. For instance, they studied the ways that stereotype threat impacts women who underperform in mathematics, White males who are told that they are being tested on their natural athletic ability, or White males who are being tested in mathematics but are told that they are being tested in comparison to Asian Americans. In fact, over the last three decades, a growing body of research revealed that “stereotype threat can negatively affect performance in domains as diverse as negotiations, financial decision making, golf putting, safe driving, and memory performance among older adults.”¹¹ Although stereotype threat has been found in more than one group across more than one domain, Steele took a special interest in stereotype threat’s impact on academic performance among students of color, and how educators might deploy useful strategies to reduce its effects in classrooms. In the next section, we will turn our attention to the work of reduction by highlighting these proposed interventions and exploring their significance for the preaching classroom.

Reducing Stereotype Threat in Preaching Classrooms

Without a doubt, Steele’s research on stereotype threat draws attention to a “wound in need of redress,” to use practical theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s term.¹² The wound cuts deep enough that it impacts more than academic performance. The research reveals that it affects self-worth, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, sense of belonging, and physical health. Lament seems like the most fitting word here, a theological word which signals that life is not the way it is supposed to be, an idea that calls for both an honest and costly account of realities on the ground. Why would we not lament that sin goes beyond the personal to the systemic and structural, that institutions preparing people for ministry in and alongside the church end up perpetuating powers and principalities instead of doing battle against them? Far too often, seminarians of color enter classrooms or walk around their campuses, and they sense intuitively that there is something in the air, some kind of toxin, that will inhibit their ability to breathe in this space where everyone else believes the air is fine.

What would need to happen for homileticians to purify the air, that is, to practice pedagogy that reduces the toxicity in the space? Although a full answer to this question is beyond the scope of this essay, and removal is outside the bounds of our control, we can consider part of the answer, albeit a narrow part. Moreover, we can do the work of reduction. Steele and his collaborators tested interventions that were designed to reduce stereotype threat both inside

memory depletion occurs when the psychological stress required to suppress negative thoughts and feelings steals energy from the part of the memory used to “control attention and effortfully process information” (420). Conscious attention to automatic processes means that a stereotyped person expends energy and effort on tasks that would normally be automated and effortless, so much so that one becomes “more vigilant for signs of failure” during processes that would normally require little to no conscious energy. See Spencer, Logel, and Davies, 419–20.

¹¹ Ibid., 417. See also Dianne M. Quinn, Rachel W. Kallen, and Steven J. Spencer, “Stereotype Threat,” in *The Sage Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination*, ed. John F. Dovidio et al. (Washington, DC: Sage, 2010), 379–94; Geoffrey L. Cohen, Valerie Purdie-Vaughns, and Julio Garcia, “An Identity Threat Perspective on Intervention,” in *Stereotype Threat: Theory, Process, and Application*, ed. Michael Inzlicht and Toni Schmader (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 280–96.

¹² Fulkerson’s larger point is that theologues that matter arise out of situations that matter. The situations that matter most occur at the site of a wound in need of remedy and transformation. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13–14, 22.

and outside of classrooms, as did other researchers who followed after them. We cannot examine every proposal that they made so let me highlight three interventions in particular, strategies that I will call identity seeing, intelligence shifting, and imaginative shaping.

Identity Seeing

Identity seeing refers to *the intentional cultivation of a “critical mass” of minoritized voices in such a way that seminarians of color see more identity representation than they would have otherwise anticipated.* By “critical mass,” Steele means “the point at which there are enough minorities in the setting, like a school or workplace, that individual minorities no longer feel uncomfortable there because they are minorities – in our terms, they no longer feel an interfering level of identity threat.”¹³ When a stereotyped person sees more rather than less representation in the space, it reduces the possibility that the space will be seen as a situational threat, which then reduces the added pressure that often leads to diminished performance.

Some critical mass work remains outside of a homiletics professor’s control. Perhaps we have little to no influence on our seminary’s practices of recruitment, retention, service, and placement, let alone its faculty hiring practices. Perhaps we do. If we do not have much influence, then we will not be able to exert much control over the “counting” that usually happens when seminarians of color enter White-majority classroom spaces, most often on the first day of class. To quote from African American tennis great Arthur Ashe: “Like many other blacks, when I find myself in a new public situation, I will count. I always count. I count the number of black and brown faces present...”¹⁴ While we might not be able to influence “the count,” we still have influence. Some activities remain within our control. How might we contribute in a positive way to an increased critical mass? What might we do to change a negative critical mass cue – “There is almost no one who looks like me here” – into a positive cue – “There are more voices and perspectives in this space than I thought there would be”?

Perhaps more than we know, our homiletics classrooms communicate to students what we value most. Do seminarians of color see a critical mass of identity representation in the syllabus that we send them before we meet them on the first day (or release on the first day)? Again, the notion of a critical mass matters here since just one reading or one class period devoted to these discussions might actually further the problem by reifying a norm-other binary. Which sermons do students watch or listen to in our preaching classes, and what do our choices communicate about which voices will be heard and which ones will not be heard? How might we de-center White normativity in the physical or digital spaces in which we teach since, in a racialized society, these spaces have immense rhetorical power to communicate who is welcome and who is not, who is family and who is a guest? Who might we recruit and lift up as role models, leaders of color in the academy and the church whose presence refutes negative stereotypes and demonstrates that these stereotypes are not at all based in fact? How might we communicate that we dialogue with a critical mass of minoritized scholars and pastors in our theological-homiletical discourses? What do we read, who do we quote, who do we cite in our publications, so that students see, hear, and know that we value minoritized voices and perspectives? Which faculty members of color, administrators of color, scholars of color, and

¹³ Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*, 135.

¹⁴ Arthur Ashe and Arnold Rampersad, *Days of Grace* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 144, as cited in Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 140.

ministers of color do we point to who are in positions of authority, especially since many seminarians of color are sensitized to power differentials in the space? How might we change negative cues related to power and authority and replace them with positive cues? As Steele reminds us, “If no powerful people in a setting have your identity, it tells you something.”¹⁵

The cultivation of a critical mass of minoritized identity representation has the potential to lead to significant decreases in the experience of stereotype threat. Students of color do less counting. They feel less added pressure. They learn important things about what their professor values. Most importantly, they breathe clearer air than they might have otherwise.

Intelligence Shifting

Intelligence shifting refers to *the strategic reconstrual of intelligence as a muscle to develop as opposed to a measurement of one’s capacity*. According to Spencer, Logel, and Davies, stereotype threat remains pervasive in spaces where “intellectual performance is both fixed and group based.”¹⁶ When Steele and his collaborators conducted their experiments on stereotype threat, they discovered how much priming matters in the determination of outcomes for minoritized students who might be trying to disprove stereotypes related to aptitude, skill, and motivation. The groups that heard messages that primed the stereotype threat such as, “This test is a measurement of your intellectual ability,” “White students tended to do better on this exam,” “This test will reveal your latent abilities,” and other messages like these, performed significantly worse than groups that did not receive this priming at all or that received positive priming instead such as messages about how the testing was nondiagnostic instead of diagnostic or that intelligence was broader than the exam. Notice the two-fold layered priming with the second group: what is *not* stated and what *is* stated about how to understand intelligence. Not only did the second group perform significantly better than the first group; more importantly, the second group performed the same or better when compared to their nonstereotyped counterparts. Put simply, simple priming strategies helped to close the achievement gap.

In a homiletics classroom, how might we cast intelligence differently than we do now, as a muscle that we can strengthen over time? How might we shift the way we talk about intelligence, describe it, evaluate it, and assess it? How do we promote what Carol Dweck refers to as a “growth mindset” over against a “fixed mindset” in the messages that we send and do not send to seminarians of color? Dweck argues that a person with a fixed mindset believes that “your qualities are carved in stone,” which then results in an “urgency to prove yourself over and over,” whereas a person with a growth mindset believes that “your basic qualities are things that you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others.”¹⁷ Although Dweck makes the important point that everyone should move toward a growth mindset, one could also argue that her research-based recommendations could be especially salient among those from stereotyped groups, individuals who experience added taxation in academic performance, and whose intelligence is consistently called into question and undermined through racist, dehumanizing messaging.

Consider a few possibilities for how to engage in intelligence shifting. How might you introduce lower-stakes assignments throughout the semester so that minoritized students (and all students for that matter) become more process-oriented and less event-oriented, so that there is a

¹⁵ Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*, 141.

¹⁶ Spencer, Logel, and Davies, “Stereotype Threat,” 428.

¹⁷ Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2016), 6–7.

greater focus on growth over time and less of a focus on the zero-sum game of success or failure? We do not have to do away with high-stakes assignments, but we do have to ask whether just one or two high-stakes assignments encourage a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. How might you encourage goal-setting so that growth feels like it is less ambiguous and more achievable? How might you construe growth less like an unattainable, moving target and more like an attainable and definable outcome? As Spencer, Logel and Davies observe, “seeing intellectual performance as something that can grow and that is not limited can thus serve as an important antidote to stereotype threat.”¹⁸

It can also make a major difference when we make slight changes to the way that we give feedback whether in writing, class activities such as discussions or sermon debriefs, face to face, or in online settings. Steele and his co-researchers discovered that the most important message to send is actually a two-fold message which I will paraphrase here: “I have high standards, and I believe in your ability to meet those standards.”¹⁹ The first half of the message communicates that a muscle cannot be built without significant effort and exertion. The second half communicates that the student has what it takes to build it, that the person is both talented enough and motivated enough to meet high standards. Bear in mind that the language does not have to be formal or written when we give this kind of feedback. It can be written, verbal, in public, or in private. For instance, in a one-on-one meeting in my office, I might say in passing something to the effect of, “Now, I’m going to push you to be a better preacher in this class, but don’t worry. You’re smart. You’re a good preacher. You’ll figure it out.” I send the same message in various ways at various times for various reasons throughout the semester. Find the language that works for you with the larger goal of sending both the first and the second half of the message at one and the same time.

Imaginative Shaping

Imaginative shaping refers to *the purposeful rescripting of identity in such a way that seminarians of color are less likely to connect their identity to their performance*. In 2007, Steele and one of his coresearchers, A. David Nussbaum, introduced the language of “situational disengagement.” In their research, they studied minoritized students who maintained high levels of motivation and resilience despite being in stereotype-threatening contexts. What trait did these students share in common? They learned how to deflect messages of devaluation without losing their motivational drive or losing their connection to their racial-ethnic identity over the long term. Put differently, they knew “how to lose the battle to win the war.”²⁰ According to Steele and Nussbaum, a person who knows how to practice “situational disengagement,” learns how to adapt and improvise in the moment of the threat without disidentifying permanently or in an unhealthy way. “Rather than permanently disidentifying, a student under stereotype pressure may simply disengage from a particular performance by denying its relevance to his or her self-

¹⁸ Spencer, Logel, and Davies, “Stereotype Threat,” 428.

¹⁹ Geoffrey L. Cohen, Claude M. Steele, and Lee D. Ross, “The Mentor’s Dilemma: Providing Critical Feedback Across the Racial Divide,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25, no. 10 (October 1, 1999): 1302–18; Geoffrey L. Cohen and Claude M. Steele, “A Barrier of Mistrust: How Negative Stereotypes Affect Cross-Race Mentoring,” in *Improving Academic Achievement: Impact of Psychological Factors on Education*, ed. Joshua Aronson (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2002), 303–27.

²⁰ A. David Nussbaum and Claude M. Steele, “Situational Disengagement and Persistence in the Face of Adversity,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 128.

worth and thus be able to persist in the domain even in the face of frustration.”²¹ Notice that Steele and Nussbaum do not claim that the students in the study somehow abrogate their identity. Rather, the students disengage their identity from their performance by disconnecting it from their self-worth, by reorienting their identity around more important value distinctions.

As homileticians, what might we do to encourage the work of disengagement, disconnection, and reorientation? How might we help seminarians of color imagine a different possibility for interpretive work, one that is not as tied to their performance in the classroom? How might we as teachers of preachers participate in the work of shaping a more deliberate and expansive account of identity?

Without denying the theological possibilities for the first two strategies, let me suggest that the richest possibilities for theologizing-for-good can be found here. Perhaps more than we realize, homileticians have access to a deep reservoir of theological resources, traditions, doctrines, stories, experiences, and retellings that position us well for doing this work. I would argue that some of us have homiletical theologies that support this kind of imaginative (re)shaping, that cast preaching as a redescription of reality itself, a sacred event that invites us out of seeing things as they *seem* to be and into seeing them the way they really are.²² Faith itself at its core, Barbara Brown Taylor claims, is a “surrender of one set of images and the acceptance of another. It is a matter of learning to see the world, each other, and ourselves as God sees us, and to live as if God’s reality were the only one that mattered.”²³ “The invitation of preaching (not unlike psychotherapy),” Walter Brueggemann writes, “is to abandon the script in which one has had confidence and to enter a different script that imaginatively tells one’s life differently.”²⁴

We know that theological language is sometimes used to damage others and to cause harm – students of color will often tell these stories about theology’s misuse to professors that they trust – however, we also know that theological language grounded in affirmation, dignity, and worth has the power to redescribe reality, to speak words of life and liberation to individuals and communities.

Let me mention just two brief examples. Black womanist theologian Jaclyn L. Grant claims that her sense of dignity and worth were imparted to her through her parents’ “theology of somebodiness, which they lived out without pretension,” a theology that conveyed to her that “in spite of the world’s denial of you, Jesus (God) affirms you.” Her life in Jesus, she writes, was “not one that restricted me as a Black person or as a female, but affirmed me and projected me into areas where, I later learned, ‘I was not supposed to go’ by virtue of my race and gender.”²⁵ Puerto Rican theologian Loida Martell-Otero tells a similar story about the power of redescription for marginalized Latinx women. Far too often, Martell-Otero observes, Latinx women hear painful and even hateful messages related to identity, being called *satas* (dogs or mongrels) by strangers and being treated as *sobrajas* (leftovers) by individuals and communities.

²¹ Nussbaum and Steele, 128.

²² See Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1988); Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (New York: Cowley, 1993); Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997); Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012); Geoff New, *Imaginative Preaching* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Partnership, 2015).

²³ Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 42.

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 34–35.

²⁵ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), ix.

To them, good news sounds like a Jesus who understands what it is like to be seen as a *sobrajo* from Galilee and treated like a *sato* by those he came to love and serve. “God has intentionally chosen to be with the *sat@s* and *sobrajas* of the world.”²⁶ In fact, God does more than stand with and suffer alongside. Martell-Otero writes: “In Christ and through the Spirit...what the world has rejected, God has called and loved. *Las satas ya no son sobrajas sino santas*, a people called by God.” In English: “The dogs are no longer leftovers but saints...”²⁷

Many of us who teach homiletics already preach sermons in which we invite people to disengage their identity from their performance, to separate their self-worth from their achievement or lack thereof, and to reorient their identity around more important value distinctions. Such a message can be heard as a word of life to all people, of course, but, in homiletics classrooms in particular it can sound like an especially hopeful word of life to those most at risk of stereotype threat. As teachers of preachers, through the work of imaginative (re)shaping, we can invite students into a “different script,” to return to Brueggemann’s phrase, a script infused with life, hope, and the possibility of shalom.

As preachers who believe in and preach about the promise of imaginative (re)shaping to others, we can also ask: What sort of disorientation for the sake of reorientation might be required of us? Both majority-culture and minoritized seminary professors benefit from re-imagining their role as teachers in light of their theologies. How might our identities be wrapped up in our performance? How might our sense of self-worth be tangled up in our achievements or lack thereof, our roles or our responsibilities? How might we de-center without abrogation? How might we reorient our identities around more important value distinctions in the classroom?

Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed a plan for mitigating stereotype threat in preaching classrooms through the work of recognition and reduction. Much more could be written about how to do both. More interventions could be proposed, especially since the research on how to mitigate this threat extends beyond my proposals, and the work of classroom interventions requires person- and context-specific strategizing. Although the ideas that I have set forth in this article for reducing stereotype threat are empirically validated strategies, the specific language that works best for me in my context might not be the language that works best for someone else in another context. For good reasons, we will use different language for the same work and imagine better interventions in one space over against another. That stated, in the work of contextualizing, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the work itself remains vitally important, that a plan of intervention is required.

Brent Staples came up with a plan for what to do while walking the streets of Hyde Park late at night. He did not so much come up with a plan as happen upon an idea by accident:

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

²⁶ Loida Martell-Otero, “From *Satas* to *Santas*: *Sobrajas* No More: Salvation in the Spaces of the Everyday,” in Loida I. Martell-Otero, Zaida Maldonado Pérez, and Elizabeth Conde-Frazer, *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 38. Italics in original and @ symbol in original.

²⁷ Martell-Otero, Maldonado Pérez, and Conde-Frazer, 51. Italics in original.

Beatles and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. The tensions drained from people's bodies when they heard me. A few even smiled as they passed me in the dark.²⁸

Especially when Staples would whistle Vivaldi, he noticed that the whole context would change from a situation of psychological stress to a non-threatening situation. The strangers may not have recognized that it was Vivaldi, but they did recognize that it was classical music. Through a simple intervention, Staples could communicate that the stereotypical scripts that others might have believed about him at first glance did not apply to him at all.

Granted, we cannot map this story onto the classroom without complication. The intervention that Staples came up with did not tackle the larger problem of the wrong and racist assumptions made by others about him, assumptions that would have continued had he not done something to change their perspective. A good teacher knows how to come up with strategies for dealing with the macro-problem and not just the micro-situation. Also, Staples had to come up with a survival strategy as a non-dominant person with less power in a racialized system whereas teachers of preaching have more power to shape the classroom or system in which they teach.

Even so, Staples' survival strategy does not strike seminarians of color as peculiar at all. It sounds all too familiar. Ask just about any seminarian of color with whom you have built trust about whether or not they have developed survival strategies for dealing with racial and ethnic prejudice at seminary in general and navigating toxic classroom ecologies in particular, and their answer will be a definitive "yes." Although there are some differences between Staples' story and what I am proposing here, my larger point is this: teachers of preachers have the capacity to come up with interventions that make situations like the one that Staples describes less likely to occur. We cannot do the work of removal, but we can do the work of recognition and reduction. Good teaching strategies reduce the need for good survival strategies.

Steele does not tell the story about Staples in *Whistling Vivaldi* in order to offer readers some kind of quaint anecdote about how a person of color made life easier for White folks a few decades ago, and he most certainly does not tell it in order to offer some kind of general panacea for eradicating racism in society. Rather, he tells the story to make a larger point: yes, stereotype threat is both pervasive and destructive and, yes, there are dynamic interventions for reducing it. A person who walks down the street without a plan experiences high levels of added pressure and psychological stress, a toxin in the air that can be debilitating. However, a person who walks down the street *with* a plan can walk with more confidence, can increase the likelihood of breathing freely without fear. Interventions *do* exist to make the air less toxic.

Although the plan that I have proposed here is both imperfect and incomplete, it is better to have a plan than not to have a plan. If I could set the plan to music, it would sound like teachers of preaching learning what it sounds like to whistle Vivaldi in their classrooms and empowering seminarians of color to do the same.

²⁸ Brent Staples, "Black Men and Public Space," *Harper's Magazine*, December 1986, 202–3, as cited in Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*, 6.