CHAPTER TEN

FIGURE 10.10
Stereotype Threat and Test Performance

African Americans performed just as well as European Americans in the control condition but performed more poorly than European Americans when they had first been asked to think about their race. These findings suggest that African Americans may sometimes suffer from stereotype threat in achievement-relevant situations.


Stereotype threat primarily affects students who identify strongly with doing well in school. If success means very little to a student, the student won’t be vulnerable to stereotype threat. Because good students care most about doing well, this means that stereotype threat will have its greatest effect on the most promising students (Pronin, Steele, & Ross, 2004; Schmader, 2002). Moreover, stereotype threat can occur even when students have substantial confidence in their own ability to succeed. The stereotype applies to the group, not to the individual, and a student needn’t accept the stereotype in order to be susceptible to its negative effects. It is simply the fear of being judged by the stereotype that undermines performance. (J. Aronson et al., 1999; C. M. Steele, 1997).

Finally, you don’t have to be African American to suffer from stereotype threat. The phenomenon can occur for any group that is characterized by a negative stereotype. For example, common stereotypes maintain that European Americans are inferior to Asians in science and engineering and inferior to African Americans in athletic ability. Consistent with Steele’s theory of stereotype threat, research has found that the task performance of European Americans suffers in these areas when they are reminded of these stereotypes (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1997).

1. Who’s Susceptible to Stereotype Threat?

2. Stereotype Threat among Women

Women consistently score lower on standardized tests of math ability than do men (Benbow, Lubinski, Shea, & Eftekhari-Sanjani, 2000), and this fact is a common