

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.