

Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: **Stereotype Threat and Attributional Ambiguity for Trans Women**

Author: **Rachel McKinnon**

Readability: **Easy/Moderate**/Difficult

(very readable, but likely requires some background knowledge of the topics she talks about).

Thesis:

McKinnon begins by noting that the vast majority (basically all) of feminist philosophy and social psychology research into stereotype threat has focused on cisgender women. She argues that transgender women experience some forms of stereotype threat in a markedly different way than cisgender women do. She claims that trans women often experience a “dual layer threat.” Moreover, she says that in understanding trans women’s experiences of stereotype threat, we gain a better understanding of the oppressive nature of stereotype threat more generally. She connects these discussions to issues surrounding attributional ambiguity.

Key Definitions:

Stereotypes: “false or misleading generalizations about groups held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, immune to counterevidence. In doing so, stereotypes powerfully shape the stereotyper's perception of stereotyped groups, seeing the stereotypic characteristics when they are not present, failing to see the contrary of those characteristics when they are, and generally homogenizing the group” (from Blum 2004, 251, quoted on p. 1-2).

Stereotype threat: “When a negative stereotype about a group that one is part of becomes personally relevant, usually as an interpretation of one’s behavior or an experience one is having, stereotype threat is the resulting sense that one can then be judged or treated in terms of the stereotype, or that one might do something that would inadvertently confirm it” (from Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002, 384, quoted on p. 3)

Attributional Ambiguity: “We find this whenever it’s unclear why someone behaves a certain way toward us, such as a positive or negative evaluation of our actions.” (p. 10).

Gender essentialism: “the view that there are features essential to being female or male, and that one is forever one’s birth-assigned sex or gender.” (p. 2)

Brief Summary:

Section 1: An Incomplete Picture of Stereotype Threat and Attributional Ambiguity

McKinnon begins by noting what the paper is (and is not) about:

“In this paper, I discuss some problems and sources of stereotype threat, and some ways in which trans women face unique forms of stereotype threat generally not present for cisgender women, and I connect these discussions to issues surrounding attributional ambiguity. I contend that trans women often experience a dual layer of stereotype threat. This makes the risk of stereotype threat and attributional ambiguity particularly troublesome for trans women. Moreover, by understanding trans women’s experiences of stereotype threat and attributional ambiguity, we’ll gain a better understanding of the oppressive nature of the phenomena more generally.” (p. 1)

“It’s important to note what this paper is not. It’s not a paper on stereotypes, or even trans women stereotypes. I won’t discuss in detail, for example, how stereotypes arise, or what effects stereotypes have on people aside from the specific phenomenon of stereotype threat. Moreover, this is not a paper on the concept of gender and what trans* identities can teach us about gender.” (p. 1)

Section 2: Trans Women Stereotypes: Three Tropes

After briefly describing what stereotypes are, McKinnon goes over three tropes that heavily influence the stereotypes about trans women. These, combined with an implicit or explicit view of gender essentialism, she argues, leads to forms of stereotype threat for trans women.

“The **deceiver trope** portrays the trans woman as dominant and powerful, still full of "male" energy.” (p. 2)

“The **pathetic trope** portrays trans women as weak, meek, and ignorant: ignorant about how to be a woman. Or, at least, they’re bad at "playing" at being a woman.” (p. 2)

“The **"artificial" trope**: trans women aren't real, and they need all sorts of tricks and medical interventions in order to remotely "pass" as women.” (p. 2)

Here, she also gives a brief overview of gender essentialism (see above) And gives a quick overview of the sex/gender ‘distinction’ and some good reasons to be skeptical about it being as strict as some tend to take it.

Section 3: Stereotype Threat

Here, McKinnon begins by defining stereotype threat (see above) and gives an overview of some classic experiments and notes that they tend to focus on performance in certain areas. As she puts it, the “classic manifestation of stereotype threat” is “the *underperformance effect*” (p. 4). McKinnon wants to look at cases of stereotype threat that go beyond performance, and in particular what she calls *situational avoidance*.

“Many manifestations of the situational avoidance aspect of stereotype threat arise when people act so as to avoid situations where the possibility of stereotype threat looms. Women, for example, may avoid STEM disciplines because their mathematical abilities, where the stereotype is that they’re less capable than men, will be constantly considered inferior, even if they aren’t (Davies et al. 2002). And as I’ll discuss in detail below, trans women may avoid a great many situations or behaviors for fear of being perceived in terms of (negative) trans stereotypes.” (p. 4)

Section 4: Examples of Stereotype Threat for Trans Women

Example 1: Wanting to read a book like Caitlin Moran’s *How To Be A Woman*

Example 2: Being Assertive or Firm in Argumentation

Examples 3: Feminine Gender Presentations and Expressions

Here, McKinnon explains what she means by the “dual layer threat” that trans women face:

“Both cis and trans women face stereotype threat about being assertive or argumentative, and both may respond with situational avoidance. For trans women, though, the threat is different: they’ll face the same stereotype threat that cisgender women face, but they’ll also face the stereotype threat from the behavior being wrongly attributed to their birth-assigned sex or gender. This adds an extra layer to the stereotype threat. This extra layer is always present for trans women, I suggest, but only rarely for cis women.” (p. 7)

From these examples, McKinnon also makes some “General Comments on Stereotype Threat for Trans Women.” One in particular is the following:

“Above, I discussed how one behavioral response to stereotype threat is situational avoidance. [...] However, trans women often can’t avoid domains where the gendered (and gender-assigned-at-birth) source of their behaviors are constantly scrutinized; or, at

least, they can't avoid domains where there isn't the threat of the application of these stereotypes. Any social domain raises the threats." (p. 8)

Section 5: Attributional Ambiguity

Here, McKinnon introduces the concept of Attributional Ambiguity:

"We find this whenever it's unclear why someone behaves a certain way toward us, such as a positive or negative evaluation of our actions. Suppose that you're a young, attractive undergraduate student in a biology lab. The male teaching assistant has just given you an A+ on your skills evaluation. Now, did he do that because your skills deserve an A+ (they very well may!), or because he's attracted to you? It's ambiguous" (p. 10)

As she explains, "Attributional ambiguity goes hand-in-hand with stereotype threat because the situations where attributional ambiguity arises are typically those where stereotype threat also functions" (p. 10). However, unlike with the case of stereotype threat, McKinnon is not arguing that "trans women experience it in importantly different ways than cis women do, as I did for stereotype threat. Instead, discussions in feminist philosophy should take note of the related research on attributional ambiguity in their discussions of stereotype threat." (p. 11)

Section 6: A More Complete Picture

Wraps things up! Also, McKinnon again points out that this paper does more than add in the experience of trans women to the discussion of stereotype threat. As she puts it:

"We gain a more complete understanding of stereotype threat by canvassing the widest range of examples. And since, as I've argued, trans women face some unique forms of stereotype threat, where the explanation for their behavior is often mistakenly attributed to their birth-assigned gender, including trans women's experiences of stereotype threat is particularly important for completing our understanding of stereotype threat: feminist philosophers and social psychologists should both take note." (p. 11)

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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Possible Applications:

- Intro M&E
- Epistemology
- Intro
- Philosophy of feminism
- Trans studies
- Oppression
- Moral psychology
- Ethics of speech
- Philosophy of language (fits nicely with dogwhistle, microaggression, and stereotype stuff; attributional ambiguity gets into uptake issues)
- Intersectionality

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- Sarah-Jane Leslie, “Carving Up the Social World with Generics” (a previous DS article)
- Rhodes, M., S.-J. Leslie, and C. M. Tworek. 2012. Cultural transmission of social essentialism. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109 (34): 13526–31.
- Blum, L. 2004. Stereotypes and stereotyping: A moral analysis. *Philosophical Papers* 33 (3): 251–89.
- Fine, Cordelia. *Delusions of Gender*.
- Kristie Dotson “Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing”
- Kimberle Crenshaw “Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color”
- Jenny Saul “Implicit bias, stereotype threat, and women in philosophy”
- Marilyn Frye “Oppression”
- Sandra Bartky “On psychological oppression”
- Sally Haslanger, “Changing the ideology and culture of philosophy: not by reason (alone)”
- Clips from the webseries HerStory <http://www.herstoryshow.com/>
- Videos from Rachel McKinnon’s youtube series, like <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwXkkPZZxdA>
- Short articles on trans women in sport, like <http://everydayfeminism.com/2017/01/no-unfair-advantage-trans-athletes/>
- Literature on ways to mitigate stereotype threat (some resources here <https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/interventionshandout.pdf>)

Possible Class Activities:

- Discuss McKinnon’s claim that gender identity is always relevant in Western society (p.8); brainstorm examples to illustrate or challenge the point
- Brainstorm examples, anecdotes relating to attributional ambiguity
 - Ex. consider statements or actions that are not ambiguous when directed toward, say, a cis man, but would be when directed toward a trans woman

- Divide students into groups, each group take a different example from section four and discuss
- Discussion on the ways that stereotypes can impact behaviour, and what steps we can take to mitigate their negative impact