whistling vivaldi

how stereotypes affect us and what we can do

CLAUDE M. STEELE

"This is an intellectual odyssey of the first order—a true tour de force."
—WILLIAM G. BOWEN

CHAPTER 11

Conclusion: Identity as a Bridge Between Us

Since the election on November 4, 2008, of Barack Obama as president of the United States—the first African American president—there has been much talk about whether American society has entered a "postracial" era in which racial identity no longer plays an important role in our opportunities or in our relations with one another. It is a hope stirred by the election itself, and it extends to other group prejudices as well. At base, it is a hope that some essence in the American character has changed or evolved to the point of freeing us, going forward, from prejudice-based injustice, a problem left behind. Aristotle believed that objects fell at different speeds because they had internal essences, like "earthiness," that differed in how attracted they were to the earth and thus how fast they made the object fall to get there. We seem to think, too, that we can gauge our progress toward an identity-fair society

by measuring an internal entity—intergroup prejudice—that we believe causes racial, gender, class, and other group injustices. If that barometer drops to zero, the idea goes, we would have a racially fair and identity-fair society, a level playing field, a postracial society. I, for one, would love to see that barometer fall to zero. But would that mean we'd have a postracial society?

The thrust of *Whistling Vivaldi* has been to offer a broadened view of what makes a social identity, like our race, important to us and to society. It isn't just the prejudicial attitudes of others toward the identity but also the contingencies that go with it in key settings. Prejudice matters. It can shape contingencies. But identity contingencies can profoundly affect a person—to the point of shaping her life—without her encountering a single prejudiced person along the way.

When I look over my life as an African American, I see improvements in the contingencies attached to that identity. The swimming pool restrictions of my youth are gone. So are the suffocating limitations Anatole Broyard would have faced as a black man in New York City in the late 1940s. Things have gotten better. But remember, contingencies grow out of an identity's role in the history and organization of a society—its role in the DNA of a society—and how society has stereotyped that identity. In the case of race in the United States, that history and its legacies are still with us. The racial segregation of our schools, as we noted in the preceding chapter, is steadily increasing, not decreasing; reflecting the long history of racial subordination in the United States, the average black family today has only ten cents of wealth for every dollar of wealth the average white family has; and so on. As William Faulkner famously said, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past."

In fact, the social psychological contingencies tied to race, while evolving, are nonetheless tenacious. Take the case of higher

education. Until the 1960s the identity contingency that African Americans worried most about was that, on the basis of race, they couldn't get into most colleges and universities in the United States or that, if admitted, they would be in such small numbers and subjected to such segregating restrictions as to make the option highly unattractive. This contingency is hardly present at all in the lives of black college applicants today. Yet, as the research examined in these pages shows, the stereotype and identity threats that can arise in today's racially integrated colleges—especially those with an accumulation of identity-threatening cues—can be formidable, not as diminishing of life chances as the total exclusion of yesteryear, but an unfortunate suppression of human potential nonetheless.

Whites too, in these more diverse settings, may confront tenacious forms of identity threat. They regularly meet blacks and other minorities now, which means they regularly face the possibility of being judged in terms of negative stereotypes about whites—reactions to which we saw acted out in the experiments by Philip Goff, Paul Davies, and me described in Chapter 10.

This is why we don't yet have a postracial society. Our racial attitudes are indeed improving. Surveys show we oppose interracial marriage less; whites report being more comfortable working for a black boss; more Americans would be happy living next door to a person of a different race; and there is that election of an African American president. But it is contingencies in our lives, not racial attitudes alone, that count. And just because those contingencies are increasingly social psychological doesn't mean they're gone.

My mission in this book is to broaden our understanding of human functioning, to get us to keep in mind that, especially in identity-integrated situations, people are not only coping with the manifest tasks of the situation, but are also busy appraising threat and protecting themselves from the risk of being negatively judged

and treated. Perhaps the chief discovery of our research is that this protective side of the human character can be aroused by the mere prospect of being negatively stereotyped, and that, once aroused, it steps in and takes over the capacities of the person—to such an extent that little capacity is left over for the work at hand. It shows that this side of the human character, aroused this way, affects our thoughts, emotions, actions, and performances in ways that have nothing to do with our internal traits, capacities, motivations, and so on, and that these effects contribute importantly to group differences in behavior, ranging from math performance to the interest shown in interracial conversations to playing golf. We could pry into the hearts and minds of people as deeply as science would allow looking for their true prejudices, and all the while miss the fact that on any given day their behavior toward blacks, for example, is determined mainly by a simple stereotype-driven predicament of identity that would affect most people who share their identity. Or we could give women a thousand tests to measure their capacity for mathematics and overlook that, in this society, from the time they first engaged mathematics they did so under the extra pressure of an identity threat that was especially strong at the frontier of their math skills and that made the whole activity seem like the unfriendly territory of another group. Or we could get times for the 100-meter dash from every major track meet in the world in search of white athletes' true running capacity and miss the reality that in the United States, ever since these runners began running fast, they did so under the almost complete societal consensus that running fast was the domain of another group.

This adds an ingredient to our understanding of group differences. It doesn't ignore the internal. It just broadens the palette of explanations. Without this broadened palette, you couldn't explain

- why changing the conception of a test from being diagnostic of ability to being a puzzle that is nondiagnostic of ability brings black performance to the same level as white performance on the Raven's Progressive Matrices IQ test, totally eliminating the typical racial gap in IQ scores;
- or why changing the definition of a golfing task from its being a measure of "natural athletic ability" to its being a measure of "sports strategic intelligence" completely reversed the performance ranking of white and black participants;
- or why reminding women math students about strong women role models just before they took a difficult math test could eliminate their typical underperformance on the test in relation to equally skilled men;
- or why describing a conversation with two African American students as a learning opportunity could get white male students to move their chairs closer for a conversation on racial profiling.

A central policy implication of the research discussed here is that unless you make people feel safe from the risk of these identity predicaments in identity-integrated settings, you won't succeed in reducing group achievement gaps or in enabling people from different backgrounds to work comfortably and well together. When this is not done, the protective side of the human character will hold sway over people and their resources. Addressing this need for safety won't completely remedy these problems. But the problems can't be remedied without attention to this need for safety. Along these lines, I've come to recognize that knowing how to address this side of the human character, especially in integrated settings, is an increasingly important skill for our teachers, managers, and leaders. It's not clear whether, without these skills, they could be effective in the increasingly diverse settings of our society.

This is where the practical lessons of *Whistling Vivaldi* come in. They constitute a beginning literature on what goes into that skill set. They offer a hopeful approach to the challenges I've outlined. Internal characteristics are hard to change; situational identity contingencies, the cues that signal them, and the narratives that interpret them are easier to change. That is illustrated by the practical findings emerging from this research in recent years:

- By changing the way you give critical feedback, you can dramatically improve minority students' motivation and receptiveness.
- By improving a group's critical mass in a setting, you can improve its members' trust, comfort, and performance in the setting.
- By simply fostering intergroup conversations among students from different backgrounds, you can improve minority students' comfort and grades in a setting.
- By allowing students, especially minority students, to affirm their most valued sense of self, you can improve their grades, even for a long time.
- By helping students develop a narrative about the setting that explains their frustrations while projecting positive engagement and success in the setting, you can greatly improve their sense of belonging and achievement—which if done at a critical time could redirect the course of their lives.

The effectiveness of these strategies is not an argument for neglecting structural and other changes that would help unwind the disadvantages attached to racial, gender, class, and other identities in our society. Such changes have to remain an important focus. But we can make a good deal of progress by addressing identity threat in our lives. And doing so is a big part of unwinding the disadvantages of identity. It may not take us all the way there.

But as I hope this book illustrates, it can take us closer than we may have recognized. And if we don't take that part of the journey, we won't get there at all.

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Still, we Americans are wary about focusing on identity. Could whatever gain it yields outweigh the divisiveness it might cause? Hasn't our use of race, for example, been one of our society's greatest shames? This is a big part of why we so want Obama's election to have marked the beginning of a postracial era—to put that shame behind us. It is perhaps ironic, then, in light of these hopes, that while Obama himself called for Americans of all identities to come together to build an era of progress, he didn't call for a postracial society or interpret his election as a sign that such a society had arrived. To the contrary, he stressed his racial and other identities, openly embraced them, wrote books about how important they were for him to understand and incorporate into his sense of self. He hungered for a strong, developed racial identity. Here he is in his own words on March 18, 2008, during his famous Philadelphia "race speech" in the heat of his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination:

> I am a son of a black man from Kenya and white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every

> hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

In this passage Obama is not hiding his racial identities but embracing them, not advocating a color-blind or postracial society but pointing to the many colors that make up this society and himself. He is putting identity and his multiple identities forward, using them as a bridge. In a society leery of identity, this could seem counterintuitive. Indeed, his staff advised him against this speech. Still, it may have gone farther than anything else he did to make nonblack Americans comfortable with him as a candidate and, eventually, as a president. It established a common ground between Obama and a huge swath of the American electorate. We all have identities, often many of them. And despite important differences between identities, a lot of the experience of having one identity is like the experience of having another identity. That he talked about his multiple identities enabled people to see this, to see into their own identities and what that understanding could tell them about the identity experiences of others. These stories of his bridged Obama to the multitudes. They enabled people to see themselves in him, a man who, without these stories about his identities, ironically would have been just a black man.

It also gave people, implicitly at least, a broader understanding of identities—that they are not rooted in unalterable essences that control the character of a person all the time. Important as identities are, people could see in Obama's experience that they don't capture or represent the whole person. They could see that identities are fluid, that their influence on us is activated by their situational relevance. It's a truth that many people sense in their own experience, and they apparently appreciated his having affirmed it. From this perspective, identity is less scary, less something to

be wary of. In fact, exploring it might be helpful. Clearly Obama gained from exploring his identities; it gave him self-awareness and poise, insight and empathy into the circumstances of other people's lives, a connection to a great range of people, and the social competence to get things done. In his example, identity wasn't a source of balkanization and threat; it was a source of wisdom about the challenges of a complex and diverse society that ultimately made him the most suitable person to lead such a society. To the surprise of all, perhaps, it was his stress on identity, not his suppression of it, that made him a symbol of hope.

My hope for *Whistling Vivaldi* is that, in some small way at least, it will help to sustain that hope.