

# THE ONLY SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST IN THE ROOM

BY EDEN HENNESSEY

Recently, I was (to my knowledge) the only social scientist in the virtual room with 500+ physicists across Canada. My goal was to present the audience with research and recommendations for anti-racist practice as a part of #ShutDownSTEM; a call for academics to learn about anti-black racism. This experience demonstrated the value in social and natural scientists engaging with each other in discussions about equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Illustrating this notion, in this testimonial I will reconstruct my cognitive process as I prepared, delivered, and reflected on the talk, connecting my thoughts to established effects in social psychology.

As a confident presenter, it still occurred to me that I might not be taken seriously — for several reasons all documented by social science. First, this thought could have arisen due to *stereotype threat*, whereby people’s performance suffers because they fear that they will confirm a negative group stereotype (e.g., “Women are bad at math”; [1]). Second, I’m acutely aware of cross-cultural stereotypes associating men with science and women with arts [2]. Third, I am cognizant that women tend to be perceived as more warm than competent, in contrast to an audience of physicists, who are stereotypically perceived as more competent than warm [3]. A fourth possibility is a phenomenon common among social scientists: researchers have coined the term *physics envy* [4], to refer to a propensity for social scientists to see their work as less scientific than those in natural sciences.

## SUMMARY

**As a Social Psychologist, I recently joined 500+ Physicists united in an academic strike (#ShutDownSTEM) to discuss anti-Black racism, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Using autoethnography, I describe this unique experience, noting how questions and requests for resources indicate readiness to learn about wise practices and engage in self-reflection in Physics.**

I started the talk with two questions: “What is racist?” and “What is anti-racist?”, which might seem simple to a highly educated audience. However, to assume all attendees understand and are committed to anti-racism, may be engaging in the *false consensus effect*, a tendency to overestimate how much other people agree with your beliefs, attitudes and values [5]. So, I asked the questions, and crafted the talk around a report aptly titled ‘The Time is Now: Systemic Changes to Increase the Representation of African Americans in Physics’ [6].

Delivering the talk, I thought it was going well; attendees were engaged, asked questions, and generated ideas to make physics more inclusive. As excited as I was, it occurred to me to temper my optimism; indeed, *optimism bias* leads to overestimating potential positive outcomes [7]. Participating in #ShutDownSTEM was encouraging but should not eclipse the labour needed for sustained, cultural change. Perhaps we can be hopeful, but not self-congratulatory; the *self-serving bias* refers to when people give themselves credit for successes and attribute shortcomings to external factors [8]. It is difficult to recognize the roles that we have played in reinforcing the status quo in science, either by our actions or inactions.

Following the talk, there was continued engagement— my colleagues and I received requests for resources, slides, and suggestions for actions, indicating a likelihood of continued momentum. However, research on *responses to discrimination* shows that although people expect that they will confront injustice actively, they tend to do little or nothing [9]. Further, concerning racial justice, intent matters far less than impact [10]. In the future, it will be critical to continue the equity dialogue between social and natural scientists, as we continue to strive for inclusive excellence. It will also be imperative for us to engage in self-reflexivity, asking where our voices can be most useful in combatting injustice. When we find ourselves hiring research assistants, reviewing scholarship applications, or writing reference letters, we must intentionally challenge ourselves to acknowledge our biases (implicit or explicit) and work toward dismantling them — our sciences depend on it.



Eden Hennessey,  
PhD (Psychology)  
<ehennessey@wlu.  
ca>  
Manager, Centre for  
Student Equity,  
Diversity, and  
Inclusion, Wilfrid  
Laurier University,  
Waterloo, Ontario

---

**REFERENCES**

1. C.M. Steel and J. Aronson, "Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African-Americans", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **69**, 797-811 (1995).
2. B.A. Nosek, F.L. Smyth, N. Sriram, N.M Lindner, T. Devos, A. Ayala, ... and S. Kesebir, "National differences in gender-science stereotypes predict national sex differences in science and math achievement", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, **106**, 10593-10597 (2009).
3. S.T. Fiske and C. Dupree, "Gaining trust as well as respect in communicating to motivated audiences about science topics", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, **111**, 13593-13597 (2014).
4. J.L. Howell, B. Collisson, and K.M. King, "Physics envy: Psychologists' perceptions of psychology and agreement about core concepts", *Teaching of Psychology*, **41**, 330-334 (2014).
5. L. Ross, D. Greene, and P. House, "The "false consensus effect": an egocentric bias in social perception and attribution processes", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **13**, 279-301 (1977).
6. American Institute of Physics. (2020). "The Time is Now: Systemic Changes to Increase African Americans with Bachelor's Degrees in Physics and Astronomy", *The AIP National Task Force to Elevate African American Representations in Undergraduate Physics and Astronomy (TEAM-UP)*. Retrieved online from: <https://www.aip.org/sites/default/files/aipcorp/files/teamup-full-report.pdf>.
7. T. Sharot, "The optimism bias", *Current Biology*, **21**, R941-R945 (2011).
8. W.M. Bernstein, W.G. Stephan, and M.H. Davis, "Explaining attributions for achievement: A path analytic approach", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **37**, 1810-1821 (1979).
9. J.A. Woodzicka, and M. LaFrance, "Real versus imagined gender harassment", *Journal of Social Issues*, **57**, 15-30 (2001).
10. S. Paradkar, "Intentions in racism don't matter. Impact Does", *The Toronto Star*, Retrieved online from: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/2019/12/04/intentions-in-racism-dont-matter-impact-does.html> (2019).