Q&A with Steven Spencer: Speaker in the Women and STEM Series Talks About How He Became Interested in Studying Psychology, Dissonance, and Stereotype Threat

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Author
Hooker, Courtney

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Speaker in the Women and STEM series talks about how he became interested in studying psychology, dissonance, and stereotype threat

As I talked with Steven Spencer, Professor at the University of Waterloo and a groundbreaking researcher in the field of stereotype threat, I was impressed by his kind demeanor and effective speaking style. He shared information about his academic career, advice for graduate students as well as discussing this research on how to dismantle the negative stereotypes that inhibit women’s progression in science, technology, engineering, and math fields (STEM).

What drew you to this field of study?

When I was an undergraduate, I was a psychology major. I thought I was going to go into pre-med, but took [a class on] comparative anatomy and realized it was not for me. I started an undergraduate research project in my second year and finished in my honors study my third year doing dissonance studies. I realized I loved doing research, and so I decided to go to graduate school doing research in social psychology.

How did you get started in your career as an academic?

Well, when I was an undergraduate doing dissonance research, I began reading the new stuff on dissonance and at that time it was Claude Steele’s self-affirmation theory. I loved his work so I decided to go work with him for graduate school. My first year project was a dissonance study but at that time, Claude was starting to think about...
stereotype threat. Therefore, I had the really good fortune of starting in graduate school focusing on stereotype threat. In fact, my dissertation was the first study done on stereotype threat, and consequently it was very good for my career.

**Which writers, researchers, or professors particularly influenced or inspired you?**

You don’t work with Claude without being inspired by a whole bunch of people. For me, there were both social psychology influences and broader influences. As my mentor, Claude would have me read Jean-Paul Sartre, Ralph Ellison, and other really inspiring authors. Social psychology-wise, Claude was fundamentally important, but a book on stigma by Ned Jones and Hazel Markus really influenced me. Jennifer Crocker and Brenda Major also both had a huge influence on my career as well. In addition, Toni Schmader ended up at my school as well and certainly inspired me.

**What is on your research agenda right now?**

One of the things I am interested in is “belonging” and an intervention for women in engineering. I think you can create a sense of belonging and connection between individuals. I also have some ideas about how to use that sense of connection through intergroup relations. Another way to say this is that in our engineering intervention, we focus on ways to help the women in this environment to feel more comfortable in their environment and give them tools to make them feel more comfortable even if they don’t feel this way. Women will create a bit of a virtuous circle because women are motivated to do well, so if we can help them get past these barriers, that motivation will carry them further. But it seems to me what you really want to do in the long run is create this sense of connection between people. You want to get men in the environment when it’s women in STEM to change, which is difficult because they may not be as motivated to change. I think this sense of connection could create the motivation for them. So, the next part of my research will attempt to change the bad culture of certain organizations, starting with engineering programs.

**How do you see the field of social psychology developing?**

There are broader things that are going to be relevant. We need to step outside and think of the major themes and influences that are affecting social psychology. Here are some:

- **Culture really matters.** We’ve come to appreciate that and have more sophisticated models of culture, and a better understanding of this will allow us to examine how we can better understand intergroup relations.
- **Neuroscience.** Culture and neuroscience is a society-level analysis, but we can make it part of a lower-level analysis to better understand intergroup relations.
- **Our field needs to be better at returning to our roots.** We need to make the case that we matter. Research moving toward interventions is going to be important and as a field, we need to support this work.

**What advice would you give current graduate students?**

Null findings are part of the game, but graduate students need to remember that it is a marathon, not a sprint. One of the things that keeps me going is the fact that I have a lot of studies going on at a given time. At the moment, I have around thirty. If more than half fail, I know that I at least will be able to write around two to three papers every year. Graduate students tend to put so much into a specific project that it can be discouraging when it doesn’t work. As a graduate student, you need to be working on five to six studies at any given time. One of the nice developments in the field over the past few years is short reports. By the end of year 2, students should aim to write something up for a short report. This gives you the opportunity to get through that review process, which typically takes a lot of time.

**Who are the people you look to now? Your current mentors or collaborators?**

My colleagues at Waterloo are the first people I look toward. I publish with Mark Zanna, Joanne Woods, and John Holmes, to name a few. I also talk to my friends from graduate school as well and, even more, former students.
Looking back at your graduate career, what is the one piece of advice you wish someone had told you that would have helped you?

Claude was wonderful, and so not much was left out. One piece of advice that Claude gave me (that I needed, but not everyone needs) is that writing is something you get better at with effort and time. As a mentor, Claude made me keep an ideas journal and wanted me to write every day. He cared about writing and the quality of writing. If I had to tell one thing to graduate students, I would tell them writing is not something you have or you don’t. It’s a very incremental process and ability that requires continuous work.

At the end of the day, it’s not about the number of articles you have. Rather, it’s about the influence they have. You want to shape the field and the way the world works. Focusing on doing too many and not making the quality the best that you can is a mistake.

Courtney Hooker is a graduate student in the Department of Social Psychology at UCLA.