Discussion Questions for *Whistling Vivaldi*

Feel free to pick and choose among these discussion questions, or ask your own!
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Chapter 1 Introduction: At the Root of Identity
1. Steele opens with the notion of "identity contingencies" and tells several stories about them. Describe a memory about an identity contingency that has affected you negatively. Can you recall a time when you benefited from an aspect of your identity?
2. When did you first realize there was a "racial order"? a "gender order"? a "class order"? Any others (e.g. age, sexual orientation, political attitudes, religious beliefs) that have mattered in the ways Steele describes? What did you understand to be your own location in those hierarchies?
3. Have you ever done anything like what the young black man Steele quotes who "whistled Vivaldi" in order to put white people at ease with his own presence? Have you done something to try to welcome or include someone in the position that young black man was in? How well did it work?
4. Do we really agree about the content of stereotypes? Test this idea in your group: choose a population (e.g., "feminists" or "poor people"); individually jot down some elements of the stereotypes about that population that spring to your mind; then compare notes. Did you have similar ideas? What items differed? Did your group list similar elements in similar order? Where do you think you learned this stereotype?
5. Have you ever tried to unlearn a stereotype about a population? What did you do to unlearn it? How successful do you think you were?
6. Now that you know what "stereotype threat" is, can you think of a time when you might have underperformed because of it? Were you aware that anything was amiss?   If so, did you try to address the problem?

Chapter 2: A Mysterious Link Between Identity and Intellectual Performance
1. Studies of the causes to which faculty (and others) attribute student underperformance indicate that most of us employ a "deficit model" to explain academic struggle – we focus on what's wrong with the student, and ignore the contexts in which the student is trying to function. Steele argues that this comes from an "observer perspective." Has your unit already made a shift from observer to actor perspective in understanding student underperformance, or not? How can you tell? If not, what would that shift look like in your unit? What might you, individually, do differently?
2. What strategies has UW-L tried that aim at preventing underperformance by students from particular populations? Do they reflect a deficit model, or something else? How can you tell?
3. Can you identify evidence that some groups of students do not feel as comfortable in the spaces you frequent at UW-L as other groups do? Be specific about what you have seen.
4. Black students at one small prestigious campus that Steele visited gave him the sense that "campus life was racially organized."   Is UW-L also "racially organized"? Where,

specifically, can you see that? Consider, for example, what kinds of conversations you hear about race in the places you go on campus. If you're struggling to see this, Steel identifies several categories in which this phenomenon existed, from the perspective of black students: "racial marginalization, racial segregation of social and academic networks, group underrepresentation in important campus roles, even a racial organization of curriculum choices." "Campus culture – its ideas of who and what were 'cool,' its prevailing values, social norms, preferences, modes of dress, images of beauty, musical preferences, modes of religious expression, and the like – was dominated by whites . . ." Or, go [here](#) for some ideas on what practices, values, and attitudes can contribute to, say, students of color viewing a space like UW-L as "white."

5. How aware do you think you are of UW-L as a racial space? Why?
6. Can you think of ways or places where UW-L also challenges the idea that it is organized by race? Be specific.

Chapter 3: Stereotype Threat Comes to Light, and in More than One Group

1. Are you aware of any group-level stereotypes about students that reflect an "observer perspective"? Describe and discuss them. Can you see ways in which such views could influence our actions as instructors or student services providers?
2. Consider the Seattle sportswriters' dilemma after the Sonics began to win with just a coaching change: they now had to explain success with the same players they had previously described as deficient when they were losing. What strengths can you see in the low-performing students with whom you have worked?
3. Steele and Aronson demonstrated that negatively-stereotyped students actually were concerned about those stereotypes under stereotype-threat conditions through a fill-in-the-blanks word-fragment exercise and a music/sports preference survey. Given that this chapter examines the research demonstrating that many groups can experience stereotype threat, how might you test whether any of the students with whom you work are experiencing stereotype threat before a test or an assignment or other type of performance?
4. Imagine *telling* negatively-stigmatized students that research shows their academic *strengths* are more significant causes of failure than their deficiencies. What might the range of reactions and behaviors be? Do you think it would fix the problem? Should we tell students about stereotype threat? What do you think Steele and his research collaborators would say?
5. If you aren't a social psychologist, given what you have read to this point, can you think of other ways we could provide "relief from the pressure of a stereotype?"
6. Is it possible that some students will feel stereotype threat from multiple aspects of their identity? What might the consequences be for that student?

Chapter 4: A Broader View of Identity: In the Lives of Anatole Broyard, Amin Maalouf, and the Rest of Us

1. Steele explains what Anatole Broyard gained when he decided to pass. What do you think he lost?
2. Where might various populations experience the kinds of "identity contingencies" Steele

describes on our campus? Where on our campus are you aware of an identity contingency that affects you? How does it affect you? does it stop you, or help you?

3. "A diffuse threat is preoccupying. And it preoccupies one with the identity it threatens." From reading Steele's explanation of identity contingencies in this chapter, how might you now respond to arguments that sexism, racism, classism (or . . .) is more important than some other identity threat? To arguments that certain groups complain too much?

4. Which of your social identities matter most to you in the settings you most often occupy at UW-L? What about the students with whom you work? Why?

5. Which of your social identities are the least threatened in the settings you most often occupy at UW-L? What about the students with whom you work? Why?

6. Are any social identities valorized at UW-L? How can you tell? Why those identities?

7. "If you want to change the behaviors and outcomes associated with social identity—say, too few women in computer science—don't focus on changing the internal manifestations of the identity, such as values, and attitudes. Focus instead on changing the contingencies to which all of that internal stuff is an adaptation." Think about your own office or your unit's main office. What could cue an identity threat in your décor and/or your use of that space? Who might your space threaten, and how? Is there something you could change in your space that might reduce that cue?

Chapter 5: The Many Experiences of Stereotype Threat
1. Steele demonstrates that the "hammering of reputation" isn't necessary for stereotype threat to emerge. Can you think of other situations – like the white male student Ted in the course on African American politics or the confident male Stanford math majors -- that could threaten a dominant group into underperforming?

2. Steele discusses a study of students with two salient identities in the area of math (Asian women). Can you think of other situations/domains/areas where two identities could be relevant to stereotype threat? Can you think of areas where two identities could both have negative effects on performance? What do you think would happen if both identities were activated at the time of the performance?

3. What kinds of social identities are positively associated with your field? How did that positive association come about? Who is left out?

Chapter 6: Identity Threat and the Efforting Life
1. Have you seen any ability-stereotyped students who seemed to be trying to disprove a stereotype? What were they doing? Especially colleagues who work in student affairs offices and work directly with students and/or with parents, what do you hear from students or parents on this subject? Is it an issue on our campus?

2. Have you worked with any students who came to college with inadequate preparation in some area who succeeded in that area despite that weakness? What did those students do that helped them? Have you asked them? If not, could you? Was it different from what the students Uri Treisman studied did?

3. If you are an instructor, do you have any empirical evidence that demonstrates what forms of study work best in your courses? Could you collect such data? If you are in student affairs, what do students tell you works well? Have you asked? Could you?

4. Have you been in a performance setting where you are a minority? Did you feel any pressure to work harder than other people did in order to prove yourself? Did you notice any negative effects from your efforts?
5. What do you see as the most critical elements of Treisman's workshops? (If you are interested in Treisman's workshops, CATL will provide more resources for you when we reach the interventions stages of this initiative – for now, just discuss what Steele has told you about them).

Chapter 7: The Mind on Stereotype Threat: Racing and Overloaded
1. We likely won't be attaching blood-pressure cuffs or functional MRIs to our students any time soon, so let's consider behaviors. What does ruminating look like in class or as a student studies? What behaviors might indicate that a student is off-topic and worrying about something like their fear of enacting a stereotype, rather than thinking about the task we've asked them to do? Might we misinterpret these behaviors?
2. So: apparently science majors are not smarter than psychology majors. Could it be that students who study the arts or humanities are also not dumber than students who study science or psychology? Is there a hierarchy in academia that produces stereotypes about which disciplines are "harder" or more rigorous than others? Do we really believe that our colleagues in other disciplines consider their discipline to be "soft" and unchallenging? and that, therefore, our colleagues in other disciplines are dumber than we are? (if you're in doubt about this, ask. But do stand at a distance . . .). Do faculty ever imply that student affairs colleagues are in that field because they aren't smart enough to be faculty? If you are an instructor, have you ever encountered attitudes from colleagues at UW-L that seem to come from the notion that "those who can't do, teach" or that faculty don't care as much about students as other UW-L staff do? In any of the roles you play at UW-L, are you or your colleagues ever guilty of reinforcing any of these stereotypes? Have you heard others reinforce them? If so, what might we change? Where will changes most matter for students? For employees?
3. If you have experienced a CATL workshop at which we have talked about the "expert blind spot," consider why interference with working memory might affect novices in your field more than experts. How does this help explain why ability-stereotyped students performed spectacularly when the task was well within their capabilities, rather than a significant stretch?
4. Discuss the "John Henry" study that compared blood pressure scores to scores on the researcher's scale of statements that indicate a low-income black person's belief in their ability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps by working harder or smarter -- a suggestion frequently offered to low-income Americans and to Americans of color. Steele notes that the relationship appears in studies with middle-class blacks as well. If ability-stereotyped students respond with "John Henryism," what might we expect to be the consequences for them?

Chapter 8 The Strength of Stereotype Threat: The Role of Cues
1. Whether you were in the minority or the majority, have you seen a shift in critical mass function? What was different when it was present from when it was absent?

2. Try seeing cues from several identity perspectives. Examine websites, classrooms, student spaces, unit spaces, your own office. What cues could be an ongoing threat for some students? What cues accumulate? Here are "the major types" of cues Steele identifies; a. The "critical mass" cue (the number of people in a setting with the same identity as the observer). b. People in positions of power with the same identity as the observer. c. A setting organized by identity (pay differences, seating arrangements, friendship networks, access to resources). d. Inclusivity messages (does the unit value diversity, is that valuing just lip service, are we all on the same page in valuing diversity). e. Prejudice cues (is expressing prejudice open or normative, are some groups disdained, are groups in competition with each other. Have you seen any of these? What did you see, and what might make someone "read" it as an identity threat? Which might be incidental and/or ambiguous?
3. Where have you encountered "colorblindness" as a value (defined in the newsletter study as "treating people, and trying to foster their welfare, as individuals")? Why might people of color distrust that idea?
4. What can we do to change some of threatening cues in our environments? Which ones should be tackled first? Why? Which ones might affect others? What kinds of cues might signal identity safety, and to whom?

Chapter 9   Reducing Identity and Stereotype Threat: A New Hope
1. How does your unit define excellence? What are the overt cues (e.g., student learning outcomes; the facts, concepts, theories you test student knowledge of; the identities of authors of readings you assign; the criteria that serve as the basis for annual evaluation)? What are the covert cues (e.g. a unit's apparent definition of the expected "work ethic")? Do you see any identity threatening or identity valuing cues in those definitions?
2. As one study Steele describes noted, "'To a great extent…early differences in grades earned [between black and Latino students and the other groups] is explained by the different susceptibilities to stereotype threat and by the different levels of preparation for college that students in different groups bring with them when they arrive on campus.'" If you are an instructor, do you use any mechanisms to evaluate students' levels of preparation as they enter your course? Would any students be at risk for stereotype threat when they complete that assessment? How might you change that assessment or the way you administer it so that it more accurately reflects students' abilities?
3. Is any of the evidence Steele has presented on the reality of stereotype threat particularly compelling to you? What evidence do you think would be compelling to others in your unit?
4. Several stories in this chapter indicate that white people can be good mentors to students of color. What are the most important things white faculty or staff can do to be good mentors to students of color?
5. What did the study on types of faculty feedback tell you? If you are an instructor, how do you give feedback now? Could you, should you, change (read the endnote at the end of section 4 too)? If you think so, what should you do differently? If you are in student affairs, what have students told you about the kinds of feedback they get from

instructors?

6. Which of the interventions introduced in this chapter would make the most sense to use in your roles on campus? Which would not? Why?
7. If you work with ability-stereotyped students who will take tests about which they *know* the stakes are high before they even arrive for the exam, how can you best prepare them?

Chapter 10   The Distance Between Us: The Role of Identity Threat

1. Have you ever felt uncomfortable or uncertain around people whose identities clearly differed from your own? What did you do? In that setting, did you act to break the discomfort, or did someone else? What did they do? Why? Who did the emotional labor to make that setting more comfortable for you?
2. If you work directly with students one-on-one (e.g. advising, mentoring, supervising student employees), how are those students assigned to you? Does their or your identity matter? Are you ever worried about your identity in relationship to a student's when you are working with a student one-on-one?
3. Are there places on campus you avoid because you're not sure you would be welcome there because of some aspect of your identity? If there are no such places, could that be because one or more of your identities override those kinds of concerns?
4. What identity threats might students encounter on our campus that could prevent them from engaging each other across differences? How might we help them to take the risk? To engage more effectively? What does *Whistling Vivaldi* suggest?
5. Could a white person's avoidance of black people because of stereotype threat simultaneously be an identity threat cue for the black people who are being avoided? If the white person is avoiding the conversation because they're worried about saying something that sounds racist, how would the black people know whether it's not plain old prejudice?
6. Here's a link to the Implicit Association Tests (Steele includes the link in the book as well). https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/ Please read some of the explanations of these tests, especially this page: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/faqs.html.   Try it if you wish. These studies measure the strength of our *unconscious* associations about groups of people. The FAQs page tells us that our implicit associations can predict our actions even though they conflict with our conscious beliefs. How might our negative and unconscious associations show up in our interactions with students or coworkers from negatively stereotyped groups?
7. "Avoidance becomes the simplest solution," Steele notes. Did you try the Implicit Associations test? Or did you avoid it because you were afraid you might get results that showed you have unconscious negative racial associations? What would convince you that taking this test is a good idea?
8. If you teach courses or offer programs or events that include discussion of diversity issues, do you have trouble getting students/staff to talk across differences? If the room is homogeneous, does that change the dynamic? Steele's study said that emphasizing learning goals might help. Have any of you tried that? What happened? How explicit are you in communicating your learning goals? How often do you frame a conversation

in that way, or is it mainly just on your syllabus? Could you try something different next week or the week after?

Chapter 11   Conclusion: Identity as a Bridge Between Us
1. Those of us who teach courses in the General Education program's "diversity" category often hear students say that the requirement itself implies that white students are ignorant about issues of race. Is that sufficient to create stereotype threat for white students in those courses? What can we do about that?
2. "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." What does this insight suggest we should be doing in order to prepare students to collaborate in a more diverse work environment? What should we be doing as employees ourselves?