Stereotype Threat, from 'Bounce', (extract), Matthew Syed, 2010

Between 2001 and 2005 Jeff Stone, a psychologist from the University of Arizona, and a colleague interviewed 1,500 students to uncover prevailing attitudes to race and sport. They found, among other things, that black athletes were rated by the participants as being higher in natural athletic ability than in sporting intelligence. White athletes, on the other hand, were rated in precisely the opposite way; better in terms of sporting intelligence than natural ability...

When it comes to sport, the direction of racial bias is reversed. Now the prevailing assumptions favour blacks while deterring whites.Whites will tend to be overlooked (particularly in sports involving strength and speed) because of the assumption that they lack natural aptitude in these areas. Blacks, on the other hand, will be perceived as naturally gifted, and encouraged, leading to extra practice and better performances, thus seeming to confirm the original assumption.

Perhaps the most graphic demonstration of the power of stereotyping occurred in an experiment undertaken by Jeff Stone and colleagues in 1997. They took white and black former high-school athletes and gave them a golf-putting task.They found that the two groups performed equally well. But when the participants were told that the task was a measure of 'natural athletic ability', the whites' performance deteriorated. The very fact that whites felt they were being judged against a negative stereotype caused them to mess up. This is known as stereotype threat.

'In matters of race we often assume that when a situation is objectively the same for different groups, it is experienced in the same way by each group,' Claude Steele, the psychologist who coined the term 'stereotype threat', has written. 'But (those burdened with negative stereotypes) know that they are especially likely to be seen as having limited ability. Groups not stereotyped in this way don't experience this extra intimidation. And it is a serious intimidation, implying as it does that they may not belong in walks of life where the tested abilities are important.'

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Stereotype Threat, (cont.)

Stereotype threat is not seen just in the world of sport, but in almost every area of life. When, for example, Steele gave a group of undergraduates a standardized test and told them that it was a measure of their intellectual ability, white students did significantly better than their black counterparts. But when the same test was presented as a laboratory tool, with no relevance to intellectual ability, the scores of blacks and whites were pretty much identical.

... If we could only ditch our race-tinted spectacles, it would not only look very different, it would soon become very different, too.