

Social psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson performed an experiment several years ago in which they gave two groups of African-American students at the University of Texas the same test composed of difficult verbal skills questions from the Graduate Record Exam. Before the test they told the first group that the purpose was to research psychological factors involved in solving verbal problems, while the second group was told that they were being given a "genuine test of your abilities and limitations." The result was that the second group performed far worse on the test than the first group. Steele and Aronson hypothesize that many African-American students are aware of stereotypic perceptions of themselves by others as intellectually weak, and thus experience excessive self-generated pressure to perform well, which has a negative impact upon their test performances. Many social psychologists believe that Steele's and Aronson's research may be valuable for understanding and overcoming barriers to academic success for African-American students that figure in many circumstances besides standardized test taking.

Is the deception perpetrated upon the subjects in Steele's and Aronson's experiment morally justified? If so, why? If not, why not? .

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The deception perpetrated upon the subjects in Steele's and Aronson's experiments is morally unjustifiable. The research concerns an important subject, and its findings might be useful in addressing a significant problem both for society and for individuals. In order to justify deception in research, however, there has to be a high probability that the research will generate significant information with a direct practical value for preventing evil. Unfortunately, very little, if any, research in the field of social psychology satisfies this strong condition, however, and it would have been unreasonable for Steele and Aronson to assume that their research did so. It is one thing to believe with good reason that a given deception has a high probability of reducing significant evil in the world. It is another thing simply to believe that a deception might possibly reduce evil. The moral rule forbidding deception would be seriously weakened if everyone viewed the latter belief as a sufficient reason for violating the rule.

Case from the February 3, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1996.