

## “Just like All the Rest” Developing Awareness of Stereotypical Thinking in Physical Education

Louis Harrison Jr. & Terry Worthy

To cite this article: Louis Harrison Jr. & Terry Worthy (2001) “Just like All the Rest” Developing Awareness of Stereotypical Thinking in Physical Education, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 72:9, 20-24, DOI: [10.1080/07303084.2001.10605862](https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2001.10605862)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2001.10605862>



Published online: 24 Feb 2013.



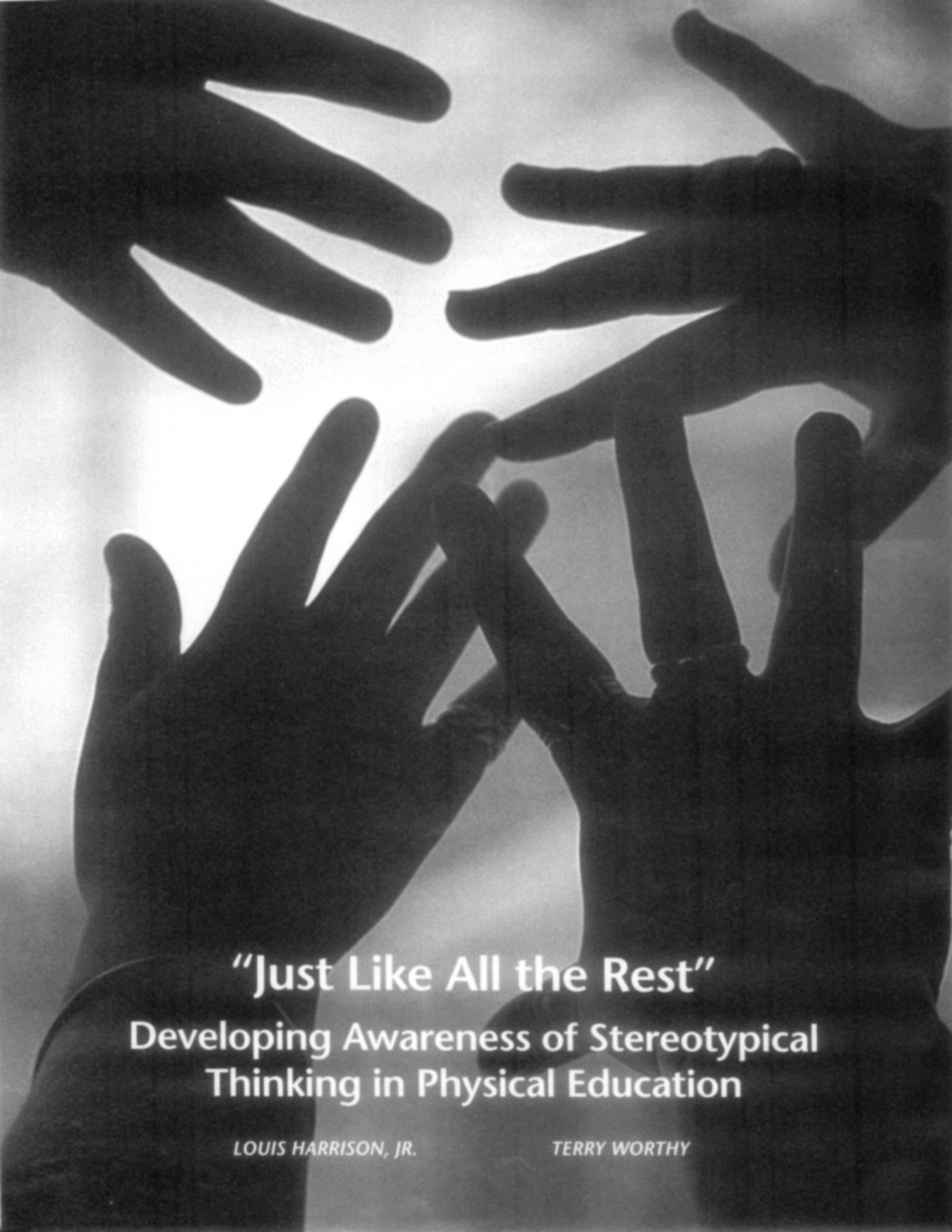
Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 69



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



## **"Just Like All the Rest"**

**Developing Awareness of Stereotypical  
Thinking in Physical Education**

*LOUIS HARRISON, JR.*

*TERRY WORTHY*

The process of imposing characteristics on people based on their perceived group membership is called stereotyping (Oaks, Haslam, & Turner, 1994). As much as educators condemn the idea of engaging in stereotypical thinking, many of them continue to stereotype their own students. Most stereotyping takes place below the conscious level; we are, for the most part, oblivious to the process. Even those who have consciously committed to an egalitarian attitude retain latent stereotypes that can resurface under the stressful conditions that are common in schools (Devine, 1989). Thus, stereotyping takes place with amazing regularity in schools and is carried out by students and teachers alike.

The stereotyping process is actually an efficient adaptation of the human mind that operates as a cognitive simplification system. Stereotypes are our brain's way of filling in missing information about individuals of whom we have inadequate knowledge by superimposing perceived traits of the group to which they belong. Stereotypes based on gender and on various social groups (e.g., athletes) are quite common in many social contexts. Stereotyping occurs even more readily in environments where people who have limited experience with others of different cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds, abruptly come into contact with each other. This environment is common in many of our nation's schools. While many schools are integrated, most minority students still live in segregated neighborhoods. This fact will become even more problematic as public-school demographics shift to greater numbers of minority students coupled with the opposite trend in the teaching population (Villegas, 1990); such conditions will provide a potentially favorable environment for the development of negative stereotypes.

When stereotypes are based on ample social and factual knowledge and are not used to make judgments about individual group members, they are generally accurate and pose few

problems. It is when stereotypes are based on fallacious, misleading, or very limited information and group interactions that they become problematic. Teachers with limited exposure to students of a different race or ethnicity can be susceptible to this sort of stereotype. In addition, teachers with dogmatic dispositions are more likely to display and perpetuate negative stereotypic attitudes. Conversely, those with the desire and willingness to critically examine their own attitudes and teaching practices can grow in their ability to understand, connect with, and better serve all of their students.

The purpose of this article is to increase teacher awareness of the stereotyping process and the ways in which it can influence curricular decisions and interactions with students. It offers recommendations for teachers who wish to diminish their propensity to use misleading stereotypes. This effort, it is hoped, will help decrease the use of negative stereotypes by students as well.

### Stereotypical Perceptions

Our social background and personal experiences influence the way we perceive incoming information. The stereotyping process may cause one individual's mental representation of information to differ significantly from another's, while both may be different from the actual information. Stereotypes can even shape our perception of causal relationships in the social environment (Wittenbrink, Gist, & Hilton, 1997). For example, a teacher may hold as fact the common stereotype that African Americans have "natural athletic ability" in the sport of basketball (Stone, Perry, & Darley, 1997). In observing a noteworthy basketball performance by an African American student, the teacher may therefore deem it unnecessary to compliment the student on this performance because, after all, it's a "natural ability." This perception overlooks the hard work and practice the student may have endured to perform at that level. This same teacher observing a similar performance by a non-

African American student may feel compelled to compliment that student and comment on the effort put forth to achieve that level of performance. Horn and Lox (1993) suggested that some basketball coaches may even look unfavorably on African American athletes who do not perform as well as European American athletes.

These stereotypic perceptions are not at all difficult to develop. We are constantly bombarded by media depictions of athletes that reinforce prevalent stereotypes. Hoberman (1997) stated that advertisers associate African American athletes' success with innate ability and strength, while European American athletes for the most part are depicted as succeeding because of their intellect, leadership, or work ethic (pp. 48-51). In another study of athletic advertising, Dufur (1998) concluded that African American athletes were often portrayed as biologically gifted, violent, or angry. These prevalent images can influence teachers' perceptions of personality and ability based on a student's ethnicity (Harrison, 2001). A conscious effort to become aware of these influences and an ardent resolve to resist them may change a teacher's outlook on students and athletes.

The development and retention of stereotypic views are a product of well-understood psychological phenomena. It is human nature to look for evidence to support what we currently believe. Often, evidence that is contrary to our beliefs is adapted to fit our beliefs or disregarded entirely. This propensity is called "confirmation bias" (Myers, 1993). When a teacher holds a stereotypical view of a particular group, that teacher's observations of the performance, interest, effort, or abilities of students who are members of that group are not wholly objective. For example, a teacher may observe a female perform a sport skill less efficiently than a male and attribute this performance to the supposed lesser ability of females in general, whereas the difference may be due simply to that individual female's lack of knowledge about the skill or

insufficient exposure to the activity. Given sufficient opportunities to practice and develop the skill, the female student may become just as competent as the male. Thus, expected behaviors, when observed, tend to confirm the teacher's preconceived notions, while unexpected behaviors are attributed to situational factors or ignored (Bodenhausen, 1988; Ickes, Patterson, Rajecki, & Tanford, 1982). For example, when females outperform males, their performance is often ascribed to special coaching or other external factors rather than to superior skill. Similarly, a teacher with stereotypical views regarding the interests and abilities of Asian students may react differently than a teacher without such views when observing an Asian girl who displays better-than-average skill in basketball. Because this is not a stereotypical Asian activity, the biased teacher may ignore the student's performance or attribute it to luck or to other external factors rather than recognize, encourage, and reinforce the student's superior abilities.

Research also indicates that people with stereotypical views will abandon their search for evidence that runs contrary to these views sooner when observed behaviors confirm their beliefs (Hamilton, Sherman, and Ruvolo, 1990). This further diminishes the odds of recognizing contrary behaviors and adjusting one's views accordingly. For example, if the same Asian student makes a mistake or a "bad play," the observer with stereotypical beliefs will revert to these beliefs more quickly in spite of the previous potential displayed by the student.

In addition, when we notice behavior or receive information that contradicts our stereotypical beliefs, we tend to subject it to more critical examination than we would other information. Often, when a member of a stereotyped group behaves contrary to our stereotypic norms and in a manner that is hard to disregard or misconstrue, we maintain our stereotypic view by developing a separate category for this person (Myers, 1993). Take the "dumb jock" image; when it con-

flicts with the reality of a student who is a star football player and who also holds high scholastic honors, we often create an exception and find a way to explain this "unique" student by attributing his success to family support or special circumstances. When this occurs, we usually hear phrases like "he's different" or "she's not like the others." This helps us preserve the stereotypical view of the larger group (Myers).

We develop stereotypes because our mind tends to focus on vivid, distinctive, and prominent examples and then to use these cases as an effortless means of judging groups. For example, one could very easily stereotype African Americans as good basketball players because of their pervasiveness in collegiate and professional basketball. Due to the extensive media coverage of this sport and its popularity in this country, it tends to have a greater impact on memory. Yet, we must remember that exceptional group members are seldom representative of the entire group. Star athletes are not the best foundation for gauging the distribution of athleticism in the African American population (Myers, 1993). It has been estimated that less than 5,000 African Americans are making a living as professional athletes. Yet, as of 2000, African American professionals included more than 41,000 physicians, almost 47,000 attorneys, and 95,000 engineers (Coakley, 2001, p. 300). Prominent African Americans outside of sport are much more abundant, but few receive the media attention given to professional athletes.

### **The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**

Stereotypical beliefs can also influence a person's expectations of others and thus play a role in what is called the "self-fulfilling prophecy," which is the propensity of one's expectations to evoke behavior in others that confirms these expectations (Merton, 1948). There are two types of self-fulfilling prophecies: the true self-fulfilling prophecy and the seemingly fulfilled prophecy (Gilovich, 1991). The true self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when a

person's expectation actually elicits the anticipated behavior. Consider the teacher who, upon encountering an obese student, assumes that this student is normally sedentary and will reject the idea of vigorous exercise. As activity begins, the teacher treats the student as a reluctant participant and fails to provide movement opportunities, motivating feedback, or adequate instruction in the activity. Sensing no support and lacking the information necessary for success, the student then becomes the reluctant participant as expected.

Gilovich (1991) defined the seemingly fulfilled prophecy as a situation where expectations limit another's responses in a way that makes it difficult to disconfirm the expectations. If a teacher stereotypes Hispanic students as hostile or violent, their inclination might be to avoid activities that require or evoke aggressiveness, such as invasion games. Thus, the stereotyped group members have no opportunity to disconfirm the expectation. Similarly, if a teacher—based on stereotypical attitudes about gender or cultural appropriateness—predicts that students will not enjoy or participate in certain activities, then he or she may eliminate these activities during curriculum design, before the students have an opportunity to express interest or a lack of interest.

### **Self-Stereotyping**

When individuals of a social group share the same perceptions of themselves, the result is a phenomenon called "self-stereotyping" (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994). The individual's personal identity is not lost in self-stereotyping, but there is a tendency to identify with a social group. This phenomenon is especially strong when the stereotypical characteristics of the group are viewed positively and are beneficial to the individual's and group's self-esteem. This can be seen when females are stereotyped as sensitive and nurturing, which are generally positive qualities. Conversely, self-stereotyping appears to have a depressing effect when negative stereotypes

are made prominent (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999). For example, many females hold the negative stereotype of female softball players as over-aggressive and masculine. Elrich (1994) chronicled similarly negative self-stereotyping in minority children in an urban school. Such views adversely affected their self-esteem, thus demonstrating the importance of intercultural understanding in addressing the needs of disadvantaged students.

### **Suggestions for Reducing Stereotyping**

One obvious way for teachers to reduce their propensity to stereotype is to get to know others outside of their own social group. Researchers call this the "dilution effect" (Holland, Holyoak, Nisbett, & Thagard, 1986). This practice causes one to make more, rather than fewer, distinctions between people, which makes simple categories such as race, gender, religion, and ability impractical. Increasing our exposure to individuals outside our own social group—particularly to those at parallel status and power levels—can alter our conception of the "typical" group member. Thus, one of the most basic teaching skills—getting to know each student individually and going beyond surface traits—will help eliminate stereotypic thinking. When evaluating students, formally or informally, teachers should rely on their own observations and on objective information, which can steer them away from overly simplistic group categories.

The most obvious means of reducing maladaptive stereotyping among students is to recognize and challenge stereotypical remarks and to provide an atmosphere for dismantling common misperceptions. Physical education and sport are replete with common stereotypes about the perceived physical abilities of particular gender, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Teachers should provide a non-threatening forum for discussion of these ideas, one in which all students feel comfortable sharing their opinions. This provides an initial platform for

challenging stereotypical beliefs. Such discussions should focus on how stereotypes are formed and how they often provide inaccurate information, limit our interests and our interactions, and limit our perception of what activities, interests, and traits are appropriate for certain groups.

Teachers can also give students visible evidence of the inaccuracy of stereotypical thinking by inviting guests who contradict stereotypical beliefs. This evidence can be reinforced by discussing examples of the wide range of people associated with a particular sport or activity. For example, teachers can highlight individuals who do not fit stereotypical categories in sport, such as golfing superstar Tiger Woods (multiethnic), National Basketball Association Rookie-of-the-Year Mike Miller (European American), and tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams (African American). Inclusion of such stereotype-disconfirming group members will help students recognize the futility of harboring rigid stereotypical beliefs and liberate their perspective on the possibilities for their own and others' participation in a wide range of sports and physical activities.

Teachers may also use teaching methods such as the "jigsaw classroom" (Aronson & Gonzalez, 1988) to foster intergroup cooperation in physical education classes. This technique divides a lesson or unit into components. The students are then placed in heterogeneous groups, and each group member is given a different section or aspect of the lesson to learn. The students are free to consult with members of other groups who are assigned the same aspect. Each student in each group must also learn the entire lesson by attending to the other members of the group. This method reinforces the idea that each student has something to offer the group and is therefore a valuable group member. This technique can easily be adapted to physical education classes.

For example, a physical educator can introduce a series of four folk dances (such as the Romanian *alunelul*, the American Cotton-Eyed

Joe, the Israeli "Mayim, Mayim," and the Mexican hat dance) by forming four-person jigsaw groups. Each group member is responsible for teaching the other members of their group one of the dances assigned by the teacher. The teacher informs students that a test on their performance of the dances will follow.

---

***Teachers can also give students visible evidence of the inaccuracy of stereotypical thinking by inviting guests who contradict stereotypical beliefs.***

---

After the initial meeting of the jigsaw groups, in which each group member is assigned a dance to learn, the students move into "expert groups" with other students who have been assigned the same dance. This is a very important part of the jigsaw process because it gives the students who may be less skillful an opportunity to learn from their more skillful peers and to practice their dance by modeling the actions of the more skillful. The practice and skill acquisition in the expert group is critical to the success of this technique.

After sufficient time has been given for practice, the jigsaw groups are brought together again. Group members then teach their dances to one another. Thus, each group member has to play the role of expert, and each is an integral part of the success of the group. Group members have to pay attention to their peers in order to be successful. They are no longer rewarded for trying to please the teacher at the expense of other students.

Caution should be taken when one is using this teaching method. If stu-

dents are not accustomed to learning in this fashion, it may take time to acclimate them to a learning style that is not teacher-centered. The potential benefits of this strategy are numerous, though. Aronson and Gonzalez (1988) reported that students in jigsaw groups significantly increased their liking for their fellow group members both within and across racial and ethnic categories. Students in these groups, especially minority students, also demonstrated increases in self-esteem. This method should also reduce negative stereotyping, since students with different backgrounds are accorded equal status. Furthermore, these findings hold true when the jigsaw method was used during as little as 20 percent of class time. Therefore, it is not necessary to completely abandon one's present teaching methods in order to make effective use of the technique.

### Conclusion

All physical education programs have the potential to provide productive multicultural experiences. To address the recent initiatives on creating diversity in physical education, some teachers have expanded their curriculum to include multicultural activities. Yet, adding diverse cultural activities to the curriculum without meaningful intercultural interactions often fosters knowledge that is devoid of true meaning and understanding (DeSensi, 1995). This condition provides fertile ground for the formation of negative stereotypes. Challenging pervasive stereotypes can help teachers dismiss inaccurate beliefs about gender, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups as well as create an atmosphere in which every student feels respected and valued (Wolfe & Spencer, 1996).

Stereotyping serves a necessary cognitive function by shrinking the volume of information we have to deal with, often based on information collected from our social environment. Yet when they are based on inaccurate information, these stereotypes can become invalid caricatures of social groups. Stereotypes about the innate abilities of various groups abound in

sport and physical education, and they may even seem true to many individuals because they can elicit anticipated behavior. Thus, teachers, coaches, and students who have limited contact and experience with other social groups should be made aware of the stereotyping process and its possible negative consequences.

### References

- Aronson, E., & Gonzalez, A. (1988). Desegregation, jigsaw and the Mexican-American experience. A clear and concise description of the jigsaw classroom technique for reducing overt prejudice and discrimination. In P. Katz & D. Taylor (Eds.), *Eliminating racism* (pp. 301-304). New York: Plenum.
- Bodenhausen, G. V. (1988). Stereotype biases in social decision making and memory: Testing process models of stereotype use. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 5*, 726-737.
- Coakley, J. J. (2001). *Sport in society: Issues and controversies*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- DeSensi, J. (1995). Understanding multiculturalism and valuing diversity: A theoretical perspective. *Quest, 47*(1), 34-43.
- Devine, P. G. (1989). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56*, 5-18.
- Dufur, M. (1998). Race logic and 'being like Mike': Representations of athletes in advertising, 1985-1994. In G. A. Sailes (Ed.), *African Americans in sport* (pp. 67-81). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Elrich, M. (1994). The stereotype within. *Educational Leadership, 51*(8), 12-15.
- Gilovich, T. (1991). *How we know what isn't so*. New York: Free Press.
- Hamilton, D. L., Sherman, S. J., & Ruvolo, C. M. (1990). Stereotype-based expectancies: Effects on information processing and social behavior. *Journal of Social Issues, 46*(2), 35-60.
- Harrison, L., Jr. (2001). Understanding the influence of stereotypes: Implications for the African American in sport and physical activity. *Quest, 53*(1), 97-114.
- Hoberman, J. (1997). *Darwin's athletes: How sport has damaged black America and preserved the myth of race*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Holland, J. H., Holyoak, K. J., Nisbett, R. E., & Thagard, P. R. (1986). *Induction*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Horn, T. S., & Lox, C. (1993). The self-fulfilling prophecy theory: When coaches' expectations become reality. In J. M. Williams (Ed.), *Applied sport psychology* (pp. 68-81). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Ickes, W., Patterson, M. L., Rajecki, D. W., & Tanford, S. (1982). Behavior and cognitive consequences of reciprocal versus compensatory responses to preinteraction expectancies. *Social Cognition, 1*, 160-190.
- Merton, R. K. (1948). The self-fulfilling prophecy. *Antioch Review, 8*, 193-210.
- Myers, D. G. (1993). *Social psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Oakes, P. J., Haslam, S. A., & Turner, J. C. (1994). *Stereotyping and social reality*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Stone, J., Lynch, C. I., Sjomeling, M., & Darley, J. M. (1999). Stereotype threat effects on black and white athletic performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*, 1213-1227.
- Stone, J., Perry, Z. W., & Darley, J. M. (1997). 'White men can't jump': Evidence for the perceptual confirmation of racial stereotypes following a basketball game. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 19*, 291-306.
- Villegas, A. M. (1990). *Culturally responsive pedagogy for the 1990s and beyond*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Wittenbrink, B., Gist, P. L., & Hilton, J. L. (1997). Structural properties of stereotypic knowledge and their influences on the construal of social situations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 526-543.
- Wolfe, C. T., & Spencer, S. J. (1996). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their overt and subtle influence in the classroom. *American Behavioral Scientist, 40*, 176-185.

---

Louis Harrison, Jr., is an assistant professor, and Terry Worthy is an associate professor, in the Department of Kinesiology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803.