

Award for Distinguished Scientific Early Career Contributions to Psychology: Nicole M. Stephens

The APA Awards for Distinguished Scientific Early Career Contributions to Psychology recognize psychologists who have demonstrated excellence early in their careers and have held a doctoral degree for no more than 9 years. One of the 2017 award winners is Nicole M. Stephens, for “groundbreaking research that leverages social psychological theories of culture and the self to understand fundamental psychological differences between working- and middle-class Americans.” Stephens’s award citation, biography, and a selected bibliography are presented here.

Citation

“For groundbreaking research that leverages social psychological theories of culture and the self to understand fundamental psychological differences between working- and middle-class Americans. Nicole M. Stephens’s work demonstrates that, within many U.S. institutions, social norms emphasizing independence can undermine the performance of underrepresented groups. Her research not only identifies institutions that fuel inequality, it also generates interventions that bridge cultural divides and dramatically improve the performance of underrepresented groups by creating organizational cultures that recognize their perspectives and values. Few scholars have had such an impressive impact in both advancing theory and generating real-world solutions to persistent social problems.”

Biography

Nicole M. Stephens’s path to becoming a social and cultural psychologist was fueled by a lifelong series of “fish out of water” experiences, in which she found herself in a minority defined by race, class, or nationality. Stephens credits this outsider perspective with opening her eyes to the key roles that culture and social structure play in shaping individuals’ experiences, behavior, and outcomes in life. Stephens learned that no one’s perspective is universal, including her own perspective as a White, North American woman from a working-class background.

Stephens was born in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, the daughter of Grady and Dottie Stephens. Both of her parents were born and raised in south Florida. They refer to themselves as “native” Floridians to distinguish themselves from the “snowbirds,” who only visit in the winter. Grady worked as a firefighter and later built his own pressure-cleaning business from the ground up. Dottie worked as a secretary and accountant before giving up her job to raise Stephens and her younger brother, Cliff, at home.

Stephens first developed an interest in psychology in high school, while playing competitive basketball. Her high

school basketball team won the Florida state championship, and during the summers she played in an Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) league. As the only White player on her team, Stephens found her experience with AAU basketball to be transformative. Her teammates fondly gave her the nickname “Becky” to tease her about how “White” she sounded when she spoke. Stephens felt the material and cultural divide that her whiteness and privileged social class status created between her and her teammates. She also became acutely aware of the social structures that made her path in life possible.

Stephens’s basketball career continued at Williams College. As the only student in her friend group from a working-class background, Stephens experienced college as simultaneously life-changing and socially isolating. Although she was academically prepared, Stephens often felt like an outsider socially.

Some specific interactions stood out in that regard. When Stephens’s friends’ parents visited campus, they would frequently take a group out to dinner. The conversation would usually begin with a parent asking the students what their parents did for a living. After hearing from friends whose parents were doctors, lawyers, academics, or politicians, Stephens became keenly aware of her working-class background and relative lack of privilege. She found herself on the opposite side of the class divide from where she was among her basketball teammates.

These experiences in college fueled her interest in understanding how students’ social class backgrounds shape their opportunity to succeed in college. Stephens developed her lifelong interest in culture and inequality by studying with psychology professors—Ken Savitsky, Steve Fein, and Ari Solomon—who took an interest in her and provided her with research opportunities. In particular, Ken’s senior seminar introduced her to the work of Hazel Markus and Claude Steele. Hazel and Claude’s work on the relationship between culture and the self and stereotype threat, respectively, were the eventual building blocks of Stephens’s own



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research agenda. Those interests, with her professors' encouragement, inspired Stephens to earn a PhD.

Stephens explored various opportunities to conduct research before applying to graduate programs. That resulted in her next "fish out of water" experience: living in Santiago, Chile, for a year on a Fulbright Fellowship. As a tall, White, North American woman, she stood out everywhere she went. She was constantly reminded of her privilege not only because of race and social class, but also to her status as a "gringa."

During this year, she studied cross-cultural psychology and clinical psychology, observing group therapy sessions for low-income women suffering from depression. This experience cemented her interest in studying social inequality from a cultural psychological perspective.

In 2004, Stephens decided to pursue a PhD in Social Psychology. She went to Stanford, where she worked with Hazel Markus, the researcher who had been so instrumental in developing Stephens's interest in the field of cultural psychology. Her timing was fortunate—Hazel had just started to conduct research on social class and culture. Stephens was excited about the opportunity to work with Hazel on this important topic that had not yet been studied in social psychology.

While at Stanford, Stephens developed important research collaborations with Stephanie Fryberg, MarYam Hamedani, and Sarah Townsend. With Hazel and these key collaborators, she developed her first line of research focused on how different social class contexts afford culture-specific selves, or understandings of the "right" way to think, feel, and act as a person in the world. Her initial work revealed how working-class contexts (defined by high

school-level education) afford relatively interdependent selves and norms for behavior, whereas middle-class contexts (defined by a 4-year degree or more) afford independent selves and norms for behavior (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011; Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007). For example, she found that choice in working-class contexts is often used to promote solidarity and connection with others, whereas choice in middle-class contexts is used to promote uniqueness and separation from others (Stephens et al., 2007).

In her next line of research, Stephens wanted to go beyond documenting social class differences in culture to consider how these differences can shape one's opportunity to succeed in "gateway institutions," such as higher education. As part of her dissertation, Stephens worked on research that integrates cultural models of self with research on stereotype threat. This award-winning research claims that one important source of social class achievement gaps is the "cultural mismatch" between the dominant cultural norms of mainstream institutions and the norms prevalent among working-class individuals participating in those institutions (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Specifically, this research documents that (1) U.S. institutions of higher education tend to promote the middle-class cultural norm of independence and exclude the interdependent cultural norms common among students from working-class backgrounds; and (2) when institutions promote only middle-class norms, they inadvertently create social class inequality by undermining the performance of working-class students.

After completing her PhD, Stephens continued her work at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. While at Kellogg, Stephens worked with MarYam Hamedani, Sarah Townsend, and Mesmin Destin on a new research agenda. She wanted to take what they had learned in their research on the cultural sources of the social class achievement gap to consider how to actively reduce the gap. Stephens and her coauthors called the approach that they developed "difference-education" and argue that educating students about how social class differences matter will better equip students from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in college. They found that difference-education closes the social class achievement gap by as much as 63%, and does so by empowering first-generation students to more fully use the campus resources available to them. At the same time, it increases students' appreciation of and comfort with their own and others' social differences (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2015; Townsend, Stephens, Smallets, & Hamedani, 2017). Compared with traditional social psychological intervention approaches, the unique

benefit of difference-education is that it equips students with an understanding of social difference that can help them to navigate today's diverse and divided world.

In May 2015, Stephens was awarded tenure. In this most recent phase of her career, she has focused on working with doctoral-level students, including Andrea Dittmann, Jessica Nelson, and Hannah Birnbaum. Stephens looks forward to extending her work on cultural mismatch to the workplace and plans to continue her research on difference-education to better understand the specific processes by which this approach benefits first-generation students in diverse settings (e.g., community colleges).

Stephens is grateful for the perspective her own experiences and opportunities have given her, as well as for the continued mentorship of Hazel Markus. Hazel's guidance began when Stephens was a doctoral-level student and has lasted throughout her career. Hazel once told Stephens that working with graduate students was the best part of her job. Now that Stephens has observed the strong relationships that Hazel forges with her students—as well as the extended academic family that she creates—Stephens understands why. Stephens also appreciates the mentorship of Jeanne Brett, who regularly offered invaluable advice about research and teaching at Kellogg. And finally, Stephens is grateful to her parents' unconditional support and their efforts to provide her with advantages that they never had.

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