

Who is Whistling Vivaldi?:
How Black Football Players Engage with Stereotype Threats in College

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Abstract

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Research has shown that the threat of negative stereotypes can have pernicious effects on the decision-making thoughts and behaviors for those who are targets (Steele, 2011). When college students and professors subscribe to stereotypes that student-athletes enter college based solely on their physical abilities rather than their academic and intellectual capabilities, targets of the stereotypes may experience identity dissonance that exacerbates their decisions, behaviors, and ultimately their academic performance. In light of the impact of negative stereotypes on student-athlete performance, the purpose of this dissertation was to conduct a phenomenological, qualitative study that examined how Black male football players engage and cope with negative stereotypes at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Data was collected and analyzed from semi-structured interviews with 10 Black male football student-athletes employing grounded theory methodology to examine how they experience, are affected by, and respond to negative stereotypes.

Empirical results elucidate various strategies employed to engage with stereotype threat. Thematic categories include responses that exacerbated, habituated to, or mitigated the stereotype encounter. The current study investigates the successful coping strategies Black football players currently use. Emergent themes gained from this inquiry helped the researcher

identify specific harbingers for interventions that would inculcate Black male student-athletes with tools to mitigate negative stereotypes that may undermine their performance in college and all areas of life. Implications are further discussed for postulating an institutionalized workshop series designed to teach effective coping mechanisms for all Black athletes.

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Thank you to every single person who ever believed in me.

DEDICATION

To Black football players past, present, and future: “If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough.” -Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Perhaps nowhere in higher education is the disenfranchisement of Black male students more insidious than in college athletics” (Harper, 2006, p. 6).

“And that feeling--as subjective and ridiculous and irrational as it may be--matters. How you feel about your abilities--your academic 'self-concept'--in the context of your classroom shapes your willingness to tackle challenges and finish difficult tasks. It's a crucial element in your motivation and confidence.” –Malcolm Gladwell

College sports are predicated on the foundation of granting student-athletes access to higher education while also enabling them to engage in competitive athletics at the collegiate level. Although there is the allure of obtaining a higher education degree, for many student-athletes it is an illusion, because as one retired National Football League player called it “the merchandising of human beings” (Moffitt as cited in Belson, 2013). Many student-athletes on college campuses at Division I National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institutions report encountering stereotypes pertaining to the “dumb jock” image (Edwards, 1984). This image is perhaps compounded among Black male athletes given certain racial stereotypes. For example, the stereotype alleging Black intellectual inferiority poses the risk of “confirming a deeply negative, racial inferiority, a suspicion of being unalterably limited and of not belonging in the academic arena” (Aronson, 2002, p. 282). Researchers have shown that the threat of negative stereotypes can have pernicious effects on the decision-making thoughts and behaviors for those who are targets (Steele, 2011). When college students and professors subscribe to stereotypes that athletes enter college based solely on their physical abilities rather than their intellectual capabilities, targets of stereotypes may experience identity dissonance that exacerbates their decisions, behaviors, and ultimately their academic performance (Comeaux, 2012). In light of the impact of negative stereotypes on student-athlete performance, the purpose of this dissertation was to conduct a phenomenological, qualitative study that examines how

Black male football players engage and cope with negative stereotypes at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Data were collected and analyzed from semi-structured interviews with 10 Black male football student-athletes from a PWI. A grounded theory methodology was employed and enabled a deep analysis of how these Black male student-athletes experienced, were affected by, and responded to negative stereotypes.

Empirical results illustrate the numerous strategies used to engage with stereotype threat, which are categorized into responses that exacerbated, habituated to, or mitigated the encounter. The current study uncovered and analyzed the successful coping strategies Black football players used in the context of negative stereotypes. Emergent themes gained from this inquiry helped the researcher identify specific harbingers for interventions that would inculcate Black male student-athletes with tools to mitigate negative stereotypes that may undermine their performance in college and all areas of life. Implications are further discussed for postulating an institutionalized workshop series designed to teach effective coping mechanisms for all Black athletes.

This chapter provides an overview of the context and background literature framing the significance of this dissertation study followed by the statement of purpose. This chapter concludes with the significance of this research as well as its design.

Background and Context

In 2011, the NCAA released a commercial to counter the myth of the “dumb jock.” The commercial claims that Black male student-athletes at Division I institutions are 10% more likely to graduate than Black men in the general student body. In 2013, a distinguished group of researchers made this claim more transparent by publishing the statistical disparities. While the NCAA’s claim is true across the entire Division I, it is not true for:

the six conferences whose member institutions routinely win football and basketball championships, play in multi-million bowl games and the annual basketball

championship tournament, and produce the largest share of Heisman trophy winners. *Across these 76 college and universities*, Black male student-athletes graduate at 5.3 percentage points lower than their same-race male peers who are not on intercollegiate sports teams. That an average of 49.8% of Black male student-athletes on these campuses do not graduate within six years is a major loss (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013, p. 7)

The commercial closes with a Black basketball player asking the camera, “Still think we’re just a bunch of dumb jocks?” Statistically speaking, the data indicate that colleges are failing Black male student-athletes, since over half do not receive their degrees. Differential graduation rate for Black student-athletes have only depreciated over time. Siegel (1996) documented Black football players graduation rates 21% lower than their White teammates. Lapchick (2000) found that White male basketball players graduate at a rate of 52% while their Black teammates graduate at a rate of 38%. Historically, Black males (athlete and non-athletes) in public universities have not been offered equitable access and distribution of resources. In 2002, Black men comprised only 4.3% of all students enrolled at institutions of higher education, the same as in 1976 (Harper, 2006). As Harper et al. (2013) point out, this gross decline continues today. The intention of these statistics is to establish the intentional and intensive socialization of Black men into sports (Beamon & Bell, 2006).

One of the explanations for the lackluster graduation rates for Black male student-athletes is the expectation or suggestion that they would underperform academically. Once the seeds for this self-fulfilling prophecy have been planted, a person’s experience can be spoiled by the perception of negative labels in many academic and social situations (Aronson, 2002). Consider the image elicited by the *dumb jock*, a label that could apply to any athlete in a classroom who is nodding off after a rigorous workout routine. If this student-athlete happens to be a Black male, they fit two descriptions of being a “lazy athlete” and an “intellectually inferior Black student.” While struggling to pay attention, a Black male student-athlete might also worry that his

behavior would confirm both deleterious labels. When the stereotype is relevant to a particular situation, the question may cross his mind: Am I behaving like a dumb Black jock? Perhaps as a result of physical and cognitive exertion, the student may become even less effective in taking notes or participating in class discussion. This apprehensive predicament about confirming stereotypes, both in the eyes of the student and of others, is what Steele and Aronson (1995) have called “stereotype threat.” These threats are invisible yet ubiquitous. No person is immune to stereotype threat given that all of us belong to one group or another and that we all have individual reputations (Aronson, 2002).

Research has demonstrated the presence of negative stereotypes towards college athletes’ regarding their lack of intelligence and rigor of coursework (Sailes, 1996), especially male student-athletes in the revenue generating sports of football and basketball (Shulman & Bowen, 2001) at highly selective universities (Dee, 2014). In addition to athletic stigmas, empirical evidence has revealed that there are stereotypes within institutions reflecting Black students’ insufficient academic and intellectual capabilities at PWIs (Littleton, 2003) and Black athletes’ innate physical superiority at the expense of intellectual inferiority (Coakley, 1990). Black males who play football in college are in the intersection of pejorative judgments based on their race, gender, sport, and athletic identities, potentially worsening the potential impact of stereotype threat on their performance on and off the field of play.

Stereotype threat may also exacerbate neuro-psychological deficits, such as ADHD, in which attentional resources are impaired during to worry or concern about behaving consistent with a particular negative bias about one’s stigmatized group. In a study on ADHD symptoms in college freshmen, Lee, Oakland, Jackson and Gutting (2008) found that the rates of Black students who reported symptom totals beyond DSM-IV-TR thresholds exceed that for Caucasian

students on all three subtypes of ADHD (as cited in Griffin, forthcoming). Furthermore, it has been found that individuals who have ADHD often achieve more success in the athletic arena than in the classroom (Broshek & Freeman, 2005). Football players, including those with ADHD are attracted to skill positions (e.g., wide receiver, running back) due to their energetic, spontaneous and creative requirements (Escalona et al., 2010). However, these positions have a three times greater risks of concussion than lineman (Pellman et al., 2004). Following this line of thought, Black male student-athletes may be at heightened risk for ADHD, as well as playing positions that have an increased risk of sustaining concussions. As a result, in addition to stereotype threat, which employs the same working memory capacities in the frontal lobe of the brain that are attenuated in ADHD and concussions (Baillargeon, Lassonde, Leclerc, & Ellemberg, 2012; Beilock, Jellison, Rydell, McConnell & Carr, 2006; Martinussen, Hayden, Hogg-Johnson, & Tannock, 2005), certain student-athletes may have multiple factors sapping their cognitive resources, which potentially contributes to impaired academic performance.

In the United States, there exists a ubiquitous belief that the individual learner is responsible for their learning outcome (Steele, 2003). If an individual is not performing, they must not be trying hard enough or they must have a deficit. Stereotype threat provides a compelling argument against this meritocratic attitude towards learning and performance by accounting for how social expectations and behaviors can affect an individual's learning outcomes. Intellectual performance is therefore not an entirely individualistic pursuit; it is also a social process. Therefore, the responsibility of failed intellectual growth becomes a shared one.

Statement of Purpose

Adjusting to the campus climate can be a challenging transition process for some Black students attending a PWI (Littleton, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). More specifically, the

experiences and stressors that influence Black football players can lead them to perceive themselves as powerlessness to be agents of their own change within the context of a PWI (Melendez, 2008). Through a psychosocial lens, the threat of stereotypes affects academic performance for Black male football players, a population that has already been proven to be at risk for not graduating. The research problem is that while literature empirically establishes the tropes of stereotype threat for Black male student-athletes, there is a paucity of recorded positive coping mechanisms in the face of such pervasive prejudices. This research intends to extend the work of Comeaux (2012) and Harrison (2001) by examining whether Black male student-athletes employ coping strategies to protect themselves from hostile campus climates.

When pursuing a research problem, renowned psychologist Claude M. Steele provided the following advice: “Take a real problem and ask why people do it and construct a simple situation. Just pick a damn problem. Read everything relevant to the problem and become a detective” (personal communication, May 25, 2013). This study applied detective-like examination to the problem of stereotype threat in Black male football players in hopes of reaching transformative moments through reflective praxis. Because previous researchers have established a foundation for stereotype threat with Black male student-athletes, it is incumbent upon current scholars to develop this evidence into useful and practical interventions.

Significance

One element missing from the existing commentary is a full expression of these students’ point of view: “We know how academically inadequate we have judged them to be, but we do not know how they experience school” (Benson, 2000). Our educational policies and practice might change if we better understood these students’ narratives of their schooling experience. We know that listening to student voices has the potential to reveal better solutions to school

problems (Freeman, 1997), but little of that approach has been applied in the research and discussions of the issue of the academic achievement of some Black student-athletes (Benson, 2000). Producing information about the experiences of these student-athletes is much needed given the pressure of academic institutions to serve this demographic. Even more needed are evidence-based protocols for academic departments to follow once they understand the needs of these student-athletes. The data in this qualitative study has great implications for “studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51) for other Division I athletic programs across the country. Ideally, this study will serve as one of the first to elucidate stereotype threat for Black male student-athletes that also includes practical strategies for interventions. Since there is a lack of literature examining the experiences for this specific set of students, the initial data provided can allow considerable insight into the phenomenology being studied. However, it is important to note that the experiences of students at one university should not be generalized to all universities, but rather to illustrate experiences that may be common to other student-athletes at other universities. The goal of this research was to be one of the first studies to examine stereotype threat in Black student-athletes as a population.

Research Questions

The following questions will guide this phenomenological study:

1. How do Black male football players experience and engage with stereotype threat at a predominantly White institution?
2. What positive coping mechanisms are Black student-athletes currently using to mitigate stereotype threat?

3. Do Black football players with higher academic identity have better coping strategies than those with higher athletic identity?

Research Design Overview

With the approval of the university's institutional review board, data was collected from 10 Black male football players. Student completed two surveys: an Academic Identity Measurement Index (AIMI) and an Athletic Identity Measurement Survey (AIMS). Students then participated in one semi-structured interview that lasted between 1-1.5 hours. To protect the identity of the interview participants, numbers were assigned and other possible identifying factors were removed. The sessions were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Open and closed coding categories were developed and focused on theory building over hypothesis testing using Glaser & Strauss's (1967) grounded theory.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

“He became what he beheld.” -William Blake (poet)
“I’ll see it when I believe it.” –Thane Pittman (social psychologist)

As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, stereotype threat was introduced as the main construct to investigate the experiences of Black male student-athletes. It represents a mosaic of social constructs and the best way to understand it in the context of the current research is to explain and teach it. This chapter of the dissertation was written to serve as a pedagogical guide to understanding and applying this complex phenomenon to previous research and the current study. While the previous chapter announced the concept of stereotype threat as a multi-faceted construct, this chapter will explicate three of its essential components: stereotypes, identities, and perceptions. After these three components have been operationalized, stereotype threat will be illuminated in the existing literature to provide sufficient coverage of the background literature that builds the case for this dissertation study. Ultimately this chapter provides the context for research questions associated with this study and the methodology that is discussed in the next chapter.

Disparaging Data for Black Male Student-Athletes

Racial inequity for Black male athletes in revenue-generating sports has been observed and quantified. In an analysis of football and basketball players in the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big East Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac 12 Conference, and the Southeastern Conference, Black representation is disaggregated by race. Between 2007 and 2010, Black men were 2.8% of full-time degree-seeking students, but 57.1% of football and 64.3% of basketball teams (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). The disproportionate amount of Black male athletes at NCAA Division I institutions would not be problematic if graduation rates were equitable. However, 96.1% of the NCAA Division I colleges and universities in the

above report graduated Black male student-athletes at rates lower than student-athletes overall (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). The surreptitious truth about Black male athlete equity is hidden in the details. For Black men, post-college success is sometimes obviated completely:

O. Harris (1994) reported that many African American males believe that doors to success in non-sports-related occupations such as business, science, and politics are only slightly ajar in comparison to those opportunities in professional sports, and that the time investment has greater odds for paying off. This could be supported by the fact that less than 2% of doctors, architects, attorneys, and business professionals are Black (Howard, 2014, p. 79).

From this data, it can be inferred that the opportunity structure for Black male athletes in the collegiate system is dubious. Black males within PWIs suffer lower academic achievement and higher attrition rates than the counterparts (Allen, 1992). Moreover, Black males report feeling a greater sense of mistrust within the institution and less connection and belonging to their peers and faculty (Walton & Cohen, 2007). This chapter will explore the profuse conditions in postsecondary education that can undermine the academic performance of Black male football players.

Black Male Student-Athletes Experiences with Faculty

Settings themselves, such as a college setting, have been shown to have powerful impacts on behavior as they can signal the degree of threat or safety a person will experience (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, & Diltman, 2008). That is, certain features or cues in a setting may create the expectation that a person's treatment will be contingent on one of their social identities. One major aspect of the collegiate setting that can provide signals to a Black male student-athlete are the professors. However, scant literature exists that chronicles Black male student-athlete intimate experiences with faculty. In one study, researchers found that faculty were more likely to offer help to White student-athletes with study skills than to Black student-athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007). In another study, of 128 faculty members at a large public

Division 1-A university (91% of whom were White), many of them held prejudicial attitudes toward student-athletes as a group (Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995). A third group of researchers found that 62.1% of the 538 participating student-athletes in the study reported that a faculty member had made a negative remark about athletes in class (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita & Jensen, 2007). Of the athletes who answered in the affirmative, a higher percentage of Blacks (79.4%) than Whites (61.2%) and Other (50.7%), of males (65.7%) than females (57.0%), and of revenue athletes (80.6%) than non-revenue athletes (57.4%) reported negative comments. In sum, Black male student-athletes in revenue generating sports experience the highest rates of explicit negative comments in college classrooms. The following literature will help demonstrate that intelligence is not the only factor that accounts for successful academic performance; there is something else in the air.

Stereotype, Identity & Perception

What are stereotypes and where do they come from? When clustered together, categories of similar images, stimuli, and thread of information make up mental frameworks called *schemas* that create the way we interact with the world (Piaget, 1951). Stereotypes are schemas that we create in our mind to quickly categorize our perceptions of people and our environment. Given how stereotype heuristics can unintentionally determine the internal expectations and outward behaviors of ourselves and of others (Rosenthal, 1963), they are integral to how we experience life. Is there harm in taking short cuts to mental clustering based on certain cultural stereotypes?

Research indicates that stereotypes can be harmful if they represent a *myopic* one:

The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story...I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all the stories of that place or that person. (Adichie, 2009).

The “single story” can create powerful cultural scripts that threaten to disempower other people and places. In sum, stereotyping is the natural tendency to accept generalizations about certain groups of people. These can be particularly pernicious when based on race markers in the context of our race-conscious society and they are manifested in one’s expectations of and interactions with others (Harrison et al., 2002; Loury, 2002).

Heuristics, such as stereotypes, are formidable because they are easily accessible and often operate outside of one’s conscious awareness (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). Even though every one of us uses mental shortcuts, they are not always reliable. More often than not, we make sweeping assertions from one or a few facts that we then generalize to a wide field. This is not a reliable method because assertions are intrinsically influenced by others’ biases and prejudices. Furthermore, joining a prejudiced belief system can damage an individual’s ability to think independent of social influence and ignore relevant information that counters or is inconsistent with a stereotype. While this may provide a sense of belonging to a larger social credence, it can easily turn into blind loyalty:

The desire to be in harmony with others is in itself a desirable trait. But it may lead a person too readily to fall in with the prejudices of others and may weaken his independence of judgment. It even leads to an extreme partisanship that regards it as disloyal to question the beliefs of a group to which one belongs (Dewey, 1933, p. 135).

Racially, the most perfidious aspect of stereotypes is that many people assume that they must be overt to be considered racist. Unfortunately, many racial stereotypes have evolved to become more covert instead of being eradicated. As one political satirist remarks:

Here’s the reality of racism in this country. The overwhelming condemnation of racists like Donald Sterling makes it clear that we have made progress in teaching everyone that racism is bad. Where we seem to have dropped the ball is in teaching people what racism actually is, which allows people to say these incredibly racist things whilst insisting they would never (Stewart, 2014).

Indeed, mental experience and mental operations are not one in the same. One's beliefs about why a behavior was performed need not have any relation to its actual cause, and people's reports of the causes of their behavior can be stated confidently and incorrectly simultaneously (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Greenwald and Banaji (1995) introduced the term implicit social cognition for describing cognitive processes that occur outside of conscious awareness or conscious control in relation to social psychological constructs - attitudes, stereotypes, and self-concepts (i.e., identity).

Identity

What constructs an identity? Identity is a theory; we become who we say we are but we do not know exactly how this process happens. Identity is the essence of a person; it cannot be compartmentalized or divided up into halves (Maalouf, 1996). It would be more appropriate to view identity as a conglomerate of interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences. According to Holland et al. (1998),

People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities...Identities are the key means by which people care about and care for what is going on around them. Identities are hard-won standpoints that, however dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible (as cited in Perry, 2003, p. 93).

When "people tell others who they are," they are sharing their perceptions of others' identities.

When people tell themselves who they are and "act as though they are who they say they are" with "strong emotional resonance," identities are created. Identities are dependent upon social support and need to be maintained to create self-direction. As Perry indicates, individual and social identities involve actions, self-understandings, emotional understandings, social settings, and support. Identity is a constant and relentless negotiation between self and others. It is

developed and conditioned in sociocultural situations; context is everything. “That is, our sense of being a certain kind of person, and our functioning like a certain kind of person, might be more variable from one context to the next than we would think” (Steele, 2010, p. 79). Different contextual circumstances draw various identities to the surface of our functioning (i.e. academic performance vs. athletic performance). While identity cannot reliably be observed, it is human nature to deduce our internal sense of being from our external actions: “We can identify people by referring to or by reacting to their characteristics and behaviors, but in either case all social identification happens in practice” (Wortham, 2006, p. 30).

In the context of learning, identity can be viewed simultaneously as a) *individual* processes that involve agency and personal sense-making and as b) *social* processes deeply influenced by social context, norms, and interactions with others across the settings in which they exist (school, community, home, and sports; Nasir, 2012). Therefore, it is not simply what is learned, but how it is learned. For a learning identity to comfortably surface, individual agency and interactions with others must both be amenable to education. Wortham (2004) understands identity over time as based on both ontogenetic and sociohistorical categories in the local school context:

For example, being an “athlete,” being “good looking,” being a “good student,” and so on. Locally, in any classroom over an academic year, particular versions of social-historical categories are used to construe signs of identity among teachers and students. Being an “athlete” or a “good student” means different things in different classrooms and among different groups (p. 717).

That identity can mean “different things in different classrooms and among different groups” exposes its fluid nature. Some “signs of identity” are easily recognizable while others can lay dormant or inoperative until the conditions are ideal. Aronson (2002) illustrates how some

students can have more identities than the ones they exhibit in specific settings, such as in schools and athletic domains.

When conditions are unfertile, some identities may never be expressed (Adler & Adler, 1985) and may even atrophy. In school, this is deleterious for those students who never feel comfortable enough to express a learning identity or never fully develop a robust sense of self as a learner. Learning identities are empowering because “learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). Transforming one’s identity through learning moments is a lifelong developmental process. In this sense, we are regularly writing new narratives and cultural scripts for ourselves to follow: “Identities take shape as a part of a cultural process of becoming – a becoming that is guided by our ever-evolving sense of who we are and who we can be” (Nasir, 2012, p. 17). Culture and identity are inextricably linked, constantly changing, and unfinished. Over time, we begin to believe and ultimately influence the decisions we make. Hence, the identities we develop can be powerful influences on our daily and life functioning. Unfortunately, the antithesis is also true: “Identity threat – the subset of identity contingencies that actually threaten the person in some way – is a primary way by which an identity takes hold of us, in the sense of shaping how we function and even in telling us that we *have* a particular identity” (Steele, 2011, p. 71, emphasis added). Our behaviors shape our identities as much as our identities construct how we act in certain scenarios. In sum, a learning experience can influence the expressions and functions of one’s identities. When stereotypes make learning conditions improbable, identity threats can interfere with our natural developmental process. Interrupted identity growth can portend negative consequences: “For, indeed, in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity” (Erikson, 1968, p. 130).

Perception

Perceptions and identities are our lived experiences. How we choose to identify ourselves combined with how we think others perceive us shape how we interact with others and intra-act with ourselves. By nature, perceptions are intersubjective: “We know what ‘people could think’” (Steele, 2010, p. 5). Knowing what people could possibly think of us is sometimes enough to determine our subsequent thoughts and behaviors. From a developmental lens, perceptions of identity and sensitivity to how other view us is perhaps most salient during the late adolescent and young adult years (Erikson, 1968). Experiences filtered through one’s identity are ubiquitous in postsecondary environments when students transition into more independent roles and encounter a range of social situations (Haase & Silbereisen, 2010). Such social situations include interacting with people of different cultures and races. Perceptions and attitudes about one’s race are particularly salient during the college years and have been shown to influence an individual’s behavior (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000).

Racial attitudes are intrinsic to how learning is experienced in college:

The racial attitudes and perceptions that students bring with them to college help to define the general racial climate on campus, influencing the degree to which groups defined by society as “other” feel comfortable enough to enjoy the full range of experiences that college has to offer, things as basic as raising one’s hand to ask a question in class, approaching a professor for individualized attention, or feeling confident enough to discuss one’s performance openly and honestly with a professor (Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2003, p. 133).

The presence of racial attitudes and perceptions are mental projections of other people’s identities. When these internal projections enter the air/climate, they are powerful enough to make one feel uncomfortable to perform basic tasks like “raising one’s hand to ask a question in class.” Given this climate, it is plausible for Black students to feel a “burden of suspicion, to feel at risk of confirming stereotypes through their behavior, and to wonder if they belong in

environments where academic ability is prized” (Aronson, 2002, p. 282). In sum, perceptions of identities in the presence of racial attitudes and stereotypes influence the performance of “others.” When perceptions convey negative expectations, they can play a significant role in undermining the achievement of students who are beholden to these perceptions about how others perceive them.

Stereotype Threat

Philosophically, identity and perception interact on individual and social planes. Identities and perceptions are imperceptible yet they exist everywhere, especially in learning spaces. When both self-identity and others’ perception are positive and capable of expanding, intellectual growth is fertile. But what would happen to that same intellectual potential if antagonistic perceptions interrupt a student’s sense of self? “Could something as abstract as stereotype threat really affect something as irrepensible as intelligence?” (Steele, 2003, p. 113). This is the essence of Steele’s seminal work on stereotype threat. His groundbreaking research traces the applications of belongingness, perception, and identity as they influence individual attitude and performance. Because individual thoughts and behaviors are fundamental in areas outside of social psychology paradigms, stereotype threat research is present in other domains such as law, business, and medicine. Kang’s (2005) article “Trojan Horses of Race” in the *Harvard Law Review* cites Steele’s research and applies our implicit biases to broadcast policies of the Federal Communications Commission in regards to the racial portrayal of violence. Steele has also extended his research into business to prove how stereotype threat affects financial decision-making (Carr & Steele, 2010). Researchers in medicine also adapt stereotype threat to seek answers to their field’s questions, e.g. “Does stereotype threat affect women in academic medicine?” (Burgess, Joseph, van Ryn, & Carnes, 2012)

What is the significance of operationalizing the abstract concept of stereotype threat? North American culture is a meritocratic one; that is, one in which power is afforded to those who achieve early in their lives. The common contingency is that if an individual works hard, they will be rewarded accordingly. Thus, the assumption is that if an individual has not achieved rewards, then she or he has not worked hard enough. This mantra resembles patriotic faith in the American ladder to success. Stereotype threat challenges the core of this idea by providing a counternarrative:

Ours is an individualistic culture; forward movement is seen to come from within. Against this cultural faith one needs evidence to argue that something as “sociological” as stereotype threat can repress something as “individualistic” as intelligence (Steele, 2003, p. 113).

Stereotype threat provides incontrovertible evidence that intelligence does not result from one person’s efforts to learn. Invisible social perceptions and expectations permeate the air in learning environments to populate individual thoughts and behaviors. As evidence, researchers have demonstrated that when negative stereotypes are activated, Black Americans perform worse on tasks described as assessing intelligence (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995) while White Americans perform worse on tasks described as assessing natural athletic ability (e.g., Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling & Darley, 1999). It seems that the key to unlocking forward movement is identifying all possible barriers to learning and performances, whether they be individual or social in nature. While there has been relatively little exploratory research on coping and compensatory strategies that individuals spontaneously employ (Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007), more than 100 articles have established stereotype threat as a real and widely accepted phenomenon.

One of the crucial tenets of stereotype threat is that targets do not need to interact with a biased individual for negative stereotypes to have a powerful debilitating effect on behavior

(Harrison et al., 2009); it can merely be present in the climate of a particular environment, such as college. The increased concern to perform adds an additional psychological burden to the task, thus undermining an individual's ability to operate at their fullest potential. The internalization of negative images can potentially damage character when it causes low self-esteem, low expectations, low motivation, and self-doubt (Steele, 2011). Stereotype threat captures the idea of a situational predicament as a contingency of one's group identity, a real threat of judgment or treatment in the person's environment that goes beyond any limitations within. In other words, it is an intersubjective hypothesis about how one *could* be seen. Steele's fundamental idea is that one's environment has a direct effect on performance. In the midst of what others *might* think, mental capacity for optimal performance is diverted and performance decreases, precipitating the cyclical effects of self-stereotyping (Harrison et al., 2002).

Following the Law of Common Fate in Gestalt psychology, people tend to group similar objects together that share a common motion or destination. When that object is a person, we can either see that individual as a member of a group or in opposition to a group. The group is presumably important when people are involved: "Here, surely, is a clear illustration of a basic sociological theme: the nature of an individual, as he himself and we impute it to him, is generated by the nature of his group affiliations" (Goffman, 1963, p. 113). Simply put, individuals reflect their social groups. In the context of school, students are constantly grouping and being grouped by others. When this healthy exploration is accompanied by a stereotype, individual identities can be consumed by larger negative group identities:

The extent to which students believe that what happens to other members of their own group affects them – their sense of sharing a *common fate* with their ingroup – may also influence academic performance in important ways, affecting the susceptibility of minority students to either oppositional subcultures or stereotype threat (Massey et al., 2003, p. 135, emphasis added).

In the context of the task, the identity of the individual can be supplanted by a stronger negative group identity: My group underperforms → I am a member of that group → I will be perceived to underperform. If $a = b$, and $b = c$, then $a = c$. This if-then logic creates the identity contingencies that create situational predicaments and can undermine individual performance.

Another exploitation of stereotype grouping is identity misclassification. This phenomenon can happen when one performs role-violating behavior and is then mistaken for a member of a stigmatized outgroup. This concept of ingroups and outgroups based on stigmatized behavior places an additional onus on the individual to corroborate the perception of their behavior: “Because false stigmatization raises the possibility of interpersonal punishment, role violators who wish to avoid it must communicate their non-stigmatized status to others” (Prewitt-Freilino & Bosson, 2008). Failure to communicate a non-stigmatized status to others can induce interpersonal punishment, which consists of negative evaluations, social isolation, and rejection. Misclassified individuals may face temporary interpersonal threats while those who openly identify as members of socially stigmatized groups face chronic threats to their fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Crocker et al., 1998).

Stereotype threat is inherent in certain situations associated with negative stereotypes (Rosenthal & Crisp, 2006). Repeated exposure to images of Blacks as aggressive and intellectually inferior causes these images to be internalized, or, implicitly accepted as true of the group, and tragically, also perhaps of one’s self (Fanon, 1952; Steele, 2011). Researchers propose that in some academic situations, stereotypes about student-athletes distort perceptions of individual performance, and in other situations, just the mere salience of the stereotypes has the potential to undermine their best performance efforts in the classroom (Martin, Harrison, Stone & Lawrence, 2010). Documentation of long-term psychological consequences of chronic

stereotype threat includes domain disidentification and domain abandonment. Domain disidentification posits that over time, members of stereotyped groups will progressively devalue their performance in the stereotyped domain (Steele, 1997). Virulent patterns can emerge if stereotype threats trigger repeated instances of defensive disengagement to protect one's self. Such a downward spiral can end with domain abandonment when self-worth is no longer associated with performance in the domain (Woodcock, Hernandez, Estrada, & Schultz, 2012). For example, a Black student-athlete may disidentify with academic performance for so long that over time, he no longer values intellectual achievement. Black male student-athletes occupy a complex mix of historically socially stigmatized groups as students of racial and intellectual minorities in college. Black male students at a PWI may seek to have an individual identity but must understand that it is not entirely independent of their in-group racial identity. Additionally, these Black student-athletes must employ self-protective strategies if they internalize group-based stigmatization in areas where they underperform.

The Character of Racial Stereotypes of Black Student-Athletes

Notable sociologist Harry Edwards argues that “dumb jocks” are not born; they are created (Edwards, 1984). There is some evidence to suggest that the dumb jock stereotype is *perceived* to be a more accurate description of college athletes who compete in revenue sports (e.g., football and men's basketball) than of athletes who compete in nonrevenue sports (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). “The perception is that in order to remain eligible and participate in sports they put in minimum effort, do little academic work, take easy classes and have others do their work for them” (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007, p. 251). This perception has only been exasperated and propagated in media, television, and film. Media attention has publicly challenged the scholarship of college athletes, particularly in revenue generating sports.

Reports of high school student-athletes not meeting NCAA minimum academic standards to establish college eligibility, accounts of college student-athletes failing their courses, and the particularly low graduation rates among major college basketball and football programs foster the belief that anti-intellectualism exists among college student-athletes (Sailes, 1993).

Concurrently, Hollywood movies perpetuate and profit from the dumb jock caricature, facilitating the acceptance of its images among the American public [e.g., *The Freshman* (1925), *Horse Feathers* (1932), *Good News* (1947), *The Longest Yard* (1974, 2005), *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Lucas* (1986), *The Program* (1993), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Happy Gilmore* (1996), *The Waterboy* (1998), *Varsity Blues* (1999), *The Replacements* (2000), *Remember the Titans* (2000), *Love and Basketball* (2000), *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001), *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (2004), *The Perfect Score* (2004), *Friday Night Lights* (2004), *Kicking & Screaming* (2005), *Coach Carter* (2005), *The Benchwarmers* (2006), *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006), *Blades of Glory* (2007), *Freedom Writers* (2007), *Semi-Pro* (2008), *The Blindside* (2009), *42* (2013)]. Further, these caricatures recapitulate the mythical belief that there is an ideal person:

For example, in an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America; a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports (Goffman, 1963, p. 128).

The belief that 1) all people are subject to stereotype threat and 2) one set of people are exempt is both spurious and miasmatic.

From the generic dumb jock stereotypes have emerged more elaborate and insidious tropes about Black male athletes. Lingering stereotypic beliefs about this historically stigmatized group depict Blacks as athletically superior while intellectually inferior to Whites (Coakley, 1990; Harrison, 2001; Harrison et al., 2002; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Hodge et al., 2008;

Sailes, 1991; Wiggins, 1989). This may be due to race logic, which suggests that White athletes' success in sports can be ascribed to intellectual attributes and hard work, whereas Black athletes' success results from natural superior physical abilities. While these stereotype scripts have a less serious effect on White athletes, they can have a compounding, negative effect on Black athletes (Sailes, 1993). As Black youth rarely encounter Black intellectuals (Hodge et al., 2008), they frequently look to role models in sports and entertainment careers (Taylor, 2000).

Empirical Evidence for Racial Stereotypes of Student-Athletes

By nature, racial stereotypes do not exist without groups that subscribe to those sets of beliefs and groups who sustain them. One study administered a fixed alternative questionnaire to 869 graduate and undergraduate students to investigate campus stereotypes (Sailes, 1993). The findings indicated that White and male students believed that athletes were not as intelligent as the typical college student, that they took easy courses to maintain their eligibility, that Black athletes were not academically prepared to attend college, were not as intelligent, did not receive as high grades as White athletes, and were generally temperamental. In the same study, Black and female students believed that Black athletes were more competitive and had a different playing style than White athletes. People who subscribe to stereotypes do not always have contact with the people that they hold inferior beliefs about. In the above study, the author notes that it is reasonable to assume the White subjects had minimal contact with Black athletes, which might account, to some extent, for the prevalence of their stereotypical attitudes. Interestingly, the same groups who believed college student-athletes were not as smart as the typical college student also felt Black athletes were less intelligent than their White counterparts. Thus, it is not a large leap from sport stereotyping to racial stereotyping in the absence of interaction with subjects of these myths.

Other researchers have explored the relationship between race and athletic identity using only an athletic identity measurement scale such as the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). Results from one study indicated that Black football student-athletes had a stronger athletic identity compared to their White counterparts, were more internally focused on their sport, felt that others perceived them only as athletes, and saw sport as the focal point in their lives (Harrison, Sailes, Rotich & Bimper, 2011). Inflated athletic identity can have negative consequences if it eclipses coexisting identities because it would magnify prevailing stereotypical views. If the level of athletic identity is too high, one may experience serious difficulties when that engagement is severed, especially when it is due to injury (Brewer, Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Intensity of focus on athletic pursuits can often sacrifice other sources of identity and neglect other sources of self-fulfillment (Webb, Nasco, Riley & Headrick, 1998). It is especially detrimental when Black students sacrifice racial identity development for the sake of athletic achievements. In a study investigating racial differences toward discrimination in athletics, Brown et al. (2003) reported that Black student-athletes who strongly identified with athletics reported low levels of racial centrality. In contrast, White student-athletes who strongly identified with athletics reported high levels of racial centrality. Here, athletic identity dampened racial identity for Black student-athletes while the same for White student-athletes was not true.

Research suggests that Black college athletes are acutely aware of how their racial identity can add an additional burden to their experience as students on campus. For example, some Black students noted that their PWI had racist elements, pointing out the racial organization and systemic racism of the institution (Martin et al., 2010; Sailes, 1996). Black student-athletes face a great risk for poor college adjustment based on their membership in multiple at-risk groups (Killeya, 2001), by belonging to a racial/ethnic minority group, by being a student-athlete, and

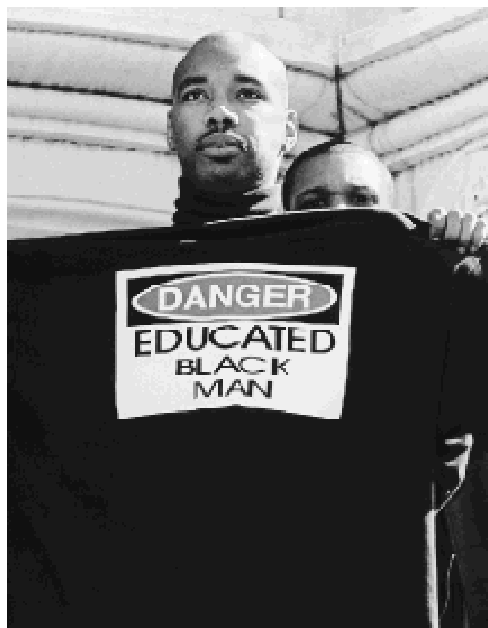


Photo by Rick Reinhard

by participating in football or men's basketball (Steinfeldt, Reed & Steinfeldt, 2009). Black student-athletes who are required to assimilate into predominantly White environments could run into problems that negatively affect one's self-concept (Brown, 2001) and force them to expend cognitive and affective energy in this process while their peers can allocate energy elsewhere (Steinfeldt, Reed & Steinfeldt, 2009).

Four themes emerged from a phenomenological study of Black male student-athlete experiences in the Pac-Ten Division I NCAA institution: "I Had to Prove I'm Worthy," "I'm a Perceived Threat to Society," "It's About Time Management," and "It's About Pride and Hard Work" (Martin et al., 2010). The need to prove academic worth was compounded by the participants' feelings of having a dual disadvantage – on one hand, they felt that they were considered academically incapable because they were Black male students; on the other hand, the participants also described the drawbacks of being an athlete: "I'm penalized twice, because I'm both a Black male on campus and I'm an athlete. I feel that I have to work twice as hard as some of my White teammates" (Martin et al., 2010, p. 138). This narrative reveals the internalization of a double penalty for belonging to two marginalized groups in higher education.

Images and media play a critical role in creating the basis for stereotype threat (Bogle, 2001; McDonald, 2010). Oseguera (2010) examined the extent to which images, positive and negative, affected Black student-athlete's academic experience on college campuses. Participants were selected not only because of their success in their respective sport but more importantly,

because they demonstrated success in the classroom. Even though the participants were accomplished students, all had experienced attacks on their intellect from a variety of college personnel including faculty, academic counselors, classmates, and teammates. The authors reported that these students felt attacks were consequences of the negative images of Black student-athletes and nothing they had personally created for themselves. The three recurrent themes directed at an athlete's academic identity and capabilities that emerged included: (1) Black student-athletes as academic frauds; (2) Black student-athletes as intellectually challenged; and (3) Black student-athletes more aptly treated as athlete-students (Oseguera, 2010). The data from this study reveals how stereotype threat is socially categorized into three dominant images of Black student-athletes in college despite their academic success in the classroom. Schools play an important role in the social construction of Black male stereotypes when they are saturated with images of a dominant narrative: "Not only does the reinforcement of physical ability over intellectual capability diminish the potential of young Black men, but it also perpetuates the myth that the road to success is paved with sports contracts, not diplomas" (Taylor, 1999, p. 75). One purpose of this dissertation is to understand the roles that schools play in reinforcing stereotype threat in order to affect large-scale change.

Cognitive & Affective Factors Exacerbated by Stereotype Threat

How do negative beliefs and stereotype threats reduce skill executions and performances among members of a stereotyped group? Existing research suggests that the poor performance in identity threat situations is partially mediated by thoughts about stigma and self-doubt (Steele & Aronson, 1995), higher levels of anxiety (Aronson et al., 1999), misclassification (Bosson et al., 2004; Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino & Taylor, 2005), increases in blood pressure (Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn & Steele, 2001) and through its impact on working memory (Beilock, Jellison,

Rydell, McConnell & Carr, 2006; Schmader & Johns, 2003). In addition, stereotype threat may contribute to inflexible perseverance, thus inhibiting an individual from abandoning an old strategy to generate a new response (Carr & Steele, 2009). The finite cognitive resources used to develop new responses are instead reallocated to suppressing stereotype threats.

Steele noted, “The brain is the most malleable organ in the body. It physically responds to experience and context” (personal communication, May 25, 2013). Working memory, one of the brain’s means of responding to experience and context, is defined as the ability to hold information in mind while performing complex tasks (Dawson & Guare, 2004). To extrapolate the strain on working memory, one study found that when stigma was activated for Black students, their self-control was impaired in the domains of attentional and physical self-regulation (Inzlicht, McKay, & Aronson, 2006). The results of this study suggest that stigma creates ego depletion and coping with it can weaken the ability to control and regulate one’s behaviors in domains unrelated to the induced stigma. Steele (2011) explains the physiological effects on general cognition and affect:

It’s this: stereotype and identity threats – these contingencies of identity – increase vigilance toward possible threat and bad consequences in the social environment, which diverts attention and mental capacity away from the task at hand, which worsens performance and general functioning, all of which further exacerbates anxiety, which further intensifies the vigilance for threat and the diversion of attention. A full-scale vicious cycle ensues, with great cost to performance and general functioning (p. 126).

When the internal structure of working memory, self-doubt, anxiety, and blood pressure are compromised, it follows that external performances have a greater likelihood of suffering.

Neurologically, the brain’s abilities to make good decisions and perform complex tasks are compromised by stereotype threat. Student-athletes greatly rely on their dexterity to make good judgment calls and perform intricate tasks in both sports and academics. Working memory capacities can be further diminished as the brain reacts to stereotype threat in addition to pre-

existing neuropsychological conditions. Attention-Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and sport-related concussions are two pertinent examples of neuropsychological conditions that exacerbate attenuated working memory capacity. Football players lead tackles with their head and shoulders, landing a substantial number of top-front impacts between 20G-80G (Breedlove et al., 2012; Talavage et al., 2010). As a result, the frontal lobe of the brain is susceptible to damage. Estimated to occupy 25-33% of the brain, each area in the frontal lobe has architectural specificity and connectivity with non-frontal regions (Stuss, 2011). These lobes house the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that houses the working memory architecture (Berninger et al., 2006; Kane & Engle, 2002). One functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study in male athletes post concussion showed poorer reduced task-related activation of the prefrontal cortex while performing a probe-recognition task (Chen, Johnson, Collie, McCrory & Ptito, 2007). Higher-level executive functions are also affected, such as shifting attention (cognitive and behavioral flexibility), dual task processing, and divided attention (Mateer, Kerns & Eso, 1996). Frontal lobe damage can result in cognitive deficits that include (but are not limited to) problems of attention, motor control, spatial orientation, short-term memory, temporal and source memory, metamemory, associative learning, creativity, perseveration, and reasoning (Fuster, 1988). Damage can also have negative affective consequences, such as irritability, clinical depression, anxiety, and impulsivity (Broshek & Freeman, 2005; Guskiewicz et al., 2007; Kontos, Covassin, Elbin, & Parker, 2012). These deficits are a function of both capacity and complexity (Beers, Goldstein & Katz, 1994).

Disorders such as ADHD are likely to increase student-athletes for risk of sport-related concussion (Harmon et al., 2013). ADHD is characterized as a deficit in executive functioning, which involves analyzing a task, planning how to address the task, organizing the steps needed to

carry out the task, developing timelines for completing the task, and completing the task in a timely way (Barkley, 1997). It is clear that executive functioning deficits can lead to difficulties in the context of academics if appropriate supports are not in place (Richeson & Shelton, 2003). ADHD may even be more prevalent in athletes than in the general population (Escalona et al., 2010) because those with ADHD may be drawn to fast-paced and stimulating physical activities (Barkley, 1998; Burton, 2000). The distribution of ADHD tends to vary by sport, with the highest levels seen in football at 17.5% (Heil, Hartman, Robinson, & Teegarden, 2002). Males with ADHD are often prone to an impulsive style of play, which is hypothesized to put them at a higher risk for concussion (DiScala, Lescohier, Barthel, & Li, 1998; Escalona et al., 2010). Theoretically, these players would be attracted to positions that benefit from spontaneous or unpredictable play (e.g., running backs) and may struggle in positions that require austere focus (e.g., a defensive player that needs to stay in a certain physical zone) (Escalona et al., 2010). Thus, playing football places a strain on working memory capacities, a necessary brain function for diffusing stereotype threat.

“Choking under pressure” literature comprises a body of work that explores unwanted skill failure. Distraction theory (Beilock & Carr, 2005) proposes that pressure creates a distracting environment that shifts attentional focus to task-irrelevant cues, such as worries about the situation and its consequences. This suggests that pressure-packed situations induce distracting thoughts and worries that compete for the finite working memory capacity needed for optimum task execution. In essence, negative thoughts and worries about the situation and its outcome utilize the resources that were once solely available to devote to the demanding task at hand and as a result, poor performance ensues (Beilock, Jellison, Rydell, McConnell & Carr, 2006). Explicit monitoring theory (Baumeister, 1984) also accounts for choking. Under pressure,

a person realizes consciously that it is important to execute behavior correctly. Consciousness attempts to ensure the correctness of this execution by monitoring the process of performance (e.g., the coordination and precision of muscle movements); but consciousness does not contain the knowledge of these skills, so that it ironically reduces the reliability and success of the performance when it attempts to control it (Baumeister, 1984). Stereotype threat can therefore be understood as exerting at least two different effects: “it populates working memory with worries and it entices the performer to try to pay more attention to step-by-step control, resulting in a double whammy” (Beilock et al., 2006, p. 1062).

In addition to cognitive diminishment, the pressure to perform at an expected level of excellence can lead to emotional problems (i.e. a triple whammy). Student-athletes enjoy varying degrees of social status on the college campus and across the nation, whether in person or through social media. For many, identity is clearly tied to sport, especially when athletic status carries with it respect, a response of adoration, and hero worship from peers. However, when this happens, student-athletes pay the price for this status: “The hero’s emotional pain can only be experienced; it cannot be evident to others because a vulnerable image is not in harmony with the persona projected” (Pinkerton, Hinz & Barrow, 1989). A corollary of a hero’s emotional pain is the threat of disappointment or disavowal from heroism if the invincible image is not maintained. Failure to maintain this image can have resounding effects. Whereas many failures of nonathletes remain invisible from the campus community, local news, and national television networks, student-athletes are often treated as celebrities in these domains. The lionization of college athletes brings a scopophilic magnifying glass to diminished performance in stereotype threat situations.

Similar to the way individuals in targeted groups are not always conscious of being stereotyped, subscribers are not always aware that they are sustaining stereotypes. Stereotypical views may operate without conscious activation (Jones, 1998). This makes it difficult for targeted individuals to engage with those who are not conscious that they hold a stereotypic view. “Disproving a stereotype is a Sisyphean task; something you have to do over and over again as long as you are in the domain where the stereotype applies” (Steele, 2010, p. 111). If and/or when faculty, coaches, and other professionals knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate stereotypic beliefs about athletic superiority and intellectual inferiority as a function of race, they do harm to the minds of impressionable youth in their charge (Hodge et al., 2008). In educational contexts, Black males may resign to academic disassociation as a relief from continuously proving stereotypes wrong.

Negative Impact of Stereotype Threat on Black Student-Athletes

Stereotype threat can potentially hinder academic performance cognitively and emotionally. The transition to college itself is a stressful phase, especially for members of stigmatized groups who enter a climate where their social identities are perceived to contrast with the ideologies of the institution (Sidanius, Levin, van Laar, & Sear, 2008). Steele (1997) reported that when Black students are continually faced with the threat of being judged or viewed as being academically incapable, they might increasingly devalue school performance. Some documented maladaptive coping mechanisms for Black students include self-defeating defenses such as self-handicapping, avoidance of challenge, self-suppression, disidentification, and fixed beliefs of intelligence (Aronson, 2002). Sensitivity to stereotype threat could lead to the development of fixed beliefs of intelligence, eliminating the necessary flexibility of learning for Black students.

It matters whether people believe that their core qualities are built in and fixed by nature (an *entity theory* or *fixed mindset*) or whether they believe that their qualities can be developed through nurture and their own persistent efforts (an *incremental theory* or *growth mindset*). It matters a great deal (Dweck, 2010, p. 614).

These mindsets matter because they have been shown to make a difference in academic success (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002). Whether a Black student-athlete is aware of their beliefs or not, fixed mindset can hinder their ability to diffuse stereotype threat, engage with learning, and perform academically.

Perhaps the maladaptive coping mechanism with the most pronounced public health implications is John Henryism, a synonym for high-effort coping with difficult psychosocial environmental stressors using hard work and sheer determination (James, 1994). Such high-effort coping mechanisms expend considerable cognitive and emotional energy when confronting race-based stressors; individuals work twice as hard to get half as far. Black men are high-risk targets of John Henryism with untoward consequences. This coping mechanism is hypothetically related to stress-related health decline, hypertension, and premature death that affect Black men disproportionately in the United States (Bonham, Sellers, & Neighbors, 2004). Stone et al. (1999) found that any situational cue that makes race salient prior to performance in a stereotype-relevant domain – and, specifically, makes race and intelligence salient – has the potential to adversely affect the performance by Blacks in that domain. They also found that stereotype threat impedes performance because the threat of confirming a negative stereotype about one's racial identity creates anxiety and self-doubt in the targeted individual. It is important to note that stereotype threat is not about conforming to the ideals of what an individual perceives as their salient social identity; rather, the salient feature of stereotype threat is the “apprehension and diminished cognitive performance that may be created by the suspicion about how one is viewed by *others*” (Dee, 2014, p. 175). It should be emphasized that the mere

suspicion of stereotype threat is enough to affect performance. If invalidating a stereotype threat is accompanied by increased effort and anxiety (e.g., an “I’ll show *you*” John Henry response), the result may be counterproductive and detrimental. Aronson (2002) notes, “On difficult standardized tests, as with brain surgery, free-throw shooting, or chess, a sort of relaxed concentration is critical, and anything that compounds performance pressure is likely to be a handicap” (p. 284). Sacrificing relaxed concentration for the sake of proving stereotypes wrong is not only an ineffective mechanism, it potentially yields counter-indicated results.

At elite post-secondary institutions, negative stigmas compel student-athletes to wonder whether they perceive their intellectual effort as a substitute or a complement to their intellectual ability. Results from Dee’s (2014) experimental design found that the academic stigma associated with being a student-athlete at a highly selective college or university makes a substantial contribution to their academic underperformance, particularly for males. Stone et al. (1999) found that the people most negatively affected by the threat of conforming to a negative stereotype are those whose sense of self-worth is connected to the outcome of their performance in the stereotype threatened domain. It follows then that when targeted individuals are psychologically disengaged from performance in the stereotyped domain, reminders of their membership in the stigmatized group do not impair their performance. However, developing a callous stance towards the previously stereotyped-threatened domain may also serve to undermine performance in that context but in a different way.

Ironically, the label of “student-athlete” itself can present a stereotype threat cue. Rather than serving to self-affirm a positive connection between scholastic and athletic identities, the label of scholar-athlete has the potential to increase the accessibility or strength of the imbalanced propositional relationship between their athletic identity, personal achievement

goals, and the dumb-jock stereotype, and this could have a devastating effect on their performance of college athletes in the classroom (Stone, Harrison & Mottley, 2012). It is argued that many student-athletes are personally ostracized on the college campus or, at best, misunderstood (Pinkerton, Hinz & Barrow, 1989). Remer, Tongate, and Watson (1978) noted:

Athletes are trapped in a self-perpetuating system set in motion early in their lives...They have a special commodity that separates them from the rest of the [college] population – athletic talent. Unfortunately, while they benefit from the special attention, they are also blocked from “normal” development by being segregated, even if they don’t realize it (p. 628).

Accordingly, student-athletes may not be conscious of the barriers to their “normal” development. Even variations of the student-athlete label can induce stereotype threat. Priming Black student-athletes for their identity as a “scholar-athlete” has even led to underperformance on standardized intelligence tests (Harrison et al., 2009; Stone et al., 2012). Interestingly, lower scores on difficult items of a GRE test segment such as verbal reasoning reveal the pervasiveness of stereotype threat into basic constructivist skills, a recognizable indicator of diminished cognitive and emotional resources.

When compared to similarly engaged White college athletes, Black student-athletes underperformed not only on the difficult test items but also on the easier items (Harrison et al., 2009). These researchers postulated that the critical issue underlying these effects is that threat is more likely to impact performance when targets perceive the task to be challenging. This finding is of note because it illuminates the moments where Black and White student-athlete academic performance is differentiated. Instead of believing that Black student-athletes who are academically engaged are completely incapable of performing, this data exposes a threshold of a perceived challenge. When this threshold is reached, White student-athletes retain their cognitive and emotional resources while these same resources in working memory are reallocated for

Black student-athletes into negative beliefs about their racial group. Notwithstanding the importance of this research, there is paucity of studies examining the impact of Black male student-athletes experience with stereotype threat in the context.

Coping Mechanisms for Mitigating Stereotype Threat

Since Steele's foundational documentation of stereotype threat in 1997, researchers have operationalized different ways to reduce its deleterious effects. One method to reduce the impact of stereotype threat is grounded in Steele's (1988) earlier work on self-affirmation theory. According to this theory, a primary source of human motivation is rooted in achieving and maintaining self-integrity and a sense of self-worth. To test the efficacy of self-affirmation theory, Martens, Johns, Greenberg, & Schimel (2006) found that instructing female participants to write about why their most valued characteristic was personally important mitigated an induced stereotype threat. Group affirmation (affirming an important group value) demonstrates how athletes can use their team as a positive resource in response to threatening events (Sherman, Kinias, Major, Kim, & Prenovost, 2007). Other strategies that moderate the effects of stereotypes include priming female participants to write a 5-minute essay about an experience when they felt powerful (Van Loo & Rydell, 2013), internalized racial identity status attitudes (Davis, Aronson, & Salinas, 2006), thought substitution (Logel, Iserman, Davies, Quinn, & Spencer, 2009), and denying the accuracy of the stereotype or its self-relevance (von Hippel et al., 2005). There are other applications of strategies to offset stereotype threat pertaining to the workplace that consist of providing managers with practices for neutralizing stereotypes, such as associating the complexity of a task with the task itself instead of the abilities of the subjects (Flanagan & Green, 2011).

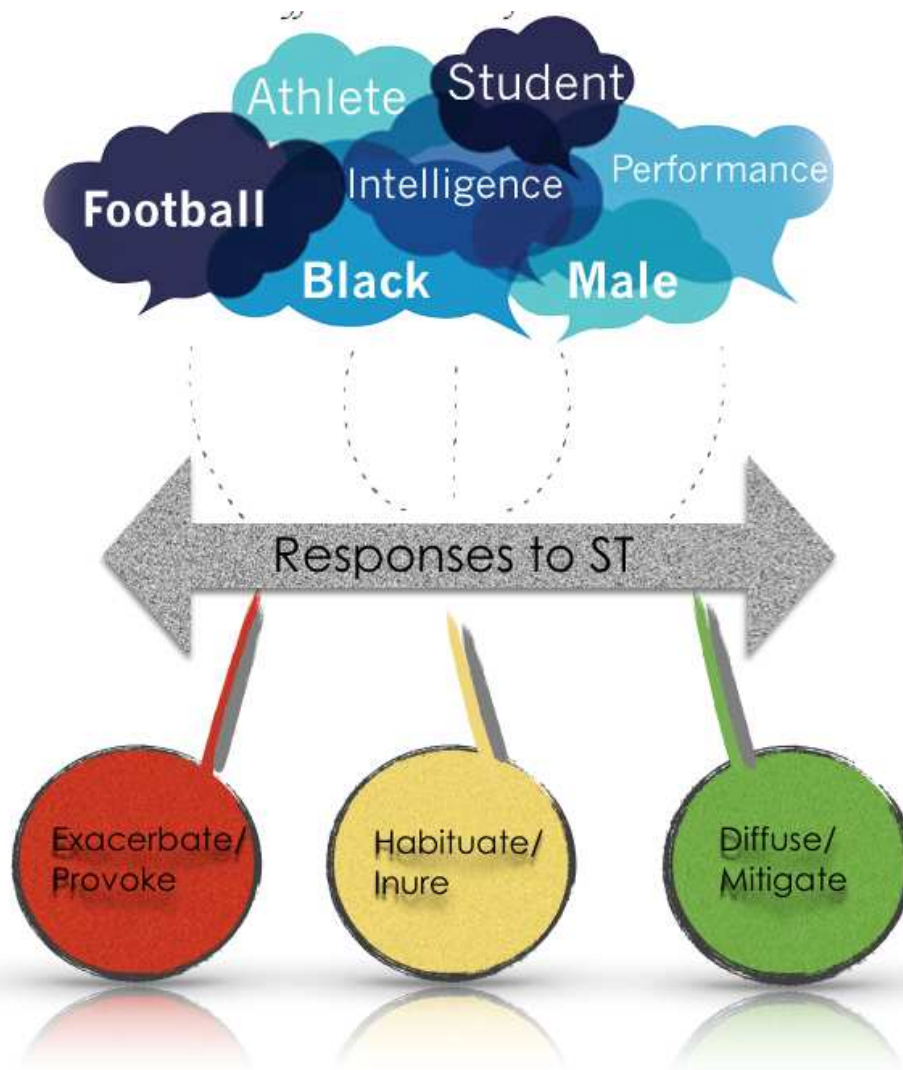
Asking participants to list characteristics shared between the ingroup and outgroup could reduce intergroup bias (Crisp & Beck, 2005), creating a category overlap that can reduce the salience of stereotype threat (Rosenthal & Crisp, 2006). Conversely, performance boost and self-confidence can occur when individuals are provided with explicit downward social comparison with a devalued outgroup (Chalabaev, Stone, Sarrazin, & Croizet, 2008). Positive role models, whether physically present or not, have been shown to moderate stereotype threat (Marx & Roman, 2002).

Perhaps the most practical intervention is informing individuals about stereotype threat to reduce its detrimental effects (Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005) through dialogue. Non-confrontational, stealthy interventions can attempt to empower students by reframing the threat as a challenge that can be managed with adaptive stress-coping mechanisms (Alter, Aronson, Darley, Rodriguez, & Ruble, 2010; Forbes & Schmader, 2010). This may be the most feasible coping mechanism to transfer to the field of athletics since sports inherently demands adaption to challenges.

Conceptual Framework

Stereotype threat is like “the experience of living under such a cloud – an experience we all have – and the role such clouds play in shaping our lives and society” (Steele, 2010, p. 7). Based on the previous literature, there are many different responses to stereotype threat. Overall, there seem to be responses that either exacerbate or mitigate stereotype situations. The literature informs the development of this conceptual model that was used to aide the qualitative interviews, particularly as it relates to the examination of coping mechanism. A third category of responses emerged from the current data in which student-athletes habituate or become inured to

the presence of stereotype threat. In this way, they neither provoke or diffuse situations and thus, do not fit into the prior two categories.



Purpose of the Dissertation Study

The reviewed literature has been helpful in establishing the presence and effect of stereotype threat for Black male football players in college. Most studies prime the identity of participants before they test the effect of stereotype threats. The purpose of this study is not to prime or measure stereotype threat. Rather, it is to expand the little research that explores how

Black male student-athletes cope or attempt to spontaneously handle incidents of stereotype threat. There is still considerable room to document how Black football players negotiate stereotype threat cues in college. The current research applies the previous literature to investigate the nuances of how Black football players naturally cope with stereotype threat at a PWI. This original work contributes to the chronicles of Black male student-athletes' experiences. Furthermore, the resulting data provides a look into potential interventions to alter aspects of collegiate settings and empower Black male student-athletes to reduce stereotype threat.

Research Questions

The following questions will guide this phenomenological study:

1. How do Black male football players experience and engage with stereotype threat at a predominantly White institution?
2. What positive coping mechanisms are Black student-athletes currently using to mitigate stereotype threat?
3. Do Black football players with higher academic identity have better coping strategies than those with higher athletic identity?

Hypothesis

Existing research supports the plausibility that student-athletes, particularly Black males, who hold negative stereotypic beliefs about their intelligence can lower self-expectations in academic contexts (Steele & Aaronson, 1995; Stone et al., 1999). Thus, it is important that academic faculty, coaches, academic advisors, and support personnel understand how race-sport stereotypes can influence the aspirations of youth toward or away from various athletic pursuits at the expense of their academic success (Hodge et al., 2008). Stone et al., (1999) suggest that

when stigmatized individuals are highly invested in a performance domain, cues that directly activate an imbalance between their group identity, personal performance goals, and the negative group stereotype can consume the cognitive and emotional resources they need to demonstrate their true potential. The AIMS and AIMI seek to capture the length to which student-athletes in this study identify self-worth and performance value with athletics and academics. Cues that link athletic identity to an academic performance should cause more stereotype threat among Black college athletes who are psychologically engaged in their performance rather than those who are disengaged in the classroom (Stone et al., 2012). Could Black football players with higher academic identity have better coping strategies than those with higher athletic identity?

The current research is imperative since “it may also be informative to interview groups who face negative stereotypes in efforts to understand some of the strategies and how certain populations cope with negative perceptions” (Martin et al., 2010, p. 132) to shed light on an important source of bias in American higher education. It is hypothesized that the threat of being perceived as having neurocognitive deficits would increase athletic identity over academic identity, causing student-athletes to underperform academically.

Chapter 3: Methodology

“Stereotypes of a Black male misunderstood
And it’s still all good.”
-Biggie Smalls

Participants and Setting

Participants were 10 males who played football for the University of Washington. Criterion sampling was employed (Patton, 2002) since all participants needed to meet the criterion of self-identification as a Black male. Additional selection criteria were used to recruit participants, including current status as part-time or full-time student at the University of Washington Seattle (UW) and ability to participate in interviews at a location on campus. According to the US News & World Report, UW is ranked 16 in the top public schools of 2014 with over 28,000 enrolled undergraduates. It is a member institution of the Pac-12 conference in the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision. UW has won four national championships recognized by the NCAA. Student-athletes were recruited through Department of Intercollegiate Athletics. Participant class standing was as follows: 2 freshmen, 1 sophomore, 2 juniors, and 5 seniors. Mean age was 20.7 years and undergraduate majors varied within the humanities and social sciences. Participants were enrolled sequentially into the study and all completed an informed consent document approved by the institutional review board of the University of Washington. As part of the consenting process, participants were told that participation was completely voluntary and they could discontinue participation at any time.

Research Design and Procedures

The current study employed a qualitative research design to enable the collection of data that permitted the examination of identity and perception from the perspective of the study participants. Borrowed from the field of sociology, this study grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss,

1967) was used to inform the qualitative data collection and analyses, which focuses on theory building over hypothesis testing. Applying grounded theory as the underlying analytical framework, findings were categorized around distinct response patterns that emerged from the data. Grounded theory also provided a mechanism for generating more nuanced, substantive theory, which has a specificity and hence usefulness to practice (i.e., perceptions of stereotypes to Black male undergraduate athletes) which is often lacking in theories that cover more global concerns. Finally, for the purposes of this study, grounded theory was particularly useful for investigating questions about process, that is, how a phenomenon changes over time (Merriam, 2009), and, thus was appropriate for addressing the implications of each research question. Through the collection of survey and interview data, my primary aim was to obtain an insider's perspective of the psychosocial experiences of this group of student-athletes. In addition, given the nature, breadth, and complexity of the experiences shared by the individuals (Melendez, 2008), grounded theory provided systematic procedures for data collection, analysis, and theory building that supported further conceptualization and insight regarding coping mechanism employed by the student-athletes in response to negative perceptions of their environment. To this end, the grounded theory approach allowed for three phases of coding – open (e.g., inductive data reduction), axial (e.g., assembling data and connecting categories), and selective (e.g., deducing the core category) – in order to arrive at a core phenomenological experience related to the research questions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Before student-athletes were recruited, the primary investigator obtained permission to conduct the study from the Associate Athletic Director for Student Development. After approval was obtained, a flyer was sent to the Assistant Director for Learning Resources in Student Athlete Academic Services. The flyer was distributed throughout the three offices of the

Learning Specialists. Student-athletes contacted the investigator from the flyer either in person or via text message to schedule interview sessions at a convenient location on campus. Snowball sampling occurred spontaneously whereby existing participants helped recruit additional student-athletes on their team about the study. Interview sessions lasted from 60-90 minutes, including the 5 minutes it took to complete AIMS and AIMI questionnaires (see below) in the beginning. The first 10 student-athletes who scheduled interview sessions and self-identified as Black, Black American, African, or African American were accepted into the study. All participants gave their informed consent at the start of each session and received a \$10 Chipotle gift card at the conclusion of the interview.

Measures

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) survey and the Academic Identity Measurement Index (AIMI) were used as primers to engage all participants with their own identities before the interviews began.

Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). The AIMS (see Table 1) was developed by Brewer, Van Raale, and Linder in 1993. This instrument has been used frequently to assess athletic identity in athletic populations (Settles, Sellers & Damas, 2002; Steinfeldt, Reed & Steinfeldt, 2010). Research has provided general support for the psychometric integrity of the AIMS (Martin, Eklund & Mushett, 1997). Evidence for the test-retest reliability ($r = .89$ over a two-week period) and internal consistency (alphas = .81 to .93) of the AIMS has been obtained (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). With regard to validity, AIMS scores have been found to increase with level of sport involvement (i.e., non athlete, recreational athlete, competitive athlete), perceived importance of sports competence, and other constructs conceptually related to athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). The AIMS consists of a ten-item scale

designed to reflect the strength and exclusivity of identification with the athlete role and items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from very strongly agree (7) to very strongly disagree (1). The AIMS, designed to encompass social (e.g., “Most of my friends are athletes,”), cognitive (e.g., “I have many goals related to sport,”), and affective (e.g., “I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport”) elements of athletic identity, taps thoughts and feelings central to the daily experience of student-athletes. The items are summed for an overall athletic identity score. Higher athletic identity scores represent higher athletic identity.

Academic Identity Measurement Index (AIMI). Adapted from Brewer’s (1991) AIMI, an Academic Identity Measurement Index was constructed in Bell’s (2009) dissertation and used for this study. The AIMI is also a 10-question survey, but one that focuses on students’ actions and feelings towards their academic experiences, rather than their feelings and actions toward athletics. Like the AIMS, it asks participants to rank each statement about academics on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from very strongly agree (7) to very strongly disagree (1) Thus, a total score of 70 would be the highest possible score for academic identity, and a score of 10 would demonstrate the greatest disassociation with the academic role. A mean score was computed across all items so that higher scores indicated a stronger athletic identity.

Qualitative Interviews. The investigator conducted all interviews and took concurrent field notes to recall responses, emotions, and transitions. Interviews were 60-90 minutes in length at a convenient location at the University of Washington. All interviews were audio-recorded. The interview style was semi-structured and designed to expand upon the answers to the identity survey as well as explore the root of perceived stereotype threat. The interviewer occasionally used prompts or questions to guide the participant back to the focus of the study. The purpose of the interview was carefully explained and reviewed when necessary. This

explanation introduced the notion that the participant was the expert and the interviewer was interested in understanding what it was like to live and learn as a Black male undergraduate at a PWI. During the interview, the author used semi-structured interviewing procedures that involved an interacting dialogic process when asking participants to reflect on ways they have tried to prove or disprove stereotypes. Asking them to be reflexive as they interacted with the investigator was beneficial for both parties: “When we are reflexive, other human participants join us in being reflective as well” (Russell & Kelly, 2002, p. 6).

Interviews began with broad questions (see Appendix B) such as, “How long have you played football?” and “What was your recruitment process to the UW?” The interviewer then asked questions that guided the participant to describe fully his experiences regarding academic difficulties, neurocognitive conditions (e.g., Attention-Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, learning disabilities, concussion), self-identities, and how others perceived him. Questions were asked in as neutral a language as possible to minimize potential bias and presuppositions. The interviewer encouraged the participant to paint a vivid word picture and asked for further description or definition when information was vague or unclear.

The purpose of the interviews extended beyond the typical collection of data. The researcher intended to use the interviews as a dialogic framework to recognize ways to mitigate and attenuate stereotype threat by asking the participants to reflect on successful moments in their past that resulted in positive coping mechanisms. Research as an interacting dialogic process “invites both the researcher and the participant to grow, learn, and change through the research process...and a space will be created that allows each voice to be heard” (Russell & Kelly, 2002, p. 5). Since the intent of each research question was to move beyond the documentation of stereotype threat and into discussing implications of positive coping

mechanisms with the student-athletes themselves, it was sensible to create a reflective environment for both researcher and participant to generate new ideas in real time.

Table 1

AIMS (Athletic Identity Measurement Scale)

1. I consider myself an athlete.
2. I have many goals related to my sport.
3. Most of my friends are athletes.
4. My sport is the most important thing in my life.
5. I spend more time thinking about my sport than anything else.
6. I need to participate in sport to feel good about myself.
7. Other people see me mainly as an athlete.
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in my sport.
9. My sport is the only important thing in my life.
10. I would be very depressed if I were injured and couldn't play college athletics.

Table 2

AIMI (Academic Identity Measurement Index)

1. I consider myself a student.
2. I have many goals related to school/academics.
3. Most of my friends are students that I met in class or through academics/studying.
4. School/academics is the most important thing in my life.
5. I spend more time thinking about school/academics/studying than anything else.
6. I need to be in college or pursuing my education to feel good about myself.
7. Other people see me mainly as a student.
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in school.
9. School/academics is the only important thing in my life.
10. I would be very depressed if I were unable to complete my college degree.

Data Analytic Approach

A majority of the interviews were transcribed by transcription services using the UW College of Education Doi Doctoral Student Research Fund, and the investigator transcribed any remaining interviews. Once all interviews were transcribed, the documents were systematically analyzed and categorized into two conceptual areas according to the mitigating or exacerbating strategies identified in Chapter 2. With these in mind, the author adopted an iterative process by systematically reading through the interviews multiple times, with specific attention paid to identify instances of coping strategies and the categories under which they would fall. Open

coding allowed me to examine “repeat of the exact word(s) of the participant, your words, or a concept from the literature” (Merriam, 2009, p. 178) when participants mentioned instances of stereotype threat. In this case, the investigator concentrated on existing labels from the literature by searching for responses that mitigated or exacerbated stereotype threat. Additionally, open coding provided the space to create new data categories that did not exist in the literature. For example, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 did not expose responses that indicated mere habituation to stereotype threat. In this way, a third response category was created in the open coding phase.

Axial coding combined inductive (emergent) and deductive (confirmatory) thinking. The investigator examined the conditions and context that gave rise to each of the three stereotype threat responses categories, which represents the “phenomena” as the unit of analysis. Once common thoughts and actions were located, the investigator examined how participants interacted with themselves and others within their response categories in the stories they told during the interviews. Selective coding involved “making inferences, developing models, or generating theory” (Merriam, 2009, p. 188) and related the categories to the story line. In other words, the aim was to examine what participants thought of their responses, how it affected their following experiences with stereotype threat, and how likely they would succeed in the face of stereotype threat in the future. It was a process, Miles and Huberman (1994) write, of moving up “from the empirical trenches to a more conceptual overview of the landscape. We’re no longer just dealing with observables, but also with unobservables, and are connecting the two with successive layers of inferential glue” (p. 261). The unobservable data helped draw inferences about the efficacy of participants’ coping mechanisms when dealing specifically with

stereotypes, as well as with adversity in general. The data was rich with linguistic content and is presented according to each research question in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

“I love playing football. I hate being a football player.”-ID #9

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the results of the qualitative interviews. As discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter is organized according to the three primary research questions that guided this investigation. In order to facilitate a clear discussion of the results from this study, a combination of tables and text are used to highlight key findings. Color coding schemes in Table 1 are used throughout the current chapter to aid the reader’s own mental schema.

Research Question 1: How do Black male football players engage and experience stereotype threat at a predominantly White institution?

To understand how Black football players in this study *engaged* with stereotype threat, an analysis of the participants’ verbal responses in response to the explicit questions that were asked was performed. These responses clustered together around three content related categories consistent with prior literature: those that exacerbated, mitigated, or habituated to the situation (see Table 1; for full list of data collection see Appendix A). To understand how participants *experienced* stereotype threat, responses were further disaggregated by implicit beliefs or outward actions. Thus, the types of responses participants gave are presented in accordance with these meta-themes that are analyzed in research question 2.

Table 1

Theme	Exacerbate	Habituate	Mitigate
Beliefs	Outward appearance	The Golden Rule of Meritocracy	The Golden Rule of Meritocracy
Actions	Engage in negative behavior and dialogue Ex: Be a disinterested student	Fatalistic Indifference or Capitulation Ex: hide athletic ID	Engage in positive behavior and dialogue ex: Be an active student

Beliefs

Outward appearance was frequently identified as a stereotype threat cue. Student-athletes clearly understood how their visible clothing affected other people's invisible perceptions of them. Many participants recognized the dangers of wearing headphones around campus that would portray them as “*closed off*” and unapproachable. One student-athlete noted the difference between clothing styles:

When I dress up, I feel like I'm looked at differently as opposed to if I'm just wearing sweats and a hoodie or shorts and a t-shirt or sweats and a t-shirt like this. Once I put on slacks and a tie, it's different. People are probably going to perceive me as 'Okay, he takes care of business. He's looking like he means something.' I feel like I'm taken more seriously.

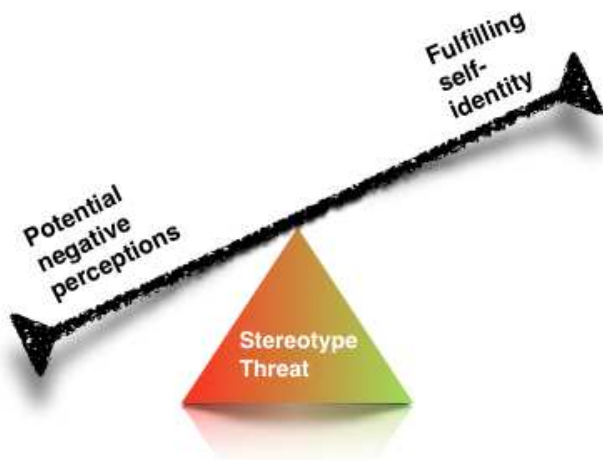
Wearing headphones and university-sponsored sweatpants has become an outward signifier of inner athletic identity, and in some cases athletes are required to wear university apparel. Even though people who “*take care of business*” are allowed to go to the gym during their free time, student-athletes are expected to fulfill their dual roles interchangeably throughout the day.

Logistically, it is difficult to meet all student and athlete requirements (e.g., football practice, lifting weights, attending class, visiting professors in office hours) while dressing according to each situation. Another student-athlete provided a practical perspective to the typical athletic apparel:

People don't know one of the main reasons you see football players or athletes and basketball players or something like in sweats, in a hoodie, on a regular basis because we're up at the crack of dawn working out or doing something like practicing or something. And then we have to go to school, and then we have to tutor... We get up before the sun is up when it's still dark out, so we don't know what the weather's going to be like... A lot of people don't know that. So, just trying to do what we do while still, while still enjoy it, I guess.

Given their hectic schedules, student-athletes sometimes cannot avoid wearing certain clothing that creates the conditions for stereotype threat. Simply thinking what others think about

appearance can trigger stereotype threat, particularly for those student-athletes who are concerned with behaving consistently with negative stereotypes (e.g., dumb jock, lazy student-athlete, etc.) Initially, this student's frustrations begin with other people's ignorance since "people don't know" the main reason why they're seeing student-athletes in sweats. A general perception is formed from this ignorance, causing student-athletes to feel uncomfortable in their dual-occupations: "So, just trying to do what we do while still, while still enjoy it, I guess." This instance highlights the fact that stereotype threat can infiltrate the natural pleasure that accompanies college athletic performance because of negative perceptions borne from ignorance. Stereotype threat seems to be a mental exercise of balancing potential negative perceptions based on appearance with fulfilling one's identity, which can create burden on an individual's cognitive processing.



The Golden Rule of Meritocracy combines two fundamental assumptions. The Golden Rule refers to ethics of reciprocity: treat others how you wish to be treated, love thy neighbor as thy self, put yourself in the other person's shoes, practice empathy, etc. Meritocracy is the notion that individualistic efforts breed forward movement. When the Golden Rule is applied to meritocracy, a person may believe that if they treat others with respect and fairness, they will be

rewarded by climbing the proverbial ladder in school and work. Some student-athletes subscribe to the Golden Rule of Meritocracy to diffuse stereotype threat. *“I feel like if you’re a good person, you’re doing what you’re supposed to, you’re a great character and you’re staying out of trouble, everything will take care of itself. The stereotypes will just be dead, just vanish. They’ll disappear.”* Here, the content of character quells negative perceptions into nonexistence. This sort of mindset could serve as a protective factor that minimizes the amount of concern or worry about being stereotyped, which in turn lessens its impact on the student-athlete’s behavior.

This same approach resonated strongly with how some student-athletes perceived their relationship with their professors:

I think it’s just about how you treat the professors and how attentive you are and active in class. I think they’ll treat you just as good as anybody else...So if you engage in [stereotypical behavior], they are going to treat you just like it. So, if you break that stereotype then it’s [pause] I wouldn’t say it’s very hard to break; you just have to apply yourself.

This particular relationship between student-athletes and professors is worth examining in light of empirical evidence that complicates the above belief. Adler and Adler’s (1985) foundational research exposed the injurious role that faculty can play in student-athlete academic performance. Specifically, they wrote about how classroom experiences with professors who reinforced perceptions of students as athletes more than academics led the participants to become progressively detached from academics. While not all faculty members act on lowered intellectual expectations for student-athletes, it happens frequently enough to merit scrutiny: “On the other hand, athletes also encountered a number of less sympathetic professors who *they thought* stereotyped them as dumb jocks or cocky athletes” (Adler & Adler, 1985, p. 246, emphasis added). This was a significant finding because the basketball players they interviewed entered college with optimistic and idealistic goals and attitudes about their imminent academic

careers, contrary to popular belief. Somewhere in the four years of athletic, social, and classroom experiences, something changed: “As a result, they make pragmatic adjustments, abandoning their earlier aspirations and expectations and gradually resigning themselves to inferior academic performance” (Adler & Adler, 1985, p. 241). Did the less sympathetic professors stereotype the basketball players as dumb jocks or cocky athletes? It doesn’t matter. What does matter is that the student-athletes *perceived* that their professors stereotyped them even though they were applying themselves. Subsequently, these basketball players’ behaviors were impacted and eventually their academic performance diminished. This difference makes all the difference.

In a pivotal article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a White professor reflects on faculty stereotypes about Black athletes as part of a social phenomenon, not an anomaly: “Some white professors are behaving in ways that keep those students at a distance, even those of us who believe we are not motivated by malice toward athletes or black students” (Perlmutter, 2003, p. 2). That behavior includes overlooking and calling on other students instead, lowered expectations about what Black athletes have to contribute to a group discussion, cutting off comments or signaling a lack of interest by checking the time, intensified scrutiny or looking to find flaws in athletes’ work, and nasty comments to the athlete or to the class at large. It is important to note that Perlmutter admits there are White professors who believe they are not motivated by malice. In stereotype threat, the motivation of the other is irrelevant. If a student thinks a professor’s behaviors are sending a standoffish message, stereotype threat is present. These motivations and behaviors can be subconscious or “often-conscious messages” from White faculty that inform how Black male students at PWIs view American society (Dancy & Brown, 2008, p. 999). Informing Black male students how to view American society is sometimes in conflict with the idea of true meritocracy. If a Black male football player treats the

professor with respect and is an active participant, then why do some White professors behave “in ways that keep those students at a distance?”

Given the evidence against reciprocal treatment in learning settings, why do some Black student-athletes steadfastly believe in the Golden Rule of Meritocracy? Why is there such an adamant hope in colorblind ideology? *“I hope in everything I do and conduct myself that there will be no reason for anyone’s beliefs to come true and if that can happen, that would be awesome and if it doesn’t then I’ll move on.”* And: *“My whole motto is that if you work hard in something, you don’t have anything to worry about.”* It seems that there is a strong conviction in the power of actions to speak louder than words when engaging stereotype threat. Even though it’s a logical approach, it is not always pragmatic. This gap in logic may be explained by cognitive dissonance, a dissonance that “exists between a cognition about the self (i.e., a self-relevant performance expectancy) and a cognition about behavior which is inconsistent with this expectancy” (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1962, p. 178). Subscribers to meritocracy believe that good behaviors and good thoughts are rewarded while negative behaviors and thoughts are punished. Cognitive dissonance would explain how even though they knew how to identify negative stereotypes based on their race and athletic identities, they still hoped their good efforts would be rewarded.

The presence of cognitive dissonance suggests that these Black student-athletes are not optimally mitigating stereotype threat in the way they think they are. Upon further analysis, the **Golden Rule of Meritocracy** paradoxically could belong in the Habituate category depending on how the person applies it. It may be a pragmatic response initially, but it should not be the final step towards diffusion. In a meritocratic society, those who get to the top deserve to be there. Conversely, those who stay at the bottom deserve to stay there, too. It may be that for certain

student-athletes, the Golden Rule of Meritocracy serves as a mitigator and others as a habituation mechanism. With the data collection procedures that were employed, it is difficult to ascertain whether the Rule actually served as a mitigating or habituating factor. However, for the Rule to work as a mitigator, it appears that it is contingent on certain actions from both parties. When professors reciprocate active participation and effort, stereotype threat may be diffused. If professors reject this notion, whether consciously or unconsciously, results could frustrate the efforts of the student-athlete. The duplicitous nature of this principle will be important for the next phase of data analysis.

Actions

Student-athletes provided several examples of how to solicit negative stereotypes. Their awareness illustrated types of **disinterested behaviors** on campus: wearing headphones, wearing sweatshirt hoods on their head, sagging, cursing or being aggressive. Sometimes stereotype threat was exacerbated when “*you have a 50 minute class and you show up the last 20 minutes. That’s disrespectful. Not to mention when you walk in the front and cruise up to the top.*”

Another participant demonstrated a clear understanding of negative behaviors as well as its role in shaping stereotypes:

I think there's a mix. I think there are some people who fulfill the athlete stereotype. So some kids go to class, go straight to sleep, snoring, eating in class, all that stuff. Never participate, sit in the back. Those people give off the perception of athletes that is stereotypical. So for a lot of people that aren't athletes, just normal people, they look at that and be like, "Ok, so that's how an athlete is."

Here, this student explains how one individual can create an image for an entire group’s identity even though there’s a mix of behaviors:

*Because there are some [Black student-athletes] that you know, show up to class on time, participate, and get good grades. And even with that being said, it's kind of hard to like I guess, it's kind of hard to take in. Because you know, you don't look at them like that, you don't look at us like that. Like, for example, **we do it all the time**. If I see a frat person,*

I'm going to imagine, or if I see a frat boy like getting super drunk or showing up to class with alcohol on his breath, then I would be like, "Ok that's how frats are."

In depicting the inception of stereotypes, he poignantly articulates the inherent desire for people to create mental categories or schema about their surroundings. In constructing the phenomenon of stereotype threat and generalizing it to all people, this student is reminiscent of Dewey.

Observe the parallels: "We all jump to conclusions; we all fail to examine and test our ideas because of our personal attitudes" (Dewey, 1933, p. 134). Merit flies out the window because as humans, "*we do it all the time.*" Whether we value talent individually or not, what we do have in common is our tendency to typecast our environment. While there are Black student-athletes who mitigate negative stereotypes with their ideal behavior, this image is "*kind of hard to take in.*" Why? Why is it easier to assimilate the image of a Black student-athlete as a disengaged participant rather than as an active contributor? The default image is the languid learner and Black male athletes seem to be guilty until proven innocent. Not only is it difficult for others to use energy to create a new mental category for the adroit Black athlete, it is irresistibly tempting to deduce new categories based on one individual's behavior (e.g., the drunk frat boy). The student-athlete in this excerpt is conscientious enough to admit this commonality, perhaps making him more forgiving and understanding of others.

Many responses implied an attitude of **fatalism or indifference** as a major theme. A plethora of apathetic phrases were verbalized around this theme: "*I'm like whatever*", "*I don't let it phase me*", "*I don't care*", and "*I just want to walk by, live life.*" Some responses that elicited hints of fatalism included: "*Well who could blame them?*", "*You can't really do anything*", and "*It's pointless trying to argue with them. I have learned that.*" These types of responses suggest that these Black student-athletes have inured or potentially become callous to the perceptions others have of them. Some felt as if they were in a "*losing battle*" and decided to

stay silent at times. This capitulation was analyzed as another form of habituation. Neither beneficial nor harmful, the effects of stereotype threat can lead to a calloused attitude toward negative perceptions. Eventually, this habituated response may deter the student from ever mitigating stereotype threat, and actually may lead the person to withdrawal from interacting with others who could positively support their development.

All participants were aware of instances when they had diffused stereotype threat. Some behaviors mentioned were not wearing headphones, smiling and greeting others, and comparing overloaded schedules with those of non-athletes. The most common method for mitigating stereotype threat was through interactive dialogue. Through conversation, participants used humor, educated peers, and confronted others. Participants frequently gave examples of confrontations by interrogating the assumptions of others:

Interrogating them like they interrogate celebrities, so basically picking at them how they pick at celebrities for every little thing that they do, how they have these preconceived notions about a black man... saying, "So, how do you feel about you being wrong about this young Black man, how he's defied the statistics? Do you still believe in all these negative things?"

At the heart of this tactic was the desire for others to understand a different perspective. *"It's not about arguing back, it's about showing the other side... It's more of just letting them know about the other side of the situation and being able to express your opinion without doing anything [ir]rational."* These participants intuitively understand that there is more to the truth than an individuals' perception. To expand one's perception, one must be questioned and exposed to *"the other side."* This finding is consistent with Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, which states that under appropriate conditions interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between hegemonic and minority group members. If one has the opportunity to dialogue and communicate with others in an open-minded environment, negative stereotypes can

be broken down through mutual interaction. Thus, a perfect balance is achieved where different points of view are exchanged and negative perceptions are ameliorated. It seems that privileged individuals who are unaware of their own myopia are in need of interacting with the stereotyped individuals on an equal playing level in order to dismiss their biases. The mindset that develops due to lack of contact and understanding with stereotyped individuals is not conducive to flexibility and empathy, two required principles for the complete dissolution of stereotypes (Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003).

The second most common method for diffusing stereotype threat that was reported by the participants was behaving like an **active participant in class**. When asked how his classmates perceive Black student-athletes, one participant responded:

Some people are afraid of us for [pause] I don't know. They just won't want to like engage with us. Sometimes people think that we don't really get why we are in school or get the fact that we are in school. It's like a negative thing. "I don't want to sit next to them because they will cheat off me during a test or a quiz." ... I'll sit in the front of the class, take my notes, and do all that stuff, and I just like try to prove stereotypes wrong like, "Oh we can sit in the front. We can learn."

Here, this student reflected on possible reasons why classmates sometimes disengage from athletes and physically move away from them. This student's response was to assuage the stereotype threat by becoming an active participant in class by purposefully, and even defiantly, proving tacit beliefs wrong. In this case, mitigating stereotype threat required conscious agency and self-efficacy: "Within these figured worlds, identity is constructed as individuals both act with agency in authoring themselves and are acted upon by social others as they are positioned (as members, nonmembers, or certain kinds of members)" (Nasir & Cooks, 2009). Authoring his own identity as a Black male athlete, this participant actively creates conditions for positive perceptions. Perhaps even more impressive than his persistent resistance is his willingness to shoulder the responsibility of being an intelligent Black student-athlete for the sake of all

members of this group: “*WE can sit in the front. WE can learn.*” Even though he clearly identifies as an active student, he has underlying motives as well. His engagement with stereotype threat sends a message about himself as an individual and about other members of his stigmatized group. This student-athlete does not try to avoid or ignore but rather confronts the stereotype in a way that fundamentally proves that it is wrong. This approach to mitigating stereotype threat is likely to take a high amount of self-efficacy, which was reflected both in his words and tone.

Research Question 2: What positive coping mechanisms are Black student-athletes currently using to mitigate stereotype threat?

Table 2 was constructed based on findings that emerged from the qualitative interviews pertaining to research question 2. This table represents all responses that indicated stereotype threat mitigation throughout the course of the interview and is sorted by participant (ID number). Visually, this table reveals each tool that participants reported using. Consistent with thematic groupings of Table 1, this table clusters meta-responses into thoughts and actions. Thoughts became synonymous with mental schema and expectations, whether for themselves or others in their environment. Similarly, actions became interchangeable with behaviors and cultural scripts that participants abided by. Within these responses, the thoughts that led the student-athlete to mitigate stereotype threat were reflective in nature: “the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration” (Dewey, 1933, p. 113). Since all Black male student-athlete participants had described stereotype threat encounters earlier in their lives, their responses during the interview became a part of “serious and consecutive consideration.” Reflections were divided into inward thoughts of self-identity and thoughts of how they were perceived by others.

Table 2

Successful Mitigating Strategies Transformation: reflection + action = praxis					
ID#	Mental Schemas Expectations (<i>Thought</i>)		Cultural Scripts Behaviors (<i>Action</i>)		
	Reflection on self identity	Reflection on others' perception	Dialogue	Body Placement	Lifestyle
3	Be proud of myself		Joke	No headphones	Get a master's degree
4				Smile	Get diploma
5			Advocate for self to higher authority	Smile	Keep copy of physical accomplishments in pockets
6	Desire to continue dad's legacy	Color conscious instead of color blind	Advocating for community back home	Removing self from situation Sit in front of class	Get good grades Pay attention in class
7		Make a positive impression for the sake of other Black male athletes	Educate others in the moment Articulate Speak with Black male athlete role models	Control body movement in moments of excitement Sit in front of class	
8		Theory of Mind	Active participant in class Make the other look dumb	No headphones	Expand network by sharing knowledge
9	Critical thinking: question assumptions & seeking truth Divergent thinking	Theory of Mind	Interrogate and challenge other to research assumptions		Live an alternative narrative Create class to educate other Black athletes how to mitigate
10	Empower others to transform negative expectations		Interrogate the other's assumptions		Be comfortable in my own skin
11	Channel energy efficiently and productively	Use low expectations as fuel to prove others wrong			Control how you are affected by your surroundings
12	Set self- expectations more positive than others' expectations	Partner with others transformers for accountability	Talk until reach the root issue of stereotype beliefs	Look the part & dress well	Live an alternative narrative Prove good stereotypes right Make parents proud

The other set of responses were categorized as behaviors and actions. Actions were conveyed through dialogue, body placement, and lifestyle. A few responses described the way participants conducted themselves individually and socially.

Reflection and action are complementary practices. Dewey argues that encouraging reflective thinking makes action possible with a conscious aim: “It converts action that is merely appetitive, blind, and impulsive into intelligent action” (p. 125). Action that is “appetitive, blind, and impulsive” may actually exacerbate stereotype threat situations (see Table 1). The student-athletes with the best coping mechanisms developed a conscious aim to alter cultural scripts for the better. The combination of these two major practices is called praxis: “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 51). Praxis emerged in the data when student-athletes transformed stereotype threat into desirable difficulties. Bjork and Bjork (2011) identified “desirable difficulties” as conditions of learning that initially appear as a difficulty but actually lead to more durable and flexible learning e.g., varying the conditions of learning rather than keeping them constant and predictable. Some student-athletes in this study seem to intuitively understand this theory.

Attention-Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) is a prime example of an identity that is threatened by stereotypes in learning environments. Two participants who reported having diagnosed ADHD asserted the way they harnessed their disability both in the classroom and on the field. One described his ADHD as having a surfeit of energy in class:

You have a lot of energy but you can put that energy into the right things. It's not getting rid of energy but where do you use it at? You can sense it coming on or you know when it's going to happen. You use that energy towards stuff that is productive and efficient instead of getting distracted/going to do something else. You learn how to control it.

For this student-athlete, adapting to his disorder involves anticipating and reallocating his surplus of energy. It is probable that he is in tune with himself enough to “sense it coming on.” After

this initial recognition, he purposefully funnels his extra energy into “*productive and efficient*” outlets, such as schoolwork and class participation. In this way, ADHD is not a disability but an asset.

A second student-athlete juxtaposed the above classroom experience with ADHD as a desirable difficulty on the field:

I like moving around positions. Like, I played defensive line and linebacker. I played running back, I played quarterback, I played full back, I played offensive line, like, I played a bunch of different positions. And, it's just like, knowing what your thought process needs to be while playing that position. It's just like I can actually get in the heads of other people and like put myself in that state of mind: “Alright, what's this guy going to do? Or, what is he thinking?” Or duh duh duh. And it like, helps me do my job.

This student-athlete transformed a learning deficit into divergent thinking. In this narrative, he astutely maps his attention onto other skill sets. His main tactic is through excessive question-asking and considering hypothetical situations. Instead of being a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none, this student becomes extremely proficient in each position. Shifting positions even once or twice can be a daunting transition for many athletes. But for this player, the more shifting that occurred, the more he excelled. By recognizing that his opponent’s knowledge was different from his own and putting himself in the other person’s “*state of mind*”, this individual exercised theory of mind (Frith & Frith, 2005) to transcend his “attention-deficit” label.

Further thoughts and actions in the data uncovered the resilience to stereotype threat, as well. Perhaps a football analogy is appropriate here. Some student-athletes played offense by seeking interpersonal relationships that would bolster their athletic and academic identities. For example, one participant explained the role that critical mass played in his confidence to mitigate stereotype threat. Another described his expectations for himself in school and athletics by using an accountability buddy:

I see him like, "Hey man, I got to study." He's like, "You got to study? I got to study, too." I go, "I'm going to go work out." [He says] "You about to go work out? I'm about to go workout, too." Something like that. Those are examples; we feed on each other. That's a great vibe... He's an example of take-care-of-business. Basically being a leader not a follower. It's easy to come to class and do what everybody expects you to do. Go up to the back and hang out as opposed to coming in you know what, I'm sitting in the front today. I don't need to sit by my teammates. I'll see them after class. I'm going to really focus for these 50 minutes.

In this scenario, expectations play a critical role. He asks himself: Do I do what everybody expects me to do? Or do I feed off of the energy from my friend and emulate his personal expectations of learning? One action leads to sitting in the back of class and socializing while the other behavior leads to meaningful learning. Engaging with an accountability friend is an optimal way to mitigate stereotype threat because it benefits both individuals: *"Not only are you networking, you're becoming a better person academically, socially. It's so beneficial in so many different ways."* Clearly, it's an easy sell. However, these decisions are not always so simple: *"It's easy to come to class and do what everybody expects you to do."* What leads an individual to willingly choose the difficult option? It may be that the interpersonal relationship he had developed prior to confronting stereotype threat situations provided a buffer against the temptation to yield to malingering behaviors. It is important to note that yielding to easy expectations is not always a bad idea. If all educators expected all students to be active participants, stereotype threat may indeed disintegrate.

The best offense is a good defense. Some student-athletes practiced defensive strategies against the insistence of stereotype threat by making adjustments and successfully adapting their behaviors. Dialogue was the most identifiable action. Several student-athletes were eager to use dialogue as a defensive tactic in anticipation of stereotype threat: *"Through the conversation, I'll make you look really dumb. But it'll be through conversation."* This student-athlete knew there were other options to confronting someone's stereotypic beliefs, but he expressed that dialogue

was the most effective option for him. Another student-athlete expressed his desire to converse with people who acted on stereotypes:

Like, "Why do you think these things? Where'd you get it from? Why haven't you, if it is or isn't true, why haven't you like looked into it? Instead of just alright, well if that's what somebody says then it's true." Because shit, I don't trust what people say.

Articulated as a lack of trust, this student-athlete uses dialogue as a weapon to challenge others' assumptions. He then admitted that he turns his critical thinking inwards and doesn't immediately believe what other people say as true. In this way, he is able to remain a reflective thinker and doer.

Body placement was another indicator of transformative action. Two student-athletes remarked that they purposefully took their headphones off when they walked around campus so that wouldn't seem so unapproachable. Two other student-athletes said that they deliberately sat in the front few rows of their classrooms. In this way, they hoped to communicate their desire to mollify stereotype threat. One student-athlete commented on what he couldn't do with his body during dialogues about stereotypes: "*[You] can't get big and just swell up. People are going to feel threatened and it's going to look like you're threatening them.*" The necessity to control body movements during moments of intense excitement is widely applicable to collegiate football players. Even though their physique is an asset on the field, it can just as easily be perceived as a visceral threat. This student-athlete acknowledges that if he wants to assuage stereotype threat, he must also be conscious of his body placement.

Lifestyle was a general and long-term approach to praxis. Student-athletes sought to earn their bachelor's and master's degrees as proof of mitigating stereotype threat. One student-athlete specifically kept a copy of his weekly academic and athletic calendar and would show it to his classmates that perceived him as intellectually inferior. Several student-athletes chose to

exemplify an alternative narrative to the stereotyped dumb Black jock through their lifestyles. For example: *“If you have to change your ways to prove that wrong, then obviously they were right about you.”* This student-athlete understood the value of living according to a personal code of ethics. When praxis becomes an internal expectation of himself, he does not have to adjust his behaviors to disprove others’ negative perceptions. One student-athlete says it best: *“I’ve always lived with stereotypes and I’ve based my life on breaking those.”*

A caveat should be noted. For those student-athletes who were diagnosed with sport-related concussions, subsequent neuropsychological factors inhibited their ability to diffuse some stereotype threat situations (see Table 1). Concussions were reported to affect concentration and memory for some participants. As demonstrated in chapter 2, stereotype threat strains working memory. The comorbid effects of concussions can potentially interfere with already diminished cognitive resources necessary for experiencing successful mitigation. While it was not within the scope of this dissertation to elucidate the effects of concussions in depth, it seems that certain external forces exist for football players that place their ability to negotiate mental schema and cultural scripts at risk for failure.

Research Question 3: Do Black football players with higher academic identity have better coping strategies than those with higher athletic identity?

The initial hypothesis postulated that Black football players with higher academic identity might have better coping strategies than those with higher athletic identity. The AIMS and AIMI results from this current study (see Appendix C) are difficult to compare to previous literature since the participants in this study were not primed for their academic or athletic identities before a performance-based evaluation (e.g., Steele, 1997; Steele, 2003; Steele, 2011; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Rather, both identity scales were given at the same time followed by a

semi-structured interview. Since previous researchers have established the pernicious effects of stereotype threat on Black male student athletes (e.g., Simons et al., 2007; Stone et al., 2004), this research design was able to build on that finding.

Whether a student-athlete scored higher on the AIMS or AIMI did not predict the efficacy of their coping skills in the face of stereotype threat. Regardless of AIMS and AIMI scores, all participants were able to identify instances where they had exacerbated, habituated to, and/or mitigated stereotypes. However, in the absence of this finding, grounded theory methods resulted in an unanticipated discovery in the data. The student-athletes who were the most successful diffusers inadvertently revealed a strong identity shaped by their fathers or father figures. The presence of a strong father figure was the greatest and most unexpected influencer of their coping skills, both in quality and quantity; the ones who were best at mitigating also had multiple methods for doing so. In addition, all participants who mentioned their fathers did so out of their own volition and without prompting from me during the interviews. In this way, the father figure theme arose organically. One participant said his stepdad identified him as a good football player when he was 2 years old. The desire for his stepdad's approval surfaced as a motivating force to excel in football. Another used his dad's accomplishments as an opportunity to continue his dad's legacy in athletics and his future career goals.

Fathers were predominantly referenced as role models either through direct advice or as implicit trailblazers. Explicit advice took the form of positive coping mechanisms: *"My dad's always grounded me to like look at my surroundings and like don't be, don't block yourself from the world and don't try to act like things aren't happening around you. So, I mean I always notice like racial things, and cultural problems and issues."* When asked to reflect on his own preferred methods of combatting stereotype threat, this student responded: *"I want to try and*

continue what he is doing, but I want to like make a change. I want to actually like do it on a bigger scale.” Following in his father’s footsteps is just the beginning; this student-athlete has plans to build onto his father’s foundations.

Another student-athlete articulated how he mitigates stereotype threat: “*Being professional and educating them like why that’s not true or that’s not a good stereotype to have because that’s actually not even true for the most part. So, you’re just handling it calmly, not over reacting.*” Exposing the misrepresentations inherent in stereotypes is not enough; it must be handled with tact and awareness of self. When asked where he learned how to educate others, he responded:

Because my dad does that a lot...He said that you have to be able to articulate your words with people and be smart in how you say things, just because the spotlight is on you, and there is not a lot of people like you, and you want to leave a good perception of black people in their mind when you leave.

Coincidentally, this is the same student-athlete who said, “*WE can sit in the front. WE can learn.*” It is hardly surprising that these young Black men learned invaluable principles from their fathers. Nor is it shocking that all of the aforementioned participants were connected to their father figures through their sport; each of them grew up with their dad or step-dad as their athletic coach. Unfortunately, not all participants grew up with a father or father figure. Those Black men also happened to be the ones with the least sophisticated coping mechanisms. Positive father figures emerged as a resource that participants did not intentionally use as a mitigating tool in real-time. It seems that some amount of coping efficacy is learned through social exchange.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

“Good morning, look at the valedictorian,
Scared of the future while I hop in the Delorean
Scared to face the world, complacent career student
Some people graduate, but we still stupid.”-Kanye West

“Sometimes I wish that I can be a football player and get the same perks that I get now and just be a regular student. Because how we spend all our time focused on football, if we were able to do that about school, we could be doctors.

We could be lawyers.

We could be whatever we wanted to be.”

-ID #12

Summary of Main Findings

The overarching purpose of this dissertation study was to examine Black male student-athletes’ experiences with and responses to negative stereotypes at one PWI. This research extends previous work by examining whether Black male student-athletes employed coping strategies to protect themselves from hostile campus climates. Results from the first research question revealed that the Black male football players engaged with stereotype threat in three unique ways. They either had responses that exacerbated, mitigated, or habituated to stereotype threat cues. Throughout these three categories, student-athletes used responses based on either their beliefs or their actions. Examples of exacerbating factors include outward appearance and disengaged behavior in class. Student-athletes mitigated stereotype threat when they were active participants in class and confronted others through dialogue. Factors that insinuated habituation were silence and indifferent attitudes. Results from the second research question illuminated the positive coping mechanisms Black student-athletes used to mitigate stereotype threat. Responses were categorized as reflections on self-identity, reflections on others’ perceptions, dialogue, body placement, and lifestyles. Analysis of academic and athletic identity found no difference in

coping strategies in research question three. However, emergent data exposed the role fathers and father figures played in employing effective coping strategies.

Differential findings in the data uncovered a spectrum of experiences with stereotype threat. Some Black male student-athletes appear to be more affected by negative stereotypes than others. Based on these findings, the Black male student-athlete whose performance may be most undermined by stereotype threat are those without father figures, those who rely on the Golden Rule of Meritocracy as their only coping mechanism, and those who do not engage in praxis. As discussed, praxis is the combination of reflection and action. Thus, Black male student-athletes who either reflect *or* act may not efficiently reduce stereotype threat in the midst of academic performance. The best mitigators seem to be those student-athletes who employed 3-4 different strategies. Two student-athletes (ID #6 and ID #12) presented responses that saturated all emergent categories. However, it must be emphasized that quantity does not outweigh quality.

Implications and Future Directions

Stereotypes are so pervasive that their existence is unequivocal (Aronson, 2002). As indicated in Table 2, all student-athletes in this study presented a variety of positive coping mechanisms as a response to chronic stereotype threat. However, as revealed in Table 1, some Black male student-athletes appear to employ negative coping strategies that exacerbate stereotypes that are in the air within the collegiate environment. How can Black male student-athletes learn about and practice mitigating identity threat and tension? The qualitative methods used in this dissertation allowed for an answer to emerge organically from the research process. Research as an interacting dialogic process “invites both the researcher and the participant to grow, learn, and change through the research process” (Russell & Kelly, 2002). Since the final objective of this study was to move beyond the documentation of stereotype threat and into

discussing implications of positive coping mechanisms with the student-athletes themselves, it was crucial to create a reflective environment for both researcher and participant to generate new ideas in real time. The solution emerged from the data itself when the investigator asked the above question to a participant:

I feel like that should just like, straight up be a class, straight up about stereotypes...credits and all. Like, aye, this is about stereotypes, and just jump from like Whites, Blacks, Asians, Mexicans, everything. Just each week, something different. Like a legit class. Mandatory for everyone...Especially professors.

One implication for developing positive coping mechanisms in the context of college athletics for Black males is to develop a proactive intervention that targets empowering Black male student-athletes with the knowledge and skills to buffer them from the negative effects of stereotype threat. The responses gleaned from the participants, who are members of this stigmatized group, along with previous scientific research help pinpoint specific strategies that could be integrated into an intervention delivered within the collegiate setting.

Interventions on addressing the negative impact of stigma have been empirically validated. Walton and Cohen (2011) created a brief social-belonging intervention for Black college freshmen who expressed greater uncertainty about their belonging in college than their White counterparts. This intervention aimed to lessen psychological perceptions of threat on campus during the transition to college, a perception that is equivalent with stereotype threat. The intervention facilitators posed the social adversity of belonging as a shared and transient experience among all Black freshmen. First, participants read a report of senior students who had worried about whether they would belong in college their freshman year but who grew confident over time. In this way, participants learned that social belonging concerns are common, natural, and ephemeral. Second, to exploit the saying-is-believing effect, students wrote an essay describing how their own experiences in college echoed the experiences summarized in the

previous report. Finally, they turned their essay into a speech, which they delivered to a video camera. Participants were told their recorded speech would be shown to future students to help ease their transition to college. Outcomes were improved academic performance, self-reported health, and well-being of the Black college freshmen over three years. Over the three-year observation period, grade point average (GPA) for these Black students rose relative to multiple control groups and halved the minority achievement gap. This academic performance boost created a positive internal feedback loop, which prevented students from viewing their intelligence as inherently inferior.

While there is no panacea for curing negative perceptions, the results from this dissertation suggest that Black male student-athletes would be receptive to learning about reforming their educational experience by diffusing stereotype threats in the air. Many great models exist and the purpose of this research is to customize existing concepts to fit this specific population. In the words of Sir Ken Robinson (2006), reforming education is about:

Customizing to your circumstances and personalizing education to the people you're actually teaching. And doing that, I think, is the answer to the future because it's not about scaling a new solution; it's about creating a movement in education in which people develop their own solutions, but with external support based on a personalized curriculum.

In answering the future and creating such a movement in education, a stereotype threat (ST) workshop is proposed. Several approaches from Walton and Cohen's (2011) experiment can be adapted to a ST workshop to tap into an individual's positive internal feedback loop. In order to plan a workshop relevant to Black male student-athletes, any curriculum would need to be first and foremost situational. Stereotype threats are context-dependent and any mediation techniques should reflect this capricious nature. The foundation of the ST workshop would be to present many different strategies for diffusing stereotype threats until student-athletes are comfortable

applying them. They will also need ample time to reflect on which strategies work, which ones do not, and which methods to try in the future. In this way, “the person who understands what the better ways of thinking are and why they are better can, if he will, change his own personal ways until they become more effective” (Dewey, 1933, p. 113). An effective outcome for participants would be to reflect and mitigate well enough to teach others. In this way, students become teachers who scaffold the development and learning of others. The highly successful Black male student-athlete would emerge as someone who could positively influence and support others in addressing and overcoming stereotype threats.

Creating a cohort-based environment for Black male student-athletes would promote critical mass and an immediate space for belonging. While this ST workshop would not approach stereotype threat as a transient experience, it would seek to impact how student-athletes perceive the power of negative expectations on their academic performance in hopes to empower them. Like Walton’s (2014) research, the ST workshop would “aim, simply, to alter a specific way in which people think or feel in the normal course of their lives to help them flourish” (p. 73). To establish the commonality of negative expectations, participants may read how other Black students dealt with stereotype threat in Steele’s (2011) *Whistling Vivaldi*. They may be instructed to keep a journal where they can write several expository essays about their personal experiences and juxtapose them with those in Steele’s book. At the end of an academic year, participants may reflect on their experiences and give speeches to future incoming Black male athletes during summer camps.

A successful intervention would lessen inequalities in academic achievement, sense of belonging, and well-being. A ST workshop would challenge student-athletes to adjust their self-perceptions of their academic abilities despite the lowered expectations of others. Steele (1997)

prescribes an intervention that reduces stereotype threat through “wise” schooling, a term borrowed from Goffman (1963). The tenets of wise schooling can be directly transferred to the ST workshop: optimistic teacher-student relationship, challenge over remediation, stressing the expandability of intelligence, affirming domain belongingness, valuing multiple perspectives, role models, nonjudgmental responsiveness, and stressing self-efficacy. Additionally, the ST workshop would seek to add to the research that empowers Blacks to speak their own voices about their experiences from marginalized positions in social relations (Parker, 2002). Ideally, the space would allow Black male student-athletes to practice interpersonal contact to reduce prejudice in a safe environment before employing Allport’s (1954) Contact Hypothesis in real situations (i.e., classroom, dorm room, etc.). Part of this process would be to empower these student-athletes to engage in dialogue and contact rather than remaining habituated to stigma.

The ST workshop would be an optimal space to demythologize strategies that do not successfully reduce stereotype threat. Specifically, when stereotype threat is present, the Golden Rule of Meritocracy may seemingly appear to be a successful response, but has the potential to produce a counterindicated effect. Most student-athletes in this study believe that their merit and respect towards others will justify a reward. However, the data demonstrated that if this reward is continually withheld, participants became calloused to the idea of merit. In turn, callousness may lead to disengagement from academics altogether (Adler & Adler, 1985). Upholding this belief is thus a double-edged sword. When a professor continuously ignores Black student-athlete’s contributions or when friends ignore or reject one’s identity, merit is erased from the equation. As a result, Black male student-athletes will adhere to a broken system. For example, one participant expressed frustration when stereotype threat was created by his Black teammates.

When he was accused of “acting White”, he said that he did nothing in response. When prompted, he expanded his answer:

There's no point of acknowledging that. You know what I mean? Like, at the end of the day you're doing the exact same thing that you hate when other non-athletes do to you. You know. Like, you start stereotyping...You put me in a category because I grew up in X with all Whites. Well the non-athletes put you in a category, which you hate, so why would you do that to someone else? You know what I mean? I'm the type of person that looks at all that. It just goes back to don't treat people the way you want to be treated...It's just those fundamental rules that we've lost sight of.

In this situation, he found it best to engage with others' perceptions with silence because his actions *must* speak louder than his words even though others had broken the “*fundamental rules.*” In the face of hurtful categorization, he expected that if he did not stigmatize others, others would not reciprocate the behavior. In reality, his belief created powerlessness while his sense of belonging was rejected.

What is disheartening is that this student-athlete actually has a better understanding of how stereotypes are perpetuated and consciously refuses to participate in the process. He adheres to the fundamental rules of reciprocity and merit. Unfortunately, this coping mechanism is unreliable and his purposeful refusal is not received the way he intends. Minutes later in the interview, this same student-athlete articulated the longitudinal psychological effects of these social interactions:

Because [stereotypes] steers away from who you are personally. Like deep down in your core and your spirit, it steers away from that. Because you have 2 worlds. You grew up in 1 world so this is all you know. Then you got introduced to another world so it's like, this is the other half of what I didn't know. And now all the sudden, I don't know who I am. And it kind of confuses you because now here you are trying to figure out what is your purpose or what you're supposed to do in this world, what your capabilities are, who you are as a person, but you can't figure it out because you have so much outside influence.

Notice, his “*outside influence*” steers him away from who he is “*personally.*” Almost poetically, this student-athlete portrays the internal struggle that his core and spirit encounter because others

categorize him. Grappling with this existential crisis and the confusion of two worlds, he insinuates the burden of the “double conscious” coined by W. E. B. DuBois in 1903:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” One ever feels his twoness, -an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (p. 3).

DuBois and the student-athlete above both mention invisible forces at play that are larger than external measures such as cognition and performance, i.e. “core,” “spirit,” and “soul.” There may be no external scale to rate the core, spirit, and soul, but that does not mean that they do not exist. The core, spirit, and soul are where the results of chronic stereotype threat made manifest. The data presented here combined with existing literature cogently demonstrate the unilateral damage of stereotype threat: one person is confused about their purpose and capabilities while one person is unaffected. For perpetrators, stereotyping may be appealing because it is mentally easy and free of consequences; it may very well be incorrigible. To investigate how Black male student-athletes cope with stereotype threat, it is important to dissect these moments of reflection so that they emerge from their existential crisis better prepared for the inevitable next time. Reflecting on moments of ideal mitigation is as important as understanding why other strategies fail. Student-athletes need to explore different methods for engaging with stereotype threat in a trial and error fashion, both intellectually and emotionally. An ST workshop would provide the necessary space to safely return to when they need to regroup before their next trial.

It is human nature to become the limitations of our perceptions in a self-fulfilling prophecy. An existential nihilistic would say that a moral answer does not exist and a fatalist would offer that efforts to eradicate the problem are useless. Frankly, it is not fair that some people can project their negative expectations onto others with impunity. Since it is not feasible

to expunge all stereotypes completely, it is incumbent upon researchers to find what can be done. There are microsolutions that can occur within institutions that teach students how to mitigate the threat of underperformance and confirmation of stereotypes? Where there is reflection and action, there is transformation (Freire, 1970) and where there is transformation, there is hope (Freire, 1992). As one student reflects on the success of his mitigation, he validates the role of hope:

I guarantee she'll think twice before she says a thing like that to another athlete. The fact that I know that I changed her perspective about me, it's possible. It's not something that's impossible. You don't have to go around accepting this because people think it. It's possible to change people's opinions. Knowing that that's possible is hope. Once you get hope, there's a lot you can do with it. There's a lot you can do with it.

Hope of changing the seemingly impossible should be explored and passed on. A space should be created to inculcate Black male student-athletes about existing heuristic structures, how to mitigate them, and how to successfully adapt their expectations and behaviors. It is proposed that a guided processing space for Black male student-athletes will only be beneficial. The application of mitigation is stressful. A group setting would help student-athletes not feel isolated when they engage in the emotional tax of reflecting on stereotype threat. The purpose of this dissertation was to demonstrate that this successful adaptation is not only possible, but can be widely disseminated using a dialogic process as a method. In this dialogic interaction, the relationship between the researcher and the participant fosters growth, learning, and change, “and a space will be created that allows each voice to be heard” (Russell & Kelly, 2002, p. 5).

Limitations

As with all studies, the present study had several limitations that are worthy of noting that temper the conclusions and provide avenues for future research in this area. The experiences of Black student-athletes at this particular university should not be generalized to all universities. It

would behoove researchers to replicate similar methods in other institutions across NCAA conferences and divisions. Small sample size was also a limitation since there were only 10 participants. In order to generalize to other Black student-athletes, more participants would be necessary. Additionally, it was beyond the scope of this dissertation to examine coping mechanisms of student-athletes of other races, genders, and sports. Finally, the only hypothesis proposed in this study was deemed null. No causal link between athletic/academic identity ratings and poor performance was found.

Conclusion

“Given the salience that sports have played in the African American cultural tradition, it would seem illogical to consider sports to be a harmful or detrimental element to the Black experience. Yet a growing body of evidence would suggest that it may be” (Howard, 2014, p. 73). This dissertation contributes to the growing body of evidence of illogical yet definitive disenfranchisement of Black male student-athletes. As an institution, if you are going to continue to only support athletic identity, you not only disservice the individual, you disempower an entire race. If we don’t give them a chance to develop and strengthen their identities, then the statistics will only accumulate.

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Appendix A

Exacerbate	Habituate	Mitigate
Give off standoffish or prideful feel (3)	"I'm like whatever" (3), "I don't let it slide/phase me" (4), "I don't care (5, 8)	Speak truth (3) Seek truth (9)
"Who could blame them?" (3)	"I don't notice" (3) or pay too much attention (10)	Joke (3)
Headphones (3) & Hood (3, 4)	"Whoa, I'm different" (3)	No headphones (3, 8)
Close off natural curiosity: "Damn, let me just shut up. I'll figure this out later." (12)	Stay silent (3) due to lack of confidence/don't bring it up (6) to encourage the other's honesty (10) to not risk misinterpretation (10), to consider the other's viewpoint (12)	Learn (9) with others outside of athletics to expand comfort zone of learning (12)
Triggered to anger (4)	Let them assume (4)	Smile or say "hi" (4, 5, 12)
Concussions affecting focus (6)	Fatalism (6): "You can't really do anything" (4)	"Forgive and forget" (4)
Sit w/ teammates in class (6, 8)	Dissociate (9)	Don't sit w/ teammates (6)
Blatantly point out racism (6)	Not engage drunks (3)	Discrediting the source based on internal stability/state (3, 5, 8)
Not vigilantly mitigating (8)	Lament lack of perspective-taking (8)	Confront people's ignorance (9) to make them take different perspectives to break stereotype perpetuation (8) by flipping roles and questioning them (10)
"Football is the #1 thing" (3)	Hide athletic identity (6)	Admire Black non-athletes for breaking racial stereotypes (4)
Media representation (12)	"I just want to walk by, live life" (4)	Display schedule as proof (5)
	Acknowledge the eternal refusal of some (10) "It's pointless trying to argue with them. I have learned that" (5)	Use other outlets (massage therapy, hot yoga, screaming on top of a mountain) (4)
	Getting yelled at by coaches as practice for habituation (12)	Advocate needs to higher authority (5)
		Handle it professionally: articulate, "be smart how you say things", act like the spotlight is on you, "leave a good perception of Black people in their mind when you leave" (7)
		Rest on education/degree (4, 5, 12), maybe a master's (12)
	Give others what they want by removing yourself from their space (12)	Educate them (5, 7) as an active participant using dialogue (8, 9, 12)
Be a bad student: go straight to sleep, snore, eat, never participate, sit in back, watch TV on laptop (8, 11), show up 20min late to 50min class, cruise up to the top, social hour (12)		Be a good student: "Oh we can sit in the front. We can learn." (6, 7), double major or difficult major (10)
		Use different approaches for different people (7) and make response relevant (10)
	You can't stereotype good people, being nice will make stereotypes vanish (12)	The Golden Rule of Meritocracy: "Apply yourself" (3, 5, 8, 12)
		Provide alternative narrative (12), defy statistics as motivation (10, 11), "I've always lived with stereotypes and I've based my life on breaking those." (9)
		Exacerbate to eventually mitigate (9)
		Proud moments as a person vs as a stereotypes (3), comfort in own skin (10) and life outside of others' perceptions (11)
		Empower others to transform their lives (10)
Sag, curse, be aggressive		Look the part (12)
		Prove good stereotypes right (12)

Appendix B

Interview Protocols

1. How long have you played football? When did you first realize you were good? Who was the first person to tell you you were good?
Probe [e.g., specific person or event.]
2. How long have you been a student? Have you ever been told you were a good student? Who was the first person to tell you you were good?
Probe [e.g., specific person or event.]
3. Have you ever been diagnosed with a Learning Disability or ADHD? Can you describe your diagnosis?
4. Have you ever been diagnosed with a concussion? Describe how it felt. What kind of treatment did you receive? Did you continue playing? How do you rationalize playing football after experiencing a concussion?
5. How have your concussion(s) affected you?
Probe [In school? At home? With friends?]
6. How did you end up in this role as a football player at UW? Recruitment process? Scholarship process?
7. What will happen in your life after football? What career/future do you see for yourself? Does your academic advisor know this?
8. Do you see your football skills carrying over into other areas?
Probe [Making decisions under pressure, working with a team]
9. When you walk around on campus from point A to point B, what identifiers about yourself come to the front of your thoughts? How do you see yourself?
10. How do others perceive Black student-athletes on campus? What do you think they're thinking?
11. How do you perceive Black student-athletes on campus?
12. What is your earliest or most hurtful experience with stereotypes? Are there any stereotypes you've encountered at UW?
13. What are some ways you've tried to disprove stereotypes? Prove them?
Probe: [Have you ever perpetuated a stereotype?]
14. How would you like to handle the next stereotype moment in your life?
15. What is some advice you could give to the incoming Black freshmen football players about stereotypes?

Appendix C

ID #	Age	Year	ΣAIMS	ΣAIMI
3	21	Sr	43	40
4	19	Sph	47	52
5	22	Sr	53	50
6	21	Jr	49	40
7	19	Fr	56	46
8	21	Jr	59	32
9	19	Fr	62	50
10	22	Sr	32	40
11	21	Sr	46	40
12	22	Sr	53	55