

# **The Influence of Stereotype Threat on the Responses of Black Males at a Predominantly White College in the South**

by

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the impact of perceptions of stereotype threat on the responses of Black males who attend a predominantly White college in the South. The selected regional, mid-sized university has an African American male graduation rate which is approximately thirteen percentage points below the national average. A purposive sampling method was used to select fifteen Black male participants. Steele and Aronson's (1995) stereotype threat was applied in a vein inspired by Deaux et al. (2007), Massey and Fischer (2005), and Spencer (1999) to gauge the effect on the experiences of the Black males interviewed.

## **Introduction**

Stereotype threat surmises that African American students, when cognizant of the fact that a standardized test, task, or their mere presence, can in some way be perceived to measure their intelligence/value, will experience anxiety regarding their ability to perform in academic settings (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

This article examines the influence of stereotype threat on the experiences of African American males, as a marginalized group, at a predominantly White college in the South. The presence of African American males on a predominantly White college campus facilitates the creation of a milieu in which “by their mere presence, negative stereotypes are in the air” (Deaux, Bikmen, Gilkes, Ventuac, Joseph, Payne, & Steele, 2007, p. 386).

This study represents a unique application of stereotype threat. This research was influenced by Steele and Aronson's (1995) classic study and subsequent works that applied stereotype threat in distinct ways. Steele and Aronson's (1995) effort “focused on the immediate situational threat that derives from the broad dissemination on one's group—the threat of possibly being judged and treated stereotypically, or of possibly self-fulfilling such a stereotype” (p. 798). In a different application of stereotype threat, Deaux et al. (2007) evaluated how negative caricatures of African Americans affected first and second generation West Indian immigrants' overall educational and occupational attainment. Spencer et al. (1999) analyzed how when members of a group are negatively stereotyped in a social setting, the associated stigma carried an extra burden to perform well, which subsequently impaired their performance. Third, Massey and Fischer (2005) conducted a study of several thousand African American and Latino college students emphasizing the psychological impact of stereotype threat on their grade point averages at twenty-eight PWIs. This manuscript focuses on how the ‘stereotyped presence’ of African American males can create an environment that is ripe for the presence of stereotype threat and possibly impact social adjustment and grades (Feagin, 1998; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Finally, this study differs from others which have employed stereotype threat (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995, Sigelman & Tuch; Torres & Charles, 2004) by accentuating how perceptions of racism and negative stereotypes at a PWI in the South create a situation ripe for the presence of stereotype threat on a small case study of African American male students. Thus, the foundational research question for this study was, “what is the possible influence of stereotype threat on adjustment and academic success for African American male college students at a PWI in the South?”

## **Foundation for the Present Study**

African American college students graduate at a rate of 39.5% within a six year period (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2012). Despite the fact that this percentage represents an increase over a few years ago, this percentage still lags behind that of Whites students who graduate at a rate of 61.5 % (Hoston, Graves, & Fleming-Randle, 2010; Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2012; Robertson, 2012). Furthermore, Black men graduate from college at a rate of 36% compared to 47% for Black women (Robertson & Mason, 2008). Lastly, over 80% of Black students attend predominantly White colleges and universities (Hoston et al, 2010).

## **Review of Literature**

The review of literature centered largely on the perception of African American males as a marginalized group and on the variables identified by Solórzano et al. (2000), Robertson et al. (2005), Rodgers & Summers (2008), and Guiffrida & Douthit (2010) as pertinent to the social adjustment/matriculation of African American males at PWIs. The logic for using the variables identified in the aforementioned studies, and excluding other variables, was that the factors included in the study most frequently appeared in the scholarly offerings on African American collegiate academic success. Moreover, social adjustment has been demonstrated as the paramount predictor of minority student academic success (Furr & Elling, 2002; Hoston et al., 2010; McClure, 2006; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Schwitzer et al. 1999; Tinto, 1993).

### ***Faculty Involvement***

Several researchers (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Edelin-Freeman, 2004; Robertson et al., 2005) have discussed the importance of African American students in general, and African American male college students in particular, establishing positive relationships with faculty. Robertson (1995) posits that African American male students who have good relationships with White faculty members are more likely to be satisfied in the White college environment. Moreover, positive relationships with faculty facilitate healthy social and personal development amongst African American college students. This positive social adjustment is one of the best determinants of good academic performance (Cuyet, 1997; Robertson et al., 2005; Edelin-Freeman, 2004). Unfortunately, there is a relative dearth of studies that adequately examine the relationship between African American male students and White faculty members (Vasquez & Wainstein, 1990). The next section of the literature review will present pertinent information regarding financial aid and college success.

### ***Financial Assistance***

The importance of financial costs of college tuition and the relationship it holds to be able to successfully matriculate at predominantly White college cannot be understated. According to Simms et al. “financial assistance availability is a substantial predictor of African American success and performance” (1993, p. 258). Studies show (e.g., Feagin et al., 1996; Fleming, 1984; Furr & Ellin, 2002) that African American students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds perform better at predominantly White colleges than those from more modest or working class backgrounds. Correspondingly, the cost of university attendance is a major contributor to the fact that a disproportionate number of low income African American students attend two-year institutions at a higher rate than their white counterparts (Bush & Bush, 2010; Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002). Further, Patitu (2007) identifies cost of attendance as one of the major barriers faced by of college-bound African American males.

To add, the prospects for proper adjustment and academic success are even more tenuous because African American students who attend white colleges are more likely to come from racially-segregated neighborhoods than their White counterparts (Charles, Dinwiddie, & Massey, 2004). Racially segregated environments, at least for African Americans, are more intimately connected with residential segregation, economic inequality, and stressful/negative social networks which combine to undermine academic performance (Charles et al., 2004). Shapiro (2005) and Oliver and Shapiro (2006) elucidate that residential segregation results in a disproportionate likelihood that middle and lower class African Americans will be trapped in blighted urban schools, resulting in poorer academic preparation and a greater need for financial assistance to take developmental courses. Equally important, when it comes to the matriculation of African American males is the collegiate classroom atmosphere.

### ***Classroom Environment***

African American students perform better in classes where the course content is reflective of their experiences and interests (Robertson, 1995; Thompson & Louque, 2005). In other words, when professors integrate information about the accomplishments of African Americans into the content of the class, the interest of African American students increase and they are more likely to perform better (Robertson et al., 2005). In addition, Johnson (2001) posits that course offerings which include African-centered classes, i.e., classes which focus on the experiences of peoples of African descent across the Diaspora, have been shown to be more receptive to the adjustment needs of African American students at predominantly White institutions. Mentioning accomplishments by African Americans in a classroom setting can negate some of sting of the stereotype that African Americans have not contributed anything noteworthy to the history of the world (Karenga, 2010). A supportive classroom environment is an even greater necessity when juxtaposed with the fact the more African American males attend White as opposed to historically Black colleges (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Hoston et al, 2010; McClure, 2006; Robertson & Mason, 2008). Therefore, when White instructors engage African American students, the students feel as though they are part of the class environment and adjust better (Booker, 2007). Not surprisingly, more African American males graduate from predominantly Black colleges than from predominantly White colleges (Edelin-Freeman, 2004; Johnson, 2000; Robertson et al., 2005). Further, the indispensability of adequate academic and personal support mechanisms is delineated in the next segment of the literature review.

### *Academic and Personal Support Services*

According to McClure (2006), African American male students have the highest attrition rates of any collegiate demographic. Therefore, African American male students enter White college settings with special needs (Bush & Bush, 2010; Cuyet, 1997). This can be understood due to the fact that Bush and Bush (2010) opine that “African American male students on predominantly White campuses perceive that the institutional environment is adversarial, citing greater feelings of unfair treatment, a devaluing of their academic capabilities, and increasing discriminatory or racist practices” (p. 44). Paramount among those needs are: 1) a non-threatening educational environment that encourages the nurturance of academic success; and 2) the deconstruction of stereotypical negative images of African American males which are detrimental (e.g., non-intelligent, thugs), (Fleming, 1984). According to Hopkins (1997), African American male students enter the White university environment with a clear understanding that society expects negative outcomes from them. Therefore, it is imperative that campus administrators, if they are truly committed to the success of these students, provide programs (e.g., tutoring, mentoring, social adjustment) for African American males to counteract what Kunjufu (1986) calls the “failure syndrome.” Failure syndrome is a concept which suggests that African American male students often internalize the stereotypes held of them by school officials and teachers and these stereotypes ultimately become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This impact of negative educational stereotypes on African American males can be seen as early as the fourth grade and persist throughout their college years. An educational environment in which African American males are viewed in a pejorative manner may be viewed as a breeding ground for the emergence of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Additionally, the importance of extracurricular activities to the success of African American males at PWIs is discussed in the forthcoming section.

### *Extracurricular Activities*

Athletic participation is an important component of self-esteem that can help facilitate social adjustment and ensure college completion among male African American students (Pascarella & Smart, 1991). Likewise, fraternal membership in traditionally Black Greek-lettered organizations has been shown to support positive social and academic integration, which in turn is correlated with better grades and retention (McClure, 2006; Robertson, et al. 2005; Tinto, 1993). Conversely, both fraternal membership and athletic participation are often viewed, in a stereotypical sense, as the reasons African American males attend college (Beamon, 2012).

A positive associated with Black Greek-lettered organization membership is that it has been demonstrated to increase political involvement, community involvement, and facilitate the development of positive social networks among African American male college students (Jones, 1999; McClure, 2006). The aforesaid helps facilitate negating the influence of stereotype threat by building self-esteem and can even lead to getting good/better grades.

Moreover, having solid relationships with fraternity members can serve to counteract the alienation that African American males often experience on White college campuses (McClure, 2006). Moreover, an elucidation of the relevance of race and an understanding of racism in the collegiate experiences of African American males is expounded upon next.

### ***Understanding and Dealing with Racism***

Racism has been a persistent impediment to the success of African American students in White college environments (Feagin et al., 1996). African American students often enter traditionally White universities with expectations of being accepted as equals (Suarez-Balcazar, Orellan-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003). However, often to their dismay, the predominantly White university can be a hostile environment (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993).

Negotiating racism is of special importance to African American male college students. African American males have traditionally been a primary target of disdain by the larger White society and the predominantly White college setting is no different (Ani, 1994; Bush & Bush, 2010; Feagin et al., 1996). One of the primary explanations for the relevance of racism is the reality that African American males have higher university attrition rates than their minority male counterparts (Flowers, 2006). Racial prejudice leads to feelings of social alienation and increased subjection to disparate treatment based upon negative stereotypes, which creates a hostile university milieu often resulting in stress, anxiety and poor academic performance (Fleming, 1984). Thus, the combination of racial prejudice, social alienation and the stereotypes regarding African American males make race a paramount issue for African American male student retention at predominantly White colleges (Campbell & Fleming, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Massey & Fischer, 2005; Singer, 2005; Spencer, 1999).

### **Method**

This study utilized in-depth interviews along with participant observation to identify and examine responses of African American males to the factors that are relevant to the retention of African American males at predominantly White universities. The studies identified variables most often associated with the adjustment and academic success of African American students at PWIs (Furr & Elling, 2002; Hoston et al., 2010; McClure, 2006; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Schwitzer et al., 1999; Tinto, 1993). The factors perceived as most conducive to environment ripe for stereotype threat, i.e., those from which perceptions of ability could be discerned, formed the foundation for the formulation of the interview questions.

The questions focused on the areas of: faculty involvement, classroom environment, student support services, and dealing with racism (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Robertson et al., 2005; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Solórzano et al., 2000). Qualitative interviews were useful to examine the topic thoroughly and to tap into the rich textual meanings of the students' responses.

### *Qualitative Methodology*

In this study, fifteen interviews were conducted with African American male students at a mid-sized, regional university in the South from August 2011 through April 2012. Purposive sampling was employed to solicit participants. Purposive or convenience sampling was employed due to the ease at which participants could be located. Respondents were solicited by posting flyers across campus in dorms, the placement of announcements in the student union, the university dining halls, and by the author's participation in an African American male mentoring program. Lastly, all participants were given pseudo-names to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality.

Rapport was established by the author's participation in the aforementioned mentoring program and by advising several African American student organizations that contained many of the study's participants. These networks with African American male students enabled the researcher to be an active member in the research setting (Singleton, 1993). To add, a large proportion of the study's participants had previously interacted with the author and felt comfortable being interviewed by him. Consequently, developing a rapport with the African American male student population allowed the interviews to flow smoothly and to ask deeper probing questions.

The data were obtained via in-depth interviews. The interviews averaged approximately one hour each with longest interview lasting approximately one hour and thirty minutes with the shortest lasting approximately thirty-five minutes. A possible caveat associated with a qualitative study is that some scholars consider a qualitative study less reliable but more valid than a quantitative study (Babbie, 2001). Further, it is possible that another researcher would have received different interview responses from the participants.

Stereotype threat theory served as the lens through which the interviews were analyzed. In other words, the interview questions addressed areas and situations related to African American male student matriculation (e.g., the perception of racism and negative racial stereotypes) which could result in a milieu ripe for stereotype threat and inhibit African American male student adjustment and optimal academic performance. The pressure and uneasiness related to a perceived fear of either fulfilling stereotypes or being judged stereotypically has been shown to impact social adjustment and, by extension, prospects for academic success (Massey & Fischer, 2005; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Steele and Aronson, 1995; Solórzano et al., 2000).

The interview questions addressed the major factors related to Black male student matriculation. Thus, the research was guided by the following questions/statements perceived to tap into situations that facilitated an atmosphere favorable for the emergence of stereotype threat:

- Describe your interactions with faculty members at this institution.
- Are faculty members involved in the development of African American male students? If so, how?
- Since you have been attending this institution, has a lack of money ever been a problem?
- Did the university provide information on how to obtain financial aid? If so, what were you told? Was the information helpful?
- Do you feel that your professors infuse information that is relevant to African Americans in your classes (e.g., information pertaining to race, discrimination, and social class)? Why or why not?
- Does your university offer classes that focus on the experiences (e.g., Black history, Black studies)? Why or why not?
- Are African Americans male students encouraged to participate in intramurals, social organizations, student government?
- Are there Pan-Hellenic, i.e., Black Greek-letter organizations, on campus?
- Do you feel as though you are in a racially hostile environment?
- Describe the racial climate on your college campus.

To identify the themes that were presented within this paper, all narrative responses were content analyzed using grounded theory and an open-coding process (Berg, 2007; Holsti, 1969; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In order to concisely elicit themes from the interview responses, words and phrases were the units of analysis. Specifically, coding involved examining all responses, keeping track of emerging themes, assigning words and symbols to each coding category, and examining how the themes presented are specifically related to the students' perception of the PWI environment. To assess the reliability of the coding system, a list of all codes and their definitions along with the transcribed responses was given to an outsider who then coded the transcripts based on this pre-determined list of codes. The outside coder was selected due to their experience with coding and analyzing narrative data. After a 97% coding reliability rate was established between the researchers and the outside coder, it was determined that a working coding system had been established. In order to adequately control for reliability, a second outside coder was selected to code and analyze the narrative data after the initial coding reliability had been established. The reliability established by the outside coder was 95%. Therefore, the robust contextual meanings of the interviews could be gleaned and determined if the participants were impacted by a milieu which was ripe for stereotype threat.



## Findings

The data were organized around three emergent themes from our grounded theory analysis of the data: (a) Faculty involvement as facilitator of stereotype threat; (b) Classroom environment as a facilitator of stereotype threat; and (c) Perceptions of racism as a facilitator of stereotype threat. The “faculty involvement as a facilitator of stereotype threat” theme was indicative of males who perceived that they were talked to, handled, or viewed in a stereotypical manner by faculty member(s). The “classroom environment as a facilitator of stereotype threat” theme was a classroom environment in which males were made to feel inferior or less than other students because of race. The “perceptions of racism as facilitator of stereotype threat” entailed any situation within the campus surroundings in which the males viewed themselves as being slighted to some degree because of their race, outside of the classroom. [See Table 1 for Themes, Definitions, and Supporting Commentary].

Table 1: *Themes, Definition, and Supporting Commentary*

Theme	Definition	Supporting Commentary
Faculty involvement at facilitator of stereotype threat	Words and/or phrases that were indicative of being talked to, handled, or being viewed in a stereotypical manner by a faculty member.	“The professors tend to lean toward White students. The relationships that they have with White students are different.”
Classroom involvement as a facilitator of stereotype threat	Words and/or phrases which made males feels less than or inferior to others because of race or culture in the classroom.	“I really do not know why my professors do not feel it is important to mention Black accomplishments in class.”
Perceptions of racism as a facilitator of stereotype threat	Words and/or phrases which were reflective of any situation, outside the classroom, in which males perceived that they were being slighted because of race.	“At night, you have more African American students and the campus police do not act pleasantly towards Black students.”

## **Theme 1: Faculty Involvement as Facilitator of Stereotype Threat**

Thirteen African American males (86%) gave responses that fit the theme of “faculty involvement as a facilitator of stereotype threat.” College students tend to value the opinions that faculty members have of them (Furr and Elling, 2002). More importantly to African American males, since they are often viewed through a narrow societal lens, faculty opinions or perceptions of those opinions can go a long way in determining the degree to which the African American male student feels comfortable and that he can be successful in the White college environment (Feagin et al., 1996 ). Additionally, college professors, in a position of power when it comes to faculty-student relations, can be influenced to be involved or not to be involved in the development of African American male university students based upon stereotypical notions. Thirdly, since professors are in a position of authority in the college classroom, and by extension are viewed as the arbiters of intelligence, their involvement in the college experience of African American males goes a long way in ameliorating some of the tensions associated with navigating hostile terrain (Feagin et al., 1996).

The following responses are evaluations of faculty involvement by African American male students in which stereotypes determined the level of interaction or the threat of living up to a stereotype can be perceived as determining how the interaction was framed. The responses below were to the following questions: “Are faculty members involved in the development of African American male students? If so, how?”

The professors tend to lean toward the White students. The relationships that they have with the White students are different. They (the White professors), have stronger relationships with the White students. It seems as though the White professors are more comfortable with the White students. They can joke with them more than the African American students can. <sup>1</sup>

No not really; only if the students come to them. Often, the students are afraid to ask for help. If the interaction is not going to help them (the White professors) they will not do it. For instance, getting a grade changed. In my department, the professors are accessible. However, I have heard that it is more difficult for African American males in other majors. I interact with my professors, thus, they help me. If you do not act as though you need help or want to interact, they will not help you. <sup>2</sup>

I would say no. I feel we (Black males) have a low graduation rate and get fewer jobs after graduation. I feel the professors do not help Black males excel and do well. They do not always want us to do as well in life as whites.

I think they (White professors) do not want to see Black males succeed because we will be competing with them for jobs. For instance, I had a test due and one of my family members was sick and I missed the morning class, but I came back and tried to take it but the professor said that it was too late. However, during the final exam a White girl came to class an hour late and he still let her take it.<sup>3</sup>

Steve (pseudo-name) provided the first response and was asked, as were each of the African American males, “are the professors involved in the development of African American male students?” The importance of examining the involvement of faculty as a sign of adherence to, or rejection of, stereotypes, can be explained several ways. First, when it comes to the proffering of negative stereotypes regarding the perceived intelligence of African Americans, academicians (e.g., Grant, 1916; Myrdal, 1944), were some of the first presenters of these absurd racist stereotypical notions into public discourse. Concomitantly, the “hallowed halls” of academia, where many of the intellectual, physical, and social stereotypes of African Americans flourished, are bastions of “stereotype threat.” Secondly, involvement and interaction can mitigate the need by African American males to adopt a tough veneer or posture, which often is employed by African American males to deal with external exigencies and subordination (Kunjufu, 1986). James’ (pseudo-name) experience does not reek of subordination or of being perceived stereotypically. James explicates that perhaps if African American students reached out more, collegiate faculty would reach out more to them. Two things can be gleaned from his point. Foremost, is that if African American males let go of the perceptions that they are being stereotyped and engage professors, the professors will view them as just like any “other” student, therefore mitigating ideas that can foment based on pejorative beliefs about them. There are several precedents in the available literature that suggest when faculty and students interact, the likelihood of optimal social adjustment and academic success increases (Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). The second idea that can be taken from James’ comment is that perhaps the threat of being perceived in stereotypical ways facilitates feelings about African American male students that are disparaging in other endeavors, i.e., lazy, ambitionless, and dumb. These ways of thinking may result in trepidation upon broaching the idea of approaching White faculty (Niemann, O’ Connor, & McClorie, 1998).

Finally, Ron (pseudo-name) delineates a view of stereotype threat that can be evaluated differently. His view is that White males, i.e., professors, view African American males as threatening to the dominant White power structure and believe that helping them can contribute to their own subsequent annihilation. To some, the aforesaid notion may seem far-fetched, but the literature has shown (e.g., Robertson, 1995, 2008; Karenga, 2010) that White males view African American males as a threat to the White-dominated power structure in academia and the larger society, and that contributes to the greater socioeconomic advancement of African American females.

## **Theme 2: Classroom Environment as a Facilitator of Stereotype Threat**

Eleven African American males (73%) gave responses that could be characterized by the theme “classroom environment as a facilitator of stereotype threat.” The classroom environment plays an important role in determining the extent to which African American males are able to adjust and be successful in predominantly White college settings. Further, studies have shown that when African American students have positive interactions with faculty and classes include information that African American students deem relevant to their experiences, the chances for optimal social adjustment and academic success increase exponentially (Johnson, 2001; McClure, 2006; Robertson et al., 2005). The following responses provided by African American males were to the questions, “Do you feel that your professors, infuse information that is relevant to African Americans in your classes (e.g., information pertaining to race, discrimination, and social class)? Why or why not? Does your university offer classes that focus on the experiences (e.g., Black history, Black studies)? Why or why not?”

No, I have not experienced that. Some classes are not amenable to that, like chemistry. My sociology class is the only class that even mentions anything about Black people. Maybe the professors do not feel that information about Black people is important. I really do not know why my professors feel it is not important to mention Black accomplishments in class.<sup>4</sup>

No, not really. African Americans go through a totally different way of learning. We have to be given a chance to learn and express our ideas in class. The classes are not offered because it is a problem finding qualified professors to teach courses relevant to the African American experience.<sup>5</sup>

I have only heard of two; an African American sociology class and an African American literature course. Because the school is predominantly White there are not any courses (that focus on the African American experience). Also, I believe if there were more Black professors, there would be more courses. I do not know why there are not more African American professors.<sup>6</sup>

Steve’s (pseudo-name) answer was to the questions that asked “Do you feel that your professors, infuse information that is relevant to African Americans in your classes (e.g., information pertaining to race, discrimination, and social class)? Why or why not?” Steve can be viewed as having expressed two sentiments. First, that there are no course offerings relevant to the interests and concerns of African American students; that there is only one course that focuses on the experiences of African American students. Second, there are not enough professors on campus qualified to teach Black/African studies courses and that the literature is replete with examples of White scholars holding on to the idea that Black/African/African American/Africana studies are not as important as the standard courses (Ani, 1994; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Karenga, 2010).

The thoughts of Jason (pseudo-name) and James appear to very similar to those of Steve. Jason points to a lack of commitment and investment in black students via available course offerings at the institution. On the other hand, James explains that the lack of African American professors on campus is problematic. Both concerns, relevant courses and African American professors, can mitigate the discomfort associated with stereotypes and contributes to proper social adjustment and academic success by making the university environment less hostile (Cuyet, 1997; Fleming, 1984; Hopkins, 1997). Further, Gallien and Peterson (2005) and Tinto (1993) posit that minority faculty can ease the adjustment that African American students have to make to the predominantly White college, reduce their (African American students') belief in negative stereotypes that exist about themselves, and serve as mentors (Robertson, 2012).

### **Theme 3: Perceptions of Racism as a Facilitator of Stereotype Threat**

Nine African American males (60%) produced narrative responses indicative of the theme "perceptions of racism as a facilitator of stereotype threat." Racism is a persistent feature of American society (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). In turn, racial issues are prevalent on contemporary white college campuses (Robertson et al., 2005). Moreover, it stands to reason that since African American males have been portrayed historically as criminals, thugs, and hustlers, they are not immune to stereotypes beliefs as they enter the predominantly White college environment (Feagin et al., 1996). The aforementioned stereotypes can result in undue stress and contribute to a hostile environment (Robertson & Mason, 2008). Consequently, the participants in this study were asked the following questions in order to discern how the threat of confirming a negative stereotype impacted their social adjustment and likelihood of academic success. The participants responded to following questions, "Do you feel as though you are in a racially hostile climate? Why or why not?"

Yes, I do. Let's say if I was to go to the library and sit by a White female. She would instantly move her purse or move herself to avoid sitting by a Black man. I guess she would do this because of the stereotypes that she has been exposed to on television.<sup>7</sup> I think we have hidden racism on campus. It is hidden during the day. At night, you have more African American students and the campus police do not act pleasantly towards students. In other words, there is more racial profiling. At night, a police officer will stand at the gates (of a dormitory) and card all of the Black students who enter and leave the dorms mainly because there are primarily Black students in the dorms at night.<sup>8</sup> There is definitely racial division on campus between Black and White students. You notice that Black student's hangout with Black folks, and White students hangout with White folks. In this area, with its lily-White suburban towns, segregation is what Whites are used to. The fraternities and sororities segregate themselves from each other. The fraternities are the ones who set the social climate for the university.<sup>9</sup>

Cedric (pseudo-name), Tony (pseudo-name), and DeSean's (pseudo-name) statements clearly illustrate the impact of stereotypes on the White college campus. Cedric recalls an experience with a White female student on campus in which he basically just sat next to her and she clutched her purse. The reaction of the White female student can aptly suggest that her feeling threatened had origins in the idea that African Americans are inherently criminals (Alexander, 2010). One can assume that the threat associated with such stereotypical ideas are firmly embedded within the background assumptions of college students since the literature shows that racial stereotypes about African Americans and Whites are understood by both African Americans and Whites by age seven (Niemann et al., 1998; Steele, 1997).

DeSean's situation, as mentioned in the preceding paragraph, discusses the racial profiling of black students by campus police officers. Alexander (2010) can be surmised as suggesting that the racial profiling of African Americans in general and African American males in particular, is because of stereotypes. Therefore, one might ask, "How are campus police officers immune to such stereotypes?" especially when the African American males are occupying a milieu in which it is perceived that they do not belong? Such profiling can contribute to African American male alienation and higher attrition rates (Campbell & Fleming, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Singer, 2005).

## **Discussion**

In this study, using stereotype threat as a lens, the objective was to examine how African American males' knowledge of negative stereotypes about themselves may have impacted their social adjustment, and by extension, their prospects for matriculation/academic success at predominantly White colleges. Since most African American males attend predominantly White colleges, studies that critically analyze the influence of negative stereotypes cannot be understated (Gallien, Jr, & Peterson, 2005; Robertson, 2012). It is hoped that this exploration into the impact of extreme prejudicial evaluations of African American males will spur other studies in a society that is purported to be post-racial and free of the influence of prejudice and race (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Such studies are increasingly important for several reasons, such as: 1) high African American male attrition rates at colleges in general, and White colleges and universities in particular; 2) to illustrate the need for more African American collegiate faculty; 3) to point out the need for more classes which address issues of relevance to African Americans; and 4) finally, the development of programs and the enactment of initiatives to decrease the alienation experienced by African American college students at predominantly White educational institutions.

This topic represents a relatively new application of stereotype threat theory. Traditionally, stereotype threat has examined the effect of negative perceptions regarding standardized test performance (Steel & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat has not only been studied in regard to African Americans, but also women (e.g., stereotypically being unable to perform as well as men in math and science courses), athletes, gay men, White men, individuals of low socioeconomic status, and Latinos to name a few (Bosson, Haymovitz, & Pinel, 2004; Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002; Spencer & Castano, 2007). On the other hand, African American males and the pejorative impact of their experiences while attending predominantly White colleges has been a topic of extensive inquiry (Feagin et al., 1996; McClure, 2006; Smedley et al., 1993; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). This inquiry has reaffirmed earlier studies that delved into this phenomenon (Fleming, 1984; Robertson et al., 2005; Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Tinto, 1993). The present study adds to previous studies in its emphasis on how the college milieu itself may facilitate an atmosphere that is ripe for the emergence of stereotype threat instead of a standardized test or the pressure associated with performing adequately in a particular course. It is believed that this work can act as a catalyst for further exploration into this topic and lead to the development of programs to ameliorate the impact of denigrating portrayals of African American males on predominantly White campuses.

Several items must be taken into consideration when dissecting the efficacy of this study. First, the size and region of the selected university must be assessed when scrutinizing the findings, because the South, as a region, with its legacies of Jim Crow and slavery, has a checkered past when it comes to its treatment of African Americans in all walks of life (Alexander, 2010; Karenga, 2010). So, it stands to reason that African American students, seemingly by the geographic location of the university alone, possessed a greater likelihood of encountering situations influenced by racial stereotypes. Second, respondents were selected via non-probability sampling. Therefore, no generalizations could be made to the larger population of African American students that attend predominantly white colleges. Additionally, there was no way to guard against researcher bias in selection of the sample.

In future studies on this topic, I will employ a random sample so that the findings can be extended to the experiences of African American male students at PWIs across the United States. A corollary problem of the sampling technique dilemma was the small sample size. I only interviewed fifteen African American males. The small sample size was a major problem, woefully inadequate in proportion to the size of the university and the African American male student population, and therefore I consider this an exploratory case study. The present study could have provided more intellectual insight into the topic of study had I included more participants. I tried earnestly to solicit participants by disseminating flyers across campus and placing announcements in the student union, dining halls, and by contacting fraternities and social/campus organizations. Further, the study could have been improved with addition of a comparison group of African American female college students.

The aforementioned is encouraged because the literature has shown (e.g., Fleming, 1984; Gallien, Jr. & Peterson, 2005; Robertson et al., 2005) that experiences of African American females are not the same as males, when it comes to academic success, at predominantly white colleges. Finally, there is only one scholarly precedent, i.e., Massey & Fischer (2005), for the application of stereotype threat in a manner similar to how it was employed in the present study. Previous studies (e.g., Bosson, Haymovitz, & Pinel, 2004; Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002; Spencer & Castano, 2007) applied stereotype threat in myriad ways, but none examined specifically how the white college environment may produce setting that is ripe for the existence of stereotype threat because of the mere presence of African American males on campus. It is ultimately desired that the present study serve as a catalyst for future explorations into the impact of negative stereotypes on the social adjustment and academic success of African American males at predominantly White colleges.

## **Recommendations**

Moving forward, there are several areas that PWIs can concentrate on to help increase the academic success of African American males. The key areas of emphasis have been explicated in several scholarly works (Bush & Bush, 2010; Davis, 2004; Gallien, Jr. & Peterson, 2005; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). To provide a brief and succinct summary, the focal areas are delineated below:

First, recruit African American faculty, staff, and students. This suggestion is connected to the findings on the importance of a classroom environment that looks upon African American males as capable of matriculation and in which African American males are not looked upon with disdain and condescension (Ancis et al., 2000). Second, develop programs or workshops to instruct African American males on how to acquire university resources that are correlated with increased retention (e.g., financial aid, mentoring, tutoring). This endorsement is related to the literature which posits that finances and proper mentoring are important components of African American male retention and graduation (Bush & Bush, 2010; Gallien, Jr. & Peterson, 2005). Third, offer courses that are relevant to the African American experience (e.g., Black studies or Africana/African American studies courses). The importance of this recommendation is that it emphasizes the findings centered on class environment and faculty involvement (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). The literature promulgates the notion that when African American contributions are infused into class content, they feel better about the university and the university (e.g., faculty, staff, and administrators) is more likely to feel better about them (Campbell & Fleming, 2000; Robertson & Mason, 2008). Finally, create an African American student pipeline by partnering with local communities and school districts to construct and implement pre-college. This recommendation correlates with the findings concerned with the White college environment. In other words, the literature reveals that when African American students engage in some sort of pre-college or preparatory program, they are more likely to perform well at the PWI (Gallien, Jr. & Peterson, 2005).



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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Interview #5 (Steve)
- <sup>2</sup> Interview #10 (James)
- <sup>3</sup> Interview #11 (Ron)
- <sup>4</sup> Interview #5 (Steve)
- <sup>5</sup> Interview #9 (Jason)
- <sup>6</sup> Interview #10 (James)
- <sup>7</sup> Interview #3 (Cedric)
- <sup>8</sup> Interview #6 (Tony)
- <sup>9</sup> Interview #13 (DeSean)