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# Black Male Persistence in Spite of Facing Stereotypes in College: A Phenomenological Exploration

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## **Black Male Persistence in Spite of Facing Stereotypes in College: A Phenomenological Exploration**

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*Stereotypes often create threatening environments for Black males on college campuses. This study sought to break the deficit narrative surrounding Black males in college by highlighting how they persisted despite facing stereotypes. Six participants were included in this study. Through interviews and naturalistic observations, we explored how participants articulated their experiences with stereotypes, how they dealt with those experiences, how the experiences shaped future endeavors, and how they used strategies to dispel stereotypes and persist through threatening experiences. Findings suggest (a) the participants dealt with internalized feelings due to stereotypes; (b) stereotypes were reinforced in various ways; and, (c) they persisted despite stereotypes by confronting, ignoring, and dispelling stereotypes, as well as alleviating pressures associated with stereotypes. In addition, the participants offered advice for other Black males as they matriculate through college. The paper closes with a discussion, which includes implications for practice and future research. Keywords: Black Males, College, Persistence, Phenomenology, Stereotype Threat, Stereotypes*

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Black males are often negatively stereotyped in college settings. Given this, the threatening environments created by stereotypes can affect Black males' academic success while they are enrolled at a college or university. Steele and Aronson (1995) have referred to this threatening environment driven by negative stereotypes as stereotype threat. When the presence of Black males on college campuses is continually questioned, they often battle internal and external pressures related to their academic ability and performance in college as a result of racialized stereotypes, hindering their true intellectual ability and potential (Museus, 2008; Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Harper (2006a, 2006b) has stated that Black males are consistently overlooked, undermined, and stereotyped as uneducated, lazy, and violent. Further, Steele (2010) contends that the social and psychological processes stereotypes induce often lead to lower rates of academic success and performance for Black males enrolled in college. Thus, the barriers fueled by racial stereotypes that Black male students face contribute to their social, psychological, and academic development in college. For example, Black males face challenges pertaining to campus racial climates, self-esteem, sense of belonging, co-curricular involvement and engagement, academic achievement, faculty/staff relationships, and persistence (Harper, 2015; Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Tinto, 1993). In turn, disparities related to these various factors, among others, create disparities in rates of retention, graduation, persistence, and the overall success of Black males in college in comparison to their collegiate counterparts (Berryhill & Bee, 2007; Harper, 2006a; Steele, 1999, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Black males in college regarding the academic, social, and psychological influences stereotypes have on Black male achievement in college. Further, this study examined how Black males persist through college

despite facing stereotypes. Finally, this study sought to identify strategies that may prove effective when responding to or dealing with racial stereotypes. The research questions that guided this study were:

- What stereotypes do Black males experience in college?
- What are the perceptions of Black males in college regarding the influences that stereotypes have on Black male achievement in college?
- In what ways are Black males persisting in college in spite of facing stereotypes?

### Literature Review

The longstanding issue of student persistence consists of countless identifiers that may or may not contribute to a student's ability to graduate from college. For instance, Astin's (1984) theory of involvement highlighted the significance of co-curricular engagement in student success, while Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure related student persistence to separation, transition, and incorporation into the collegiate environment. Similar to Astin, Tinto placed precedence on the relationship between co-curricular involvement and student persistence. However, Tinto also originally suggested that students must separate, transition, and incorporate into the collegiate realm if they were to persist through college. While Tinto's original work is compelling, in his revised work, Tinto (2006-2007) contended that underrepresented student populations—primarily composed of students of color—should, in fact, remain connected to past communities, churches, tribes, or family as an essential part of their persistence through college. For Black males specifically, Harper (2006b) also noted that these support systems are an essential part of their persistence to and through the collegiate realm.

Although these theories have provided insight regarding how and why students persist, gaps remain in the rates of persistence among students of color, specifically Black males. For example, numerous studies have recognized the gaps in persistence between Black males and their White male counterparts (e.g., see Berryhill & Bee, 2007; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006a, 2006b, 2012, 2015; Ross et al., 2012; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Comparatively speaking, Black males graduate from college at lower rates than all other racial and ethnic minoritized groups (Harper, 2012). (We use *minoritized groups* rather than *minority groups* to indicate race and racism as social constructions and that people of color are *minoritized* as a result of White privilege and the oppression of people of color (see Harper, 2012)).

In 2004, the mean graduation rate for Black males was 44.3%, while White males graduated at a rate of 61.4% and Black females graduated at a rate of 53.2% (Harper, 2006a). To explain and rectify these gaps, various psychological, social, and institutional factors associated with influential indicators of Black male persistence have been shown to positively or negatively affect Black male experiences in higher education (Berryhill & Bee, 2007; Reynolds, Sneva, & Beehler, 2010; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007).

During stereotype threat situations, Black males may experience an array of emotions and feelings, which could include shock, confusion, surprise, anxiety, anger, vulnerability, or fear (Harper, 2015). As a result, Black males may feel the need to internalize feelings and emotions stemming from stereotype threats to seemingly ignore the situation at hand. This internalization may stem from instances of *racial battle fatigue*, or the result of students being fed up with policing others' racial ignorance (McGee & Martin, 2011). For instance, when subtle racial slurs, comments, or phrases occur, minoritized students often have to police, call out, or bring awareness to the racial undertone of the comment or remark made. As a result, minoritized students experience instances of fatigue or exhaustion due to the volume of

instances that occur in collegiate settings (McGee & Martin, 2011). Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) stated that these coping strategies of internalization can lead to severe and traumatic psychological stress. Such internalization has been linked to psychological effects, including feelings of vulnerability and loneliness, which foster lower levels of self-esteem and can damage mental health (Smith et al., 2007). On the other hand, Harper's (2015) work surrounding resistant responses to stereotypes suggested that students refused to ignore microaggressions, which are "subtle, covert racial attacks that are often subconscious in nature" (L. D. Patton, 2009, p. 723), and racial slurs by addressing stereotypes when they arose; these individuals rejected the idea of suppressing or internalizing feelings and emotions in the wake of microaggressions and stereotypes.

Black males have consistently reported having their academic abilities and talents questioned, negated, or attributed to affirmative action, athletics, or programs/scholarships related to their race or socioeconomic status (Harper, 2012, 2015; McGee & Martin, 2011). Additionally, Black males are often disproportionately represented in interactions with police officers, are heavily surveilled, and are seen as out of place or "fitting the description" (Smith et al., 2007). Black males have also reported that their White peers assumed they knew where to get drugs and how to dance, used slang terms or broken English, came from impoverished neighborhoods, were athletically talented, and had a scary or threatening appearance (Harper, 2015). With this, it is important to note Smith et al.'s (2007) study which found, in many instances, when Black males were stereotyped on campus (e.g., when their intellectual abilities were contested due to race) they had feelings of confusion, resentment, anxiety, avoidance, and fear which led to a lack in sense of belonging at the institution. Smith et al. (2007) concluded that these emotions Black males feel as a result of stereotypes and racial microaggressions influence their ability to perform academically and affect them socially. Alternatively, when students become embedded into university communities on social and psychological levels, their rates of persistence increase (Astin, 1984; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Harper, 2006b, 2012; Tinto, 1993).

Still, the experiences of Black males in college continually show lower levels of engagement (Harper, 2006a). Scholars have examined this phenomenon and have identified key contributors to Black male social engagement. They include, but are not limited to, peer support, mentoring, faculty interactions, and campus climate (Barker & Avery, 2012; Harper, 2006b; Hausmann et al., 2009). Additionally, Harper (2006b) found that peer support was an indicator of success among Black male college students. Respondents in his study reported their peers provided them with leverage and support in times of need, advancement, and achievement in their collegiate endeavors. Further, faculty, staff members, administrators, and university departments/centers have also been shown to counteract some of the burdens stereotypes play in the advancement and achievement of Black males in college (Barker & Avery, 2012; Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). This highlights the importance of institutional factors in supporting, enriching, and advancing Black male collegiate success.

Overall, it has been made clear that the positive interactions Black students have with faculty and staff members contribute to increases in persistence efforts for those students (Barker & Avery, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). In an effort to combat these trends and experiences for Black males, higher education professionals have developed specialized programs, orientations, and campus/community groups/organizations. It has been documented that Black male leadership programs help students get involved in campus organizations, increase faculty engagement, and build community among participants (Sutton & Terrell, 1997). Further, multicultural centers, Black student unions, and Black cultural centers provide students with a comforting space on campus where they are able to express their opinions and views without being viewed, judged, or stereotyped for doing so

(Barker & Avery, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Sutton & Terrell, 1997). Initiatives such as these have been shown to improve Black male persistence rates as they continue to increase Black males' sense of belonging, peer support, out-of-class faculty engagement, and co-curricular involvement (Barker & Avery, 2012; Broman, 1997; Harper, 2006b, 2012; LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997).

Although efforts have been made to combat the aforementioned barriers to Black male collegiate success, issues regarding racial stereotypes and Black male persistence still exist. This study brings to light the fact that Black males are continuously stereotyped in collegiate settings while documenting the ways in which they persist. This study's anti-deficit approach is the foundation upon which this study was conducted and addresses a gap made clear in the literature:

In what ways are Black males persisting in college in spite of facing stereotypes? To this end, the intent of the present study is to bring light to the issue at hand and to document the lived experiences of Black male collegians persisting despite stereotypes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In light of the racialized stereotypes Black males face on collegiate campuses and given the purpose of the current study, three theoretical frameworks were used to shape this study: critical race theory, stereotype threat, and Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework.

#### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the mid-1970s from an earlier legal movement called critical legal studies after realizations that the Civil Rights Movement had become somewhat stagnant (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Similar to the Civil Rights Movement, CRT is rooted in issues pertaining to history, economics, group- and self-interest, feelings, and the unconscious (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). It is a combination of thoughts and ideas by scholars who devoted their time and efforts to enlightening others on societal issues pertaining to race, racism, and power (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Five common tenets of CRT are (a) the normalcy of racism, (b) interest convergence, (c) counter-storytelling, (d) intersectionality and anti-essentialism, and (5) Whiteness as property (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

First, CRT notes that racism is normal and addresses ways in which society operates daily regarding the common experiences of people of color, suggesting that racism is seemingly a "normal science" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 7). Second, interest convergence is a tenet within CRT that explains the motivational factors compelling advocacy for minoritized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT theorists contend Whites must have something in it for them (e.g., extrinsic rewards) to actively pursue or advance people of color rather than an intrinsic motivation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

The third tenet highlighted is counter-storytelling. Ladson-Billings (1998) suggested that stories and counternarratives add necessary contextual contours to objective perspectives. In addition, Ladson-Billings stated that naming one's own reality, or telling one's story, seeks to highlight the significance of the perspective of the storyteller.

The fourth tenet couples intersectionality and anti-essentialism. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) defined intersectionality as "the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combinations play out in various settings" (p. 51). Thus, the complexities surrounding multiple identities construct individual and group experiences within society. Coupled with intersectionality is anti-essentialism. Essentialism is the notion that all people identifying within the same group, think, act, and believe in the same way about the

same things (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), “CRT scholars guard against essentializing the perspectives and experiences of racial groups” (p. 59) and contend the amount of within-group differences is greater among ethnic or racial groups than between-group differences.

The final tenet we highlight is Whiteness as property. Harris (1993) noted, “The ability to define, possess, and own property has been a central feature of power in America” (p. 53). Harris argued that being White has a material and social value and introduces four property functions of Whiteness: (a) rights of disposition, (b) rights to use and enjoyment, (c) reputation and status property, and (d) the absolute right to exclude. The property of being White is linked to inherent privileges Blacks are aware of and will never possess.

### **Stereotype Threat**

Steele (1997) defined stereotype threat as occurring when a negative stereotype becomes self-relevant “for something one is doing, for an experience one is having, or for a situation one is in, that has relevance to one’s self-definition” (p. 616). For stereotype threat to exist, the individual the stereotype is imposed upon must identify with the domain being evaluated (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Therefore, the stereotyped individual must identify in some way with the identity being challenged for stereotype threat to exist (Steele, 2010). Further, Steele (2010) stated that the threatening environment created by negative stereotypes is generated from the “pressure not to confirm the stereotype for fear of being judged or treated in terms of it” (p. 89).

Stereotype threat is a situational threat that can affect any group of individuals for which stereotypes exist (Steele, 1997). Specifically, Black men in college are more prone to experiencing stereotypes in general and are thus more susceptible to stereotype threats and the threatening environments that stereotypes create (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

### **Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework**

Harper’s (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework is one of few models aimed at reshaping the view of Black males within higher education contexts. This framework derives from 30 years of literature focused on Black males in education and society, and is grounded in sociology, psychology, gender studies, and educational theories. Harper (2007) stated that some of the guiding research used to inform this framework focused on “understanding why [B]lack men excel instead of adding to the already well-understood reasons that they fail” (p. 61).

The anti-deficit achievement framework consists of a series of probing questions that researchers, educators, and administrators can direct at Black males about their experiences to and through college. Questions are broken into three categories: (a) pre-college socialization and readiness, (b) college achievement, and (c) post-college success (Harper, 2012). Further, these three overarching sections are subcategorized into what Harper (2012) calls “eight researchable dimensions of achievement (familial factors, K-12 school forces, out-of-school college prep resources, classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, enriching educational experiences, graduate school enrollment, and career readiness)” (p. 5).

### **Researchers’ Positionalities**

As common in qualitative research to improve trustworthiness and openness, we thought it would be important to describe our positionalities in relation to the study.

TB: I am a Biracial male. My father identifies as a Black male and my mother identifies as a White female. I grew up in the Southeastern United States and have been subject to stereotypes, microaggressions, and oppression in various environments. My scholarly interests include social justice issues in the U.S. higher education contexts due to my personal experiences during my educational endeavors in high school and college. More specifically, my intent with this study and others concerning African-American/Black males is to bring light to the injustices plaguing African-American/Black males in higher education, while also encouraging success, innovation, and advancement through an anti-deficit approach. My hope is to inspire African American/Black male collegians as they continue to persist through environments that threaten their existence and progression in higher education contexts.

DM: I am an African American male and my scholarship explores race, gender, identity intersections, and intersectionality in higher education contexts. Broadly, I am an advocate for social justice and inclusion so my research often focuses on the experiences of minoritized populations like the participants who were included in the present study. Further, since I identify with participants in the present study, I was particularly invested in what we might discover that may help improve the experiences of African American males as they persist in college.

### **Method**

We utilized a phenomenological research design since we sought rich, thick descriptions of the participants' experiences (M. Q. Patton, 2002). Phenomenological studies seek to explore and interpret the lived experiences of the research participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By using this design, we were able to give voice to Black males, an often marginalized population, and ultimately capture their collective perspectives and points of views (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, because counternarratives are a tenet of CRT, the phenomenological design provided participants with the opportunity to speak out, giving their often unheard voices an opportunity to express some of the deeply rooted issues surrounding stereotypes and the threatening environments they create.

This study was conducted—with the university's Institutional Review Board approval—at a large, predominantly White institution (PWI) located in the Midwestern United States. The participants for this study self-identified as Black/African American males. Criteria for involvement in this study were specific: (a) an individual who identified as Black/African American; (b) an individual who identified as male; (c) a current undergraduate student with an academic status of sophomore, junior, or senior; and (d) a grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 or higher on a 4.0 scale. In collaboration with the institution's office of institutional analysis, a recruitment email was sent to qualified participants outlining the nature of the research study and their potential involvement. We then instructed individuals who met the participation criteria to contact TB for detailed instructions regarding future contributions to the study. Ultimately, six eligible participants responded during the recruitment process. Participant demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Academic Standing</b>	<b>Current or Previous Campus Involvement</b>	<b>Future Goals/Aspirations</b>
Mayor	African-American	Senior	Bible Study Group, Student Senate	“Pursue a graduate degree or Ph.D. in psychology.”
Michael	Black	Senior	Presidential Leadership Academy, Mock Trial Association, Governance/Student Senate, Model UN Group	“Lawyer and/or Politician.”
JD	Black	Junior	LGBT Student Ambassador, Queer and Trans People of Color	“Develop an organization that helps Black queer individuals or women-centered. Own my own place.”
Trevor	African-American	Senior	Intern, Resident Assistant, AKPSI Business Fraternity, Sport Leadership Club	“High school/college athletic director, basketball coach, founder/director of an afterschool program for troubled children.”
Chris	Black/African American	Sophomore	Peer Mentor, Campus Ministry, Trio, Pre-Med Club	“Graduate – attain B.S., go to medical school, study abroad.”
Sony	Black	Junior	National Association for Music Education, United Way of Lakeshore, Symphony Orchestra Volunteer, Phi Theta Kappa	“Pursue a doctoral degree and become a collegiate teacher. Work with non-profit organization to help students in need.”



## **Data Collection**

Our data collection process consisted of two semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and observational data collection. For the interviews, each participant was asked to choose a private, quiet location on the institution's campus to ensure comfort. At the start of the initial interviews, participants were informed of their rights and the voluntary nature of their participation in the research study. Also, during initial interviews participants were asked to select a pseudonym to protect their identity throughout the data analysis, findings, and conclusion portions of this study.

Upon receiving permission to do so, each interview was audio-recorded to ensure all experiences, accounts, and details of the interview were captured for in-depth data analysis. Furthermore, during each interview TB recorded detailed notes of the participant's responses, mannerisms, attitudes, quotes, and demeanor for future analysis. Although interview questions were preset (see Appendix A), the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for follow-up/probing questions to gain a better, more detailed account of the participants' experiences with racialized stereotypes in college.

During the observational portion of research, TB used naturalistic observation—an observational technique where the researcher does not manipulate the environment in which subjects reside (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In doing so, TB observed participants in various social and academic settings on campus in order to capture participants' experiences, occurrences, and happenings when and if participants were stereotyped on campus. Thus, outside of the participant of the study, other individuals were unaware of TB's presence and/or observational note taking. This led to results that were more naturally occurring; the participants' and others' actions were uncontaminated and unaltered as they happened. Data collected from these observations were handwritten and referred to occurrences and happenings related to racial stereotypes in the various social or academic settings. Quotes or phrases were used if applicable. However, information was gathered and reported in a manner that protected the anonymity of those involved.

Finally, we utilized a follow-up or "anchored interview" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 139) immediately after observations took place. The one-on-one anchored interviews were rooted, or anchored, in the observations TB made. Thus, this semi-structured interview format obtained information related to the participants' lived experiences and internalized thoughts in the immediate aftermath of a specific occurrence or event regarding racial stereotypes, if any were presented. As a result, TB was able to examine real-time observations of racial stereotypes and participants' reactions to these environments based on the interactions and interpretations of the lived experience.

During the anchored interview process, TB continued to adhere to the same protocol utilized in the initial interview to obtain participants' knowing and willing consent. Moreover, the semi-structured nature of these interviews allowed TB to question participants about their interactions, perceptions, feelings, and internalizations regarding the racial stereotype(s) they experienced. Similar to previous interview techniques, TB recorded notes during all one-on-one anchored interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

After completing all of the interviews and observations, we created transcripts from the audiotaped interviews, matched them for accuracy, and they were used for analysis along with the handwritten notes. The interviews ranged from 25 to 85 minutes in length and the observations ranged from 15 to 75 minutes in length. When conducting qualitative research, the data gathered can appear messy, scattered, voluminous, or long-winded, thus the researcher

must pair down various statements to their core meanings (Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor, & Barnard, 2013). To organize the data, we first used line-by-line coding of the transcribed interviews to highlight phrases, ideas, and statements made during each interview process. Line-by-line coding or analysis is a meticulous process in which the researcher is able to pinpoint and identify key components of the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition to line-by-line coding, we cross referenced the handwritten interview notes with the codes that emerged from the line-by-line analysis. This allowed us the opportunity to utilize a technique often used in phenomenological analysis called *thematic synthesis*, which was combining the ideas, concepts, and codes derived from the previous line-by-line analysis with the interview notes (Spencer et al., 2013). We then utilized a comparative analysis by comparing the codes derived from observational notes to the codes that emerged following the line-by-line coding. As a result, themes, or patterns within the data emerged, allowing us to identify commonalities and similarities within the transcribed codes and concepts extracted from interview transcripts, interview notes, and observational notes. These themes guide the conclusion and findings portion of this research. Appendix B highlights the themes, concepts, and codes from the study.

We used the criteria of credibility and reliability as trustworthiness measures for the study. Credibility addresses the extent to which the research findings match the lived experiences of the participants, and reliability refers to the extent to which the study can be replicated based on including details about the study's design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The techniques to improve the study's trustworthiness involved (a) including raw data from the study, which is often called an audit trail; (b) comparing findings to existing literature in the discussion; and (c) going through a peer debriefing process related to the data analysis. The peer debriefing process consisted of TB going through the data independently and highlighting codes, concepts, and themes that emerged. DM then reviewed the codes, concepts, and themes in light of the participants' quotes, observational notes, and the theoretical framework to address the degree of agreement with TB's analysis. We used the peer debriefing process as a practice of *epoché*, or suspending our biases, to ensure the findings matched the lived experiences of the participants which is important in phenomenological explorations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All of the codes, concepts, and themes presented by TB were confirmed by DM.

## Findings

After analysis, four themes were identified and each theme was accompanied by concepts or subthemes. The four themes were: (a) internalization, (b) stereotypes, (c) persistence, and (d) advice (see Appendix B).

### Internalization

Participants in this study not only spoke about their prior experiences with stereotypes during interviews, but we were able to view five of the six in real time, capturing first-hand experiences, reactions, and ways in which these individuals dealt with stereotypes in academic and social settings on their college campus. Three concepts derived from this larger theme: (a) emotions/feelings, (b) containment, and (c) questioning. Throughout these experiences, participants not only felt specific instances of anger, frustration, and annoyance; more often than not, many of their feelings were suppressed in the moment as participants internalized these emotions and began questioning themselves and others.

**Emotions/feelings.** Feelings and emotions displayed and or expressed by participants were simply anger or frustration. Michael stated his feelings that came about during stereotype situations as “Anger. Straight up.” However, Chris described an added emotion when speaking about his experiences: “So, as far as feeling and emotions, I think that feeling of kind of almost anger but at the same time, like, wanting to inform.” This sense of not wanting to overreact while informing others of how their actions affect those around them directly relates to the second concept, containment.

**Containment.** Trevor described this concept with precision when he stated, “But I have felt like I couldn’t display my full self because of reactions of other people.” Containment occurs when individuals feel as if they must alter or contain their true selves in fear of being judged, ridiculed, or rejected as a result of their expressed emotions. Michael described the “pressure” experienced during stereotype situations as “help[ing] to kind of contain my anger and then vent that anger or express that anger in a more positive way.” Trevor added that this containment hindered some of his abilities in the classroom when engaging with the larger group:

It happened to me a few times in classes, like, where I was honestly the only Black student in a class of 40. It's kind of like teachers ... if I had a question, I wouldn't know if I really wanted to ask it because I didn't want people to look at me like, "Oh, he's not ... How does he not understand this?" And things like that. So I felt uncomfortable displaying my unsureness in the classroom.

**Questioning.** Participants also spoke of the ambivalent nature they endured when internalizing the emotions and feelings they had when being stereotyped. Similar to Trevor’s experience of containing his classroom engagement as a result of perceived stereotypes from classmates, JD stated, “I try to pick and choose what stereotypes I’m going to try to dispel, which ones I’m going to have to, at some point, internalize, and have a constant conversation with myself about it.”

Sony described his internal struggle as a mixture of frustration and fatigue as he constantly had to battle with what is appropriate and how to speak up when threatened by stereotypes:

Here it goes again, I knew we were gonna get to this point. And then anger, not being able to just ... like always being seen as the Black friend instead of just as a friend. And then you have to be courageous and actually speak up about it, so sometimes it's like an inner battle with yourself. Conflict, do I let this slide, or do I address it?

Although it is apparent many Black males struggle with internalization, as exhibited through many of the participants’ quotes and experiences, much of their ambivalence stems from wanting to inform others of their racial ignorance and intolerance.

## **Stereotypes**

This second theme was developed from four concepts: (a) prejudice/preconceived notions, (b) stereotype threat, (c) microaggressions, and (d) normalcy of racial stereotypes.

**Prejudice/preconceived notions.** Black male participants overwhelmingly experienced racial stereotypes in the form of preconceived notions about their intelligence or the area of work/study they were expected to engage in. Both Michael and Mayor spoke of their experiences within the same student organization on campus, where they were expected

and/or selected to sit on the “diversity committee” due to what they perceived to be preconceived notions about their interest and involvement. Michael highlighted this notion in an analogy to his experiences in the classroom:

You know, one of the reasons that automatically gives off the fact that you're being stereotyped is the difference in how other people are treated. Right? So the White boy sitting next to me is not expected to become a civil rights lawyer. The White boy sitting next to me is expected to become a CEO or a corporate lawyer, like I want to be.

In addition, Michael described the “exceptional Negro” concept experienced by many Black males in intellectual and/or collegiate settings:

They automatically got what they think of you in their head. And it's either they think that you're just like you're supposed to be as a Black man, you're unintelligent, you're uneducated, you're going nowhere, or somehow that you're exceptionally bright, as if that's different than the normal.

**Stereotype threat.** In keeping with Steele's (1999) articulation of stereotype threat, Chris explained his experiences with the threatening environments stereotypes created for him:

I would never say I felt threatened, but I felt intimidated in different occurrences. I don't know if it was because of stereotypes necessarily, but just being in an environment where you are maybe the only person of color, or the only Black person, or the only Black male.

Similarly, Michael stated, “There are a lot of social interactions that I kind of stay away from because of stereotypes.” These instances of avoidance and lack of engagement have severe implications for Black males' persistence in the collegiate realm.

**Microaggressions.** Many of the threats created by stereotypes exist as a result of microaggressions. Microaggressions refer to the subtle repeated insults, slander, or racial interactions frequently encountered by people of color (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Every participant spoke of, or was observed in, a situation where a microaggression was exhibited. Sony's coworker called him by another coworker's name during his observation. During the follow-up interview we asked him why he thought that happened, and he expressed that he and his coworker were often confused for each other due to the color of their skin. These subtle racial instances were described by Chris from an encounter he had during his involvement with a religious organization on campus:

As soon as I got there he was like, “Hey Chris, what's up?” And I told him what's up and then he immediately goes for the handshake where it's like, you being it in, and then you do the little tap on the back instead of the regular handshake. So I think that kind of notion of that's what I do since I'm a Black man. Like, I shake hands like that.

Due to the frequent nature of these experiences, the overwhelming majority of participants spoke of the seemingly normal nature of experiencing stereotypes at their Midwestern PWI.

**Normalcy of racial stereotypes.** The saliency of CRT is exhibited in this concept. The inevitable nature of stereotypes was described by participants as “nothing new” or simply “being used to it.” Trevor elaborated:

Just the environment we live in in this area is honestly not shocking. So at this point of being here for four years, it's kind of like you're going to experience things, and I can't let it ... prolong an effect on my behavior, I guess, for a long period of time.

Similarly, Sony described his experiences with stereotypes as normal and something he had come to expect during his collegiate tenure. He noted, "Yeah, I'm kinda used to it [stereotypes]. I guess I don't get upset because, I mean, I expect that to happen." Sony went on to state that, "uncomfortability is just something I have to live with.... Uncomfortability just became normal, something I had to deal with." Thus, he explained an additional burden/load Black males carry with them as they navigate institutions of higher education.

### **Persistence**

The persistence theme was exhibited through four concepts described as (a) confronting stereotypes, (b) ignoring stereotypes, (c) dispelling stereotypes, and (d) alleviating pressure. Following Harper's (2012) anti-deficit model, this theme (persistence) emerged as participants described how they were able to excel and persist through the threatening environments they faced as a result of racial stereotypes in both social and academic settings.

**Confronting stereotypes.** Participants saw confronting stereotypes as one of the most effective ways of educating others on how and why what they say could be interpreted or perceived as threatening or unjust. Michael stated that when he confronts racial ignorance and injustices he utilizes a tactic of asking questions to dig deeper and get to the basis or root of helping others realize what they are saying/doing:

But I do speak my mind and I definitely tell them, or at least ask them questions and make them get as to why. Because sometimes people can be stereotypical of races and not really realize that they're being that because the system is designed to where as long as you're not on that side and you don't know what's going on.

Michael then elaborated on his approach in these varying situations:

I think if you do it in a way that doesn't expel them from the conversation, doesn't isolate them in the conversation, they're more likely to engage, and they're more likely to see your point of view, and then they're more likely to say, "You know what? You're right. I understand why you would feel that way."

Moreover, Sony spoke about his success when employing these types of tactics in an environment with his friend group, a self-described place where he experiences stereotypes the most in college: "My friends always make those racial jokes, which are decreasing now because I'm calling people on them when they say it."

**Ignoring stereotypes.** Alternatively, as a result of fatigue, some participants choose to ignore many of the stereotypes and microaggressions they experience so frequently. McGee and Martin (2011) described being fed up with this frequency of racialized experiences as racial battle fatigue. JD expressed his frustration and his tactic of utilizing this means to an end in some instances:

It's stressful being a college student, sometimes. I'm out here trying to type papers. I'm out here trying to study for my exams and things, so some days I'm

just going to choose to ignore it... it's not my [fault]... I feel like Google is free, there are a lot of different people talking about this, talking about this exact same subject, and I should not have to be your Black teacher. So, you know, some days, as a friend once told me, some days I'm "off-duty Black."

Although there is a seemingly inevitable weight imposed on Black male collegians in regard to stereotypes while enrolled, Chris highlighted his expectation of the inevitable and how he employs an anti-deficit framework when ignoring stereotypes: "I already know what to expect and adjust some to that... Just being conscientious, but also not kind of letting that almost dictate my experience."

**Dispelling stereotypes.** Participants spoke of ways in which they dispel stereotypes by utilizing tactics such as codeswitching and overcompensating, as well as using stereotypes as fuel/motivation for success in academic and social settings. In regard to codeswitching, Sony spoke about having a "second face" he would put on during certain instances:

But when [Black males] go into a professional setting we have to switch, flip the switch and be the second person, this two-faced person. Not in a bad way, but so that the world isn't offended by our culture or, you know, the way that we do things, our comfortability.

He went on to tell a detailed story about a time when he had to employ this tactic around what he described as "important people" at the institution claiming, "Of course [there] was that second face that I would have to put on because I want to have a good impression, and I didn't want to see them play out those stereotypes or anything." Sony employed this tactic so often that during observations, he did not even realize how much he altered his voice, tone, and language when speaking on the phone and to other colleagues in the office. He said he is so accustomed to codeswitching that it has become unconscious in nature.

Other participants like Chris, spoke of breaking down those stereotypes and hashing away at them in regard to overcompensation: "You wanna dispel them and you wanna break down those barriers to kind of hash away that stereotype." JD also took an optimistic perspective to breaking down stereotypes when he stated, "I kind of use it to my advantage, because when you think I'm a certain way, and I go above and beyond that to prove you wrong... I get some satisfaction out of it." This optimistic or anti-deficit approach taken by Black males in college is precisely how these unique individuals are persisting in the wake of stereotypes today.

**Alleviating pressure.** Alleviating pressure for many participants came in the form of choosing and selecting mature and culturally competent friend groups with which to surround themselves throughout their collegiate tenure. Sony spoke not only of friend groups, but of the significance institutional administrators played in his success in persisting through stereotypes:

When I got to college I started being around people who were quick to combat those kind of stereotypes, and so I think that gave me more ideas and more courage to call people out on it when they said things like that.

Moreover, Sony described his experiences consulting with institutional administrators:

[Surrounding myself with] other people who are in the college settings who are highly educated people [because] they've dealt with systematic racism and not just that face-to-face racism that you might face on the street. I think I've learned more of how to deal with that... if that makes sense.

## **Advice**

Although advice was the shortest of the four themes, this was due to the blunt and frank nature in which participants spoke about providing advice to younger Black male collegians. What follows are examples of their advice:

Speak up, and speak up early because when you stay silent, you give authority to it. You give permission to people you stay silent to, to do that. So if you are offended, if there is something that is bugging you, just speak up, just say something. Because that's how you change it. (Michael)

Don't try to be someone you're not, and appreciate you for who you are. And just because everything around you looks a certain way doesn't mean that you have to look that way too. It's okay to be different and mold your own personality. (Sony)

Don't feel pressured by other people to fit into what they want you to be, and definitely just believe in yourself, believe in your own magic, believe in your own practice. (JD)

## **Discussion**

In almost every observation, participants' internalized feelings and emotions were brought forth by being stereotyped by others. Additionally, during one-on-one interviews, participants described in detail how their feelings and emotions were affected by being stereotyped by others. Feelings of anxiety, pressure, fear, ambivalence, and confusion were all brought forth by stereotypes and stereotype threat. Broman (1997), Steele and Aronson (1995), and Utsey (1998) all have contended that stereotypes and stereotype threats are linked to health risk factors, which may have an effect on academic persistence and retention. Dahlvig (2010) stated that feelings of isolation could influence rates of persistence and retention among African American students at PWIs. In addition, psychological effects, such as internalization, can lead to psychological stressors (Smith et al., 2007). Although instances of internalization occurred more often than not, as participants in this study continued their efforts to combat and dispel stereotypes in their later years of college, they began to directly address these instances, realizing that silence can indicate acceptance and tolerance of the stereotypes. This approach has been reinforced by Harper (2015), who found that participants in his study rejected the notion of suppressing or internalizing feelings and emotions when stereotyped by others, further contributing to the action-oriented suggestions and advice made by the majority of participants in this study.

Along with psychological implications, in many instances participants explained how stereotypes shaped their social interactions and experiences as well. Walton and Cohen (2003) described the "mistrust of the motives behind other people's treatment" (p. 83) as a result of experiencing or perceiving a stereotype or a threatening environment. Participants in our study either chose not to participate in a campus organization because of how they perceived they would be stereotyped (e.g., joining a fraternity), or after they had been stereotyped by others in social environments (e.g., friend groups, student government, religiously affiliated campus organizations). As a result, these students were less engaged on campus, highlighting Astin's (1984) and Tinto's (1993) suggestions that students who are less engaged on campus suffer more academically, directly relating to measures of persistence.

Participants did find comfort in associating with other Black people on campus, whether they were colleagues, peers, mentors, faculty members, or administrators. Often, participants stated that same-race institutional administrators provided support, guidance, and hope for future endeavors. LaVant et al. (1997) found that minority students, specifically Black males, found it comforting and beneficial in their educational and social gains when accompanied by a mentor. Additionally, Strayhorn and Terrell (2007) found that forming a research focus with faculty or staff members was of more benefit than simply forming a social mentoring relationship. However, the results from our study indicated non-research focused mentor/mentee relationships can also have significant effects on Black male collegiate persistence.

Participants explained how the majority of stereotypes they encounter stem from subtle, yet threatening, experiences with microaggressions and prejudice/preconceived notions. Participants outlined how the two intertwined, expressing how prejudice and preconceived notions played a significant role when instances of microaggressions would occur. For instance, the preconceived notion that Black males are incapable and unintelligent might trigger a microaggression of a White student telling a Black male that the only reason the Black male was accepted into college was due to the color of his skin rather than his intellectual ability. Moreover, participants stated their lack of classroom engagement was hindered by the perceived stereotype that others saw them as intellectually incapable. Steele (2010) acknowledged and reaffirmed this belief when he explained how stereotypes can create a threatening environment for students simply due to the “pressure not to confirm the stereotype for fear of being judged or treated in terms of it” (p. 89). Although one participant described a specific instance in this way, the majority of the participants in this study highlighted the fact that blatant stereotypes, preconceived notions, or microaggressions fueled their ability to work harder and dispel the negative stereotypes that were placed upon them. These instances of dispelling stereotypes address Harper’s (2012) anti-deficit model question, stating, “What compels one to speak and participate actively in a course in which he is the only Black student?” (p. 5). This anti-deficit framework and ideology utilized by Black males in academia provides significant insight into how and why these unique, brilliant minds combat stereotypes and utilize others’ ignorance and intolerance to propel their own academic and social advancements.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Participants were clear in their responses and alluded to a number of practices and policies institutions could adopt to increase persistence and retention efforts for Black male collegians. First, students continually spoke of internalizing thoughts and emotions related to stereotypes and the threatening environments they create, which can lead to severe psychological and social implications. Still, these participants never mentioned seeking or being offered assistance or help in the form of counseling or psychological services on campus. Such services with intentional outreach, marketing, and planning focused on Black male collegians could help alleviate the pressures and trauma stereotype threats have the potential to cause. Creating groups or subgroups focused on males of color, and in this case Black males, might prove beneficial in dispelling the stigma surrounding counseling services while targeting a specific student population that is in need.

Second, providing students with stereotype threat bystander intervention training or a similar seminar as a component of the general education requirements of the institution might reduce the impact of the number of stereotype threat situations occurring on campus while simultaneously educating the student population about this prominent issue facing many Black male students. If incoming students are being educated on the influence they can have on the



experiences of others, it will positively influence cross-cultural interactions and relations. In turn, this could reduce the number of stereotypes occurring on campus, ultimately affecting the ways in which Black males persist through the collegiate realm. For instance, as stereotypes decrease, Black males may be more willing to experience and engage in a number of on-campus activities contributing to academic and social successes. With this, stereotype interactions have the potential to decrease and become less frequent, providing Black males with fewer barriers in obtaining and persisting to and through a collegiate degree.

### Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on Black collegiate males and how they persist through college in the wake of stereotypes. Future research should expand on how multiple intersecting identities represented within Black male collegians (e.g., gay, first-generation college, low-income, athlete) play a role in their persistence. Insight into these intersections of identity might result in differing experiences for Black male collegians.

Although observational techniques were utilized to obtain a more detailed account of the participants' experience with stereotypes in the immediate setting, future observational settings might be more controlled. For example, a study could view Black males only in academic classroom settings rather than academic and social settings.

Finally, studies about persistence could be expanded to include more participants at various ranges in their academic tenures. Focusing on specific academic years (i.e., sophomore, junior, senior) could provide insights and highlight how Black males are specifically persisting from year to year.

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## Appendix A

### Initial Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. What stereotypes do you think people hold against you?
  - a. Good and bad...
3. Have you ever been stereotyped before you came to college?
  - a. How did you persist through these stereotypes and continue on to college?
  - b. Do you still employ similar tactics to deal with stereotypes while you are in college?
4. How do you know someone is stereotyping you or holds a stereotype toward an identity group you possess?
  - a. What do they do?
  - b. How do they act?
5. What do they say? Can you give me an example of a time you were stereotyped in college?
  - a. If so, what was the stereotype?
  - b. How did you react when you were stereotyped?
    - i. Do you think that Black males are trying to dispel the stereotype(s)?
    - ii. Do you think Black males are trying to conform to the stereotype(s)?
6. Where do you experience stereotypes the most? (i.e., social setting, academic setting,

- specific area of campus, etc.)
7. What are some feelings/emotions that come about when you perceive someone holds a stereotype against you?
    - a. What are some ways in which you handle or deal with your emotions when someone is holding stereotypes against you?
  8. Have you ever felt threatened in an environment as a result of a perceived stereotype?
  9. Have you ever felt uncomfortable in a setting as a result of a perceived stereotype from another individual?
    - a. If so, what did that feel like? (pressured, anxious, nervous, etc.)
  10. What did you do when faced with this challenge? Have you ever tried to conform to or dispel a stereotype someone else held against you? (maybe this was in a particular setting, group, or just in general [i.e., advancing your education])
  11. Have you ever felt that stereotypes have hindered or excelled your academic performance in the classroom?
  12. Have you ever felt that stereotypes have hindered your social experiences?
    - a. If yes, what did you do when faced with this scenario?
  13. Similarly, have you ever participated or not participated in an event, group, or activity due to a perceived stereotype someone may have against you?
  14. How do you think stereotypes have shaped your academic endeavors in college?
  15. Have your experiences with stereotypes shaped your involvement with university groups, clubs, or organizations?
  16. What advice, if any, would you give your younger self about dealing with stereotypes?

## Appendix B

### Themes, Concepts, and Codes

Themes	Concepts	Codes
Internalization	Emotions/Feelings	- Isolation
		- Fatigue
		- Annoyance
Internalization	Containment	- Don't belong
		- Anger, fear, anxiety, nervous, stress, isolation
		- Confusion
Internalization	Questioning (ambivalence)	- Controlling, subduing, alteration of emotions and true self
		- Holding back
		- Do it to protect my emotions
Stereotypes	Prejudice/Preconceived Notions	- Questioning emotions & reactions
		- Questioning reaction/decisions/thoughts
		- Questioning others intentions
		- Owning certain clothing/shoes
		- "Angry Black man" (violent)
Stereotypes	Prejudice/Preconceived Notions	- Low S.E.S./poor
		- Unintelligent or incapable
		- Blackness as threatening

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Area of study/interest</li> <li>- Listen to specific types of music</li> <li>- “Exceptional Negro”</li> </ul>
	Stereotype Threat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not speaking up in class</li> <li>- Only person of color in environment</li> <li>- Avoiding certain groups/student orgs</li> </ul>
	Microaggressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Questioning existence in this space</li> </ul>
	Normalcy of Racial Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mannerisms/body language</li> <li>- jokes</li> <li>- Articulation (phrases, sayings, slang)</li> <li>- Avoidance/silence</li> <li>- Handshakes</li> </ul>
Persistence	Confronting Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not shocking</li> <li>- Used to it</li> <li>- Nothing new</li> <li>- Directly address</li> <li>- Question others intentions/meaning</li> <li>- Educating others</li> </ul>
	Ignoring Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fatigue... “Off duty Black”</li> <li>- Brush it off</li> <li>- Don’t let it dictate my actions</li> </ul>
	Dispelling Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Using stereotype as fuel/motivation for success</li> <li>- Overcompensate</li> <li>- Not feeding into what others want</li> <li>- Codeswitching</li> </ul>
	Alleviating Pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involvement in student orgs of color</li> <li>- Friends/friend groups (same race)</li> <li>- Role models, mentors, administrators (same race)</li> </ul>
Advice	Speak up!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Silence gives authority to stereotypes</li> <li>- Confront</li> <li>- Ask probing questions (why?)</li> </ul>
	Be yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Don’t feed into what others want you to be</li> </ul>

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