

BEYOND THE NUMBERS:  
THE EXPERIENTIAL EFFECTS OF STEREOTYPE  
THREAT ON STUDENTS OF  
COLOR AT TCU

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine if and how the effects of negative stereotypes of students of color are felt beyond the statistical measures of academic success, reaching into the classroom and social experiences of these students. Through face-to-face interviews with four Community Scholars on the campus of Texas Christian University, key stereotypes of students of color were identified and several implications examined. This paper provides an analysis of the ways in which the classroom dynamics and performance, as well as the social life and experiences, of students of color at TCU are impacted by their identity as students of color and the stereotypes that others hold about their abilities. These experiences are informed by the concept of stereotype threat, in which students experience identity contingencies when asked to perform in a situation relevant to the stereotypes held about their identity. Ultimately, this study hopes to inform better practices and spread awareness of the difficulties and challenges faced by students of color, both in the classroom and socially, during their experiences at TCU.

*Keywords:* students of color, stereotype threat, classroom dynamics, identity contingencies, stereotypes, qualitative research

*“I never knew what stereotypes [were] until I left my high school and got here. And I never realized how prominent microaggressions were until I got here. I was just more aware of my African American-ness once I got to TCU.”* These words, uttered by a current undergraduate student of color at Texas Christian University, reflect the current campus climate and the sentiments of students of color at the university. As a predominantly white institution, TCU has a white student population that comprises 68.1% of the student body (TCU Factbook, 2018). While the white student population is currently the lowest in school history, students of color continue to be the minority on TCU’s campus, often leaving them feeling unwelcomed and uncomfortable. As reflected by the student above, many students of color are constantly aware of their social identity and understand how others view them because of this identity. They recognize that stereotypes exist about the characteristics and abilities of people like them and live in an environment in which these stereotypes impact their daily interactions.

At the national level, test scores, grade point averages, and graduation rates among students of color fall below those of their white counterparts, creating a host of stereotypes regarding students of color at prestigious universities. However, the data fails to examine the lived experiences of students of color and to qualitatively study the environments in which these students are asked to perform. In fact, students of color must often work harder and smarter to find the motivation and inspiration needed to counteract a campus culture that stunts their success. Stereotypes about the abilities and characteristics of students of color inhibit their success and create environments that are unwelcoming and unsupportive. To fully understand the challenges and experiences of students of color, one must ask questions, probe for details, and aim to understand their perspectives on academic and social life on a college campus. Educational disparity measures combined with the voices of these students, who tell their stories

and recount their experiences, provide a holistic, expansive picture of what it truly means to be a student of color at a predominantly white institution.

In this study, I examine the effect of stereotype threat on the experiences of students of color at Texas Christian University. Through the use of a qualitative research approach, I aim to understand the perspectives of these students and how their experiences can enrich and inform traditional, quantitative studies of academic success for students of color at higher educational institutions. As an aspiring college admissions counselor, I was influenced to conduct this study by my interest in how admissions policies impact students of color and the quality of and satisfaction with their college experience. Ultimately, this study seeks to provide suggestions for improving the campus experiences of students of color at TCU and to illuminate areas of further research to examine the connections among stereotype threat, academic performance, and the campus experiences of students of color across the country.

In the review of literature, I provide an overview of the current literature concerning racial disparities in educational achievement and explain relevant terms and concepts. First, I discuss the birth of Affirmative Action programs at universities across the United States and the effect these programs have had on the enrollment of students of color. Next, I examine current data on standardized test scores and how these scores vary by race. The discussion concludes with an examination of stereotype threat and the necessary conditions that create a situation in which a student of color is subjected to this threat. I elaborate on the ways in which stereotype threat has been proven to impact the classroom performance of students of color and how my study contributes to the existing research. I also provide a theoretical perspective through which one can examine these research findings.

In the methods section, I discuss the case selection for this study and the methods used during research. I provide a brief history of Texas Christian University and outline why studying a predominantly white institution is particularly beneficial for such a study by examining current data on student demographics, test scores, and graduation rates. I highlight TCU's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and explain why this study, in conjunction with these DEI initiatives, is especially significant to helping TCU improve its culture and institution as it concerns questions of student of color experiences on campus. Additionally, I discuss my recruitment and selection efforts for interview participants and why I chose to study students in TCU's Community Scholars Program. After providing a brief description of the program, I outline the demographics of the interview participants and the limitations of the study. Finally, I address my position as the researcher in this study and how my social status and demographics might have impacted the interviews.

In the findings section, I synthesize the data from the four interviews. I begin by providing narratives of the four interviewees and outlining stereotypes present at TCU that were identified in the interviews. Next, I address two sets of implications of the identified stereotypes. Broken down into academic and social implications, each section delves deeper into the specific ways in which these stereotypes are experienced by students of color at TCU and is substantiated by quotes from interviewees. The implications for classroom dynamics elaborate on the feelings of loneliness and isolation felt by students of color in the classroom, the pressure they feel to represent a group, and their fear of underperformance and participation. A longing for comfort and understanding and the pressure of the status quo encompass the social implications discovered in the data.

Finally, in the discussion and conclusion, I consider the implications of the study, both for the field of sociology and the study of stereotype threat. Additionally, I describe how this study could inform the development of programs and policies related to students of color on college campuses and specifically at predominantly white institutions. I examine the importance of classroom diversity and changes that can be made to improve the classroom environment for students of color. I also discuss the significance of physical space on college campuses and how creating this intentional space for students of color has the power to positively impact their experiences.

### **Review of Literature**

Affirmative Action programs, creating a pathway to higher education for historically disadvantaged racial groups, were initially adopted by many schools in the first half of the 1960s. President John F. Kennedy issued an executive order to create the program in 1961, when the Civil Rights Movement and protests were gaining momentum in the United States (Stulberg & Chen, 2013; Nicholas Pedriana, 1999). Since then, there has been much controversy about their intentions, fairness, and practices. Qiang (2006) documented programs at the University of Michigan and Harvard that unofficially provided point boosts to the application scores of students of color in their rating systems as a result of Affirmative Action. Additionally, through his own studies, Qiang (2006) revealed that Affirmative Action programs widen the test score gap, supporting the claim that these programs do not do enough to reduce racial inequality in the realm of education.

However, using race as criteria for admissions is not a new policy, nor is it concealed to questions pertaining to Affirmative Action. Legacy policies, specifically at elite universities in the United States, date back to the mid-1800s (Martin & Spenner, 2008). These policies have

historically advantaged white, wealthy individuals and continue to do so today. By giving students with familial alumni connections to a given university preferential treatment in the admissions process, these institutions perpetuate a class of white, educated individuals with higher socioeconomic status. Those who have been most hurt by these policies have, over time, included Jewish and public-school students, many of whom are students of color (Martin & Spenner, 2008).

Statistically, according to Alon and Tienda (2007), students of color—excluding Asian students—do not perform as well as their white counterparts on standardized tests. Fischer (2009) demonstrates that these tests are inherently biased towards the dominant group and are low predictability measures for a student's future academic success compared to GPA or class rank in high school. In nearly all measures of academic ability and performance, black and Latino students underperform white and Asian students (Fischer, 2009). According to the College Board, test takers in the class of 2018 nationally averaged a score of 1068 out of a possible 1600 on the SAT. White students and Asian students both achieved averages above the national average, reporting scores of 1123 and 1223, respectively. Contrarily, students who identified as black/African American and Hispanic/Latino reported average scores below the national average, scoring only 946 and 990, respectively (College Board, 2018). National ACT average scores unfortunately tell the same story. According to the ACT's National Profile Report for the graduating class of 2016, white students achieved a national average score of 22.2, and Asian students reported an even higher average score of 24.0, both on a 36-point scale. Again, black/African American and Hispanic/Latino fall below the overall national average score of 20.8. Black/African American students reported an average score of 17.0, while Hispanic/Latino students claimed an average of 18.7 (ACT, 2016). However, numbers do not tell the whole story;

it is important to understand the influential factors that impact both the standardized test scores and overall academic preparedness of students of color across the United States. Disparities in academic experiences, resources, and potential begin at a young age. Students of color disproportionately live in poorer neighborhoods and school districts, which affect their ability to gain access to equal educational opportunities (Letukas, 2016). Additionally, Ferguson (1998) argues that the experiences that students of color and white students have inside and outside the classroom vary dramatically, impacting their ability to prepare and perform on standardized tests. Mickelson (2006) finds that inside the classroom, even in diverse school environments, black students are more likely to be placed in lower academic tracks, even after controlling for outside social factors, such as gender, effort, familial background, peer group influences, and prior achievement. One source of this disparate tracking is the discipline gap. A study published by the U.S. Government Accountability Office in 2018 found that, in K-12 public schools, black students are among the group of disproportionately disciplined students in classrooms. Black students accounted for roughly 39 percent of school suspensions, while only making up about 15.5 percent of public school students nationally. These discipline practices, disproportionately affecting students of color, remove students from the classroom and put them at greater risk of dropping out, repeating a grade, and even getting involved in the juvenile justice system (GAO, 2018). Thus, when compounded, these influences place students of color at a disadvantage academically and fail to provide equal classroom preparation and exposure for standardized tests and other future academic pursuits. While this research focuses primarily on students in the K-12 setting, this study hopes to illuminate how these practices and tendencies in primary and secondary education have continuing effects on the experiences of students of color at the college level.

The factors revealed above support the argument that differences in standardized test scores are not reflective of inherent performance differences. Massey and Owens (2013) argue that these differences can, in part, be attributed to the effect of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat theory “posits that some minority students feel additional pressures in academic realms due to negative group stereotypes of intellectual inferiority” (Fischer, 2010, p. 37). This phenomenon may arise when three qualifications are met: a stereotype about the group exists, group members are aware of the stereotype, and group members are asked to perform in a situation that is relevant to the ideas presented in the stereotype (Massey & Owens, 2013). Stereotype threat affects both the academic performance and social satisfaction of students of color. Fischer (2009) asserts that many students feel an increased pressure to perform while struggling to define themselves beyond this stereotype. Thus, the process is cyclical and self-perpetuating. By reporting lower scores on standardized tests, students of color are subjected to negative stereotypes about their academic abilities. But, these same stereotypes then turn around and continue to impact their future performance on such tests, creating a never-ending cycle of inequality and judgment.

In his book *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*, Claude M. Steele states that “the reality of stereotype threat also [makes] the point that places like classrooms, university campuses, standardized-testing rooms, or competitive-running tracks, though seemingly the same for everybody, are, in fact, different places for different people” (Steele, 2010, p. 60). In an experiment he conducted with students of color at the University of Michigan, Steele found that something other than weaker academic abilities was responsible for the differences in college performance among white students and students of color. When looking at students who entered Michigan with similar SAT scores, students of color generally

performed at a lower level once in college. However, if the SAT is intended to predict future academic success, Steele concluded that something else must have impacted their performance, explaining why they were receiving a smaller return on their prescribed academic abilities. After conducting many studies at the University of Michigan and Stanford University, Steele identified stereotype and identity threat as the main causes of this underperformance. Steele has studied stereotype threat's impact on academic performance in a variety of situations: black and white students, male and female students. For example, Steele and his colleagues conducted an experiment at Stanford University with black and white students in which participants were given a difficult verbal reasoning test from the Advanced Graduate Record Examination. The researchers knew the test would cause frustration in students because of its level of difficulty; samples of students who had taken this exam had only scored 30 percent correct. The first group of participants was given the exam as it would be administered in a standardized testing situation, under the notion that it was a test of intellectual ability. In this situation, the researchers found that white students answered, on average, four more questions correctly than black students. The next group of participants was given the same exam, but they were told it was a task to study general problem solving. The researchers hypothesized that black students would score better than in the first situation because the threat of confirming a stereotype of their inferior intellectual ability had been removed, simply by changing the stated purpose of the exam. The researchers were right. Black and white students performed at the same level on this exam, endorsing the hypothesis that a threat of confirming a negative stereotype can have damaging effects on the academic performance of students of color.

In each situation he has studied, Steele has found that the impact is more than a threat of prejudice; it is a threat of identity contingencies, which Steele defines as “the things you have to

deal with in a situation because you have a given social identity” (p. 3). For example, Steele related a situation from his childhood in which he was forced to restrict his swimming at the public pool to Wednesday afternoons because he was black. Because the pool only allowed people of color to swim during this time, his behavior was controlled by his social identity. In education, there does not have to be a particular susceptibility or incident that occurs to provoke such feelings of threat to create poor academic performance. One simple prerequisite is important: that the student cares about their performance and identity that are in question. Simply, the social identity of students of color puts them in a position of worry and inferiority in social situations, negatively impacting their performance and further perpetuating the destructive stereotypes that already exist about their abilities.

Even the space on a university campus is often characterized as racialized, which can impact the feelings and comfortability of students of color in every aspect of their existence on such a campus. Because TCU is a predominantly white institution (PWI), it may be identified by many students of color as a racialized space, meaning that it is a white space “where cultural biases influence perceptions of the space as belonging to whites and where people of color feel unwelcome” (Steele, 2010, p. 229). Students of color may feel like intruders in these spaces because the majority doesn’t look like them. The white majority inadvertently controls and influences how the space is constructed and the messages it communicates to others. From the names on campus buildings to the historical figures emphasized in the classroom, every aspect of the campus space and curriculum symbolizes something about what the university stands for and believes. Unfortunately, for many students of color on college campuses across the country, these spaces primarily communicate messages outside their culture, making them feel isolated and invisible on campus (Steele, 2010).

The work of W.E.B. DuBois, in particular his concept of “double consciousness,” informs the observations in this study. DuBois first introduced the concept of double consciousness in the 1900s and explains it by saying that “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (DuBois, 1903, p. 3). DuBois (1903) articulates “double consciousness” as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 3). He described how African Americans are subjected to viewing themselves through the negative perceptions others hold of them in society. The idea of looking at one’s self through the eyes of others and through one’s own eyes creates the double sense of self characterized in the term “double consciousness.” Thus, African Americans feel a sense of duality, or two-ness. They are both American or, in this case, a student of Texas Christian University and an African American (Meer, 2019). They struggle to meld their identities and ultimately must create two separate selves. Double consciousness informs the study of stereotype threat by illuminating how students of color visualize themselves through the eyes of those around them and how those perceptions impact their idea of self and their performance. In their study, Logel et. al. (2009) demonstrated the dangers of double consciousness in relation to stereotype threat. They studied women in math contexts who were aware of negative judgments about their math abilities. Like students of color, these women engaged in thought suppression in order to overcome the negative stereotypes that existed about their abilities. However, this process of thought suppression put them in a state of double consciousness, as defined by DuBois, because they were both hyper-aware of these stereotypes and simultaneously motivated to suppress these thoughts, ultimately undermining their academic

performance. Additionally, Feagin (2013) utilizes the concept of “double consciousness” to address white-dominant spaces on college campuses. He states that students of color “learn that they must more or less conform to many white-normed and white-framed societal realities, so that they can survive in this still racially oppressive society” (p. 117). Feagin (2013) clearly connects DuBois’s work to campus spaces and describes how college students of color are forced to adapt to a white-dominated campus environment in order to survive. Thus, it is important to keep this theoretical perspective in mind when examining findings from this study, specifically concerning the implications for classroom performance and dynamics.

Research has yet to investigate how conditions of stereotype threat, often fueled by the use of biased standardized test scores in the college admissions process, impact the campus experiences of students of color. Much research suggests that these policies, initially intended to equalize the American higher education system, are not doing enough to bridge this gap, especially at the level of day-to-day campus experiences. The goal of this study is to examine if and how the effects of these stereotypes are felt beyond the statistical measures of academic success, reaching into the classroom and social experiences of students of color. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following research question:

RQ: How do negative stereotypes of the academic abilities of students of color affect their campus experiences?

When referencing students of color in this study, students from black or Latino backgrounds are being discussed. Students from these backgrounds, as is described above, are the primary bearers of negative stereotype threat of academic abilities. This study is informed by the disparities in standardized test scores, one of many influential factors in the college admissions process, between students of color and their white counterparts that create situations

in which stereotype threat is present. This study is not arguing that standardized test scores are the only influential factor that creates situations in which stereotype threat is present, but these scores do provide data that supports an environment in which students of color at TCU would be subjected to such stigmatism.

## **Methods**

### **Case/Site Selection**

Texas Christian University was founded by brothers Addison and Randolph Clark in Thorp Spring, Texas in 1873. Both brothers had previously served in the Confederacy before becoming educators and founding the university (TSHA). Likely influenced by its founders and initial members, TCU has historically been a white institution. While initially offering higher educational opportunities to both men and women, students of color were not enrolled in the university until 1962, nearly 90 years after its founding (TCU 360, 2014). Today, TCU enrolls and employs many more students of color than the initial three brave individuals who stepped onto campus in 1962, marking an historic transition at the university. However, TCU remains predominantly white, both in its student body and its ruling officials.

Examining Texas Christian University is particularly beneficial for this study. As a PWI, TCU provides an environment in which students of color are greatly outnumbered and are potentially socially and academically isolated on campus. According to the most recent statistics available through the TCU Factbook (2018), 68.1% of students at TCU identify as white, while only 13.7% identify as Hispanic/Latino, 5.7% as black/African American, and 3.0% as Asian. The fall of 2017 marked the first time the white population at TCU fell below 70% in the school's nearly 150-year history. Acceptance rates also provide significant information about the assumed caliber of students applying to TCU within each racial category. While the overall

acceptance rate for students entering in the fall of 2018 was roughly 40.7%, white students had an acceptance rate of approximately 52.62%, compared with disproportionately low acceptance rates of 26.59% for Hispanic/Latino applicants and 16.07% for black/African American applicants. Assuming that TCU's admissions staff, while possibly engaging in Affirmative Action and legacy policies, makes decisions based on a holistic evaluation of a student's application, applicants who identify as students of color simply do not stand the same chance from the beginning. The factors previously described, known to impact their access to sufficient academic resources and opportunities, put many in a position for academic struggle and stereotype threat before they are even given a chance to prove themselves at the university level.

Those who do make it into the university, though, statistically underperform and fail to graduate at the average institutional rate. Students who are admitted to and enter TCU adhere to national standardized test score trends. White students admitted to TCU for the fall of 2018 reported an average SAT score of 1,266, while Hispanic/Latino students posted an average SAT of 1,214 and black/African American students an average of 1,115. Similarly, white students admitted in the same academic term reported an average ACT score of 28, while Hispanic/Latino students reported an average of 27 and black/African American students an average score of 23 (TCU Institutional Research). While it is notable that all of these averages are above the national averages, the discrepancy in scores by race still poses the possibility of creating an environment in which stereotype threat could be present on TCU's campus. Moreover, the percentage of white students who graduate from TCU in four years is higher than the percentage of Hispanic/Latino or Black/African American students, potentially contributing to negative stereotypes of the academic abilities of students of color. In this category, white students who entered TCU in the fall of 2014 edged out black students who entered during the same academic semester by an

astounding 18%. Among white students, 71.2 percent graduated in four years, compared to 53.2 percent of black students and 68.1 percent of Latino students.

Additionally, many of the issues discussed in this study have been brought to the forefront at TCU in recent years. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee is comprised of faculty, staff, and students across campus and is committed to creating a more diverse and inclusive campus environment. Among other projects and initiatives, it is currently working to increase the number of incoming Community Scholars (discussed below), develop the new STEM Scholar Program, and hire more employees of color who will contribute to these efforts (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, 2019). The Student Government Association also recently passed a measure with 82% support to require a DEI component in the TCU Core Curriculum without adding additional hour requirements to the degree plan. While faculty still have the deciding vote, support from the student body represents a desire to create a more inclusive learning environment and an acknowledgment that TCU students require better competency as it relates to questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (TCU 360, 2018). Aside from investigating and keeping up with peer institutions, a student-issued list of demands was a main precipitating event sparking the creation of such diversity and inclusion initiatives at TCU. Several students of color met with the Chancellor and issued a list of demands for the university to make TCU a truly inclusive and welcoming campus. Demands included amending the code of conduct to outline a zero-tolerance policy for hate speech, increasing faculty of color by at least ten percent, and creating mandatory cultural sensitivity training (Daily Caller, 2016). Since the issuance of these demands, TCU has actively worked to improve race relations on campus. TCU is moving in the right direction; many students and employees alike want to see change happen, but in order for change to be lasting and impactful, all areas of the college experience must be

evaluated and improved. This study hopes to highlight some of the problems that exist within our classrooms and social settings that must also be addressed. Overlooking an important aspect of a student's experience jeopardizes the beneficial impact of other campus efforts.

### **Recruitment and Interviews**

To conduct this study, I completed semi-structured interviews with students in the Community Scholars Program at Texas Christian University. According to the current director of the program, the program was created in 1999 to "recruit top candidates from urban, high minority public high schools" in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and provide them with the opportunity to attend the university on full scholarship (personal communication, 2019). The inaugural class of 12 students started in the fall of 2000. Today, approximately 50 scholarships are offered per incoming class. Anywhere between 60 and 90 students are invited for on-campus interviews each year, from which the incoming class of Community Scholars is selected. The goal of the program is to provide accomplished students the funding they need to be successful members of the TCU community and to achieve their future potential. Students in the program are required to meet strict standards to maintain membership in the program. Each semester, Community Scholars are required to attend four cultural events, one professional development event, complete 20 hours of community service, partake in one outreach event, participate in either the Leadership Scholars Program or the Chancellor's Leadership Program on campus, be involved in a minimum of one student organization, earn a GPA of at least 2.75, and live on campus.

Participants for the study were recruited using both purposive and snowball sampling. I first reached out to the director of the Community Scholars Program to gather names of students who might be interested in participating in such an interview on campus. I then emailed these

students with information about the study and was able to set up three of my interviews in this manner. One of the students I interviewed then connected me with a friend who is also in the program, which is how I set up the fourth interview. All four students attended high school in the DFW area, but two of them had previously lived in African countries. Two of the four participants identified as African American and male; one identified as African American and female; the final interviewee identified as Latino and male. Three of the four interviewees classified themselves as sophomores, while the fourth identified as a junior at TCU. Two students are majors in the College of Science and Engineering. One student is a major in the AddRan College of Liberal Arts, and another student is a major in the Bob Schieffer College of Communication. All four students have attended TCU for the entirety of their collegiate experiences.

The interviews were all conducted in the Mary Couets Burnett Library on the campus of Texas Christian University. They generally lasted thirty to forty-five minutes each. I entered each interview with the same set of pre-identified questions but also used the responses of the participants to guide further questioning. All participants were required to sign consent forms before participating in the interview, and their names have been changed in order to protect their privacy and respect their personal experiences. I personally transcribed all four interviews.

Students from the Community Scholars Program were specifically selected for this study because they provided a small group of primarily students of color who, by their association in the program, were likely to be subjected to stereotype threat on campus. Students in the program are required to report their status as Community Scholars to their professors. Additionally, as students awarded full academic scholarships to a prestigious university, they are likely committed to and care about their academic success. Thus, they would be more vulnerable to

situations of stereotype threat because they care about the quality of their academic performance. Students from African American and Latino backgrounds were selected because, as identified earlier, students from these racial and ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be subjected to negative stereotypes about their academic abilities. Additionally, I wanted to include a variety of perspectives and knew diversity in gender, major, and classification was key. Consequently, both male and female students were interviewed, as well as students from various colleges and at different stages in their time at TCU.

### **Limitations**

As with any sociological study, there are limitations to the work that has been done. Firstly, more students could have been interviewed for the study to provide a broader sense of how students of color experience the university. Initially, my goal was to interview 5-7 students, but I experienced complications locating students in the Community Scholars Program who had the time and desire to participate. Approximately fifteen emails were sent to students in the program, but not all responded to this invitation. It is important to consider whether the challenges to recruiting participants reflect the vulnerability of discussing academic experiences as a student of color at a PWI. In addition, while only four Community Scholars were able to highlight the experiences of students in this group, hearing from students of color *outside* the Community Scholars Program could further illuminate issues experienced by such students at TCU. Furthermore, limited representation from the female and Latinx perspectives hindered the ability to more adequately represent these experiences. The Latina perspective was not represented in this study, presenting room for further exploration and research. However, it is important to reiterate that the goal of this study was not to speak for all students of color at Texas

Christian University, but rather to catalyze conversation about issues facing our campus community through the stories and experiences of a few brave, current TCU students of color.

### **Positionality**

My personal social location and location within the study must be identified and considered in order to better understand the interactions that took place and the reliability of my findings. Deutsch (2004) states that the personal values and social positioning the researcher brings to the interviews influence the research and the relationships formed with research participants. Self-reflexivity has become a trademark of feminist research and requires the acknowledgment of the various positions the researcher holds, both in relation to the participants and to the larger social world. As a white, middle class student at a predominantly white institution, I was initially hesitant to undertake such a study. I knew my race had the potential to negatively impact the information participants would be willing to share with me. Discussing race across racial lines has the potential to create an awkward and uncomfortable situation for both parties if common understanding and empathy cannot be reached. Rhodes (1994) states that, in cross-racial interviewing, “black people’s mistrust of white people in general will, therefore, [will] be extended to the white researcher or interviewer, preventing access to, if access is obtained, distorting the quality of communication which ensues” (p. 548). Because I do not share the same social location as a student of color at TCU, the interviewees may have been hesitant to fully open up to me about their experiences and relay the full truth of their existence at TCU. While I was incredibly impressed by the honesty I felt I experienced in the interviews and the respect shown on both ends, I cannot be sure that my own race did not impact interviewees’ responses. Additionally, because I identify as female, the female participant may have felt more comfortable sharing her experiences with me than she would have with a male interviewer. The

opposite could be said for the male participants. However, I believe developing rapport with the interviewees was facilitated by our similar age and shared experiences as TCU students. We were able to share stories and understandings as students at the same university. Creating this sense of familiarity and comfortability may have aided in establishing an open and vulnerable space. Again, while these influences and their consequences cannot be known for sure, acknowledging the potential presence of unintentional impacts encourages the reader to be more conscious of these factors when reading the data and understanding findings from the study.

## **Findings**

### **Presence of Stereotypes at TCU**

Through the research conducted in this study, it is evident that students of color face stereotypes about their social identities on campus. Stereotype threat is not simply a psychological pressure; it is also social. As mentioned previously, according to Massey and Owens (2013), there are three factors that influence the presence of a stereotype threat: the existence of stereotypes, that group members for which the stereotype exists are aware of the stereotype, and that group members are asked to perform in a situation that is relevant to the ideas presented in the stereotype. The first and second requirements are supported by the acknowledgement of stereotypes in the interviews conducted with students of color at TCU. The third qualification will be examined in the following sections that reveal how the academic and social settings on the campus of Texas Christian University represent situations in which students of color are confronted with stereotypes and how these stereotypes have implications for the experiences of these students, both in the classroom and socially. Moreover, the evidence from the interviews goes beyond these three categories, describing qualitatively how these stereotypes are experienced by students of color.

The following narratives describe the stories of the four students who were interviewed for this study. Each narrative defines a stereotype recognized by these students and describes the stereotype through the perspective of each student.

### David

David is a sophomore mechanical engineering major at TCU. He identifies as an African American male from Arlington, Texas but is originally from the Republic of Congo. He moved to the United States in the last decade. Before coming to TCU, David attended a predominantly Hispanic high school with very few white students. He said coming to TCU was challenging because the student body was so different than what he was used to seeing. His high school was composed primarily of students from a low-income neighborhood, but, at TCU, there are many high-income students. David was a very strong student in high school. In his large school, he achieved a top-10 percent ranking and made A-B honor roll. He started taking pre-AP classes during his freshman year then moved onto AP classes. He played both football and soccer in high school. David would occasionally go to tutoring, but he also served as a tutor, using his native fluency in French to help his peers. As part of the Community Scholars Program, David attends TCU free of charge. He earned a full-ride scholarship based on his academic achievements and community involvement. At TCU, David is involved in the African Student Organization (ASO) and the Black Student Association (BSA). For the most part, David enjoys being a student at TCU. He sees the diversity that exists on campus and appreciates the opportunities to interact with students from other cultures and learn about their traditions. However, he also acknowledges the hardships that come with being a student of color on this campus. As a black male, David admits that many students assume he is an athlete at TCU. He says, "I feel like a lot of like people that just assume stereotypes do it innocently, instead of

knowing that they like did them, [thinking] he's black and tall, he must play basketball or football or run track or something." David has experienced this stereotype with both students and staff. Because of the color of his skin and his physical build, people often assume David must be on an athletic team. Another interviewee suspected that athletes and students of color face similar stereotypes about their academic abilities on campus, as both groups are often assumed to be admitted to an institution while possessing inferior academic abilities. By assuming David is an athlete, people make subconscious judgments about his academic abilities in many situations. Mistaken identity as an athlete is just one of many stereotypes faced by students of color at TCU.

### Ahmed

Ahmed is a sophomore mathematics major at TCU. He identifies as an African American male. Ahmed was born in East Africa, but he moved to the Dallas-Fort Worth area at the age of seven. He attended an incredibly diverse high school in the local area. He enjoyed the mixing of cultures and nationalities that existed at his school, specifically Vietnamese, Hispanic, and African students. Ahmed prided himself on interacting across various cultures while most students stuck with others within their own cultural groups. Going into his sophomore year of high school, Ahmed started taking honors courses. His school didn't offer many AP classes because it lacked sufficient funding, but he took the few that were offered. He graduated with a 3.96 GPA. Additionally, he was involved in many extracurricular activities, including the cross country, track and soccer teams. Despite growing up on East Berry Street, Ahmed did not know much about TCU and had never seen campus until his junior year of high school, even though it is located on the west side of Berry Street. He's extremely grateful for the opportunity to be a Community Scholar at TCU because he acknowledges that he probably would not have been able to attend college without the scholarship. At TCU, Ahmed is a member of the Muslim

Student Association, Get Together, the African Student Association, and the Omega Delta Phi fraternity. He described himself as a very active student in high school, always asking questions and interacting with other students and teachers. However, when he came to TCU, he said he no longer engaged in these behaviors. As the only student of color in the classroom or one of few students of color, he fears being thought of as stupid or confirming a stereotype about his academic abilities. Ahmed has faced a stereotype that dictates a lack of capability to succeed academically. A fellow student in one of Ahmed's math classes told him he wasn't capable of continuing to major in math and should look into other majors. Ahmed stated that he "really felt like [he] was classified as being a black student that could not do math." He also mentioned several instances of struggling to work in groups on projects because he feels pushed away. Ahmed said his group members fail to give him a role on the project, making him feel like he isn't a member of the group. He analyzed the situation by saying that "maybe they could have stereotypes about how people like [him] work or they may think that [he's] lazy." As someone who used to be an active leader in groups, Ahmed feels shut down and rejected when forced to work with others who he feels stereotype him and don't see his value in the group. He has been subjected to several situations in which his peers doubted his academic abilities and capacity to succeed in the classroom. This sentiment was shared by other interviewees who discussed similar situations in which peers suggested they consider an easier major. Some students even recounted instances where they felt that professors doubted their ability to succeed in a course or questioned the work they turned in because the professor did not believe they were capable of producing work at such a level. One interviewee told the story of a friend who was encouraged to switch majors by her academic advisor, who told the friend "that a lot of people don't do really well in biology and people like her specifically, who is an African American woman." This

story, while second-hand, stands out in the mind of the subject, suggesting the power of second-hand stories to act as a reinforcement of stereotype threat. Thus, students of color at TCU are subjected to negative stereotyping about their academic abilities and capability to succeed.

### Kiara

Kiara is a sophomore communication studies major from Fort Worth, Texas. She identifies as an African American female. She grew up on the lower east side of Fort Worth in a low-income neighborhood. Most people from her community do not go to college or even consider pursuing a college education. Kiara attended a high school with minimum funding, and the funding it did receive was funneled into athletics. One of the biggest differences she notices between her high school and TCU is that TCU has so much money, allowing her to pursue what she desires. She attended a predominantly African American high school. Kiara said that she has always loved education and admitted that she likely would have been more successful applying to college had she attended a school with more resources. Despite the lack of resources at her school, Kiara managed to graduate in the top 10 percent of her class, was heavily involved in school organizations, and earned a full-ride scholarship to TCU through the Community Scholars Program. Because she was a high-achieving high school student, she was thrown into all AP classes. She applied to TCU at the last minute, doubting the likelihood of getting in. However, TCU offered her the most money of the 17 schools to which she applied, making it an easy financial choice for college. At TCU, Kiara is involved in the Black Student Association, Young Democratic Leaders, LeadNOW, and Women of Empowerment, an organization she founded on campus for other women of color. As a woman of color on campus, Kiara feels that she is subjected to the stereotype of “the angry black woman.” She recounted an encounter she had with a white male on campus last year in her dorm. It was three in the morning, and Kiara had a

class at eight that morning. The male student was banging on her door. Kiara was upset because she had been woken up in the middle of the night, but she went to answer the door. The student was looking for one of his friends and quickly realized he was in the wrong room, but he made a comment stating “ohh I’m gonna make her mad.” He and his other friend at the door started laughing. Kiara said, “they took it as a joke, but like my intent isn’t to come off angry, but I’m allowed to be angry. Anger is a natural emotion.” The existence of the “angry black woman” stereotype at TCU causes Kiara to feel that she does not have the freedom to express her emotions and ideas, especially in the classroom. She fears doing so will simply confirm the negative ideas people already hold of her because she is a black woman, so she often remains quiet in her classes and withholds her opinions and beliefs, developing anxiety over confirming the stereotype. In the first semester of her freshman year, Kiara started receiving C’s in her classes. She had never scored so low in school, but the stereotyping she was experiencing on campus, including that of the “angry black woman,” was taking a toll on her general wellbeing. This stereotype has the power to erode the confidence and comfort of black women across campus, as it did to Kiara early on in her TCU experience.

### Daniel

Daniel, the final interview participant, is a junior political science major from Fort Worth, Texas. He identifies as a Latino male. Daniel attended several schools growing up, exposing him to a variety of cultures, including a predominantly white culture. He went to high school with many other Mexican and Mexican American students. He kept busy in high school, playing three sports. Academically, Daniel was successful, graduating at the top of his class and earning a full-ride scholarship to TCU through the Community Scholars Program. Daniel had some prior experience with TCU before attending as a student. His father is a professor at the university,

which he said has helped him become accustomed to the TCU culture. Additionally, Daniel describes himself as bi-cultural and says that he is able to adapt to different cultures, which has aided him at TCU. Right now, he says he mostly uses the university as a resource and an avenue for his degree plan. Daniel is involved in the United Latino Association (ULA) and has started a chapter of the My Brother's Keeper organization at TCU, an organization that played an integral role in his high school experience and exposed him to the inadequacies of the education system for students of color. Daniel has a strong desire to engage with others across differences and bring people together, something he hopes to accomplish through his new student organization. After remaining in his comfort zone during his first year and a half at TCU, Daniel was encouraged by close, influential friends on campus to branch out and begin extending himself to others who may not look like him. However, like David, Ahmed, and Kiara, Daniel has faced stereotypes during his time at TCU that have negatively impacted his experience. One of the most prominent stereotypes in his experience has been others questioning his identity as a student at TCU. Because he is a student of color, Daniel has experienced situations in which staff of the university have doubted that he is a student. Specifically, Daniel recounted an incident that happened at the university recreation center one summer. Most students, specifically white students, were gone for the break, so Daniel came to campus one night to play beach volleyball with some of his friends from high school. He politely asked a worker in the rec center to turn on the lights before they closed. When the lights were not turned on, he went back inside to ask again. Daniel said he noticed that the woman "kind of looked over [his] shoulder and saw it was all black and brown people out there playing." She asked him if they had reserved the courts, something he knew was not necessary as a student of the university. Ultimately, the woman refused to turn on the lights because they were closed, despite the fact that Daniel had gone

inside to ask before they closed. Daniel let the issue go at the time, but he said it is an experience he thinks about often. Students do have the right to be on campus and bring friends and family. Daniel also recounted how one of his friends stood up to a police officer in such a situation, asking the man if other students' friends and family, specifically those who are white, are threatened with arrest as well. Daniel's story was echoed by the other interviewees who all reported situations of not feeling at home or accepted at TCU. They live on this campus, but the application of racial stereotypes by others creates conflicts that make them feel that they do not belong. Because the majority of students at TCU are white, the racial optics of campus create doubt as to whether or not a person of color is actually a student, thus reinforcing stereotypes. Daniel describes it as "just one of the repercussions that comes with being a person of color here at TCU."

In student narratives of their experiences on campus, it is evident that a range of stereotypes exist at TCU and negatively impact the experiences of students of color on campus. Their abilities, identities, and intentions are constantly at risk of being questioned by other students, faculty, staff, police officers, etc., leaving students afraid and self-conscious, worried that any false step will confirm the negative ideas others hold about them. In the sections that follow, I examine how the academic and social settings on the campus of Texas Christian University present situations in which students of color are confronted with the aforementioned stereotypes and how these stereotypes have implications for the experiences of these students, both in the classroom and socially.

### **Classroom Dynamics and Performance**

This section examines how the stereotypes outlined above impact the classroom experiences of students of color at TCU. As acknowledged previously, existing research has

determined that stereotype threat causes students of color to perform at lower levels than their white counterparts when faced with such identity contingencies in performance situations. This section details in depth the effects stereotype threat has on the behaviors and classroom experiences of students of color and how those behaviors and experiences may be connected to their performance. As noted earlier, stereotype threat is both psychological and social. The classroom implications of stereotypes on campus are divided into three categories: the feeling of loneliness and discomfort in the classroom, the pressure to represent a group, and the fear of underperformance and participation.

***“I would say I don’t really feel at home in most of my classes:” The feeling of loneliness and discomfort in the classroom.***

A prevalent theme throughout all four interviews was the feeling of loneliness and discomfort felt by students of color in the classroom at TCU. This category details how students feel when they are the only student of color or one of few students of color in the classroom. Stereotypes questioning the belonging of students of color at TCU and their academic abilities create these feelings of isolation and uneasiness, as students often struggle to find their place in academic environments in which people doubt their capabilities and place at the university. When asked to describe a typical classroom environment at TCU, all four students acknowledged the lack of students of color within the classroom. As David remarked about his classrooms:

*“The majority...here are, you know, white people, so it’s only normal that, you know, there’s more white people in classrooms than, you know, minorities.”*

David’s comment speaks to the overwhelming visibility of white students in classrooms at TCU. By identifying the groups as “majority” and “minority,” David illustrates the overshadowing number of white students. Additionally, by citing demography, David thereby normalizes

whiteness in the classroom. He says that “it’s only normal that…” which shows how students of color conform to the status quo in ways that make the campus climate feel inescapable and unchangeable. Kiara extends this discussion by commenting on her place in the classroom:

*“In [the] majority of my classes here, I’ve been the only African American or minority in my class, which can be a little uncomfortable.”*

Kiara reflects on the lack of students of color in her classrooms. While David acknowledges that the majority of students in these classes are white, Kiara observes how she stands out in these environments because few people look like her. Thus, a majority of white students and the lack of other students of color create an unfamiliar and uncomfortable environment for students of color in the classroom. However, the presence of other students of color does not necessarily create a more comfortable environment for these students. As Daniel remarks:

*“Like first semester, I walked into a classroom and, honestly, I’d probably be the only Mexican kid in the class or…there would probably be another person of color, but they’ll be in a frat or some other type of IFC or something, you know. They’re already with the other people.”*

Daniel’s comment speaks to the idea that group association plays a large role in classroom comfort for students of color. While Daniel has been in classes with other students of color, when he perceives them as being aligned with white students, he still feels alone in the class. Daniel also verbalizes an important distinction in the characterization of students by saying:

*“I like that you referred to people of color. I think last time I interviewed someone, or a person interviewed me for the honors thing, she used the word minority. So, [it] kind of academically like changed her terms. So, that’s what I like about yours because it’s more correct.”*

Distinguishing these students as “minority students” refers to them in the context of their visible numbers in the classroom, while speaking of them as “students of color” acknowledges their social identity and humanness. Daniel’s distinction is important to note, as these students are often labeled as minorities at TCU, reflected by their numbers on campus and in the classroom. Minority can also be used to refer to their lack of power and voice as a group on campus. However, he reveals that the language used to discuss students like him changes his perspective and emotional response to the conversation. While their presence in the classroom might qualify them as the minority, acknowledging their existence as people of color provides them with the dignity and respect they desire and deserve.

The sentiments of feeling isolated and alone in the classroom are not only produced by being in the numerical minority on campus, but are also accentuated by how students, faculty, and staff react to and treat students of color. As Daniel explains:

*“I for sure feel like when I walk in the room everyone’s looking at me.”*

Daniel’s statement reflects feelings of discomfort and difference. While already aware of the demographics of the classroom, this fact is further emphasized and ingrained in his mind by the looks and gazes of his classmates. They remind him that he stands out by gawking at his presence in the classroom, causing him to feel as though his existence is something unfamiliar and uncomfortable for them as well. Additionally, Kiara relates an account from one of her classes by saying:

*“I’ve had someone literally pick up and move because they didn’t want me sitting next to them. So, I’m like ok this is a great start to the semester.”*

In this situation, Kiara has been physically isolated in the classroom. She perceived that a student moved away from where she, as a woman of color, was sitting, leaving her alone and

embarrassed. Kiara knows that her identity and appearance are different than that of the other students in the classroom, but they reinforce these ideas in her mind by physically isolating her. These feelings of isolation and discomfort can have damaging effects on students of color. These effects are reflected in Daniel's comment:

*"I told people like my first semester I felt like I was in a cradle position all the time. I just kind of wanted to ball up and secure myself and just not really do anything. I think that's because it was a culture shock I was having."*

Daniel's reflection on his first semester highlights the detrimental effects of classroom isolation and discomfort. He faced difficulty doing other things and functioning in normal ways. He was so uncomfortable in his classes that he simply wanted to secure himself and "ball up." These feelings of discomfort and loneliness experienced by students of color, impacted by others' stereotypes of them as not belonging or not fitting in at TCU, also create barriers to interaction in the classroom and can reinforce stereotypes about students of color.

Specifically, students recount difficulties communicating and working with other students on group projects and struggles establishing relationships in the classroom. Kiara made an insightful observation about the formation of groups in classes when she said:

*"One thing that I also found interesting is that, when it comes time to form groups for group projects and stuff, I'm always the last one to get into a group, and everyone automatically finds their clique. So even outside of organizations, because a lot of times we tend to migrate to people who are like us, the same thing happens in the classroom, so I thought that was pretty interesting. So that's all, it's an adjustment. So, I never stop adjusting to the classrooms here at TCU."*

Her feelings of isolation and discomfort are again confirmed when it comes time to form groups in class. She finds herself sitting alone while everyone else comes together. When classrooms do not contain a sizable number of students of color, these students are left to fend for themselves. Kiara is left feeling alone while her classmates find comfort and familiarity. Kiara's experience persists and endures as Kiara says that she never stops adjusting at TCU. Often, people suggest that students experience a "culture shock" upon arriving at TCU, or another PWI, for the first time, but Kiara's statement implies that the process of adjustment is one that is ongoing. Furthermore, when students of color are inevitably required to work with other students in class, they have difficulty contributing and feeling respected by their fellow group members. As Ahmed suggested about working in a group:

*"I didn't feel like I was part of the group, you know. Most of the time, they would just do most of the stuff or they would not give me a lot of role in the group project, so that was really hard on me because I would always be the leader or the second or put behind the leader like the second person in the group like active, but here at TCU I'm not like [that] within those group projects."*

Ahmed played an active role in the classroom and in group projects while in high school, but, at TCU, he doesn't feel comfortable or welcome in such roles. He has difficulty communicating with group members because, as he discussed in the interview, he believes they lack trust in his ability to complete the work. As Ahmed implied, his belief is confirmed by their disregard for his role in the group project.

However, these feelings are not replicated when working with other students of color. For example, David explained how he was the only black student in his freshman-year English course. The final project was a group presentation. He did his part to complete the project, but he

did not remain friends with his group members after the semester. Contrarily, also during his freshman year, David worked with another student of color on a project in his engineering class. He could not pinpoint an exact reason but speculated that because they were both students of color and had similar interests, they were able to continue the relationship after the course ended and have even worked together on projects in other classes since.

Overall, the demographics of the typical TCU classroom create an environment in which feelings of loneliness and discomfort flourish among students of color. These feelings inhibit their ability to work productively with other students and feel accepted and welcomed by others in the classroom. In somewhat of a never-ending cycle, these negative interactions and group projects reinforce the stereotypes and feelings described above.

***“Every time I go into a classroom, don’t let black people down. Don’t let minorities down:” The pressure to represent a group.***

Another aspect of classroom dynamics and performance is the pressure to represent a group, specifically the larger racial or ethnic group to which the student belongs. As reflected in the quote in the title of the section, students of color, especially in classrooms in which they are the only representative of their race, feel they have something to prove to others about their entire racial or ethnic group. They face increased pressure to disprove the stereotypes described earlier that others hold about their academic abilities. Not only do they face this pressure individually, but they feel a certain pressure to prove that all black students or all Latino students do not corroborate these stereotypes. As David explained:

*“I can’t afford to slack. I can’t afford to fail the exams and fail quizzes because it kind of like creates this thing that like going back to what I said about people not, you know, not being used to seeing people that are different from them, you know.*”

*If you see someone you haven't seen before and you know they don't, they're not as smart, [you're] gonna think that maybe all of his people are like that."*

David perfectly describes the added level of pressure felt by students of color in the classroom. He understands that other students in his classes look to him to help them categorize all students like him because they lack experience with students of color. Thus, David bears the weight of representing his group well and countering the stereotypes he knows exist about students of color on campus. From his perspective, he must succeed to pave the way for other students of color to succeed. In a more positive light, David believes that if he performs at a higher level than expected by others, maybe they will begin to reevaluate the stereotypes they hold about the academic abilities of all students of color. Similarly, Ahmed recounts stories shared with him by friends:

*"They don't want to... look dumb and be like the minority student or the black student that could not, that doesn't know what's going on or stuff like that."*

Here, Ahmed identifies the worries and fears of students of color in the classroom. As a member of a group perceived as less intelligent or lacking academic ability due to popular racist stereotypes, these students fear the repercussions of providing a wrong answer in front of the class. They understand that doing so risks confirming stereotypes and further tarnishing the image of their racial group.

Furthermore, the pressure to represent a group extends beyond confirming or disproving the academic stereotypes that exist about the group. As a member of a specific racial or ethnic group, students of color are often expected to have a greater knowledge of topics related to the group and even speak on behalf of their entire racial or ethnic group. These expectations are held

by both peers and professors but are often articulated and encouraged by the professor in the classroom. As Kiara states:

*“A lot of times when we talk about race in the classroom, I’m the spokesperson for everything [related to] people of color because I’m the only person of color in the classroom.”*

As identified by Kiara, when classrooms lack representation, the one or two students of color in the room are expected to speak for others. Many of the students discussed the lack of awareness and understanding of other races that many students at TCU have. Thus, when the only exposure these students have to the perspectives of students of color is the one or two students in their classes, they tend to extend these students’ beliefs to all people of that race. As the only person of color in her class, Kiara is often faced with the pressure of both possessing a vast knowledge of her race and culture and representing her group to others in a positive light, so as not to confirm or extend previously held stereotypes. This pressure is echoed by Daniel:

*“I think sometimes there’s like a preconceived notion, especially if it’s something towards Latino history or something. They assume I’m already gonna be wanting to participate and do this and that. Which in reality, I’m sort of an introvert, so to me, it’s like take notes, sit back in the class, observe, observe what I’m learning.”*

From Daniel’s perspective, the pressure and expectation to represent his group push him beyond his comfort zone and preferred style of learning. Because he is a member of a particular group, those around him expect he will want to speak up and share his perspective. When presented with such a situation, Daniel faces the decision to educate others on his group’s history and perspective by extending himself beyond his place of comfort or to remain true to his personality but fail to enlighten others on critical issues.

This challenge is faced by many students of color. Often, they do not have the luxury of remaining quiet or reserved because they understand the importance of using their scarce presence in the classroom as a platform for education and change. Daniel reflects this opportunity to speak up for others by explaining a conversation he had with a friend:

*“But he brought up a good point, like he uses his platform, especially his skin tone, to break down stereotypes and break down preconceived notions that people already have of him. So, whenever he told me that, I started doing that in my classes. So, whenever anyone has anything to say, it’s like it’s not this, it goes the other way. I kind of use that same platform to utilize it in my classes as well to speak up when I need to.”*

Because students of color experience a pressure to represent their race in the classroom, they must consider how to educate others and spread awareness. Daniel uses his position as the only student of color in his classes to speak up and correct others’ false beliefs about people like him, despite his introverted nature. Serving as the voice for a broader group of individuals is a pressure faced by many students of color at a PWI like TCU. While they feel an increased pressure to perform in competitive academic environments, so as to avoid confirming existing stereotypes, they also understand the importance and necessity of speaking up for others like them and changing the narrative about their academic abilities that exists in the classroom.

***“We don’t want to look like we’re dumb or we don’t understand what’s going on:” The fear of underperformance and participation.***

Closely related to the pressure to represent a group is the fear of underperformance and participation. Because students of color feel pressure to represent their race positively in the classroom and avoid confirming stereotypes, they experience fear and anxiety related to their

level of participation and academic performance. They understand that their level of success will be used to assess the abilities of other students of color. While many students in a classroom worry about what others may think of them if they answer a question incorrectly or receive a bad grade, students of color additionally have to think about how other students of color will be affected by their performance, making them more hesitant to participate. For example, Kiara describes her typical behavior in a TCU classroom by saying:

*“A lot of times, I’ll be sitting in class and I’ll have all my materials. I’ve read. I know the answer to the question. The professor asks, and I just won’t say anything. It’s like girl you know the answer, just say it. Umm but a lot of times it’s out of fear of being wrong. And so, I fear as though if I’m wrong, then that’s kind of what is expected of being the student of color. Like, aw she’s wrong, we knew she was gonna be wrong. So, a lot of times that’s why I choose to be wrong when many times it’s not the case.”*

As seen in Kiara’s example, students of color are constantly and internally processing what others will think of them based on their answer to a question in class. They often censor themselves and talk themselves out of participating, even when they know they are right, because they are so worried about the repercussions, for themselves and others, of providing an incorrect answer. Many times, these students drastically change their behaviors from those displayed in high school, especially when they are coming from a more diverse classroom environment.

The appearance of the predominantly white TCU classroom causes students of color to adjust their behaviors, often in detrimental ways. Ahmed describes how his classroom participation changed from high school to college and how it has impacted his ability to learn:

*“And also, presenting myself in front of the class also is difficult because at my high school, I would be like really comfortable at just like presenting for the class, like I’d be really comfortable, but like here at TCU, presenting in front of my classmates is difficult for me. I feel like that can also impact in terms of how I learn.”*

Ahmed was asked how struggling to rely on and trust others impacted him academically. In high school, he was very active in his classes and sociable with others. However, at TCU, he is afraid to display these behaviors because he does not feel welcomed and accepted by others in the classroom. Ahmed identified how this fear impacts his ability to learn productively and actively. This inclination not to participate is strongly connected to students’ performance. As noted by Kiara:

*“In the social work class that I’m taking now, we’re in a group project, and so I have so many great ideas for our project, and every time I voice those ideas in my group, no one listens. Or it’ll immediately change to the next topic. So, then things like that make me not want to speak up. And then if I don’t speak up, I don’t get any participation points. So, it’s kind of a lose-lose situation.”*

Kiara’s quote echoes the sentiments expressed by Ahmed earlier when discussing the difficulty of working with others and communicating in group projects. While possibly unintentionally, Kiara’s group members silence her voice. By doing so, they reinforce in Kiara the idea that her opinion is not wanted or valued. Because her grade depends on her participation, Kiara struggles to perform well in the class. She is subjected to an environment that silences her voice and creates in her a sense of fear that being wrong will harm her reputation and that of others like her. These behaviors are heavily influenced by the stereotype that students of color are not as

smart or capable. Eventually, students of color begin to internalize these sentiments and may experience issues with confidence and mental health, as expressed by Kiara:

*“I get anxiety really really bad. And then a lot of times I start to doubt myself.”*

Kiara described her experience with anxiety as a freshman. She received Cs for the first time and was struggling to find her place at TCU, specifically in the classroom. She had developed such a strong fear of participation and letting other students of color down. Soon, Kiara realized her grades and mental health were suffering because of this fear. When students of color begin to internalize the stereotypes expressed by others about their academic abilities, they doubt themselves and restrict their participation. In predominantly white classrooms where stereotype threat is present, students of color develop a fear that participating will only serve to confirm and perpetuate preconceived stereotypes about their abilities, leading them to become quiet, inactive classroom observers.

### **Effects on Social Life**

The implications of academic stereotypes are not isolated to the classroom. These stereotypes continue to impact students of color when they leave their classes and engage with others on campus. A less acknowledged aspect of stereotype threat is that social life, on a broader level, is influenced by the interactions of the classroom. Because students of color are often shocked and uncomfortable upon walking into a predominantly white classroom, they tend to find their comfort zone by associating with people who look like them outside the classroom. Some may express a desire to engage with others who are different, but this process is difficult and takes time. Additionally, they often feel judged or excluded, by both whites and other students of color, if they try to associate across racial lines. Thus, there are two categories that

explain the effects of stereotypes on social life: a longing for comfort and understanding and the pressure of the status quo.

***“Going there I never felt like I had to force myself to fit in or I had to force myself to be someone I’m not. I just naturally went with the flow:” A longing for comfort and understanding.***

Because students of color often do not feel comfortable or welcome in their classes, they seek familiarity and understanding in their social life. They cannot control the number of students of color in the classroom, but they do have control over their friends, the organizations in which they are involved, and the relationships they form. Each research participant was asked about the organizations with which they are involved and if the students in these organizations are their closest friends. All four students indicated that they were involved in organizations that reflected their identity, such as the Black Student Association, the Muslim Student Association, and the United Latino Association. They also noted that the students in these organizations tend to be their closest friends. As noted by Kiara about her experience with the BSA:

*“[I] joined the Black Student Association, and almost every African American student that goes here is in that organization. So, going there I never felt like I had to force myself to fit in or I had to force myself to be someone I’m not. I just naturally went with the flow. Every event that we throw is like a big family reunion; it’s like we haven’t seen each other in years. And you can’t get us to shut up either. So, I just really like the organization. It feels like home to me. So, it’s my home away from home.”*

Kiara identifies that this organization comprises nearly all African American students on campus. Unlike her classrooms, Kiara feels that she can open up in this environment and be

herself without worrying what others will think or how they will judge her. These organizations, comprised of nearly all students of color, provide students the social escape they need to feel comfortable and “at home” at a PWI.

When asked where they felt most at home on campus, students also identified specific buildings or physical spaces on campus, such as Student Support Services (SSS) and Jarvis Hall. These programs and buildings are targeted at first generation college students, international students, and students of color. Thus, students know they are more likely to be surrounded by other individuals like them. For instance, Kiara describes Jarvis by saying:

*“So, my go-to person is Damien in Jarvis. And so, he helps me like sit down and process a lot of things I experience, like ok well this happened, so maybe this is why you act like this. And maybe this is the reason you say this. So, let’s figure out a better way to get you through this. So, that always helps too.”*

Kiara knows she can find the support she needs in Jarvis, both emotionally and relationally. When she goes through a difficult experience, these are the people she goes to for help because they understand her perspective as a person of color at a PWI. Similarly, Kiara described how she began to cope with the anxiety she experienced during her freshman year:

*“A lot of the times when we internalize stuff like that, we don’t really understand the effects that it has on us. So, my friends were asking me what was wrong with me. I wasn’t eating. I had Cs in all my classes, and I had never gotten a C in my life until I got here. And so just understanding that talking about it because I didn’t realize that a lot of other students of color were having those same experiences. So, on one side, I built my own community of friends, and we were more comfortable creating safe spaces and brave spaces to have those*

*conversations. My grades started to improve because I was better able, umm we were able to help navigate but help each other through this experience.”*

When students of color are confronted with stereotypes in the classroom and struggle to perform well and make connections in those environments, they feel a desperate need for understanding and community in their social and personal lives. They cannot find this community of other people of color in the classroom, so they must find it socially. It is integral to their success and experience as a student at TCU. Additionally, it is important to note that these students did not mention seeking support from the TCU Counseling Center when struggling emotionally at TCU.

Each student underscored this idea by discussing the comfort they found by joining organizations that aligned with their social identity as soon as they came to TCU. However, many also expressed an interest to reach beyond their comfort zone, as stated by Ahmed:

*“Yeah umm to be honest like yeah that’s one thing about me that I want to change. I want to just like go out to other organizations, like just out of my comfort zone, because like all of these organizations I’m part of, I feel like they’re part of my comfort zone because all of them are like my friends and they’re just people I knew before coming to TCU and stuff like that. So, yeah like almost all of the organizations are like my friends and people that look like me.”*

Ahmed acknowledges that his current organization associations are comprised of his friends and other individuals who look like him, but he also expresses a desire to reach beyond his comfort zone in the future. As a sophomore, he has yet to be successful in this venture, possibly because he still needs the comfort and familiarity of organizations comprised of students like him. As a junior, Daniel has been more successful in pursuing his goal of engaging with others who do not look like him, as expressed below:

*“Like my first year and a half here I kinda did that. I would just stick with them, with that little group. But then I saw Kyle (friend) and them and started like putting seeds in my head, and so I saw it wasn’t very healthy for me as well, and so what I started doing was I started going out to meet new people, whether it be going to the BLUU, talking to someone new, meeting new friends. Because eventually you’re gonna see them around campus anyways and say hello and stuff. So, that kinda helped me get out of my comfort zone and develop more as a person.”*

Possibly, as students age, they become more comfortable extending themselves beyond their comfort zone and do not feel as strong a need to rely on identity groups. But, this process takes time. As noted by Daniel, it was not until a year and a half into his experience that he realized how confined he was to his comfort zone socially. Students of color have a longing and need for comfort and understanding when they first walk onto TCU’s campus. They desire a close-knit community that looks and thinks like them in a larger, predominantly white, unfamiliar social and academic environment.

***“So, from what I’ve observed here on campus, it’s a lot of self-segregation in a way:”***

**The pressure of the status quo.**

While there is a definite need for students of color to create a social community with other students of color to find the comfort they lack in the classroom, there is also a social pressure and expectation that students will associate with others who look like them. Many of the interviewees vocalized their acknowledgment of this pressure and expectation. As expressed by Daniel:

*“So, from what I’ve observed here on campus, it’s a lot of self-segregation in a way. So, you see the blacks and the Africans in two different organizations and obviously ULA and then whatever other organizations there are as well. I also see rarely black and brown power together as well, even like when white people are in there too.”*

Daniel realizes that much of the segregation experienced on campus is self-inflicted. Students have the opportunity to decide who to socialize with, but they often pick others just like them.

This sentiment was echoed by David:

*“Yeah, so I mean I feel like culturally speaking or socially speaking, there’s only so much that the school can do, you know. I think umm TCU does a great job promoting diversity and inclusiveness. I think it’s up to the people themselves, the students, you know. I would give an example of like sorority or Greek like. You know uhh like black fraternities and white fraternities and Latino fraternities and people look down at like, they’re looked down upon if they’re white and they want to join a black frat or if you’re black and want to join a white frat. Like the school can’t really do anything about it, you know. It’s kind of like if you’re so and so you can’t join these people because they’re not like you. See, I feel like that’s kind of like people themselves having to segregate themselves from other people.”*

David articulates that students are looked down upon by other students if they try to join a group composed of people who do not look like them, especially when a similar group, composed of people who do look like them, exists. Students of color originally search out these identity groups for comfort and understanding when confronted with an unfamiliar, uncomfortable environment, but once in these groups, they realize the difficulties and obstacles that stand in the

way of cross-cultural relations and associations. While several students expressed an interest in extending themselves beyond their comfort zone, they struggle to do so because the student culture of the university does not encourage such natural social integration. The university can only provide so much structure for integration; at some point, it is up to the students to engage on their own. David expressed his frustration with students professing to be inclusive and understanding and then sharing racist or insensitive remarks across campus. He said:

*“It makes you not want to associate with those people. And honestly, from what people tell you or tell me as a minority about their stories, when you see people acting like that, you kind of assume that the whole population acts like that, so that’s also the segregation of why people like just hang out with people that look like themselves. It’s kind of that you know people telling you their stories and experiences, you are witnessing it yourself. Because a select few people can change somebody else’s mind.”*

David acknowledges that his views of others are often influenced or confirmed by the stories shared with him by friends. Their stories align with what he sees and experiences, making him less likely to associate with others unlike him. When both parties hold negative views of the other, cross-cultural integration is difficult. They face the pressure and expectation of remaining true to those who are like them and understand them. Socially, students are initially drawn to the comfort of others like them. These initial interactions are then solidified and reinforced by the status quo, campus culture, and negative stereotypes held by both groups about the other.

In the following chapter, I will address some of the implications for these findings for TCU, colleges more generally, and for conceptualizations of stereotype threat. These

findings, I hope, will be useful in identifying areas of improvement at TCU and assist in guiding future better practices for inclusiveness and cultural awareness across the country.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

As outlined above, there are several implications of stereotypes about the abilities and characteristics of students of color that impact their college experiences, specifically at predominantly white institutions. Both academic and social experiences are influenced by the existence of stereotype threat on a college campus. In the classroom, students of color feel isolated and alone, they feel an intense pressure to represent their racial group, and they fear underperformance and in-class participation. Socially, they desire the comfort and understanding they lack in the classroom, and they face pressure to conform to the status quo, creating homogenous social groups.

DuBois's concept of double consciousness is particularly salient when examining the academic implications from this study. This theoretical perspective helps connect the psychological aspects of stereotype threat to the implications felt by students of color in their social, lived campus experiences. In the section discussing students' fear of underperformance and participation, Kiara was quoted considering how her participation in class is impacted by her awareness of negative stereotypes about her academic abilities. She discussed how, despite knowing the answer, she suppressed her response because she feared being wrong and confirming a stereotype. She had convinced herself that she was not smart enough or confident enough to speak up because her own self-perception had been influenced by others' perceptions of her abilities. In this sense, Kiara experiences double consciousness in the classroom because she is unable to see herself through her own eyes, only through the eyes of others. Their ideas

about her overtake her own sense of self and influence how she behaves and performs in an environment ripe with stereotype threat.

This study further contributes to the study of stereotype threat by emphasizing the social, not simply the psychological, aspects of the threat. Previous studies detailed how stereotype threat impacts the psychological processes of individuals and how these internal processes negatively influence the academic performance of students in such an environment. However, this study extends the understanding of stereotype threat by presenting social implications, both in the classroom and social life. Because students of color experience stereotype threat in the classroom, they have difficulty interacting and working with other students on group projects. They are hyper-aware of others' perceptions of their abilities; not only does this awareness impact their test scores and GPAs, it also impacts their willingness to participate and interact with others who they anticipate may hold these negative views about them. The social implications of stereotype threat extend far beyond the classroom. Because students of color are left feeling isolated and alone in classrooms that lack students like them, they seek the comfort and understanding of other students of color socially. At a predominantly white institution with little diversity in the classroom, students create homogenous social groups because they need this support to endure the stereotype threat they experience in their daily lives.

Beyond contributions to the study of stereotype threat, this study represents a contribution to the field of sociology as a whole. Much current research focuses on an educational disparity gap from a quantitative approach; data is analyzed to reveal differences in academic performance. However, this study provides support for the significance of quantitative research coupled with a qualitative approach. Discussions of the educational disparity gap seen across the country cannot begin and end with statistics. Without examining the intricacies of the

educational experience from the perspective of the students who are currently suffering, research fails to account for the interpersonal and social nature of education. The educational disparity gap, in part, reflects an educational environment that preferences some students over others, simply by the composition of the classroom and the interactions that take place within it. To fully understand *why* an educational disparity gap exists, researchers must take a qualitative approach and aim to understand the perspective and lived experiences of students.

One goal of this study was to inform better practices concerning students of color at Texas Christian University, other predominantly white institutions, and universities as whole. Two important areas of consideration were revealed through the analysis of student interviews: classroom diversity and physical space. The academic and social implications of stereotype threat are cyclical; the classroom environment impacts the social groups that form on campus, and these social groups also influence the classroom dynamics. Students bring their homogenous group formations into the classroom. These intergroup dynamics can lead to exclusion that is reproduced in the classroom through white dominance and social dynamics. Classrooms need to be organized in a way that breaks up this inevitable exclusion of students of color. These students represent a numerical minority on campus, but classrooms have the potential to embrace, rather than emphasize, this difference. Classrooms must be attended to more closely to create intentional environments in which all students feel welcomed and included, not just those who exist in the majority. This diversity in the classroom must also extend to the faculty that teach these courses. Several students discussed how having a professor who is also a person of color creates a more welcoming and understanding environment. Their success is, in some part, dependent on seeing people like them who have been successful in the same field. Both the recruitment and retention of faculty of color deserve more attention at universities in which these

numbers are currently low, especially at predominantly white institutions in which students of color will unavoidably struggle to find the comfort and understanding they need in an academic environment.

A second suggestion for institutions to consider is the creation of intentional physical space designed for students of color. Often times, these students struggle to feel at home on campuses that have historically excluded or disadvantaged people like them. Several students referenced places like Jarvis Hall or Student Support Services at TCU, which include many resources for students of color and first-generation students. When students of color feel uncomfortable in classrooms or when they are surrounded by too many students who do not look like them, they place a greater significance on finding and having physical space that is filled with people like them and that makes them feel relaxed and content with who they are. Because demographic and structural change cannot happen overnight, attention needs to be given to the physical space students occupy on campus in order to improve their overall experience and provide them with the comfort and wellbeing experienced by other students on campus.

While this study extends the understanding of stereotype threat and provides suggestions for improving the experience of students of color on college campuses, there is room for further expansion and research. Future research should include a greater number of students and expand the associations of these students on campus. It is possible that students outside the Community Scholars Program at TCU possess a different perspective on this issue. Additionally, research should be conducted at other predominantly white institutions and institutions with greater student diversity to ascertain the veracity of these results. A limitation of qualitative research is that it lacks generalizability like much quantitative study, but it does provide deeper understanding of important areas of research. The educational disparity gap that exists between

white students and students of color nationally cannot simply be understood statistically. Future research must include a qualitative component in order to fully understand the experiences and perspectives of students who are currently disadvantaged and underserved in our education system today.

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