Re/Writing Identity: A Narrative Inquiry Exploring Stereotype Thereat, Sense of Belonging, and Self-Efficacy Among Young Men of Color in First-Year Writing Courses

Jenny O. Arras

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RE/WRITING IDENTITY: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING
STEREOTYPE THREAT, SENSE OF BELONGING, AND SELF-EFFICACY
AMONG YOUNG MEN OF COLOR IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING COURSES

A Dissertation

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University of South Alabama
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requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

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May 2024
This dissertation is dedicated to my mami, my mom and hero;
to my beloved Grandma Honey, our angel in the skies;
to my two boys, the loves of my life, mis pedacitos de cielo;
and my husband, mi pedazote.
Each one of you is made of all the stars.

You are as kind as you are good,
as loving as you are brave.
And I dedicate everything,
including this one little body of work,
to you.
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ABSTRACT

Jenny O. Arras, Ed.D., University of South Alabama, May 2024. Re/Writing Identity: A Narrative Inquiry of Stereotype Threat, Sense of Belonging, and Self-Efficacy Among Young Men of Color in First-Year Writing Courses. Chair of Committee: Peggy M. Delmas, Ph.D.

This narrative study explored the ways in which two Black male undergraduate students experienced and situated their identity in their first-year composition (FYC) courses. The study sought to reveal how the participants experienced stereotype threat in both the classroom and larger community and the ways in which this perceived threat impacted their self-efficacy and sense of belonging. The participants, enrolled in an FYC course for underprepared writers at a southeastern university, were both performing well in the class, thereby providing insight into the factors and experiences that helped mitigate the potential of stereotype threat. In order to more fully understand the ways that they negotiated and perceived their identity, a narrative study was utilized, and the participants were asked to illuminate their larger stories and lived experiences in semi-structured, open-ended interviews. The findings reveal that the participants’ high self-efficacy allowed them to feel a greater sense of belonging in their FYC classroom, both of which helped to protect them from stereotype threat. The role of the instructor in creating an identity-affirming classroom environment also proved instrumental in fostering their sense of belonging in the class. The findings also reveal that despite their overall strong sense of belonging and high self-efficacy in their FYC courses, the participants remained vulnerable to stereotype threat in these spaces. The participants seemed particularly
susceptible to intersecting racialized and gendered identity threats, which were activated for them when it came to speaking in their FYC courses. The findings ultimately reveal that mitigating stereotype threat could help to empower this academically vulnerable student population in FYC courses. Finally, recommendations for practice and future research were discussed.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

As 21st century society becomes more diverse, pluralistic, and multicultural, institutions of higher education, which serve as microcosms of democracy and the larger world, must be able to adapt and also build capacity for students from all socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds as well (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013; Smith, 2020). Part of these efforts, grounded in an ethos of equity and inclusion, include making spaces not only for a diverse body of students but for students who have traditionally been underrepresented in the world of higher education: students from under-resourced, underprivileged schools and communities, who may have been denied access to resources necessary to succeed in college but who can certainly succeed if provided with proper resources and support (Means & Pyne, 2017). As a result, leaders in higher education have devoted considerable time and resources to creating initiatives for student success, which include finding strategies that respond to the social forces that trigger inequities in educational systems (Zhang et al., 2018).

The efforts and initiatives of higher education to address inequities and inequalities have largely resided in ways that higher education can embrace diversity while fostering students’ sense of belonging and self-efficacy in their new social and academic world, particularly during their first year in college, as both of these
noncognitive markers are strongly correlated with student success (Bandura, 1986, 2006; Han et al., 2017; Nicholes & Reimer, 2020). The research clearly reveals that a student’s level of success in the first year is fundamental to their overall academic success in college (Cole et al., 2020; Nicholes & Reimer, 2020). In particular, success in first-year composition (FYC) courses has proven to be the strongest, most reliable predictor of students’ success in college and their likelihood of persistence and graduation (Bedyńska et al., 2021; Brunk-Chavez & Fredericksen, 2008). Thus, ensuring students’ success in FYC courses is an integral part of ensuring their success during their time in academia.

This work proves all the more necessary (and challenging) in the face of the national statistics on writing proficiency. A national assessment of students’ writing skills conducted by the United States Department of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019) revealed that approximately 72% of students entering higher education lack proficiency in writing, a majority of whom come from disadvantaged schools and backgrounds. And the data also revealed a significant gender gap in literacy skills, with girls scoring three times as high as the boys in reading and markedly outperforming boys in writing (NCES, 2019; Reilly et al., 2019). With these disparities and with more underprepared writers entering first-year writing courses, it is imperative that universities/colleges and faculty create spaces that allow emergent writers to not only develop their critical thinking and writing skills but that they also understand both the cognitive and affective factors that impact students’ success in these courses (Farrington et al., 2012; Han et al., 2017; Lewine et al., 2019). For instance, creating FYC spaces and classrooms that do not operate from a deficit framework but rather from an asset-based one in which students are taught that their skills are strengths from which they can build
on rather than deficits that are fixed and will preclude their ability to succeed in the course—is fundamental.

These identity-affirming spaces are especially necessary for marginalized students arriving on higher education campuses, tasked with the responsibility of expressing themselves in classrooms, such as the writing classroom. This expression often feels intimidating and uncomfortable in a space where students may not feel “safe” enough to express themselves—their identities—not only as student writers but also as individuals with individual and collective identities (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). But it is imperative that students engage in this expression, for success in a composition course has proven to be the key to success in acquiring and accessing the language and norms of academia (Bartholomae, 1985, 2005; Tedrow, 2020; Tingle, 2004). Students are also significantly more likely to persist to the second semester of composition if they receive a grade of an A/B in Composition 1; and their performance in this class (whether they pass or fail) is also the most powerful predictive variable of student graduation within 4 to 6 years (Garrett et al., 2017; Nicholes & Reimer, 2020; Volpe, 2011).

The process of trying to appropriate new modes of discourse in FYC courses, however, can prove particularly daunting for low-income, first-generation students and may lead to a decrease in self-efficacy and sense of belonging (Ardoin & Martinez, 2019; Jury et al., 2017). It can prove equally as daunting for racially minoritized students, particularly Black college students, as they become introduced to an academic culture that has historically maintained hierarchies of valued identities and where FYC has often been3escry3hed as a gatekeeping course that privileges and maintains white, bourgeois discourses (Kynard, 2013). First-year writing courses have also been criticized for
“glorifying the dominant literacies preferred by the educated White American middle-
class majority and delegitimizing Black, indigenous, and other marginalized literacy
practices” (Delpit, 1995, p. 165).

For precisely these reasons, FYC courses can serve as a valuable space in which
to explore the impact of students’ academic and affective experiences; for in this course,
students are learning how to both navigate and negotiate their multiple marginalized
identities in a space that introduces them to and demands their acquiescence to the
prevailing white, middle-class discourse of academia (Bloom, 1996; Downs & Wardle,
2007; Duf, 2010). Thus, in the very act and process of re/learning how to write, these
students are engaging in a kind of identity work (Duf, 2010). The fact that students are
engaging in identity work in FYC courses is precisely why identity threat is such a salient
lens by which to examine these spaces and their impact on first-year students, particularly
those who are racialized, underrepresented, or marginalized. Stereotype threat theory
(Steele & Aronson, 1995) has helped to shed light on many racial and gender disparities
pertaining to academic outcomes and performance, particularly in the academic domain
of STEM. The research reveals that stereotype threat can result in diminished cognitive
ability and memory and can also lead students to disidentify and disengage with the
academic domain that invokes this anxiety so that their self-concept (self-worth) is not
tied to their performance in the domain (Aronson et al., 1998; Major et al., 1998; Steele
& Aronson, 1995).

Thus, stereotype threat can significantly weaken academic performance, invoke
stress and anxiety, and lead to negative student outcomes. Racially minoritized students,
in particular, experience a heightened sense of anxiety when they feel stereotype
threatened (Spencer et al., 1999; Steele, 1997). The studies conducted on stereotype threat found that when Black students were aware of negative stereotypes positioning them as intellectually inferior to their White peers, they were more likely to struggle cognitively, underperform academically, and to internalize this deficit thinking (Spencer et al., 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). This deficit thinking also makes it more difficult for students to feel a sense of belonging and have high self-efficacy, both of which have been found to positively correlate with students’ academic success in college (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Cruz et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2018). When the psychosocial scope is narrowed to the space of classroom, the same proves true: students need to have positive self-concept regarding their specific academic domain to succeed; for instance, in writing classrooms, students need to possess high writing self-efficacy because that is strongly associated with quality of their writing (Cruz et al., 2019; Sanders-Reio et al., 2014). But in order for them to have positive perceptions of their writing ability, they also need to feel like they belong in the classroom; thus, they need to feel that their identity is not being threatened in this space and not worry that their performance could potentially confirm negative stereotypes about their group identity.

This potential stereotype threat may help explain why some Black students underperform or disengage with the academic domain of writing. The identity-based framework of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) could prove useful for interrogating systemic gender gaps in writing as well—and for complicating (and lending greater understanding to) the growing body of evidence that reveals that females significantly outperform males in terms of writing ability (Scheiber et al., 2015). As more students are entering college as underprepared writers, and achievement gaps continue to
widen (NCES, 2019), FYC courses have the potential to be powerful spaces of transformation for students, particularly in terms of belonging and self-efficacy, as they discover their own voices, agency, and power in their larger community and world.

**Problem Statement**

The research on stereotype threat has shed a tremendous amount of light on the devastating impacts that this identity-based threat has not only on students' academic outcomes but on their cognitive abilities and psychological well-being as well, when they are exposed (implicitly or explicitly) to the threat of stereotypes (Steele & Aronson, 1995). For instance, the research on stereotype threat has helped to illuminate why African Americans underperform on certain tests when their identity is made salient or when they fear that their performance will confirm a negative stereotype about their group’s identity (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The research has also revealed that the same holds true for women when they are taking tests or asked to complete a task (in science/mathematics courses, in particular) in which they feel their performance may reflect negatively on their gender (Major et al., 1998; Quinn & Spencer, 2001; Reilly et al., 2019). This line of research has also helped to underscore the reasons why women and minorities were largely underrepresented in the academic domains of STEM fields in which they are more likely to perceive their own inferiority in these subjects, where they have also traditionally been largely underrepresented. And yet the literature on stereotype threat in the humanities, and in FYC classrooms, in particular, is virtually nonexistent, which is particularly concerning, because Black and Latinx students are significantly lagging behind their White peers in literacy skills (Kareem, 2018; NCES, 2019). And this gap has devastating impacts on their future success because the ability to effectively
communicate in writing is an essential skill in higher education and in the professional world.

Equally as concerning is the fact that in studies conducted on literacy skills, a significant achievement gap among gender has also been found, with girls scoring significantly higher than boys in areas of reading and writing, and yet not much research has been devoted to addressing this literacy gap and gender disparity (NCES, 2019; Reilly et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2015; Scheiber et al., 2015). And although the research is replete with evidence for why Black and Latinx minorities and young women underperform in science and mathematics—because of the significant contributions of the research on stereotype threat—a gap in the literature still remains when it comes to examining how and why marginalized students are markedly underperforming in reading and writing—despite the fact that performance in FYC courses has been proven to be one of the strongest, most reliable predictors of retention and overall success in college (Garrett et al., 2017; Nicholes & Reimer, 2020; Volpe, 2011). Therefore, further research is needed for better understanding the nature of the achievement disparities in literacy skills, particularly for racially minoritized students, and, more specifically, for young men of color, who are continuing to demonstrate a marked lag in achievement in literacy skills, and who are also significantly less likely to graduate from college than women of color and their White peers ((NCES, 2019).

It is evident from the gap in the literature, however, that further research is needed to examine these psychosocial variables and students’ “fear of judgment” (Camfield, 2016) in particular, to determine if this fear is rooted in racialized and/or gendered anxieties: that is, whether this fear is inextricably interwoven with identity threat—and
the fear of being judged not only as writers but as members of a group or collective identity. The significant academic disparity and literacy gap that has been found between boys and girls as well as African Americans (and Latino/a/s) and their White peers, also gestures to the fact that further understanding of why this gap exists is needed. And viewing these disparities through the lenses of social identity theory and stereotype threat may help to provide greater clarity and understanding (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele et al., 2002; Tajfel, 1978).

The findings from studies on stereotype threat in STEM fields point to the possibility that this threat could also impact students’ affective and academic experiences in FYC courses as well. Thus, this research seems especially urgent as more underrepresented (e.g., first-generation, low-income, English Language Learners, and/or Black and Latinx) students are entering college and FYC courses as underprepared writers (NCES, 2019). And to better support these students at such a crucial moment in their academic lives, it is important to identify what impact noncognitive (psychosocial and affective) factors such as stereotype (identity) threat, sense of belonging, and self-efficacy have on students’ experiences and academic performance in FYC courses.

**Purpose of the Study**

The number of students entering higher education lacking proficiency in writing continues to rise, and the statistics prove even more daunting for marginalized and/or minoritized students—as young men of color continue to lag behind their White and female peers in national literacy rates. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the ways in which underprepared writers, specifically young men of color, perceive their first-year composition (FYC) classrooms, in terms of their own identity
and the presence of stereotype threat. This study explored whether perceived stereotype threat impacts the experiences of this vulnerable student population in FYC courses, and then examined the relationship between stereotype threat, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging. This study thus sought to shed light on whether stereotype threat played a role in these students’ underperformance in these courses since they are particularly vulnerable to the potential of intersecting (gendered and racialized) identity threats in writing classrooms.

**Research Questions (RQs):**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How did underprepared young men of color experience the presence of stereotype threat in FYC courses?

RQ2: How did underprepared young men of color perceive their identity in FYC courses, particularly in terms of their self-efficacy and sense of belonging?

**Overview of Methodology**

This study utilized narrative inquiry as a research design to address these research questions. A qualitative approach seemed best suited for this study as it sought to elevate and center the voices of academically underprepared young Black men in order to gain a greater understanding about their identity through their storied experiences, which is what lies at the heart of narrative inquiry (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). The participants comprised two young Black men, both first-year students enrolled in English 101 CT courses for academically vulnerable students at a university in the southeastern United States. The participants each participated in semi-structured interviews, answering open-ended questions about their larger lived experiences (see Appendix A). The interviews
were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Thematic analysis was then applied to the participants’ narratives in order to address the guiding research questions.

**Rationale and Significance of the Study**

Understanding students’ experiences as well as what factors impact their performance in first-year writing classrooms, which are strongly predictive of student success, retention, and persistence, is becoming more vital as achievement gaps in reading/writing continue to widen, and more students are entering college as underprepared writers (Nicholes & Reimer, 2020; NCES, 2019; Okeke et al., 2009). By exploring these students’ experiences in terms of their own identities and experiences in FYC courses, this study could help provide leaders in higher education with greater insight into ways that they can address and close these fundamental achievement gaps. Exploring the psychosocial factors that attribute to this gap through the lens of stereotype threat could ultimately help improve students’ performance in these classes as well as their sense of self-efficacy and belonging. The findings could also lead to increased retention and graduation rates among underprepared and/or marginalized students. Understanding the gendered differences in writing abilities could help close the writing achievement gap between males and females (Reilly et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2015; Scheiber et al., 2015). Finally, understanding the racialized differences could help close this gap between Black and Latinx students and their White peers (Kareem, 2018).

Thus, utilizing an identity-based and intersectional lens to explore students’ experiences in FYC courses may have significant implications for young men of color, who may experience potential stereotype threat in these writing spaces that is also intersectional, stemming from both their gender and race. And these findings may not
only have implications for their academic outcomes in the course (in addition to other courses that are writing-intensive) but for their overall academic achievement and success in college as well. The research highlights how students of color, in particular, need to feel safe—psychologically and in terms of their identity—in order to succeed and thrive in college (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). The lens of stereotype threat could offer valuable insight into the ways that racialized and/or gendered anxiety may impact students’ self-efficacy and/or apprehension about writing as well as their sense of belonging.

Thus, exploring whether stereotype threat is a potential affective factor for self-efficacy and belongingness may help educators find ways to mitigate this threat in order to create intentionally identity-affirming and culturally competent spaces of learning that center students’ identities and lived experiences (Kareem, 2018; Kynard, 2013; Means & Pyne, 2017). In turn, students may not only increase their self-efficacy and their overall beliefs about writing but feel a greater sense of belonging in the classroom and college community. Thus, this study could ultimately provide institutional agents (faculty and administrators) with valuable insight into how they can help bolster student success and find ways to mitigate stereotype threat if it appears to play a role in students’ self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and/or their academic outcomes. The findings could add much needed insight into the role of stereotype threat in an academic domain and course in which it has largely been overlooked: FYC courses. In doing so, this study may also have considerable implications for further research on identity-based threat that helps to inform the gendered and racialized literacy gap (Reilly et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2015).
This study will contribute to the research on ways that institutions can help students succeed while also nurturing and centering their identities (D’Antonio, 2020). Therefore, this study may not only help bolster the success of underprepared, underserved students in higher education but young men of color, in particular, who have proven to be especially academically vulnerable in these writing spaces (Kareem, 2018). Thus, having a better understanding of the affective and psychosocial identity-based factors that impact students’ learning experiences for marginalized and underserved students, could help lead to the creation of initiatives, curricula, and programs in higher education that ultimately serve to empower these students and their identities—allowing them to tap into the power of their own voices as they learn to navigate their new academic community and world.

**Role of Researcher**

As an instructor in the English Department of the public university in the southeastern U.S. where the students who participated in this study are enrolled, I also serve as the coordinator of the CT Composition Program in the English department, overseeing the FYC courses designed to help underprepared writers succeed. These courses are entitled English 101 CT classes, in which the CT represents “Course Tutor,” because each one of these classes includes a course-embedded tutor to provide these students with additional support while still mainstreaming them into the traditional English 101 courses. In addition to coordinating this program, I also teach these courses and work closely with these students throughout the academic year; thus, I am deeply committed to the success of these academically vulnerable students.

Having worked closely with these students for eight years at this university, I chose to investigate students enrolled in English 101 CT courses in the program. As the
researcher, I am therefore considered a part of the setting and research, but I took all the necessary steps to promote objectivity and protect the confidentiality of the participants in my study. My own identity as a Latinx woman informed the ways in which I interpreted the data, as I remained committed to interrogating my own potential biases in order to ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of this study. But ultimately, my emic perspective serves as a strength, because while I may not have the same lived experiences of young Black men, I am strongly devoted to the work of equity and justice—and centering and elevating the voices of marginalized and minoritized individuals navigating both academic spaces and the larger world. Upon completing this study, I will share the data and findings with key stakeholders—administrators and faculty–affiliated with my home institution, to not only help improve student success but, ultimately, to empower these underprepared, often underserved and marginalized, students in their foundational first-year writing courses.

**Delimitations**

The study contained the following delimitations:

1. The participants only comprised students who were enrolled in a first-year composition (FYC) course for underprepared students, entitled English 101 CT.

2. The participants were enrolled in this course in Summer/Fall 2023 or Spring 2024.

**Assumptions**

The study included the following assumptions:

1. The students in the English 101 CT sections who participated in the study did so voluntarily.
2. All students who participated in the study were forthcoming and transparent in their responses.

**Definition of Terms**

*Belongingness*: For the purpose of this study, contextualized within the space of higher education, belongingness is defined as a feeling of connectedness but one that both exists and functions as a corollary of students’ perceived social support and the extent to which they feel valued, respected, and cared for by members of their college community (Strayhorn, 2018).

*Identity Safety*: When an individual feels identity safe, they feel that their identity is an asset rather than a barrier/deficit. Thus, when students feel identity safe, they are more likely to feel valued and willing to take interpersonal, social, and/or intellectual risks in the classroom, because they feel safe enough to do so and do not fear that taking these risks will lead to negative consequences, such as being stereotyped (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013).

*Self-Efficacy*: self-efficacy is an individual’s belief in their ability to achieve and produce their desired results in an academic context or domain (Bandura, 1977).

*Stereotype Threat*: Stereotype threat is a disruptive psychological state in which an individual fears that their performance could potentially confirm a negative stereotype about their group identity (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

*Underprepared Writers*: Underprepared writers, also considered developmental or basic writers, will be referred to as underprepared writers in this study as that term places more of the rhetorical onus on the educational backgrounds/institutions of these students and less on the students themselves. That is, these students are largely underprepared
because their educational institutions and/or backgrounds often failed to adequately prepare them for college-level writing (Antonetti, 2017). For the purposes of this study, the students who are considered underprepared writers are those who were placed into English 101 CT sections because they scored below a 19 on the verbal section of the ACT.

Writing self-efficacy: Writing self-efficacy, derived from Bandura’s (1977) concept of self-efficacy, is a student’s belief about their overall writing abilities and/or their ability to perform on a specific writing task in a way that demonstrates proficiency (adherence to rules, norms, mechanics, etc.) appropriate to their educational level (Pajares et al., 2006).

Conclusion

Chapter I provided an introduction to the study and included an overview of the racialized and gendered literacy gaps that exist among students in the United States. These gaps in literacy skills remain evident in first-year composition courses in college, as young men of color continue to lag behind their peers in writing and reading skills. The question this study then aimed to explore is how underprepared young Black men experience their identity (and identity threat) in writing classrooms/spaces, where identity is continually being both centered and constructed. The study utilized narrative inquiry as the research design for it ultimately seeks to explore and understand the experiences of these students—through their larger storied experiences.

Chapter II will review the literature on stereotype threat as well as self-efficacy and belonging, particularly as they pertain to constructs of identity. The locus for this study lies in exploring the identity of young Black men as racialized bodies but also as
college students and emergent writers in first-year writing courses. The research on stereotype threat has largely been relegated to academic domains of STEM; and therefore, the gaps in the literature when it comes to stereotype threat in the humanities, or in literacy domains, will also be revealed. Chapter III describes the methodology and articulates the rationale for narrative inquiry as the research design. Chapter IV will then present the findings of the study, elevating the voices of the young Black men as they share their narratives. Finally, Chapter V will provide an analysis of the narratives of the participants in order to help fill in the gaps in the research on stereotype threat in spaces of literacy. This study ultimately seeks to center the voices and stories of young Black men, who have not been given the adequate attention that they deserve in the research on their underperformance in academic domains of reading and writing.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As colleges and universities have become increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, and language identity, leaders in higher education have made tremendous strides in addressing and overcoming structural barriers and inequalities (Smith, 2020). But despite the progress, the unfortunate reality is that academic achievement gaps continue to widen among marginalized students, particularly Black and Latinx populations. One gap in particular—the literacy gap—is staggering in terms of how racialized and gendered the disparities are, and yet the literature has not adequately documented nor addressed the reasons for it. As previously mentioned, 72% of students are transitioning from high school to college as less-than-proficient writers, and African American and Latinx students are significantly underperforming in reading and writing (NCES, 2019). As more underprepared writers are entering higher education, it is important to understand ways in which the affective factor of stereotype (identity) threat impacts students as well as its relationship to belongingness and self-efficacy within the context of the first-year composition (FYC) classroom, particularly because success in this course is predictive of students’ overall academic success in college.

The research on stereotype threat has helped close the achievement gap for women and African Americans in STEM fields, but the achievement gap among men and
women in reading/writing, and particularly for Black men, is widening (NCES, 2019). And yet scarcity of research on this topic abounds. This literature review will aim to connect the research that could help shed light on this tremendous literacy gap and explore whether perceived stereotype threat is activated for marginalized and racially minoritized students, in particular, in their first-year composition (FYC) courses. Widening the scope of the current research and theoretical lenses is essential to determining the many factors that contribute to lower academic achievement in writing among our most underprepared and underrepresented students.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

While social identity theory will not be utilized as the primary theoretical framework in this study, it is nonetheless important to include in the literature review because of its symbiotic relationship to stereotype threat. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that different social identities can respond differently to the exact same situation based on the historical and sociocultural context and legacies tied to the respective groups. For instance, since racial and ethnic minorities in the United States have been historically discriminated against, subjugated, and excluded from certain educational and professional spaces, many of them, particularly African Americans still contend not only with this sordid racial legacy and history but with continued discrimination as well (Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Smith, 2020). As a result of such discrimination and segregation and being viewed as intellectually inferior, African Americans (and other marginalized identities) can feel a heightened sensitivity to situational cues or indicators of inclusion and respect in their environment or ones that
make them feel stereotype threatened (Emerson et al., 2020; Steele & Aronson, 1995). These situational cues signal to stigmatized/excluded groups whether their identity is threatened or affirmed. For instance, situational cues that make stereotypes salient can make minorities feel concerned that they could be viewed through those stereotypical lenses by their peers or by those in power. The stereotype does not have to directly align with or pertain to the stigmatized or marginalized group in itself; the mere presence of a situational cue that invokes stereotypes makes minorities experience the psychological threat and fear of being stereotyped (Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Okeke et al., 2009; Steele, 1997).

**Stereotype Threat**

Steele and Aronson (1995) defined stereotype threat as “the social-psychological threat that is invoked for a member of stigmatized groups in which they feel that their behavior or performance will confirm the negative stereotypes ascribed to their group [identity]” (p. 23). In their groundbreaking research, Steele and Aronson conducted a study in which they induced stereotype threat among racial/ethnic minorities in a classroom. An identical test was administered among two groups; one group was told that the test would measure cognitive ability while the other group was told the test had no real impact. The Black students in the control group scored significantly lower than the White students. In the group where they were told that the test would have no effect, they scored almost identically. The findings were significant in terms of revealing the ways that stereotype threat can significantly weaken academic performance, invoke stress and anxiety, and lead to negative student outcomes. These findings have been replicated in numerous studies over the years with similar results and have led to significant strides in
understanding the ways in which women and racial/ethnic minorities are impacted by stereotype threat (Major et al., 1998; Quinn & Spencer, 2001; Schmader et al. 2001, 2004). Stereotype threat has also been found to result in diminished memory (Schmader & Johns, 2003) and can also lead students to disidentify and disengage with the academic domain that invokes this particular anxiety so that their self-concept is not tied to their performance in the domain (Aronson et al., 1998; Major et al., 1998).

Beasley and Fisher (2012) also explored the ways in which group performance anxiety arising from stereotype threat impacts the attrition of women and minorities in science, engineering, and math fields in college. The authors noted that previous research in this area has primarily relied on a deficit framework to explain the lower attrition rate among women and minorities, largely attributing it to academic deficits and/or lower socioeconomic status (SES). Thus, in their study, the researchers opted to rely upon the concept of stereotype threat instead to shed light on why women and minorities have remained largely absent in these academic domains (Steele, 1997; Steele and Aronson, 1995). They aimed to investigate how group-based performance anxiety influenced the attrition of different racial and gender groups from STEM majors.

For their study, Beasley and Fisher (2012) utilized data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF), a probability sample of nearly 4000 students entering 28 selective colleges and universities as first-year students; the sample included 998 Whites, 959 Asians, 916 Latinos, and 1,051 African Americans. The researchers asked the participants to complete a survey designed to gather comprehensive data about participants prior to their beginning college to measure their perceptions, attitudes, and motivations as well as background characteristics (Massey & Fischer, 2005). The survey
also assessed students’ experiences and examined the reasons for their retention and departure from STEM majors. The researchers utilized a logistic regression to help determine if significant differences among the majors and non-majors existed and whether group-based performance was a factor in their attrition from STEM (Beasley & Fisher, 2012).

The results mirrored findings from earlier research that showed that stereotype threat and performance anxiety did play a role in students’ choosing to either continue in or depart from STEM fields (Massey & Fischer, 2005). Their findings also revealed that Black and Hispanic students experienced greater stereotype threat than their White and Asian peers in STEM, with Black majors displaying the highest group-based performance anxiety, followed by Hispanics and Asians; White students had the lowest scores of anxiety. This research not only highlights the pervasiveness of stereotype threat and its negative effects but it also reveals how these threats are not always limited to situations in which the stereotype is made explicit.

These threats may also be implicitly activated for students, as Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev’s (2000) study showed; in their study, women who completed an exam with men performed worse than when they completed it with women. In essence, this study revealed that susceptibility to stereotype threat requires only that individuals be aware of negative stereotypes about their group. In her study on writing centers, Azima (2020) utilized the theoretical frameworks of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and validation theory (Rendón, 1994), respectively, in order to examine whether mandated visits to writing centers validate or invalidate students of color on both an interpersonal and academic level. The findings revealed that the required visits were beneficial overall,
but that a positive association with the writing center can only occur when the following benefits are evident: academic validation, interpersonal validation, and the presence of identity-safe cues. The drawbacks of required visits also proved to be consistent with what the researchers hypothesized and, that is, the potential for students to experience stereotype threat when they were required to visit the writing center, depending on their own racial/ethnic background or personal experiences (Azima, 2020). Marginalized groups often require that an institutional agent (within or outside of the classroom) first validate their identity, presence, and their abilities before they can truly feel a sense of belonging on campus and perform at their optimal level (Azima, 2020). These findings also mirror Jordan and Lovett’s research (2007) that showed that Black students in their study perceived not only the college classroom but the college community as a whole as an evaluative setting, thereby causing stereotype threat effects to almost always be present, even when no explicit threat was presented.

These studies highlight the importance of understanding marginalized students’ affective experiences in academic spaces, particularly in terms of their identity (whether they experience threat or affirmation/validation) (Azima, 2020; Jordan & Lovett, 2007). Since the publication of Steele and Aronson’s (1995) research, the efforts of those working to bolster the numbers of women and minorities in STEM have been successful as their participation in STEM has increased by almost 5% (Beasley & Fisher, 2012). This study gestures, however, to the need to devote the same amount of research to understanding the underperformance and underrepresentation of minorities, particularly Black men, in college writing courses.
Racial and Gender Achievement Gaps

Throughout the course of their education, Black and Latinx populations have had lower academic outcomes and achievement than their White peers, including lower standardized test scores (Rodriguez, 2014; Steele & Aronson, 1995). While the studies have documented the negative effects that lower socioeconomic (SES) and lesser quality of education and life can have on Black and Latinx academic achievement, research has also suggested the even when these factors are controlled or constant, these students still lag behind their White counterparts, suggesting that although these factors certainly exacerbate the racial academic disparities, the reasons are, ultimately, much more complex than these reasons alone; because of this complexity, more attention needs to be given to the psychosocial variables that arise from systemic and institutional racism, bias, and/or discrimination—all of which could potentially attribute to this gap; and stereotype is one such powerful iteration of these forces.

According to the National Science Foundation (NSF, 2017b) the Latinx and African American college students comprised 30% of the student population in 2014, yet only 21% of them graduated from institutions of higher education in 2016. These students also earn bachelor’s degrees at lower rates when compared to White college students. The disparities and underrepresentation among Latinx and Black students are even greater when gender is taken into account. For instance, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019) 36% of Black male students and 52% of Latino male students graduated with a bachelor’s degree within six years, while 63% of White males received theirs within the same timeframe. These lower attrition rates suggest that Black
and Latinx males may face greater stereotype threat and need more support than their female counterparts when entering college (Reilly et al., 2019).

These troubling statistics are mirrored in the literacy rates among this population as well. And while writing is not an academic domain that is often reported in national statistics, because it is not often measured in educational assessments, the data that does exist clearly reveals that male students are markedly lagging behind their female peers in terms of writing (and reading) ability (Reilly et al., 2019). In the most recent Nation’s Report Card that was released by National Center for Education Statistics in 2017, girls scored three times higher than boys in reading/writing, and yet this gender disparity is not widely studied in the literature (NCES, 2019). Perhaps the underperformance of male students in writing courses lies in part because the male students are also encountering potential stereotype threat of their verbal abilities and perceived intellectual inferiority or inability to express themselves in this regard (Okeke et al., 2009; Reilly et al., 2019). But it is perhaps even more psychologically and culturally complex than for young men of color in these writing spaces as they encounter intersecting stereotypes associated with both their race and gender (Okeke et al., 2009).

**First-Year Composition (FYC) and Student Success**

Nicholes and Reimer (2020) examined the relationship between first-year composition (FYC), grades, and persistence at a polytechnic university in the midwestern United States. The authors wanted to build upon the literature that has consistently revealed that FYC is a strong and reliable predictor of student success and can therefore help to shape retention initiatives and interventions for first-year students (Brunk-Chavez & Fredericksen, 2008). In addition, these courses have also shown promise in predicting
student success and retention after only one or two semesters. And, more specifically, the grades students receive in these courses in FYC also serve as reliable predictors for whether they will persist from the first year to the second year of college as well as whether they will graduate (Nicholes & Reimer, 2020).

For their own study, Nicholes and Reimer (2020) drew upon several studies that had been conducted; they utilized one study that was conducted in which the academic records of 500 community college students were analyzed, and Volpe (2011) concluded that grades in FYC courses were strongly correlated with persistence after two semesters and that students who received below a C in the course were significantly less likely to persist than those who received A/B grades. They also relied upon another study that analyzed student records in a four-year metropolitan university and corroborated Volpe’s (2011) findings; Garrett et al. (2017) found that students who received a C or below had a 17% likelihood of graduating versus a 53% chance if they received a grade of A or B. Garrett et. AI (2017) also found that failing this class was as strong of a predictor of student success and graduation as students’ grade-point averages in their respective majors; in fact, they posited that of all first-year general education (GE) courses failing FYC proved to be the strongest predictor of a student not graduating. For this reason, first-year writing courses have proven to be promising spaces for student success initiatives and approaches.

Their study also utilized Tinto’s (1993) model of student motivation and persistence in order to examine the intersections of FYC, grades, and persistence. In this model of student motivation and persistence, Tinto postulated that students’ sense of belonging to their academic community is a strong predictor of both their motivation and
willingness to persist in college. In their study, Nicholes and Reimer (2020) aimed to investigate whether the grades students received in Composition 1 served as predictors for the following: their persistence to Composition 2 and their graduation within 4-6 years. The researchers conducted a large-scale evaluation study that comprised 8,916 student participants. The researchers conducted logistic regression to determine the predictive potentials of each of the five predictor variables: gender identity, ethnic identity, first-generation status, taking Composition 1 in a fall semester, and final grades in this course. The results indicated that the role of Composition 1 was a strong predictor of persistence and graduation, corroborating earlier findings about the predictive power of students’ performance in first-year writing courses in regard to students’ persistence and graduation. Students were significantly more likely to persist to the second semester of composition if they received a grade of an A or B in Composition 1. They were also more likely to take it the following semester if they received an A or B and more likely to receive a comparable grade in Composition 2. An overwhelming 95% of students in the study who failed Composition 1 did not graduate within 4 to 6 years. The grade students received in Composition 1 (not Composition 2) proved to be the most powerful predictive variable of student graduation within 4 to 6 years.

This study not only highlights the essential role first-year writing courses play in student success, retention, and persistence but the importance of examining what factors, in particular, preclude student success in these spaces. That is, what role is identity or stereotype threat playing in impeding some marginalized students from developing their voices as writers and students in these spaces? The first-year writing course is an integral space for identity development and transformation because it allows students to navigate
the new world and discourses of academia and access the language and communication structures that they need to thrive as college students. But some marginalized students, in particular, have been denied access to these discourses and have been culturally invalidated in first-year writing courses (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015).

Identity and First-Year Writing Classrooms

Identity Safety

The notion of identity safety presented in this section will be conceptualized through the psychological framework of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). When the researcher refers to the term safety, this notion is both undergirded and presupposed by identity threat; therefore, the term “identity safe” will be used to describe the direct opposite of identity-threatened; that is, if a student feels stereotype threatened they do not feel identity safe. The work of organizational psychologist Edmonson (2019) has led to organizational leaders’ emphasizing the importance of creating and perpetuating a sense of “psychological safety” among their employees in the private sector; this lens, however, has not seldom been applied to the realm of education—and higher education, in particular. It has also ultimately failed to include another fundamental aspect of safety for students, particularly students of color, and that is “identity safety” (Maimon et al., 2021). Thus, this emphasis on identity safety may be the key to the empowerment and belongingness of students—both academically and interpersonally/socially. Students of color, in particular, need to feel truly safe—psychologically and in terms of their identity—in order to succeed and thrive in college communities (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). This safety cannot be attained without the implementation of particular, intentional strategies that ensure that students not only feel
psychologically (identity) safe enough in the classroom and in their communities to take interpersonal risks but, ultimately, that they feel safe enough to express their identities as well—that is, that they feel truly seen and heard—and not stereotype threatened—as students of color (Maimon et al., 2021). A particularly rich space for this exploration of identity threat and safety is the first-year composition (FYC) classroom, where students are already engaging in the work of developing their identities (Duf, 2010; Kareem, 2018; Ryan, 2020).

Soares and Lopes (2020) examined the ways in which the roles of students and lecturers in higher education affect academic performance. The authors note that the teaching and learning experience in higher education has shifted from a lecture-based one to a more engaging, participatory, and collaborative experience, and that effective engagement of students and staff is now one of the most significant issues facing higher education. This shift has led to questions regarding relationships between students, the characteristics of the lecturer/teacher, and the social environment on the students’ academic performance. In order to address these questions, the authors conducted a study in which they examined the role of authentic leadership, psychological safety, and network density on academic performance. The study rested on the theoretical framework of social network theory as well as psychological safety, both of which posit the importance of social interactions and interdependence and interconnectedness among members in a class (team) on overall performance.

The findings revealed that psychological safety positively impacts students’ academic performance. When students feel safe to take interpersonal risks and express their ideas in a classroom with a teacher who is authentic and encourages their social
interaction and risk-taking, the network density (interconnectedness or social network) in the classroom becomes more cohesive, and all of these lead to stronger academic performance (Soares & Lopes, 2020). The researchers utilized a questionnaire that was a modified version of organizational psychologist Amy Edmonson’s (2019) psychological safety scale that was adapted to fit a higher education model; and, therefore, the word “team” was replaced with “class.” Their findings reveal that all of these factors do have positive impacts on academic performance, which has significant theoretical implications for the importance of psychological safety and eliminating stereotype threat in the teaching and learning experience in higher education.

In this same line of thinking, Kezar et al. (2022) examined the ways in which college campuses can create cultures on campus that support low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students; and rather than referring to these students through deficit-oriented lenses and labeling them as “at-risk,” the authors refer to them instead as “at-promise” students (p. 370). This study explored a comprehensive and large-scale transition and success program for college students, noting that their research also identifies a space in which at-promise students thrive—a culture of “ecological validation” (Kitchen et al., 2021). Kezar et al. (2022) utilized Rendón’s theory of validation (1994) that holds that validation occurs both within and outside of the classroom and that the responsibility of validating marginalized students falls to agents within the institution, not the students themselves. Rendón (1994) distinguishes between both types of validation: interpersonal and academic. Interpersonal validation fosters the social and emotional responses of students while academic validation nurtures students’ beliefs in their innate abilities to succeed and to participate in the creation of knowledge.
Kezar et al. (2022) sought to expand upon and concretize validation theory and determine what campus cultures would look like if validation theory were embedded within the culture of a campus in order to not only make at-promise students succeed but all students. The findings reveal that a culture of ecological validation is one that centers at-promise students and their experiences, their needs as well as their strengths. The findings also highlight the defining features that must be enacted in order to create a culture of ecological validation: identity-conscious spaces that use language of care or affirming language, center the students’ lived experiences and identities, and ultimately make them feel validated and affirmed—which could easily be reconceptualized as “safe.” This research clearly illustrates that the concept of validation is intertwined with affirmation, and that both of these are inextricably interconnected with notions of safety as well. And while understanding what factors help to foster validating/affirming/safe identity-conscious environment for students is fundamental to student success and well-being, understanding the inverse is equally as important—that is, having greater clarity on what factors preclude students from feeling validated or safe or that their classroom invokes stereotype threat, particularly for students of color and other underrepresented students.

Identity Development

First-year composition (FYC) classrooms at predominately white institutions (PWIs) are often more diverse in terms of their student demographics because they are general education courses. But they are also holding a mirror to the gross inequities and inequalities that still persist in U.S. educational systems. While high school students in more affluent school districts are able to exploit strong academic opportunities and
resources, such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) English courses, as well as dual enrollment programs, allowing them to place out of first-year writing courses, that is not proving to be the case for disadvantaged students from schools with less funding and resources. Thus, it is often marginalized students—racially/ethnically minoritized, first-generation, low-income students, and/or English Language learners, who are more often than their White peers coming from underfunded, underprivileged school systems and communities (NCES, 2019). These students are also more likely to enter college as underprepared writers. Thus, it is imperative to address ways in which to empower these students and their identities in writing classrooms.

D’Antonio (2020) implicitly addresses the relationship between identity development and safety in their research on how developmental writing courses in community colleges often fail to teach students the skills needed to succeed in college-level writing courses. D’Antonio suggests that these courses are ineffective because they often operate from a deficit framework and focus on the students’ deficiencies and weaknesses in writing instead of fostering their agency as writers. The author also shows how many of these courses for underprepared writers do not offer a transformative pedagogical approach that is also integrative and attempts to address improvement of writing skills, self-efficacy of students, and students’ engagement and agency in their own learning. D’Antonio conducted a study in which they utilized the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI), an emerging meta-theoretical model, to both conceptualize and create a comprehensive picture of the connection between students’ academic identities and their writing identities—as well as their overall motivation. By utilizing these principles to guide the design of a developmental writing course, the
course sought to promote students’ identity exploration and development around the
domain of writing. The findings revealed that underprepared students with diverse
backgrounds were positively impacted by developmental writing courses that promoted
identity exploration (D’Antonio, 2020). Rather than merely connecting students’
identities to their academic content, D’Antonio posits that classrooms need to be spaces
in which students can purposefully and thoughtfully explore their own identities through
the academic content. This approach leads to greater student engagement and motivation
as they begin to realize their own agency and identity as writers (D’Antonio, 2020). This
sense of personal agency is particularly essential for underprepared students in FYC
courses. But when students feel stereotype threatened, this agency becomes harder for
them to attain.

Identity exploration (IdEx) activities proved to be particularly effective for
motivating and empowering students (D’Antonio, 2020). Thus, this literature gestures to
the possibility of IdEx activities as a possible pathway for achieving identity safety
among students and, ultimately, a greater sense of belonging not only in the classroom
but in their larger community. But while research exists on ways to foster student
belongingness and self-efficacy by helping them explore their identity in positive ways, it
is virtually non-existent when it comes to examining what non-cognitive factors make
students disengage or underperform or feel identity-threatened in first-year writing
courses, which are always-already engaging in the work of identity (Duf, 2010). And
perhaps perceived or potential stereotype threat may help explain why some students
underperform or disengage with the academic domain of writing, which has traditionally
been gendered as a feminine domain, a “soft” subject unlike that of the hard sciences or fields of mathematics.

**Gender Identity**

The research has shown that social behaviors and intellectual or academic tasks are readily identified by children as either masculine or feminine in nature (Kagan, 1964). The ways that children classify them are based on shared sociocultural beliefs about gender norms and roles. For instance, reading and language have been largely regarded as naturally feminine domains, stereotypes adhered to by both males and females (Halpern et al., 2011; Sablonnière et al., 2013). This gender stereotype has been considered to be one of the factors leading to a diminished interest in reading among boys in adolescence, particularly for boys who may feel more driven by adhering to traditional gender norms. The studies on reading achievement have posited the correlation with reading achievement and reading motivation, and as boys, on a whole, report lower reading motivation or interest in reading in adolescence, the impact can be seen in their lower achievement scores (Reilly et al., 2019).

These restrictive social norms of gender also play a role in male students’ engagement in certain academic spaces, as the research highlights how men in college, particularly young men of color, find it difficult to be vulnerable in front of their peers, who may then perceive them as weak or soft (feminine) for being in touch with their emotions (Schwab & Dupuis, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). Therefore, male students who do not want to be stereotyped as feminine or have their heteronormative masculinity diminished in the classroom find themselves in an almost continual process of internally negotiating their understanding of manhood in college (Davis, 2013; Marrs, 2016;
Schwab & Dupuis, 2020). This negotiation can then lead these young men to conform to expectations of hegemonic masculinity in which emotional stoicism and silence are regarded as masculine ideals and strengths (Schwab & Dupuis, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). And while the research underlines the importance of college men forming a healthy gender identity and how institutional agents in higher education should encourage young men of color, in particular, to challenge rigid constructs of masculinity, a gap remains when it comes to exploring how emotional vulnerability is fostered in spaces and classrooms of higher education (Huerta, 2022; Schwab & Dupuis, 2020).

The question then becomes what happens to students in academic spaces that demand a certain emotional vulnerability, such as the writing classroom. In FYC courses, students are expected to center their voices and identities as they learn to express themselves through writing, which calls for a level of emotional expression that does not align with traditional ideologies of masculinity that eschews the appearance of weakness and in which emotional stoicism is a marker of toughness and real masculinity. The research clearly reveals, however, how rigid conformity to traditional masculine ideologies and gender roles is associated with lower levels of academic engagement, motivation, and even achievement; and when students resist conforming to restrictive norms, they ultimately engage more and perform better academically (Brown, 2019; Davis, 2013; Marrs, 2016; Yu et al., 2021).

**Racial Identity**

Kareem (2018) investigated the correlation between racialized experiences (whether negative or positive) with past literacy education and student perceptions of FYC courses. His research also explored the ways in which racial identities shape the
experiences of racial minorities, particularly ones who identified as having been racially subjugated in their former writing classrooms, as they transition from high school to college. The student-participants described writing situations in school that made them feel either confident or insecure. Many of the Black students who participated in the study expressed feeling insecure in the classroom, largely because of what they deemed to be the irrelevance of the curriculum and content in terms of their own lived experiences. This insecurity could also be framed as low self-efficacy that served to preclude their sense of belonging in the space—as they felt “Othered” by the unrelatable nature of the content.

Kareem (2018) argues that by the time students reach FYC and other writing-intensive courses, they already have a toolbox of discursive instruments for composing academic writing. Some of these instruments for Black Americans often include what they perceive to be as the rejection of their home or non-academic linguistic practices. Kareem cites numerous instances of students who claimed that when they rejected their natural writing voice for the one they used in academic writing, they were essentially “fronting” or engaging in a sort of performative identity in order to make the grade. Another iteration of this phenomenon and behavior is “code-switching,” a term coined by sociolinguist Einar Haugen (1956) to refer to the process of switching from one language or dialect to another, which is also performative in nature.

Kareem’s (2018) study reinforces why it is essential to examine students’ experience in FYC courses not merely through lenses of academic outcomes but also through the noncognitive and psychosocial factors that impact first-year students’ experiences, particularly students of color, as they learn to navigate new academic
discourses but, ultimately, as they “transition across raciolinguistic literacies” (Kareem, 2018, p. 24). If learning how to develop and write in academic language or utilize one’s academic voice is one of the outcomes of FYC courses, then examining the students’ move from African American English Vernacular (AAVE) to postsecondary academic writing is imperative (Kareem, 2018).

And the fact that students have clearly expressed the performative nature of college-level writing gestures all the more to why the role of stereotype threat needs to be examined in these spaces—and the affect of having to prove or perform their authenticity in these spaces. Through academic discourse and writing, students both perform and construct their identity as college students; thus, the writing classroom helps students create this identity. Some theorists go a bit further in their articulation of this identity-construction and assert that traditional and institutionalized literacy education not only largely renders Blackness invisible but that it serves as “an artifact of white supremacy” (Kynard, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 21). The hierarchical and invisibility-rendering nature of many first-year writing classrooms makes it rife with possibility for exploring stereotype threat as a potential psychosocial force that makes students of color underperform as they learn to appropriate new modes of discourse as college students and writers—which is much more than just an intellectual task for marginalized students.

In Kareem’s (2018) study, the participants also noted that their racial perspective impacts their engagement (on both academic and social levels) but it does so in almost invisible ways; they also suggested that one of these invisible influences could be stereotype threat. These invisible forces are of particular significance in spaces like the FYC classroom that is engaging in the work of identity—both performing and
constructing it. The participants even claimed that they felt that their identity as college
students was tied to their identity as an academic writer. But interestingly, while the
participants did not explicitly speak to the impact of racialized experiences their
responses denoted the invisible influences. For example, they described feeling as if they
had to convey their intelligence through writing and/or adhere to strict rules of citation
and discourse. Kareem suggests that the abundance of conventions and rules are the
product of racialized ideologies that privileged the norms and discourses of whiteness;
and therefore, FYC courses often ask students to show obedience to these rules and to
dominant racialized ideologies.

In a similar vein, Durkee et al. (2021) examined the ways in which the specific
cultural invalidation of Black college students experiencing the “acting white accusation”
(AWA) affected their racial identity (RI) development. Their research revealed the ways
that this type of cultural invalidation can not only undermine Black students’ racial
authenticity but their identity development as well. This cultural invalidation could also
easily be perceived as a specific type of social identity threat that people of color face.
Such invalidation can lead to complicated identity development and internalization of
racist thinking and beliefs (Durkee et al., 2021). Cultural invalidation is particularly
challenging because it can target individuals’ sense of belonging to the social groups with
which they identify. It can also lead to questions of authenticity for people of color; as a
result, minoritized individuals often internalize and grapple with this question of
authenticity and feel as if they have to perform their racial identity in order to prove that
they are racially authentic and that they do indeed belong to their racial group (Durkee et
al., 2021).
The research clearly underlines how invalidation (or identity threat) manifests and the ways in which it can serve to undermine, minimize, and de-legitimize racial authenticity—racial identity—which is useful for conceptualizing and understanding the ways that students in FYC courses have to access dominant discourses in the academy to prove their authenticity as emergent writers and college students, perhaps to the detriment or silencing of their authentic racial identity (Kynard, 2013; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). The act of writing and discovering one’s voice as a writer in first-year writing courses demands reflexivity as well as affective and metacognitive engagement, and ultimately, the construction of a new identity, and this study sought to investigate the underlying factors (threats) that serve to hinder this development and growth and can ultimately lead to marginalized or underrepresented students’ underperformance in these courses.

Acevedo-Gil et al. (2015) suggest that another type of invalidation, academic invalidation, can happen among all students FYC courses, however, particularly in writing courses for underprepared (or developmental) writers. In their study of students in a developmental FYC course, the students claimed that they felt academically invalidated through the often-remedial nature of the developmental courses and the instruction that focused on basic skills alone. The students also reported that courses that challenged them made them feel academically validated. And it was also academically and interpersonally validating for the students when institutional agents recognized and acknowledged their identities, whether racial/ethnic, what neighborhood they grew up in, and so forth. The findings also reveal that instructors who operated not from a deficit framework but from one of academic strengths, noting what the individual students’ strengths were as well as ways in which they could continue to improve, was also a
source of tremendous validation for these students. The results reaffirm the literature that shows that validating environments are conducive to optimal learning and are particularly beneficial for students of color.

**Sense of Belonging**

Gillen-O’Neel (2021) explores the ways in which students, both first-generation and continuing generation, assess their sense of belonging as well as their behavioral and emotional engagement on a daily basis. The author notes that most of the research that has been conducted on students’ sense of belonging has examined it in relation to student success and academic outcomes and reveals that students’ sense of belonging is strongly associated with positive academic outcomes (Groccia, 2018; Strayhorn, 2018). Gillen-O’Neel (2021) notes, however, that a gap in the literature remains when it comes to exploring students’ sense of belonging on a more micro-level, on the personal and daily level. The purpose of the study was to investigate how students from different educational backgrounds perceive their sense of belonging and how they report engaging on both an emotional and behavioral level in college every day for a week.

The author drew upon Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) “belongingness hypothesis” as well as Ryan and Deci’s (2020) self-determination theory to undergird their study. The findings revealed that first-generation students were particularly sensitive to daily fluctuations of belonging that affected their level of engagement more than their peers. The findings also showed that when students felt a greater sense of belonging, they were also more engaged on that day, revealing the strong correlation between belongingness and engagement, particularly for first-generation students (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021). Perceived identity threat could perhaps be one of the factors that leads to a greater sense
of belonging or, more specifically, a belongingness that is rooted in self-efficacy. As Gillen-O’Neel suggests, belongingness is an important variable (and affect) to study in relation to other unexplored constructs or factors because it is such a complex psychological issue, particularly for students who have been historically “Othered.” The literature reveals how students, marginalized students and those considered “Other,” can become empowered and discover their own agency and sense of belonging in their college communities through a process of writing that is purposefully connected to identity development and exploration (D’Antonio, 2020; Tharp, 2017). But the literature does not adequately delineate the ways that FYC courses could help to mediate the gendered-racialized literacy gap, in particular.

Means and Pyne (2017) also explored the ways that low-income, first-generation students experienced institutional structures of support designed to facilitate students’ sense of belonging at their university. The authors explored support structures that have been identified as spaces/structures that increase belongingness among students, such as social identity-based centers and student organizations, residence hall communities, academic support services, as well as faculty relationships and educational experiences. The purpose of their study was to determine whether these spaces fostered or increased a sense of belonging among low-income first-generation students, in particular. Means and Pyne (2017) sought to discover what institutional support structures low-income, first-generation, first-year college students would identify as increasing their sense of belonging and helping them navigate their institutions.

The authors utilized Strayhorn’s (2018) conceptual framework for belongingness in which he described sense of belonging as that which “refers to students’ perceived
social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 3). Strayhorn (2018) argued that belonging is a basic human need, and in order for students to feel a sense of belonging in their college community, they need to feel that they matter and are valued; he also claimed that race and ethnicity play a significant role in students’ perceived sense of belonging. The researcher also drew upon Engle and Tinto’s (2008) research on the ways that, despite increased college enrollment among this student population, their persistence and attrition rates still remain lower than that of their more affluent, continuing-generation peers. Means and Pyne (2017) sought to address and shed light on this attainment gap in their study by centering the voices and experiences of these low-income, first-generation students.

The findings revealed that all of the participants had already internalized messages and beliefs about their own sense of belonging on campus before they ever even arrived on their respective campuses. Their internalized beliefs were highly impacted and shaped by the students’ racialized and class-based social identities. The students identified the support structures as most integral to their dismantling of and pushing back on their pre-college, internalized racist, classist beliefs that diminished their sense of belonging and instead made them feel a real sense of belonging on campus as follows: institutional, need-based scholarship programs that also offered socioemotional support; meaningful relationships with student-centered faculty; and social identity-based student organizations (Means & Pyne, 2017).
Self-Efficacy and Writing Self-Efficacy

Sanders-Reio et al. (2014) examined the ways in which beliefs about writing, writing self-efficacy, and writing apprehension predict writing performance. The authors utilized the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory that underlines the importance of beliefs in both learning and performance (Bandura, 1989). This theory holds that the most essential of the beliefs are those pertaining to self-efficacy or confidence in one’s ability to perform a given task and achieve certain goals. As Bandura (1989) revealed in their research, the higher an individual’s self-efficacy is the more likely they are to attempt difficult tasks and persist in challenging situations. This theory has also been concretized with respect to writing as writing self-efficacy has been strongly linked to apprehension and performance as well; students with greater writing self-efficacy are less apprehensive about their writing and write better (Pajares et al., 2006; Ryan, 2020; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). The findings revealed that a strong correlation exists between writing self-efficacy and writing apprehension. The higher the students’ efficacy was, the lower their apprehension for writing was as well. Students who were less apprehensive to write also received higher grades on the writing assignment they completed as part of the study. Thus, the results showed that students’ beliefs about writing were strongly linked to their writing apprehension, efficacy, and performance. Self-efficacious student writers were highly motivated to write to the best of their ability. But stereotype threat can prove to be especially disruptive to this self-efficacy, particularly for students of color, who are more susceptible to feeling “Othered” and, therefore, more vulnerable to greater awareness of stereotypes and stereotype threat, which can have negative impacts on a person’s self-esteem (Aronson et al., 1998; Kareem, 2018).
Summary

The literature clearly illustrates the ways in which research on stereotype threat has helped to strengthen understanding of the role that stereotype threat has played in STEM classrooms and fields. The FYC classroom, which centers language and discourse, thus serves as an ideal space through which to explore whether stereotype threat impacts young Black men’s experiences and, ultimately, how they perceive and navigate issues related to their identity in both the classroom and beyond. In the writing classroom, students are actively engaged in the work of meaning-making and identity-making as they learn to become writers and thinkers in the discourse community and world of academia. For students who are deemed “Other,” however, this identity-making is riddled with complexity as they must learn to center themselves and their voices in order to both discover and strengthen their voices—always-already aware that their voice (their language and their writing) is precisely what can signal to others whether they truly belong in this space, in this academic world. Thus, it is in the very act of centering their identity and voice, which demands a certain and specific kind of vulnerability, that may also make them feel susceptible to stereotype threat.

For language lies at the core of identity, both in terms of how one understands and situates their own identity as well as how others then perceive and categorize people’s identity based on the language with which they speak and write. That is, language both reflects and shapes social and cultural identities, which can have significantly different implications and consequences for marginalized, racialized identities learning to navigate and appropriate the language of academia. The question therefore lies in whether academically vulnerable students of color, particularly young Black men, who are continually underperforming in FYC courses, are impacted by stereotype threat and if
this identity threat also affects their self-efficacy and sense of belonging in these spaces and in their larger college community.

The research suggests that those students who report higher levels of self-efficacy in the particular academic domain are significantly less likely to experience stereotype threat (Aronson et al., 1998). This increased self-efficacy is also strongly correlated with a greater sense of belonging, and this study sought to explore this relationship within the context of the writing classroom as well. The literature reveals the tremendous gap that exists in research on stereotype threat in the humanities; and yet, this research has proven to have a significant impact on helping to increase the enrollment of and empower historically marginalized students in STEM. And while the humanities are perhaps not as marketable or lucrative as STEM fields, the reality is that literacy rates—and students’ abilities to read and write (and think critically) with college-level proficiency—is a key predictor of college retention and success—and thus the students’ overall future success.

In fact, students’ success in first-year composition courses is one of the primary determinants of whether students will succeed academically and persist until graduation (Garrett et al., 2017; Nicholes & Reimer, 2020; Volpe, 2011). Therefore, this study could have significant implications for this vulnerable population in an academic space that has been largely overlooked in the research. Thus, it seems a worthy endeavor to shift the lenses of research on stereotype threat to young Black men in first-year writing classrooms, who have not been given the attention they deserve when it comes to their underperformance in spaces of literacy.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In English 101 courses at the southeastern university that is the research setting for this study, archival data that include student demographics (race, ethnicity, and gender) and grade reports for every English 101 course offered each academic year, consistently reveal that Black male students perform at the lowest rates in these courses. As stated in Chapter 1, their underachievement in these courses mirrors the national literacy trends, in which Black males have continued to lag behind their White and/or female counterparts in both reading and writing (NCES, 2019). This qualitative study aims to explore whether stereotype threat is one factor that could be contributing to students’ underachievement in these academic domains.

As the previous chapters outlined, it is in large part because of the research on stereotype threat and attention given to exploring the reasons for the historical underrepresentation (and underperformance) of women and minorities in STEM, that the number of both of these sectors of the population being represented in this field has continued to rise. And yet the same attention has not been devoted to the underperformance of men of color in the humanities. This qualitative study utilized narrative inquiry to address this gap by creating a space for underrepresented students to
share their larger narratives in order to allow for a greater understanding of how their lived experiences (and social, cultural, and institutional forces) have shaped their identities, both within the writing classroom and beyond. This narrative inquiry sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How did underprepared young men of color experience the presence of stereotype threat in FYC courses?

RQ2: How did underprepared young men of color perceive their identity in FYC courses, particularly in terms of their self-efficacy and sense of belonging?

Research Design

As the preeminent scholars of narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) helped to elevate narrative inquiry as one of the prominent modes of qualitative research, particularly in the social sciences and educational research. Although narrative inquiry has a long intellectual history, borne from anthropology, psychology, and medicine, all of which seek to explore and understand the human experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) drew upon Dewey’s (1927) pragmatic philosophy to argue that inquiring into experience is absolutely foundational to education, for experience cannot be separated from education and life (Caine at al., 2022). They appropriate Dewey’s pragmatic theory of experience, which includes two primary criteria of experience. The first is that experience exists on a continuum, as a sort of “changing stream” in which the ripples of experience are continually shape-shifting, as experiences are borne out of other experiences, which then lead to further experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121). This notion is ontological because it holds that experiences are indeed connected
through time; they don’t merely appear to be so. They are. The second tenet of Dewey’s theory of experience upon which Clandinin and Connelly drew was the notion that experience is interactional and context dependent. Clandinin (2007, 2013) posited that attending to the context in which the narrative is embedded is imperative as:

the focus of narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals’ experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted (p. 18).

And because this study was not only interested in exploring this precise entanglement of education, experience, and life but ultimately centering and elevating the voices of Black male students’ individual lived experiences as well, narrative inquiry seemed a particularly well-suited research design for this study. For integral to the narratives of the participants are the ways they have experienced and made sense of the sociocultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives that have shaped their identities over the course of their lives.

Thus, by creating space for them to share and tell their stories, this study aimed to empower their voices by capturing the essence of their experiences. And narrative inquiry rests on the notion that each one of our lives is ultimately forged through our stories (Clandinin, 2007, 2013). We are both our individual and collective experiences, and we navigate the world in relation not only to the stories that we tell ourselves but the stories that (we perceive) others are telling about us as well. Experience is not a fixed absolute but rather something that is always-already being oriented towards the future, situated in both the past and present; thus, as humans with lived experiences, we are constantly in
the making and in the process of becoming. And our “human world is constructed and continually reconstructed through the processes of story living and storytelling” (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 407).

“Narrative inquiry is [rather simply] stories lived and told,” but it is also a space by which the participant exists in relation to the researcher, and in which a powerful reciprocity of storytelling, of co-construction of meaning, and of re-writing our identities across time occurs (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 405). This relational space is integral to narrative inquiry because relationship is what lies at the core of this work. The researcher does not try to remove or “bracket themselves outside of the inquiry” but rather recognizes and embraces that they are bracketed within the inquiry itself (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 407). And that is where the power of narrative inquiry also lies, for the researcher is aware that they are co-composing the narratives (and learning) alongside the participants and that the stories that are lived and told are also in conversation (and in creation with) those of the researchers’ own stories and experiences. For this reason, as Johnson and Christensen (2020) aptly stated, “no one leaves a narrative inquiry unchanged” (p. 411).

Narrative research is therefore fitting for this study because narrative inquiry can be both method and phenomena—that is, the narrative is the phenomenon being studied and/or the method by which the data are analyzed as the researcher works to construct the narrative of experience. This type of research design thus makes space for the gaps, the silences, the embodiment of experience, the language, the histories. Narrative inquiry has its philosophical underpinnings in social constructivism, which holds that multiple social realities exist and that “understandings of reality are constructed both individually and
socially” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021, p. 14). All observations are therefore value-laden by extension, and narrative researchers must always be guided by deep empathy for their participants, particularly for those who have been marginalized or silenced as the storytellers of their own lived experiences for far too long.

Narrative inquiry allows both the researcher and participants to construct a more cohesive narrative that delineates the lived experiences of marginalized students and their distinctive experiences in their first-year writing courses. One of the prominent researchers in narrative psychology, McAdams (1985) posited that identity is essentially a narrative that is both internalized and always evolving; and it is in this life story integrated into notions of self and identity that a person finds meaning and purpose. McAdams (2008) articulates narrative identity as:

the stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and culture writ large. (p. 242)

The hope was that by utilizing narrative analysis, this study would be able to center the voices—and the narrative identities—of the participants, whose voices have been largely rendered silent in the research on stereotype threat in the humanities. This research sought to create a substantive data story/narrative from which the researcher could derive meaningful data that will ultimately help empower underprepared and marginalized students as they engage in the process of re/writing the story of their integrative self. The narrative inquiry thus seeks to understand the participants’ lived
experiences with their racialized and social identity—and how they both reconciled and negotiated their perceived/imagined sense of selves with their embodied selves in society. And as participants revealed (and construct) their narratives of identity, the inquiry also aimed to explore whether they experienced stereotype threat in their FYC courses. As the researcher, I was seeking to illuminate the lived experiences of the students as well as their perceptions, beliefs, and feelings, in order to capture the essence of their experiences—that is, the ways in which they experience, understand, and negotiate their identity and perceived stereotype threat as young Black men in the college writing classroom and in the larger community.

This qualitative study was also influenced by interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009). The methodological approach of IPA allowed the researcher to closely examine and center the lived experiences of individuals as they experienced a certain phenomena—in this case: stereotype (identity) threat. But ultimately, it was the participants’ larger, overarching narratives that helped to reveal the ways in which they both experience and position themselves as young Black men in academic spaces and in the larger world. While this study was attempting to get at the essence of a phenomenon (stereotype threat), it was seeking to do so through narrative because this phenomenon of stereotype threat cannot exist in isolation or independent of the participants’ lived experiences and the trajectory of their lives—their stories. It is the experience itself that is the phenomenon under study in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative approach exists as a fluid inquiry, not as a fixed set of procedures that must be followed in a linear fashion (Clandinin, 2013). Thus, narratives can be analyzed in multiple ways; and for the purposes of this study, I engage in thematic
analysis, extracting and uncovering themes that are found across the participants’ stories and across time.

**Conceptual Framework**

The following is the conceptual framework (see Figure 1) for this study that both highlights and connects the different variables and constructs that lead to the underperformance of underprepared writers of color and which the researcher sought to better understand and uncover in this narrative inquiry:

**Figure 1**
*A Conceptual Framework for Underprepared Young Men of Color in First-Year Composition (FYC) Courses.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Setting</th>
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<td>The research setting was a mid-sized regional public university [and predominately white institution (PWI)] located in the southeastern United States, with an approximate</td>
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undergraduate enrollment of 8,500 students. The demographics of the student population are as follows: 60% identified as White, 22% as Black, 5% as Hispanic, 4% as Asian, 4% as two or more races, and the remaining students are unknown. The English 101 CT courses in which the student-participants are enrolled also comprise diverse student populations. In Fall 2023, of the almost 400 students enrolled in these classes, approximately 40% of them identified as Black; 35% as White; 6% as Hispanic/Latinx; and the remaining students identified as “Other.” As for the distribution of students with regard to gender, approximately 60% identified as female and 40% as male.

**Participants**

The participants were two Black male students enrolled in an English 101 CT course designed for underprepared, academically vulnerable students. The students were placed into these courses because they have either earned a “C” average (or below) in their high school English classes and/or scored below a 19 on the verbal section of the ACT. The participants were both first-year students who recently graduated from high school and entered as regular admits in the Fall. They were enrolled in a Fall or Spring English 101 CT course, and their respective courses contained a course-embedded tutor to help provide these students with additional support.

The qualitative study utilized purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Patton, 2014) as only first-year, Black male students were selected for the interviews. It is important to note that while some researchers have employed the term *purposeful sampling*, this type of sampling is synonymous (and therefore interchangeable with) *criterion-based sampling* and *purposive sampling* (Johnson & Christensen, 2020; Patton, 2014). The researcher interviewed young Black men who, statistically, are more likely to
underperform in writing courses (NCES, 2019). Creswell (2015) recommends that a small sample size of 1-2 participants is optimal in narrative studies as it allows for a more intensive and comprehensive exploration of the participants’ lived experiences.

**Instrumentation and Procedures**

**Data Collection**

Semi-structured, 60-minute interviews served as the instrument for this qualitative study. Once I received approval from the institution’s IRB to conduct the study, the interviews were conducted with two underprepared first-year Black male students about their lived experiences prior to attending college as well as their experiences in FYC courses, particularly as they pertain to their identity. The interviews were conducted with each participant separately. The interview questions were open-ended and included probing questions as well as follow-up questions in order to elicit students’ perceptions of and experiences with their own identity and stereotype threat (see Appendix A). Open-ended, comprehensive questions were also being utilized in order to evoke the students’ beliefs and perceptions about their writing abilities and sense of belonging in FYC courses.

In a qualitative study, the researcher is also said to be the “data-collection instrument” for they must decide which data are deemed most significant and worthy of being recorded and analyzed (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 198). For this reason, the use of field notes is strongly encouraged in qualitative research. In my field notes, I recorded what I observed during the interviews to help me better remember and analyze participant responses after the interviews. Immediately following each interview, I also
included additional observations and reflections to my field notes, which I later used to help with my narrative data analysis.

**Interview Process**

As the coordinator of the program that oversees these composition courses for underprepared writers at the research site, I work closely with the faculty and tutors, both supervising and training them to ensure they know how to adequately support and empower these students. I met with these students at the end of the semester and asked them individually if they would be willing to let me interview them about their lived experiences as well as their experience in these courses. The participants did not include my own students and, therefore, they should have felt less pressured to participate, as I am not their instructor and have no influence over nor access to their grades in the course; I also assured them that their participation could not impact their grade in any way.

The interviews took place in a study room in the library on campus. I chose this interview site as it seemed a less formal, intimidating option than my departmental office, particularly since the students are already familiar with this space, having been attending weekly workshops and other learning activities in the library during the term. Once we agreed on a date/time, I met with each student individually and conducted a semi-structured interview comprised of open-ended questions. I audio recorded the interviews on my phone after asking for their permission to do so. The interview questions were designed to encourage the participants to share their stories and experiences in ways that they felt comfortable expressing them.
Data Analysis

As I took notes during each one of the interviews, I assured each one of the participants that note-taking is customary and that I was only doing so to help me recall and organize the data. The notes were both descriptive and reflective in nature and helped in later recollection and “restorying” of the participants’ narratives (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 408). I transcribed the recordings with Otter.ai software, a program that utilizes artificial intelligence to transcribe voice to text (Corrente & Bourgeault, 2022; Otter.ai, n.d.). I then used both the transcription and my interview notes to create a matrix to organize and begin coding the data. In qualitative research, a code is a short word or phrase that describes a summative or salient portion of verbal data (Saldaña, 2013). The process of data coding can thus serve as the “critical link” between data collection and data analysis, for the code itself is a researcher-generated construct that both symbolizes and attributes meaning to the essence of the data (Charmaz, 2001, as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). For these reasons, coding can be described as an analytic act; it is a heuristic or problem-solving approach that allows the researcher to begin the process of exploration and discovery, the linking of one idea to another, which inevitably leads to another idea. And it is here where the bones of the analysis are constructed (Saldaña, 2013).

During the interviews, I began the initial process of interpreting the data, noting emergent codes and themes in my field notes. Once their interviews were transcribed, I closely reviewed each transcription and assigned meaningful segments of text a descriptive code, ensuring that the most significant themes and patterns that emerge in their responses did not get overlooked. Descriptive coding entails distilling the language-
based data into words that capture (describe) the essence of the data (Saldaña, 2013).

Thus, the process of analysis consisted of open coding the data in order to conduct a thematic analysis, identifying recurrent and key themes/patterns that emerge in their responses and narratives. In thematic narrative analysis, the primary focus is on the content within the narrative itself; and in the process of interpretation, the researcher seeks to derive and make meaning from the content-data, rather than the structure or dialogic elements of the narrative (Butina, 2015). It was through the elements of the narrative itself that I hoped to be able to decipher and uncover more about the participants’ identities, their histories, and their sociocultural foundation and experiences.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, questions of trustworthiness abound since validity has become a construct largely ascribed to quantitative research (Johnson & Christensen, 2020; Smith, 1984). Johnson and Christensen (2020) argue that the concept of validity, or research validity, is both applicable and relevant to qualitative research, however, and that when qualitative researchers speak of validity, they are ultimately referring to qualitative research that is credible and trustworthy. For this reason, some qualitative researchers prefer the term trustworthiness that Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced to describe validity in qualitative research; and for the purposes of this narrative study, the researcher will adopt the concept of trustworthiness as well. Johnson and Christensen (2020) further posit that like validity in quantitative studies, trustworthiness is also a concept that can be both developed and maximized in qualitative studies. The authors highlight multiple strategies qualitative researchers, particularly narrative researchers, can utilize to foster trustworthiness in their own research, three of which will be used in this
study: reflexivity, triangulation, and thick description (Johnson & Christensen, 2020; Stahl & King, 2020).

Reflexivity is an important component of qualitative research in which little to no distance exists between the researcher and the participant/s. As a human instrument in the study, therefore, it is essential that the researcher continually engage in a process of self-reflection, questioning their own assumptions, biases, and so forth as well the ways in which they may impact their own research and analyses (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021). Reflexive journaling has been found to be a particularly useful method for researchers to reflect on and gather information about themselves as a human instrument, allowing them to both interrogate and investigate their methodologies on a regular basis (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021). This reflexivity can thus serve as a powerful antidote for researcher bias, in which researchers fall prey to confirming their own biases or simply “finding what they want to find” in the results of their study; and in doing so, ultimately threaten the trustworthiness of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 284).

The concept of trustworthiness is particularly important in narrative inquiry, which is situated in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm (Loh, 2013). That is, narrative study resides in an ontological space where reality is always-already being re/constructed through the act of storytelling. For this reason, questions of academic rigor and trustworthiness in narrative research have persisted; and narrative researchers have been tasked with answering (and asking themselves) how and why their narrative studies matter within the broader field of qualitative research (Loh, 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 5) offered four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research,
which are also useful for narrative study: credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity). Reflexivity, thick description, triangulation, and member checking can all aid in ensuring these criteria are met (Carlson, 2010; Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Loh, 2013; Stahl & King, 2020; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021).

In narrative studies, researchers seek to tell a compelling story and in offering rich and thick description, they not only more accurately convey the stories of their participants, but they also demonstrate their own understanding of the participants’ deeper meanings and perspectives (Geertz, 1973). When readers feel as though they are positioned within the narrative themselves and sense that they too are “there,” that also helps foster credibility and trustworthiness (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021). The thick description technique therefore both intersects with and strengthens the emic perspective (or insider perspective) in which the researcher is enmeshed within both the story and the storytelling, tasked with providing the subjective views of the participants and accurately capturing their thoughts, feelings, and emotions as well as the larger context of their lived experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2020).

This study also utilized data triangulation to foster trustworthiness. It did so by comparing the responses of one interviewee to the other’s responses to identify patterns and consistencies (as well as contradictions) among the themes. The process of intentionally selecting contradictions or cases that appear to disconfirm the expectations of the researcher is known as “negative case sampling” (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 260). Thus, negative case sampling can also serve as a form of triangulation in which the negative (or inconsistent) data are compared with the rest of the data to more fully
uncover what else may emerge when viewed through these contradictory, nuanced lenses (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). By appropriating lenses of multiplicity, triangulation ultimately allows researchers to test the credibility of their research (Stahl & King, 2020).

Finally, this study also utilized member checking, which is precisely what the term suggests—an opportunity for the members (participants) to check the transcripts/analysis to make sure that they align with the participants’ intended meaning or experiences (Carson, 2010). This process of allowing the participants to confirm whether the transcripts/analysis are congruent with their meanings and experiences is particularly important in narrative study, which strives to elevate and center the voices of the participants. Narrative study itself is undergirded by the reciprocity of meaning-making that takes place between researcher and participant, and member checking ensures this co-construction of meaning continues, even after the interviews have ended.

As the researcher of this narrative study, I am considered a part of the setting and research, but I took the steps delineated in this section to ensure trustworthiness of this study. Narrative study necessitates utilizing approaches that intentionally and continually point to and develop its own trustworthiness. Narrative researchers enhance the trustworthiness of their research when they engage in continual self-reflection, explore the data from multiple angles, and use thick descriptions and member checking to re/construct the lived stories of their participants. And in narrative research that ultimately seeks to give voice to and honor the stories (and lives) of participants who have been historically marginalized and silenced in academia, ensuring trustworthiness in the study is all the more imperative.
Researcher Positionality

As the researcher, my own identity as a Latinx woman may have informed the ways in which I interpreted the data, but I remained committed to interrogating my own potential biases in order to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. But ultimately, my emic perspective serves as a strength, because while I may not have the same lived experiences of young Black men, I am deeply committed to the work of equity and justice—and centering and elevating the voices of marginalized and minoritized individuals navigating both academic spaces and the larger world.

As the coordinator of the Composition program that oversees English 101 courses for underprepared writers, I am also highly devoted to the success of these academically vulnerable students. And, ultimately, my own study was guided by “relational ethics,” which is the notion that ethical considerations are not something researchers simply attend to as they seek to gain IRB approval or as they design and begin the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 432). In the case of narrative inquiries that are deeply relational and in which little distance exists between researcher and participant, ethical concerns must be attended to throughout the process (Caine et al., 2022). As a researcher, I committed to engaging in this “ethics of care” (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 433) by actively and deeply listening to the stories of my participants, by validating their experiences, by ensuring that they always felt safe and respected and, above all, by listening and responding in a way that gestured to them that their storytelling was deeply impacting me as well, shaping my very own story and lived experience. Thus, my guiding ethos and positionality as a researcher was one I have also ascribed to as a longtime English educator and can perhaps best be captured in the following statement:
The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other’s memory. That is how people care for themselves (Lopez, 1998, p. 18).

**Summary**

This chapter delineated the methodological approach of this qualitative study, which utilized a narrative inquiry design. As the researcher, I asked students to meet for in-depth, semi-structured interviews in which they described their life experiences as well as their experiences in their FYC courses in terms of their identity and whether they felt identity-threatened or identity safe and/or what factors led to such feelings. The extent to which students experienced stereotype threat, if at all, was assessed through the interviews and what they revealed in their larger narratives of experience. The interviews were transcribed and coded, and I sought to identify emergent themes in the participants’ responses.

That is, I aimed to both understand and describe the students’ experiences in FYC courses and identify what factors in their lived experiences led them to feeling identity safe or identity-threatened in these spaces. The data were analyzed in terms of the following identifiers: racial and/or ethnic identity, gender, socioeconomic status, and first- or continuing-generation student status. The qualitative data—their narratives—were then analyzed together to determine the relationship between stereotype threat, writing self-efficacy, and belongingness—and how these concepts correlate or differ across time and identities. This study ultimately sought and seeks to provide greater clarity and
understanding for why certain students underperform in first-year writing courses, particularly young men of color. The findings illuminate the ways in which this vulnerable student population experienced their FYC courses in terms of their own identity (and level of identity safety or threat). The data analysis helped shed light on how students’ sense of belonging and self-efficacy about their writing was impacted by whether they felt that their identity was either validated or threatened in these spaces.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the ways in which underprepared writers, specifically young men of color, perceive their first-year composition (FYC) classrooms, in terms of their own identity and the presence of stereotype threat. This study explored whether perceived stereotype threat impacted the experiences of this vulnerable student population in their FYC courses, and then examined the relationship between stereotype threat, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging. In the spirit of capturing the participants’ larger lived experiences and their respective narratives, I have chosen to interweave the findings with the discussion/analysis, because a singular narrative seems like the most appropriate way to maintain the integrity and cohesiveness of this narrative study (Josselson, 2006). This study utilized thematic narrative analysis, which is similar to literary analysis in that the focus of critique lies on the content within the narrative itself. The data is thus presented and analyzed through the emerging themes in order to capture the participants’ overall lived stories and reveal how their stories impacted their experience and identity in FYC courses. For the data, much like the content of our lived experiences, cannot always be neatly categorized or placed into distinct categories, because each experience exists on a
continuum of past-present-future, in which one moment is inextricably connected to another moment, which then becomes the story of our lives—and the very basis of our identity.

Ultimately, six themes emerged in the findings: racial identity, gendered identity, classroom environment, belonging, self-efficacy, and language. But because all of these themes are inextricably woven together, some of them will overlap and be discussed in more than one thematic section. The theme of belonging, for instance, proved particularly multifaceted in terms of its relationship to and dependence on both identity and environment and was therefore viewed through the lenses of racial and gender identity as well as classroom environment, respectively—both of which the participants gestured to as playing the most significant roles in their sense of belonging. Therefore, the themes are presented as follows (see Table 1):

**Table 1**
*Emerging Themes and Sub-themes from Interviews of Underprepared Young Men of Color in FYC Courses.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Sub-themes</th>
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<td>• Racial and Gender Identity and Belonging:</td>
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<td>⇒ The Racialized Body and Belonging</td>
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<td>⇒ Gendered Identity and Belonging</td>
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<td>• Classroom Environment and Belonging</td>
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<td>• Self-Efficacy and Writing Self-Efficacy</td>
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<td>• Language and Identity</td>
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Thus, this chapter provides a brief biographical introduction to each participant and then presents the data through the themes that emerged as the participants both shared and constructed their larger narratives. The final chapter discusses the findings through the lenses of the research questions that were primarily focused on the participants’ experience in their FYC courses.

Participants

The first participant I interviewed will be named, for the purpose of this study, “Andre.” Andre was a tall young Black man with short wavy hair. He wore a plain gray hoodie and was unassuming in his style and mild-mannered with his body language. His kind, rounded face, at 19 years old, was poised somewhere between boyhood and adulthood, and he was soft-spoken and quiet. Andre grew up in a military family as both his parents are in the military. They moved a lot during his childhood, but his dad decided to retire, and they settled in the South during his last year of middle school. Andre attended high school at one of the best high schools in the state—a large, diverse school.

The second participant, who will be referred to as “Jack,” a young Black man, also 19 years of age, with short, styled locs, was self-assured and extroverted and had a strong sense of style, wearing a fitted track jacket, slim-fitting patchwork jeans, crisp white sneakers, and one tiny diamond stud in each ear. As soon as he spoke, he revealed his outgoing yet deeply reflective nature. Jack grew up in a predominantly Black, low-income, rural community and school system in the South. Jack’s hometown is one of the most poverty-stricken areas in the state, where the median household income is only $22,159 (Data USA, 2021). Jack, his brother, and sister were raised by their single mother and her mother, his grandmother. Despite growing up with financial struggles,
noting that his financial situation had “a lot of ups and downs,” and the family went through periods of extreme poverty where he “had to wear the same clothes for two years” and was deeply insecure because of his clothing, Jack eventually grew into a self-assured, confident young man. He stated that while he was “exposed to a lot” in his community, as many of his peers were getting in trouble, it taught him a great deal about what kind of a person he wants to be: someone with honor. Jack is the first person in his family to attend college and wants to be a mechanical engineer.

Andre, on the other hand, grew up in a middle-class neighborhood with his parents and two older siblings. He described his childhood as “normal” and states that although “they moved around a lot,” they remained a close family who grew up in the church. His parents have been married for over twenty years, and they now work (post-retirement) in the aerospace industry as government contractors. They both attended college while they were in the military. Andre has attended schools across the United States but has spent most of his life on the South and East Coast and had the opportunity to attend a lot of competitive, diverse schools. Andre is pursuing his goal of becoming a physical therapist.

Data Presentation

Racial and Gender Identity and Belonging

The Racialized Body and Belonging

As their biographical sketches suggest, Andre and Jack experienced rather disparate socioeconomic and educational realities during their childhoods. Their lived experiences found common ground, however, in their racialized (and gendered) experiences, for as soon as they began to describe their upbringings, it became evident
how much their sense of belonging in both their classrooms and the larger world was tethered to their racial identity—and how much both of these young men had worked to shield themselves from identity threat.

When asked about defining moments in his childhood, Andre quickly responded that he learned at a very young age “that there were things I can and can’t do like other kids.” His entire demeanor shifted in this moment, his heavyset body becoming smaller as he slumped in his chair, carrying the heaviness of the past experience. He then began to describe the instance in which he learned the powerful lesson of what he can and cannot do in this world:

I went to Walmart with my friends, and we used to see people all the time when we were there, playing hide-and-seek and tag throughout the store…just goofing off and having a fun time. And the one time I tried to do it, I went around the corner of an aisle…and a guy pulled a gun out on me…because he thought I was fixin’ to run up on him and attack him. I’m like, I’m only in middle school.

He laughed nervously and paused for a moment before continuing: “I froze and put my hands up. And then I slowly just started walking backwards. And he put it away, and I just walked off and then I left the store as soon as it happened.” From this moment on, Andre described taking fewer risks because he knew it was no longer safe to do so.

Jack described growing up in a community where most people looked like him, and where he spent most of his days “running around playing with all of his cousins in his neighborhood.” He credited his cousins for helping him stay out of trouble and not falling into the cycle of crime that many of his peers had. Jack knew that he wanted a life beyond where he grew up, because “so many people got trapped in the vision of the
place.” This vision, according to Jack, was one marked by drugs and violence and “making it in the streets.” Jack was therefore tremendously eager to move to a different part of the state for college and pursue his goal of becoming an engineer. And while he claimed that he was happy with his college experience overall, he also stated that it had not been easy. He then described an instance in which he realized that he “did not really belong on this campus” in the utterance:

I remember the most recent moment I had, understanding where my place in the school is…I was walking down the sidewalk, from one dorm to another to go into the cafeteria. I was coming from the gym. And I had a mean face on me that day. I didn’t try to have a mean face on, but I had a mean face…and a pronounced walk for sure. Like aggressive. Like, I’ll say that. And I was walking down the sidewalk, there was a kid that was coming towards me. He was White…and he was coming towards me. He was on his phone when he first saw me. And he looked up, and he saw me, and he instantly…I seen the shock in his eyes from seeing me. First thing he does while I’m walking down the sidewalk—we’re intersecting each other, like we’re coming towards each other like this (he makes a gesture with his hands to describe how they were crossing paths). He gets off the sidewalk, stepped into the grass…waits until I pass and gets back on the sidewalk and then keeps going. He didn’t…he didn’t decide to walk past me. He just stopped right there while I was walking; and when I got past him, he got back on the sidewalk and kept walking his way. And that just showed me a lot, like “oh my God, I still am feared.”
And in this moment, as he uttered the words, “oh my God, I still am feared,” his sadness, his grief, were palpable; and the heaviness in his eyes and in his entire body was what spoke the most loudly. This one moment and encounter with the young man who decided “he didn’t want to walk past [him]” on the sidewalk immediately became etched into the larger narrative of Jack’s identity—as a young Black man in his first year of college. And what was written into his story that afternoon by this other young man was “you do not belong here.” What was written into his story was: “you are (still) feared.”

And then that harmful narrative of being deemed a threat is something that becomes part of Jack’s lived story, and another piece of his story that he has to carry and work to undo, to rewrite. And it was this same message of not belonging and being perceived as a threat that Andre received as well, and the same grief that he bore, the day a man pointed a gun at him as a young Black boy playing in a supermarket. And it was apparent that, as a result of their lived experiences, each one of these young men had actively worked to overcome feelings of insecurity as young Black men in both academic spaces and the larger community, developing a sort of protective shield. In fact, this shield proved to be something both participants had clearly spent many years developing, and still used to this day as they continued to encounter racist assumptions (and stereotype threat) in their college community, for instance when Jack noted:

It feels weird when nobody looks like you. I’ve always been one to be in a place where I don’t belong, so I’m not gonna say I’m uncomfortable in the uncomfortable, but looking around, I can tell that nobody would like to interact with me because of what they think I look like. And that they’ve already written me because of how I come.
This notion of being written or ascribed a story (stereotype) simply because of how one is (their racial identity) was echoed in Andre’s experiences on his college campus as well:

You walk into certain buildings, and they look at you like, why are you in this building? Like, you just feel like all eyes are on you. Like somebody’s constantly watching you, because they feel like you’re gonna do something...like steal an object in the building, or like vandalize something. I’m just like, I’m just here to go to my class.

Andre revealed how he also has to contend with the reality that, in some instances and in some spaces (regardless of what he does), he will ultimately already be “written” and will already be “feared” simply for who he is: a young Black man. Andre seemed to have accepted this reality as he stated that “he knows it will happen,” so he responds accordingly and makes sure that he seems and behaves as non-threatening as possible—in terms of his clothing, his body language, and his overall demeanor. In this gesture, Andre revealed how acutely aware he is of the fact that he will face stereotype threats in certain spaces on campus because of his racial identity. But he also seemed determined to not internalize these threats and let it disrupt his overall sense of belonging.

Despite the respondents’ overcoming of racialized obstacles, it was clear that what was happening in the spaces in between their words, and in their silence, also revealed powerful truths about them. For instance, these young men were aware of how others may be surprised to learn that they were both deeply reflective and thoughtful in nature, always-already observing the entire world as a text. As young men and emergent writers with deeply reflective natures, however, their gaze onto the world clearly
remained fixed and mapped onto their racialized identity. They both had a quiet vulnerability cloaked beneath a tougher exterior. Jack stated that the way he carries himself is “stern” and that when “other people of different races see him, they are going to look at him and say, ‘that’s a mean guy’ and will probably be frightened to talk to him.” But that is because he has “to keep his poker face on and can’t show any signs of weakness.” This statement revealed how this participant had clearly ascribed to traditional masculine ideologies that perpetuate the notion that emotionality is a weakness (Yu et al., 2021).

Jack ultimately seemed to have a more pronounced racial centrality, or the extent to which racial identity is central to an individual’s identity (Okeke et al., 2009), as he gestured to his racial identity more explicitly than Andre did:

Yeh I can say—like I look different than everybody else here. The way I dress or come from the place I come from. I haven’t seen no kids on this campus that looks like me yet. Not (just) in a sense of skin tone.

And it was perhaps what Jack did not say that was the most powerful moment—because he was not simply gesturing to his identity as a Black man but as one from a low-income Black community, acutely (yet implicitly in his utterance) aware that his Blackness (and lack of belongingness) was only exacerbated by his low socioeconomic status (SES):

So, the way I carry myself or the way I look…if you never met me a day in my life, and you seen me in this college, you will probably, or the first thing that will probably go through anybody’s head on this campus is, “how did he get here?” In this moment, he once again gestured to the stereotypes about his racial identity, intricately tethered to his social identity and SES status. This statement reveals the ways
in which feeling stereotyped and then internalizing the assumptions made about him because of his racial identity, can quickly efface a strong sense of belonging and self-efficacy, at once. Whereas Andre was from a larger city and attended one of the state’s largest, most diverse public schools, Jack was from a small rural town, a low-income community in the South that had been largely neglected, and he attended a predominantly Black high school. This young man’s hometown, marked by the impacts of historical, systemic racism and extreme poverty, has also received national attention as one of the most egregious examples of environmental racism in the United States. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Jack claimed, regarding his hometown: “This place is too much. I gotta make it out. I gotta get out.”

Although Andre did not feel that he had to “get out” of his community, his experiences with identity threat ultimately gesture to the power of racist and patriarchal hegemonies and social forces that still exist. For despite the privileges Andre may have had growing up, in terms of his educational opportunities and socioeconomic status, he still (like Jack) has yet to “get out” of a world that continues to view him, in many ways, as “Other”—as a threat, as a harmful (dangerous) stereotype—or, just as dangerously, renders him and his voice invisible altogether.

**Gendered Identity and Belonging**

In addition to their racialized identity, the participants both stated that as young men it was also hard for them to be vulnerable and show emotions. Andre described growing up as a young man who was always taught to be strong and not show his emotions because men are supposed to be “the rock of their family.” And if he were to become emotional or show vulnerability then he wouldn’t be able to be this rock, this
source of strength, that his family needed in order be able to rely on him. Therefore, for Andre, vulnerability diminished the norms of masculinity that he was taught. And it could also be one of the reasons that Andre was always so quiet in class, which he also noted:

I do think it’s harder for young men to open up in any class, because when we are being raised we are taught to not show our emotions and that we are supposed to be the rock of our family. And if we are out here showing our emotions then our family won’t be able to rely on us. Basically, we need to be strong for everyone else and put our emotions last.

He furthered his perceptions of these gendered differences as he claimed:

I just think females are more confident in speaking up their minds than males are. It’s harder for a male to get into that vulnerable space, like to start sharing their inner thoughts with everybody.

It was evident that this type of vulnerability was particularly difficult for Andre and made him feel as if he were not only straying from or rejecting masculine ideals but that by doing so, he was ultimately disappointing his family. For this young man, this hegemonic construct of masculinity was deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology and the idea that men are the bedrock, the strength, of the family. Andre also gestured to another way in which he had internalized hegemonic masculinity that prescribes rejecting behaviors or norms associated with femininity, one of which includes actively seeking help (Huerta, 2022). The participant revealed his own reticence to ask for help in the classroom in the following statement:

If I have a question, I write it down…and I will not ask it until I have made sure
that the teacher has not answered it, and I listen to every word in class to make
sure they haven’t before I ask…and then I wait until after class. And that is what I
do every time.

And while Andre’s insistence on actively listening for the potential answer to his
question reflected his conscientiousness and determination as a student, it was also clear
that Andre had a significant amount of reticence to ask for help unless he absolutely
needed it. And when he did ask for help, he did not like to do so in front of others.
Therefore, part of this reticence seemed to reveal a larger anxiety about his identity,
concerned about how others may perceive him (or even how he may perceive himself) if
allowed himself to be vulnerable to asking questions in class.

Jack also held on to heteronormative constructs of masculinity, strongly clinging
to the belief that he could not show emotions or be vulnerable because “he could not
show any signs of weakness.” This construct seemed more rooted, for Jack, in the belief
that he had to be “hard” in the environment into which he was born, and he couldn’t
appear “soft,” which would take away or diminish his credibility or belongingness among
his pee’s. It was evident that his belief systems were still firmly rooted in those of his
community, where vulnerability was deemed a weakness not a strength, and where this
tough exterior was not only lauded but necessary. Yet, the act of writing, as students
discover their own voices as emergent writers, demands a kind of vulnerability, and so
does the writing classroom, where students are asked to center their voices and thus their
identities.
Classroom Environment and Belonging

Andre and Jack highlighted the ways that their strong sense of belonging in their FYC courses had shielded them from the potential impacts of stereotype threat, but what also helped to protect them in the academic space of the writing classroom was the overall classroom environment. Andre and Jack both described being “really quiet” when the term first began, sitting in the back and observing the classroom to get a sense of the teacher and the students. Once they both realized that the teacher was approachable and helpful and that the students were not “judgmental,” it allowed them to feel a greater sense of belonging in each one of their courses.

Jack also described his FYC classroom as “a good environment overall” in which, “the teacher is helpful, and he makes us work for it.” He noted that he appreciated “being challenged and yet encouraged” and that the instructor’s helpfulness and commitment to student success created a classroom environment that made the students feel a sense of belonging. Jack did qualify that a bit, however, stating that some students, “especially those who seemed to already have low self-esteem” shut down in the course, because the instructor was somewhat blunt with their feedback, but Jack appreciated the directness, because it was clear to him that it was coming from a “good place.” Jack reiterated that the instructor simply wanted the students to succeed—and created “an overall positive environment” in which they could do so. The participant’s responses clearly underline the importance of the role that the instructor plays in fostering a sense of belonging and a strong sense of community in the classroom, one in which all students are challenged and encouraged to meet their full potential.

As for the classroom environment in his FYC course, Andre described it as one
where initially,

[e]veryone was shy and laid back and scared to ask questions because they don’t know how the teacher is going to react. But then, after a while, it kinda like loosened up. And people were willing to go and ask questions. And then like, even start arguments to basically debate their point of view on a certain topic. She (the instructor) made it feel very comfortable in there…so like nobody was scared to answer a question.

Andre then went on to describe an experience he had in one of his high school English classes in which the teacher failed to create the type of inclusive classroom environment that his FYC instructor had:

I had one of my English teachers, like, there was a group of me and my friends. And we decided to sit together in the class because, as she said, it was open seating. We all sat down together…she literally pointed out our table and was like, “I don’t expect that group of students to pass my class.” I ended up getting an A in her class, and she was surprised.

When I asked Andre to explain why he believed the teacher had singled his table out to make such a claim, he stated that he was seated with a group of his classmates, who were all either Black or Latino, and he believes that a negative experience with other Black and Brown students had led her to believe that they would be the same. But despite being acutely aware of the fact that this teacher had racially discriminated against them, it was difficult for Andre to state that explicitly. When he first described the instance, Andre stated that the teacher had simply “made up her mind about them,” but it was here where
he revealed his fierce defenses against being reduced to a harmful racial stereotype and his determination to push back on the racist ignorance of his teacher:

I told her at the end of her going after us like that, “I’m gonna make an “A” in your class and there’s nothing you can do to try to stop me.” And she, basically, she graded my paper harder than the other students… and she’ll count off like if I misplaced a comma or something; she’ll count off like 10 points for that, but if another student did it, she would count off two points.

These moments were particularly eye-opening, because it was clear Andre was not accustomed to centering his racial identity when discussing himself, marked by his palpable hesitation in alluding to his own racial identity (and others’). Andre had grown up in diverse middle-class neighborhoods and school systems and was comfortable with diversity—both in his communities and in his school. He also described having diverse classmates as well as teachers who included Black, Latinx, and even international faculty members who taught him about their cultures. And perhaps because Andre had always existed in and moved through diverse spaces, he seemed somewhat uncomfortable when he described moments in which he felt discriminated against because of his racial identity. That is, he seemed reticent to state that the discrimination was racialized until he was asked to elaborate. For example, Andre would state that some of his teachers “would discriminate against certain people” or that they “could not help certain people,” because then “they would have to help everybody else.” But when asked explicitly who these people were, he would state that they were people of color.

Andre did not grow up in a world like Jack did, a low-income community with a 96% African American population, where poverty and violence and forces of racism are
perhaps more visible and prevalent in the day-to-day reality. Andre’s world was diverse racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically. While Andre’s world was largely middle-class and college-educated, more than 50% of Jack’s classmates lived in abject poverty. Their disparate lived experiences found common ground in their racialized (and gendered) identities, however, because as Andre was reminded repeatedly, the world still largely encountered him and wrote him into its moral imaginations as “Other.” It still considered him a danger or threat or did not make him feel that he truly belonged in certain spaces. And so much of this narrative that was imposed on him as a young Black man proved beyond his control. And this racialized-gendered intersection for Black man or men of color is a precarious one; it does not often feel like a safe space—interpersonally, psychologically, academically, or even physically. That is, the classrooms that both Andre and Jack described as fostering a sense of belonging are what the research would largely describe as “identity-affirming” or “identity-safe spaces”—spaces in which students feel that they can show up as who they are and take interpersonal risks (Azima, 2020; Kezar et al., 2022; Soares & Lopez, 2020).

Jack further demonstrated understanding of this relationship when he stated that “some students shut down, but that’s because [the professor] is assertive, and they probably have low self-esteem so when he talks a certain way, they get scared.” These findings confirm the ways in which marginalized groups often require that an institutional agent (within or outside of the classroom) first validate their identity, presence, and their abilities before they can truly feel a sense of belonging on campus and perform at their optimal level (Azima, 2020). And Jack revealed precisely what can happen when students do not experience this validation within the classroom, as he described the following
instance that occurred in the subsequent Composition 2 (English 102) course that he took, having just completed his English 101 course:

So, I remember, I used to look around the class. And I used to just see, like, all the Black people were kind of sectioned off, like they kind of just went to the back of the class. Never got called on, never got asked about nothing. None of that. Then there’s all of the White people in the middle of class. And they’re answering all the questions. Answering every, every little detail, raising hands.

As we discussed the ways that “students that look like him” can sometimes feel invisible in certain classrooms so they render themselves invisible as well, Jack described an instance in which he believed this invisibility-rendering is precisely what happened:

It was a kid that was like me, he was, like from my environment. So I seen that. And when he came to class, he just used to put on his earphones and didn’t listen. He really didn’t…he really didn’t say too much. And throughout half of the month, he dropped that class. I seen it; I knew he was going to do it. I just didn’t know when the day would come, so I definitely think, in this aspect…that’s what happened to him.

Jack also ended up withdrawing from this course, and while he took accountability for his own lack of engagement in the class and not attending as often as he should have, it was also evident, palpable even, that this classroom environment did not make him feel identity safe and that he felt stereotype threatened by what he perceived as the instructor’s microaggressions. He described one instance, in particular, in which the instructor pointed to the Black students in the course and stated that they “probably knew what it was like to grow up without fathers.” And while Jack acknowledged that the
instructor was not trying to be hurtful, he also admitted that it did, in fact, make him disengage and shut down in the class; and he strongly believed it made other Black students do the same. His sense of belonging and self-efficacy had both been significantly diminished in this learning environment. But it was here where Jack and Andre revealed somewhat opposing responses to feeling identity threatened. Jack revealed that it was easier for him to shut down and disengage when he did not feel identity safe in the classroom while Andre stated that he simply “” and tried to compartmentalize and not internalize it. When asked what perhaps shielded him from shutting down, Andre replied: “I think it’s just because I have gotten used to it, so I have come to expect it.” He alluded once again to what felt like a refrain in his life at this point, after having first learned the lesson of the performative nature of his existence as a young Black boy in the aisles of Walmart, forced to learn the dance of what he could and could not do in this life as a young Black boy or man:

I have to keep moving. And then I have to realize, like, there’s certain things that I won’t be able to do. Like, at the time, I’ll have to move a certain way or walk a certain way…so they won’t think that I’m trying to do anything specific. Like, I walk into a building with my hood on, I immediately [think], no, I have to take it off. Because somebody’s gonna think something. Like if I have a beanie or a hat, I know they will think something if I have that, like I’m trying to hide my face and what I’m looking like.

He concluded by saying that he sometimes feels like h’ has to engage in this self-conscious performance in his classes but that it largely depends on the class, “primarily on the teacher, but also the students.” He stated that he did not feel like he had to move,
walk, or act a certain way if the teacher makes it clear that it will be “a safe environment and that there will be no bullying or anything going on during their classes.” Andre stated that for some reason he felt less safe in his first-year math and history classes and began describing an instance in one of his history courses on campus, where the subject of slavery came up in the class, and some of the students immediately began making jokes about it:

A lot of people was making jokes, well, not the Black kids, the White kids was making a lot of jokes about it. They would see no problem with it [slavery], and they’d say, “I’m not the one who did it, so you can’t be mad at me.”

He added, “the teacher was sitting in the front of the class hearing all of it, but they did not shut it down.” And it was in that moment that Andre determined that this classroom was not an identity-safe space.

While Jack also reinforced this notion of having grown accustomed to and not being surprised by microaggressions or racialized discrimination, he did not appear to have the same coping mechanism that Andre did, admitting that it was easier for him to disengage with the class. They had both learned how to contend with these social forces in their own ways, but it was clear that these forces were still pervasive in their daily lives. Their responses ultimately emphasized the integral role that the instructor plays in fostering and creating a safe, inclusive classroom environment—one that is ultimately conscious of and attuned to racial identity—and to affirming the identity of all students. Jack also noted the importance of teachers’ centering or at least being aware of racial identity in the classroom, claiming “Black and White students can learn so much from one another.” He further stated that he believes “it is beneficial when teachers make
Black and White students sit together” in the classroom or during group activities, so that they do not segregate themselves and miss an opportunity to be exposed to and learn from different people. Thus, for Jack and Andre, it is clear that a welcoming and positive classroom environment is inextricably linked to one that also affirms racial identity.

Self-Efficacy and Writing Self-Efficacy

While the participants were rather different in overall personality and demeanor, they quickly revealed a similarity in regard to their writing self-efficacy. The participants each noted the ways that confidence in their writing abilities shielded them from feeling identity-threatened in their FYC course. That is, when asked independently how they experienced the class as young Black men, each one noted that they felt confident because they were confident in their writing. Jack revealed his writing self-efficacy as he noted, “I’m a pretty adept writer. I will say that if I was to show some of my work, I wouldn’t be scared to show somebody my work because I’m pretty confident.” And Andre made a similar claim: “I would say that I’m a good writer, and I have continued to improve over time.” They both noted that as a result of this self-efficacy they felt a sense of belonging in their first-year writing classrooms. They enjoyed their English classes overall, particularly the more confident they became with their writing.

Jack also stated that “[he] had always been good at English” and expressed his love of creative writing as a child: “I used to write stories when I was young, like I used to write books. And being a writer progresses your English a lot more.” In this statement, Jack revealed a strong, innate understanding of the relationship between writing and English proficiency, which will be discussed in further detail in the section on language.
Ultimately, Jack and Andre both gestured to how their writing self-efficacy helped protect them from potential stereotype threat—or the possibility of confirming negative stereotypes about their racial group.

Both of their responses support the research that underlines how students who report higher levels of self-efficacy in the particular academic domain were significantly less likely to experience perceived stereotype threat (Aronson et al., 1998). Andre revealed an even stronger understanding of this self-efficacy and the dangers of falling prey to low self-efficacy as he claimed that “when people (teachers) don’t think [he is] capable of doing something [he] wants to prove them wrong.” They both also revealed a similar persistence that has stayed with them in their FYC courses. Jack and Andre were determined to do well because they knew they were capable of doing so. For each one of them, however, their personal determination was rooted in and borne from different motivations and reasons.

For Jack, his determination primarily stemmed from wanting “to get out” and to break cycles of poverty in his family and be the first in his family to graduate from college. He then described a somewhat epiphanic moment he had that cemented his desire to succeed:

I did go through the experiences that you usually go through in that certain environment. But I think the only thing different about me versus everybody else in that environment is most people probably did the things I did, and probably seen a lot, and were like forget it, you know, or “f- it,” basically, but I’ve seen it and thought, I could take something from this—either I could keep on doing the
same thing I’m doing right now and end up someplace much worse, or I can take something from this knowledge and use it to my advantage.

For Andre, his determination largely came from the way his parents raised him and his ability to adapt as a result of moving around so much; and he became the type of person whose guiding ethos was: “if you tell me I can’t do it, I’m going to prove you wrong.” Andre stated that his parents instilled the values of persistence and determination in him from a young age. He also attributed these qualities to being exposed to so many diverse environments and schools and being somewhat forced to persist and be resilient, because he would not have succeeded otherwise. He also stated that his parents, both of whom graduated from college, ultimately helped to prepare him for his college experience: “They always told me what it would be like, and they shared papers they wrote with me.” He said that they also taught him the importance of time management in college, and that this lesson had proven particularly helpful and was one of the skills that he attributes to his success and confidence as a college student. Andre described himself as a good student, flexible, and as someone “who listens before asking a question to make sure that the teacher does not answer it first.”

He stated that his challenging high school English classes also helped to prepare him for college writing, and that the writing in his FYC course did not feel particularly challenging and, in fact, felt repetitive in a lot of ways because he had already written similar types of essays in high school. His exposure to academic writing in high school thus clearly served to increase his self-efficacy in his FYC course. But despite not feeling initially challenged, Andre noted that he did continue to improve as a writer throughout the semester, which seemed to strengthen his confidence even more. It was also evident
that Andre had learned effective academic habits that helped to make him successful as a student, such as engaging in active listening, note-taking, and following along with the material on his laptop during class. This engagement also signals to and evidences his developed academic identity as well as his sense of belonging in this learning environment.

Jack, however, did not have such a clearly developed academic identity and described how difficult the transition to college was as he did not have anyone in his family who could help prepare him for what it would be like or how challenging it would be. He maintained his self-efficacy, however, because he did feel that he was a good writer and was determined to carve a different path for himself. And he also attributed his determination and self-efficacy and his belief in his potential to a powerful encounter and experience that he had with a teacher in elementary school:

I will tell you exactly what made me start to like English way more than any other subject in my life. Wow. I remember. I remember it was a library when I was young. And I walked into that library, and it was just such a visual imagination of everything that I’ve ever wanted… I walked inside the library, and it was this lady in the library—she was a sweet lady, like very sweet. Like, I walked into the library, and I smelled the book covers. Soon as I hit the door, I seen colorful chairs and couches over there sitting in the wall, the beautiful road that has “ABCDEF,” you know, stuff like that. And I remember this lady, this woman in the library—she worked with me a lot. She saw the potential in me when nobody else did. Every day, every couple of days for a week, she used to invite me to the library just to read a book.
At this point, Jack’s eyes were gazing upwards towards the sky, his imagination unfurling as he continued describing his encounter with this transformative space:

The couches and the rugs and the letters...I felt like I had a whole world available to me, and I could learn about anything I wanted to...and she was the first person to teach me that. The only person. And she saw potential in me when nobody else did.

As a young boy, this teacher not only made Jack believe in and recognize his own potential, but she opened up an entirely different world to him as well: one in which he learned that he had “a whole world available to [him].” And this belief sustained Jack—her belief in him and his belief in a greater world—all the result of one teacher who taught a young boy about the magic of books and all the knowledge and worlds that they contained. But perhaps even more importantly, this teacher planted seeds of self-efficacy in Jack that he had never before experienced. By recognizing his potential when “nobody else did” and teaching him that “he could learn about anything he wanted to,” Jack perhaps learned the greatest lesson of all from this teacher: that he contained infinite worlds and possibility inside of himself, too. And it was clear that he still tried to cling to this belief and to let it sustain him on his current path, even when the world told him otherwise.

**Language and Identity**

Despite their overall sense of confidence in the FYC classroom, however, both participants still described remaining quiet during class overall. And while it seemed that, for Jack and Andre, being quiet or reserved was somewhat in their nature, more so for Andre, it was also evident that the quietness was a learned behavior as each one of them
had learned “to sit back and observe” before speaking up in order to fully assess what type of space and classroom environment the class would be. Jack also described this environment in terms of language and code-switching in his classes:

When I talk to my teachers, I try to sound way more professional. But there’s a natural slur in my words, and sometimes, I don’t try to bring it out, it just comes out. So, for me for code-switching, I really try to appear as who I actually am, a bright young man, like, I try to be as much as I am possible. I have to try to push who I am, who I am internally as much as possible, instead of what they see externally.

In this statement, Jack reveals his awareness of how his teachers perceive him as less than intelligent and that they have already made assumptions about him because of “who they see externally”—a young Black man who is from a “certain kind of environment.” This utterance was particularly telling because it was clear that Jack both believes and understands that his Black vernacular makes him appear less intelligent, and that he has internalized the notion that academic discourse, which is also the language of White bourgeoisie, is the language that signals intelligence.

In this moment, Jack ultimately reveals how he has both normalized and internalized such classist, racist beliefs and that he wants his teachers to see him as something other than a young Black man from a low-income community. Jack knows that is how the larger world perceives him, because that is what his lived experiences have told him, and in this new academic world, he feels particularly compelled to dismantle those stereotypes of himself. Thus, even with the code-switching, Jack implicitly reveals how he does not want to feel stereotype threatened by speaking in a way that would confirm the stereotypes about him.
And it was at this point that the interview took a particularly fascinating turn, as each participant began to discuss their relationship with English in an unexpected and yet similar way; they both strongly emphasized not only how they felt about writing but the power of the *spoken word* and the phenomenological aspects of the *language* itself. Andre referenced his earlier struggles as a child, noting that he had a stutter, and that he was always mispronouncing words. And although he stated that his stutter was only minimal now, having significantly improved over time, he also noted that he still faces tremendous anxiety over the possibility of having to speak or read aloud in class: “I worry about it [speaking or reading in class] all the time. It makes me very anxious. I have learned to hide my stutter, but when I get emotional, it gets bad again.” This speech impediment had clearly caused him significant anxiety and distress, but despite overcoming his stutter (it was not detectable during the interview), he was still reticent to speak in class.

When Jack referred to his love of writing in his earlier years, he demonstrated an awareness between the role of writing and the development of his language skills, noting that “being a writer progresses your English a lot more.” In this moment, Jack articulated:

I always liked to know big words; I felt like knowing big words would have helped me a lot. So now, in the present, when I come across a small word, it is just kind of pronounced differently than every other word. It kind of like confuse me, and I can’t say the word.

He continues describing what seems like a literacy journey with an emphasis on the spoken word—the pronunciation:
This is what it feels like, in my head: When I read words, they go by pretty fast, but if there’s a word I don’t know, my brain automatically kind of starts to use it in a syllable. So just say like, if it was “decontamination,” I would say de-con-ta-mi-na-tion to figure out the word.

These moments were particularly striking because both participants strongly emphasized the spoken aspect of English and their struggles with it but for remarkably different reasons.

And, for Andre, the only thing that seemed to diminish his self-efficacy as an English student was when he referred to his speech impediment and still having to overcome his stutter; it was hard for him not to view this stutter solely through a deficit mindset, particularly because he worked so hard to conceal it. And in this moment, the relationship and interconnectedness between self-efficacy and belonging once again becomes apparent, because when Andre’s self-concept was tied to his perceived weakness/impediment, he did not feel a sense of belonging in his school; and in fact, he felt alienated from his peers because of his language difference. He did not explicitly connect these feelings of alienation to his racial identity, but he gestured to his awareness that how he spoke was inextricably woven into his identity, and he did not want others to hear his stutter.

Thus, it seems of particular interest that these young men, both native English speakers, referred to their experience with their English classes in a way that almost mirrored non-native speakers’ experiences, as they both stressed a similar discomfort and difficulty with the spoken aspects of the language. Their focus on the linguistic and phonological elements of the language itself was striking because they both revealed it,
albeit for different reasons. But despite the differences, what proved to be the most compelling aspect was that it was clear that the spoken word, the act of speaking “correctly” was a source of anxiety for each one of them—and a possible trigger for stereotype threat (Kurinec & Weaver, 2021). They both seemed aware (Jack more than Andre) of not wanting to pronounce things incorrectly despite their self-reported high writing self-efficacy. And it is in this space where some of the most meaningful data were derived. For while both of these young men had clearly worked to mitigate and not internalize historical racialized narratives and stereotypes about Black men as “less literate and intelligent,” their identity seemed to be threatened by the possibility of not being able to speak correctly or not adhere to the linguistic conventions in the academy (Kurinec & Weaver, 2021).

It was evident that part of their reticence to speak in class was not only rooted in the relationship between language and racial identity but also in the relationship between language and gender identity—and restrictive masculine norms that denied them the ability to feel that they could express (speak) their vulnerability. Thus, these findings seem particularly significant overall, gesturing to the need to explore the relationship between speaking and young men of color’s experiences in their FYC classes in greater depth. Both of these young men were confident writers yet were not fully confident in their ability as speakers, which served to potentially threaten their identity as well as their self-efficacy and sense of belonging, for on some level, neither one of them felt entirely confident about themselves or that they belonged as active participants (speakers) in the class.
And although it was hard for Jack to be vulnerable in certain spaces, because he had learned through his own lived experiences that vulnerability (particularly as a man) was a weakness, and he did not feel that he could ever “display any type of weakness,” it was clear that Andre, as a young Black man, felt the same way. And it was also through his lived experiences, particularly the one where his racialized body at the age of 12 was marked a threat, his young body weaponized, that he first learned to retreat, to withdraw, to not put himself in a position (physical or psychological) where he may be perceived as or reduced to a dangerous stereotype. From that day on, he noted becoming someone who “sat back and observed” before talking, and even though “he was always thinking,” he was reticent to say or do something. This reticence, however, was not a manifestation of low self-efficacy because Andre knew that he was bright and capable and “thoughtful” and had “meaningful things to say.” He simply chose a more observant role in both the world and in the classroom, even in classrooms that he described as welcoming and inclusive as his English 101 course.

When Andre described himself in his classes, he noted: “I am really quiet and into myself.” He paused before continuing, “because that is how I have learned to assess situations.” Thus, while his stutter was part of the reason he did not actively participate in the class, it also seemed more complicated than that, and perhaps borne out of lived experiences that continually taught (and reminded) him that it was safer to observe than to actively engage with the world as a text—loudly and boldly—and to continually “assess situations.” The question then becomes how the participants’ acute awareness of their racial and gendered identity and their physical body as a text onto which an entire history and even future is mapped—both shape and factor into their experiences in the
classroom and whether they feel as free to take interpersonal risks in the classroom because of how they may be perceived in terms of their identity. For if we know that these young people are sitting in classrooms with these stories inside of themselves, waiting to tell and re/write their own, rather than having them simply be written for them, onto them—then we need to create space for their voices, their stories.

**Summary**

This chapter ultimately aimed to capture the overall lived experiences of the participants. It presented the findings and analyzed them through a thematic analysis, in which many of the themes overlap, for the racial identity of the participants cannot be entirely separated from their gendered identity, just as their sense of belonging cannot exist entirely independent of their self-efficacy, both of which are ultimately connected to the classroom environment as well. The findings reveal how these identities and constructs are deeply entangled with one another and function almost symbiotically, always-already intersecting. The findings also illustrate how the participants’ difficulty expressing emotional vulnerability (the result of adhering to restrictive social norms of masculinity) and speaking in class (also connected to their struggle with vulnerability), made them feel more susceptible to stereotype threat. In the following chapter, the findings are presented through the frames of the research questions, which are more limited in their scope and pertain to the participants’ experiences in their FYC courses specifically.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the ways in which underprepared writers, specifically young men of color, perceive their first-year composition (FYC) classrooms, in terms of their own identity and the presence of stereotype threat. This study explored whether perceived stereotype threat impacted the experiences of this vulnerable student population in FYC courses, and then examined the relationship between stereotype threat, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging. The findings in this chapter are discussed in relation to the two research questions, stated below, that guided this study. But again, in the spirit of maintaining the integrity of the participants’ narratives, the analysis in the two research questions may, at times, overlap because the findings reveal how inextricably intertwined the relationship between them is—that is, how these young men experienced stereotype threat not only shaped but was shaped by their perceived self-efficacy and sense of belonging as well.
Discussion/Analysis of Findings

RQ1: How did underprepared young men of color experience the presence of stereotype threat in FYC courses?

This study ultimately reaffirmed Steele and Aronson’s theory of stereotype threat (1995) which holds that the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about one’s racial, cultural, and ethnic group can cause students to carry a high cognitive load and negatively impact their perceived intellectual ability, weaken academic performance, and/or create heightened sense of anxiety that reduces one’s sense of belonging in a learning environment. Jack’s acute awareness of his racial identity as a text onto which the world had already “written him for how [he] come” was palpable and prevalent as well, and yet he was also determined to not let his story be written by others, because he knew that the racial stereotypes ascribed to him were not the truth, which he clearly revealed when he stated, “because I do look like I come from a certain place. That is true. I do come from that place, but in that place, I didn’t get myself wrapped up around the experiences.” The fact that he was aware of these stereotypes being made about him revealed how stereotype threat was an undercurrent and narrative that he was having to push back on as he made his way into this new academic world. And the certainty with which Jack stated, “looking around, I can tell that nobody would like to interact with me because of what they think I look like” and with which Andre stated, “they look at you like, why are you in this building?” is a heavy burden to carry, one that still requires a high level of mental and cognitive energy, despite being able to overcome it (Bullock et al., 2020). And that is also precisely what stereotype threat looks like.
The findings reveal the ways in which stereotype threat served as an affective factor for the participants’ perceived self-efficacy and belongingness; that is, when the participants felt stereotype threatened, either within or outside of the classroom, they still carried this mental and cognitive load with them into the classroom, even if they were able to overcome it on their own through their learned coping mechanisms (Bullock et al., 2020). The identity threats that they faced outside of their FYC classroom, whether from their overall lived experiences or a more recent incident on campus or in the community, still served to threaten their sense of belonging and self-efficacy in the classroom—ultimately revealing the precariousness of both.

The findings also support the research that revealed that marginalized students, particularly low-income, first-generation students, had already internalized messages and beliefs about their own sense of belonging on campus before they ever arrived on their respective campuses (Means & Pyne, 2017). Their internalized beliefs were highly impacted and shaped by the students’ racialized and class-based social identities. But, in the case of this study, even the participant who was not a first-generation student from a low-income community, revealed that he, too, had already internalized similar beliefs. The difference was that while he may have initially felt that he belonged more than the other participant who had no college graduate in his immediate family to help prepare him or make it seem accessible, he still had to confront and wrestle with his own sense of belonging on a regular basis, as a young Black man moving through spaces in which he was quickly “Othered” and his identity threatened.

Thus, while Andre may have had more protective measures to shield him from internalizing (or conceding to) feelings of stereotype threat or that did he not truly belong
in academia, it was still something that he (and the other participant) had to actively confront and resist in terms of his identity as a Black man. The findings also corroborate the research that reveals that one of the most integral support structures in helping students to dismantle (and reject) their pre-college, internalized racist, classist beliefs that diminish their sense of belonging and allow them instead to feel a real sense of belonging in their college classroom and community is: meaningful relationships with student-centered faculty (Means & Pyne, 2017).

These meaningful relationships were ultimately marked by what the research highlights as one of the keys to marginalized students’ feeling affirmed and empowered in academic spaces: receiving both academic validation and cultural validation from their instructors (Durkee et al., 2021). Jack perhaps most aptly described what cultural validation looks like when he claimed that a good teacher was someone who “looks at [him] not as a dangerous person [as a Black man] but as a young Black man who is capable of doing anything.” In this statement, the participant simultaneously uttered how a good teacher both culturally validates (affirms his identity as a Black man) and academically validates him (as a student with tremendous potential). Implicit in this utterance is also a rejection of the deficit framework in which the instructor sees the student not as a threat but as an asset. And that is also what fostering an identity-safe and identity-affirming space and learning environment looks like (Kezar et al., 2022; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013).

Their FYC classrooms, which participants described as welcoming and safe overall, mitigated their feelings of stereotype threat, which still clearly resided just under the surface for these students, both of whom had come to expect feeling identity-
threatened in their classrooms. That is precisely why they both claimed that they waited to see what type of classroom environment it would be before they decided to engage or not. It became clear in these moments that the participants’ threat of being negatively stereotyped remained, despite possessing the other protective barriers of a high self-efficacy and strong sense of belonging. Jack, in particular, seemed acutely aware that his strong sense of self (and positive self-concept) could be “undone” if he pronounced words incorrectly—thus signaling to his stereotypical “Blackness.” By pronouncing words incorrectly, he could be perceived as “sounding Black,” or adopting the linguistic features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). And as the research underlines, speakers of AAVE are perceived as being less educated than speakers of Standard American English (SAE) (Billings, 2005; Koch et al., 2001; Payne et al., 2000). The research also shows that individuals only have to have an awareness of negative stereotypes about their group identity in order to be susceptible to stereotype threat (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000).

Thus, perhaps the most surprising part was that both of these participants articulated their experience with their prior English courses and their current FYC course through lenses of linguistics and literacy—and their relationship to the English language itself—without ever being asked about the English language. This finding is consistent with the research that highlights how for many African American students whose dominant cultural and community discourse is AAVE, learning the conventions of SAE in the academy can feel akin to learning another language (Harris & Schroeder, 2013; Kurinec & Weaver, 2021). Although Andre’s uneasiness with the spoken language itself may have stemmed from his childhood speech disorder, he also seemed aware that the
consequences for him, as a young Black man, were significantly more complicated, because he had already noted that he had been discriminated against by teachers in the past who had made prejudiced assumptions about him, based on the color of his skin.

Therefore, possessing this type of fear and lower self-efficacy when it comes to speaking, and more specifically, pronunciation could be said to implicitly activate stereotype threat (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000). The research further posits that previous life experiences or microaggressions can also trigger stereotype threat, which is precisely what seemed to happen with the respondents when they expressed their anxieties with speaking the language (Kurinec & Weaver, 2021). These young men both had an implicit yet strong understanding of the power of the spoken language. And the spoken word seemed to carry as much weight for them, in many ways, as the written word in terms of what it could reveal about their identity.

These findings also align with the research that highlights how important it is for institutional agents, in particular, to validate young men of color by creating classrooms (and other spaces on campus) that both cultivate and encourage emotional vulnerability (Huerta, 2022; Schwab & Dupuis, 2020). The findings further support the research that reveals how rigid conformity to traditional masculine ideologies and norms is associated with lower engagement in class, both of which the participants also revealed in terms of their reticence to speak in class (or engage in discussions) (Brown, 2019; Marrs, 2016; Yu et al., 2021). The findings gesture to how much more work can be done in fostering emotional vulnerability, particularly for young men of color, in FYC classrooms as well; because despite their overall positive experience in their FYC courses (reflected in their strong sense of belonging and high self-efficacy), the participants still found it difficult to
be vulnerable in these spaces. For they both had ultimately ascribed to and internalized constructs of masculinity in which vulnerability was deemed a weakness not a strength (Huerta, 2022; Schwab & Dupuis, 2020). By internalizing these stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity, they were all the more susceptible to stereotype threat; that is, they did not want to be perceived as not masculine or as “soft” or feminine. Their restrictive emotionality clearly impacted the ways in which they chose to interact with their peers and engage in their FYC courses as well, both claiming that they remained largely silent and did not actively participate in discussion, despite feeling that it was an identity-safe space.

The findings thus support the research that reveals how stereotype threat can result in diminished cognitive ability and memory and can also lead students to disidentify and disengage with the academic domain that invokes this anxiety so that their self-concept (self-worth) is not tied to their performance in the domain (Aronson et al., 1998; Major et al., 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1995). That is precisely what happened to Jack when he encountered stereotype threat in his English 102 course, from which he ended up withdrawing. Although this course was not what was specifically being explored in this study, it still provided meaningful insight for what can happen to a young Black man who feels that he is being rendered invisible or diminished to a stereotype in a classroom, particularly in a writing classroom that demands a certain vulnerability and centering of one’s identity. The findings align with the studies conducted on stereotype threat that found that when Black students were aware of negative stereotypes positioning them as intellectually inferior to their White peers, they were more likely to struggle cognitively, underperform academically, and to internalize this deficit thinking (Spencer
et al., 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). This deficit thinking also makes it more difficult for students to feel a sense of belonging and have high self-efficacy, both of which have been found to positively correlate with students’ academic success in college (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Cruz et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2018).

In this writing classroom, Jack no longer experienced a strong sense of belonging and self-efficacy, which underlines the importance of seeing both constructs as just that—constructs. And as constructs, they must continually be re/constructed and re/written into the larger narrative of our identities. As educational leaders, we cannot perceive the taken-for-grantedness of either one of them, especially for students whose identities are in an almost perpetual (or at least regular) state of being identity threatened. That is, even if their self-efficacy or sense of belonging is strong in a particular moment in time, that does not mean that they will maintain and carry a strong self-efficacy and sense of belonging into their future courses. The research also delineates how self-efficacy is domain dependent while sense of belonging is more strongly related to one’s identity (NSF, 2017a). The findings supported this notion for when either participant felt that others were threatened by their identity as Black men, their sense of belonging was instantly diminished, but they still managed to cling to their self-efficacy. Their self-efficacy, however, also seemed to be a construct they were frequently in a state of trying to maintain, aware that at any moment, even in their inclusive FYC classroom, it could be diminished by external cues or signals that made them feel stereotype threatened.

The anxieties and affective impacts of these young Black men expecting to feel stereotype threatened is not something that can be ignored; in fact, the constant psychological weight that the participants bore, who despite having strong self-efficacy
and sense of belonging in their FYC classrooms, were in an almost perpetual state of hyperawareness of their identity as young Black men—and what their bodies as young Black men signaled to the world as they entered a building or even walked down a sidewalk. Thus, they seemed to be repeatedly engaging in a performance of their identity, for even when Jack described walking down the sidewalk on campus, it was as if he were detailing how he performed his masculinity; that is, how he corporealized it in his “pronounced, aggressive walk” and his “mean” facial expression to gesture to his “hard” masculinity. But it was ultimately the intersection of his masculinity with his race that signaled to the other male student who passed him that he was not just a young man with a tough exterior but a young Black man with a tough exterior—and therefore a threat. And in this moment, the powerful intersectional forces of identity threats that are not only racialized but gendered were exposed. This moment ultimately highlighted the irreconcilable (and paradoxical) tension created by those hegemonic social forces that engender restrictive norms of racial and gender identity. That is, the same forces that compelled this young man of color to adhere to certain norms of masculine identity then denied him the vulnerability to express how he felt when he was diminished, disempowered, and stereotyped as a result of his identity.

This study reaffirms the research that reveals how Black students largely perceive not only the college classroom but the entire college community as an evaluative setting, thereby causing stereotype threat effects to almost always be present, even when no explicit threat was presented (Azima, 2020; Jordan & Lovett, 2007). And we cannot be naïve enough to think that this hyperawareness and anxiety, rooted in a racialized and gendered identity, is not something that stands to threaten the success of these young men.
in college or in academia. And it certainly stands to threaten their identities in their first-year writing classrooms.

For instance, Andre and Jack both felt identity-safe in their FYC courses overall, but it was also evident that they each played similar roles as observers in their respective courses, watching and waiting as they determined whether this space was indeed a safe space for them as young Black men—that is, whether they truly belonged in it. These findings support the research that posits how when students feel safe to take interpersonal risks and express their ideas in a classroom with a teacher who is authentic and encourages their social interaction and risk-taking, the network density (interconnectedness or social network) in the classroom becomes more cohesive (Soares & Lopes, 2020). The participants both revealed that as soon as it became evident that the instructor was welcoming and encouraged active participation among all students that their classmates began to interact with each other and the instructor more, and the environment became even more welcoming. Thus, for both of the participants, racial/gender identity, belonging, and classroom environment ultimately existed in a symbiotic relationship.

This study helped to reinforce and substantiate what the students considered the most important factor in mitigating stereotype threat in the classroom, including their FYC courses—an instructor who created intentionally identity-affirming and culturally competent spaces of learning that centered the students’ identities and lived experiences (Kareem, 2018; Kynard, 2013; Means & Pyne, 2017). The findings supported the research that in these identity-affirming, inclusive spaces, students not only increased their self-efficacy and overall beliefs about writing but felt a greater sense of belonging in
the classroom and in their larger community (Kezar et al., 2022; Means & Pyne, 2017; Soares & Lopez, 2020). But the identity safety that the participants felt outside of their FYC classroom seemed precarious at best, because they continued to encounter instances and experiences that made them feel stereotype threatened.

When students are in an almost perpetual state of performance regarding their racialized (and gendered) identity, it is essential that, as educational leaders, we begin to understand the psychosocial and affective impacts of this heightened state of awareness or anxiety. It is imperative that we understand what we can do to help mitigate these identity threats, so that we can allow these young men of color to tap into the power of their own voices as they learn to navigate not only their FYC courses but their larger academic community and world.

**RQ2: How did underprepared young men of color perceive their identity in FYC courses, particularly in terms of their self-efficacy and sense of belonging?**

Ultimately, both participants served as testaments to what the literature reveals about the powerful role that a strong sense of belonging and self-efficacy can play as mediating factors for stereotype threat. It became evident, however, that these young men still experienced potential stereotype threat in their FYC courses. As mentioned in the previous section, the participants were both acutely aware of English as a language in a way that non-native English speakers often are, highlighting the very phonology of the language with an acute awareness of the importance of pronunciation. This emphasis on the phonological gestures to the participants’ internal (subconscious) awareness that the English language, at least in academic spaces, is also something that has to be learned in the same way as a new language, and perhaps approached with the same exacting nature.
These young men also seemed to have an implicit knowing of deficit thinking mindset, which holds that students who are linguistically and culturally diverse are often perceived as intellectually deficient and not as academically capable (Kezar et al., 2022).

For this reason, students who believe that they will be viewed through this deficit lens often internalize this belief which, in turn, affects their self-efficacy and sense of belonging in the course (and their larger college community) (Kezar et al., 2022). Stereotype threat can prove to be especially disruptive to this self-efficacy, particularly for students of color, who are more susceptible to feeling “Othered” and, therefore, more vulnerable to greater awareness of stereotypes and stereotype threat, which can have negative impacts on a person’s self-esteem and their academic performance (Aronson et al., 1998; Kareem, 2018). This deficit mindset found another iteration in the participants’ conformity to and appropriation of traditional masculine norms, as they both believed that vulnerability was a weakness (a deficit) in terms of one’s masculinity and were therefore reticent to speak up in class. Thus, their reticence to speak aligns with the research that highlights how men, particularly men of color, find it challenging to access their emotions and make themselves vulnerable to others’ judgment or assumptions (stereotypes) of them as not masculine (Huerta, 2022; Schwab & Dupuis, 2020).

These findings also reinforce the importance of institutional agents’ creating spaces that push back on traditional masculine ideologies and constellation of norms that conflate vulnerability and emotionality with femininity (Azima, 2020; Huerta, 2022). For when young men ascribe to the notion of restrictive emotionality as a marker of manhood, that can deny them the opportunity to reach their full potential and experience a fuller sense of belonging in their learning environments. Thus, even the representation
(and performance) of their masculinity then becomes, in the classroom, another potential source of stereotype threat as they risked effacing hegemonic ideals of “real” masculinity by breaking their silence. And this threat also served to threaten their sense of belonging, at least in terms of feeling that they belonged as active participants in the course.

The findings also align with the research that delineates the ways in which first-generation students prove to be particularly sensitive to daily fluctuations of belonging that affect their level of engagement more than their peers (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021). The first-generation participant in this study reinforced these findings, particularly as he revealed how he stopped engaging in his English 102 course when he no longer felt a sense of belonging in the space because of his racial identity. The findings further illustrate the research that shows how when students feel a greater sense of belonging, they are also more engaged on that day, revealing the strong correlation between belongingness and engagement, particularly for first-generation students (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021). That proved to be the case for both participants in this study who revealed that they became engaged in their FYC courses (in terms of actively listening and completing all of their assignments) as soon as they felt a sense of belonging in the classroom. The did not engage in terms of their speaking in these courses, however, suggesting that they did not feel a sense of belonging in terms of their ability to emotionally express themselves in this space. That is, as young men, they perhaps did not feel a real sense of belonging when it came to being vulnerable as active participants in the course.

Despite their confidence as writers and overall sense of belonging in their respective FYC courses, the participants both stated that they remained largely quiet in
the class and did not actively participate in the discussions. The question then becomes whether they did so, in part, because they did not feel safe enough to take risks with their pronunciation and the spoken language or with the emotional vulnerability that actively participating (speaking) in class demands. The findings suggest that was indeed the case.

For perhaps these young men rendered themselves silent and invisible (as active speakers in the class, at least), clinging on to the belief in the power of their written language as their salve, the primary source of both their belonging and self-efficacy. And yet they remained fearful that if they mispronounced words or expressed vulnerability by speaking in the class, that could make way for discrimination or judgment, both rooted in and exacerbated by their racialized and gendered identity.

For Jack, the act of code-switching was a necessary and “natural” iteration of learning to navigate academic (and professional) spaces; but the question then becomes whether it is natural if it is rooted in the belief that code-switching is ultimately a tool (a rhetorical gesture), or way of proving, that students of color are not actually “who [others] see externally”—that is, that they are not the stereotypes which they have already been ascribed. Perhaps then the bigger issue (problem) is this undergirding, this hegemonic belief, and not the mastery of the academic discourse itself. While students clearly need to learn how to master the conventions of academic writing, it is important that educators understand the potential anxiety that this code-switching invokes, which was implicit when Jack stated that he code-switched so that teachers would see “who I am internally, instead of who they see externally.” For implicit in this utterance is Jack’s belief that who his teachers see externally is not a capable young Black man.
Thus, perhaps by creating space for or legitimizing this vernacular in the classroom, students would not feel that they had to work to undo perceptions (stereotypes) imposed on them. They could then show up more authentically and face less anxiety over having to perform or prove their intellectual ability through their speech—through the way they talk. And in this vein, perhaps we can create spaces in FYC classrooms in which we teach students that the language of the academy is White academic bourgeois discourse and they would benefit from learning to appropriate it, but that they still are allowed, and encouraged even, to show up—and to speak—as precisely who they are. And that they will not be tasked with undoing the stereotypes of themselves but rather that we will be tasked with not adhering to the stereotypes in the first place.

Andre demonstrated the burdensome nature of this task, stating that “just going through it (being stereotyped) every day” and “expecting it to happen” is what has helped him learn to cope with being racially stereotyped. In this utterance, Andre revealed that it was repeated exposure to stereotype threat that had essentially helped him become desensitized to it; that is, he had acclimated to identity threats and, like so many other things in his life, he had “learned to adapt.” He had learned how to perform accordingly—to remove his hoodie in buildings on campus, to show his face, to not look threatening. He had to work to maintain his sense of belonging and self-efficacy on a continual basis. When students are tasked with undoing and defying the stereotypes, it is a heavy burden to carry and one that stands to threaten students’ sense of belonging and self-efficacy in their learning communities as well.

It is at this point that the findings become a bit more nuanced as the research reveals that students who are performing well academically in a specific course are more susceptible to stereotype threat because they fear confirming the negative stereotypes
about their group if they feel connected to the academic domain and then do not perform
well academically in it (Steele & Aronson, 1995). And when these students feel that they
are being evaluated or judged in this domain, that proves sufficient to trigger the typical
responses associated with stereotype threat, including but not limited to increased anxiety
and stress, underperformance, decreased feelings of belongingness, and/or disengaging
from academic work (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Both of these
students were high achieving in their FYC courses and, overall, they seemed to be largely
protected from stereotype threat in these courses because of the inclusive classroom
environment fostered by the instructor as well as their strong writing self-efficacy and
sense of belonging; but this threat did seem to emerge more when it came to their
speaking in class. Thus, these findings suggest that this particular aspect of young Black
men’s experience/s, including the high-achieving ones in FYC courses, needs to be more
closely examined.

Ultimately, the precarity of these young men’s belonging and self-efficacy in their
first-year composition courses was evident. And this precarity seemed to reside largely in
the possibility of their being stereotype threatened (by racialized and gendered iterations).
Thus, these young men’s experiences, their stories, and perceptions serve as a powerful
utterance of the fact that, despite the tremendous strides we have made in education (and
society) to advance and create equitable learning environments, we still have so much
work to do to embrace the multiple and nuanced expressions of racial and gendered
identity. And despite the differences in their socioeconomic and educational
backgrounds, the participants had similar experiences in terms of their racialized and
gendered identities and perceived self-efficacy and sense of belonging in both their FYC
courses and spaces of higher education. And they were both still largely threatened by stereotype threat.

Thus, when young Black men like Jack state, “I gotta get out,” and then they do indeed get out, the fact remains that this out, even for highly confident, competent young Black men can quickly become a place that Others them and tells them that they do not belong. In their college communities, Andre was aware of “what [he] could and could not do” and Jack realized, “oh my God, I am still feared”; and as they spoke about their racialized experiences, their expressions revealed not only pain but a certain resignation to being diminished to harmful stereotypes in their academic community. They seemed to be navigating a heavy, emotionally draining paradox of existence—a performance—a dance of signaling to others that they are safe around them while, ultimately, they do not always feel that themselves. Our work then, as educational leaders, lies in the undoing of this reality and creating a world where no young Black man (or any other marginalized individuals) on a college campus will ever believe that others, upon seeing them, immediately ask themselves, “how did they get here?” For the only answer to that question is because they belong here—as their fullest, most authentic selves. And it is in the rewriting of this narrative and ethos, where the real work of equity lies.

These young men are both highly intelligent, capable young men, who deemed themselves proficient writers, and yet, they were both still considered academically vulnerable and placed into a course for underprepared writers. The fact that their perceived writing self-efficacy did not fully align with their institution’s perception of their writing proficiency (determined by measurements of standardized testing and/or grades), is not generalizable on its own; however, it does gesture to the importance of
further exploring the intersections of race and gender in terms of these students’ experiences with and relationship to writing and English classrooms. And as a result of the gendered and racialized forces they continually had to confront not only within themselves but in their larger college community, their sense of belonging and self-efficacy proved to be constructs they both had to actively work to maintain.

Although they managed to maintain an overall sense of belonging and self-efficacy in their FYC courses, they still rendered themselves silent in this space, which gestures to the possibility that they still denied themselves a larger part of their identity and potential. And perhaps this silence is the result of feeling stereotype threatened and hindered by ideologies that conflate emotional stoicism and silence as ideals of masculinity. Therefore, this silence among young men of color, is not something we should simply just accept; for we need to consider the possibility that much was (is) still lost for these participants, emotionally and academically (and in terms of reaching their full potential) by rendering themselves largely silent in these spaces. Perhaps if they had not rendered themselves as silent in their FYC courses, they would have developed an even greater sense of belonging and stronger self-efficacy that could have served to empower them beyond the classroom. It is possible then that speaking up more in class could have ultimately helped them to tap into and discover the real power of their voices as young Black men.

Thus, it is one thing for us, as educational leaders, to be aware that racism and patriarchal ideology exist but to untangle these racialized and gendered forces is entirely different work in and of itself. It is work in which we intentionally strive to center and elevate the voices, the stories, of these young men, so that we can help them rewrite their
narratives in writing classrooms and in spaces of literacy—or any space where language and vulnerability lie at the core. We need to reside in the affective spaces, in the non-cognitive ones, in the silences, in the unspoken, in order to more fully hear and see these young Black men in these spaces—and to more fully understand what these young men are experiencing in these classrooms, that is, how they are experiencing them (and themselves) in this context.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The findings reveal the importance of classroom environment and, more specifically, the instructor’s role in creating safe, welcoming, identity-affirming spaces for students (Azima, 2020; Kezar et al., 2022; Soares & Lopez, 2020). That is, instructors should strive to center and elevate the voices of students of color in their FYC and writing classrooms. This centering can happen through assignments, discussions, and even through the physical space of the classroom where instructors can intentionally create diverse student groups. This type of environment can also be fostered by instructors’ connecting the material to the students’ lived experiences. The literature clearly reveals how students, particularly marginalized students and those considered “Other,” can become empowered and discover their own agency and sense of belonging in their college communities through a process of writing that is purposefully connected to identity development and exploration (D’Antonio, 2020; Tharp, 2017). One of the participants in this study reinforced this notion, alluding to how meaningful they found writing their autobiographical narratives (despite their reticence to be vulnerable). The findings suggest that it may prove useful for instructors to find ways to incorporate
personal narratives into their classrooms to empower their students and elevate their voices, particularly those with marginalized identities.

Instructors should receive training on how to encourage meaningful discussion and interaction among students to foster a strong sense of community within the classroom where students feel like they can participate in class discussion marked by an open exchange of ideas (Soares & Lopes, 2020; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). This training should also offer specific instruction on ways that instructors can prevent and shut down microaggressions or insensitive comments targeted to a specific group of students in the classroom; otherwise, we create learning environments ripe for stereotype threat (Kurinec & Weaver, 2021). Thus, in order to create spaces that affirm identity, educators should strive to examine their own ideologies as well. For example, constructs of masculinity that are heteronormative and patriarchal are worth interrogating, because they can deny young men like the ones in this study the power or freedom to express vulnerability or a full range of emotions in the classroom. By cultivating emotional vulnerability in the classroom, whether through instructors’ sharing their own experiences or encouraging others to share theirs, we create spaces in which students feel not only safe but empowered to be vulnerable in these spaces (Huerta, 2022; Marrs, 2016; Schwab & Dupuis, 2020). In this type of environment, students feel safe enough to take interpersonal risks in the classroom and share their ideas without fear of judgment or of being stereotype threatened (Soares & Lopes, 2020). And they can learn to challenge and push back on those forces of hegemonic masculinity tethered to emotional stoicism-as-toughness and reject the notion that they have to deny their emotions or render
themselves silent out of fear of being emasculated or deemed too feminine (Huerta, 2022; Schwab & Dupuis, 2020).

And while I have primarily included recommendations of practice for instructors in this section, I would invite all educational leaders and stakeholders to work towards creating identity-safe communities. The research clearly underlines that success in FYC courses has proven to be the strongest, most reliable predictor of students’ success in college and their likelihood of persistence and graduation (Bedyńska et al., 2021; Brunk-Chavez & Fredericksen, 2008). And ensuring students’ success in first-year writing courses is an integral part of ensuring their success during their time in academia. Thus, the larger work of retention and student success in higher education should not be viewed in isolation of the work in FYC courses. It is important that higher educational leaders consider the iterations and implications of success in this course on an institutional level; that is, when we examine what creating inclusive, identity-affirming spaces in FYC courses looks like through wider lenses, we can begin to intentionally scale these efforts up—and work towards creating spaces that lessen the likelihood of students’ experiencing identity-based threats in their larger college community as well.

Leaders in higher education should therefore receive cultural competency and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belongingness (DEIB) training that offer specific ways to create and foster a strong sense of belonging—one in which every community member both understands the importance of and knows how to create identity-affirming spaces (Kezar et al., 2022). And specific training on stereotype threat and ways to mitigate identity-based threats could also prove useful in cultivating an inclusive environment. Higher educational leaders should strive to continually interrogate their own belief
systems and commit to creating identity-safe communities, not merely through mission statements, but by integrating and embedding core values of identity affirmation into institutional policies and practices (Kezar et al., 2022). They should also provide and mandate training and professional development opportunities, tailored to fostering identity-safe communities, for all of their institutional agents; and they should do so not in isolation, or as one-time events, but as part of a larger diversity curriculum for the institution as a whole.

The findings reaffirm the research on creating a culture of ecological validation on college campuses that centers academically vulnerable and/or marginalized students and their experiences, their needs as well as their strengths (Kezar et al., 2022). This type of academic ecosystem therefore does not operate from or perpetuate a deficit mindset; and, in this environment, the at-risk student becomes the at-promise student (Kezar et al., 2022). Thus, the defining features that must be enacted in order to create a culture of ecological validation are as follows: identity-conscious spaces that use language of care or affirming language, centering the students’ lived experiences and identities, and ultimately making them feel validated and affirmed—which could easily be reconceptualized as “safe” (Azima, 2020; Kezar et al., 2022; Soares & Lopez, 2020; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013).

This work, these efforts, should be continual and intentional; all of us working in spaces of higher education should strive to build capacity for diversity and for empowering the most vulnerable among us. And even (especially) in places with polemical and polarizing sociopolitical landscapes, this work should be privileged, because the classroom is and should always be the frontlines of social justice. For social
justice is not a partisan political project; it is the work of education and democracy. Thus, the classroom and college campus should be spaces where we ensure that all of our students’ voices are heard, that all of their identities and lived experiences are affirmed, and where they all feel a sense of belonging. Ensuring that academically vulnerable student populations (whether they are students of color or other marginalized populations) are fully empowered benefits our entire educational community and society. We all benefit when everyone among us feels safe to be and exist as precisely who we are, not performing, not being prejudiced against, not being restricted by oppressive social forces or belief systems. And this practice can only be borne from a philosophy in which we commit first and foremost to validating and affirming the identities of all people. And by affirming identity, we see others not as threats but as assets; and we see each other through the multiplicity of our identities. That is, we see each other in our full humanity.

**Limitations of Study**

This research is subject to several limitations, one of which is the use of purposeful sampling, which lessens the likelihood of the findings being generalizable to a larger population. The sample population comprised two participants who demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy and a strong sense of belonging in their FYC courses, both of which have been revealed to be mediating factors for stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson, 1995). A proposed recommendation for this limitation would be including participants who also self-reported lower levels of self-efficacy and/or sense of belonging in their first-year writing courses. And, lastly, in narrative inquiries, in particular, the potential for researcher bias as well as the ethical implications of imposing (unintended)
meaning on the participants’ experiences are also limitations of the study. Future studies should continue to account for such limitations.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should continue to unpack the relationship between stereotype threat and first-year writing courses, particularly among academically underprepared low-income, first-generation students of color. It would also be useful to explore this relationship across gendered and racialized lines in light of the persistent achievement gaps between Black and White, and male and female students, respectively (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015). While race-based and gendered psychosocial variables have been isolated and examined in STEM courses, they have been largely ignored in the research in the humanities and in higher education. Research should continue to explore the overall lived experiences of young men of color and how their identities as college students have ultimately been shaped by their storied lives as young men of color.

It would also be valuable to explore the role of the racialized and gendered body as an integral component of their narratives—for so much is mapped and written onto the male body of color. Future studies should also explore the act of speaking as a potential trigger for stereotype threat among young men of color in FYC courses. The question of male students’ silence, in particular, is a place where more research should be conducted and where rigid conformity to masculine ideologies in the classroom should be interrogated/explored as well (Huerta, 2022; Schwab & Dupuis, 2020). Future studies could thus continue to explore the ways that these classrooms can nurture and encourage emotional vulnerability, especially for young men of color.
Furthermore, future research could not only expand the size of the sample population but also include students who are either enrolled in or have completed Composition 2 to continue exploring the ways in which young men of color experience and situate their identities in these spaces. The findings illuminate the role of stereotype threat for young men of color in an academic domain in which it has largely been overlooked and in which they have historically been academically vulnerable: FYC courses (Kareem, 2018). In doing so, this study has considerable implications for further research on identity-based threat that helps to inform the gendered and racialized literacy gap (Reilly et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2015).

Future research should strive to gain a better understanding of the affective and psychosocial identity-based factors that impact learning experiences for academically vulnerable young men of color (and other marginalized and/or underserved students). Ultimately, shining a light on these gaps could have tremendous implications for national literacy rates and for the success of Black males (and young men of color) in our society, who have faced persistent problems of academic underachievement for far too long. Since literacy and writing proficiency are so inextricably linked to academic success, this research needs to be conducted with a sense of urgency as well—because that is what this academically vulnerable population deserves.

**Reflection**

As I conclude this study, I would invite all of us working in education to continue to ask ourselves: How can we expect young men of color to not bring the entirety of their lived experiences into their classrooms; and how we can expect them to reach their fullest potential if we are not allowing them to bring their fullest selves to this space? How can
we honor and nurture their academic identities if we deny their identities as young Black men? How can we expect them to compartmentalize or ignore their racialized experiences and the ways in which they intersect with their gender in a world that is still largely writing their identities for them? How can we encourage their vulnerability as young men if we are not first vulnerable enough to see and hear their lived stories—and to center them in our own pedagogy? And how can we expect young Black men to not bring the weight of their performative gestures, their always-already being aware of what *they can and cannot do* in certain spaces into their classrooms?

For while this study may have only shared the narratives of two young Black men, the findings gesture to the possibility that a world of lived stories exist, just like Andre’s and Jack’s, in which young, brilliant, thoughtful Black men move through the world expecting to encounter stereotype threat. Thus, while it may sound idealistic, perhaps the first step, the only step really, is to simply affirm these young men by validating the full experience of their lives and the heaviness that they may carry or that they may have witnessed, simply because of who they are as they move through the world. That is not to assume that they have all been discriminated against per se, but rather it is to attempt to not make any assumptions about or ascribe any narrative onto them at all. And we can only validate their lived experiences if we center and elevate the voices and identities of these young men in our classrooms. Thus, we need to create learning environments where these young men are encouraged to show up authentically and freely. We need to embrace pedagogies that affirm and grant them their full humanity—in a world which is still largely ascribing so many stereotypes onto their identities and their narratives.

The writing classroom is a rich, optimal space for identity-making and meaning-
making, and it has the potential to be a transformational space where we can all expand our moral imaginations. It is a space where we can empower our students, particularly those with marginalized identities, who have been operating under and with psychosocial constraints for too long. We can help them learn to navigate a new academic and social community—and ultimately help them discover the power of their own voices—and their agency in this world. For young men of color, it is also a space where we can push back on restrictive norms of masculinity or harmful stereotypes of Blackness/Brownness that hinder this student population and work to dismantle them.

We also need to be aware of the potential impacts for some students of color in FYC courses, who must access dominant discourses in the academy to prove their authenticity as emergent writers and college students, perhaps to the detriment or silencing of their authentic racial identity (Kareem, 2018; Kynard, 2013). We also need to be aware of the power of racialized and gendered hegemonies that serve to silence young men of color in writing courses (and other academic spaces). And we need to be intentional about not simply normalizing their silence and strive instead to create spaces that challenge them not to be silent; for just imagine what kind of extraordinary potential and what kind of brilliance is possibly being lost in their silence. The act of writing and discovering one’s voice as a writer in first-year writing courses demands vulnerability and reflexivity as well as affective and metacognitive engagement, and ultimately, the construction of a new identity. Thus, we need to create identity-affirming spaces for marginalized or underrepresented students, in particular, so that they can work to construct—and re/write—their identity in these spaces.
Summary

This narrative study centered the voices of two young Black men in their first year of college to shed light on how their lived experiences shaped their experiences and identity in their FYC courses as well as their sense of belonging and self-efficacy. The findings underline the ways in which the participants’ identities and experiences as young Black men navigating gendered and racialized spaces in both the classrooms and larger community impacted their experiences in their first-year writing classrooms. The findings from each participant ultimately both align with and reinforce the research on stereotype threat, sense of belonging, and self-efficacy and also provided valuable insight into future practices that could be implemented by educational leaders to help empower academically vulnerable young men of color. Finally, this chapter provided recommendations for future researchers who are also seeking to help fill the gap in the literature on stereotype threat and young men of color navigating first-year writing courses and other academic spaces in college.

The FYC classroom exists, much like narrative inquiry, as a social constructionist, relational space in which all participants have the opportunity to engage in a perpetual reciprocity of storytelling and meaning making through which we can ultimately re/write our own lived stories and identities together. And by doing so, we strive to ensure that young men of color (or any student) will no longer question whether they belong in a classroom or on a college campus. And we strive to ensure that these young men (and all of our students) discover, just as Jack did when he first walked into his school’s library as a young, wide-eyed boy in elementary school and met a teacher who believed in him:
that, through education, other worlds, all worlds, rife with imagination, access, knowledge, creativity, freedom, and equity, are possible.

When we commit to this work in FYC classrooms or in spaces of higher education, we are committing to the work of equity and justice. And we do so not because we are engaging in political acts as educational leaders but because we are engaging in the ultimate work of education: “to unlock the door to freedom” (Carver, 1896). And freedom looks like belonging. It looks like showing up authentically, without fear of being reduced to a stereotype or rendered invisible. It looks like not having to adhere to restrictive or oppressive social norms. It looks like embracing the multiplicity and nuance of our identities. It looks like feeling safe, physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually. It looks like not being silenced or silencing ourselves out of fear of being silenced. It looks like having the power to re/write the stories of our identities and not having others write them for us. It looks like having “the whole world available to [us].” And, ultimately, freedom looks like centering and elevating each other’s humanity and lived experiences. And perhaps no greater antidote for stereotype threat or for “unlock[ing] the door to freedom” exists than by doing just that.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe yourself in terms of your identity? (I will ask specifically about race, culture, ethnicity, and gender if they do not address it.)

2. What is your major? What are your career goals?

3. Can you tell me the story of your upbringing or childhood?
   a. Tell me about where you grew up—your hometown, community?

4. Can you tell me what experiences really stand out for you during your childhood; that is, which ones do you feel are the most defining ones?

5. How would you describe your family and family dynamics?

6. Did any of your family members graduate from college?
   a. What were their experiences like?
   b. Have any of your family members ever expressed anything about their college experiences that impacted your perceptions/beliefs about what college would be like? If so, what did they express, and how did that impact your sense of identity, or who you are (or identity threat)?

7. Can you tell me about your experiences with school (K-12)? How would you describe your overall educational experiences?
a. Elementary, middle, and high school

b. What were your classmates like? What was your relationship with them like? How did you perceive them as students/learners?

c. What were your teachers like? How would you describe them?

d. What was your relationship like with your teachers? Did you have diverse teachers; did you have any Black teachers—men and/or women?

8. How would you describe your experience with your K-12 English classes?

a. Tell me specifically about your high school English classes. Did you find them meaningful or enjoyable?

b. What did you write about, and did you enjoy any of the writing? If so, which types of writing did you most enjoy?

c. Did you feel confident in your writing abilities (compared to other students as well)?

9. What did you perceive would be the most challenging part/s of transitioning from high school to college? How did you feel about that?

10. How would you describe yourself as a student?

11. How do you think your previous high school teachers would describe you? Your ones in college?

   a. How do you think your current and previous English teachers would describe you?

12. If I were to come to your English class, what experiences would I observe you having?

13. How would you describe the classroom environment—climate/tone, student
engagement, teacher-student interactions, etc.? Which students participate the most?

14. How do you think your classmates in your English class would describe you?

15. Do you feel supported by your instructor when the subject matter is challenging/difficult?
   a. What do you do when something is challenging academically?
   b. How do you study?
   c. Do you feel that English 101 is helping you be more successful in your other classes? If so, how? If not, why?

16. How do you feel about yourself as an English student and writer?
   a. Do you feel confident in your writing abilities? If not, why?
   b. Do you feel confident participating in class? If not, why?

17. As a _____ (insert their answer to Question 1), do you believe your identity shapes your experience in the class? If so, how?

18. How do you feel in your English class? For example, do you feel confident, excited, uncomfortable, bored, etc.?

19. Do you believe that certain people are better English students than others? Have you always felt this way?
   a. How would you describe these people, and why do you think they are better at writing (or English)?

20. How do you think others perceive you here at Southeastern University? You can refer to everyone in this college community (peers, faculty, and staff).

21. What would you like for others to know about you or your story that you feel that
they don’t already know? That is, does anything surprising exist in your story?

22. Would you like to share anything else at all?
Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Arras, MA
IRB # and Title: IRB PROTOCOL: 23-482
[2122974-1] Re/Writing Identity: A Narrative Inquiry of Stereotype Threat, Sense of Belonging, and Self-Efficacy in First-Year Writing Courses
Status: APPROVED Review Type: Full Committee Review
Approval Date: Dec. 6, 2023 Submission Type: New Project
Initial Approval: Dec. 6, 2023 Next Report Due: December 6, 2024
Review Category: 45 CFR 46.104 (d)(2): Research that only includes interaction involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording):

iii. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can be readily ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

This panel, operating under the authority of the DHHS Office for Human Research and Protection, assurance number FWA 00001602, and IRB #00000288 or #00011574, has reviewed the submitted materials for the following:

1. Protection of the rights and the welfare of human subjects involved.
2. The methods used to secure and the appropriateness of informed consent.
3. The risk and potential benefits to the subject.

The regulations require that the investigator not initiate any changes in the research without prior IRB approval, except where necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the human subjects, and that all problems involving risks and adverse events be reported to the IRB immediately!

Subsequent supporting documents that have been approved will be stamped with an IRB approval and expiration date (if applicable) on every page. Copies of the supporting documents must be utilized with the current IRB approval stamp unless consent has been waived.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Name of Author: Jenny O. Arras

Graduate and Undergraduate Schools Attended:

University of South Alabama, Mobile, Alabama
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana

Degrees Awarded:

Doctor of Education, 2024, University of South Alabama
Master of Arts, English, 2003, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Bachelor of Arts, English, 2000, Spring Hill College

Awards and Honors:

Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, University of South Alabama, 2023
Teaching Fellowship, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001-06
Spring Hill College, Magna Cum Laude, 2000