# ABSTRACT

**DISSERTATION:** Stereotype Threat and Self-Affirmation: How Self-Affirmation Protects the Performance Of Stigmatized Individuals

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Members of stigmatized social groups routinely encounter situations where they fear their behavior will confirm negative stereotypes associated with their social identity (Steele & Aronson, 1995). A plethora of empirical research has demonstrated this apprehension – known as stereotype threat – activates behavioral, cognitive, and emotional reactions that adversely impact performance (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008; Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008; Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). Efforts to identify methods of protecting the performance of stigmatized individuals have demonstrated that allowing individuals to reflect on important personal characteristics prior to a performance event (i.e., self-affirmation) can effectively eliminate the debilitative influence of stereotype threat on performance. However, little is known regarding the mechanisms that contribute to the protective benefits of self-affirmation exercises (McQueen & Kline, 2006). The current research focuses on the influence of self-affirmation on the most proximal mediator of the stereotype threat and performance relationship, working memory effectiveness.

For this study participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions (no self-affirmation & low stereotype threat, no self-affirmation & high stereotype threat, self-

affirmation & low stereotype threat, and self-affirmation & high stereotype threat). Participants in each condition completed two working memory measures (i.e., operation span task, Foster et al., 2014; letter-memory task; Morris & Jones, 1990) and a series of high-working memory demand modular arithmetic problems (Beilock, Rydell, & McConnell, 2007). Results indicated engaging in the process of self-affirmation was associated with increased mathematical performance when modular arithmetic problems were completed in the absence of stereotype threat-inducing cues. However, results demonstrated engaging in the process of self-affirmation was associated with reductions in mathematical performance when modular arithmetic problems were completed in the presence of stereotype threat activating cues. Finally, results indicated there were no differences on the working memory measure among participants assigned to the four experimental conditions.