Research Statement:
Culture Divides as a Source of and Solution to Inequality

The United States is suffering from a shortage of highly trained workers. Yet businesses, universities, and communities routinely fail to harness the potential of three of the nation's largest labor pools: women (51% of the U.S. population), non-White Americans (37% of the population—and swiftly growing), and working-class Americans (66% of the population). Hundreds of studies show that these groups can perform as well as or better than their middle- class White male counterparts, yet these groups frequently do not realize their own potential.

According to social psychological theories of inequality, these groups often underperform because of psychological barriers such as *stereotype threat* (i.e., the concern about being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype). Building on theories of stereotype threat, my research illuminates another critical—but largely unrecognized—factor that also contributes to inequality: *cultural divides*, or the differences in cultural norms among social groups (e.g., working-class versus middle-class) or between social groups and institutions. In particular, my research focuses on the independent-interdependent cultural divide between the independent norms foundational to mainstream U.S. institutions (e.g., "chart your own course," "express uniqueness," "influence others") and the interdependent norms common among social groups typically underrepresented in these institutions (e.g., "adjust to the situation," "fit in with others," "maintain relationships").

By focusing on the performance consequences of the independent-interdependent cultural divide, my research integrates the literature on stereotype threat with research on cultural models of self. Traditional research on cultural models of self examines how independent versus interdependent cultures produce psychological differences *across nations*. I build on and extend this theory in two key ways. First, I examine the cultural norms that guide behavior of subcultures *within the United States* (i.e., social class, race, and gender). Second, I illuminate how the cultural norms among different social groups interact with institutions to yield important behavioral consequences that produce and maintain inequality.

I propose that the independent-interdependent cultural divide is both a key source of and a solution to inequality (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, *Psychological Review*, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 2014). Broadly, this theory of cultural divides asserts that inequality is produced when the cultural norms in mainstream institutions do not match the norms prevalent among individuals participating in those institutions. Specifically, this theory consists of three key tenets: (1) U.S. institutions tend to promote mainstream, independent cultural norms, and exclude interdependent cultural norms common among underrepresented groups; (2) when institutions promote only mainstream norms, they inadvertently fuel inequality by creating barriers to the understanding and performance of underrepresented groups; and (3) when institutions create cultures that include interdependent norms, they can break down these barriers.

I develop and test this theory using a wide range of methodologies. Although some studies are conducted online, the bulk of my research uses more in-depth and time-intensive methods, including laboratory and field experiments, longitudinal surveys, structured interviews, content analyses of cultural products, and psychophysiological assays. These types of methods make it possible to access the subjective psychological experiences of participants whose voices are poorly understood and often go unheard in psychological and organizational research. Participants in our studies include firefighters, police officers, university deans, college students with diverse social class backgrounds, and Hurricane Katrina relief workers and survivors.

My program of research consists of three complementary streams of laboratory and field studies. In my first line of research, I uncover how behavioral differences between working- and middle-class Americans reflect the independent-interdependent divide. My second line examines how the emphasis on independent norms of U.S. institutions (e.g., the media, higher education, the workplace) can lead to a misunderstanding of others' behavior, undermine underrepresented groups' performance, and fuel inequality. In my third line of research, I draw on this theory to design and test experimental interventions that bridge cultural divides and reduce inequality. My work demonstrates that these interventions can dramatically improve the performance of underrepresented groups in U.S. institutions by creating organizational cultures that recognize their perspectives and values.

1. Characterizing the Independent-Interdependent Divide

My first line of research characterizes the independent-interdependent divide between working-class and middle-class Americans. Throughout my research, I use educational attainment as an indicator of social class because research reveals that education drives many of the economic, health, and lifestyle differences associated with social class. Considering that a college education marks one of the largest divides in U.S. culture, I classify adults with at least a four-year college degree as *middle-class* and people who have not attained this degree as *working-class*. In the case of college students, I classify those who have at least one parent with a four-year degree as from a middle-class background and those who have neither parent with a four-year degree as from a working-class background.

In U.S. society, the act of choosing is saturated with cultural meanings and therefore reveals the independent-interdependent divide. Mainstream U.S. culture is rife with appeals to choice, from advertising ("Choose anything but ordinary," implores a Camel cigarette ad), to politics ("School choice means better educational opportunity," claims a school vouchers proponent), and even childrearing ("Would you rather behave or go to bed?" offer millions of weary parents). These appeals assume that giving people choice will lead to better outcomes because people have opportunities to express their uniqueness, exert control, and feel independent from others.

My research shows that choice does not have the same meaning or the same positive consequences for working-class Americans as it does for their middle-class counterparts.

For example, in an interview study, we asked middle-class MBA students and working-class firefighters to describe how they would feel if a friend purchased the same car they did. MBA students' responses were negative, reflecting independent norms. As one respondent put it, "I'd be disappointed because my car is no longer unique." In contrast, reflecting interdependent norms, firefighters responded positively. One replied, "Cool. Let's start a car club!" These divergent cultural norms are also visible in magazine ads. Ads appealing to the middle-class encourage people to make unique choices; for example, Audi sells a sports car with the message, "Never follow." In contrast, ads designed for the working-class emphasize friends and family; for example, Honda sells a sedan by urging, "Take family time further" (Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2007).

In another set of studies, we have also found that working-class Americans are less enthusiastic about the act of choosing compared to members of the middle-class. For instance, in one study, we found that working-class people more often associated the word "choice" with "difficulty" and "stress," whereas middle-class people more often associated "choice" with "freedom" and "independence." Moreover, in a laboratory study, we observed that working-class adults preferred to accept a pen of the experimenter's choosing rather than select one for themselves, whereas middle-class adults showed the opposite pattern (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, *Social and Personality Psychology Science*, 2011).

2. Cultural Divides Fuel Inequality

My second line of research examines how the independent-interdependent cultural divide drives inequality in disaster relief, the workplace, and higher education. Specifically, I examine how the emphasis on independent norms in U.S. institutions can lead to a misunderstanding of behavior and also can undermine the performance of underrepresented groups.

Misunderstanding Behavior in Disaster Relief. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the mainstream U.S. media and many middle-class Americans asked why the mostly working-class Black survivors "chose" to weather the storm in New Orleans. In asking this question, the observers misunderstood the behavior of the survivors who did not evacuate (the "stayers"). A cultural divide was at the heart of this misunderstanding. Our surveys of the relief workers who came to survivors' aid revealed that the relief workers relied on middle-class independent norms to make sense of the working-class survivors' behavior; they assumed that any sensible person would take charge, influence the situation, and find a way to evacuate before the storm. On the other hand, our interviews with stayers revealed that they understood their own behavior in more interdependent terms: being strong, caring for others, and making the best of the situation. Thus, despite recognizing that stayers lacked the necessary resources (e.g., savings) to evacuate, relief workers reported that the stayers' behavior did not make sense, and they derogated the stayers as lazy, passive, and hopeless (Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, *Psych Science*, 2009; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, & Hamedani, *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology*, 2013).

Ignoring Societal Barriers in the Workplace. A second set of studies examines how the assumption of independent, or "free," choice leads people to ignore the barriers that women face in the workplace. For example, the media often portray women's actions as personal choices—"opting out"—rather than as reactions to inflexible workplace policies, the pressures of balancing workplace demands with the "second shift" at home, "mommy tracking," and other forms of discrimination. In one experiment, we found that merely exposing participants to the independent choice framework (i.e., hanging a poster advertising a book about women opting out on the wall) increased participants' belief that opportunities are equal and gender discrimination no longer exists (Stephens & Levine, *Psych Science*, 2011). These results demonstrate that a choice framework perpetuates inequality by concealing societal barriers and reducing people's motivation to change discriminatory systems. In related experiments, we found that brief exposure to choice, such as requiring participants to make an incidental choice or to watch someone else choose, had the surprising but potent effect of increasing victim-blaming and reducing empathy for disadvantaged groups (Savani, Stephens, & Markus, *Psychological Science*, 2011).

Undermining Performance in Higher Education. Independent norms also contribute to the underperformance of working-class college students (i.e., students whose parents do not have four-year degrees). In a survey of college administrators, we found that U.S. universities primarily value norms of independence (e.g., "pave your own path," "develop your own opinions"). In a second survey of incoming college students, we found that these university norms diverge from the interdependent norms (e.g., "give back to community," "help family") that working-class students commonly cite as their motivations for attending college. Finally, in a set of experiments, we examined the consequences of this cultural divide. Representing the university culture as independent (a mismatch with working-class students' motives) increased working-class students' stress (as indexed by cortisol reactivity) and undermined their performance on academic tasks. Conversely, representing the university culture as interdependent (a match with working-class students' motives) led working-class students to perform just as well as their middle-class peers (Stephens et al., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 2012).

In a current longitudinal study, Phillips, Townsend, and I examine the long-term consequences of this mismatch between independent university cultural norms and interdependent norms common among working-class students. Although college often is described as the "great equalizer," our longitudinal study indicates that it does not erase—nor even decrease—cultural differences associated with social class. Rather, we find that, compared with middle-class students, first-year working-class students' greater endorsement of interdependent motives persists throughout college. These motives, in turn, predict reduced fit, lower levels of perceived social status, and worse academic performance (i.e., grades) at the end of college.

3. Bridging Cultural Divides Reduces Inequality

Finally, in my third line of research, I design and test theoretically informed interventions that bridge social class and racial divides in university settings. This intervention research not only reveals many practical applications but also makes critical contributions to basic social psychological theories of self, motivation, and performance.

Students' social class and racial-ethnic backgrounds predict their educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes even after controlling for high school grades and standardized test scores. As a result of the additional academic, social, and cultural obstacles they confront in college, working-class and racial-minority students tend to receive lower grades, drop out at higher rates, and interact less with their professors than do middle-class and White college students.

Most researchers and practitioners seek to reduce these disparities by giving students either knowledge and skills (e.g., additional training in math) or structural resources (e.g., access to increased financial aid). The theory of cultural divides suggests that reducing inequality requires not only providing these necessary skills and resources but also changing the university culture to make it more inclusive of interdependent cultural norms. I employ two key strategies to accomplish this objective: acknowledging cultural divides and including the perspectives of underrepresented groups in institutional ideas and practices (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 2015).

Acknowledging Cultural Divides. Using the first strategy, I bridge the social class divide in higher education by acknowledging the significance of students' social class backgrounds. In one study, incoming working-class and middle-class college students attended one of two student discussion panels upon entering college: a *difference-education* panel or a *control* panel (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, *Psychological Science*, 2014). In both conditions, the same socioeconomically diverse senior students told their personal stories of adjusting to college. In the difference-education condition, panelists highlighted both how their social class backgrounds shaped the obstacles they faced, and the strengths and strategies they leveraged to be successful. In other words, participants gained a framework for making sense of how their social class backgrounds matter in college. In the *control* condition, panelists did not mention their social class backgrounds and participants did not gain this framework. Evaluating the effects of the intervention at the end of students' freshman year, we found that the difference-education condition fully eliminated the social class achievement gap compared to the control condition. Compared to working-class students in the control condition, working-class students in the difference-education condition earned better grades (an increase of .25 GPA points) and sought more campus resources (an increase of 30%). Moreover, both working- and middle-class students in the difference-education condition reported greater social fit in college, better psychological well-being, and less stress and anxiety than students in the control condition. We are currently tracking participants from this intervention to examine the effects throughout their four years of college.

In a follow-up study with these students, we sought to capture the recursive, or self-

reinforcing, processes by which we theorized the intervention benefitted them. Specifically, at the end of their second year in college, we brought students into the lab, presented them with a series of stressful college situations (i.e., a speech, a word puzzle, and a cognitive task), and assessed their behavioral and hormonal responses. We found that all participants in the difference-education compared to the control condition more frequently discussed their backgrounds in a speech, which suggests they were using what they learned in the intervention to make sense of how their different backgrounds influence their college experiences (Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, *Psychological Science*, 2015). Further illuminating this process, we found that working-class participants in the difference-education showed greater physiological thriving in their coping responses (i.e., as indicated by neuroendocrine measures) to academic stressors, suggesting that they experienced their working-class background as a strength.

Including the Perspectives of Underrepresented Groups. Using the second strategy for intervention, I bridge the social class and racial divide in higher education by including the perspectives of working-class and racial-minority students in the mainstream university culture. In one current study, Townsend, Nelson, and I exposed incoming college students from diverse social class and racial backgrounds to one of two welcome letters from their university. In the *interdependent* condition, the letter emphasized the interdependent cultural norms common among many working-class and racial-minority students (e.g., "be part of a community"). In contrast, the independent condition focused on the independent cultural norms prevalent in university settings (i.e., "pave your own path"). We found that working-class and racial-minority participants who received the interdependent compared to the independent representation of the university culture earned higher grades at the end of the first quarter in college. These students were also more willing to engage in the types of activities (e.g., working with other students, spending time on homework) that drive academic success.

Conclusion and Future Directions

My program of research develops and tests a novel theory of cultural divides that provides a blueprint to better understand the sources of and solutions to inequality. By integrating theories of stereotype threat with cultural models of self, my work uncovers how cultural divides among social groups (e.g., working-class versus middle-class) or between social groups and institutions influence basic psychological processes, such as motivation, well-being, and performance. I further document how these behavioral consequences can produce and maintain inequality.

When left unmarked, cultural divides will produce inefficient, undesirable outcomes for individuals, groups, and organizations. At the same time, as I highlight in my intervention research, these cultural divides are not inevitable. When schools and workplaces take action to bridge these cultural divides, they can more effectively unleash the potential of underrepresented groups. My research reveals two effective yet simple strategies for doing so: acknowledging cultural divides and including the values and perspectives of underrepresented groups.

In my current and future work, I will further examine the sources of and solutions to social class, racial-ethnic, and gender divides across organizational contexts, such as police departments, law firms, and the military. Additionally, building upon my existing intervention research, I will identify the precise mechanisms through which different types of interventions can confer psychological benefits to different social groups, as well as to examine additional outcomes such as attrition, health, and productivity. Through current and future directions, my program of research will uncover additional strategies to harness the untapped potential of underrepresented groups and in the process will continue to create more inclusive and effective schools, workplaces, and communities.