Faculty Publications

3-16-2016

# The Price of Strength: Black College Women's Perspectives on the Strong Black Woman Stereotype

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# The Price of Strength: Black College Women's Perspectives on the Strong Black Woman Stereotype

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*Black feminist scholars posit that the Strong Black Woman stereotype (SBW) is a compelling image that depicts Black women as strong, independent, and self-sacrificing. Research suggests SBW internalization is related to mental and physical health problems. This study asked Black college women open-ended questions on several SBW-related topics. Thematic analysis of approximately 90 participants revealed definitions of SBW, including, strong, independent, hardworking, and caring. Contrary to SBW's positive perception, the majority of participants reported SBW's negative effects on their health, highlighting SBW's paradox. Findings increase awareness of the SBW stereotype for mental health professionals who work with Black college women.*

*KEYWORDS   Black women, Strong Black Women stereotype, mental health*

Although examining race and gender separately is still common in social science literature, scholars have begun paying more attention to how racialization and gender intersect to influence how we see ourselves and others

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(Coles, 2009; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1994; Settles, 2006). This intersectional examination is important when considering stereotypic images of Black women, which are similar to *and* different from those of Black men and White women. For example, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) stereotype shares the racialized perception of Black people as tough and strong and shares the gendered perception of women as communal and caring (Donovan, 2011; Romero, 2000). The combination of these sets of traits, however, has not been found in the stereotypic images of Black men or White women, making SBW unique to being simultaneously racialized as Black and gendered as a woman. Adding to its complexity, research suggests the SBW image is internalized by many Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Given the possible influence of SBW on how Black women perceive themselves, it is surprising how little empirical interest the topic has received. The work that has been done indicates the image might be mixed. On the one hand, studies suggest Black women may embody SBW as a way to cope with multiple oppressive forces like racism, sexism, and classism (Donovan & West, 2014). On the other hand, studies also suggest that high internalization of SBW may be linked directly or indirectly to such negative outcomes as depression, overeating, self-silencing, and reduced help-seeking and self-care (Donovan & Williams, 2002; Donovan & West, 2014; Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). These studies underscore the importance of examining SBW in Black female populations. Significant gaps, however, remain in the understanding of Black women's own interpretation of SBW, particularly Black college women who are exposed to multiple ways of embodying womanhood via their education environments. This study attempts to bridge this gap by exploring, in their own words, Black college women's conceptualizations of and identification with SBW.

## INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY AND BLACK COLLEGE WOMEN

Intersectionality examines the ways in which one's location within and among such hierarchical statuses like race, gender, class, sexuality, and age, to name a few, influence intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Collins, 2000; Suyemoto & Donovan, in press). Within intersectionality theory, it is extremely important to consider the systems, structures, and power dynamics at play among individuals who hold multiple oppressed statuses (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2000). Through an intersectional lens, an individual's statuses are viewed as interactions, rather than as separate and compartmentalized (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012). Intersectionality is relevant to Black college women because their experiences reflect, go against, or even expand previous understanding of intersectionality (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2013).

Although intersectional theory and empirical evidence suggest that race and gender impact how Black college women perceive themselves and are perceived and treated by others (e.g., Collins, 2000; Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, & Mazzeo, 2015; Crenshaw, 1994; Krebs et al., 2011; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014), there is limited research on the ways in which gender and race intersect to impact how the dominant culture stereotypes Black women. One exception is a recent study that explored how White college students stereotype Black women. Results suggested that tough and strong, traits indicative of SBW, were dominant ways Black women were perceived by this sample (Donovan, 2011). In support of intersectional theory, tough and strong were not dominant in the perceptions of White women, who were instead perceived mainly as emotional and intelligent (Donovan, 2011).

For Black college women, internalizing SBW, at some levels, has been found to buffer against anxiety symptoms in the face of adversity (Donovan & West, 2014). This finding suggests that the internalization of strength, up to a point, may provide some protection against the psychological and physical outcomes of stressful events, including experiences of racism and sexism. At the same time, being perceived as strong and tough can limit Black women's access to services, support, and justice as a result of these attribution errors (Donovan, 2011; Donovan & Williams, 2002) and, simultaneously, exacerbate symptomatology and feelings of shame in response to these negative perceptions (Harris-Perry, 2011). Further, these beliefs about what it means to be a Black women could lead to the negating and minimizing of Black women's mental and physical health problems by the Black women themselves and by the doctors and therapists who may treat them (Donovan; Donovan & Williams, 2002). The theoretical considerations from the studies described indicate further exploration of the psychological impact of SBW among Black college women is needed.

## SBW IN THE PSYCHOTHERAPY CONTEXT

### SBW – Definitions and Origins

Romero (2000) is one of a few writers to comprehensively define the SBW stereotypical image in the context of psychotherapy. She posits that the image consists of two parts. Of no surprise, the first part is strength and independence. This strength and independence are seen in SBW's ability to handle all types of stressors without complaint, in her resilience, emotional containment, and self-reliance. The second part is SBW's role as caretaker of others. This caretaking role is seen in SBW's willingness to put everyone's needs before her own, including those of her immediate and extended family and community members. Romero (2000) further posits that Black women who identify with SBW may have difficulty starting and staying in therapy

due to ambivalence around acknowledging the need for help and around focusing on self-care. These barriers to successful therapy make SBW an important construct for clinicians who work with Black women to understand and explore.

Other scholars who focus on SBW describe the image in similar ways to Romero (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harrington et al., 2010; Harris-Lacewell, 2001; Woods-Giscombé, 2010), suggesting she captured it well. Of note, Superwoman is a comparable image to SBW found in the literature. This image shares Romero's description of SBW as being simultaneously strong, independent, and caring (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004; Wallace, 1990; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). The underlying similarity between these images indicates both might refer to the same representation of Black women regardless of nomenclature (Donovan & West, 2014; Harris-Lacewell, 2001). Given the popularity of the SBW label in media and research, we have chosen to name the stereotypic image described in this study "Strong Black Woman."

The history of SBW is less debated than the definition. The SBW traits of strength, independence, and caregiving are linked most consistently to slavery. Portraying Black women as innately strong enabled White southerners to justify the practice of forcing Black enslaved women into the fields to labor beside Black enslaved men, while simultaneously upholding beliefs of White women as weak, helpless, and in need of (White) men's protection and control (Collins, 2000; Harrington et al., 2010; hooks, 1981; Wallace, 1990; Welter, 1966; White, 1999). Although the myth of strength originated outside the Black community, Black enslaved women likely "cultivated" strength and independence in Black girls (White, 1999, p. 119). Possession of strength and independence was requisite to surviving plantations where daily life was filled with brutality and violence and where male protection, albeit a sexist notion, was not possible (White, 1999). As strength and independence were necessary for personal survival, caregiving was necessary for community survival (Davis, 1995; White, 1999). Influenced by patriarchal expectations of White women, research suggests it was enslaved Black women who were in charge of caring for young children, pregnant women, the elderly, and the infirm (Davis, 1995; hooks, 1981; White, 1999). Given the lack of outside help in these areas, the role of caregiver was likely valued in the slave community (White, 1999).

Today, strength, independence, and caring continue to manifest in several stereotypic images of Black women. SBW, however, is unique among these images because it combines all three traits, while the others do not. For example, the Matriarch stereotype portrays Black women as strong and independent, but also uncaring and emasculating (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1995; Donovan, 2011; Donovan & Williams, 2002); the Mammy stereotype portrays Black women as caring and selfless, particularly to the White families who employ them, but also subservient and dependent (Collins, 2000;

Donovan, 2011; West, 1995; White, 1999). SBW is also unique compared to other stereotypic images of Black women in that it is not overtly negative. Unlike the emasculating Matriarch, subservient Mammy, and hypersexual Jezebel, SBW provides the illusion of a pathway, albeit narrow, to acceptance and respectability for Black women (Collins, 2004; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). In a world where Black women are regularly "othered" and devalued, the SBW pathway can seem appealing. Unfortunately, this appealing pathway appears to have pitfalls.

## SBW – Internalization, Stress, Coping, and Health

Anecdotal and qualitative evidence have consistently shown that SBW is one of the primary ways Black womanhood is conceptualized among Black girls and women, suggesting the image is highly internalized in this population (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). For example, many Black women in a qualitative study conducted by Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) voiced the ways SBW is passed down from generation to generation as the image of their mothers and grandmothers, and therefore, the image they are supposed to uphold. Although this image may be helpful in small doses, SBW internalization may negatively impact health when it is relied on too heavily as a coping mechanism for stress.

Scholars have speculated that cultural and social identities impact exposure to and effects of stress (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Harrell, 2000; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). This is particularly relevant to Black women whose everyday stress is exacerbated by their intersectional racialized, gendered, and classed location. Within this stressful existence, healthy coping is vital to mitigating the negative effects of stress. Some of the main tenets of SBW, namely self-reliance and emotional containment, however, have been found to exacerbate the negative outcomes of stress (Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). So, if Black women overly identify with the SBW image, they may feel as if they have to live up to societal expectations of invincibility and indestructibility, even in the face of significant stress. Endeavoring to maintain a strong exterior may inadvertently exacerbate this stress and its effects in Black women's lives.

There is emerging qualitative and quantitative evidence, albeit limited, suggesting a link between living up to SBW's unnatural ideals and a variety of interrelated negative outcomes in stress level, coping, and health. In relevant qualitative studies, many Black female participants identify living up to the SBW image means limiting their ability to seek help or express negative emotions like sadness, anger, or frustration (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Nicolaidis et al., 2010). In Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2009) qualitative study, for example, the overwhelming majority of the Black women

participants expressed the need to accommodate their feelings in order to appear strong. In other words, these women engaged in behavioral responses where they would seemingly acquiesce to socialization messages by "muting" their thoughts and emotions through stoicism, silence, and self-lessness. Only a minority of participants revealed efforts to combat these images by asserting their vulnerability. Similarly, in a qualitative study about Black women's responses to depression, Nicolaidis and colleagues (2010) found the SBW image to be a barrier to acknowledging depressive symp-toms, accepting the diagnosis, and help-seeking. As one participant put it when discussing her early lessons about coping with adversity, "Somebody's worser off than we are, so we just got to deal. So that's where the mask came in. I'm a strong Black woman, so I got to be strong and inside you're break-ing down" (Nicolaidis et al., 2010, p. 1473).

Two recent quantitative studies support qualitative evidence related to SBW, stress, coping, and health (Donovan & West, 2014; Harrington et al., 2010). One of the studies found that both moderate and high levels of SBW endorsement significantly increased the positive relationship between stress arousal (e.g., irritability and agitation) and depressive symptoms, while low levels of SBW endorsement did not (Donovan & West, 2014). In other words, stress was not associated with depressive symptoms for those Black women who reported low levels of SBW endorsement, but stress was signifi-cantly associated with depressive symptoms for those Black women who reported moderate and high levels of SBW endorsement. The other study found SBW endorsement was associated with reduced emotional regulation and increased self-silencing for Black women who had experienced stressful life events (e.g., sexual assault, natural disaster; Harrington et al., 2010). As with the first study and the qualitative studies discussed, these data suggest the endorsement of SBW limits the ability to cope with stress which in turn increases the negative mental health consequences of stress. Adding support for this stress-coping disruption model, both of the quantitative studies found that increases in the endorsement of the SBW image were associated with increases in stress level (Donovan & West, 2014; Harrington et al., 2010).

Taken together, the anecdotal, qualitative, and quantitative evidence indicates that embracing the SBW image may increase Black women's vul-nerability to at least one negative consequence of stress. The evidence also suggests that rejecting or limiting internalization of the SBW image may be beneficial to Black women's health. Prior to emphasizing the clinical rel-evance of the SBW image for Black women, additional work is needed to understand better what the SBW image encompasses for Black women. Given the influence of education on perceptions of self and life outcomes (Block, Koch, Liberman, Merriweather, & Roberson, 2011), it is also neces-sary to examine how Black women of different education levels respond to SBW. For example, does the SBW image have strong appeal for women in college who are provided a variety of ways to embody womanhood via

their educational setting and who are living in an era where self-care is often espoused in the mainstream media by influential models, including Black women (i.e., Oprah)?

## Study Goals

Our study is a response to the need to understand better the nature of the SBW image among Black women in a college setting. Through the use of open-ended questions, we sought to understand whether the Black college women in our sample describe the SBW image in ways similar to the literature; whether they see themselves and other Black women in the image; and their beliefs about the image's impact on mental health.

## METHOD

### Participants

Data were collected from 113 Black women college students from an urban, New England university as a part of a larger study. For the qualitative aspect of the study, analyses consisted of data from approximately 94 to 82 participants, depending on how many responded to the question examined. Participants in this study ranged in age from 18 to 47 ($N = 91$, $M = 23.32$ years, $SD = 6.02$, *Median* = 21, Mode = 22). Specifically, 77 participants (85%) were born in the 1980s, six participants (7%) were born in the 1970s, and five participants (6%) were born in the 1960s. Forty-one percent of the sample ethnically identified as African American; 18% as West Indian/Caribbean; 15% as African or Cape Verdean; 7% as Multiracial/Biracial; 3% as Hispanic Black; and 17% as "other." Eighty-nine percent of the participants were full-time students, and 11% were part-time students. Seventy-nine percent of the sample reported working while attending school ($M = 20.81$ hours per week).

### Measures

#### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

The researchers created a questionnaire that was used to gather information about the participants' background. Participants were asked questions related to their age, ethnicity, family income, student status, and other socio-demographic information.

#### OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

The survey given to participants consisted of multiple questionnaires. Of interest to these analyses, participants answered six open-ended questions that asked the following: "In your own words, please describe a Black

woman that represents the Strong Black Woman image?"; "Do you think you fit the image that you just described?"; If you identify with some or all aspects of the Strong Black Woman image, do you feel like this image affects your mental health?"; "Is the Strong Black Woman a positive image or a negative image?"; and "What percentage of Black women do you think fit the image of the Strong Black Woman?"

## Procedure

The participants learned about the current study from recruitment tools, such as posters, information tables throughout the university, and announcements in psychology and African-American studies classrooms. A $15 incentive was provided to participants for their completion of the study. The questionnaires were administered via a secured Internet database.

## RESULTS

### Reflexivity

In light of the qualitative methodology used for this study, it is important for each of the authors to "situate" herself in relation to the participants, in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the authors' perspectives and the context in which this research was conducted (Given, 2008). The first author (LW), at the time the study was conducted, was a graduate student in her early 20s. LW racially identifies as Black and biracial (Black/White) and ethnically as African-American. LW also identifies as a cisgender female. When the study was conducted, the second author (RD) was Assistant Professor of Psychology in her late 30s. RD was born in Georgetown Guyana and immigrated with her family to New York when she was 6 years old. RD identifies as a Black cisgender female. When the data from the study was analyzed, the third author (AD) was an undergraduate student in her early 20s. AD identifies as a biracial (Black/Puerto Rican) female.

### Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to explore responses to the open-ended SBW items. For this analysis, the three Black female researchers of this study worked together in order to enlist multiple perspectives for the analysis and to allow for reflexivity, an important part of ensuring validity for more inductive research (Creswell, 2007; Morrow, 2005). For example, each of the three researchers had her own personal experiences with what it meant to be a Black woman in higher education. Moreover, each researcher related to aspects of the SBW and perceived a connection to this construct in her

own life. Because of our own individual levels of closeness to the topic of the SBW, we engaged in discussions of our personal values, biases, and assumptions so that we would be more likely to notice and identify the impact of our personal experiences in order to minimize the effect of these experiences while interpreting the data. Each researcher separately coded her data, and as a group, codes were discussed in order to discern areas of agreement and disagreement. For each point in the coding process, we coded in separate files as to not be swayed by another researchers' perception of a theme. In addition, discussions of agreement and disagreement included a thorough discernment of what was truly the voice of the participant and the potential theoretical application, *and* what might have been our own opinion or bias as a result of our positionality relative to the study. After the open codes discussion, data were reanalyzed as a way to test the goodness of fit for the codes that had been generated during the initial coding processes. Then, codes that were common to all three coders were included in the analysis. These codes were organized into themes based on content and recurring themes were identified.

## SBW DESCRIBED

Ninety-four participants responded to the question asking them to describe a Black woman that represents the Strong Black Woman image. Of these 94, four participants only named an individual (e.g., Oprah, their mother) and did not provide any descriptions. These participants were removed from all of the analyses related to this question except the analysis for the theme related to naming an individual. The thematic analyses resulted in themes that either highlighted historical or contemporary relevance or represented both. Themes with historical relevance included (in order of most endorsed to least endorsed): *strong/assertive, independent, caring,* and *religious.* Themes with contemporary relevance included (in order of most endorsed to least endorsed): *hardworking/ambitious, educated, self-confident, racial pride, feminine, interpersonally savvy,* and *beautiful.* One theme emerged with both historical and contemporary relevance, and that was the theme of *naming an individual.*

## THEMES WITH HISTORICAL RELEVANCE

Themes within this broad category were included if the meaning of the theme was related to aspects of historical theoretical writings about the SBW and/or related to the original definitions of the SBW.

*Strong/assertive.* Among the 90 Black women who responded to this question, 51 (57%) described SBW as strong/assertive. Regardless of the apparent obviousness of this type of response, over half of the women used

words reflecting strength. Responses were coded as *strong/assertive* if participants used language that referred to strength, resilience, "never giving up," "rising above adversity," "standing up for oneself," "having the ability to be aggressive or assertive," and remarks about being able to "handle anything." For example, SBW was described by one participant as the "essence of strength who has endured through many hardships." Another participant wrote, "[SBW] is not to be in the defensive but to be assertive, to know what to say and when to say it."

*Independent.* Overall, 32 responses (36%) referred to SBW as independent. However, upon further analysis, in addition to independence in general, two subcategories of independence—financial and romantic—were extracted from the data. Five responses (16%) of independence referred to financial independence; whereas six responses (19%) of independence were coded as romantic independence. General independence referred to any mention about being independent, "an ability to handle anything on one's own," or phrases that referenced self-directedness. For example, one woman wrote, "[SBW] is a woman who relies on herself to get things done." Financial independence was coded with any mention of being able to provide for oneself financially or any mention of ownership of material goods. For example, "she needs to be able to support herself financially first before anything else." Romantic independence was coded if there were any mention of not being dependent on a partner, being a single parent, "leaving Black men behind," or "not relying on a man for security."

*Caring.* Twenty-three responses (26%) referred to SBW as caring. These responses were coded in this category with any mention of caring, selflessness, kindhearted, or sacrificing for kids and loved ones. For example, one participant wrote, "She takes care of her family and her loved ones to the best of her ability." Another example comes from a participant who believes SBWs "do whatever they can for their kids because they didn't have it as kids growing up."

*Religious.* Eleven responses (12%) were categorized as religious with any mention of religion, spirituality, or being "God-fearing."

THEMES WITH CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Themes within this broad category were included if the meaning of the theme was unrelated to earlier theoretical writings on the SBW and unrelated to the original definitions of the SBW. Themes within this category may reflect an expansion of the SBW definition among college-age women living in the 21st century.

*Hardworking/Ambitious.* Thirty-four responses (38%) were coded as hardworking/ambitious. Hardworking/ambitious was defined as any response that referenced hardworking, motivated, ambitious, success, achievement, accolades, accomplishments, or future-oriented. One woman wrote, SBW is a "woman who handles her business no matter what it is." For another participant, the definition of hardworking was described as a woman who "gets a great career as a businesswoman, doctor, lawyer, or politician."

*Educated.* Twenty-six responses (29%) fell in the *educated* theme. Educated was coded when respondents referred to education, intelligence, or wisdom. One participant described SBW as "a woman who is very educated, but not just towards academics but towards learning and experiencing things from her own life."

*Self-confident.* Twenty-two responses (24%) referred to *self-confident* if participants described SBW as a woman with self-respect, high self-esteem, or confidence. One woman wrote SBW "must know who she is, what she likes and does not like, where she wants to go in life, and what's best for her mind, body, and spirit." Another woman wrote, "Black women must know who they are."

*Racial pride.* Eight responses (9%) fell within the code named *racial pride*. Responses were coded in this category if women mentioned a pride in one's race, a sense of connection to the Black community and Black history, or even a sense of altruism toward one's racial group. One participant expressed SBW "is a woman who is proud of who she is, especially her race."

*Feminine.* Eight responses (9%) were represented in the *feminine* category. Responses were coded in this group with any mention of femininity, gracefulness, humility, being classy, humble, or even submissive.

*Interpersonally savvy.* Six responses (7%) fell into the category called *interpersonally savvy*. The essence of this code represented responses that referred to an ability to negotiate spaces and contexts, interpersonal sophistication, a keenness and sharpness in social settings, and an ability to shift one's identity depending on what was dictated by a particular interaction. One participant wrote, SBW "carries herself well in any and every situation and knows how to speak with people."

*Beautiful.* Five responses (6%) were coded as *beautiful* if respondents referred to any physical attribute or dispositional characteristic of the SBW image as beautiful.

THEME WITH HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Only one theme was categorized within this broader theme. This theme reflects the naming of Black women who either represent an influential figure in Black history or the naming of a contemporary, more familiar Black woman figure (either through familial ties or current celebrity).

*Naming an individual.* Thirty-four participants (36%) responded to this question by naming an individual. Responses were coded naming an individual if a participant mentioned an actual person to describe SBW. The 34 participants generated 56 names of individuals. To categorize the types of individuals named, we created the categories: historical (e.g., Rosa Parks or Harriet Tubman), contemporary (e.g., Oprah), family (e.g., mother or grandmother), and self. Of the 56 responses, five (9%) mentioned a historical figure, 29 (52%) named a contemporary celebrity, 19 (34%) mentioned a family member, and three (5%) named themselves.

SBW FIT

Out of the 86 participants who answered the question asking participants if they identified with the SBW image, 83% ($N = 71$) of the women in this study endorsed fitting the image to varying degrees. Of these 71 women, 61% agreed they fit this image; whereas 22% endorsed they fit the image somewhat or hope to fit the image someday. An example response from a participant who reported fitting the image is, "Yes, because I try to never give up." The following example highlights the more complex answer where women reported they are working on fitting the image:

> "I think I fit that image somewhat. I am confident and I will not let things get in my way. I am not an independent Black woman, because I am used to people (family, friends) spoiling me, but I want to fit that image, because I know that it will make me a stronger, wiser person."

Sixteen percent of the sample ($N = 13$) felt they did not fit the image. Interestingly, only two out of the 13 participants who responded in this way reported not wanting to fit the image; whereas eleven of the participants who reported they do not fit the image explained they do not fit the image because they are currently not living up to it (i.e., "too sensitive"). A participant who felt she did not fit the image wrote, "Nope. This is because I know that I'm not independent. My mother pays all my bills for me. And she buys all my major purchases (car, cell phone)." Another participant commented, "No, I do not fit that image because I'm not confident in myself, and do care a lot what other people have to say about me."

SBW AND MENTAL HEALTH

When asked if this image affected their mental health, out of the 83 participants who answered this question, 57% ($N = 47$) said "yes" and 43% ($N = 36$) said "no." Of the 47 women who reported "yes," 46 provided additional information regarding whether SBW had a negative or positive impact on mental health. Fifty-two percent ($N = 24$) expressed that SBW has a negative effect on mental health; whereas 48% ($N = 22$) noted that SBW has a positive effect on mental health. For negative effects on mental health, one participant wrote, "Yes, I noticed that it often causes me to refuse and avoid asking for help from others [...] thus trapping me in a rut and leaving me frustrated," and she also remarked, "Yes, living up to an image affects everyone's mental health. It can create the false belief that one is not good enough." Additional responses were, "Yes, we are expected to cope with a lot of traumatizing things," and

> "Yes, actually it gives me a lot of stress. Fighting the negative image people are trying to put on me and fight myself at times to keep going when you want to give up. Also trying to stand up to the high expectations other people have set for me as well as those that I have set for myself. [ … ] sometimes aiming for perfection can stress you out mentally because you're thinking of every little step in life."

For positive effects on mental health, one participant wrote, "Yes, I think this image makes me stronger mentally, because I feel like I get more alert to make sure that I don't fall back." Another participant wrote,

> "Absolutely! Without the Strong Black Woman image of not being discouraged regardless of the difficulty of a task, I would not be a student of [name of university] now as I would have been too scared to even attempt college. Additionally, mentally, the Strong Black Woman image allows me to have the confidence and strength to face the society daily as part of a minority group."

For those participants who answered "no" responses included statements such as, "mental health isn't affected by those sorts of things" and "if you let it." One participant explained, "No, actually my health is better when I walk in the strength of what I define as Black women." Another women wrote, "I don't think that it would really affect my mental health because if I were such a strong Black woman I would be too grounded to let anything really affect my mental health."

SBW POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE

Out of the 85 participants who responded to the question about whether the SBW is a positive or negative image, 78% ($N = 66$) described SBW as a

positive image, 22% ($N = 19$) described SBW as positive or negative, and only 2% ($N = 2$) described SBW as a negative image. An example of a positive response is, "A SBW is positive, it inspires many other women who felt that they did not have the power or the strength to make a difference when they do." One participant who reported the SBW is a negative image wrote, "I think the general public's idea of a SBW is negative. A White woman is usually represented as being soft and understanding while the Black woman is aggressive, rude, less educated." Women who reported that the SBW is both positive and negative remarked in ways similar to this participant's response:

> "The SBW image is both a negative and positive ideal in my opinion. It sets the standard for what strength could be considered (being able to handle situations, independence, not being manipulated, higher self-image, etc.) and gives Black women something to aspire to become. But at the same time, some people take it to the maximum, sometimes being intentionally cruel to others without reason, trying to handle everything on their own, etc."

## SBW PREVALENCE

For the final question, participants were asked to estimate the percentage of Black women that represent the SBW image. The percentages reported by 85 participants ranged from 2% to 95%. Twenty-six percent ($N = 22$) of the participants' reported 75% to 100% of Black women fit the SBW image, 45% ($N = 38$) reported 50% to 74%, 19% ($N = 16$) reported 25% to 49%, and 9% ($N = 8$) reported 0% to 24%.

## DISCUSSION

Women of all racial backgrounds are often faced with their personal interpretations of strength. Depending on the woman, strength may be an aspiration, a prerequisite to womanhood, or a stance of opposition to a sexist view of weakness. These potential definitions are relevant to Black women as well; however, the experience of strength in combination with independence and caring is unique to the Strong Black Woman stereotypical image (SBW), which is uniquely tied to the history of Black women in the United States. Our data support this history, and the SBW specifically, continues to intersect with Black college women's contemporary intersectional experience of racial and gender oppression.

Interestingly, SBW is quite the paradox; on the one hand, it may be a positive form of coping and a protective factor for optimal mental health; on the other hand, it may be a negative form of coping and a predictive factor for poor mental health. Given the anecdotal, qualitative, and quantitative

evidence trending toward the negative impact of internalization of SBW on Black women's health, the current study aimed to fill the research gap on SBW's influence on Black women by examining whether Black college women: (1) are aware of SBW and can describe a Black woman who represents this image; (2) internalize the image; (3) note its negative relevance to mental and physical health; (4) perceive it as positive attribute; and (5) believe in its contemporary relevance. Thematic analysis generated themes highlighting the impact of SBW internalization and the ways in which it is quite the paradox.

## Summary of Findings

Thematic analysis revealed several definitions of what it means to be SBW. The highest endorsed definitions included strong/assertive, independence, educated, hardworking/ambitious, caring, and self-confidence. Fewer endorsed definitions of SBW included religious, racial pride, feminine, interpersonally savvy, and beautiful. Many of the highly endorsed descriptive themes, specifically strong/assertive, independence, and caring, are consistent with scholarly definitions of the SBW image (Collins, 2004; Romero, 2000).

The thematic analysis, however, also revealed differences from scholarly definitions, suggesting an expansion of the meaning of SBW for this group of Black college women. For example, participants highly endorsed the descriptions of hardworking/ambitious, educated, and self-confidence. It is possible these endorsements are responses to stereotypic views that cast Black women as working class or poor (e.g., Matriarch, Welfare Queen, and Mammy). These additional contemporary descriptions may have been noted in order to combat the subtler stereotypes that impact the lived experience of Black women and may have been a way to respond to the lack of attention to positive descriptions of Black women. It is also possible that these contemporary descriptions of the SBW speak to a perceived importance placed on education and ambition, both of which could be viewed as proxies for social class. If these descriptions do, in fact, serve as proxies for social class, then it is especially important to note the potential added burden of classism to Black women's experiences of racism and sexism. Neal-Barnett and Crowther (2000) have noted that most research on Black women conflates Black women with having a low-income.

Given the potential relationship of SBW with social class, the triple burden of racism, sexism, and classism may have increased SBW's contemporary relevance, as Black college women who endorse the SBW image may associate this image with educational and career pursuits. This is not to say that being achievement-oriented and hardworking are negative, but in a racist, sexist, and classist context, these positive aspirations may quickly turn into perceived pressure and perfectionism, both of which are defining features

of many psychological disorders. Additionally, racism, sexism, and classism serve as structural barriers to Black college women's ability to achieve even if they are hardworking and educated, making adherence to this part of SBW challenging (Harris-Perry, 2011).

In addition to the potential connection to social class, these contemporary themes may actually not be contemporary at all, but may be simply a historical exclamation or reawakening of the politics of respectability. For example, Black women's lived experience has always represented socially constructed blurred lines that juxtapose hyper visibility and invisibility due to race and gendered status (Harris-Perry, 2011). In other words, Black women are hyper visible in terms of the misrecognition of their identities (i.e., stereotypes) as perceived by higher status racial groups, while also being invisible for any recognition that affirms their identities as hardworking, ambitious, and self-assured. Though not as frequently endorsed, the themes related to religious, racial pride, feminine, interpersonally savvy, and beautiful may be in response to the longstanding dehumanization and hyper sexualization of Black women. The nineteenth and twentieth century civil rights movements that specifically involved the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) were formed in response to this misrecognition and myths of promiscuity by fostering a sense of racial pride among Black women and by promoting "religious fidelity, personal moderation, and social respectability" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 61). Taken together, the current study has brought to light several additional attributes to describe SBW that historically may have always been there, but may not have been so explicitly linked to the SBW image. The synthesis of history, theory, qualitative, and quantitative studies may have been exactly what was required to work toward understanding the complete profile of what it means to be SBW.

The overwhelming majority of Black college women in this sample (83%) reported fitting with this image currently or hoping to in the future, and 78% saw this image as positive. These findings suggest Black college women, at least those in this sample, continue to see the contemporary relevance of the SBW image. The analysis of the relevance of the SBW image is important to note because *if* the majority of Black college women in this sample did not believe this image to have contemporary relevance, then we could perhaps rule out the negative health implications in populations similar to this sample.

Adding complexity to the findings, there seemed to be an understanding by many in the sample of the negative implications of SBW on mental health, elucidating the SBW paradox. On the one hand, high percentages of the Black college women in this sample endorsed the image of SBW and reported it as positive; on the other hand, high percentages of these same women endorsed that identifying with the SBW image is linked with negative mental health consequences. From a behavioral lens, if Black women

understand the nuances within the SBW image, what function would it serve them to identify with this image knowing the health risks? Perhaps this relates to the level of internalization or endorsement of this image. As data from one study suggests, low levels of identification with the SBW image may not be linked to negative mental health outcomes, but it is the moderate and high levels that do contribute to this relationship (Donovan & West, 2014). So, for the Black women in this sample, the frequency in endorsement of the SBW image, does not fully explicate the extent to which these women may actually internalize this image. It is also possible that the women in this sample may see the risks as inevitable and as the fate of Black women. For example, the Black women in this sample may continue to identify with this image knowing the costs because they believe this is their only choice to live and survive in this world. It is also plausible the women in this sample may identify with this image knowing the costs and may also have the false belief that the risks will not apply to them. Taken together, this result is consistent with the idea that over-identification with the SBW image may increase vulnerability to negative mental health outcomes due to societal pressures to be invincible and indestructible.

Even though this negative perception of the SBW image was not endorsed by all participants, the results of the thematic analysis are consistent with both previous qualitative (Woods-Giscombé, 2010) and quantitative studies (Donovan & West, 2014; Harrington et al., 2010). Clearly, each open-ended question continued to illuminate SBW's paradox, suggesting these seemingly positive themes should be interpreted with some caution. Separately, each of these questions examines an aspect of SBW; however, examination of all of the responses tells a story that may capture a phenomenon that locates an emotional turning point where striving too much for the highest standards may begin to take a toll mentally and physically. For example, in many ways, independence can be viewed as a positive trait, but it is also possible that too much independence can contribute to negative mental health outcomes. If too much independence contributes a Black woman to isolate herself and to put up a facade to both herself and to others that she is not in need of help and that she is effortlessly perfect, these cognitive and behavioral machinations will likely be unsustainable and contribute to an emotional and physical downfall.

Unfortunately, this paradox of strength often leads to the juxtaposition of strength and weakness. It is important to note that, not only is this juxtaposition simply incorrect, but that strength is not a categorical concept that can only be understood as either having strength or not having strength. Evidence for fluidity in the conceptualization of strength in relationship to SBW is seen in the previously mentioned study that noted relationships among low, moderate, and high levels of SBW internalization, where lower levels of SBW internalization is not associated with negative health outcomes, but it is the higher levels of this internalization that should be noted as a risk

factor (Donovan & West, 2014). To that end, strength must be interpreted as a complex concept that is positive in many ways, but it is also negative *and* can contribute to additional risk for Black women above and beyond their White female counterparts. Recognition of this level of nuance within strength, as a trait, has important clinical implications.

## Clinical Implications

Open-ended responses revealed the role of the SBW image likely has significant relevance in therapy with Black college women. For example, strengths-based interventions with a focus on positive psychology and/or resilience are certainly effective, evidence-based interventions; however, future clinical research should consider examining the ways in which such treatments may be inadvertently bringing to light the paradox of the SBW and, therefore, worsening Black women's functioning. If the focus of an intervention shifts to helping clients reconnect to their strengths, such as being hardworking/ ambitious, independent, etc., interventions like these could put Black women at additional risk given the possibility that these very strengths at moderate and high levels may have already been the contributing factors in their current mental and physical health state. It is important for clinicians to ask their female Black clients about their personal identifications with SBW so they can fully assess the level of internalization of this image and determine the mental health role it may be playing. Clinicians who have this understanding are then better able to discuss the potential impact of the SBW image on mental health.

It should also be noted that the above suggestions have not taken into account the ways in which identification with this image often prevents Black women from seeking therapeutic services in the first place. Given this, it is important for mental health professionals on college campuses to consider culturally tailored recruitment mechanisms and treatment offerings for Black women who endorse the SBW image. In order to reach these women, service-providers may need to consider creative ways of connecting with these women. For example, advertisements with images should display pictures of Black women of a similar age as the target group. Mental health professionals may also need to meet important stakeholders in the college community in order to build trust with the students. For example, by fostering community, these services could be in the form of open, support groups with co-sponsorships with Black student organizations and sororities with a focus on well-being and social support rather than mental illness. This particular avenue could provide the safety and trust these Black college women may need if they are strongly identified with the SBW, an image that may make it difficult to speak freely about ones challenges. In particular, a group setting could highlight that they are not alone. In addition, for experiences related to the SBW, Black college women could learn the ways in which this

image is a paradox filled with risks and rewards rooted in a longstanding history of racism and sexism.

## Study Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be considered in light of its strengths. The level of detail provided by the participants may have been impacted by the open-ended format and online platform. Even though the study allowed for an expansion of the theoretical understanding of SBW, other formats may have revealed even more. Future studies should consider one-on-one interviews or focus groups to really capture the phenomenon of the SBW in Black women's lives. In addition, given the format, it is unclear whether the participants fully understood what was meant by the SBW image. By not asking the women to define SBW in addition to describing it, we are limited in the meaning we can make from the data. For example, the participants' naming of individuals (e.g., Oprah, Maya Angelou) certainly enriches the data and adds to the contemporary relevance, and at the same time, it also limits the degree to which we can fully understand the participants' point of view. This limitation would also be addressed by a one-on-one interview or focus group format. Next, the questions related to the SBW image assume a level of understanding related to being Black women, which then presumes that the participants in this study have thought about racially gendered experiences in these particular ways. Because these questions implicitly require some reflection and awareness about race and gender identity, it is possible there were participants who answered in certain ways because race and/or gender were not a salient part of their lived experiences.

Even though this sample was similar across race and gender, the women in this study represented ethnic and nationality diversity. Because sample diversity provides support for the generalizability of these findings, it is also possible that there may be unique experiences among race, ethnicity, and the SBW that were not captured. Given this, future studies should consider the emphasis of ethnicity with SBW. In addition, future work on immigration status and stereotypes among racialized groups within the United States context would certainly enhance the understanding of these complex experiences. Lastly, it is important to note there may be particular regional and university differences that are unique to this sample of Black college women. The participants in this study are college students attending a diverse urban university in a New England city heavily populated with students seeking higher and advanced graduate education. It would be critical to explore the SBW image in other regions and university settings given the possibility our results may be specific to this context. Even though a college sample is a strength of the current study, it also limits the generalizability of the lived experience of the SBW. Future studies should continue this work with samples of Black women no longer in college or who never attended college, as these women may

have different experiences of SBW. Future studies that take into account these methodological considerations in qualitative research will build on the existing literature and enable greater understanding of the SBW phenomenon among a diverse group of Black women. Doing so will also ensure a more complete contemporary definition of SBW. Further, continued qualitative or mixed methodology would inform quantitative research that continues to be limited in sound psychometrics for the SBW construct.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding how Black college women perceive and internalize SBW is important for several reasons. First, in general, there is limited research on the variables that influence Black women's mental and physical health, even though much is known about women in general. Second, given the high prevalence rates of depression, anxiety, hypertension, and obesity in Black women (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin, 2010; Neal-Barnett, 2003; Rosenthal & Schreiner, 2000), it is important to understand the role SBW internalization might play in these health issues. Finally, understanding the centrality of the SBW image in Black college women's lives could help with developing accurate and culturally sensitive mental health interventions for Black women who experience stress and distress as a result of identifying with the SBW. Having this level of understanding, as a clinician, can serve as a launching pad for discussions that aim to redefine what strength means, specifically, and what it really means to be SBW, more broadly. For example, is it possible to change Black college women's cognitive contingencies of "If I'm not independent, then I am weak or an imposter" to "If I ask for support, then I am recognizing my strength and my value." The latter example allows for Black women to redefine what strength means and to acknowledge a true and more authentic version of them. This is just one example of an intervention that could utilize both evidence-based and multicultural therapy techniques to help Black women examine what it really means to be a SBW.

The current study provides knowledge about the high degree to which Black college women internalize the SBW stereotype and their misperceptions about its positive impact on mental and physical health. As a result, the findings potentially impact the community, students, and the disciplines of psychology, gender studies, and ethnic studies. Generally, the results can improve our society's understanding of how stereotypes can affect stigmatized group members' behaviors and perceptions about themselves, a community gain. Mental health professionals who work with Black college women can also benefit from these data, creating the possibility for greater awareness of the ways the SBW stereotype may be influencing clients' presentation and therapists' interpretations and interventions. Further, the disciplines of psychology, gender studies, and Black studies would benefit

from empirical research that provides information about stereotype internalization as it relates to Black women. This information is important because there is ample anecdotal evidence about the stereotypic images of Black women and the implications of these images on how Black women perceive themselves, but little research that scientifically examines this evidence.

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