


Rethinking Strength: Black Women's Perceptions of the "Strong Black Woman" Role

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, we examined perceptions of the strong Black woman (SBW) or superwoman role in a sample of 30 Black women. We found that participants conceptualized the SBW/superwoman role through five characteristics: independent, taking care of family and others, hardworking and high achieving, overcoming adversity, and emotionally contained. Most participants were ambivalent about their relationship with this role, given historical accounts and familial examples of Black women. Many participants appropriated the SBW/superwoman role by redefining it in ways that were more empowering and freeing. Several participants were critical of and rejected the SBW/superwoman role, focusing on its problematic and rigid view of strength. All of these perspectives underscore the importance of increasing awareness of restrictive gendered and racialized role expectations as well as the desire to maintain connections to the cultural legacy of Black women. Several important contextual factors (e.g., social status, family relationships) emerged that are relevant to the identified themes. Results from this study highlight how the discourse of strength and familiarity with the SBW/superwoman role are pervasive among Black women. Our findings underscore the need for practitioners to understand the complexity in how Black women make meaning of this role relative to help seeking for physical and mental health.

Keywords

self-concept, ethnic identity, gender identity, sex-role attitudes, constructivism

Black women in the African diaspora share a collective history that includes slavery, colonialism, and forced migration (Collins, 2000). In particular, the enslavement of African women in the United States continues to affect the lives of Black women today. Indeed, history contextualizes the present and, given the preponderance of racist, sexist, and classist ideologies that remain embedded within the U.S. culture, stereotypical views of Black women that originated during the slave era are pervasive (Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; West, 1995). These stereotypes continue to affect perceptions of Black women. Nonetheless, how Black women internalize and comprehend these stereotypes today varies.

Previous research with Black women has documented a relationship between the internalization of negative stereotypical images and psychological distress, low self-esteem, chronic health conditions, and participation in risky sexual behaviors (Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004; Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010). Consequently, Black feminist theorists and scholars have suggested that Black women enact alternatives to stereotypical images in order to interrupt distorted representations (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hooks, 1993). One alternative, well-known

image that has received widespread attention is the strong Black woman (SBW) or superwoman role (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, 2007, 2009; Gillespie, 1984; Wallace, 1990; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) and Romero (2000), theorize that this role consists of caretaking, independence, and restricted emotionality and may counter disparaging portrayals of Black women as subservient, hostile, and lazy. However, there is some concern that negative consequences might accompany this role (Amankwaa, 2003; Romero, 2000; Thompson, 2000).

The researchers in the current study investigated how Black women conceptualize the SBW/superwoman role. We endeavor to (1) broaden the discourse through interviews with Black women familiar with this construct and (2) discuss how Black women manage these roles in particularized contexts.

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The Discourse of Strength

Researchers have suggested that strength forms a central part of the identity of Black women (Littlefield, 2004; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Strength has been posited as a culturally specific coping mechanism critical for the survival of women of African descent. Black women's strength has its underpinnings in perseverance through adversity, which is exemplified through historical representations of enslaved Black women (Collins, 2000). In particular, Black women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Mary Prince have been celebrated as emblems of strength, who persisted against insurmountable odds (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Although historical accounts of enslaved Black women emphasize strength, it is important to acknowledge that enslaved Black women were considered and treated as property. Perceived as physically strong, hypersexual, and immoral, enslaved Black women were subjected to brutalizing conditions. To strengthen economic productivity, their fertility was controlled by slave owners' desires for an increased labor force (Collins, 2000). In addition, Black female sexuality was viewed through the repressed European lens that considered Black women immoral and promiscuous, which their slave owners used to justify rape and degradation (Jones, 1982; Palmer, 1983). As a form of resistance and survival, enslaved Black women masked their emotions in the presence of their slave owners. The consequences of expressing negative emotions were severe and included being sold or having one's children sold (Jones, 1982).

If, under slavery, Black women's physical strength was used as a justification to exploit their labor, Black women may have embraced strength to insulate themselves and their communities from further abuse. Thus, the legacy of strength has been critical for sustaining families and enduring obstacles established and maintained by racism (Thompson, 2000). Further, racial socialization practices, which often include messages of strength, have helped to preserve and enhance the resilience of Black women despite discrimination and oppression (Brown & Tylka, 2011). For example, many Black women socialize their daughters to be strong within a society that often devalues them and their culture (Thomas & King, 2007; Thomas, Speight, & Witherspoon, 2008). Researchers have found that African American mothers' racial socialization practices with their daughters include higher expectations, increased responsibilities, and additional demands, compared to their sons (Mandara, Varna, & Richman, 2010). These parenting practices have been associated with a range of positive outcomes (Davis & Stevenson, 2006; Hughes et al., 2006; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006; Thomas, Hoxha, & Hacker, 2013).

This view of strength predates the trans-Atlantic slave trade; certain aspects of Black culture were retained from African ways of life prior to enslavement (Ani, 1980). Because African-centered principles, such as interconnectedness, strength in collectivity, self-knowledge (know thyself),

and "spiritness," continue to shape the Black experience (Parham, 2009), Black women may acquire strength from spirituality and their relationships with others, which include sizable extended families, and communities (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Mattis, 2002). Cognizant of African tradition and historical disadvantage, Black women may have a deep sense of collectivity based on a strong desire to preserve family and community.

Controlling Images and the Emergence of the SBW

Stereotypes of Black women are pervasive in the U.S. culture. Four prominent controlling images of Black women include (1) the nurturing, asexual, overly selfless "mammy"; (2) the argumentative, highly hostile, emasculating "sapphire"; (3) the lazy, dependent "welfare queen"; and (4) the sexually promiscuous "jezebel" (Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; West, 1995, 2004). The media and society, according to Collins, have portrayed "African American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas" (2000, p. 69) in order to subjugate Black women. Collins describes the dominant culture's use of controlling images to disempower subordinate groups and craft inaccurate ideas about Black women. Consequently, Black women encounter these images not as "disembodied" semiotic messages but as concepts that should provide meaning in their daily lives (Collins, 2000). Scholars have suggested that the SBW provides an alternative to controlling images of Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hooks, 1993; Wallace, 1990). For instance, to counter narratives of nurturing and caretaking for White families (mammy), the SBW emphasizes caregiving of Black families, extended families, and perhaps, coworkers. Similarly, for women to disassociate from the sapphire or angry Black woman image, the SBW role requires emotional regulation or self-containment of anger. In addition, the SBW emphasizes the importance of independence and self-reliance to construct an identity that is capable, strong, and economically independent, which is the antithesis of the welfare queen. Last, to appear respectable, the SBW may abhor any identification with overt sexuality in an effort to combat the jezebel role. Romero (2000) has suggested that some Black women view these characteristics (i.e., caretaking and nurturing of family, emotion regulation or self-containment, and independence or self-reliance) positively, as reflections of Black women's strength despite enslavement, racism, and structural inequality.

Although the SBW/superwoman role might counter stereotypical images of Black women, some scholars have posited that this role is simply another problematic stereotype akin to a modern day mammy (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011). That is, excessive adherence to these characteristics may silence Black women from voicing their personal needs, which are often unacknowledged and

ignored. The SBW role is connected to the enslaved Black woman, who also labored at great personal expense. As the brutalization of the enslaved Black woman was rationalized and attributed to her “strong” physicality, the SBW/superwoman role is yet another controlling image that emphasizes personal responsibility by concealing structural institutions that maintain racial inequality (Collins, 2000, 2004). In interviews with Black women, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) found that strength experienced through struggle was a key characteristic of the SBW. Moreover, the SBW was “essentially about appearing so, affecting a persona and performance of managing a difficult life with dignity, grace, and composure” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, pp. 38–39). In focus groups, Woods-Giscombé (2010) determined that the “superwoman schema,” which mirrors the SBW, consists of helping others, an obligation to manifest strength, resistance to vulnerability or dependence, emotion restriction, and success despite limited resources. Further, Amankwaa (2003) found in interviews that adherence to SBW was related to managing postpartum depression by “dealing with it,” rather than conceptualizing their experience as depression and seeking treatment.

Cultural Variability on the SBW/Superwoman Role

Because women of African descent live in diverse countries, researchers have also explored strength and SBW among Black women outside of the United States (Edge & Rogers, 2005; Schreiber, Stern, & Wilson, 2000; Sisley, Hutton, Goodbody, & Brown, 2011). For example, Schreiber and colleagues (2000) found that participants referred to culturally defined ways of “being strong” by suppressing vulnerability. Similarly, Edge and Rogers (2005) found that Black Caribbean women’s rejection of depression was associated with imperatives to normalize distress. Further, Sisley and colleagues (2011) found that African Caribbean women coped with emotional distress by “being strong,” which was viewed as both a contributing factor to distress and responsible for increased ability to manage distress (Sisley et al., 2011). Although researchers did not directly investigate how women conceptualize the SBW role, findings support the need to further explore these notions among a group of diverse Black women.

The Current Study

The aim of the current study was to understand how a diverse group of Black women perceive the SBW role. Two main questions guided this research: First, how do Black women conceptualize the SBW role? Black women have considered strength a cultural value; however, some theorists maintain that attributions of strength rationalize inequality (Collins, 2000). We explored how Black women discuss and think about strength. Second, how do Black women relate to, and identify with, strength within the SBW role? By highlighting

the nuanced nature of this role, we examined how women assign meaning to the SBW role. We explored how Black women adhere to the gendered aspects of this role and the strategic manner in which they access and appropriate the role. Further, we investigated how contextual influences such as ethnic background, relationship status, and age shape how the SBW role is perceived.

Method

We used a constructivist–interpretivist framework to conduct the current study. Social constructivism, which is often combined with interpretivism, seeks to understand subjective meanings of experiences that are multiplicative, equally valid, and socially co-constructed realities (Creswell, 2007). Events, realities, meanings, and experiences are the effects of a range of societal discourses that are socially produced and reproduced (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ponterotto, 2005). We used intersectionality as an interpretive lens to investigate women’s perceptions and meaning making surrounding ideas of strength and the SBW/superwoman role.

Intersectionality researchers argue that theorizing and researching race and ethnicity, class, and gender as independent constructs that exert independent influences on outcome variables are problematic (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). In other words, these socially constructed categories exist interdependently rather than independently. Thus, it is the combination of individuals’ race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality that influences their experiences and self-perceptions (Andersen & Collins, 2004). Further, sociocultural forces exert power over the construction of identity, such that the meaning and effects of one’s race, ethnicity, class, and gender grow out of social practices in specific settings (Andersen & Collins, 2004).

Participants

Thirty Black American women participated in this study (see Table 1). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 66, with a mean age of 33.43 years ($SD = 12.43$). Fifteen participants (50%) were mothers. Twenty-eight participants (93%) were born in the United States. All participants self-identified as Black women; however, the women were diverse in their ethnic identification. Nineteen participants (63.3%) identified as African American and 11 participants (36.7%) identified as from the Caribbean region¹ (1 Bajan American, 2 Dominican American, 5 Haitian American, and 3 Jamaican American). In terms of education, 18 participants (60%) had a bachelor’s degree or higher, 8 participants (26.7%) had some college or an associate’s degree, and 4 participants (13.3%) had a high school diploma or General Education Diploma (GED). Twenty participants (66.7%) were currently employed, 5 were students (16.7%), and 5 were out of work (16.7%). With regard to annual household income, 12 participants (40%) reported earning US\$50,000 or more a year,

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Characteristic	(%)
Marital status	
Married	23.3
Member of an unmarried couple	6.7
Never married	60
Separated or divorced	10
Do you have children?	
Yes	50
No	50
Annual household income	
Less than US\$10,000	10
US\$10,000–US\$14,999	6.7
US\$15,000–US\$19,999	0.0
US\$20,000–US\$24,999	6.7
US\$25,000–US\$34,999	23.3
US\$35,000–US\$49,999	13.3
US\$50,000–US\$74,999	26.7
US\$75,000 or more	13.3
Employment status	
Employed	66.7
Out of work	16.7
Student	16.7
Education	
High school graduate or GED	13.3
Some college or associate's degree	26.7
Bachelor's degree	40
Graduate degree	20
Born in the United States	
Yes	93.3
No	6.7
Ethnicity	
African American	63.3
Caribbean American	36.7
Age	$M = 33.43, SD = 12.43$

Note. $N = 30$.

11 participants (36.6%) reported earning between US\$25,000 and US\$49,999 a year, and 7 participants (23.4%) reported earning less than US\$25,000 a year.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via verbal communication, e-mail, and flyers advertised in hair salons, churches, community organizations, and colleges within and around a large metropolitan city in the northeastern United States. Women were eligible to participate if they self-identified as Black and were 18 years of age or older. Participants were explicitly informed that the study requirements included the completion of a demographic questionnaire and an interview that focused on understanding Black women's perspectives of strength. Participants received a US\$20.00 gift card after the completion of the demographics questionnaire and interview. The university's institutional review board approved this research.

After providing informed consent, participants completed a short demographic questionnaire followed by a semistructured

interview that was piloted prior to data collection. The first author, an African American female graduate student, piloted the questions by discussing the clarity and breadth of questions, length of interview, and suggestions for improvement with the first three participants. The participants did not recommend substantive changes to the questions. The piloted interviews were included in the analyses. All interviews were conducted and audiotaped in the participants' preferred locations, which included public libraries, coffee shops, churches, and their homes. The first author conducted all 30 interviews and transcribed 20; the third author transcribed 10 interviews. An informal conversation regarding the author's background and interests preceded a discussion of the study requirements. In the first section of the interview, we explored participants' experiences within their family relationships. Participants were also asked to recall a challenging time or difficult situation and how they coped with this adversity. The second section specifically focused on strength and the SBW role, including participants' meaning making about strength and SBW. The third section focused on how the SBW role relates to physical and mental health as well as help seeking for depression. Given the focus of this article, only data from the first two sections were analyzed. Data from the third section are not included and will be analyzed and discussed in a subsequent paper that will focus specifically on help seeking for depression.

On average, the interviews lasted 45–60 min. For the current study, we asked the following questions: Tell me a little bit about the relationship with your family. What do you believe is your role? What do you think about your role? How does it feel to have this role? What are some positive/negative aspects about this role? How do you manage the less positive aspects of this role? Can you think of a personally challenging problem or difficult situation that you recently went through? How did you deal with this situation? What did you do to help yourself feel better? What is strength? What specifically does strength mean for you? Have you ever heard the term SBW or superwoman? What do you believe is meant by SBW or superwoman? How would you define an SBW or superwoman? What do you think are some of the consequences of being an SBW or superwoman? What are strong Black women more/less likely to do? Do you consider yourself an SBW?

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyze the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a "method in its own right" (p. 78) for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data; a theme is a cluster of linked categories conveying similar meanings that reflect meaning within the data (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). The purpose of thematic analysis is to identify patterns of meaning across a data set to adequately address a research question. We identified patterns within the data through a rigorous process of familiarizing ourselves with the data, generating initial codes,

Table 2. Conceptualization and Identification With the Strong Black Woman/Superwoman Role.

Theme	n (%)
Conceptualization of SBW	
Independent	22 (73)
Taking care of family and others	19 (63)
Hardworking and high achieving	17 (57)
Overcoming adversity	16 (53)
Emotionally contained	10 (33)
Identification with SBW	
Critical	7 (23)
Ambivalent	14 (47)
Appropriating	9 (30)

Note. SBW = strong Black woman.

searching for themes, developing themes, and revising themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is an ideal method for this study because it can be conducted within the constructivist–interpretivist framework. Through thematic analysis, we examined the ways in which experiences, events, and meanings are the effects of a variety of discourses functioning within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, thematic analysis was chosen in order to enhance the existing discourse related to SBW/superwoman. Patterns and themes were actively identified with respect to existing knowledge of SBW/superwoman. We believe that engagement with the relevant literature can enhance analysis by sensitization to more nuanced aspects of the data (Tuckett, 2005).

Following data collection, we used Transana software to transcribe 10 interviews (Fassnacht & Woods, 2006) and Microsoft Word to transcribe 20. We assigned pseudonyms to all participants to protect confidentiality. We used Dedoose 4.5.95, a qualitative data analysis software program, to code interview data (Lieber, Wiesner, & Presley, 2003). Data analysis followed the six phases of thematic analyses outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The first step of data analysis included familiarization with the data. The first author, who self-identifies as African American, read all interviews. The second author, who self-identifies as a Latino male, and the third author, who self-identifies as a Black woman and was a research assistant on the project, engaged with the first author in active discussion throughout the process and prior to coding. The second step included generating an initial list of ideas and codes. The first and third author independently coded transcripts to generate initial codes. We compared our coding of these initial transcripts in order to detect similarities and discrepancies. During ongoing meetings throughout the data analysis phase, the two coders discussed discrepancies in coding. Codes were refined and collapsed and notes were included within the analysis software regarding the meanings of codes that were ambiguous. Next, codes were reviewed, sorted, and analyzed to understand how different codes could be combined to form an overarching theme. These themes were then reviewed and defined (see Table 2).

In the constructivist–interpretivist tradition, the researcher is a co-creator of meaning. Thus, we discussed reflexivity, bracketing, and awareness of personal bias, during our work (Peshkin, 1988, p. 20). As researchers, we acknowledge that our familiarity with Black feminist theorists' work shapes how we conceptualize the SBW role. However, we considered these interviews as an opportunity to listen to and learn about how Black women make meaning of SBW. We conveyed to participants that they were the authority on SBW and were particularly attuned to how Black women navigate, critique, or support the notion of SBW.

Results

When asked directly, all participants reported that they were familiar with the SBW/superwoman role. The majority of participants viewed the terms SBW and superwoman as synonymous. However, a few women (9/30 participants, 30%) differentiated between the SBW and superwoman role, indicating that the latter is unrealistic or akin to a superhero. The interview findings are organized to reflect the themes pertaining to how Black women conceptualized and identified with SBW.

Conceptualization of SBW

The participants varied in how they viewed the SBW/superwoman role, and the characteristics, attitudes, and coping strategies that comprise it. Participants made distinctions between societal characterizations and personal definitions of the SBW role. Nonetheless, similar to previous research, we found that participants defined the SBW/superwoman role by five characteristics: independent, taking care of family and others, hardworking and high achieving, overcoming adversity, and emotionally contained.

Independent. The majority of women (22/30 participants, 73%) stated that the SBW role consists of being independent. In particular, strength consisted of the ability to care for one's own problems and work through difficult situations in a self-reliant manner. When discussing the SBW role, many women cited the difficulties that Black women have had to overcome in combating stereotypes of being dependent on government assistance. Participants viewed the SBW role as a response to disparaging views of Black women. For example:

A strong Black woman—she doesn't take anything, um, any mess from anyone. She doesn't play, she knows who she is, independent—she has her goals, she can reach it. She knows exactly how to reach them and basically what she wants out of life. (Bianca, 25, single, African American)

To me, the SBW is all about being independent and being able to take care of your own problems in your own family and being able to work through whatever arises. White society feels threatened by a very strong, independent, Black female. (Mikayla, 48, single, African American)

For Bianca and Mikayla, it was imperative that the SBW “doesn’t play.” Independence and self-reliance were necessary for SBW/superwomen who have much adversity to overcome. In addition, Mikayla noted how SBW threatens Whites, which is interesting given that for some, the SBW role is viewed as respectable in mainstream U.S. culture. While Bianca and Mikayla described the SBW role as independent, in a manner congruent with the predominant discourse, another participant, Leila, also noted the SBW role’s independence but considered independence in a negative manner and chose to dissociate from this view of the SBW role. Leila asserted, “A strong Black woman? Oh God! So, she’s too assertive. Snobby. She knows it all and is controlling. She’s miss independent and therefore, she doesn’t need anyone. I’m like stay away from me with all of that!” (Leila, 34, married, Haitian American). Although women identified and constructed SBW’s independence in different ways, independence was the most salient characteristic used to characterize the SBW role.

Taking care of family and others. Responsibilities, such as taking care of family and others, were central to many participants’ description of the SBW (19/30 participants, 63%). This theme reflected the historical and cultural context of Black women as nurturers and providers for the Black family. Inga, a 53-year-old, single, African American woman stated, “We are nurturers, providers, caretakers, breadwinners, the protectors of the home—you know everything! It’s sort of like we’re the mothers and the fathers!” Similarly, another participant asserted, “My mom was an SBW. She raised us by herself, you know. She left my father when I was born and did whatever she had to do to survive” (Soraya, 53, married, African American). Likewise, Mikayla maintained:

My sons make a lot of jokes about me having balls. When father’s day comes around, they tell me happy father’s day, ma! Sometimes they even get me a card too, but they’re right on point because I raised both of my sons by myself as a single mom by choice. (Mikayla, 48, single, African American)

These quotes highlight how Black women continue to provide for their family and serve in dual roles that are not bounded by their gender. Inga, Soraya, and Mikayla all noted how Black women function as both mothers and fathers, which highlights the sole responsibility that single Black women assume in providing care for their children.

Hardworking and high achieving. Many women (17/30 participants, 57%) viewed the SBW role as hardworking and high achieving. Among these participants, the SBW role was defined as successful. For example:

I think of a woman who is kind of doing a lot by herself and then there’s the other strong Black woman who I think of—similar to like Michelle Obama who is also taking on a lot and isn’t single and on her own. Even like, Melissa Harris-Perry or somebody

who is just like—you’re like how do you do it all? You have a child; you’re flying from Tulane to New York! So, I think of somebody who multitasks, who um, overcomes all, you know? Perceptions and barriers or perceived barriers, like in the Melissa Harris-Perry example, somebody may think that a barrier may be her distance or her traveling, but somehow she does it! (Taylor, 26, single, African American)

Within the theme of hardworking and high achieving, the notion of “proving themselves,” such that Black women have to do more, was a salient message that several women identified as an impetus for the need to achieve and show commitment to hard work. A participant noted, “Sometimes Black women think that . . . well, a lot of the time they think that they have to do more than everybody else and it’s true sometimes, like we do have to do more” (Elle, 18, single, Haitian American). In this quote, Elle not only highlighted how Black women think that they need to do more, but affirmed that sentiment as congruent with her own personal views of Black women. Similarly, Zina reflected the same sentiment but in a slightly different manner. Zina expressed that SBW’s work reflects her excellence, so that others do not perceive her as a stereotype.

When I picture the SBW, I kind of picture either, you know, the African American woman who has a child [and is] getting by without government assistance or welfare and I also see a business minded Black woman, who honestly this is going to sound terrible, but instead of stressing about what’s going on in her life, she puts that energy back into her work. So, her work not only reflects the way she feels, but it also reflects her excellence. (Zina, 22, single, Jamaican American)

Zina’s contentions further highlighted class distinctions within the SBW role. Zina’s portrayal of “getting by without government assistance” described a poor Black woman who refuses to seek support in order to avoid a stereotype (e.g., welfare queen). In contrast, the “business-minded” Black woman is the woman of higher socioeconomic status who works so much without attending to her feelings. This image of an SBW is productive within her employment. This notion complements a similar idea stated by Elle, when she notes, “Some strong Black women don’t know how to not work. I guess a lot of them work a lot to just cope with stress. If they’re not working, they’re going crazy.” Elle’s notion of working highlights how focusing on work may reflect an avoidance strategy to distance from challenges within their personal lives.

Overcoming adversity. Consistent with previous literature, the notion of overcoming adversity was central to the SBW/superwoman role (16/30 participants, 53%). Some participants ascribed these characteristics to single mothers. However, the language used to discuss the SBW/superwoman role included “persevering” and “surviving.” For example:

The SBW is someone who is not afraid to stand up for themselves or stand up for their culture or race—whatever the case may be. Strong Black Woman has—they all don't have kids, but they all go through a struggle. And they all know what it's like to see someone go through a struggle and want to help. (Olivia, 22, single, African American)

Another participant argued, “You know Black women just be like—it's whatever! Wake up and gotta keep it moving and be glad to wake up!” (Simone, 46, single, African American). Participants also cited shared difficulties of Black women in the workplace and academic settings. These women described challenges they had experienced in navigating the collegiate environment as first-generation college students, or their experiences growing up in a rough neighborhood, as evidence of strength among Black women. In addition, these participants reported that Black women have to “prove ourselves” due to the intersection of race and gender. As such, many participants were cognizant that Black women's position being both female and Black makes it more difficult to navigate obstacles; many expressed this sentiment and the cultural messages that contextualize how Black women make meaning regarding this role.

Emotionally contained. A number of women (10/30 participants, 33%) noted that the SBW role also requires emotional containment. They stated that the SBW is private with her personal matters and in keeping her emotions at bay. She is logical and able to keep her true feelings hidden from others as a means of self-protection. Several women expressed that having emotions “in check” is necessary for SBW and for displaying strength. For example:

Even when my grandmother lost her two sons, you know, she didn't even—it was so funny, but it was like the funeral happened and then things were just business as usual. So, you felt this amazing strength come from both my mom who had lost her brothers and my grandmother who had lost her sons. You felt the strength, but it's like where does this thing come from? (Gina, 43, single, African American)

Some women discussed how the SBW/superwoman role differs from European American culture's construction of women as being emotional. One participant stated that the SBW is the “everyday man.” Similarly, another participant stated, “American culture says that women are emotional, they don't think logically, they just think with their hearts or intuition, there are no facts to what they do . . . I think the SBW would be more logical in [her] actions” (Ayanna, 18, single, African American). Similarly, another participant declared, “Strong Black Women do not express emotions. They just keep it all in. They won't show that stress to the world” (Lydia, 24, single, Dominican American). For Ayanna, Lydia, and many other participants, the SBW is more consistent with conventional societal definitions of roles ascribed to men. Describing the role of the SBW as

rational, rather than emotional, Ayanna, highlights the distinction between White women and Black women within the U.S. culture. Ayanna viewed the SBW as having some agency, and that is different from traditional views of women in the United States.

Overall, participants generally viewed the SBW/superwoman role in a manner consistent with previous literature. Central to the participants' stories was the notion of productivity. Portraying Black women as productive workers—whether within their families, places of employment, or educational settings—continues the narrative of Black women's role as providers. In addition, participants' views of emotional containment exemplify differences in the perception of gender role identities among Black women.

Identification With SBW Role

All of the participants were able to identify perceived benefits and liabilities associated with ascribing to SBW roles. However, when asked directly whether they considered themselves an SBW or superwoman, 23 (77%) women endorsed this role, with a number of caveats, while 7 (23%) women were forthright in their rejection of this role. However, women's responses revealed an interesting spectrum of perceptions regarding their thoughts and experiences navigating strength and the SBW role. Three overarching perceptions emerged relative to how women positioned themselves in juxtaposition with the discourse of the SBW/superwoman role: rejecting, ambivalent, or appropriating.

Rejecting: “I don't like labels.” The first perception, endorsed by a number of participants ($n = 7$, 23%), was a critique of strength and rejection of the notion of the SBW/superwoman role. Participants viewed an essentialized notion of Black women's strength as problematic and disavowed the notion of the SBW/superwoman role. Women in this group did not see any tangible benefits of the SBW/superwoman role and instead indicated that the SBW is a stereotype that places restrictions on Black women. More than half of the seven women in this group were Caribbean women ($n = 4$) or were married African American women ($n = 4$). For example:

I think the SBW sounds good to the next person. It sounds great! I'm a strong Black woman. I can do it all, but we can't. I'm not saying greatness is not attainable, I just don't think that it's a title we should walk around saying. Because even though you might be able to do all these things, you've already titled yourself that. If I can do everything, I don't need help, I don't need direction, I don't need guidance. But if you lose the title, then you can ask for help; you can accept help. (Chanise, 44 married, African American)

Another participant argued, “She has the world on her shoulders and on her back and she doesn't know how to—it's a mask, you know. You're putting up a front like you can do it all; you got it all; but, you know you're struggling!”

(Kayla, 25, single, Jamaican American). Further, another participant reiterated this notion when she declared:

The concept of SBW is I can do it because I have to do it. The SBW doesn't know how to take care of herself. She's never had anyone to tell her how because that's not a part of being strong. So a lot of times there's very little self-worth, or self-esteem—they haven't thought about themselves in that way, but they know that they're providing! That's where worth comes from. I'm providing so I'm doing everything I can. I can't be an alcoholic because we have food on the table and the bills are paid. I can't be physically abusing my kids because they're going to school everyday. I can't be depressed because I'm going to work everyday. That's the strong Black woman—that's what she thinks. (Kia, 26, married, African American)

The quotes above reiterate the widespread discursive narrative of what strength and the SBW can do: She can do it all. However, participants noted that accepting this title limits Black women's personhood, including their ability to ask for help. Farah, a 29-year-old, single, Haitian American woman, expressed her desire to resist labels and expectations put forth by other people. Farah noted that she "doesn't want to be considered anything, but me." In her interview, Farah expressed the "harmfulness" in the title and likened the SBW to a stereotype.

Ambivalent: "I do and I don't." The second perception, expressed by a plurality of women (14/30 participants, 47%), was characterized by ambivalence regarding strength and the SBW/superwoman role. These women discussed perceived benefits and limitations of Black women's strength and appeared to accept the SBW/superwoman role in name only. However, they wavered when describing meaning relative to this role within the context of their individual experience and societal expectations, as they had mixed feelings regarding this notion. Participants in this group actively affirmed and questioned their exceptionality as Black women. For example, Elle, an 18-year-old Haitian American college student, critically and eloquently reflected upon what she deemed are the pitfalls of the strength discourse and the role of the SBW/superwoman. Regarding the SBW/superwoman, Elle stated, "sometimes it messes up your head . . . a lot." For Elle, the SBW/superwoman is "closed off," untrusting, and unable to show affection and, in particular, love. Elle articulated the drive, the keep-it-moving mantra, that so many women who adhere to the SBW/superwoman role often undertake at the expense of personal physical and mental health. The SBW role and strength discourse "messes up your head a lot" because the SBW desires rest, affection, and relationship with others but often does not know how to "turn it off." Although Elle was able to articulate these attributes, when asked directly, she indicated that she considered herself a "strong Black young lady." Interestingly, Elle states that "she is not there yet" because she has not yet

experienced "the struggle" that SBW/superwomen endure. Other women also expressed this ambivalence. For example:

I was raised to be a SBW. I have been raised around women with very strong personalities, who are very opinionated and not afraid to share those opinions with others relentlessly without request! And so, I look at my life and my experiences and some things that I've dealt with that I know other people weren't able to handle. However, sometimes, I know that I've put more on myself unnecessarily. Because we can't appear to be weak to other people. So, I can't tell people, you know, that my kids are out of control and I don't know what to do. Or that I'm stressed as a mother, you know, because we don't want to give that image. To some extent, it's a façade, because you're not strong all the time. I don't care who you are. (Ananda, 35, single, African American)

Appropriation: "By my definition." The last perception was expressed by nine women (30%) and entailed an appropriation of the notion of strength and the SBW/superwoman role. These women had redefined strength to include reflexivity, willingness to grow, and an understanding of self as a multi-dimensional human being. Further, these women redefined the SBW/superwoman role in a manner in which they asserted agency over this phenomenon—similar to reclaiming stereotypes. These women redefined strength beyond persevering and facing obstacles. Instead, they asserted that strength included courage to face one's emotions, express vulnerability, engage in self-reflection, and experience personal growth. Thus, these participants redefined strength and the SBW in a manner in order to assert agency. For example:

To me a strong Black woman is a woman who is able to hold her own, but realizes that she's not in it alone. So basically she's strong, but vulnerable at the same time. I feel like the strength comes from knowing how to deal with that vulnerability and not being afraid of it. (Ayanna, 18, single, African American)

Do I want to carry that label? Yeah, to an extent. Yes, I do think I'm strong. I have overcome some obstacles, but at the same time I don't want to lose sight of the fact that I need help. I think about my daughter a lot more now because she's 19 and when I think about her I want to—if I'm professing or thinking that I'm a strong Black woman, I think that one of my responsibilities and obligations is to teach her differently. Yes, I want to teach her how to be strong, but to also be realistic and take care of herself and love herself enough to admit that she needs help. (Gina, 43, single, African American)

Ayanna and Gina have chosen to redefine characteristics that SBW/superwomen are said to embody—that is, emotional suppression and inability to ask for help. These quotes position strength in vulnerability. That is, having the courage to face and learn about one's self. Participants within this group expressed the necessity of acknowledging one's needs rather

than solely servicing others. Women in this group viewed the notion of strength as multidimensional.

Contextual Factors

Relationships with mothers. One highly salient context that we identified was participants' personal relationships with their mothers. Several participants discussed their mother's or grandmother's experiences and perspectives regarding strength and used these experiences to co-construct how they identified with strength and SBW. For example, Rashida, who was pregnant, working full-time, in graduate school, and the "mediator of reoccurring, family drama," discussed coming to terms with abandoning strength and the SBW/superwoman role. Tired from having to deal with the pressures of having it together and doing it all, Rashida abandoned the SBW/superwoman role following an experience with her mother. She noted:

I also remember like when I, when I realized that my mother wasn't the strong Black woman, my world rocked! When she wasn't that strong Black woman, like she wasn't, because she cried and I was like what the heck! You know, my mother . . . it was—my world was just like, you know, what the heck is going on, you know? To this day I thank her for it because it allowed me to see her as a human being. (Rashida, 33, married, African American)

After discussing what she perceived to be positive aspects of the SBW/superwoman role, Rashida discussed the impenetrable emotional fortitude that is ascribed to the SBW/superwoman role. Rashida's bewildered response highlights the message that SBWs do not cry. Her mother's display of emotion interrupted the perception of her mother as the SBW and instead emphasized her mother's humanity.

On the other hand, Daphne, who is working part-time to help put herself through college, is actively and consciously navigating gendered standards of caretaking/nurturing and her mother's parenting practices from her culture of origin. Daphne states:

My mom always kept us (refers to self and 2 sisters) inside the house. She let our brothers go out and she just thinks the female is supposed to stay inside, take care of their siblings. I understand where she's coming from, but you know, I was born and raised here, so sometimes I get angry because my two older brothers they're never responsible for anything and they get away with it and they're not seen as the responsible one. (Daphne, 22, single, Haitian American)

Daphne was critical of her responsibilities in comparison to her brothers, two of whom are older than she is. Daphne spoke of being responsible for the family, including her older brothers, due to her mother's workload and the needs of the household. Daphne recognized the double standard applied to

her experience, and problematizes her mother's ideas about what her responsibilities should be.

Sociodemographic factors. Perceptions of strength and the SBW/superwoman role can be further understood by examining the sociodemographic factors of women who described strength and the SBW/superwoman role. Within our sample, African American and Caribbean American women generally did not vary in the manner in which they conceptualized strength and the SBW/superwoman role. However, more Caribbean American women were critical of strength and the SBW/superwoman role than African American women. This may suggest that Caribbean American women may problematize the SBW/superwoman role to a greater extent, given their cultural and historical contexts.

Many married women indicated that the prevailing discourse of strength and the SBW/superwoman role was important to Black women because of its historical and sociocultural context. Strength and the SBW/superwoman role was problematized for having become an expectation that many women are unable to meet. Married women generally tended to say that they had less need to be strong or an SBW/superwoman, especially with their partners. Married women also reported that they had explored past desires, performances of strength, and adherence to the notions of the SBW/superwoman role within families, with their partners, in order to "let go of strength" or move beyond the SBW role.

Participants in this sample who were current college students generally described strength as something they desired to enact when balancing stressful situations (i.e., attending school as a first-generation college student and working full-time). These women were also able to articulate the historical background that shapes the construction of the SBW/superwoman role; they problematized gendered aspects of this role. However, some college students continued to voice aspirations to become an SBW in the future. Indeed, one college student proposed that she was a "strong Black lady," as she had not experienced enough adversity. This statement conveys how an experience with struggle is critical in the constructions of the SBW/superwoman role. Last, some college women appropriated the SBW role by formulating new personal and flexible definitions of strength.

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine Black women's perceptions regarding strength and the SBW/superwoman role by understanding how a diverse group of Black women conceptualize and relate to these concepts. Our goals were to (1) examine how Black women conceptualize the SBW/superwoman role and (2) investigate how Black women relate to, and identify with, strength and the SBW/superwoman role.

Findings from this study substantiate and extend previous work that examined how Black women conceptualize

strength and the SBW role. Results indicate that participants in this study were considerably attuned to the discourse of strength and the SBW/superwoman role, terms that were often used interchangeably, but for some had varied connotations. Although participants were able to articulate both positive and negative aspects of this particular role, few women were critical of the notion of Black women's strength and rejected the SBW/superwoman role. Notably, four of the seven women who rejected the SBW role identified as Caribbean American. This finding extends previous work by suggesting that understandings of strength and the SBW/superwoman role are not unique to African American women. Indeed, the common focus on strength among Caribbean American women may be indicative of a response to a history of adaptation to colonialism and slavery (Paquet, 1992; Prince, 1831/2004). The participants' strength discourse also configures a cultural identity of Caribbean Black women as strong, enduring, and self-reliant (Edge & Rogers, 2005; Schreiber, Stern, & Wilson, 1998).

In addition, our findings indicate that most women in our study expressed ambivalent perceptions of strength and SBW relative to their own personal experience, which included knowledge of historical accounts and familial/community examples of Black women. This may be what Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) refers to as "multiple, shifting, and contradictory stances" (p. 8). Women actively both affirm and question essentialist notions of Black women's strength. Their questioning underscores the challenges faced by Black women, as a result of pressures faced by an increasing awareness of restrictive gendered and racialized role expectations and, at the same time, the desire to maintain and connect with foremothers and the cultural representations of strength. Further, this finding is consistent with research on the sex role attitudes of Black women who report more androgynous characteristics (Binion, 1990). Although participants are able to articulate the limitations of Black women's strength, they cannot avoid the cultural messages that underscore the identity of Black womanhood.

Finally, our study indicates that there are Black women who are consciously redefining the role of strength and SBW. We believe that our study also extends previous work, as women in this study were critical of these concepts but choose to reclaim them in a way that asserts power over what they perceive as problematic. Indeed, these women are aware of Black feminist literature's critique of the concepts, yet choose to redefine them in a manner that they deemed acceptable. Thus, independence was replaced with interdependence—a notion that was discussed as "mutual intentionality," which may more fully describe the active role that many Black women and their social support networks and families engage in as a helping process (Coffman & Ray, 1999). In addition, perceptions of strength and the SBW/superwoman role include vulnerability and connection with other Black women, in a fuller and more adequate notion of strong Black women.

Practice Implications

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) suggests that the enactment of the SBW/superwoman role is akin to performance. Thus, when Black women feel obligated to perform strength or characteristics of SBW, this may generate policing of Black womanhood by other Black women, irrespective of whether or not one supports the notion of strength. One begins to raise questions of what performance is authentic, by whom, and under what circumstances? Consequently, this may lead to pressure to enact particular identities that might be inconsistent with one's individual experience. This pressure may lead to isolation, resentment, and even psychological distress among Black women due to perceived differences in their performance of strength by others. Thus, having to maintain a facade of strength may be detrimental for Black women's physical and mental health.

Maintaining a facade of strength may be difficult to abandon, given that the idea of strength is a personal characteristic that Black women feel they possess (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). This may become problematic for women who have specific experiences that contradict the SBW (i.e., Black women who suffer from mental health conditions or Black women in therapy). The manner in which these concepts continue to shape Black women's knowledge of their experiences, relative to their mental and physical health, warrants increased attention before determining treatment approaches. Mental health professionals should consider how Black women might conceptualize mental illness vis-à-vis the discourse of strength and the SBW/superwoman role in concert with previous experiences relative to depression, obesity, help seeking, and mental health treatment. Further, knowledge dissemination regarding these experiences among Black women may engender increased awareness of these concepts, which, in turn, may influence increased psychological support. Accordingly, "sister circles" have been suggested as a promising outlet for psychological support for Black women experiencing mental health conditions (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Thus, the promulgation of these networks by Black women may stimulate dialogue and formation of groups that actively work to ensure the mental and physical health of Black women. These spaces may provide an area for strong Black women to inhabit without pressure to "not show weakness."

Limitations and Strengths

There are several limitations to this study. First, this sample consisted primarily of women living in the Northeast United States, limiting our understanding of this topic with Black women in other geographic regions. Second, in recruitment materials, women were invited to participate in an interview to discuss strength and the SBW/superwoman role among Black women. It is not surprising, therefore, that all of the women in this study indicated that they were familiar with

this role. Thus, it is likely that this method of recruitment resulted in a sample of participants who were more keenly aware of the SBW/superwoman role compared to Black women within the general population. Perhaps Black women who were not attracted to the study advertisements conceptualize strength differently and/or may not be as familiar with this topic. Third, 60% of Black women in this study had at least a college degree and 50% reported annual incomes of greater than US\$50,000. It is plausible that Black women with less formal education and lower income may think differently about this topic. Finally, since we have relied upon one interview with each participant, careful consideration must be exercised to avoid inaccurate generalizations about each woman's level of identification with and/or enactment of the SBW role.

Despite these limitations, this study has several strengths. First, the current study contributes to the growing body of research on strength and the SBW role. Second, although the majority of participants in this study were born in the United States, this study was not limited to women who only identify as African American. This study also adds to previous studies that demonstrate these concepts are pertinent to Black women with Caribbean ethnic and cultural experiences.

Conclusions

Collins (2000) proposes that controlling images “are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (p. 77). Given that the discourse of strength and familiarity with the SBW/superwoman role is pervasive within Black culture, it is important for both clinicians and researchers who work with Black women to be knowledgeable about and sensitive to the cultural context and the complex, intersecting identities of Black women (Williams, 2005). Knowledge about these concepts might help to explain what may be perceived as Black women's resistance to intervention or therapeutic services. Consequently, clinicians should support strengths in Black women, while encouraging vulnerability and self-care. Researchers might want to explore how these concepts may relate to how Black women understand and seek help for their personal mental and physical health.

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Note

1. We use the term Caribbean American to describe a diverse group of women. In all quotations, we report how each participant self-identified.

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