

# Lift Every Voice: Exploring the Stressors and Coping Mechanisms of Black College Women Attending Predominantly White Institutions

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## **Abstract**

In the past 40 years, there has been a significant increase in Black students' enrollment at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Meanwhile, research shows that Black students often experience difficulty with transitioning and adjusting to PWIs. Previous research has effectively documented the challenges facing a significant number of Black students at PWIs; however, less is known about the experiences of Black women in particular. This study examined stress from racial tension experienced among 129 Black undergraduate women at PWIs in the Northeast region of the United States, as well as the potential moderating factors of the theorized Strong Black Woman concept and the Africultural coping theory. Hierarchical regression analyses indicated a significant positive association between racial tension experienced on campus and stress. Results also indicated that only Africultural coping was a significant moderator of this relationship, such that there was a weaker relationship between racial tension and stress among the participants who engaged more in Africultural coping. Policy implications

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for improving the campus racial climate and the academic experiences of Black college women at PWIs are discussed.

### **Keywords**

stress, coping, racism, Black women at predominantly White institutions

Black students experience unique psychological, social, and academic challenges at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). In addition to the general sources of stress that most college students experience (e.g., academic, financial, and interpersonal), Black students at PWIs encounter race-related stressors—such as racial discrimination, prejudice, and culture shock—that have consistently been associated with worse academic performance, psychological well-being, and social adjustment (Edmunds, 1984; Neville, Heppner, Ji, & Thye, 2004). Although previous research has documented the numerous challenges that Black students face at PWIs, gaps in our knowledge base remain. In particular, the potentially unique experiences of Black college women at PWIs have been less explored by researchers.

The importance of gender is clear in the numerous research findings that show differences in experiences between Black college men and women at PWIs (Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, & Green, 2004; Keels, 2013; Neville et al., 2004). For example, some findings suggest that Black women have greater college success at PWIs than Black men, including being more likely to earn their degree (Chavous et al., 2004; Constantine & Watt, 2002; Keels, 2013). However, Neville et al. (2004) found that Black women experience greater difficulties with psychological/interpersonal stress when enrolled at PWIs as compared with Black men. Yet very little is known about the mechanisms underlying these gender differences. Thus, additional research is needed to further understand the interrelationships among racial tension, gender, and coping among Black students at PWIs.

The current study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the potential influences of culture-salient coping and the Strong Black Woman Cultural Construct (SBWCC) on the relationship between racial tension and stress among a sample of Black women enrolled in PWIs. Prior to presenting details from the study, we first review relevant literature on racial climate, gender differences and cultural attitudes among Black students attending PWIs, and coping mechanisms.

### *Intersectionality Framework and Black College Women*

Black women hold a complex position in American society, as they are a part of two groups who have been historically marginalized: woman and people

of African descent. With the implementation of desegregation and the Civil Rights Act, Black women have been able to make impressive strides in higher education attainment (V. Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Despite the increases in college enrollment for Black women, they often face various difficulties while working toward their degrees, particularly at PWIs (Settles, 2006; Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). The racial, gender, and class inequities that influence the social structure of the United States are reflected in the culture of many PWIs (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2013). Unsurprisingly, Black women have often reported feelings of isolation, experiencing racism and discrimination, and being misunderstood while attending PWIs (Domingue, 2015; Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016; Miles, Jones, Clemons, & Golay, 2011; Robinson, Equibel, & Rich, 2013; Settles, 2006).

To better understand Black college women's experiences in the context of PWIs, the theoretical framework that grounds this study is intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Intersectionality theory posits that the combination of multiple social identities, including gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, shapes how we see ourselves and how others view and treat us (Cho et al., 2013; Cole, 2009; Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006). Given the increased stress Black women experience due to stigma based on the intersections of their race and gender (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; A. J. Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008), and their reports of racism experienced at PWIs (Chao, Mallinckrodt, & Wei, 2012; Griffin, Cunningham, & Mwangi, 2016; Reynolds, Sneva, & Beehler, 2010), it is important to examine the methods used to deal with the stress from racial tension on campus. In particular, we examine the role of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) concept first coined by bell hooks (1988), who argued that the controlling images depicting Black women as strong, independent, and resilient beings can overshadow the exploitation and oppression they often experience (hooks, 1988). We also examine the role of culture-specific coping among Black college women attending PWIs.

### *Campus Climate: Effects of Racism*

Several research findings have suggested that racial discrimination and prejudice are prevalent on PWIs and perceived by Black students. For example, in one study of 135 African American college students, 98.5% of the sample indicated they had experienced racism on campus in the previous year (Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006). Moreover, recent research has found that Black students perceive race relations on their campus more negatively than White students (Lo, McCallum, Hughes, Smith, & McKnight, 2017;

Pieterse, Carter, Evans, & Walter, 2010). Researchers have reported that many African American college students feel that they are treated with less respect than their White counterparts due to negative stereotypes, which in turn can lead Black students to feel that they must always positively represent not only themselves but their entire race (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Baber, 2012; Griffin et al., 2016; Massey & Owens, 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Together, these findings suggest that both subtle and blatant forms of racism may hinder Black students integration at PWIs (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

These negative campus climate experiences can have academic consequences (Boyras, Horne, Owens, & Armstrong, 2016; Massey & Owens, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2010; Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008; Walton & Cohen, 2007). For example, Schmader et al. (2008) found that Black students who experienced stereotype threat had challenges adjusting socially and intellectually in their college environments. Similarly, Walton and Cohen (2007) found that Black students who experienced belonging uncertainty had high levels of stress and dissatisfaction, which were associated with decreased motivation and lower GPAs compared with students who were more socially integrated. Together, these negative experiences may explain, in part, the recent finding that African American first-year college students attending PWIs had significantly lower grades than those enrolled at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs; Boyraz et al., 2016).

### ***Black Women at PWIs***

Given the high enrollment rates of Black women in college as compared with Black men (Kim, 2011), there is an added need for research that focuses on Black women's experiences and their efforts to maintain high levels of achievement. While some studies have shown that Black women who attend PWIs have a more positive academic self-concept than Black men and are less negatively affected by perceived discrimination (Chavous et al., 2004; Constantine & Watt, 2002; Keels, 2013), the challenges Black women experience at PWIs have been relatively overlooked. For instance, Howard-Vital (1989) noted that Black women often lack a strong sense of belonging, with some Black female college students experiencing feelings of emotional pain, isolation, and invisibility in hostile campus environments. Furthermore, qualitative findings suggested that Black women at PWIs often feel like outsiders, with heightened fears about their competence surrounding their academic abilities (Carter-Black, 2008; Domingue, 2015; Miles et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2013; Settles, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

Moreover, in these investigations, Black female students discussed feeling unsupported, lacking dedicated faculty mentors, and being held to low expectations. Many Black college women at PWIs reported that their professors and peers were surprised by their intelligence and described feeling overlooked and dismissed in classroom settings (Domingue, 2015; Miles et al., 2011; Settles, 2006). Notably, the experiences of Black women at PWIs contrast with those of Black women at HBCUs. For example, researchers have found that African American women at HBCUs had higher levels of cultural congruity, life satisfaction, and academic competence than those who attend PWIs (Constantine & Watt, 2002).

Racial and gendered stereotypes may create unique challenges for Black women based on preconceived notions about Black people in general and Black women in particular (Collins, 2000; Donovan, 2011; Howard-Vital, 1989; Settles, 2006; A. J. Thomas et al., 2008). For instance, in Donovan's (2011) study of 109 White college students, participants revealed that they viewed Black women as loud, tough, strong, angry, and domineering. Black women were also frequently described as talkative, insensitive, and less educated as compared with White women. Hence, these (mis)perceptions of Black women may negatively influence their experiences at PWIs. Moreover, stereotypical images that depict Black women as strong, independent, and stoic can often mask struggles and hardships (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, 2008; Donovan, 2011; hooks, 1988).

### *Coping Mechanisms: Thriving Via Culture*

Researchers interested in understanding how Black students cope with race-related stressors at PWIs have identified three primary forms of culturally salient coping that are used by Black students (Brown, Phillips, Abdullah, Vinson, & Robertson, 2011; Greer & Brown, 2011; Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers, 2012; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000).

The first, social support, has consistently been shown to play an important role in helping Black college students adjust to PWIs (Barnett, 2004; Constantine, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Negga, Applewhite, & Livingston, 2007; Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006). Although social support is a common coping mechanism, several researchers have found that Black college students at PWIs rely on social support when transitioning to PWIs more than White students who make up the majority in them (Constantine et al., 2003; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Constantine et al. (2002) speculated that social support may be a culturally salient form of coping, since many Black families socialize their children to use family, close friends, and community members as resources when experiencing hardship.

In support of this idea, Barnett (2004) determined that family support was important in decreasing stress and providing an emotional outlet for the students. Similarly, Hinderlie and Kenny (2002) found that on campus social support and parental attachment were positively associated with emotional well-being, academic adjustment, and institutional attachment for African American college students at PWIs.

In addition to social support, spiritual and religious practices have also been commonly identified as a useful coping method that Black college students use to relieve stress (Brown et al., 2011; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Patton & McClure, 2009; Smith, 2012). In a recent study of 362 Black college and graduate students, Smith (2012) reported that students who used spiritual coping possessed better meaning-making skills and had a stronger sense of purpose. Spiritual coping was also positively associated with psychological well-being and negatively associated with psychological distress, anxiety, and depression. Similarly, other researchers have found religious and spiritual coping mechanisms to be associated with positive academic performance among Black college students (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Patton & McClure, 2009). For instance, Patton and McClure (2009) reported that African American women enrolled at a PWI often depended on spiritual beliefs to cope with feeling overlooked, racially isolated, misrepresented, and misunderstood. In turn, spirituality provided motivation and empowerment for Black female college students by protecting and strengthening their psychological well-being.

Researchers have also found that some Black college students use less active forms of coping when in distress, such as mental distraction, disengagement, and detachment (Greer, Ricks, & Baylor, 2015; Hoggard et al., 2012). Such coping, often termed avoidance coping when used excessively, aims to reduce the stress associated with negative situations or feelings by minimizing the severity of the issue, engaging in distracting activities, or trying to ignore or forget about the situation. Moreover, some Black students attending PWIs may use more avoidance style coping as compared with students at HBCUs (Fleming, 1981) and prefer this form of coping if they have experienced racism (Brown et al., 2011; Hoggard et al., 2012; Utsey et al., 2000). Notably, avoidance coping strategies has also been linked to lower academic performance for Black students who experience intragroup race-related stress (Greer et al., 2015). However, some research with low-income urban African American youth has found avoidance coping to be associated with positive outcomes (Dempsey, 2002).

In sum, researchers have identified three prevalent forms of culturally salient coping mechanisms used by Black students to cope with experiences of racism and sexism. Two forms of culturally salient coping, social support

seeking and religiosity, have been associated with positive outcomes, while one—avoidant coping—has been associated with mixed outcomes. However, gaps still remain in the literature, including how gender might shape how Black students cope with these experiences. Although some research suggests that Black women show better adjustment at PWIs than Black men, there is little known about how they manage to do so. One area that may be relevant to this research may be the concept of the SBW (hooks, 1988).

### *The Strong Black Woman*

For many Black women, the SBW concept shapes their values and influences their interactions in society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, 2008; Donovan, 2011; Nelson, Cardemil, & Adeoye, 2016). The SBW role is a culturally specific gender concept that includes expectations for Black women to be self-reliant, care taking, and affect regulating (Hamin, 2008; Romero, 2000). This concept is connected to the cultural norm of strength in the Black community, which some scholars suggest stems from racism, beginning with the enslavement of Black people and including racism and sexism in the United States (Donovan & West, 2016; Watson & Hunter, 2016). Thus, some Black women may portray strength through being independent, hardworking, selfless, and emotionally stoic (Nelson et al., 2016). Moreover, research has shown that many Black women take pride in being able to overcome adversity and tend to normalize their struggles (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007).

In either case, because strength and resilience have become culturally ingrained in the lives of Black women, the SBW concept may influence the help-seeking and coping behaviors for Black women, which in turn influences their psychological well-being (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, 2008; Donovan & West, 2016; Nelson et al., 2016; Schreiber, Stern, & Wilson, 1998, 2000; Ward, Clark, & Heidrich, 2009; Watson & Hunter, 2015, 2016). With regard to Black college women attending PWIs, the SBW concept may serve as a protective factor, as it may allow them to manage negative stereotypes and stressors specific to their college careers. The internalization of strength deeply embedded in the SBW concept may help Black female college students cope with the negative effects of gendered and racialized interpersonal/psychological and academic stress experienced in PWIs.

Importantly, although the characteristics of the SBW concept can be motivating and protective, researchers have found that excessive reliance upon this role can be associated with stress and depressive symptoms (Donovan & West, 2016; Watson & Hunter, 2015). Moreover, some women may become overly self-reliant and emotionally restrictive in order to maintain the façade of having it all together, which can lead to psychological distress and chronic

health problems (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, 2008; Donovan & West, 2016; Schreiber et al., 1998, 2000; Ward et al., 2009; Watson & Hunter, 2015; Woods-Giscombe & Black, 2010). Ultimately, this minimizes the challenges that Black women face at PWIs and makes it difficult for Black women to demonstrate vulnerability (Donovan, 2011).

### **Purpose of Study**

We explored the college experiences of Black women attending PWIs by examining the relationship between campus racial tension and stress. We also investigated whether coping styles and the SBW concept moderated this relationship. Three specific questions were investigated: (a) Are Black women's perceptions of campus racial tension associated with stress? (b) Do culture-specific coping styles moderate the association between campus racial tension and student stress? (c) Does adherence to the SBW concept moderate the association between campus racial tension and stress? We hypothesized that campus racial tension would be associated with Black student stress. In addition, we hypothesized that both culture-specific coping and the SBW concept would moderate the relationship between campus racial tension and stress.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 129 Black women enrolled in 25 selective to highly selective predominately White colleges and universities in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast region of the United States. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 56 years with a mean age of 19.8 ( $SD = 3.1$ ). Regarding racial and/or ethnic heritage, 67 (28.6%) of the participants identified as African American, 65 (27.8%) identified as Black, 35 (15%) identified as African, and 33 (14.1%) identified as Afro-Caribbean. The majority of the participants were Christian ( $n = 97$ , 63.8%), while 32 (21.1%) participants identified as spiritual, not religious. A small minority of participants identified as lesbian ( $n = 3$ , 2.1%) and bisexual ( $n = 11$ , 7.5%), while 106 participants identified as heterosexual (72.6%). Forty-nine (38%) women were first-generation college students. With regard to education level, 29 (22.5%) of the participants were freshmen, 39 (30.2%) were sophomores, 36 (27.9%) were juniors, and 25 (19.4%) were seniors. The majority of the participants were born in the United States, making up over half of the sample (69.9%).



## Procedure

A list of selective to highly selective predominately White liberal arts colleges and research universities in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast region of the United States was generated. Institutions with multicultural and/or Black student groups were contacted. Participants were recruited through an e-mail announcement of the study that was sent to the listserv contact person of various college/university multicultural and Black student groups on the selected campuses. The e-mail requested recipients to forward our recruitment e-mail, which included a brief description of the study and the survey's hyperlink to their listservs.

Participants completed an online Qualtrics survey. After reading the informed consent form and consenting to participate, participants completed a brief screening to verify eligibility. Eligibility requirements included self-identifying as a woman of African descent, aged 18 years or older, and currently enrolled as an undergraduate at a PWI. The survey included a demographic questionnaire and the measures described below. As an incentive, participants who completed the study received a \$10 electronic gift card. The university's institutional review board approved this research.

## Measures

*Demographic information* assessed participants' age, college/university, class standing, major, college generation status, GPA, racial and ethnic group, birthplace, family annual income, sexual orientation, and religious/spiritual identity.

The *Racial Tension subscale of the Cultural Attitudes and Climate Questionnaire (CACQ)* measures students' experiences and perspectives of racial tension on their university's campus (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). The original scale required participants to use a 5-point Likert-type scale to report their degree of agreement with six statements surrounding campus racial tension. In a study examining student perceptions of campus climate by race, Ancis et al. (2000) reported good internal reliability for the Racial Tension subscale ( $\alpha = .76$ ). The present investigation used the same 5-point Likert-type scale, but used nine items to better portray racial tension on campus. The original subscale included items specifically assessing perceptions of interracial conflict, separation, and resentment on campus and classroom settings. To increase the internal reliability of the subscale, we revised the subscale by adding three items from the original CACQ subscales focused on perceptions of faculty racism (e.g., I have often been exposed to a racist atmosphere created by faculty in the classroom) and residence hall racial

tension (e.g., There are interracial tensions in residence halls). The internal reliability for the revised racial tension scale was good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

The *Black Student Stress Inventory* (BSSI) was used to measure the levels of stress perceived by Black college students (Edmunds, 1984). The original measure consisted of 82 items with six categories, which included financial, academic, environmental, personal, interpersonal, and career factors. In the current study, we used a revised version of the scale created by Neville and colleagues (2004). The modified scale consisted of 55 items with three subscales assessing (a) Academic (e.g., Test anxiety), (b) Race-related (e.g., Coping with racism), and (c) Interpersonal/psychological stressors (e.g., Depression). The original scoring was also modified from a 10-point Likert-type scale to a 6-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater stress (Neville et al., 2004). Using a sample of 90 Black students enrolled at PWIs, Neville et al. (2004) used the revised BSSI to examine the relationship among perceived stressors, racial identity, and coping. The revised BSSI had an internal consistency of .96. The current study's internal reliability for the BSSI was excellent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .95$ ).

The *Africultural Coping Systems Inventory* (ACSI) is a 30-item, 4-point Likert-type scale that measures the culture-specific coping methods of people of African descent during stressful events (Utsey et al., 2000). The scale consists of four subscales, which include (a) Cognitive/emotional debriefing (11 items), (b) Spiritual-centered coping (8 items), (c) Collective coping (8 items), and (d) Ritual-centered coping (3 items). Cognitive/emotional debriefing measures attempts to manage environmental stress through adaptive emotional and cognitive reactions, such as distraction and disengagement. Spiritual coping measures the act of seeking a higher power through spiritual and religious-based practices. Collective coping measures reliance on social interactions and group activities to cope. Last, ritual-centered coping measures the use of rituals to alleviate stress, such as lighting candles and burning incense. In a study examining the development and the validity of the ACSI in a sample of 220 African American, Utsey et al. (2000) reported that the alpha coefficients for Cognitive/emotional debriefing, Spiritual-centered coping, Collective coping, and Ritual-centered coping were .79, .82, .78, and .76, respectively. In the current study, the internal reliability for the overall ACSI was good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ).

The Strong Black Woman Cultural Construct was used to measure the cultural attitudes of the SBW concept (Hamin, 2008). The instrument is a revision of the Strong Black Woman Attitudes Scale, influenced by and created through focus group interviews with Black women. The SBWCC had an adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha = .76$ ) in a sample of 152 Black women. The 22-item measure consists of three subscales: (a) Affect regulation (5 items),

**Table 1.** Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations Among Black Student Stress, Racial Tension, the Strong Black Woman Cultural Construct, and Africultural Coping.

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Black Student Stress Inventory	3.27 (0.88)	—			
2. Racial Tension	3.25 (0.67)	<b>.461**</b>	—		
3. Strong Black Woman Cultural Construct	3.74 (0.55)	<b>.381**</b>	<b>.312**</b>	—	
4. Africultural Coping System Inventory	2.24 (0.47)	.045	-.034	-.049	—

Note: All correlations in the table are significant at the  $p < .01$  level.  
 \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

(b) Caretaking (9 items), and (c) Self-reliance (5 items). The instrument uses a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “never” to “almost always.” Higher scores indicate greater identification with the cultural attitudes of the SBWCC. In the current study, internal reliability for the SBWCC as a whole was good (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$ ).

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Bivariate Pearson correlations among variables of interest are presented in Table 1. Several one-way Analyses of Variance indicated that Black Student Stress (BSSI), Racial Tension, Africultural coping (ASCI), and the SBW concept (SBWCC) did not significantly differ by class standing, racial/ethnic subgroup, sexual orientation, college-generation status, birthplace, or family annual household income. However, there was a significant difference in a variable of interest based on reported religious orientation. Specifically, participants who self-identified as religious had significantly higher scores for Africultural coping compared with participants who self-identified as spiritual,  $M = 2.33$  ( $SD = 0.48$ ) versus  $M = 2.08$  ( $SD = 0.43$ ),  $t(125) = 4.67$ ,  $p = .01$ . Africultural coping scores also differed among participants who were neither religious nor spiritual compared with those who were  $M = 2.04$  ( $SD = 0.37$ ). Given the significant differences between religious orientations in coping, religion was controlled for in all hypothesis-driven analyses.

While respondents who identified as religious had significantly higher ACSI scores, ASCI scores were not significantly correlated with the subject of focus—Racial Tension—as measured by our revision of the Ancis et al.

(2000) Racial Tension subscale, nor with the BSSI or SBWCC. Bivariate Pearson correlations (see Table 1) indicated that there was a significant positive association between BSSI and Racial Tension ( $r = .46, p = .01$ ). In addition, scores on the SBWCC were significantly correlated with the scores on the BSSI ( $r = .38, p = .01$ ) and Racial Tension scores ( $r = .31, p = .01$ ).

### *Hypothesis-Driven Analyses*

A series of hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted, with total scores on the BSSI serving as the dependent variable. Prior to conducting all analyses, we mean centered the BSSI, Racial Tension, ACSI, and SBWCC, as well as the subscales analyzed below. In all regressions, religion was entered as covariates in Step 1 (see Table 2).

**Hypothesis 1:** Racial Tension will be significantly associated with overall stress.

Following Step 1, the CACQ subscale Racial Tension was entered in Step 2 (see Table 2). In support of Hypothesis 1, campus Racial Tension was significantly associated with total BSSI scores,  $B = .48, t(125) = 6.17, p < .001$ .

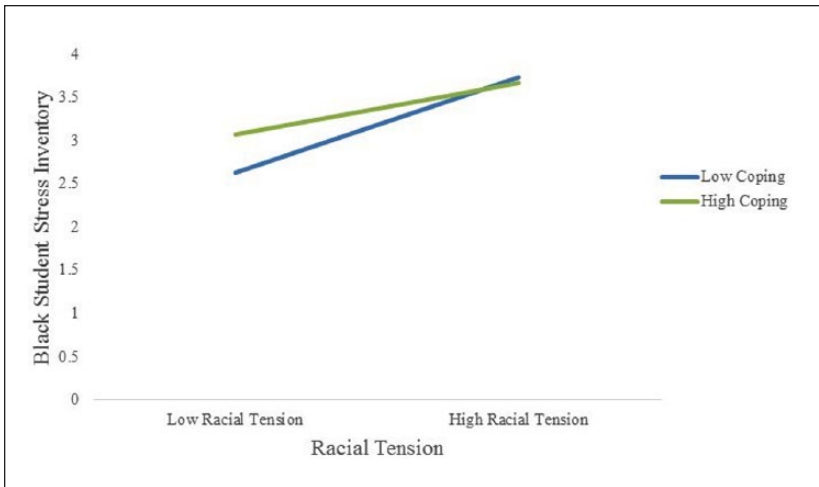
**Hypothesis 2:** Culture-specific coping will serve as a buffer between racial tension and overall student stress.

Next, we examined whether the total scores of ACSI functioned as a moderator of the relationship between campus Racial Tension and total BSSI. Extending the hierarchical multiple regression in Hypothesis 1, we next entered total ACSI scores as a main effect (Step 3). Results indicate that ACSI was not significantly associated with total BSSI scores  $B = .10, t(125) = 1.23, p > .05$ . In Step 4, we entered the interaction term between Racial Tension and Africultural coping (see Table 2). In support of Hypothesis 2, Africultural coping served as a moderator between campus Racial Tension and the total BSSI scores,  $B = -.96, t(125) = -2.33, p < .05$ . Probing the interaction revealed that, at low levels of Racial Tension, participants who used more Africultural coping reported more stress than participants who used less Africultural coping. However, as Racial Tension increased, participants who used less Africultural coping reported a greater increase in stress than participants who used more Africultural coping (see Figure 1).

**Table 2.** Moderation Models on the Relationship Between Black Student Stress and Racial Tension.

	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p
<b>Model 1: Africultural Coping</b>					
Religion	.079	.050	.139	1.573	.118
Racial Tension	.635	.103	.481	6.172	<.0001
Africultural Coping	.182	.148	.097	1.230	.221
Africultural Coping * Racial Tension	-.391	.168	-.958	-2.332	.021*
<b>Model 2: Strong Black Woman</b>					
Religion	.079	.050	.139	1.573	.118
Racial Tension	.635	.103	.481	6.172	<.0001
Strong Black Woman	.441	.121	.273	3.480	.001*
Strong Black Woman * Racial Tension	-.034	.190	-.137	-.181	.857
<b>Model 3: Cognitive/emotional debriefing</b>					
Religion	.079	.050	.139	1.573	.118
Racial Tension	.635	.103	.481	6.172	<.0001
Cognitive/emotional debriefing	.242	.128	.146	1.895	.060
Cognitive/emotional debriefing * Racial Tension	-.372	.149	-1.07	-2.493	.014*

Note: SE = standard error.



**Figure 1.** The relationship between Racial Tension and Black Student Stress by Africultural coping.

**Hypothesis 3:** The SBWCC will serve as a buffer between racial tension and overall stress.

In order to investigate the extent to which the SBW measure would moderate the relationship between Racial Tension and the total of BSSI, we extended the hierarchical regression we began in Hypothesis 1 (see Table 2). In Step 3, the total scores of SBWCC were entered as a main effect. Results indicated that SBWCC was significantly associated with total BSSI scores,  $B = .27$ ,  $t(125) = 3.50$ ,  $p < .01$ . In Step 4, we entered the interaction term between Racial Tension and the total score of the SBWCC. Contrary to our hypothesis, the SBWCC measure did not moderate the relationship between Racial Tension and overall student stress,  $B = -.14$ ,  $t(125) = -0.181$ ,  $p > .05$ .

### *Exploratory Analyses*

Given the significant moderation effect of the total ACSI score on the total scores of BSSI and Racial Tension, we wanted to explore which ACSI subscales (i.e., cognitive/emotional debriefing, spiritual-centered coping, collective coping, and ritual-centered coping) might be driving this effect. We conducted several hierarchical multiple regression analyses examining each of the ACSI subscales as moderators between the relationship of campus Racial Tension and the total scores of BSSI. In this analysis, Steps 1 and 2 consisted of the same variables as the previous regressions. In Step 3, each ACSI subscale was entered separately as a main effect. In the fourth and final step, the interaction term between campus Racial tension and the corresponding ACSI subscale was entered. We found a significant interaction between only the cognitive/emotional debriefing subscale and campus Racial Tension  $B = -1.07$ ,  $t(125) = -2.43$ ,  $p < .05$  (see Table 2). Probing the interaction yielded a similar pattern as with overall ACSI. That is, at low levels of Racial Tension, participants who used more cognitive/emotional debriefing reported more stress than participants who used less cognitive/emotional debriefing. However, as Racial Tension increased, participants who used less cognitive/emotional debriefing reported a greater increase in stress than participants who used less cognitive/emotional debriefing.

### **Discussion**

The current study explored the intersection of being Black and female at PWIs. Specifically, we examined the relationship between campus racial tension and stress. We found that campus racial tension was a significant predictor of stress among Black female college students at PWIs. In general, this

finding is consistent with previous research among Black college students attending PWIs (Chao et al., 2012; Neville et al., 2004; Pieterse et al., 2010; Prelow et al., 2006). However, the present study extends previous work by focusing on Black women in particular. As Black women experience unique challenges at PWIs due to both sexism and racism, the focus on the experience of Black women is warranted. Moreover, the negative campus environments that Black women experience is associated with increased stress, which may in turn affect Black women's mental health.

In addition to examining the relationship between perceived racial tension and levels of stress, we examined if culture-specific coping was a moderator of this relationship. Our results were mixed, in that participants who used more culture-specific coping reported more stress than participants who used less culture-specific coping. However, as racial tension increased, participants who used less culture-specific coping reported a greater increase in stress than participants who used more culture-specific coping. Our exploratory analyses suggest that this finding was driven primarily by cognitive-emotional debriefing. It may be that when racial tension is not present or less pervasive, cognitive-emotional debriefing may not be an effective form of coping with daily stressors. However, as racial tension becomes more prevalent, perhaps those women who continue to try to actively cope experience more stress as their efforts to change their environment are met with frustration. Therefore, Cognitive/emotional debriefing may buffer the relationship between higher levels of racial tension and stress. As dealing with racism on campus may be emotionally draining, perhaps Black women use less active approaches and take on more adaptive responses to manage environmental stressors. The literature has produced similarly mixed findings for the role of Cognitive-emotional debriefing, with some researchers finding it associated with both negative consequences (A. J. Thomas et al., 2008) and positive outcomes (Gaylord-Harden, Gipson, Mance, & Grant, 2008). Given the systematic nature of racism, and how ingrained it is in American society, Black women entering PWIs that have high levels of racial tension may use Cognitive/emotional debriefing strategically as a survival tactic, which may help them manage the burden of structural and individual racism and refocus on matters they can control.

Finally, this study also explored how Black female college students identified with the racial and gendered cultural attitudes of the SBW concept. Despite being significantly associated with both campus racial tension and overall stress, such that women who endorsed characteristics of the SBW concept were more likely to both perceive racial tension on campus and experience higher levels of stress, the SBWCC did not moderate the relationship between perceived racial tension and levels of stress. Surprisingly, in our

study, the SBWCC neither buffered nor enhanced the relationship between racial tension and stress. This finding contrasts with Donovan and West's (2016) findings where the endorsement of the SBW concept increased the relationship between stress and depressive symptoms. Given the positive correlation between the SBWCC and stress in our sample, adherence to the SBW concept may be in response to racial tension, which in turn increases stress. To cope with the racism experienced at PWIs, Black college women may view aspects of the SBW concept as protective although they may lead to negative consequences (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013).

### *Limitations and Strengths*

There are several limitations of this study. First, this sample consisted of women living in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions United States, which limits our understanding of this topic with Black female college students attending PWIs in other geographic regions of the United States. Second, we utilized referral sampling via e-mail and listservs to multicultural student organizations to recruit our participants. This may have resulted in a sample composed primarily of Black college women who are involved with multicultural campus organizations. Third, this study is a cross-sectional study; therefore, we cannot infer causality from these results.

Despite these limitations, this study has several strengths worth noting. Foremost, this is the first quantitative study to explore the relationship between racial tension and stress solely among Black women attending PWIs. Moreover, the focus on Black college women enhances our knowledge pertaining to the unique challenges that Black women experience in PWIs given the lack of quantitative research in this area. Second, this study explored protective factors of the relationship between campus racial tension and stress, which may increase our understanding on effective ways Black college women may manage stressors experienced on predominately White campuses. Third, our research extends the limited literature focused the role of SBW in Black college women by examining the cultural construct as a potential moderator of the relationship between campus racial tension and stress. Though our results did not support this relationship, as empirical work related to SBW increases, future research should explore mechanisms of SBW.

Lastly, our findings draw attention to the potential negative effects that racial tension may have on the mental health outcomes of Black college women at PWIs. With the growth of research that has shown the adverse effects of racism on the well-being of Black women, there is a need for more culturally tailored interventions and prevention efforts aiming to improve the psychological outcomes of Black women.



## Policy Implications

In addition to advancing the literature focused on Black women attending PWIs, the current study's findings have important implications for administrators, faculty, and staff working on predominately White college campuses. Over the years, research has well established that Black students have had a difficult time adjusting at PWIs (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Griffin et al., 2016; Neville et al., 2004; Prelow et al., 2006). In particular, some Black college women have described their PWIs as unwelcoming, unsupportive, and hostile (Howard-Vital, 1989; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Thus, administrators should both understand and address the detrimental effects of racism and how it permeates college settings (Lee & Barnes, 2015). Policies should be implemented to combat the pervasiveness of institutionalized racism, including the development of initiatives to foster a more culturally inclusive campus.

Awareness of the harmfulness of prejudice and discrimination and its relevance in academic settings is critical for both students and faculty (e.g., Donovan, 2011). Furthermore, faculty and staff trainings that focus on cultural competence and sensitivity to the unique experiences of Black female students is warranted to create a safe and supportive, learning environment. Moreover, to improve the experiences of Black women at PWIs, safe spaces such as support groups should be created so that they can freely express themselves among fellow women of color (Donovan & West, 2016; Lee & Barnes, 2015).

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