

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES IDENTIFIED IN THE STRONG

BLACK WOMAN

by

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Trustworthiness and Credibility

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative was to explore psychological and behavioral outcomes identified by Black women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) using grounded theory. The following chapters emphasized the realities of psychological and behavioral responses of SBW as it related to interactions with their social environment. As part of this study, fifteen participants responded to semi-structured open-ended interviews, which was coded based on reoccurring themes, pattern recognition, and content analysis. Results identified prevalent themes specific to this population of strong Black women. The introduction of loneliness as an underexplored psychological theme resulted from participant interviews. Behavioral themes introduced included defending SBW through means of education and communication. Additional themes based on social perception include socially derived perception as inadequate and authenticity. This study also provides a view of spiritual and religious beliefs used as strength and SBW used within a cultural context. In conclusion, these reported psychological and behavioral responses to social perceptions inform society and the therapeutic community of the dynamic experiences of SBW.

Keywords: Strong Black Woman, loneliness, authenticity, social perception

Copyright Page

Dedication

All praise to God for allowing this research to be. It was through Your help and many prayers that I was able to complete this project. Jeremiah 17: 7-8 states, “But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” This has been my reminder to trust God and place my confidence in Him.

I would also like to dedicate this research project to the strong Black women who came before me, whose lives are the essence of this research.

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My deepest appreciation is to the Concord Church in Dallas, Texas, specifically, the Harmony Counseling Center. Harmony holds a special place in my heart as you played a significant part in my development as a professional counselor.

A special acknowledgment goes to the participants who shared their experiences so openly. Without you bearing your truths, this would not be. I am forever grateful.

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List of Abbreviations

Strong Black Woman– SBW

Tranquility Mental Wellness -TMW

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The concept of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) derived because of historical and cultural self-preservation methods of Black women in the face of stereotypes, which substantiated unjustified oppression (Donovan, 2011; Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, & Felicie, 2012; Donovan & West, 2015). Development of the personas of the SBW served to combat negative and controlling images by offering Black women a sense of agency and identity (Ashley, 2014). Along with the autonomy and personal ownership of identifying as SBW, there are detrimental factors resulting in physiological and mental health consequences (Donovan & West, 2015; Watson & Hunter, 2015). The purpose of this study is to perform a qualitative research study to explore psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences as it related to SBW, and address the gaps in current research surrounding historical and social perceptions of this gender culture. Also, this study addressed the implications of future studies as it relates to the overall perceptions through lived experiences of SBW, providing recommendations for positive social change in knowledge-base of current gender population.

This study begins with an introduction to the background of the SBW, problem statement, purpose statement, the significance of the study, research questions and definitions in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 includes a review of relevant literature pertaining to SBW including, stereotypes, mental health, and SBW, historical perception of Black womanhood, intersectionality and Black femininity, John Henryism, behavioral health, coping and research gaps, and racism. Chapter 3 provides a detailed rationale of the qualitative research methodology used in this study, research questions, setting, data collection, data analysis,

methods to ensure trustworthiness and credibility, dependability and confirmability, transferability, and ethical considerations. In Chapter 4 I cover data analysis, and Chapter 5 concludes this study with a response to research questions, discussion, implications, delimitations and limitations and suggestions for future research.

Background

During much of the history of this nation, Black women have endured racist rhetoric, enactments, and laws instituted to marginalize, oppress, and instill fear to control every aspect of life. During this time in history, these factors contributed to the development of the SBW, which resulted from emotional and racial oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, 2008; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Descriptions of SBW include characteristics such as independent, self-sacrificing, hardworking, and high achieving, able to overcome adversity, and emotionally contained (Nelson et al., 2016). SBW became relevant during the Civil Rights era and has continued to present. Negative stereotypes of Black women served as justification for the SBW persona, which functions to counter those stereotypes (Wilkins, 2012). I review the foundation for the SBW persona, from an inclusive perspective of historical and modern circumstances regarding race and African Americans.

Using force, slaves witnessed the harsh discipline of family members (Nelson, Cardemil & Adeoye, 2016). In viewing these atrocities, slave owners challenged Black women to hide emotions to prevent themselves from enduring severe consequences (Nelson et al., 2016). As a result, attributions of Black women having the strength of men normalized their resilience in the face of suffering (Donovan, 2011). Community responsibilities to represent excellence burdened Black women. Socialization goals and outcomes observed in Black communities drew positive associations with agony and suffering. The expectation of strength and invulnerability prevented

Black women from expressing psychological distress (Watson & Hunter, 2015). As they adopted the ability to stifle emotions, secondary habits to cope with difficult emotions also developed.

Situation to Self

Prior to the completion of the literature review for SBW, I planned to focus the study on motivation and learned helplessness. My intention was to understand the behavior of marginalized and oppressed racial groups, particularly in the southern region of the United States. It was my desire to understand this premise and empower them to rise to greater determination and self-sufficiency. I quickly became aware that the topic of motivation was very broad in scope and challenging to narrow. That is when I came across an article with the phrase “Strong Black Woman” in the title. Given the current political climate, I became enraged as my previous witnessing of the stereotype was negative and demeaning towards Black women. As I read through the article, I became enlightened by the research directed at this sociocultural stereotype. My concern heightened once I recognized the disparities in physical and mental health resulting from the internalization of this stereotype.

Holding a clinical license as a licensed professional counselor (LPC), predominantly serving the African American community as a faith-based counselor in Dallas, Texas, my clientele ranged in demographic features. One thing I noticed was the perseverance of the women I served, regardless of the situation or social status to “make things happen”. Unbeknownst to me, I was witnessing the manifestations embraced in the concept of the SBW. What I also realized was the emergence of Black women’s awareness of the debilitating outcomes resulting from generational cycles of failure to attend to their mental or physical wellness. Further review of the literature coupled with professional therapeutic interaction with this gender population, guided my understanding of the SBW stereotype. This contributed to my aim of investigating

how or whether current empowerment strategies geared towards Black women for self-awareness, healing, self-exploration, and individuality influenced or controlled the unfolding images of their experiences. Thus, the aim of this study became to bring attention to the emotions of SBW as they encounter their social environment.

The focus also reflected a need to fill a gap in literature given the minimal review of the emotions and feelings of this population outside of a college setting. Many of the psychological responses focused on depression, anxiety, and emotional regulation, but lacked data capturing feelings and emotions. Through this study, I address and extend previous research detailing the psychological and behavioral responses of identifying as SBW, while also looking at the influence of social perceptions of controlling images. Specifically, this study seeks to identify emotional responses through psychological outcomes and determine additional behavior responses surrounding identity as an SBW in relationship to social interactions.

A combined philosophical approach guided the assumptions of this research as aspects of the tenants of ontology and epistemology could not be excluded from inclusion when considering the realities of this population. Researchers described constructivism and critical theory as merging, they commented, “two or more paradigms often ‘interbreed’ and the boundaries among these perspectives are in constant flux (Heppner et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.146).” Components outlined in the constructivism paradigm guided assumptions as data collection relied on the communication between researcher and the perspectives of the participants surrounding the reality of ingrained historical, cultural, and communal systems (Bell, 2012; Heppner et al., 2016). This denotes aspects of conventionalization based on an epistemological orientation. A hermeneutical approach guided data collection as I gathered

participant perspectives and interpreted the meaning they shared while removing biases and predilections of expected outcomes (Bell, 2012; Heppner et al., 2016).

Critical theory also informed the philosophical underpinnings of this research on the identified population as various “social, political, cultural, historical, and economic forces in the environment that have often been created by individuals who are positions of power,” associated with the ontological foundation (Heppner et al., 2016, p. 9). A dialectical approach within critical theory challenged participants understanding of power and social status with an intent to create change, affirming aspects of the methodological approach. The focus of this research was creating awareness and change of social constructs for SBW as participants begin to consider the effect society has on their perception of self as well as their psychological and cognitive responses.

Problem Statement

In conducting a literature review concerning SBW, I identified several critical components including stereotypes, controlling images, strength, emotional regulation, and coping. These factors influence the overall functioning and experience of what it means to identify as an SBW. Further exploration exposed these terms as manifesting through behavioral or psychological experiences. The social perception of Black women outlined in literature has a historical basis assumed from stereotypes and controlling images (Ashely, 2014; Dow, 2014; Nelson, Cardemi, & Adeoye 2016; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Frequently. Due to internalized social perceptions of Black women, society frequently fails to consider the psychological and behavioral effect of resulting symptoms based on misconceptions. In conducting this study, I review the psychological, behavioral, and social disparities as they relate to historical and social perceptions of SBW.

Stereotypes, controlling images, strength, and emotional regulation define the psychological effect of those who identify as an SBW. Hilton and von Hippel (1996) revealed how stereotypes are the acceptance and endorsement of generalizations about the features along with traits affirmed by labeling typical behaviors of members who identify with a particular group. The internalization of stereotypes amongst Black women results in increased physical and psychological stress reactions (e.g. generalized anxiety, depression, decrease in well-being, intragroup racism) (Clark et al., 1999; Soto, Dawson-Andoh, BeLue, 2011; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Depictions of these stereotypes lead to controlling images, which police the lives of Black women, limiting individual expression and a sense of agency. Public illustrations influence the social perceptions of Black women, forcing many to experience discomfort as they find their place in diverse environments. To manage the psychological influence of the representations, SBW utilizes strength as a coping mechanism (Davis, 2015; Nelson et al., 2016). Using inner fortitude to manage adverse feelings produces the characteristics of Black women who choose to become silent, stoic, and self-reliant to effectively handle disappointment and numerous challenges (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; 2008). Choosing to be strong results in physical, mental, and emotional repercussions, undergirding their forced resiliency. Researchers attribute suppressed emotional expression in the SBW to the negative stereotypes and controlling images of Black women (Watson & Hunter, 2015). They base the lack of emotionality on expectations of Black women to remain staunch, loyal, stoic, spiritual, and emotionless (Ashley, 2014). The lack of demonstrative expression and supportive environment further increases symptoms of depression and anxiety (Watson-Singleton, 2017).

The persona of the SBW advanced as a response to negative stereotypes projected toward Black women (Walker-Barnes, 2009; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Many stereotypes developed

have controlled the lives of these women, arresting their ability to choose their own identity freely (Wilkins, 2012). Rather than create their identity, many Black women assimilate into the dominant culture and shift between personas for acceptance and to boost access to opportunities. Seemingly automatic or unconscious interdependent identities relate stereotyped attributes to Black women (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Originated through historical and limited interactions they can transpire based upon the intersectionality of demographics such as race, gender, or ethnicity. These beliefs generalize one or more facets separating minorities from the dominant group, ethnicity, or culture.

Behavioral components contribute to how Black women who identify with SBW conduct themselves, have adverse psychological consequences, and damaging influences on them (Wilkins, 2012). Literature outlined internalization, shifting and high-effort coping as ways in which SBW further managed negative social perceptions (Bronder, Speight, Witherspoon & Thomas, 2014; Hudson et al., 2016; Johnson, Gamest, Meyers, Arellano-Morales, Shorter-Gooden, 2015). In coping with undesirable environmental experiences, SBW gravitates to methods of self-protection through self-reliance and self-sacrifice. These factors attributed to characteristics of resiliency as well as suppressed emotional expression. The suppression of emotional expression, also viewed through encompassing strength, also proved to be maladaptive. Additionally, SBW served as a protective factor in the face marginalization (Watson & Hunter, 2015).

The SBW persona has also been a way to separate individuals from negative images of Black women by providing a source of empowerment in the face of trials and adversity (Nelson et al., 2016). Black femininity encompasses the mandates ascribed to women as a gender, with the additional cultural implications handed down to Black women (Nelson et al., 2016). Cultural

mandates create challenges in determining appropriate behavior and responses. For example, society condemns boisterous Black women through controlling images and negative stereotypes. Alternatively, they receive praise and accolades when the results of such behavior result in political and social advances that enrich humanity. The problem is the psychological and behavioral outcomes in current research do not discuss the lived experiences of African American women who identify as SBW as it relates to emotions. Black women who distinguish themselves as SBW although perceived as strong, also internalize invalidating representations of themselves, which results in the implementation of maladaptive behavioral mechanisms to survive (Wilkins, 2012).

Attention to these outcomes is necessary as psychological and behavioral factors affect the functionality of Black women in the way in which they interpret and adapt to social perceptions. Physiological responses to stress, and lack of emotional expression induced by subscribing to the SBW persona warrant attention (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Justification of the need for further scrutiny also rests in the continued stigma attached to receiving therapeutic treatment, which is steeped in historical and cultural perspectives connected to the proliferation of stereotypes (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to explore how societal perceptions of SBW affects psychological and behavioral adaptations. Attention to this aspect of the lived experiences of the population will detail the internalization of controlling images as well as detrimental stereotypes. Wilkins (2012) revealed how incorporating these deleterious characterizations prevent Black women from realizing social acceptance. Conducting this research assists in memorializing the maladaptive experiences of Black women who identify as SBW in various facets of their lives,

while further exploring the behavioral and psychological effects. I viewed the behavioral responses of SBW through responses to controlling images, coping, enacting strength, and self-sacrifice. Additionally, I collected data representative of significant psychological responses to stereotypes, controlling images, strength, and emotional regulation. Furthermore, in conducting the study I examine the perception of the SBW in society as well as the self-perception based on controlling images, which act to constrain individuality. To investigate emotional states, I review mechanisms employed by SBW to adapt their environments based on controlling images and how society looks upon them.

Significance of the Study

I explored the psychological and behavioral responses of SBW in society and through the study introduced new variables relating to previously identified attributes such independence, denial of self-care for family and others, hardworking and high achieving, overcoming adversity, and emotionally contained (Nelson et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). The SBW concept emphasizes maladaptive coping through strength, self-reliance, and silence, which has negative consequences (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, 2008; Romero, 2000; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Although the perception of SBW serves as a protective factor against marginalization, conversely, it has influenced the perception of failures in Black women who subscribe to be an SBW and the restriction of emotional expression (Watson & Hunter, 2015). In addition, researchers linked to symptoms indicating stress and depression to identifying as an SBW (Donovan & West, 2015).

Intersectional Theory

Researchers who use intersectional theory support understanding how people perceive individuals and how they see themselves (Donovan, 2011). This includes the inability to separate

gender and race. When compared with other ethnic groups, Black women appear to have characteristics that align with male and female features, proven valuable for survival (Belgrave & Adams, 2016). The aforementioned traces back to slave conditioning when slave masters believed Black women to have superhuman physical, mental, and emotional strength (Harris-Lacewell, 2001; White-Jackson, 2012). Presuming this preconditioned perception may be associated with Black women who identify themselves as SBW may deem it necessary to overperform based on the concept of strength. Some mindsets for Black women include perception to be mentally tough but do not participate in strengthening mental capabilities. In this perceived struggle, Black women attempt to break through barriers, thus resisting feeling weak or needy (Watson & Hunter, 2016). They encompass acceptance of the responsibility to be strong and survive.

Previous researchers recognized the psychological effect actualizing of the concept SBW included developing symptoms, which can be debilitating once Black women become aware of them. This study is an addition to current research, contributing psychological and behavioral outcomes leading to awareness and healing for Black women who subscribe to the characteristics associated with SBW. Also, through this study, I further recognized the concept of strength regarding Black women while illustrating various associated components of the behavior. Furthermore, the social expectations of Black women exuding masculinity and femininity prevent the actualization of certain aspects of individuality from developing (Donovan & West, 2015). Attending to the psychological and behavioral responses of SBW creates the ability to begin defining womanhood for themselves, increasing new acceptance and celebration of diversity. Focusing on social determinants magnifies the social structures and systemic factors that create challenges to the health and wellness of Black women. The outcomes of this study

can provide additional insight into the realities experienced by Black women who identify as SBW.

Research Questions

1. What are some of the maladaptive perceptions that influence African-American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) in current gender culture?
2. How do African American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) respond behaviorally to the perception of psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences in current gender culture?
3. How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them?

Definitions

Adversity: a state or instance of serious or continued difficulty or misfortune.

Awareness: the quality or state of being aware: knowledge and understanding that something is happening or exists.

Behavioral: of or relating to behavior: pertaining to reactions made in response to social stimuli.

Black: Refers to individuals of African American descent. Interchangeable with African American.

Controlling images: Used interchangeably with stereotypes. Developed as a source of justification of unfavorable ideas of the Black female gender to validate inferior treatment.

Coping: to deal with and attempt to overcome problems and difficulties —often used with learning to cope with the demands of her schedule.

Culture: the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.

Dispel: to cause to vanish; alleviate.

Emotion: a conscious mental reaction (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body.

Employment: activity in which one engages or is employed.

Environment: the aggregate of social and cultural conditions that influence the life of an individual or community.

Experience: something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through.

Feeling: an emotional state or reaction.

Image: a mental picture or impression of something.

Interaction: mutual or reciprocal action or influence.

Perception: quick, acute, and intuitive cognition.

Persona: the personality that a person projects in public.

Psychological: having an effect on or involving the mind.

Race: a category of humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits.

Racism: a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. A doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles. A political or social system founded on racism. A system of privilege and power, that precludes minorities from the easily accessing resources and other civil liberties (Bulhan, 1985).

Social environment: the environment developed by humans as contrasted with the natural environment; society, especially in relation to individuals.

Stereotypes: an idea that is used to describe a particular type of person or thing, or a person or thing thought to represent such an idea. Stereotypes can also include the endorsement or internalization of attitudes and beliefs about a gender culture.

Strong Black Woman (SBW): Strong Black Woman.

Summary

Attention to the psychological and behavioral impact to the SBW affords Black women an avenue to gain additional self-awareness to manage social stresses and aim towards obtaining optimal well-being. Awareness of the challenges SBW endure resulting from controlling images requires attention as these factors influence their well-being. Social perceptions can impact the daily lives of this specific gender culture in how they interpret and respond when aware. Gaining an understanding of the lived experience of social perceptions allows for increased comprehension and implementation of practical techniques to cope and reduce the burden. I contribute further insight into the reality of SBW as it pertains to psychological and behavioral components.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The strong Black woman (SWB) concept encompasses personality and psychological characteristics with historical derivatives. These traits, while detrimental to the health and well-being of African-American women, has also served as a method of protection and preservation through grim circumstances. Historical research defining SBW has focused on the stereotypes and controlling images as well as the psychological and physical health deficits resultant from

internalization. The conceptual framework and related literature explored provide the foundation for the development of this study.

Conceptual Framework

The SBW schema progressed out of necessity following a time when people treated those of African descent as property, believing they were not being created in the image of God. The persona of the SBW advanced in response to negative stereotypes directed toward Black women following the period when the struggle for civil liberties ensued (Walker Barnes, 2009; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Pioneers in the study of SBW denoted praise and admiration surrounding this controlling image, applauding strength at all cost (Collins, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Townsend Gilkes 2001; Wallace [1978] 1990). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) posited the detrimental characteristics and behaviors associated with strength in Black women related to depression. Researchers viewed much of the strength as it related to Black women as concealing vulnerabilities, sorrow, and exasperation (Taylor, 1995). In the literature, researchers identified concepts of the SBW as independent, denying self-care in lieu of family and others, hardworking and high achieving, overcoming adversity, and emotionally contained. Internalizing the SBW construct further emphasized negative coping through strength, self-reliance, and silence, which produces negative consequences (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Nelson et al., 2016). They found the SBW persona also served as a protective factor in the face marginalization.

Conversely, SBW influenced the perception of failures of Black women and the stipulation of emotional expression (Watson & Hunter, 2015). SBW also served as a way to separate oneself from negative images of Black women while receiving further empowerment through the endorsement of strength as coping with adversity (Nelson et al., 2016). Davis (2015)

discussed the importance identified by Black women to impart strength amongst African American women who subscribe to the SBW persona through means of communication.

The stereotypes of Black women include Mammy, Sapphire (matriarch), welfare queen, and Jezebel (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). In addition to the these themes, additional schemas associated with Black women include Sojourner Truth Syndrome (STS) (Mullings, 2006) and Sisterella Complex (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). While many of the schemas circling Black women possessed a negative connotation (e.g., Jezebel, Sapphire, and Mammy) the SBW ideal is regarded through historical characteristics opposite to negative stereotypes (e.g. the Superwoman, Modern Mammy, Black Lady, and Sojourner Syndrome (Donovan & West, 2015; Woods-Giscombe, 2010).

The stereotypical images of Black women described throughout literature include Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, the Welfare Queen, the Angry Black Woman, and the SBW. The image of a mammy is a Black woman whose primary function was to attend to the needs of others. She possesses a dominant, overbearing personality, is obese, and unattractive. Depictions of the mammy is a comfortable woman caring for the needs of others to the point of neglecting her own needs, even to the point of failing health and death. The Sapphire persona represents a Black woman who presents as aggressive, masculine, dictatorial, and bossy. Characteristics associated with the Jezebel persona include promiscuity and heightened sexual desires. However, portrayal of the Welfare Queen is a Black woman who relies on social assistance as the primary source of financial provision for her family. This persona links directly to the expectation and demands of Black women dating back to slavery, in which they were to mate and generate workers for the slave master (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Stay-at-home moms experienced the control felt by Black women regarding the use of the description as a Welfare Queen. Dow (2014) revealed how

Black mothers who stay home to raise their children feel pressure and control based on the assumptions of others, and the need to explain their efforts to care for their family. Efforts to dissipate these stereotypes proved to be a constant task not only for themselves but also for their children. In many environments, Black women felt excluded endorsing the need to prove they are "different" and belong, revealing status, and accolades. The Welfare Queen served as a reminder and source of empowerment to rise above stereotypes.

The angry Black woman is another negative stereotype deemed detrimental to the self-concept, self-worth, and confidence of these women. According to this stereotype, Black women appear continually upset, belligerent, and antagonistic. Additional characteristics of the angry Black woman describe them as domineering, masculine, harsh, unattractive, combative, heavily opinionated, and rude (Ashley, 2014; Malveaux, 1989; Morgan & Bennett, 2006). Ashley (2014) further emphasized concerns of Black women surrounding their identification as an Angry Black woman, which results in the minimization and suppression of anger. Society seems to pick and choose the celebration of the Angry Black Woman. She is positively recognized when vocalizing injustice for all, but condemnation ensues when the speaking of indignation towards herself (Ashley, 2014). The multiple traits linked with the angry Black woman creates internal confusion with removing the association of negative stereotypes and the denial of natural expressions of anger. When considering the persona of the Angry Black women, it is relevant to understand the necessary function and purpose for anger. The fundamental use of anger is to aid an individual in survival. It provides intuitive knowledge, encouraging and igniting excitement for action.

Woods-Giscombe (2010) further expounded upon the Superwoman stereotype detailing how Black women defined the Superwoman and SBW schema. Personal narratives of Black women provided groundwork in identifying the characteristics for the Superwoman. The

characteristics embraced by Black women connected to the Superwoman include strength, courage, diligence, and flexibility while facing challenges due to their intersecting identities. Qualities associated with the Superwoman included mandates surrounding courage, stamina, and stability. Additional decrees included camouflaging emotions and weakness, independence, and perseverance towards accomplishments while aiding those less fortunate (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Identified benefits resulting from embracing the Superwoman schema, include protection and advancement of the family and community. Consequently, adverse realities result from relentless strength embodied through the Superwoman schema. Unstable intimate relationships as well as decreased attention to personal needs, sleep disturbances, stress-related eating, anxiety, depression, and adverse birth outcomes are some of the negative outcomes related to identifying as a Superwoman (Woods-Giscombe, 2010).

Stereotypes

One tactic used to ignite fear of Blacks is stereotypes. According to Hilton and von Hippel (1996), stereotypes are the acceptance and endorsement of generalizations about the features and traits affirmed and typical of members who identify with a particular group. Some stereotypes are related in interdependent identities and seem automatic or unconscious (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Many stereotypes are based on historical interactions and limited interactions with certain groups of people. They can be based on race, gender, or ethnicity (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Often the basis of these stereotypes rests on the crossroads of gender and race. These beliefs generalize one facet separating minorities from the dominant group, ethnicity, or culture.

Rosenthal and Lobel (2016) discussed how stereotypes contribute to disparities in healthcare. The unequal treatment effects and heightens concerns regarding reproductive health,

communicable diseases, and adverse birth outcomes. Labels associated with the sexual and reproductive health of Black women trace back to the acceptance, endorsement, and internalization of the Jezebel stereotype. Internalization of this persona potentially influences the attitudes and beliefs of some Black women.

In addition to societal influence, the internalization of stereotypes amongst Black women results in increased physical and psychological stress reactions (e.g., generalized anxiety, depression, decrease in well-being, intragroup racism). Stress responses to perceived racism are known to affect many areas of life including physical health (Soto, Dawson-Andoh, & BeLue, 2011; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Adverse outcomes such as ridicule of one's race, embellished type cast characteristics, and intragroup racism generate

d as a result of internalized beliefs and acceptance of stereotypes, further diminishes an overall sense of satisfaction (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Okazawa-Rey et al., 1986; Clark et al., 1999).

Societal thoughts influence beliefs and preconceived notions regarding various races and ethnicities based on limited interactions with members of diverse groups. These interactions and subsequent beliefs affect political agendas and public policies enacted to control and eliminate marginalization. In the healthcare setting, a steadfast belief of these stereotypes prevents individuals from obtaining appropriate care and treatment needed to achieve optimal functioning (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016).

Mental Health and SBW

Researchers documented how SBW influenced symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (Donovan & West, 2015; Watson & Hunter, 2015). Identifying with SBW was linked with these symptoms, yet these individuals held opposing attitudes on mental health. African

American women underutilizing behavioral health outpatient services, provides evidence of the prevalence of negative factors affects their mental health. The SBW construct emphasizes negative coping through strength, self-reliance, and silence, has detrimental consequences. Internalizing the SBW serves as a protective factor in the face of marginalization. Conversely, SBW affects the perception of failures in Black women and restricts emotional expression. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007, 2008) discussed how feeling a sense of ease is one reason Black women do not rely on others for emotional support, especially if they have internalized the SBW persona.

Related Literature

Racism

Clark, Anderson, Clark, and Williams (1999) explained how racism determines the mindset and formation of uniform practices intended to challenge individuals based on their ethnic background. Historically, enforcement of these challenges through codes or laws affects the lives of those discriminated against. Racism defined as a systematic effort of dominant cultures to oppress populations supports discriminatory actions taken against divergent groups of people based on genetic factors that determine their gender, skin color, race, and cultural or ethnic identification.

Racism when viewed as two classes, divides the biased acts as either attitudinal, which slanders individuals or behavioral, which causes people to withhold a fair and unbiased approach to their interactions (Yetman, 1985; Sigleman & Welch, 1991; Clark et al., 1999). Racist acts unfairly treat individuals within like ethnic groups, referred to as intragroup racism, as well as individuals in other ethnic and racial groups, known as intergroup racism (Clark et al., 1999).

Discriminatory acts based on race deeply affect the individual lives of those targeted as recipients of prejudicial conduct. The ramifications exclude them from receiving equal access to education, employment, housing, and healthcare. Certain racist acts are subtle, less overt, but nonetheless produce stress. As a result, diverse cultures experience physical and emotional symptoms stemming from this tension, thereby giving rise to the determination of racism as a stressor. This is possibly due to ineffective coping strategies in the face of racism, which results from individual deficits. In addition, Clark et al. (1999) confirmed that using specific guidelines assists in managing fluctuations in responses to racism and ineffective coping mechanisms. From this understanding emerged a stress-coping model developed from the work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This model considers the significance of racist events, which create mental and physical anxiety in conjunction with the individual response to stress in general. Mental and physical coping mechanisms employed to handle internal responses to racism do not qualify whether the outcoming behaviors are maladaptive or beneficial. However, when targeted towards African Americans, further examination of their responses assists in understanding the burden placed on their physical health and well-being (Clark et. al, 1999). The outcome creates noticeable variations in the life experiences of African Americans.

In a study conducted by Donovan et al. (2011), the researchers recognized how instances of overt and covert racial discrimination contributed to exacerbations of depression and anxiety in African American women. They noted how overt racial acts were a major factor in developing an anxiety disorder. Overt acts are typically difficult to ignore or deny compared to more subtle acts of discrimination. The researchers also noted the affect racial stereotypes have on the treatment of African American women. One possibility point to the lack of significant results

regarding subtle acts of racism makes it difficult to capture and resolve insidious insults, especially in female populations.

In addition to racism, race alone is a contributing factor to stress, especially within the population of African American women (Cole & Omari, 2003). The authors determined simply interacting with the dominant culture creates an ancillary stressor (Cole & Omari, 2003). Assimilating ignites feelings of estrangement from one's own culture while experiencing disdain from the dominant culture. This ideation is an occurrence deemed as common for African Americans who acquire middle-class status, especially when their experience in their youth was less diverse. Entering professions who traditionally did not welcome minorities, also has the potential to elicit similar feelings (Cole & Omari, 2003). In addition to managing feelings of estrangement and disdain, African Americans in such positions deal with "tokenism," microaggressions, and undisguised bigotry. Their experiences often include feeling forced or challenged to speak on behalf all who identify as African American (Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008; Gomez, 2015).

Race-related stress does not cease with immediately following the lived experience. Immediate family members, children, and extended family also suffer along with the individual. In looking at traditional structures of African American families, consider traditions carried through the transatlantic slave trade, which reinforced the foundations of community, kinship, knowledge of self, and spirituality (Nelson, Cardemil and Adeoye, 2016). When one experiences racism, the family experiences shared pain, as African Americans use family and kinships to manage frustrations (Cole & Omari, 2003). Researchers recognized similar feelings in the children as they are part of the family and carry a portion of the strain in experiencing mental and emotional stress.

Historical Perception of Black Womanhood

Racism, identified as a stressor for Black women, has the potential to influence mental and physical health (Clark et al., 1999). This began with ideas held towards slave women by the slave masters. They thought Black female slaves exemplified more mental and physical strength as opposed to their White counterparts (Harris-Lacewell, 2001; White Jackson, 2012). Such propaganda spread regarding Black women the slave masters used as one of the tactics to impose heartless demands on them. Resultant from these demands and based on faulty beliefs, many stereotypes developed and potentially controlled the lives of Black women, arresting their ability to freely choose their own identity (Wilkins, 2012). Rather than create their identity many Black women have been socialized to assimilate into dominant culture and switch between personas given to them from foremothers in attempts to be accepted and gain access to opportunities.

The dominant culture defines certain standards for womanhood Many of these ideals do not apply to Black women. These women did not receive the same privileges or judgments about their anger as White women during or even after the end of slavery (Dow, 2014). Historical views of Black women continue to affect their lives via the way people perceive them and the ways in which they value self, which can be a source of distress (Nelson et al., 2016). When compared with other ethnic groups, Black women appear to have traits that align with male and female (gender roles), along with characteristics which have been of value across the life span.

With a variety of roles, the basis of judgments regarding Black women reflects traditional gender roles although historically not ascribed to them, add to the controlling images placed upon them. They adopted additional attributes such as piety and religious devotion as these traits mirrored the expectations of socially acceptable gender-specific behaviors (Ashely, 2014; Morgan & Bennett, 2006). Ashley (2014) discussed the presumptions of Black women

conducting themselves as staunch, loyal, stoic, spiritual, and emotionless. Researchers concluded Black women have historically been unsupported and unprotected emotionally, viewed as subhuman sex objects, and expected to exhibit the physical abilities of a man. Some of the qualities the dominant culture observed in Black women caused fear (Bilodeau, 1992; Ashely, 2014).

The end of slavery offered limited opportunities for former slave women. To survive, many took employment at sharecroppers and as domestic servants tending to the needs of White men, women, and children. During this time Black women noticed their invisibility. Black women surreptitiously gained knowledge and inside information typically shared only among elite White people in society. Black women utilized this information to adapt to the dominant White culture or shifting (Johnson, Gamest, Meyers, Arellano-Morales, & Shorter-Gooden, 2015). Shifting was a means for inclusion and no longer remaining invisible.

Black women used shifting behaviors to adjust to various social settings in which they experienced discrimination and invisibility. Johnson et al. (2015) examined behaviors such as acculturation and enculturation adapted in mainstream White culture. They also explored the association between the stress associated with acculturation and expected speech. The researchers determined shifting was a method to counteract stereotypes and discrimination based on sex and racial attitudes, which also acts as a coping mechanism to perceived and potential judgments. African American women felt a strong inclination to adjust who they are to meet the expectations of mainstream culture (Johnson et al., 2015).

Intersectional Theory and Black Femininity

While facing substantial amounts of racial inequality and subsequent effects, vastly affects the lives of African American women. Researchers often overlook the foundational theory significant to comprehending the challenges encompassed in Black femininity. One school of thought focuses on how being a woman and a minority creates suffering based on intersecting identities. Intersectional theory, as coined by Crenshaw (1989) suggested various identifying factors contribute to how people perceive individuals with intersecting identities. Defined as the point in where two different identities combine to impact an individual's circumstance and experience in life, intersecting identities create an interdependence of constructs (Collins, 2000; 2015; Crenshaw, 1989; Donovan & West, 2015; Nelson et al., 2016). Intersectional theory further details the influence of gender and race on how social perceptions shape how people see themselves. Therefore, Black women experience oppression based on their gender, race, and social standing (Jones et al., 2007).

Two views, ubiquitous and contingent assist in understanding intersectional theory. Authors subscribing to ubiquitous intersectionality argued the difference in perception of standards for White women when applied to Black women while supporters of contingent intersectionality asserted certain standards apply to all women (Jones et al., 2007). The description of Black women does align with standards-based on norms derived from the dominant culture, thereby often ignored by investigators of the phenomenon (Donovan, 2015).

The intersectionality of race and gender also creates struggles for Black women seeking assistance (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Researchers documented how the maltreatment of Black women occurred in areas such as healthcare, employment, housing, and education. Unjust service provision resulted in disparities affecting their health and psychological well-being.

Results including psychological distress and poor coping mechanisms stem from racial inequities. Review of historical social disadvantages inclusive of theoretical understanding of intersectionality further revealed the deleterious outcomes for African American women (Woods-Giscombe, 2010).

John Henryism

Another concept reviewed in research concerning African American and mental health is John Henryism. This concept is associated with the SBW and Superwoman personas as it describes Black women's efforts to cope with stress and disappointments. Researchers determined the theory unveils how the women mask depression through heightened work ethics and achievements (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014). The theory evolved from an African American folk tale relating the story of John Henry, as a man who raced with a machine to build a railroad for a locomotive. He successfully completed the task of laying the railroad track by hand but died due to overwork and exhaustion. In academic literature, John Henryism describes Blacks who work relentlessly to cope with stress, which is also known as high effort coping (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope and Belgrave, 2014). High effort coping describes "sustained cognitive and emotional engagement" (Hudson et al., 2016). Embracing John Henryism resulted in mixed outcomes for African Americans who exemplify these characteristics. While increased concentration in work efforts contributes to achieving success, detrimental consequences to physical health and mental stability also occur, such as SBW complex. Researchers found similar attributes associated with SBW, Superwoman concepts, and John Henryism. High-effort coping relates one strategy African Americans use in relation to racism. Hudson et al. (2016) revealed the concept has unhealthy consequences, however, an increase in mental health and social standing does offer desired stability. Also associated with high incidents of

high-effort coping are decreases in depressive symptoms and adverse mental health outcomes (Bronder, Speight, Witherspoon, & Thomas, 2014). Researchers discovered a link between higher educational attainment and increased experiences with racial discrimination. Those endorsing high John Henryism were more likely to experience depression as they used increased work activities as a coping mechanism. They concluded individuals who work excessively also displayed poor health habits. An interesting fact identified by this concept was increased hours working resulted in higher financial returns but also increased rates of depression (Hudson et al., 2015, 2016).

Behavioral Health and Black Women

Stereotypes regarding race and sexuality influence the lives and social perceptions of Black women (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). These perceptions, which they also experience when seeking treatment contribute to African American women not obtaining appropriate care (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Knowing these stereotypes exist prevents Black women from fully engaging in therapeutic processes when they seek treatment. This creates barriers and influences the individual to internalize feelings and beliefs associated with stereotypical associations (Ashley, 2014). Acceptance of inferiority can lead to a decrease in psychological functioning (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) utilized the Nadanolitization scale to measure feelings of inferiority in the target population. Researchers use the scale to identify internalized beliefs African Americans hold regarding their inherent subordination to the dominant race along with their comfort level in the presence of other Blacks (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). The authors also documented how those who hold close to beliefs based on oppressive views were more likely to endorse symptoms of depression. In addition to increased depression, racial self-hatred negatively affected self-esteem

(Jones, Cross & DeFour, 2007). Their analysis indicated the population was more likely to struggle financially and be of lower social standing.

Many of the accepted stereotypes serve as internal police noted within Black women. For example, the perception of the angry Black woman may decrease the expression of anger, deterring them from feeling able to convey their emotions. As the internal controls increase mental anguish, they employ negative coping strategies. Healthcare options and treatments potentially cause harm or result in the use of less effective methods when stereotypes whether known or hidden, affect the quality of service provision (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). This can lead to poor treatment outcomes resultant from misdiagnosing based on secondary symptoms. As racial discrimination is a noted source of depression and stress, studies conducted by longitudinal researchers underscore the distress and psychological damage caused by race-related subjugation (Jones et al., 2007). In the United States, Blacks experience symptoms of mental illness with fewer options for care. Not feeling heard and respected by clinicians create barriers to African Americans accessing treatment (Gomez, 2015).

Coping and Black Women

As outlined by Clark et al (1999), general coping responses helped African Americans handle stress related to racism. These coping responses included high-effort coping, faith-based activity, and community involvement. Since slavery, thought of African American women included having the strength of men, giving rise to the normalization of resilience in the face of suffering. Also burdened with community responsibilities, African American women continued to pursue excellence in every aspect of their lives. Due to socialization goals and outcomes observed in African American communities, there is a necessity to assist them in identifying feelings of agony and suffering. Expectations for Black women to display strength and

invulnerability prevents them from expressing psychological distress. Becoming trained to stifle emotions creates secondary habits to cope with difficult emotions. A study by Watson and Hunter (2015) revealed the characteristics associated with the SBW can elicit anxiety and depressive symptoms due to opposing attitudes regarding mental health.

Identifying themselves as Black acts as a protective factor with respect to their feelings toward mental health, self-esteem, and body image. However, the identification of Black by those experiencing sexism and racism were more likely to display symptoms of depression. Social support and various initiatives to reduce stress (mindfulness-based stress reduction, loving kindness meditation, and NTU psychotherapy) are methods of helping to improve their health and well-being (Snowden & Hines, 1999). Culturally specific and empowerment interventions that affirm identifying as a Black woman act as protective factors, encouraging the elimination of perceived health barriers.

Traditionally, African Americans deemed the church as the center of life in their communities. It is likely African Americans seek direction and support from clergy, church, and supportive family and friends as opposed to physicians or specialists. These types of groups serve as the primary means by which African Americans receive support. Church-based health promotion has been one method to educate African Americans and provide basic awareness (Hays & Aranda, 2016).

The expectations for Black women to display the ability to be strong and not show vulnerability prevent the expression of psychological distress. They learn to stifle emotions creating secondary habits to cope with difficult emotions or unpleasant situations in life. According to literature, subsequent effects of maladaptive coping with stressful situations surface when African American women enter therapy. One such idea to assist in the identification of

suffering in African American women would be the development of culturally specific assessments.

A study by Watson and Hunter (2015) revealed women who identify with the SBW may experience unrecognized anxiety and depression and have negative attitudes towards mental health treatment. Researchers discussed culturally sensitive methods to screen Black American women for depression. Culturally specific assessments to identify symptoms of depression and anxiety could provide necessary information to assist in the remediation of maladaptive coping and other psychological distresses along with potentially preventing physical manifestations of anguish (Donovan & West, 2015). Researchers conducted studies leading to the conclusion that collecting assessment data during doctor-initiated conversations, should focus on evaluating emotional and social support, finances, providing education about mental health, pregnancy, and postpartum care (Cruser, Asanter-Ackuayi, Brown, Cardenas, Lee, 2012). Another recommended intervention centered around the attending staff. Treatment providers should utilize clinical skills and be cognizant of differences in cultural orientation and avoid assumptions based on physical characteristics (DelVecchio Good & Hannah, 2015). To prevent adverse treatment outcomes patients, need to feel their individual needs require attention and services directed at identification of culturally accepted guidelines.

Providers should identify and incorporate coping strategies used by African Americans engaging in counseling services (Gomez, 2015). Clark et al. (1999) outlined and adapted the stress-coping model birthed from the work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Clark et al. (1999) revealed what is termed race-specific coping responses. They identified maladaptive and effective coping strategies in relation to perceived racism. The authors noted passive and obvious discriminatory actions resulted in mental anguish, decreased happiness and the continuation of

chronic physiological symptoms. West, Donovan, and Roemer (2010) discussed the importance of problem-focused coping as a factor that reduces exacerbations of depression resultant from recognized acts of racial discrimination.

In studying the classic treatment theories, researchers ignore the significance of cultural ideologies and typically do not include the need to understand the developmental process of the individual, especially in clinical settings. Additional factors to examine include the treatment of minorities and economically challenged individuals who are either similar or share assumptions are their ethnicity and socioeconomic status, which can present simultaneously (Holmes et al., 2011). Another identified disadvantage of traditional therapeutic models is the inhibition of variance based on assumptions of the family system. Clinicians often determine family structures that do not align with the dominant White middle-class culture as flawed or defective. Further disadvantages to traditional models view the client as a victim and their victimization as the source of their problem(s) (Holmes, et al., 2011).

Holmes et al. (2011) offered an alternative to traditional therapy models, suggesting reducing challenges or preventing intimidation or oppression when those considered ethnically and culturally diverse seek psychotherapy. One recommendation is to identify the individual's surroundings, reviewing the problem from an individual perspective, which includes considering their environment. This approach recognizes environmental factors impeding elevation and achievements. Other options included in alternatives is the utilization of temporal process incorporating past, present, and future strengths. A strength-based process, the method elicits awareness and change without excluding culture or considering individual culture as dysfunctional.

Glasser's choice of theory addressed ten precepts for working with women who personally endorsed various characteristics associated with SBW's (Holmes et. al., 2011). These precepts support SBW's inclusion of proficiency in personal behavior, sharing needs, wants, and desires, focusing on current relationships and circumstances, not revisiting the past, identifying basic needs, and learning effective ways to meet those needs. Additionally, the author discussed guidance directed at satisfying genetic needs (safety, affection, affiliation, autonomy, capability, and enjoyment), choosing behaviors that attract others, controlling behavior by monitoring thoughts and attitudes and directing behavior to meet basic needs. These are very influential principles that can assist in evaluating and reformulating personal identities of SBW's, without excluding their culture or environment (Holmes et. al., 2011). In addition, it can also encourage healthy ways to cultivate positive growth in relationships, which has been recognized as a misaligned basic need and source of developing maladaptive behaviors.

Research Gaps

In reviewing current literature surrounding SBW additional research suggested areas in which the researchers believed required special attention. Many of the studies lacked generalizability because they conducted them in various geographic regions of the United States. Donovan and West (2015) suggested future studies to identify additional confounds contributing to stress and displaying symptoms associated with depression. The study identified possible confounds such as ethnic background, age group, social, and economic influences. Watson and Hunter (2015) indicated the findings of their study, which considers the liabilities and benefits of the SBW schema, as requiring focused research of women in the upper and middle socioeconomic classes. The authors suggested the inclusion of married women and those in relationships. Abrams et al. (2015) suggested conducting further research directed towards socio-

historical encounters and gender roles. There is also a need for investigating faith-based mental health initiatives that treat the psychological and emotional diagnosis, those who recognize microaggressions and macroaggressions as well as religious and psychosocial support for African Americans (Donovan et al., 2011; Hays & Aranda, 2016; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000).

Summary

With the constant elevation of the socioeconomic status of Black women despite intersectional identities, there remains minimal inclusion of their experiences in the body of literature. The associated effects of stress-related health disparities and the changing social environment increase the number of African American women experiencing symptoms of psychological distress and seeking therapeutic treatment for the first time. As the literature suggested, African American women are obtaining higher education and earning higher wages than previous generations. Lower incidences of blatant racism and Black women being a double minority in the hiring process also presents challenges related to increasing financial status and maintaining financial stability for those acknowledging their tendency to accept the label of SBW (JBHE Foundation, Inc., 2001).

Understanding various cultural and ethnic implications of mental illnesses assists in obtaining knowledge to gain an understanding of the development of identities and personalities. With the change in social climate and increased opportunities for African American women, more seek access to care for not only physical, but mental and emotional health. This entails knowledge and access to employee assistance programs (EAP) and other mental health benefits.

Foundational research while appropriate does not include current facets of the SBW persona. Previous research focused on developing the contextual framework of the SBW and

associated characteristics. Regarding current functioning and present circumstances, focusing on the feelings and emotions of SBW can lead to awareness and a healthier way of living. By paying attention to emotions, Black women can relieve stress, possibly reducing other physical and mental illnesses, and improve relational interactions. This awareness can improve interpersonal relationships and increase an overall sense of community and well-being.

The political and social climate in the United States elicits stress, anxiety, and fears for many African American women. There is a quote by Ghanaian scholar Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey that stated, “if you educate a man you educate an individual but if you educate a woman you educate a whole nation.” This thought coincides with what is known about the historical foundations of the African American family and aspects of the SBW. The matriarch of the family nurtures and model’s initial ideals of femininity and further socializes any children guiding them for success in future goals and endeavors. With the exploration of emotional outcomes towards healthier Black women, this framework serves as the foundation to shift the emotional compass, potentially modeling healthy interpersonal interactions and relationships, appropriate vulnerability, the formation of a support system, and healthy interdependence.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The proposed research is timely, reflective of the focus of studies regarding the stigma and disparities in minority mental health increases. More Black women seek access to avenues to address concerns related to their mental and behavioral health, many are the first in their family to ever receive therapeutic care. The historical, cultural, and societal conceptualizations of their image affect Black women’s psychological stability. As greater awareness surfaces, the realization of inhibitions to seek treatment increases in significance as more Black women come

to terms with the cognitions, behavioral, and psychological ramifications, which are inseparable from the reality of social perceptions.

I conducted this study to provide data detailing the lived experiences of SBW, further defining SBW according to current cultural definitions and revealing the psychological and behavioral responses to social perceptions of those who identify as SBW. My aim was to provide additional insights through data collected surrounding stereotypes, controlling images, strength, emotional regulation, and coping as it related to the experiences of Black women who identify as SBW. I review the design, research questions, participants, setting, instrument procedures, and data analysis utilized to attain these components in the following section.

Design

I used a qualitative design to further capture the lived experiences of SBW. Choosing this method broadens the knowledge base of culture-specific topics lacking an abundance of research (Heppner, Wampold, Owen, Thompson, & Wang, 2016). Qualitative researchers attempt to understand the meaning attached to individual experiences who may not be part of the dominant culture. Their analysis provides additional information while adding varying viewpoints into those experiences (Heppner et al., 2016). The benefit of the qualitative design is participants tell their own story and share their experiences in their own words. The sharing of individual worldviews offers a more comprehensive understanding of expressions of each person's reality and interactions with the environment, filling gaps in the literature with empirical data. Their reality serves as filters through which we obtain knowledge. Using qualitative methodology further captures the emotional responses of participants. Understanding the complexity of the outcomes of the process is essential with respect to the SBW concept, its proliferation of stoicism, while simultaneously avoiding emotional vulnerability.

I used semi-structured interviews to obtain qualitative data. Use of this method proved useful in helping to validate the cognitive, behavioral, and psychological concerns of SBW as it related to their social environment. Based on the unveiling of emotional concerns of SBW, the clinical community can further understand, which therapeutic interventions can offer culturally focused resolutions. By using a qualitative design, useful insight contributed to a greater understanding of the challenges faced by SBW. In this research, I employed qualitative measures to provide perspective on the experiences of SBW and inform the body of literature of relevant themes.

Utilizing narratives obtained through interviews I identified repetitive themes based on the concerns participants expressed related to issues SBW confront. My objective was to describe their shared experiences, bringing further attention to the behaviors and psychological responses of SBW in response to social perceptions and awareness of stereotypes and controlling images. I analyzed the data collected through interviews using a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis allows for a “systematic framework for coding qualitative data and then using that coding to identify patterns across the dataset in relation to the research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2014).

Grounded theory allows for the inclusion of social context to create meaning of interactions (Heppner et al, 2016). Building upon these interactions are codes, concepts, and categories creating theory. Grounded theorist does not build upon an existing theoretical framework but creates conceptual frameworks from the emerging themes produced in the data (i.e., participant interviews) (Charmez, 2006; Hepper et al, 2016). Codes derived from the interviews identify emerging concepts and categories.

Research Questions

1. What are some of the maladaptive perceptions that influence African-American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) in current gender culture?

2. How do African American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) respond behaviorally to the perception of psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences in current gender culture?
3. How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them?

Setting

Tranquility Mental Wellness (TMW) is the pseudonym given to a location who provides anonymity and confidentiality of participants. TMW has locations in far north Dallas as well as the southern sector. Census Bureau (2017) statistics revealed the ethnic demographics of north Dallas as 61.3% White, 23% Hispanic, 13.4% Black or African American, and 3.4% Asian. Census Bureau (2017) statistics for the southern sector of Dallas, TX is 81.5% Black or African American, 17% Hispanic, 15% White and 1.8% Asian. The atmosphere of TMW aligned with suggestions of Creswell (2008) as the location provided a private, quiet, and confidential atmosphere conducive to organic, and productive interviewing. This research was open to Black women 18 years of age and older who identified as SBW and located throughout the United States. If participants were not in an accessible geographic location, I offered HIPPA compliant teleconferencing. Various options increased participant eagerness and agreeance to participate. The themes associated with SBW may be applicable to other races and ethnicities, however, I framed the study in the historical context of the experiences of women of African descent in the United States.

Participants

Fifteen Black women age 18 and over who identify as an SBW participated in the study. I selected the population to promote diversity in the participant pool giving variety in

demographics, background, and experiences. Participants varied in socioeconomic status, age, employment, education, and income. My aim was to prevent overrepresentation of experiences typically attributed to demographic variables. I recruited participants using direct solicitation, word of mouth, advertisements in social media groups comprised mainly of Black women, and flyers throughout the surrounding community, churches, and counseling centers.

Procedures

I obtained approval to conduct the study from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Composition of the participant pool was purposeful and selected based on assuring variations in multiple demographics. I recruited the fifteen participants from the pool of responders to the recruitment requests. Once selected I assigned each participant a sequenced number (ex: Participant 0001, Participant 0002...) and then contacted to set up a time and place for the interview. If unable to schedule an interview with an individual originally selected, I selected another participant at random from the participant pool. I offered participants choices between the researcher's office locations and virtual connections. Participants not in the geographic location of the researcher received electronic informed consent documents, which provided a detailed rationale for the study, along with requirements, risks, and benefits. They memorialized and returned the documents prior to the interview, which I conducted via video conferencing. I advised each participant of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and reviewed the confidentiality and informed consent again prior to conducting the interview. Those agreeing to go forward with an interview completed a demographic questionnaire in which included their participant number to assure no identifying information could be associated with participant responses. Participants in the study responded to semi-structured interview questions, which after signing an agreement, I recorded and transcribed for

analysis. I secured the recordings and corresponding transcription in a location in my office requiring two methods of access.

Researcher's Role

Qualitative research requires careful unbiased interaction with the researcher's personal experiences (Heppner et al., 2016). Interactions with the researcher can inhibit the participant's responses. When exploring sensitive multicultural topics, the researcher's cultural identification can serve as a factor when attempting to elicit honest responses from participants. They may feel an increased sense of comfort and familiarity when their cultural identity is similar to the investigator (Heppner et al., 2016). To prevent bias, it is essential for researchers to remain subjective, understand personal worldview and attitudes along with beliefs, regardless of racial or cultural identity. Benefits afforded by qualitative research include the introduction of new concepts and themes previously unexplored, allowing tailoring of questions to the targeted audience (Heppner et al., 2016).

My role as a researcher in this study was both as an interviewer and instrument. It was important to interact with participants in a natural environment. To avoid bias, I discussed possible biases with a clinician familiar with the research topic, but not involved with the study or participants. To avoid biasing the participants' answers, I intentionally limited my response to parroting the information they shared in response to a question. I posed minimal follow-up questions, only asking participants to elaborate on experiences or to gain clarity on unfamiliar statements. Reoccurring response patterns to questions further provided feedback and validation of the semi-structured questions designed to collect pertinent data. During interviews, I was careful to take note of ideas and possible patterns as they occurred, which was also a method to ensure accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I journaled information during and after the completion of participant interviews (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

I developed qualitative questions to gain perspective on the psychological and behavioral responses of SBW to social perceptions. The questions elicited participant responses in regard to their lived experiences surrounding the SBW concept. Literature from my review process supported the development of the questions. The research questions provided a catalyst for participants to share experiences that corroborated or dispelled previous literature as well as introducing new concepts.

Individual interviews using the following semi-structured questions enabled participants to elaborate on their emotions, self-perceptions, strength, behavior, and interactions as an SBW. Participant responses provided additional insight to experiences within their environment and with society. Interviews began by introducing the topic and explaining in similar statements, “I am not looking for a particular response, but seeking to know more about your experience as an SBW.” As mentioned above, I asked minimal follow-up questions but primarily probed to encourage them to elaborate on experiences or for me to gain clarity on unfamiliar statements.

Interviews (Appendix A)

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Qualitative Study

1. How would you define what it means to be an SBW?
2. How do you know you're an SBW?
3. What is it like to be an SBW?
4. Describe the feelings/emotions connected to being an SBW.
5. Have you ever experienced stereotyping of SBW, and if so, was it used unfavorably by someone of another race/culture?
6. When have you found it challenging to be Black?

7. What is your perception of yourself as a Black woman in your place of employment and/or social environment?
8. As an SBW, what does strength mean to you and how have you had to express strength?
9. What would a lack of strength look like?
10. How has being an SBW shaped your behavior?
11. How do you find yourself trying to dispel stereotypes about SBW?
12. What are your behaviors in response to your awareness of stereotypes?
13. Does your interaction as an SBW with society vary, and if so, how?
14. Considering aspects of SBW, can you identify any behavioral or psychological responses to uphold to the persona of SBW?

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is the methodology of choice to analyze qualitative data reflecting the psychological, behavioral, social perceptions, and lived experiences of Black women that identify as SBW. I used this method to pinpoint the reality, perception, interaction, beliefs, emotions, and cognitions absent from previous research. As it relates to data, TA allows for summarization, organization, and coding of prevalent themes related to the research questions (Clark & Braun, 2017). The identified TA codes provide the foundation for my analysis of emerging, meaningful themes. Interpretation of themes through TA reflects collective responses to research questions (Clark & Braun, 2017). Prevalent themes identified through data provide further insight on societal trends as it relates to the participants (Brain & Clarke, 2006). This method also supported developing a better understanding of psychological data.

The TA process includes a transcription of all interviews and additional reviews to ensure accuracy. As mentioned above, the researcher made notes of ideas and possible patterns during

interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I used a transcription service and checked their results against the original verbal interview for accuracy. Once transcribed, I reviewed the content of the interviews multiple times, actively seeking meaning and patterns. Codes and themes emerged from the identification of patterns. I coded using an inductive analysis of the transcribed data and did not confine the outcomes to a specific coding frame or theory previously identified in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I hand-coded and drew associations to develop themes from the transcribed information. The resulting themes related to the concepts outlined in the research questions. I attributed consistent themes of SBW to the concepts identified in the research questions and captured unrelated information as “unexpected themes” for potential use in future research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following identification of themes, I reviewed the outcomes again to ensure proper organization and concision, using a map to capture and correlate the data. Interpretation brought forth meaning in relation to the research questions. I composed a detailed analysis of the relationship between the overall patterns and overall theme, including sub-themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Final analysis of themes provided the content for a report documenting evidence of the realities of SBW in regard to the psychological, behavioral, and social perceptions through lived experiences. Themes identified through analysis provided insight to maladaptive perceptions, behavioral responses, and psychological outcomes as it related to social disparities influencing African-American women who identify as SBW.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

This researcher has successfully completed coursework at Liberty University that provided foundational knowledge to conduct this study. The dissertation committee consisting of a chair and reader reviewed all components of the process. I established trustworthiness by thoroughly examining my biases prior to beginning the project using guidance from “The Researcher’s

Role” and “Situation to Self.” I established the credibility of this study through the validation of the qualitative interview questions using member-checking, triangulation, and participant quotes, which provided clarity (Creswell, 2008). Further credibility occurred through analyzing themes emerging from data through the phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Dependability and Confirmability

I displayed dependability and confirmability through the formulation of qualitative research questions and further through analysis of data as it related to my inquiries. To maintain dependability and confirmability I detailed the role of the researcher as an interviewer and tool.

Transferability

Research methods aligned with the outlined protocol for qualitative research for data collection through interviews following thematic analysis established the lack of transferability (Braun & Clark, 2006). Replicating this study necessities alignment with qualitative research and an aim to provide insight regarding a significant and relevant cultural phenomenon (Heppner et al., 2016). Replication requires the ability to reach a similar population-based on demographics, setting, instrumentation, and data analysis methods (Creswell, 2013). Future researchers could potentially use a phenomenological approach to better qualify and analyze the shared lived experiences of participants. Geographical constraints, along with other cultural nuances restrict the ability of researchers to replicate the study using identical methods.

Ethical Considerations

I upheld the ethical mandate to do no harm and assure confidentiality while working in various mental and behavioral health settings, which encourages interviewing and assessment skills. Additionally, an appointed dissertation chair served as supervisor for this research. This provided guidance and reduced extensive errors throughout the study. The chair also ensured

adherence to protocols established by Liberty University. I protected the participants of this study by adhering to ethical mandates to do no harm and carried out ensuring confidentiality and privacy according to federal and professional guidelines. I conducted all interviews in a confidential setting and all research-related documentation (transcripts, copies used for coding, notes, and memos) was scanned into a PDF document and saved on a password-protected computer, which only this researcher had access.

The research warrants a qualitative approach and approved through Liberty's IRB prior to implementation. I provided each participant with sufficient information to make an informed decision about their participation. They received written and verbal descriptions of risks and benefits, confidentiality, informed consent as well as voluntary inclusion for the study.

Ethical considerations for this research in addition to informed consent included the protection of participant information. Maintaining confidentiality included not using identifiable information and assigning a unique number sequence upon agreement to participate in the research. I also used pseudonyms to further ensure confidentiality during data analysis. After scanning the collected data and copies of transcripts used for this study, I will electronically secure the information by storing the information on a password-protected computer, that I hold exclusive access to open and is also password protected. As directed by the IRB at Liberty University, I will maintain the documents and associated information for three years prior to destroying them in an eco-friendly manner. Additionally, there are no assumed risks for participants in this study, and the benefit of providing new insight to the field outweighs any potential hazards.

Summary

To determine a response to the research questions surrounding the psychological and behavioral concepts of SBW, I deemed a qualitative approach as appropriate to conduct my inquiry. In addition to the psychological and behavioral concepts, social perceptions, and lived experiences of SBW further warranted the utilization of a qualitative approach. The expected insight extracted from data directly from SBW underscores the usefulness of a qualitative approach. I attached the individual's meaning to their personal experiences in conducting a thematic analysis of the data I collected during semi-structured interviews of 15 participants. The meaning was revealed in a way that followed ethical protocols, preventing harm to participants while enriching the area of research related to the topic of SBW.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

In conducting this qualitative study, I sought to identify behavioral and psychological responses to further explore the ramifications for women identifying as SBW. My purpose included describing the influence of internalized social perceptions of the target population. Increased attention to the reality of this gender culture allows for greater insight based on the expectations of controlling images as well as societal stereotypes marginalizing the women and thereby potentially minimizing their individuality. I aimed to recognize maladaptive experiences of the fifteen participants in this population of Black women who identify as SBW, in various facets of their lives. As a result, I also explored the behavioral and psychological responses of the SBW through participant's awareness of stereotypes and self-perception based on controlling images and strength. The examination of psychological responses occurred through evaluating responses to stereotypes, controlling images, strength, and emotional regulation. Documentation

of the psychological and behavioral responses of SBW in society increases awareness of the effect of their realities and introduced new concepts relatable to historically identified themes and attributes. Themes identified by these SBW paved the way for instituting diversity and acceptance of SBW who define femininity for themselves.

Throughout this chapter, I explore the themes developed from the fifteen-participant responses to interview questions. During the discussions with the participants, common themes emerged, which I classified into categories based on research questions. The study uncovered the participants' collective experience of being and revealed unexpected themes. Throughout this research, I gave priority to the participants' experiences via personal narratives of their reality as an SBW.

Research Questions

1. What are some of the maladaptive perceptions that influence African-American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) in current gender culture?
2. How do African American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) respond behaviorally to the perception of psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences in current gender culture?
3. How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them?

Participants

Study participants lived in the United States, were over the age of eighteen and identified as an SBW. A majority of the participants lived in Dallas, Texas with the exception of a few who lived in Houston, Texas, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania. I used participant numbers and pseudonyms throughout this study to protect the identities of the fifteen participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Table

Participant	Age	Income	Education	Relationship	Employment
Jade-001	35	Greater than \$100,000	Masters	Married	Full-Time
Porsha-002	48	Less than \$60,000	High School/GED	Married	Full-Time
Barbara-003	54	\$70,001 to \$80,000	Bachelors	Married	Homemaker
Erica-004	43	Less than \$60,000	Doctorate	Single	Full-Time
Lauren-005	33	\$70,001 to \$80,000	Masters	Single	Full-Time
Cheryl-006	60	Greater than \$100,000	Masters	Divorced	Full-Time
Brandy-007	25	Less than \$60,000	Masters	Single	Full-Time
Monica-008	41	Greater than \$100,000	Masters	Married	Full-Time
Michelle-009	53	\$90,001 to \$100,000	Doctorate	Married	Retired
Kenya-010	44	\$70,001 to \$80,000	Masters	Divorced	Full-Time
elli-011	38	Greater than \$100,000	Masters	Single	Full-Time
Kandi-012	35	Greater than \$100,000	Masters	Married	Full-Time
Mercedes-013	25	Less than \$60,000	Masters	Single	Full-Time
Latoya-014	49	Less than \$60,000	Bachelors	Divorced	Full-Time
Alice-015	63	\$70,001 to \$80,000	Doctorate	Divorced	Full-Time

Participant 001-Jade

Participant 0001 was a married 35-year-old African-American female who at the time of this study, lived in Texas. Jade was the caregiver for one child. She has a master's degree and employed full-time in government administration. Her combined annual family income was greater than \$100,000. Jade's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her biological parents and indicated a household size of three people.

Demographic information provided shared she was is not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Participant 002-Porsha

Participant 0002 is a married 48-year-old African-American female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Porsha is the caregiver for 5 children. She has a high school diploma and is currently employed full-time as an administrative billing coordinator. Her combined annual family income is less than \$60,000. Porsha's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her paternal and maternal grandmothers, grandfather, and both biological parents. Porsha indicated two people resided in her primary residence during her youth. Demographic information provided stated is not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Participant 003-Barbara

Participant 0003 is a married 54-year-old African-American female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Barbara is the caregiver for 2 children. She has a bachelor's degree and is currently a homemaker and described her profession as an educator. Her combined annual family income ranges between \$70,001 and \$80,000. Barbara's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her biological mother and indicated a household size of 7 people during her youth. Demographic information provided stated is not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Participant 004- Erica

Participant 0004 is a 43-year-old African-American single female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Erica is not the caregiver for any children. She has a doctorate degree

and is currently employed full-time in finance. Her annual income is less than \$60,000. Erica's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her biological mother and stepfather and lived in a household size of 3 during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.). Her family did receive government assistance during her youth.

Participant 005- Lauren

Participant 0005 is a 33-year-old African-American divorced female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Lauren is the caregiver for one child. She has a master's degree and is currently employed full-time as a medical social worker. Her annual income ranges between \$70,000 to \$80, 000. Lauren's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her biological mother and indicated a household size of 2 people during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Participant 006-Cheryl

Participant 0006 is a 60-year-old African-American divorced female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Cheryl does not currently care for any children. She has a master's degree and is currently employed full-time as a registered nurse. Her annual income is greater than \$100,000. Cheryl's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her biological and indicated a household size of 7 people during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Participant 007-Brandy

Participant 0007 is a 25-year-old African-American single female who at the time of this study, resided in Pennsylvania. Brandy does not currently care for any children. She has a master's degree and is currently self-employed as a marriage and family therapist. Her annual income is less than \$60,000. Brandy's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her mother and indicated a household size of 5 during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.). Her family did receive government assistance during her youth.

Participant 008- Monica

Participant 0008 is a married 41-year-old African-American female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Monica is the caregiver for 2 children. She has a master's degree and is currently employed full-time as a licensed social worker. Her combined annual family income is greater than \$100,000. Monica's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her mother and indicated a household size of 6 people during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Participant 009- Michelle

Participant 0009 is a married 53-year-old African-American female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Michelle is the caregiver for one child. She has a doctorate degree and is and is currently a retired counselor. Her combined annual family income ranges between \$90,000-\$100,000. Michelle's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her parents and indicated a household size of 4 people. Demographic

information provided shared she currently receives government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) and did during her childhood.

Participant 010-Kenya

Participant 0010 is a 44-year-old divorced African-American female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Kenya is the caregiver for one child. She has a masters/specialist degree and is currently employed full-time as a school psychologist. Her annual family income ranges between \$70,001 to \$80,000. Kenya's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood were her parents (mom and dad) and indicated a household size of 4 people during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Participant 011-Kellie

Participant 0011 is a 38-year-old African-American single female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Kellie does not care for any children. She has a master's degree and is currently employed full-time in as a human resource solution consultant. Her annual income is greater than \$100,000. Kellie's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her mother and indicated a household size of 4 people during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) however, her family did during her childhood.

Participant 012- Kandi

Participant 0012 is a married 35-year-old African-American female who at the time of this study, resided in Arkansas. Kandi is the caregiver for one child. She has a doctorate degree and is currently employed full-time as a senior business relationship manager. Her combined

family income is greater than \$100,000. Kandi's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her mother and father and indicated a household size of 3 people during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Participant 013-Mercedes

Participant 0013 is a single 25-year-old African-American female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Mercedes does not care for any children. She has a master's degree and is currently employed full-time as a policy project manager. Her annual income is less than \$60,000. Mercedes' demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her grandmother and indicated a household size of 3 people during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was a recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) during her childhood. She is not a current recipient of government assistance at the time of this study.

Participant 014-Latoya

Participant 0014 is a 49-year-old African-American divorced female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Latoya is the caregiver for one child. She has a bachelor's degree and is currently employed full-time as an administrative assistant. Her annual income is less than \$60,000. Latoya's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood were her parents and grandparents and household size of 3 people during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Participant 015- Alice

Participant 0015 is a divorced 63-year-old African-American female who at the time of this study, resided in Texas. Alice does not currently care for any children. She holds a doctorate degree and is currently employed full-time as a therapist/minister. Her annual income ranges between \$70,000 to \$80,000. Alice's demographic questionnaire revealed her primary support during her childhood was her mother and indicated a household size of 7 people during her youth. Demographic information provided shared she was not a current recipient of government assistance (TANF, food stamps, etc.) nor was her family during her childhood.

Results

Results detailed in this section are a representation of the reoccurring and common statements retrieved through analysis of the fifteen interviews. I used an automated transcription service and reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. Following transcription and review for accuracy, I analyzed the data using a thematic analysis. I outline frequent word use, phrases, and statements. Using Vivo coding, I highlighted additional commonalities, which assisted me in outlining similar participant responses. I then organized reoccurring statements, frequently used words, and phrases into an outline format.

Theme development

I recruited participants using direct solicitation, word of mouth, advertisements in social media groups comprised of Black women, email, and flyers throughout the surrounding community. Once I purposefully selection of 15 participants I assigned each one a number sequence (ex: Participant 0001, Participant 0002...) and then contacted them to arrange an interview. If unable to schedule an interview with an individual originally selected, I revised the list and added another person from the participant pool. I provided location options, including the

availability of various teleconferencing platforms and arranged a time and date to conduct the meeting. Participants could also agree to come to the office locations of TMW, described above. I emailed the informed consent documents to participants, not in the local geographic location which they completed and returned prior to the interview via video teleconferencing. Upon request, those agreeing to go forward with an interview completed a demographic questionnaire with their participant number attached to assure identifying information was not associated with participant responses. During the assigned date and time, participants met with me individually, and respond to semi-structured interview questions previously validated. I recorded the interview after the participants agreed to the taping process. Once the transcription entity finished I deleted the copies after I reviewed the outcomes of the interview. I secured transcripts and additional documentation used in this study with protected passwords on a password protected computer I owned and exclusively accessed. I am the only person with the password to the computer.

Demographic Questions

Prior to the interview, each participant agreed to complete a demographic questionnaire. The document served as a screening tool for participants to verify age and identification as an African-American female. Additional information provided by the demographic survey included ethnicity, marital status, current family size, annual income, employment status, education level as well as current profession or occupation. The questionnaire provided the researcher whether the participant was a caregiver to any children, the number of people that lived in the primary residence and the primary residence during childhood. Lastly, responses to the questionnaire provided information surrounding receiving government assistance now or during their youth.

Interview Questions

This study included a total of fifteen participants. I interviewed seven of the participants via teleconference and the remaining eight participants met with me in person at an agreed-upon private location. The consent included an agreement to record the interviews, which I reviewed again prior to beginning the interview. Using a digital recording device allowed the interviews to be memorialized and transcribed via automated transcription services. The interviews ranged from 15-60 minutes. I captured participant gestures, eye contact, facial expression during the interviews using pen and paper and used the same method to notate internal emotional responses and changes I experienced during the process. After scanning the documentation into a PDF document, I saved the data on my password-protected computer. Following the last interview, I submitted the recordings for transcription and reviewed them for accuracy before beginning the analysis.

I entered each question into an excel spreadsheet, followed by each participant response to that particular question, which I verified twice for accuracy. This provided me with an organizational system for data collected and allowed for ease in coding and to begin identifying patterns emerging from the thematic analysis. During the actual interviews as well as the coding process, I began to note reoccurring responses to interview questions. Once I completed the initial analysis, I compared memos taken during interviews with the identified reoccurring patterns.

Theme Development

Table 2. Coding outline

Category	Interview Question #
Code #1: Psychological outcomes identified by SBW	4, 5, 14
Code #2: Behavioral outcomes identified by SBW	10,11, 12, 13,14
Code #3: Maladaptive Perceptions identified by SBW	3,5,6,7
Code #4: Defining Strength for the SBW	8,9

I reviewed emergent themes and patterns that evolved from participant responses to interview questions. Following the completion of the fifteen participant interviews, I identified the themes (see table 3) as reoccurring patterns and responses. Furthermore, patterns and derived emergent themes from participant descriptions that were either associated with themes or from a direct statement of the actual coded theme itself. I organized thematic categories according to the concept in which the theme referred (i.e. psychological, behavioral, social perception, strength for the SBW and unexpected themes). This section following includes examples of participant responses through direct quotes from interviews.

Table 3. Psychological Themes and Codes Identified from Frequent Participant Responses.

Content of text	Emergent theme	Type of theme
There's a sense of pride	Pride	Major
I feel proud		
It's exciting		
Powerful		
Confident/Confidence		
Happiness		
You have to be emotionally mature	Emotional regulation	Subtheme
Emotional stability		
I feel overwhelmed	Overwhelmed	Major
It's a rollercoaster/emotional rollercoaster		
Frustrated		
Sadness attributed to being alone	Loneliness	Major
Lack of support		
Sad		
I feel scared	Fear	Subtheme
There's fear		
Apprehension		
There's an angst/anxiety		
There's some uncertainty		

Thematic Category 1: Psychological Outcomes

The use of semi-structured interview questions allowed me to identify themes and categorize reoccurring statements and descriptions referenced or defined as a psychological outcome. The theme that relates to the psychological outcomes supports the research questions “How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them?” Participants responses used words such as pride, loneliness, and feeling overwhelmed, which I identified as major themes. Other themes included emotional regulation and fear (see Table 2). These results include participant responses that either directly stated pride, feeling overwhelmed, loneliness, or provided a relatable description. Interview questions in which participants described or identified these themes were; (a) “What is it like to be a Strong Black Woman,” (b) “Describe the feelings and emotions connected to being a strong Black woman,” and (c) “Considering the aspects of being a strong Black woman can you identify any behavioral or psychological responses to uphold to the persona of a strong Black woman?”

Looking at participant responses that identified loneliness, Erica noted “there's sometimes feeling like you're by yourself, I'm not fond of that. I would prefer to have a human companion that I could count on, you know?” Latonya responded,

It's a good, and it can also be a not so good position to be in, because it comes with a lot of scrutiny from external sources meaning, if you identify as or are perceived as an SBW, then it always comes with a load of questions from other people that either want to know what it's like or they want to know how to achieve the end result, the strength. And so sometimes if people don't identify or can't identify that that's what it is, it can be categorized as a lot of other things; anger, conceit, arrogance. It can be perceived a lot of

different ways, so it also can be a lonely position to stand in, if you don't readily have an explanation available for people for why you are the way you are, or why you act the way you act.

Kandi explained,

I do need some help. Because I think being a strong Black woman doesn't mean you are all-encompassing self-sufficient and it's still, you still require the help of others and so it can also feel lonely when people think you don't need support and help.

The second psychological theme identified in this study was feeling overwhelmed.

Michelle states “Sometimes it can be very overwhelming because of all the expectations that are on you.” Mercedes notes “Honestly it's hard. It's overwhelming. I find myself daily just being a little tired especially at work. Just having to go above and beyond because you don't want to be labeled as whatever they may label you as, "Oh she's lazy, she's this." Monica revealed, “It's kind of like an emotional rollercoaster because if you know you have a strong personality and you're a strong woman you constantly have to gauge where you're at based on different situations.”

Pride was the third psychological theme to emerge. Jade shared,

I think right now at this time, I think it's exciting. You know I'm proud to be who I am, I'm proud to be Black, I'm proud to be a woman. So, I think right now just with you know where America is, I think we're in a good position, Black women and I'm proud to be a Black woman, there ain't nobody better to be.

Brandy remarked “For me, I feel a sense of pride. I feel a sense of pride and kind of happiness around being a strong Black woman.” Kenya defined pride as, “I feel a sense of pride from being able to withstand and sustain the different circumstances that come along with building the strength of being strong and balanced. Barbara expressed pride as an SBW in terms of her role as

a caregiver “there's some pride in knowing I look at my kids and I see my kids are fine. I'm fine. My family is fine.” Alice noted,

The high extreme of emotion is being proud of yourself, having other people be proud of you and being accepted by others. Being able to connect with other people who can accept just your healthiness, your ability to stand in who God made you and feeling comfortable in that.

Fear was a subtheme that emerged from participant responses. The themes of fear included anxiety and uncertainty. In regard to fear, Erica shared “I know that I experience fear, and Lauren noted, “I would say fear.” Kenya shared,

I would definitely say from my experience that anxiety comes up. Being anxious, going along with the apprehension of not knowing, the uncertainty of through those strengths can bring on uncertainty. Am I not being balanced in my approach? Am I coming off as defensive? You start to question and worry and wonder about the moves that you made and if it's been received appropriately.

Barbara noted in regards to anxiety, “There is some angst, there's some angst because I feel like there's a lot on me. You know apart from God I really would be a mess because he undergirds me so there's some anxiety that comes with it.”

Emotional regulation emerged as a subtheme from participant interviews. Some participants defined emotional regulation as, emotional maturity and emotional stability. These responses merged under emotional regulation due to the nature of participant response. Latonya stated,

So emotionally, if you are not stable, meaning you're not used to encountering those things, or safely navigating those things, the rejection, the abandonment. Then I think that

you won't be able to. That's where the strength comes from, being able to handle those things. And emotionally being stable means, you don't break down emotionally or even internalize emotionally how you feel when you encounter those things because they're imminent. They're going to happen.

Kandi noted, “you have to actually be emotionally mature and mentally strong to be in my opinion, a strong Black woman.”

Table 4. Behavioral Themes and Codes Identified from Frequent Participant Responses

Content of text	Emergent theme	Type of theme
Aware of self	An awareness of	Major
Self-Conscious	self	
Observant of others response to me		
Recognizing		
Guarded	Self-Protection:	Major
Wearing a Mask	Protect who I am	
I get defensive		
Become assertive		
Accommodate others	Act accordingly	Subtheme
Adjust to environment and others		
I want to educate others	Defending SBW	Major
I become the teacher	(Communication)	
Try to have a conversation		
I want to explain why		

You have to be poised	Represent for the	Major
Dignified	culture	
Representative for others		
Role model for others		
Being kind		
Have humility		
Be approachable and personable		

Thematic Category 2: Behavioral Outcomes

I identified behavioral outcomes based on participant responses to semi-structured questions that provided a reaction to social stimuli, specifically stereotypes. The behavioral responses reflect the views of SBW through responses to controlling images surrounding identifying as SBW or behavior outcomes as an SBW. The interview questions aimed to elicit behavioral responses included; (a) “How has being an SBW shaped your behavior,” (b) “How do you find yourself trying to dispel stereotypes about SBW,” (c) “What are your behaviors in response to your awareness of stereotypes?” (d) “Does your interaction as an SBW with society vary, and if so, how?” and (e) “Considering aspects of SBW, can you identify any behavioral or psychological responses to uphold to the persona of SBW.” These questions supported the research question: “How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them?” and How do African American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) respond behaviorally to the perception of psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences in current gender culture? The major behavioral themes identified from participant responses included an

awareness of self, self-protection: protecting who I am, defending SBW, represent for the culture and act accordingly as presented in Table 2.

Regarding awareness of self, Michelle explains “I will say I have found myself trying not to do certain things because of certain, stereotypical things that people say about us.” In regard to her awareness of stereotypes, Brandy shared “I feel self-conscious about those stereotypes of coming off as like an angry Black woman or coming off as some who's not educated.” Monica explained,

I'm more observant. Definitely more observant analyzing the situation more, really trying to be more self-aware of my own characteristics as an SBW as far as body language. Making sure I tone down my body language in certain situations so that my body language is not aggressive...it may be a response as far as lowering my tone of voice, so it doesn't seem like there's a lot of power or strength coming in my voice. It may be something very nice, but because of my tone, it may be perceived in a different way. So just more observant more than anything so that I can assess how I need to manage the situation, making sure that I'm not representing any of those negative stereotypes.

The second behavioral theme emerged from participants attributing their response to self-protection: protect who I am. Brandy shared that identifying as SBW has “shaped my behavior for me to feel like I can't trust other people and I have to have a wall up.” She further noted, “So I think that's part of the biggest thing that impacts me is just not feeling safe around others always having a sense of a barrier and a protective mindset.” Latoya explained her behavior as an SBW reinforces her to, “operate in a more guarded and protective way, meaning I have surfaced, general conversations with people I don't personally know or trust.” Kellie expounded on self-protection as she shared identifying as SBW,

made me wear a mask for a very long time. It shaped my behavior because I would not ask for advice. I would not ask for help. I would not ask for anything so, my behavior became more stubborn. My behavior became authoritative, almost to a stubborn aspect. And it's both on with responsibilities that I put on myself and responsibilities that I felt that other people were putting on me. So, it now has shaped my behavior because it's allowing me to be more humble, to understand that all the stuff that I knew I didn't know but was going to continue acting like I knew. To let all that, to let all that go. So now my behavior is more prone to listening and understanding. More prone to not having to argue but wanting to seek understanding, and not having to be right, but instead wanting to be effective. So my behavior is now a lot more collaborative, and the whole stubborn part comes with protecting who I am, protecting my peace of mind.

Defending SBW evolved as the third emergent theme for this participant pool of SBW. I identified this theme based on participant responses as they became aware of stereotypes. In regard to attempts to dispel stereotypes, Porsha stated,

Educate really. I love connecting with people especially Whites, Hispanics and so showing them a different side explaining in a way about what a SBW looks like or if they see something, say it's a video posted because that happened there was a video posted and they kind of had a look on their face like they didn't understand well let me show you why she's doing like this because she went through poverty or she did this or she did that and just trying to educate and explain and then make a connection to something that they also have probably had in their lives and then seen in a totally different way.

Kandi responded,

I feel like I love doing this a lot more among Black people. Especially my girlfriends. And having conversations with them and saying, "You know it's ok if you feel like X," you know, "It's okay if you can't handle it all." Like take a self-care day, don't go to work today, stay home. Like you don't have to keep going on this way. No one is going to think less of you for taking some time to yourself or telling someone I can't take this on right now. And I haven't really had to have the conversation with White people about it, just because the interactions that I have with White people are mainly at my job and I'm just not talking this at work.

Barbara responded, "So pointing out stereotypes and prejudices is important. And I, when, when they are in my face like that, I'm gonna respond and just show the inequity of it." Jade noted,

Through conversations with individuals. Conversations, I think because I've never had to deal with any negative stereotypes so that I haven't had to like dispel anyone's belief, but even in the circle of friends that I have or the circle of co-workers that I have that I would characterize as strong Black women, just from our conversations you realize, that we're not better than anybody else, but that we all have our same struggles, insecurities, just people. Alice indicated, "Because there are opportunities to teach and to share perceptions with those who are open to receive that. And many times build relationships and build understanding with. Other people who may think differently or voice differently than you feel."

Michelle shared,

I think having conversations, especially with the brothers. I'm not afraid to sit down and talk to someone and ask them, "Why do you feel that way" or "Why are you saying that?"

And when you begin to engage a person into a positive conversation and kind of pick their brain as to why they're saying that and why they're thinking that, if you really listen to them, you really understand there is some missing information or something that happened to them or they have a notion or perceived ideal about a person that's really not true only because they've heard others say it. So you have to really, I would say, engaging a person into a conversation and just really seeing why they're saying what they're saying. And a lot of times they can be disproved if you really sit down and take the time to really talk to a person and you can kind of just plant some seeds that will change their thinking or their thought process.

Represent for the culture evolved as the fourth emergent theme from this population of participants and emerged from several descriptions relating to the presentation of SBW, which described a controlled calm demeanor associated with cultural representation. As stated by Lauren,

It's definitely made me be conscious of how I carry myself. For my child as well as for other people who don't understand Black culture. It's definitely made me keep choosing every day to try to be better than I was the day before, when I feel like I'm having a down day it's definitely made me look at the situation and push myself to climb out of it or to put the focus elsewhere where I need to so that I can keep pushing forward.

Alice expressed,

What I think about when I think about behaviors, and it's being positive. Being positive knowing that in many areas you are on the frontline of not just representing yourself, but representing all African-American women. Making sure that throughout your lifespan that you maintain positive behaviors, influential behaviors that impact those that are peers

of yours. That you maintain relationships with people who are going before you. Who are mentors and that you can learn from and most importantly that you continue to pour out in African-American women of all ages younger than you are, to continue to share the journey and to share your perspective of the journey and help as much of it as possible, not to be fearful for them and not to be unexpected.

Kenya added,

I identify with them, these are all woman who are referenced as having strength and their strength, they are very confident yet they are very personable and approachable. They are leaders, yet they also know how to follow the pathway of others who came before them and learn from their mistakes and also they learn from their successes, they are also women who can hear the voices of others to bring about change but they are also assertive in giving their strengths and giving their gifts to the cause so that the works of these other women and the persona that they had, the women before them and the ancestors.

Act accordingly was the fifth emergent behavioral theme described or stated by participants in the study. Regarding accommodating or adjusting, Latoya responded,

My behavior in response, I would say, it goes back to the making adjustments in my behavior like I mentioned before. In mixed settings, there are some things I just don't do because I just don't know how it may be received in a particular setting. And when I say don't do, I don't agree with or lean with or give my vote to things based on race or gender, I just try to remain neutral. Cause when we discuss things, it can be news and current events, if the suspects or the entertainer is someone that I share a race and gender with, I just try to remain neutral.

Monica interjected, ‘I definitely think you're constantly looking at your circumstances to see how you respond because you don't want to come off as that strong Black woman because there are so many negative stereotypes that come with that.’ Kellie shared, “when I was in certain environments, whether it's work or whether it's social, I would say that, if I'm viewed, based on stereotypes, then I try to show you the other side of it.”

Table 5. Perceptions Identified from Frequent Participant Responses.

Content of text	Emergent theme	Type of theme
Underestimated-They didn't see me coming	Socially derived perception as	Major
Not accepted (disapproval)	inadequate	
Inferior/Powerless		
Misunderstood		
Settling for where I am (Glass Ceiling)		

Thematic Category 3: Perceptions Identified by the SBW

The thematic category “perceptions identified by SBW” described how to bring awareness to perceptions identified by SBW as gathered through the attitudes and conclusions offered by individuals encountered either socially or places of employment. This thematic category was relevant to the research questions; How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them” and “What are some of the maladaptive perceptions that influence African-American women who identify as strong Black women (SBW) in current gender culture?” Emergent themes and reoccurring patterns were elicited from semi-structured interview questions; (a) “Have you ever experienced stereotyping of SBW, and if so, was it used unfavorably by someone of another

race/culture,” (b) “When have you found it challenging to be Black,” and (c) “What is your perception of yourself as a Black woman in your place of employment and/or social environment?” I categorized themes as socially derived perception as inadequate. Contextual descriptions of “Inadequate as SBW” included, underestimated, inferior/powerless, excluded, misunderstood, Glass ceiling/settling for less. Identified content aligned with SBW but used unfavorably by another race/culture included statements about life-threatening medical experiences and diversity at work. Participant responses pointing towards the emerged theme SBW with culture included content descriptions surrounding experiencing stereotyping from Black women and Black men.

Underestimated emerged in participant responses as Jade shared,

I ran into situations at work where somebody will ask me a question and I'll give them an answer and I don't know because they don't like the answer I gave them or maybe it's not what they want to hear and they'll follow up on my response and I'm like, "hmm because they don't trust me? Why is that? Is it because I'm Black?" We always kind of have those thoughts.

Alice shared,

in the initial part of my ministry, the clergy was predominantly male. And in the denomination that I serve in, it was not very acceptable at all for a female to be clergy and to be in ministry. So from that perspective in terms of my place of employment, it was as if everyone felt like I needed to prove myself. To prove that I was worthy as opposed to where I stood which was standing on the call and anointing that God had on my life.

Latoya contributed to how being underestimated as she noted,

I think I have surprised them, by being intelligent because I don't think they expected it, and so my perception of myself is that I'm viewed as one of the best-kept secrets, so to speak, in that area, because I don't think, not I don't think, they didn't see me coming. They didn't see my intelligence coming. They didn't see me, my connections with so many people in the organizations. They didn't see it coming, they weren't expecting what they got. So, they have "Aha" moments every day.

Inferiority and powerless was noted as Kenya who offered, not personal feelings of inferiority because I didn't feel inferior to them within myself, but I knew that professionally and in that setting, I was always the inferior person because they had two things going for 'em that I did not; they were White, number one, and number two they were the women in control.

Kenya further shared

I felt like, I couldn't go say anything about those White women. There's the people who were directly over them because they weren't going to do anything about it." "Who is this Black girl coming to complain on these two White women?" And I felt like, the Black woman who was in leadership, I felt like she was pulling kind of an "Uncle Tom" type situation where she was gonna do what she had to do to stay in their good graces and sometimes she would clam up. So it's just, professional feelings of inferiority, and an inability to really protect, protect myself and get real justice."

Misunderstood was identified in Lauren's statement,

Misunderstood is the first thing that comes to mind because people don't understand our culture and the clientele I typically work with, I hear people of other races say things that they really don't understand about the Black culture or about Black women, about a lot of the things that we encounter. I hear a lot of statements that I'm just like they just don't know, they're ignorant. And I wonder how that carries over into myself even though I'm an employee, I'm still a Black woman just like that client of theirs was.”

Glass ceiling/settling for less was shown via Cheryl’s statement “I feel like I paid my dues in my profession and I should be even higher up than what I am, but because of the fact that I'm Black, I had to maintain and settle for where I am. I should have been in a higher position than what I have.”

Table 6. Defining Strength as Identified From Frequent Participant Responses.

Content of text	Emergent theme	Type of theme
Recognize vulnerability/weakness	Defining strength	Major
Responsibility		
You have to be mature, the bigger person		
Independence		
Orderly or structured		
Self-control		
Spiritual/Religious beliefs		

Thematic Category 4: Defining Strength for the SBW

The theme defining strength for the SBW emerged through solicited participant responses to semi-structured interview questions, which prompted personal definitions and expressions surrounding strength as it related to identifying as an SBW. The definitions offered by participants add to both psychological and behavioral concepts identified in this research. Specific semi-structured questions that elicited these responses included “As an SBW, what does strength mean to you and how have you had to express strength” and “What would a lack of strength look like.” These interview questions were constructed to substantiate the research questions “How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them?” and How do African American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) respond behaviorally to the perception of psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences in current gender culture? Defining strength was identified through the context in which participants indicated vulnerability, responsibility, maturity, independence, order and structure, self-control, and spiritual and religious beliefs. Erica explained,

that strength “means power under control, knowing how to fight. I don't mean physically, but I mean, philosophically. Knowing how to fight, emotionally, mentally, verbally, professionally, spiritually. But also knowing what battles to fight. Strength for me is relying on the God of all grace and the God of all power, recognizing that I can't do it.

Jade indicates responsibility and maturity in strength as she suggested, “one thing about strength is your reactions, reacting responsibly. I think you kind of learn that with maturity. It takes a lot to be the bigger person sometimes.” Kenya shared “to me strength is being vulnerable ...

meaning a strong person is able to identify their strengths, what they are good with, as well as the weaknesses and where they need areas of growth.” Although participants defined spiritual and religious beliefs contextually as part of strength, I expounded upon under the thematic category outlining unexpected themes and categories as reoccurring statements and phrases identifying spiritual and religious beliefs and practices identified segments of interviews which pertained to other themes.

Table 7. Unexpected Themes and Codes Identified from Frequent Participant Responses.

Content of text	Emergent theme	Type of theme
Referring to God Jesus Christ Lord and Savior Prayer	Acknowledgment of Spiritual and Religious beliefs	Major
Independent thinker Be my authentic self Who I am	Authenticity	Major
Life-threatening medical experience Lack of diversity at work	SBW used unfavorably by another race/culture	Major
Used unfavorably by Black Women Heard it from Black Men	SBW used unfavorably within culture	Major

Thematic Category 5: Other themes

I identified unexpected themes and reoccurring patterns while conducting this study. Acknowledgment of spiritual and religious beliefs and authenticity, SBW used unfavorably by another race/culture, however, SBW used within the culture. I did not solicit the themes through specific semi-structured questions but rather evolved from overall participant responses as to interview questions I posed. As a reoccurring theme and pattern identified through participant interviews was their acknowledgment of spiritual and religious beliefs. They shared and discussed this theme as part of their beliefs and practices. For example, Jade offered, “I think also what I've learned, you've got to have a spiritual grounding too for strength. So... yes all my strength comes from The Lord because it gets rough sometimes.” Michelle expressed,

that term strong Black woman, I think it really depends on what your foundation is, and mine, of course, is in the Lord Jesus Christ. So, my strength, my foundation to be a strong Black woman is to have strong morals and values, to be able to balance your work, your career and your faith, and able to deal with life situations and tragedies without allowing them to overcome you. For me, that comes from having faith in Christ.

Porsha stated, “drawing from a strong source and my source is God.” Alice conveyed, “So many times I would have to say I have to always be grounded in prayer and lead my thought process from a Godly place.” Lauren revealed strength through her religious and spiritual beliefs as she indicated

...knowing that I can't do it by myself since I am Christian I do rely on God no matter what happens when I feel like I'm stuck. I always know there is a way out of this because I know that He's not gonna bring me to it and not bring me through it. So, my feeling stuck is not really feeling stuck. Like I feel like I might be backed into a corner for a

second but I know if I could just sit here, think, pray, be still there's some kind of way out of this corner.

I also found authenticity as an emergent theme among this participant pool of SBW.

Across multiple participant interviews, the idea of being “my authentic self” arose as they shared several expressions. Porsha noted,

I would say that a strong Black woman is based on being your most authentic self. We all have different and unique qualities that make us strong. And it's not a cookie-cutter thing versus one might have a way that they talk that's strong, but in the way that I present myself it might be strong, so I think that if you're your most authentic self as a Black woman, who you've been raised to be, your beliefs then through that foundation you are defined by Black women, if you're being true to yourself.

Mercedes exclaimed, “loving and accepting myself and being able to be who I am in any type of environment that I'm in.” She added, “What does it mean to be a strong Black woman, it just means just be you, like I say it, just be you and accept who you are and embrace it.” Alice highlighted, “To be a strong Black woman means to have your own individual identity and to feel comfortable in that identity and not need to connect to stereotypes or what other people may think it means.” Brady felt, “there's also moments where I will continue to be who I am, whether it's a stereotype or not because that's a part of my personality and culture.”

SBW used unfavorably by another race/culture presented as a relevant theme for this participant population through descriptions surrounding life-threatening medical experiences and diversity at work. Kellie shared,

I had a boss and he, he had teams work in Dallas. He had like let's Colorado just other areas. But I realized very quickly that in his Dallas office he only had Black women. So, one day we were asking about it and he explained that "It's nothing. I just feel that the people that I hired," which I know that the tone meant Black woman. He said "I knew that as far as having to like monitor ya'll, micromanaging it wasn't necessary. Ya'll were gonna make sure everything was handled. You were going to make sure that any other department that needed to get something done had it. If there was any type of confrontation you're not going to back down from it. So you're going to make sure that's taking care of as well." And so you would see a lot more diversity in his other areas. But the stereotype of it was that because we were the strong Black women that everything was going to get done. But in reality I mean in reality, it did. So there was definitely a validity to that, but at the same time because he thought we were strong Black women certain things you see such as when he's explaining a situation with someone and whether it be the neck rolling or whether it be like the dialect that he's using you know he's talking about a Black woman. And in those situations strong Black women. So that is definitely the unfavorable part is being seen as though we have an attitude. And that we are closed off. But I do see that on both sides, whether through its, our own culture or other cultures.

Kandi explained,

I think that happened to me when I gave birth to my child. We had him, I had him by cesarean section and he was the NICU and I was laid up in the hospital. And my doctor was a Black woman and they could not figure out what my blood pressure stayed up. And I mean, we're talking about I'm in there for the third day, my blood pressure had not gone down and my doctors happen to look at my chart and she's like you know, "What pain

regimen are you on?" And I was like "Well, they're just giving me pills." and she was like "You never received an IV drip of medication, of morphine or anything?" and I was like "No I didn't get anything." and she was like "You're kidding me!" And I was like "No, after they brought me back to the room, you know, they gave me these pills and said this is for your pain, that's all I got." And little did I know, I was supposed to have a whole morphine drip. I didn't know that. And so my whole care team, minus my doctor, was White women and the one White woman that was on duty the particular day that my doctor finally had had enough of this, you could just tell that she was kinda like, she really didn't want to be interacting with, my Black baby and my Black family, you know. I dare say, she probably was like "Well, she can handle it." You know, and it's probably from that perspective of me being a Black woman. And so I would say that's probably an instance where that could have harmed my life. You know because she had that perception of me, like and she did say to my doctor, well she wasn't complaining about the pain. Well, I thought that this was all I got. You know like, so what am I going to complain about. You know I thought this is normal to feel like this after having a baby. And so I think that was an instance where that, that stereotype harmed me because if my blood pressure kept going up I could have had a stroke. I could have died, you know, things, something bad really could have happened to me.

SBW used unfavorably within a culture, which emerged as a theme by the participants in this study evolved based on content in interviews, which described or eluded to experiences of stereotyping. Lauren shared her experience of stereotyping within this particular gender culture and with Black men,

I would say stereotyping that I experience was our own culture. I would say whether it's judgment and criticism by other Black women where you wished you could look at each other and know that you're in a struggle together and support one another. There is this stereotype of if I carry myself a certain way or if I don't have gold teeth or if I don't, you know, where revealing clothing or things like that that I think I'm better than other Black women or if I don't smoke that I think I know I'm bougie or I'm siddity. That's most of the stereotypes that I've encountered. And then when it comes to our Black men I think it's more of I don't need them or I'm too independent or they're just afraid of my success.

Kellie provided an experience relating to her,

I am proper because I'm fair skin. I'm challenged within my own culture and outside people telling me that I don't count because I'm not Black, and that's going to be from others. Or within my own culture of "Hey you are Black, you should know about this stuff, you should be doing this stuff, you are more diverse." I'm really not that diverse. I just am open-minded to different things. So I get it on all sides from both other African-Americans because I'm seen as different, but then for people who are not Black because I am not seen as the stereotype.”

Erica also acknowledged experiencing stereotyping of SBW with Black male counterparts as she shared, “I have experienced it. It was used unfavorably to me. It was not by someone of another race or culture. It was within the Black community. Having men to say the little stuff like, ‘I don't see any vulnerability in you,’ basically implying that, I'm not soft, I'm not ladylike, I'm hard, I'm rough.”

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an analysis of psychological and behavioral outcomes in addition to maladaptive perceptions of African-American women who identify as SBW. A total of 15 women between the ages of 25 to 63 years of age who self-identified as SBW participated in semi-structured interviews. Through these interviews, participants shared their experiences, which contributed to the identification of emergent themes. Significant themes pertaining to psychological outcomes included loneliness and pride, each emerging directly from participant interview responses. Noteworthy behavioral outcomes emerging from interviews included an awareness of self, self-protection; protect who I am, act accordingly, defending SBW and represent for the culture. Themes attributed to maladaptive perceptions were inadequate as SBW when used unfavorably by another race/culture, and SBW used unfavorably within a culture. Unexpected themes emerged from this research, including the acknowledgment of spiritual and religious beliefs and authenticity.

During data analysis, I aimed to answer the identified research questions which focused on; (a) maladaptive perceptions that influence SBW, (b) behavioral responses of SBW based on perceptions of psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences and (c) psychological and behavioral responses to social perceptions. I provided answers to research questions through the analysis of transcripts obtained during semi-structured interviews. Research questions guided developing thematic categories from emerging themes. Thematic categories identified in this research included (a) psychological outcomes, (b) behavioral responses, (c) maladaptive responses, (d) defining SBW. Unexpected thematic categories emerged to describe other themes presented in this research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

Throughout this chapter, I provide a detailed analysis of the results of this research as outlined in Chapter 4, expanding knowledge surrounding SBW. The analysis incorporated existing literature surrounding African American women who identify as SBW. I used qualitative research methods to gain insight into the realities and lived experiences of SBW (Heppner et al, 2016). I focused on identifying how this gender culture responds psychologically and behaviorally as an SBW, while also highlighting maladaptive perceptions gained through societal interactions drawn through answers to research questions identified in Chapter 1. I inductively analyzed the data collected from the participants using semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. The format allowed participants to share freely, providing their reality, which I reviewed to identify reoccurring themes. This chapter consists of (a) summary of findings, (b) discussion of findings with implications according to relevant literature, (c) implications, (d) delimitations and limitations and (e) recommendations for future research.

My analysis expands the knowledge surrounding psychological outcomes and social perceptions of African American women who identify as SBW. These efforts may help to inform clinical interventions and provide social awareness of the struggles and potential effects on this gender group. While the research for SBW is growing with several qualitative and quantitative studies, many of the studies focus on disparities and debilitating symptoms (Donovan & West, 2015; Watson & Hunter, 2015). While many of these studies inform the mental and behavioral health challenges of SBW, the lack of salient literature warrants additional studies on culturally focused clinical interventions. I can use the study to further inform clinicians regarding the psychological outcomes of loneliness and strength through recognizing areas of vulnerability. I

also presented the concept of authenticity and religion as additions to the body of literature surrounding SBW, which offers insights on the application of religion to inform strength.

Summary of Findings

My purpose in conducting this qualitative study was to bring awareness to the psychological outcomes, behavioral responses, and perceptions identified by African American women who identify as an SBW. I employed the use of collecting data by engaging participants in semi-structured interviews to elicit participant responses leading to emergent themes. Once transcribed, I organized participant responses using an excel spreadsheet with questions grouped based on the category of the question (i.e., psychological, behavioral, perceptions, realities, and stereotypes, defining SBW and strength). I developed the following research questions as a guide for this research:

RQ1: What are some of the maladaptive perceptions that influence African-American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) in current gender culture?

RQ2: How do African American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) respond behaviorally to the perception of psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences in current gender culture?

RQ3: How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them?

I viewed the behavioral responses of the SBW through participant responses to coping, enacting strength, self-sacrifice, and psychological responses through stereotypes, controlling images, strength, and emotional regulation. The thematic category defining strength allowed for the extraction of both psychological and behavioral outcomes. In concluding vulnerability as a dual outcome, my observation of participants indicated they did not show weakness by appearing

soft as well as maintaining cognitive awareness of personal areas of vulnerability and a need to protect them. I identified maladaptive perceptions for this population and framed them appropriately as social perceptions, which resulted in the inadequacy of SBW. To understand culture experiences with African American women and their male counterparts, I documented flawed perceptions as influencing their thoughts and habits.

Research Question Responses

I address the research questions guiding the study as presented in Chapter 1 in this chapter. The research questions were:

1. What are some of the maladaptive perceptions that influence African-American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) in current gender culture?
2. How do African American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) respond behaviorally to the perception of psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences in current gender culture?
3. How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them?

Research Question 1: Social Perceptions

What are some of the maladaptive perceptions that influence African-American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) in current gender culture? Themes outlined in TA further shaped this research question to identify external or social perceptions (Clark & Braun, 2017).

The participants in this population identified social perceptions rather than maladaptive perceptions attributed to them as gathered through interactions in their place of employment or while interacting in a public environment. Maladaptive perceptions reflected social sensitivities

indicative of inadequacies of SBW. Content in participant interviews described their experiences in which they recognized they were underestimated, received disapproval, misunderstood, and arbitrarily forced to “settle for less” in their careers. These descriptions of inadequacy did not appear to be the internalized perception of those who participated in this study, rather they were reflective of external attitudes and beliefs directed towards them as they engaged within their communities. Awareness and insight gained through societal attitudes identified by participants informed their interpretation of external perceptions. Social perceptions gathered appeared to further inform the SBW of societal expectations of African American women who identify as SBW. Participants further shared these social perceptions of inadequacy did not inform their self-perception but conveyed the assumptions of those they encountered. Participants provided their realities revealing situations where they felt underestimated in their place of employment, as well as examples where they perceived people from the dominant culture regarded them as inferior. Subordination was not adopted personally, but rather in the situations they encountered and environments, like their place of employment, where they felt defined as powerlessness. This aligns with social disparities in communities which historically marginalized individuals. While these individuals may not own the perception of inferiority, they experienced the effects. Aside from the unfavorable perceptions identified by the majority of participants, a few shared a more positive lens, which aligned with current characteristics of SBW as nurtures and caregivers.

An interesting emerging concept was how cultural experiences influenced the viewpoints of the SBW label. Participants shared several examples of challenges faced within the African American culture, which shaped their world view as an SBW. They mentioned feeling criticism, judgment, and a lack of support based on within culture variances. The participants attributed differences to expectations of those who SBW encountered, who may or may not identify with

the label. Assumptions provided further insight to inform aspects of the development and functionality of SBW. Historically, the concept of an SBW was to overcome against all odds. The concept also embraced disassociating from stereotypes commonly attributed to African American women which includes mammy, Jezebel, and welfare queen (Donovan, 2011; Donovan et al., 2012; Donovan & West, 2015; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). For these participants, identifying as SBW informed their discernment within gendered cultures. The concept provided evidence for additional research to increased awareness into subcultures based on stereotypes.

Research Question 2: Behavioral Outcomes

How do African American women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) respond behaviorally to the perception of psychological, behavioral, social disparities, and lived experiences in current gender culture?

Data obtained further shaped this research question to identify the behavioral outcomes of SBW. Strength was an area, which I aimed to define based on participant disclosures. Several definitions coincided with current definitions of strength, independence, self-control, responsibility, dependability, and maturity (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2007;2008; Davis, 2015; Nelson et al., 2016, Wilkins, 2012). Participants highlighted vulnerability as a factor of strength, recognizing weaknesses and vulnerability, as informing their strength. This was posited in a manner for SBW to protect themselves by being aware of areas in which they are more susceptible to attack, requiring them to use enabling means of self-protection and emotional regulation.

Reinforcing strength for SBW was briefly mentioned as one participant expounded upon being socialized to be strong and independent, while attempting to balance social expectations of

femininity, which do not support independence manifested through identification as SBW or ideas surrounding Black femininity (Donovan & West, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2016).

Research Question 3: Psychological and Behavioral Responses To Social Perceptions

How do African-American women who identify as SBW respond psychologically and behaviorally to social perceptions attributed to them?

By asking this research question, I sought to obtain the psychological and behavioral responses to societal perceptions of SBW, as they related to an awareness of stereotypes. The African American women who identified as SBW provided several responses outlining their reaction to perceptions attributed to them. Findings from participant interviews produced three general themes and two subthemes within a psychological framework. The themes included (a) pride, (b) overwhelmed, and (c) loneliness. Subthemes encompassed expressions of emotional regulation and fear.

Participants identified three primary psychological themes, which were prevalent in response to social perceptions attributed to them because of their identity as an SBW, loneliness, overwhelmed, and pride. They described loneliness as encounters that left them feeling abandoned due to being an SBW. This included their reactions based on marital status (single) and isolation related to the perception of independence through self-sufficiency and strength, a lack of professional comradery, and solitude, in addition to feeling unsupported in their personal lives (e.g. intimate relationships, family relationships). Analysis of the data provided further evidence regarding loneliness as resulting from perceptions of isolating factors.

SBW clearly described feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, or identified rollercoaster-like feelings, which they indicated as both positive and negative Fear and emotional regulation

emerged as subthemes, which they attributed to psychological responses. Fear came as a few of the participants expressed feeling threatened when relating to people from the dominant culture. They also shared they experienced fear regarding the potential harm to their husbands, sons, and other Black male connections. The SBW discussed how emotional regulating their emotions to cope with the realities and experiences of despair. The ability to effectively handle emotions assisted them in internally managing challenges to their mental health.

The behavioral responses participants identified through the emergent theme of awareness of self-described ongoing conscious efforts to remain observant of self, recognizing when they needed to alter something about themselves to possibly control how people view them. The participants shared this primarily occurred in their work environment. Distinguishing socially appropriate viewpoints within the culture created opportunities for sharing their experiences with others who had similar encounters. Although they felt inadequate in social situations, SBW in this study embodied a sense of pride regardless of historical perceptions (Bilodeau, 1992; Ashely, 2014).

Discussion

The motivation and foundation behind this study resulted from a review of literature in which there appeared a need for the current insight of Black women who identify as SBW as previous studies identified disparities associated with SBW. Much of the foundational research is more than 10 years old, a time when the political atmosphere in the United States set the stage for racial and cultural empowerment of Black women. It was comparable to the period when the Civil Rights Movement occurred and Black women accepted the onus of exemplifying womanhood through the SBW concept (Wilkins, 2012; Stanton, Jerald, Ward & Avery, 2017). Licensed clinicians with experience serving primarily the African American community, in

various aspects of mental health, shift cultural messages by removing stigmas and myths surrounding psychological distress, thereby empowering individuals to seek therapeutic services.

Loneliness

Black women have historically, Black women felt unsupported and emotionally unprotected. The notion to explore cognitions around feelings and emotions of SBW relating to social perceptions emanated based on the lack of support (Bilodeau, 1992; Ashely, 2014). My goal was to identify additional feelings and emotions experienced by SBW as they engaged with society. Hearing the about environmental interactions from the participants provided me with specific information about their thoughts concerning isolation and confinement. Overall psychological and behavioral themes in this population corroborated current research with the extension of the psychological outcome of loneliness, not previously expounded upon in the literature I reviewed. Aside from loneliness, vulnerability informed strength, authenticity and within culture experiences as SBW shared emergent themes.

While participants expressed historically prevalent themes of caregiving and resilience, they introduced additional concepts from the lens of an SBW. The women shared relevant knowledge and insight regarding loneliness through the detailed experiences of seclusion associated with identification as an SBW. Self-reliance and independence, concepts previously associated with SBW, also presented in this study, but in a manner not previously endorsed. The women who discussed self-reliance and independence shared their experiences as they related to previous beliefs and attitudes. SBW upheld the detrimental belief of maintaining staunch independence and self-reliance (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T, 2009; Davis, 2015). Participants presented an alternative framework endorsing attitudes and beliefs revealing that they needed and desired support.

Loneliness as a psychological outcome was a prevalent theme and several SBW in this population who appeared independent and self-reliant related how their presentation often led to isolation and exclusion. Participants expounded upon this concept of loneliness by comparing their encounters to others who were not able to comprehend their strength. Loneliness further supported feeling misunderstood as a result of external misconceptions of independence, which appeared to remove the need for external support. Data in this research further informs beliefs surrounding independence, self-reliance, and the desired support of SBW. My research underscored outcomes from a recent quantitative study focused on loneliness as a relevant factor for comprehending SBWs need for emotional support (Watson-Singleton, 2017). The expression of loneliness as described by participants was not specific to any age category and the relationship to psychological health further aligned with the lack of reciprocity in which SBW endorse in their relationship as detailed in a study conducted by Watson-Singleton (2017). Since the Watson-Singleton (2017) study does not specify loneliness in the measure of perceived support, this study extends upon reviewed literature surrounding the phenomenon. Davis and Afifi (2019) defined loneliness, as similar to confinement, solitude, and fear in response to discriminatory actions taken against them. While I did not specifically ask about psychiatric diagnosis, those experiencing loneliness, and sadness could potentially screen positive for depression.

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation aligned with the characteristic of emotional containment and further substantiates stoicism. Black women who identify as SBW appeared to subscribe to part of the historical attributes associated with this stereotype. One of these attributes that presented as a reoccurring theme amongst participants in this study was the affirmation that SBW must be

mature and present as emotionally regulated. This belief upholds previous literature suggesting SBW remain emotional contained and stoic (Nelson et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). While the aspect of emotional containment remained present, this population shed additional insight on a more progressive stance of coping and self-care, not commonly addressed in the literature. While they shared some maladaptive coping behaviors, they considered them as previous actions they no longer display. This further gives evidence to the transformations of SBW to be more active in coping as opposed to solely embodying strength while not engaging in activities to maintain strength (Ashley, 2014, Davis, 2015; Nelson et al., 2016). Coping mechanisms outlined in the literature suggested lowering race-related stress by using high-effort coping, faith-based activities, and community involvement (Clark et al, 1999; Hays & Aranda, 2016). Activities to increase and maintain aspects of strength as shared by participants included counseling, associated therapeutic interventions, and a variety of self-care activities.

Behavioral Responses

Behavioral responses to social perceptions identified by SBW participants overwhelmingly coincided with the previously documented themes of shifting and intersectionality. There was a resounding concordance with the participants in this study as they shared the concepts of SBW as protective factors. This aligned with the theme, an increased sense of awareness, which expand methods SBW used as protection. Awareness of self, proved to be a major behavioral theme as several participants suggested a need to constantly be aware of their surroundings when engaging in social activities. SBW need increased cultural self-awareness as they navigate spaces, which may appear threatening or unaccepting. Although not labeled as such, an awareness of self is comparable to shifting. Participants in this study provided

insight into the actual manner in which shifting occurs. It was also recognized that SBW became more self-conscious as their awareness increased.

SBW as a Protective Factor

SBW was a protective factor as described by the participants. Through behavioral responses in which SBW affirmed the protection of self physically, as well as self-protection of their identity, and personality through assertiveness, they discussed the need for guarding themselves by wearing a self-imposed mask. Self-protection appeared to emerge in this study through the theme “awareness of self.” When mentioning awareness, or attention to the environment, observation, and other behavioral responses to social stimuli, they attributed their concerns to aspects of protecting themselves (Watson & Hunter, 2015). Protection of self as discussed by participants, primarily revolved around places of employment and potential perceptions from others. SBW wanted to prevent unnecessary criticism, which supported the behavioral response known as shifting (Johnson et al., 2015).

As stated in the literature, Black women use shifting behaviors to adjust to social environments. Socialized to assimilate into the dominant culture when discrimination was possible, SBW could achieve access to more advancement opportunities (Johnson et al., 2015). Also connected to shifting was the emergent theme “act accordingly.” This theme as described by SBW included adjusting their behavior to accommodate the dominant culture in an effort to prevent themselves from being perceived negatively. This included removing possible perceptions of being threatening, especially when the setting is not comprised of predominantly African Americans. Shifting was also associated with acculturation and enculturation and described by this population as changes in tone of voice to ensure clarity in communication.

While literature views shifting as a coping mechanism to possible stereotypes and discrimination, I did not investigate shifting specifically (Johnson et al., 2015).

Defending SBW was a theme captured by the participants regarding behavioral responses as they became aware of stereotypes. This overarching theme encompassed SBW descriptions of educating people through conversation and explanations to eliminate disparaging beliefs about African American women. They unexpectedly described the attempts needed within the culture to defend SBW. The participants found it necessary to address stereotypes of African American women with others of the same racial and ethnic group. The concept of defending SBW was specifically expressed in relationship to disparaging views of SBW from other African American women and their male counterparts. The literature I reviewed did not provide in-depth studies on the stereotype of SBW used negatively within culture although researchers mentioned intragroup racism as psychologically stressful and life-altering when associated with internalization of stereotypes amongst Black women (Bronder et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2015; Lazarus & Soto, Dawson-Andoh, BeLue, 2011; Woods-Giscombe, 2010; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016).

Authenticity

The concept of authenticity was prevalent with several of the participant responses in this study, which presents an alternative perspective from the images controlling the lives of SBW by limiting their ability to choose their identity (Wilkins, 2012). They raised the issue of authenticity as they discussed perceptions and what it meant for them to be an SBW. This alluded to an idea that SBW was creating a sense of individuality within this gender culture. The women considered it as an alternative to the demands placed by policing and mandates common for this gender culture. Kandi shared,

I try to be my authentic self at work, I'm done with that. I am going to be as much of myself as I can be at work because it is too tiring to be one person at work and one person at home. I'm not going to do that anymore. And thankfully, who I am authentically is has been received well at work, as far as I can tell. I've gotten every job I've wanted to get. I've gotten on special projects. You know, I can talk and meet with executives and present to executives in the company and get kudos. So, I don't think it's been a challenge for me in that regard. I think they think I work hard. I think they think that I'm knowledgeable and competent and funny, and kind and all those things that to me are a part of who I am authentically.

Represent for the Culture

Historically, burdening Black women with community responsibilities represented excellence as a role model, although they also performed responsibilities carried out by women from the dominant culture (Donovan, 2015). The theme represents for the culture, is connected to the existing concept of intersectionality. This theme shared similarities to the socialization of Black women in respect to feminine attributes, as well as the interdependence of constructs where gender, race, and social standing influence perception (Jones et al., 2007; Nelson et al., 2016).

SBW within Culture

The theme, SBW within culture, incorporated colorism, and intragroup racism, along with current themes in the existing literature. As affirmed through participants lived experiences, these concepts indicated contempt of one's race, adaptation, and internalization of stereotypes received from both Black men and women. Another reality, this theme further revealed behavioral responses of SBW as defensive. Other theories explained how shared experiences

with Black men aligned with research that ascribed masculine characteristics and traits to SBW (Ashley, 2014). This presents conflicting views to the mandates and socialization of SBW with cultural reinforcements of strength and the expectation to embody feminine attributes of the dominant culture. One participant shared this conflict as she revealed her father instilled strength, however, this strength created conflicts as she interacted with men. This exemplifies the conflict resulting from SBW who are socialized to be strong and feminine, with the perception of others from different genders and cultures.

Strength & Vulnerability

Participants identified vulnerability, viewed as a paradox in the literature regarding SBW, as an informant of strength. Collins (2000) described the exposure of weakness and strict adherence to self-reliance as a basic, fundamental concept associated with SBW. Women in this study shared that understanding areas where they are potentially vulnerable, informed aspects of their strength. Their disclosure offered further evidence to the operational aspect of strength. Mandates delivered to Black women of strength and invulnerability prevents the expression of psychological distress. Becoming trained to stifle emotions creates secondary habits to cope with difficult emotions, which lead to potentially adverse health outcomes (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2007; 2008). Spirituality and spiritual awareness are not foreign to African Americans, specifically SBW, as exemplified by numerous references they shared throughout their interviews (Hays & Aranda, 2016). In conducting this study, I also add to evidence substantiating mechanisms that confer aspects of religiosity and spirituality of SBW.

Implications

The results founded in this study align with existing literature. Data provided in this research adds additional knowledge based on the lived experiences of the gender culture, SBW. I further

inform those interacting with SBW of the influence social perception can have on psychological and behavioral responses.

Counselors who engaged SBW in clinical practice should be aware of the additional psychological and behavioral outcomes experienced by this population. It is important to note the population of SBW identified loneliness as a struggle because it emanates from isolation based on awareness of social perceptions. Loneliness expressed as feeling misunderstood or excluded could potentially reinforce independence and self-reliance, which are known attributes of the target population. Furthermore, clinicians can encourage acknowledgment of loneliness and expression of emotional needs.

Participants shared the influence of counseling in assisting with coping mechanisms. There is a need for discussions to educate SBW on creating a balance between beneficial and detrimental outcomes of complex coping mechanisms such as John Henryism and high-effort coping. Service providers can utilize interventions focused on identifying those who subscribe to the SBW persona to provide psychoeducation on debilitating symptoms that encompass physical and psychological symptoms. Based on the outcomes of the study, I recommend clinical interventions, which address processing psychological and behavioral issues, as they attempt to navigate their environment, including noting any challenges to their functioning.

Based on the description and importance of authenticity, clinicians working with African American women who identify as SBW should use the lens in which they define strength. They can offer encouragement to develop an individual definition of strength. Clinicians should also be mindful of perceptions informed through interactions, regardless of the cultural identity of the clinician. Participants in this study shared how weakness informed their strength, exercising a paradoxical approach previously outlined in the literature. Considering this, reaffirming strength

through a strength-based approach would appeal to SBW. Also, empowering and increasing client awareness of strength through self-care, personal agency, emotional awareness, and interpersonal processing would possibly foster more adaptive coping strategies.

As with many clients that present for counseling, interventions for SBW when seeking therapy would benefit from techniques and strategies to manage immediate symptoms. Counselors who engage SBW in clinical practices should be aware of the additional psychological and behavioral outcomes experienced by this population when considering clinical interventions. Following symptom management, education, and a historical review of pertinent literature would benefit this gender group. Clinicians working with this population can encourage acknowledgment of symptoms, specifically emotional needs, and loneliness. Screening SBW for possible psychological symptoms could also prove helpful and with using interventions focused on assisting and supporting those who identify as SBW. I would also recommend providing education based on previous research while allowing for processing psychological and behavioral outcomes for this gender culture, especially if they present with challenges affecting their overall functioning. While many of the participants appeared informed about racial and ethnic implications on their psychological behavioral responses, additional insight on intersectionality could benefit the population as a whole.

I provided examples from the data collected from study participants to inform others on how to apply Christian values to manage one's behavioral responses and further shape thoughts and attitudes surrounding difficulties and challenges. Many participants acknowledge the value of spiritual and religious beliefs in their coping strategies. Spiritual conceptualizations represent their connection to God and religious practices reflect their belief system. Findings in existing literature imply adherence for SBW to Christian values and spiritual expressions through prayer

and application of religious and spiritual teachings (Ashley, 2014). Participants in this study add to that understanding with insight into those beliefs as they provide concrete examples of how SBW utilize religion as strength and as a coping mechanism. Their statements exemplified not only religious practices (i.e. prayer) but also correlations to their behavior and cognitive processing (Ashely, 2014; Hays & Aranda, 2016; Morgan & Bennett, 2006).

Jade asserted,

What I've learned, you've got to have a spiritual grounding too for strength. So yes, all my strength comes from The Lord. [laughs] Cause it gets rough sometimes. Yeah, I think that's one of the things that I've had to be able to just kind of trust God and say 'you know I'm just gone step back.'

Also, Lauren suggested,

Knowing that I can't do it by myself since I am Christian, I do rely on God no matter what happens when I feel like I'm stuck. I always know there is a way out of this because I know that He's not gonna bring me to it and not bring me through it. So, my feeling stuck is not really feeling stuck. Like I feel like I might be backed into a corner for a second, but I know if I could just sit here, think, pray, be still there's some kind of way out of this corner.

The outcomes of the research supported previous literature relating to religious devotion by providing how it is applied (Ashely, 2014; Hays & Aranda, 2016; Morgan & Bennett, 2006). Furthermore, African American women who identify as religious while seeking direction and support from clergy and other faith-based organizations, value the idea of interdependence as they also seek family and friends for support (Hays & Aranda, 2016). The group is also likely to search for support from the community and social groups. This aspect of support presents as a

conflict to the attribute of fierce independence noted behaviors among SBW. A study on SBW collectives reviewed the idea of care obtained by this gender group, how support formed in the face of discrimination and less obvious microaggressions (Davis & Afifi, 2019). Determining the situations and circumstances in which SBW seek help from others would be of interest as the associated behaviors conflict with independence. While the faith community utilizes education African Americans, they can also employ varying methods to inform the counselors and therapist who work with African American women (Hays & Aranda, 2016). The clinical community should seek an understanding of the meaning attached to individual experiences of SBW in an effort to make recommendations for positive social change and increase the knowledge-base of current gender population. Such change would include considerations to the psychological and behavioral effect of these misconceptions.

Delimitations and Limitations

While I gained insight pertaining to SBW, findings in this study are not applicable to all Black women who identify as SBW. Limitations associated with this study include confining attributions of participants in this study to broader populations. However, the insights and analysis can inform future research efforts. It is also important to note the demographic features of participants reflected those of previous research populations surrounding this topic. They all identified as either Black or African American, however, I did not inquire about intragroup variations. For example, one participant also identified as Jamaican. Various demographic parameters such as family-of-origin, geographical region, educational attainment, and other socioeconomic factors potentially influence the experiences and perspectives of participants. I provided detailed demographic descriptions in Table 1.

Recommendations for Future Research

Participants disclosed feelings of loneliness, which they attributed to depression and identified them as resultant of the SBW schema. Loneliness can occur from feelings associated with the lack of companionship, isolation, exclusion, feelings disconnected or misunderstood. Loneliness can also stem from life changes such as relocating, starting a new job, or a change in the social environment. It can also result from feeling a lack of control over one's life or life circumstances. Black women who identify as an SBW are more likely to experience life-altering psychological diagnosis (i.e., anxiety and depression), possibly linking to the experiences of loneliness. Considering the context of loneliness and depression, thoughts surrounding the emotions can create feelings of sadness, worthlessness, and hopelessness. Aside from the previous feelings mentioned, diagnostic criteria for depression attributable to SBW includes inordinate guilt, and risk factors associated with temperament (neuroticism), environment, genetic and physiological manifestations as well as diagnostic factors related to culture and gender (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013).

All things considered, loneliness evolving from various culturally specific factors affecting SBW require additional research due to the increased likelihood of this population screening positive for the malady. The caregiving aspect of the SBW schema may, in essence, increase feelings associated with guilt due to economic disparities experienced with many African American families, in which women are the sole provider or high earner. Various adverse cultural experiences are relevant to the environmental and gender criteria of depression for this gender group (i.e., slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, systemic racism, microaggressions, and intersectionality) (APA, 2013; Harris-Lacewell, 2001). Intertwined with the environmental and gender factors contributing to depressive symptomology, is the multigenerational transference of adverse experiences, better explained through epigenetics

(Wolynn, 2000). This provides an initial basis for consideration to compare psychological and behavioral outcomes of SBW with trauma victims and survivors.

Future researchers should include a more economically diverse population of Black women who identify as SBW. A large amount of research reviewed reflected the experiences of traditional college-aged women or women from low socioeconomic status. Although some racial experiences are not based on socioeconomic status, it would be valuable to shed light on the lived experiences, particularly within-culture dynamics of SBW of a higher socioeconomic status. Along with a more economically diverse population of Black women, there is a need for quantitative research focused on the validation of a scale to measure SBW attributes. Additional research areas include a combined mediation and/or moderation analysis of the effects of loneliness on depression in SBW. This would further remove biases associated with interpretation and qualitative designs. Additionally, researchers can consider incorporating authenticity followed by religion and spirituality, a characteristic of SBW, as these themes emerged in this research. Understanding aspects of authenticity as defined for this population would increase the knowledge of individuality and agency for SBW. Lastly, religious coping and enacting spiritual strength within this gender group would serve to further inform those engaging SBW in clinical practice on the importance of faith with Black women who identify as SBW.

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APPENDIX A

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 11, 2019

Nelina R. Moffett

IRB Approval 3733.041119: Psychological and Behavioral Outcomes Identified in the Strong Black Woman

Dear Nelina R. Moffett,

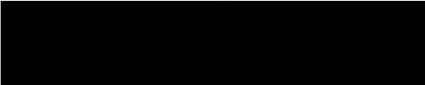
We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

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APPENDIX B

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
4/18/2019 to 4/17/2020
Protocol # 3733.041819

CONSENT FORM

Psychological and Behavioral Outcomes Identified in the Strong Black Woman
Nelina Moffett
Liberty University
School of Behavioral Sciences

You are invited to be in a research study on Black/African American women who identify as a strong Black woman. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a Black/African-American woman 18 years of age or older, and you identify as a strong Black woman. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Nelina Moffett, a doctoral candidate in the Community Care and Counseling cognate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to explore the self-perception, social interaction, as well as the psychological and behavioral experiences, of those who identify as a strong Black woman. This study aims to bring awareness to the lived experiences of this gender culture.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a demographic survey, which should take about 1 minute.
2. Participate in recorded interview with the researcher. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this research. Benefits to society include implementing awareness and research contribution that identifies characteristics on the definition of a strong Black woman in society.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject.

Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a participant number. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
4/18/2019 to 4/17/2020
Protocol # 3733.041819

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The Researcher conducting this study is Ms. Nelina Moffett. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at 214-546-4746 and/or lmoffett3@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Lakisha Mearidy-Bell, Ph.D, at lmearidybell@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Sta. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Psychological and Behavioral Outcomes Identified in the Strong Black woman

Directions: You will be asked 14 questions to assess your perception of the term Strong Black Woman. Please note that these questions will only be used for the purpose of this dissertation and to educate and inform the community care and counseling profession.

1. How would you define what it means to be a SBW?
2. How do you know you're an SBW?
3. What is it like to be a SBW?
4. Describe the feelings/emotions connected to being a SBW.
5. Have you ever experienced stereotyping of SBW, and if so, was it used unfavorably by someone of another race/culture?
6. When have you found it challenging to be Black?
7. What is your perception of yourself as a Black woman in your place of employment and/or social environment?
8. As a SBW, what does strength mean to you and how have you had to express strength?
9. What would a lack of strength look like?
10. How has being a SBW shaped your behavior?
11. How do you find yourself trying to dispel stereotypes about SBW?
12. What are your behaviors in response to your awareness of stereotypes?
13. Does your interaction as a SBW with society vary, and if so, how?
14. Considering aspects of SBW, can you identify any behavioral or psychological responses to uphold to the persona of SBW?

Appendix D Recruitment Email

Greetings,

I am Nelina Moffett, LPC, a Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University in the School of Behavioral Sciences. I am conducting research to better understand the psychological and behavioral responses to social perceptions of Black women who identify as a strong Black woman. This study aims at bringing awareness to the lived experiences of this gender culture. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

You are eligible to participate if you are a Black/African-American woman, 18 years of age or older, and identify as a strong Black woman. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete a demographic survey and be interviewed by this researcher, which will take about 30 minutes to complete. Your name and/or other identifying information will be collected as part of your participation, but this information will remain confidential.

A consent document will be emailed to you after the interview is scheduled. To participate, you will need to sign and return the consent form via email or in person when we meet for your interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

Should you like to participate, please contact me at 214-546-4746 or lmoffett3@liberty.edu to schedule an interview.

Appendix E

Are you a Strong Black Woman?

Who am I: Nelina R. Moffett, LPC
doctoral candidate for a Doctor of
Education degree in Community Care and
Counseling at Liberty University.

What am I doing: Conducting voluntary
research to better understand the
psychological and behavioral responses to
social perceptions of Black women who
identify as a Strong Black Woman.

How long will this take?

Approximately 1 minute for a
demographic survey and 30 minutes to
complete a confidential interview at an
agreed upon location.

It is my hopes that the results of this study
will increase current awareness of the
psychological and behavioral impact of this
prevalent stereotype.

How can I participate? If you or
anyone you know is interested in
participating, please contact Ms. Nelina
Moffett at **214-546-4746** or email
lmoffett3@liberty.edu to schedule an
interview.

- Are you a Black/ African American female 18 years of age or older?
- Do you identify as a Strong Black Woman?
- If you answered **YES**, your experiences as a Strong Black Woman can be used to increase social awareness.
- For questions or additional information, contact **Nelina Moffett at 214-546-4746 or email lmoffett3@liberty.edu.**

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
School Of Behavioral Sciences

RESEARCHER:

Nelina R. Moffett, LPC

CHAIR:

Dr. Lakisha Mearidy-Bell, Ph. D

Liberty University IRB
1971 University Blvd.
Green Hall 2845
Lynchburg, VA 24515