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Carrying the World with the Grace of a Lady and the Grit of a Warrior: Deepening Our
Understanding of the “Strong Black Woman” Schema

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Abstract

1
2 Across varied disciplines, attempts have been made to capture the multidimensionality of Black
3 womanhood under a unifying framework illustrative of Black women's perceived roles,
4 responsibilities, and experiences of intersectional oppression. The result has been the emergence
5 of a number of divergent but overlapping constructs (e.g., Superwoman Schema, Sojourner Truth
6 Syndrome, Sisterella Complex, and Strong Black Woman [SBW] Schema). The goal of our
7 study is to integrate overlapping attributes of existing constructs beneath a single term while also
8 expounding upon the defining characteristics of the SBW Schema. Thematic analyses were
9 conducted with data gathered from eight focus groups with 44 Black women from the Mid-
10 Atlantic region of the United States. Women ranged in age from 18 to 91 and were diverse in
11 religious and educational backgrounds. Data analysis involved iterative processes (i.e.,
12 continuous development of new codes and constant comparison of themes). Prominent themes
13 identified as characteristics of the SBW Schema were (a) Embodies and Displays Multiple
14 Forms of Strength, (b) Possesses Self/Ethnic Pride in Spite of Intersectional Oppression, (c)
15 Embraces Being Every Woman, and (d) Anchored by Religion/Spirituality. Mental and physical
16 health outcomes (e.g., psychological distress, depressive symptomology, obesity, and
17 cardiovascular disease risk) associated with characteristics of the SBW Schema underscore the
18 importance of the construct and the necessity of its exploration.

19

20 *Keywords:* Schema, Self-concept, Social perception, Ethnic identity, Gender identity,
21 Race and ethnic discrimination, Sexism Strong Black Woman, Superwoman, African American
22 women

1 Carrying the World with the Grace of a Lady and the Grit of a Warrior: Deepening Our
2 Understanding of the “Strong Black Woman” Schema

3 She’s the fearless foremother: Harriet stealing back into the pit of slavery boldly
4 leading us to freedom; Sojourner the abolitionist refusing to be cowed...She’s that
5 Mama men love to brag about who sacrificed all for them...The do-it-all mother,
6 always on call, raising children, sustaining households, working both outside and
7 inside the home...the community mother...the determined sister...We’ve named
8 her the “Strong Black Woman.” – Marcia Ann Gillespie (Parks, 2010, p. viii)

9 As Gillespie references above, the social, familial, and personal roles of Black women are
10 varied and multifaceted. However, there is one characteristic that has been generously ascribed
11 to most: “strong.” Characterized by socialized beliefs that Black women are obligated to assume
12 multiple roles as financial providers and caregivers and possess the ability to independently
13 support their families, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) construct is ubiquitous in Black culture
14 (Parks, 2010). This and other related constructs have gained increased interest among lay and
15 scholarly audiences in recent years (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003, 2007, 2009; Hamilton-Mason,
16 Hall, & Everette, 2009; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Kerrigan et al., 2007; Thomas,
17 Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004; Woods-Giscombé, 2010) and have been popularized in Black
18 culture (Black, 2008; Collins, 2005; Mullings, 2006; Parks, 2010; Romero, 2000; Wallace,
19 1990). Much of this research suggests that sociohistorical antecedents specific to Black women
20 have contributed to the development, endorsement, internalization, and maintenance of the SBW
21 phenomenon.

22 Previous research has categorized the SBW phenomenon as merely a construct. However,
23 more recent empirical inquires expand the SBW construct to also be a culturally relevant gender

1 schema, manifesting in a specific set of behavioral and cognitive characteristics. Across varied
2 disciplines (e.g., nursing, sociology, and gender studies) attempts have been made to synthesize
3 the attributes of the SBW under a unifying framework that is illustrative of Black women's
4 perceived roles, responsibilities, and experiences of intersectional oppression. The result has
5 been a number of divergent but overlapping constructs, including the Superwoman Schema
6 (Woods-Giscombé, 2010), the Sojourner Truth Syndrome (Mullings, 2006), and the Sisterella
7 Complex (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

8 Such contributions to the literature have helped to elucidate some of the key schematic
9 properties of the SBW (e.g., unyielding strength, assumption of multiple roles, and self-
10 sacrifice). However, the fragmented nature of this area of research and the aforementioned use of
11 divergent terminology points to the need to coalesce overlapping attributes of existing constructs
12 beneath a term more recognizable within Black culture (Black & Peacock, 2011; Parks, 2010).
13 Identifying additional defining characteristics of the SBW Schema could also further enhance
14 our understanding of the SBW phenomenon. As such, the goal of our paper is to fill these gaps in
15 the literature. In interviewing Black women from multiple walks of life to unearth additional
16 characteristics of the SBW schema, and by unifying related constructs under a single
17 recognizable term, our study: (a) provides a more complete framework for understanding the
18 psychological and physical well-being of Black women (b) expands the current body of SBW
19 literature to include the voices of Black women from various backgrounds (c) bridges the gap
20 between lay and scholarly literatures on the topic, and,(d) lends itself to the development of more
21 focused and comprehensive examinations of the construct.

22 **The Strong Black Woman**

1 According to interviews conducted with Black women, a SBW should, at all costs,
2 remain strong (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Even in the presence of extreme pain and fear,
3 Black women have little room to express their emotions because emotional displays are
4 considered signs of weakness and inadequacy (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). A SBW's resistance
5 to vulnerability and unwillingness to ask for assistance often force her to deal with the stress and
6 hassles of daily life in solitude (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Black & Peacock, 2011). In seeking
7 to better understand this phenomenon, researchers have developed several constructs, which we
8 describe in the following paragraphs. Nuanced but similar, these constructs shed light on the
9 origins and key characteristics of the SBW Schema.

10 Woods-Giscombé (2010) utilized a qualitative methodology to highlight the existence of
11 the Superwoman Schema, a construct nearly identical to the SBW Schema. According to her
12 findings, a Black Superwoman or SBW is characterized by perceived obligations to suppress fear
13 and weakness, showcase strength, resist being vulnerable or dependent, constantly help others,
14 and succeed despite limited resources. Similarly, Mullings (2000, p. 8) likens the SBW to
15 Sojourner Truth, describing the plight of such women as “the assumption of economic,
16 household, and community responsibilities, which are expressed in family headships, working
17 outside the home (like a man), and the constant need to address community empowerment—
18 often carried out in conditions made difficult by discrimination and scarce resources.”

19 Also describing the hardships of a SBW, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) present the
20 Sisterella Complex, a type of functional depression experienced by women who embrace
21 characteristics of a SBW. Black women who internalize the Sisterella Complex suffer quietly as
22 they work assiduously to meet the expectations of their families, their jobs, and larger society.
23 Rather than seeking help, these women turn inward—beating themselves up and experiencing

1 excessive feelings of guilt and worthlessness when they have sacrificed too much of themselves
2 or become unable to meet unrealistic expectations that have been bestowed upon them. More
3 importantly, their psychological turmoil is masked by the appearance of unparalleled strength,
4 the unifying commonality among all of the previously described constructs.

5 Based on descriptions of the Superwoman Schema, STS, and Sisterella Complex, the
6 following characteristics emerge across the constructs to define the SBW as a provider and
7 caretaker who is resistant to vulnerability or dependency, displays strength, suppresses emotions,
8 succeeds despite inadequate resources, and assumes responsibilities as a community agent.
9 Together these constructs capture the socialized and often internalized perception that Black
10 women, by virtue of their gender and historical legacy, are obligated to assume innumerable
11 responsibilities while consistently manifesting strength.

12 **Historical and Sociocultural Influences**

13 Although women across varied ethnicities experience the stress of assuming multiple
14 roles and asserting their independence, sociohistorical experiences unique to Black women have
15 influenced the adoption of the culturally-specific SBW Schema. Sociohistorical factors leading
16 to the endorsement of characteristics associated with the SBW Schema were identified in a
17 qualitative study by Woods-Giscombé (2010) where participants acknowledged four contextual
18 factors as contributors to the development and maintenance of the related Superwoman Schema.
19 These contextual factors include a historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping or
20 oppression; lessons from foremothers; a past personal history of disappointment, mistreatment,
21 or abuse; and spiritual values.

22 Origins of the SBW date back to North American chattel slavery. Rationalization of the
23 enslavement of African women was hinged on the proclamation that they were superior in

1 physical and psychological strength compared to White women (Harris-Lacewell, 2001) and
2 equal in this regard to Black men (Jones, 1982). For hundreds of years systematic, cultural, and
3 institutional oppression—pre and post enslavement—have disenfranchised and fragmented Black
4 women and their families (Anderson, 1994; Collins, 2005; Schiele, 2005; Wright, 2000; Young,
5 1996). Because of oppressive social barriers and stifling government policies, Black
6 communities have endured underdeveloped infrastructures, limited socioeconomic mobility, and
7 disproportionately high rates of crime (Pinkney, 1976; Travis & Waul, 2003; Western, 2003).

8 Even more concerning is the large percentage of Black households that are headed by
9 single mother (Collins, 2000). U.S. Census data reveals that 50.4% of all Black children lived in
10 a single-mother household in 2009 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Although multiple explanatory
11 factors exist, Black single parent households—in conjunction with neighborhood disorganization
12 (i.e., communities with high rates of crime, unemployment, and family disruption) (Garibaldi,
13 2007; Sampson, 1995; Testa & Krogh, 1995)—appear to contribute to the need for Black women
14 to develop strong, independent, and self-efficacious attitudes (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).
15 Moreover, with increasing numbers of Black men being disproportionately affected by high rates
16 of incarceration (Sentencing Project, 2012), an even greater responsibility weighs upon Black
17 women to manage their communities, their families, and themselves independent of outside
18 assistance. Comprising resilience and independence, the SBW Schema exists as a psychological
19 coping mechanism that facilitates familial and community preservation (Woods-Giscombé,
20 2010).

21 When Black women are without tangible and intangible support, they are often forced to
22 simultaneously assume the roles of financial provider, caregiver, and community agent (Romero,
23 2000). In this sense, being a SBW—the cornerstone of the family—is not a choice, but often a

1 social and economic obligation (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Harris-Lacewell, 2001). Strong
2 Black Women were birthed of necessity, created to endure physical and mental oppression, and
3 maintained throughout generations to ensure the survival of Black families (Mullings, 2006).
4 Their existence is a reflection of historical and economic hardship. Today, Strong Black Women
5 emerge from a variety of educational, socioeconomic, and familial backgrounds (Jones &
6 Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Although diverse in other demographic markers, Strong Black Women
7 persist through familial and societal socialization and behavioral modeling.

8 **Transmission of the SBW Schema**

9 Teachings related to the importance of being a SBW are acquired from a number of
10 proximal influences including aunts, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and other female fictive kin
11 (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003). Black women socialize their daughters to embrace independent
12 and multiple role behaviors through dialogue, modeling, and vicarious conditioning. From a
13 young age, Black girls learn the essentiality of being a SBW and the qualities one must possess
14 to assume the role (Staples & Johnson, 1993; Wallace, 2007). In a study about gender ideologies
15 of Black adolescents, female participants highlighted the experience of direct and indirect modes
16 of parental and community socialization (Kerrigan et al., 2007). Sometimes Black girls are told
17 directly of the need to be strong and independent, and other times they indirectly make note of
18 how they are to navigate life based on the lives of female role models (Kerrigan et al., 2007).

19 The SBW Schema is also reinforced by portrayals of Black women in Black culture,
20 specifically popular media (Western, 2003). In popular media, one of the more recognizable
21 vehicles for the manifestation of cultural beliefs, Black women are portrayed as breadwinners
22 and matriarchs who are able to simultaneously be strong, independent, resilient, nurturing, and
23 selfless (Parks, 2010). Media portrayals of Strong Black Women have also been transmitted via

1 music/song lyrics and videos, with various song lyrics promoting Black females' independence,
2 perseverance, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance as positive aspects of the Black female persona
3 (Brooks, 2008; Henry, West, & Jackson; 2010). In Black oral culture, song lyrics convey
4 messages emphasizing Black females' ability to exhibit resilience and strength when dealing
5 with their roles/responsibilities and social injustices (Brooks, 2008; Henry et al., 2010).
6 Moreover, women are encouraged to suppress their emotional pain and resist showing signs of
7 vulnerability and/or weakness, thus promoting independence, resistance to vulnerability, and
8 suppression of emotions as ideal traits of Black women.

9 Magazines and internet websites deliver similar messages regarding the SBW Schema.
10 Black and Peacock (2011) examined popular Black women's magazines (e.g., *Essence* and
11 *EBONY*) and internet blogs in order to gain a better understanding of Black women's
12 perspectives on the SBW Schema. Reviewing the content of these media sources, they found
13 evidence that suggested a relationship between Black women's reported endorsement of the
14 SBW Schema, daily stress, and lowered mental health and well-being. In essence, women
15 believed that characteristics associated with being a SBW (i.e., desire to please others and
16 delaying self-care), endorsement of SBW attributes, and attempts to live up to this ideal
17 contributed to the stress Black women experienced in their daily lives (Black & Peacock, 2011).
18 Taken together, descriptions of the SBW Schema in media are consistent with the small but
19 expanding body of literature that has addressed the stereotypical role of Black women as
20 resilient, breadwinning matriarchs.

21 **Implications Associated With Being a SBW**

22 Among Black women, the adoption and internalization of the belief that one must carry
23 the world's burdens without respite is a perceived obligation that has been bequeathed to them

1 by unique sociohistorical circumstances. Functioning with such a mentality is of great concern
2 because there are negative psychological and physical health implications associated with
3 internalizing an ideology of invincibility (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). In particular, researchers
4 assert that the perception of Black women as unbreakable and self-sufficient contributes to self-
5 neglect and incessant stress.

6 In a study by Harrington, Shipherd, and Crowther (2010), Black women exposed to
7 traumatic events were more likely to internalize the “SBW ideology” and exhibit emotional
8 inhibitions and emotion regulation difficulties. Such regulation deficiencies were reflected in
9 eating for psychological reasons and ultimately binge eating. Relatedly, in a comprehensive
10 literature review of research on strong, Black, and overweight women, Beauboeuf-Lafontant
11 (2003) found the assumption of multiple roles coupled with limited resources to be related to
12 self-neglect and the mismanagement of one’s physical health and weight.

13 The SBW Schema has also been implicated in the development of chronic stress. A study
14 of single Black mothers revealed chronic stress to be a serious psychosocial risk factor for the
15 manifestation of cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and increased heart rate (Williams
16 & Cashion, 2008). In addition, Woods- Giscombé and Black (2010) identify the related
17 Superwoman Schema as influential in the experience of abnormally high levels of stress among
18 Black women. The health consequences associated with internalizing the SBW Schema
19 underscore the importance of the construct and the necessity of its exploration. To this effect,
20 developing an encompassing knowledge of this construct, its attributes, and the mechanisms
21 through which its traits manifest could prove helpful in understanding and improving the
22 physical and mental health of Black women.

23 **The Current Study**

1 Over the past decade, the SBW Schema and related constructs have amassed significant
2 scholarly and popular media attention. By way of empirical inquires and media outlets, a SBW is
3 characterized as a woman capable of carrying the world with the grace of a lady and the grit of a
4 warrior. Several studies have laid the foundation for our understanding of the SBW phenomenon
5 and associated characteristics. Black women often refer to strength whenever discussing their
6 race and gender (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). However, there remains a need to better
7 understand how women conceptualize the characteristics associated with being a SBW.
8 Operating with this goal in the current study, we used thematic analysis of focus group data with
9 44 Black women to ascertain how Black women perceive a SBW and define her roles. The
10 current study supports and expands the existing body of literature describing the construct.
11 Whereas most studies have examined the SBW phenomenon among women residing in Southern
12 and Midwestern regions of the United States, the views of the participants in the current study
13 are from a geographic region (i.e., Mid-Atlantic metropolitan area) where this construct is
14 understudied, and our participants include a range of generational, educational, and familial
15 backgrounds. Thus, the current study further contributes to the literature by highlighting the
16 ways in which U.S. women from various backgrounds define what it means to be a SBW.

17 **Method**

18 The current study was part of a larger study in which the goal was to develop a measure
19 of gender role beliefs for Black women. Given the purpose of the larger study, the researchers
20 felt it most appropriate to conduct focus groups versus individual interviews. Collins (1990, p.
21 212) asserts: “for Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from
22 other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a
23 community.” Furthermore, compared to individual interviews, focus groups produce a wide

1 range of information, are useful when attempting to learn about the opinions of a homogenous
2 group, and do not have to end when a person does not respond (Basch, 1987; Lewis, 1992).

3 **Participants**

4 After receiving approval from the university's IRB, the recruitment process began. In an
5 effort to obtain a wide variety of perspectives and responses, purposive, convenience, and
6 snowballing sampling techniques were utilized. Participants were recruited from community
7 agencies that serve Black women, a faith based program in a Black church, and from the
8 Psychology subject pool at a large urban university via posted flyers and word-of-mouth. The
9 sampling strategy used helped to ensure socioeconomic, religious (i.e., Christian and Muslim),
10 and generational diversity among women. In order to be eligible to participate in the current
11 study participants had to identify as African American or Black and be at least 18 years-old.

12 Focus groups participants were 44 Black women from the Mid-Atlantic region of the
13 United States, ranging in age from 18 to 91 ($M = 44.23$, $SD = 19.63$). Thirty-one women were
14 community members, and 13 were college students. Of the community women, four also
15 identified as college students. Two groups of women ($ns = 4, 5$) were recruited from the
16 Psychology Department's subject/participant pool. Another two groups ($ns = 8, 8$) were recruited
17 from a community-based organization that serves low-income Blacks. One group ($n = 7$) was
18 recruited via flyers and word of mouth and was composed of women who lived and worked in an
19 urban metropolitan area. Two groups of women ($ns = 3, 3$) were recruited through a liaison in the
20 Muslim community. A faith-based senior citizen program was utilized to recruit a group of elder
21 Black American women ($n = 6$).

22 A majority of the sample, approximately 88% ($n = 39$) of the women, reported having at
23 least a high school diploma or equivalent, 32% ($n = 14$) obtained some college, 11% ($n = 5$)

1 earned an associate's degree, 16% ($n = 7$) earned a bachelor's degree, and 11% ($n = 5$) attended
2 graduate or professional school. More than half of the women (63%; $n = 28$) were mothers and
3 most were employed, either full-time ($n = 10$) or part-time ($n = 14$). Single and never married
4 women composed 45% of the total sample ($n = 20$), 18% ($n = 8$) were married women, and 20%
5 ($n = 9$) divorced.

6 **Procedure**

7 We conducted a total of eight focus groups, separated by participant age (18-24, 25-39,
8 40-54, 55 and older). We utilized this strategy to group individuals with similar life experiences
9 (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Two interviewers conducted the focus groups. The principal
10 investigator (a middle-aged Black woman) facilitated all of the focus groups with local
11 community residents, and a research assistant (a Black female graduate student) conducted the
12 focus groups with college students. An observer (two ethnic minority female graduate students)
13 was also present for each session to compose detailed field notes. Focus groups sessions were
14 held in private rooms at the site from which participants were recruited or at a local university.
15 During the sessions participants were offered light refreshments. Confidentiality was discussed
16 prior to beginning each group discussion. Participants then completed consent and demographic
17 data forms. To ensure accurate identification of participants when recording responses, women
18 were asked to identify themselves every time they spoke and were given the option to use only
19 their first name, initials, or a pseudonym. Focus group facilitators employed clarification to
20 better understand views and beliefs of participants (O'Connor, 2001). Group sessions lasted
21 between 30 minutes and 1.25 hours and ranged in size from three to eight participants. Focus
22 group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed by trained research assistants.

1 Group discussions were guided by open-ended questions. Questions were written for the
2 purposes of a larger study, which sought to identify participants' views of gender role beliefs for
3 Black women and men. These questions included: When you think of women, what comes to
4 mind?; When you think of men, what comes to mind?; What do you think (if anything) makes
5 African American women different from women in other racial/ethnic groups?; What do you
6 think (if anything) makes African American men different from men in other racial/ethnic
7 groups?; In your opinion, what would an ideal Black woman be like?; In your opinion, what
8 would an ideal Black man be like?; What do you think are some of the roles and responsibilities
9 of Black women?; How would you define "masculine"?; How would you define "feminine"?;
10 and What does it mean to be a "Strong" Black Woman?

11 Focus group discussion among participants was guided by the interviewers, who
12 encouraged all group members to participate. In each focus group, all participants were
13 encouraged to respond. Although participant responses were not equal in quantity, each
14 participant made at least one contribution to the group's discussion. To ensure a valid
15 understanding of participants' remarks, the interviewer used clarification in the form of restating
16 responses, asking clarifying questions, and encouraging participants to elaborate on vague
17 statements. At the conclusion of the group discussion, the interviewer asked participants if they
18 had any additional questions or comments they would like to share. Participants were thanked
19 and community participants were provided an incentive of \$20.00 at the end of the session.
20 College students were provided with extra course credit.

21 **Data Analyses**

22 Our analyses were conducted within the interpretive paradigmatic framework to explore
23 the thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs of Black women. This paradigm maximizes subjectivity by

1 understanding the world through the personal experiences of others as a participant versus a
2 spectator (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). In other words, this approach encourages the involvement
3 of the researcher as an individual engaged in the process of research in ways that mimic that of
4 participants (i.e., producing explanations for research practices and influences) rather than
5 simply observing participants (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). We deemed this framework
6 appropriate because it allowed for Black women to be placed at the center of the research,
7 offering this sometimes marginalized group an opportunity to describe, in their words, their
8 opinions based on their experiences.

9 Data analyses were based on data gathered mainly from the question “What does it mean
10 to be a ‘Strong’ Black Woman?” However, women often mentioned the SBW construct before
11 the interviewer had a chance to ask this specific question. Thus, data were utilized from
12 numerous focus group questions, based on whenever the women mentioned and discussed the
13 SBW. After transcription of focus group data, five female research team members reviewed all
14 transcripts thoroughly and developed a preliminary coding scheme based on common responses
15 and patterns identified in the data.

16 Thematic analysis based on guidelines offered by Braun and Clarke (2006) was
17 conducted with data generated from the eight focus groups. After reviewing all of the transcripts
18 for units of data that stand alone as important concepts, codes were assigned to the data units.
19 NVivo 8, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to code transcribed data. A total
20 of 12 prevalent codes emerged from the verbatim transcripts of the eight focus groups. The
21 criteria for identifying prevalent codes were based on the frequency in which a code was utilized
22 by women across and within groups. Codes that were considered prevalent were mentioned in at
23 least four of the eight groups and were mentioned across groups at least 10 times. Prevalent

1 codes were grouped by similarity and relevance into four themes and four subthemes. The data
2 analytic approach was cyclical and involved continuous development of new codes and constant
3 comparison of themes. This emergent design is essential for capturing the experiences, voices,
4 and beliefs of respondents (Creswell, 2007; O'Connor, 2001). These techniques (e.g., an
5 emergent research design, iterative processes, and inductive data analyses with a qualitative
6 software package) helped to strengthen scientific rigor.

7 **Results**

8 Focus group discussions about Strong Black Women were passionate and rich. Women
9 spoke ardently about what it meant to be a SBW. Prevalent codes were grouped according to
10 similarity, which resulted in a hierarchical structure of themes with four main themes: (a)
11 Embodies and Displays Multiple Forms of Strength, (b) Possesses Self/Ethnic Pride in Spite of
12 Intersectional Oppression, (c) Embraces Being Every Woman, and (d) Anchored by
13 Religion/Spirituality. Detailed descriptions of each theme and related subthemes are presented
14 here, followed by a comparison of differences/similarities in participants' responses.

15 **Embodies and Displays Multiple Forms of Strength**

16 As *the* defining characteristic of a SBW, strength was depicted as a core value and
17 women often spoken of it in a positive light. Participants deconstructed a SBW's most salient
18 characteristic, and descriptions of this characteristic revealed a complex and multidimensional
19 trait that typically manifests in the form of obligatory and volitional independence, learned and
20 compulsory resilience, and matriarchal leadership.

21 **Obligatory and volitional independence.** Independence was most often reflected in a
22 woman's ability to autonomously provide for herself and her family, not expecting or needing to
23 depend on others. This subtheme was mentioned in each focus group by a total of 29 (66%) of

1 the 44 participants. Based on focus group discussions, it appears that a SBW exhibits
2 characteristics associated with independence for one of two primary reasons: (a) they choose to
3 do so because of an internal need to maintain their sense of identity (volitional independence) or
4 (b) they are required to do so out of necessity as single parents or head of households (obligatory
5 independence). Across both forms, a SBW was described as striving for independence in order to
6 maintain a sense of control, confidence, pride, and self-sufficiency.

7 A divorced mother in her 50s highlighted obligatory independence by stating, “You have
8 to show a lotta strength and you show it when...you go out to work every day. As a single
9 parent...you’re showing strength...you have to be a mother and a father.” Many women believed
10 independent strength to be a necessity for a SBW due to a lack of supportive networks,
11 especially in the absence of male partners.

12 Embracing obligatory and volitional independence appeared to be related to women’s
13 personal needs to achieve a sense of self-efficacy in being independent. When sharing her
14 experience with being a strong independent woman, a 40 year-old divorced mother captured this
15 sentiment by expressing the following:

16 Black women [are] independent because sometimes we need to know that we can do it
17 without a man...I’m a single mom you know and I’m very independent and that makes
18 me strong in a sense because I don’t look for a Black man to supply me or my child
19 needs. I go ahead and do what I need to do as a provider and as a caregiver and as a
20 mother.

21 The independent strength discussed by women was reflected in numerous stories of
22 women being sole providers and caretakers for their families. Experiences of single parenting
23 transcended generations and seemed to reinforce women’s beliefs in the need to be self-sufficient

1 because women are taught to “...never be dependent on anybody” (18 year-old single college
2 student). “Strong Black Women like our mothers, our grandmothers, and godmothers,
3 aunts...taught us how to be strong and how to work with or without a man in our lives, making
4 us Strong Black Women” (40 year-old divorced mother). This woman explained that even when
5 supportive male partners are part of the picture, women can become Strong Black Women. This
6 implies that even in contexts where women have support, independence persists as a valuable
7 and consciously expressed trait of a SBW. This further demonstrates that there are other reasons,
8 beyond the absence of supportive male partners, why women choose to embody and/or display
9 independent strength. Thus, this type of strength can exist within multiple contexts, transcending
10 situations.

11 Women discussed independence as being able to “think for yourself” and “not letting
12 anyone control your life.” An elder woman (age and marital status not given) commented: “I
13 think a Strong Black Woman will always stand up for herself and don’t depend on other people
14 to do things for them or talk for them.” In other words, a SBW is not meek, mild, or timid. She is
15 assertive and often times opinionated, not afraid to boldly and confidently share her thoughts
16 with others. Another woman noted that as a SBW you “...should be...independent and...[able
17 to] think for yourself—don’t like let people think for you. Do what you want to do. Don’t let
18 anyone...try to control your life...” (19 year-old single college student). Despite the attempts of
19 others to mold the actions of Strong Black Women, these women challenge and often combat
20 these influences by displaying self-sufficiency and crafting their own paths. Choosing to be
21 independent appeared to reinforce self-efficacious mindsets while allowing women to experience
22 a sense of accomplishment. The inherent need to display autonomy and oppose dependence was

1 deeply entrenched in the belief systems of many women, and some women strongly believed that
2 “self” was the only person on whom they could rely for support.

3 **Learned and compulsory resilience.** Many women referenced history and resilience
4 learned via modeling behaviors of those from past generations. Resilience was described as
5 overcoming various challenges and being able to regain composure in the midst of adversity.
6 Mentioned in seven of the eight groups by 25 (57%) women, this type of strength was described
7 as a mandate. A married mother in her 50s stated that “we had to be resilient, we had to be
8 flexible...in order to carry out responsibilities of being women and mothers and wives.” Another
9 woman shared her remarks:

10 ...you take a lot of stuff off of people, you know the challenges, ah, things that you go
11 through in life you know, like Maya Angelou said even though you go through all of
12 these challenges and all these obstacles whatever may come your way “still I rise.” (41
13 year-old separated mother)

14 Women appeared to have a firm grasp of the historical hardships endured by Black women and
15 cited resilience as the primary means for survival. Women positively described the resilient
16 strength displayed by their ancestors. One woman shared: [because of] “...what we have been
17 exposed to ...I think that experience...it defines us...” (54 year-old married mother). Reflections
18 on ancestral resilience revealed a shared historical consciousness that empowered and motivated
19 women to reconstruct and embody the resilient identities of their enslaved ancestors. There
20 appeared to be a cultural memory of resilience among participants that was inspired by ancestral
21 legacies of strength that emerged in the face of hundreds of years of oppression. Women believe
22 that if their ancestors could be strong in displaying resilience, they should be able to do to the
23 same.

1 In addition to being described as a mechanism for survival and growth, resilience was
2 depicted as a persistent requisite for a SBW. Women felt that they needed to be resiliently strong
3 even when they felt “weak” because:

4 ...you’re supposed to be a pack man, to carry it all on your back for yourself and nobody
5 else emotionally and physically...that strength can lead [to] resilience and I think that
6 strength is what got [us] where we are...we had to be strong because when we wanted to
7 fall back...there was nobody there to catch us, [we] got up, picked up our little sack, [and
8 said] I guess I better stand on back up and keep going. And that strength has made us
9 resilient. It has made us bounce back and keep on going. (53 year-old married mother)

10 When this woman shared her thoughts, the entire room was arrested, silently captivated
11 by her words. Groans of agreement emerged, suggesting that this statement hit the core of each
12 woman present. She fervently and a bit sarcastically explained how as Strong Black Women,
13 individuals feel as if they have no support system even when they do not have the strength to
14 carry on. There appeared to be a general understanding that women will inevitably endure
15 hardships and that many women are forced to face their problems alone due to an inability to rely
16 on supportive networks in times of need. It seemed that participants believed that women will
17 fall, hit the ground, and would have to get back up, dusty and bruised, without an outstretched
18 hand to assist them. And even when they manage to garner just enough strength get back up,
19 they must “pick up their little sack” and continue to carry their overburdened load.

20 “So it’s...[being] able to build yourself up and be stronger and be able to...react in
21 situations where...we won’t let it break us down” (19 year-old single college student). Resilient
22 strength was esteemed but there was also a sense of fatigue that permeated these descriptions.

1 However, as stated above, weariness is not an option for a SBW. She must continuously regroup
2 after difficulties without allowing herself the convenience of a break or a breakdown.

3 **Matriarchal leadership.** Being strong was also associated with leadership. This form of
4 strength was described in a variety of ways and was referenced in each of the focus groups by 30
5 (68%) women. Women explained that "...you have to be...strong in leadership...[and] strong in
6 your mind..." (40 year-old divorced mother). According to participants, strength could be
7 demonstrated by being a leader in family settings, communities, and even the world. Participants
8 also believed that Strong Black Women "...should be role models for their children and for the
9 community" having enough knowledge to be able "...to teach other people" (elder woman, age
10 and marital status not given). In the community, a SBW can display leadership through
11 mentoring others.

12 In particular, middle aged and elder women expressed leadership as an important
13 characteristic of a SBW. Being strong in leadership was associated with helping and leading
14 those who came after you. A 54 year-old divorced mother stated, "I think that's another role...to
15 reach back and look out for the younger sisters and help out any way we can." Younger women
16 agreed that this type of leadership was important and expressed eagerness to follow in the
17 footsteps of more senior Strong Black Women. A 22 year-old single woman shared, "...I want to
18 be a Strong Black Woman like the [older] women I described."

19 In terms of leading families, a SBW was often depicted as a matriarch. Some women
20 expressed that Black women as heads of families was the ideal family structure. In sharing her
21 views, one woman described her experiences:

22 I grew up in an environment [where] matriarchy [was] being practiced and it worked. I
23 had a very strong grandmother who was the glue of the family...she was the head of the

1 family. She was the matriarch. To me as a Black woman the [family] model works when
2 the mothers [and] the grandmothers are the ones who are the ultimate authority in the
3 family. (54 year-old married mother)

4 Women expressed that a SBW could exist in families where men were considered to be leaders
5 but a SBW would not be “subordinate on all levels.” In the home she will take on leadership in
6 some form or another. Women shared that a SBW’s assumption of leadership in the home was
7 related to society’s treatment of Black men. For example, Black men “have not historically had
8 the ability to fully carry out and exercise that role [of being a dominant leader. Thus,] Black
9 women have had to be leaders, heads of households” and women associate that with “strength
10 because they are...forced to become so because of...history” (44 year-old divorced mother).

11 Oppression and the limited socio-economic mobility of Black men appeared to have
12 strongly influenced women’s beliefs about being strong leaders of households and families.
13 Women expressed feeling as if they were obligated to take on leadership roles in families in
14 order to ensure survival of their families and their communities. As a leader, a SBW is able to
15 exert a social influence that enables the accomplishment of varied personal and interpersonal
16 goals.

17 **Summary.** Strength in the forms of obligatory and volitional independence, learned and
18 compulsory resilience, and matriarchal leadership is a necessity for a SBW. In describing all
19 forms of strength, women felt that Strong Black Women are forced or obligated to possess or
20 display these various types of strength either due to social circumstances or by the sheer nature
21 of their existence as an individual simultaneously embracing identities as a Black person and a
22 woman. As the women continued to discuss the concept of strength, it appeared that this
23 characteristic not only is internalized in numerous ways by a SBW, but also must persist. Many

1 women did not feel that relief from being consistently strong was an option for a SBW because
2 strength, in one or more of its three forms, was described as a characteristic that was required to
3 be on display even when a SBW feels tired, broken, and weak.

4 **Possesses Self/Ethnic Pride in Spite of Intersectional Oppression**

5 Possesses Self/Ethnic Pride in Spite of Intersectional Oppression was the second
6 prominent theme that emerged from the focus group discussions. Being prideful as a SBW was
7 mentioned by 28 (64%) women in six of the eight groups. This type of pride is displayed through
8 confidence in self, both as a woman and a Black person. Women discussed self-pride as being
9 able to recognize their own beauty without a need for external validation. A woman shared her
10 thoughts about how "...realizing that you [are] beautiful inside and out without a Black man or
11 any man telling you...makes a Strong Black Woman" (40 year-old divorced mother).

12 A SBW's self-concept is positive; despite her flaws she is able to independently
13 recognize her worth and splendor. Her emotional evaluation of herself is not hinged on the
14 actions or beliefs of others but instead on the confidence she has in herself and her abilities. "A
15 Strong Black Woman to me is somebody who is confident in what it is that they are doing, where
16 they are, and their place in the world and is comfortable at that station" (59 year-old married
17 mother). Descriptions of the pride and confidence a SBW must possess revealed that a SBW can
18 come from a variety of backgrounds. She may "clean floors at the bank" or she may be a
19 business executive in Corporate America. Despite occupation, socioeconomic status, level of
20 social support, religion, marital status, or age, a SBW is an individual who does not desire to
21 have another identity. She is unashamed of self, comfortable being self, and is able to be
22 confident no matter the context. Her love of and pride in self is reflected in her walk, her
23 confident nature, assertive voice, and deliberate actions.

1 A SBW is the essence of Black femininity; she is proud to be Black and identifies
2 strongly with her ethnic background. A SBW:
3 ...is confident in her identity as being an African American woman and is proud of being
4 an African American woman and not trying to be some other identity or set of
5 behaviors...that don't reflect the strong sense of an African identity. (64 year-old married
6 mother)

7 Her psychological attachment to her womanhood and ethnic background must be able to
8 withstand oppression such that a SBW is "not afraid to embrace the fact that she is a strong
9 African American woman and that she is proud of it" (19 year-old single college student). The
10 assertion that it is the responsibility of a SBW to strongly identify with her ethnic background
11 was so pervasive that during one of the focus groups chants of a Black Power anthem erupted,
12 "say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud!" Exuberant laughs followed chants of the legendary
13 James Brown song that was written during a time where Black pride was met with overt
14 prejudice and racism.

15 The previously referenced song empowers listeners to be proud of their Blackness in
16 spite of society's views that Black self-love is militant and that Blackness and Black culture, in
17 general, lack social value. Women in the focus groups believed in that message and felt it
18 essential that a SBW be proud of her Black self. A SBW does not desire to escape or suppress all
19 that comes with her Blackness. She honors the blood-stained experiences of her ancestors and
20 embraces her tinted skin, larger lips, and wider nose. She stands tall on her history and honorably
21 wears African features that may intimidate or disconcert others.

22 Participants also commented on the pride they took in the diversity of the features of
23 Black women. They seemed to be especially appreciative of the "rainbow" of colors, shapes, and

1 sizes held by Black women as compared to women of other ethnic backgrounds. “I think that we
2 are definitely stronger [and] more beautiful. The shapes that we have and our hues—it’s so
3 lovely...we are like the rose that grows out of the concrete...we see the beauty and are a lot more
4 accepting than anybody else” (54 year-old divorced mother). Her goal is not to assimilate to
5 majority culture but to be boldly Black and essentially different, allowing for the celebration of
6 Black beauty that perseveres despite the stifling “concrete” of mainstream standards. Women
7 were delighted to be Strong Black Women. In this regard, one woman gleefully stated that she
8 was “...so glad to be a Black, Strong Black Woman doing [her] thing...” (56 year-old divorced
9 mother).

10 Finally, it is the intersection of being simultaneously Black and a woman in which a
11 SBW takes pride. This intersection of identities is particularly fascinating because each sits at the
12 crux of two of the most extreme forms of oppression in the United States. Experiences of racism
13 and sexism work together to uniquely shape the identity of a SBW. As a Black woman, a SBW
14 has “two strikes against her” in terms of her societal position. In order to establish and maintain
15 self- and ethnic-pride in a society that makes one feel as if they are at the “bottom of the totem
16 pole,” a SBW must continuously engage in psychological warfare. To preserve a positive self-
17 image and then to be proud, a SBW must work to refrain from allowing negative stereotypes,
18 multiple prejudices, and varied discrimination to penetrate or decompose her esteemed view of
19 self. Thus, the embodiment of self- and ethnic-pride as requisites for a SBW is reflective of a
20 type of psychological strength or emotional toughness that works to preserve the intersection of
21 Blackness and womanhood as “beautiful inside and out.”

22 **Embraces Being Every Woman**

1 Embraces Being Every Woman was the third prominent theme that emerged and includes
2 the subtheme Provides Self-Sacrificial Care for Others. Having multiple roles as a SBW was
3 mentioned by 34 (77%) women across each of the eight focus groups. Responsibilities of a SBW
4 are so great in number that women often referred to her responsibilities as being able to handle
5 “everything.” According to participants, a SBW possesses the ability to be “every woman,”
6 taking on the roles of being a provider, caretaker, and a homemaker with little or no help from
7 others. “They’re responsible for keeping the house...together like the cleaning, the cooking,
8 taking care of the kids” (19 year-old single woman). Another woman commented, she “...is one
9 that can wear many hats” (54 year-old married mother). When it comes to meeting multiple
10 expectations and assuming numerous roles, a SBW goes “beyond the call of duty, above and
11 beyond” (50 year-old single woman).

12 A Strong Black Woman [is] like Chaka Khan said “I’m every woman” and I can wear
13 every hat, whether it’s a construction hat...or a nurses hat...I’m that woman. A Strong
14 Black Woman has many hats and she wears each one of them well, whether it’s
15 recognized or not. She’s got it all. She just like a Heinz 57, all flavors for the day...” (56
16 year-old divorced mother)

17 Women expressed a sense of pride when referencing their abilities as Strong Black
18 Women to do it all. In addition, as conveyed in the previous quote, a SBW does not have to be
19 recognized for her efforts. She will assume multiples roles without receiving acknowledgment. If
20 she recognizes a need, she puts on the appropriate “hat” and works to address it. She is able to
21 simultaneously take on both traditional male and female gender roles. After all, “to be a Strong
22 Black Woman means...having it all together” (26 year-old single woman). Among her many
23 expectations and roles, caring for others was the most salient.

1 The subtheme of Providing Self-Sacrificial Care for Others was mentioned in each focus
2 group by 31 (70%) women. The SBW's abilities to multitask and embrace numerous roles are
3 seen as assets. However, women explained that the dedication to care for others is so strong it
4 often takes priority over care for self, potentially causing harm to physical and mental well-
5 being. "By definition a Strong Black Woman is to deny your own needs..." (54 year-old married
6 mother). One woman captured the essentiality of self-sacrifice among Strong Black Women
7 when she commented:

8 some of the roles and responsibilities of a Black woman are just too much...it's expected
9 that they are to be superwoman...I think that Black women have been trained in their
10 family as well as society to be just that—superwoman, that you can do it all and you
11 can't. And in doing it all there's deprivation,...hurt,...spiritual anorexia that occurs
12 because in doing it all you just neglect yourself...then the health problems come...it was
13 manifested emotionally first over years and years of doing everything and taking care of
14 everybody else other than herself...She has to do everything. She has to make sure that
15 the income is coming into the house...household duties are taken care of...has to work or
16 obtain money...make sure the children are taken care of...but for the most part she needs
17 help. But it's just too many roles and too many responsibilities..." (54 year-old divorced
18 mother)

19 The previous quote captures the essence of what many other women expressed. When
20 this woman shared the endless list of responsibilities for a Black Superwoman or SBW, she
21 seemed overwhelmed. As other women in the room nodded in agreement and offered reassuring
22 affirmations, there was a heaviness that permeated the ambiance and the burden of having "to do
23 everything" was clearly explicated. Numerous women mentioned that a SBW is able to do it all.

1 Conversely, this woman states that even though Black women are socialized to do it all, they
2 cannot. She then goes on to describe physical, mental, and spiritual consequences associated with
3 doing it all, which in fact suggests that Strong Black Women are able “to do any and everything”
4 (22 year-old single woman) at the expense of their personal well-being.

5 This ideological divergence implies that Strong Black Women may experience cognitive
6 dissonance when assuming multiple roles. On one hand, they feel as if there are “too many roles
7 and too many responsibilities.” On the other hand, they feel obligated to take on these numerous
8 roles and subsequently they become overwhelmed. Participant remarks reflected that despite
9 feeling overwhelmed with the nature and magnitude of their responsibilities, Strong Black
10 Women are expected to consistently rise to the challenge, meeting and often exceeding role
11 expectations. Fulfilled yet burdened, women expressed the belief that a SBW has “a lot going on
12 [her] plate” and must work to meet “...a lot of expectations...from the family and society,
13 from...the world, like everyone” (19 year-old single woman).

14 **Anchored by Religion/Spirituality**

15 Religion/Spirituality was the fourth prominent theme that emerged and that seemed to
16 occur across themes, functioning as a mechanism by which Strong Black Women are sustained
17 and empowered. This theme was captured in six of the eight groups and mentioned by 28 (64%)
18 women. Participants believed that a SBW could gain guidance, wisdom, and strength by
19 acknowledging or honoring a higher power, seeking to identify and fulfill a purpose in life, and
20 engaging in religious/spiritual practices. “When you pray, you’re praying for your faith, and
21 hope, and spirit to sustain you...you have to believe in your God... As long as you believe and
22 keep that faith up, all things are possible. Your faith is very, very, very important” (56 year-old
23 divorced mother). Honoring God and praying were believed to be essential to being able to

1 endure difficulties associated with being a SBW. Religion should be woven into the character of
2 a SBW. It is her source of hope and allows her to garner strength. Women expressed that
3 religiosity and spirituality were means through which they maintained strength and found
4 support.

5 A woman shared that a SBW "...realizes...it's her and God and...that's her strength to
6 know that Allah will always be there..." (54 year-old married mother). For some women, it
7 seemed that a lack of social support could be supplanted by a fulfilling spiritual relationship with
8 God and engaging regularly in religious practices. It is perhaps this characteristic that mitigates
9 the cognitive dissonance Strong Black Women may experience when assuming multiple roles. It
10 seemed that religiously based references conveying that "all things are possible" were used as
11 encouragement and empowerment for women to manage the numerous roles and responsibilities
12 associated with being a SBW.

13 Women also expressed that religion and spirituality should be at the core of a SBW,
14 providing a foundation for the development of other characteristics. An elder woman (age and
15 marital status not given) stated: "...to be a Strong Black Woman, you must first of all have
16 Christ in your life. Ask for guidance and wisdom to do the things that...come before you each
17 and every day and to...stand for which is right." Women stated that Strong Black Women must
18 be spiritually grounded. It is this foundation that allows women to attain guidance. It also
19 provides the sustenance needed to survive and overcome adversity. Religion and spirituality help
20 women with making sound decisions and provide a platform for them in which to believe and
21 from which to advocate for social justice.

22 Although a SBW is described as being spiritual and religious, it also seemed that a SBW
23 needed religion *and* spirituality. Women described spirituality as a personal experience that

1 compels one to make appropriate decisions and be actively involved in life. Such inward
2 practices are grounded in empowerment and can offer a source of replenishment for women who
3 continuously expend their physical, emotional, and financial resources to everyone but
4 themselves. A SBW is comfortable in relying on a higher power, offering her a relationship in
5 which she is readily dependent. Spirituality for a SBW becomes a solace of sorts and a break
6 from the daily mantra of independence and self-sacrifice. After all, when a SBW reflects on her
7 triumphs over adversity, she recognizes that “when [she] fell [she] knew that Allah was gonna
8 catch [her].”

9 **Similarities and Differences in Perspectives**

10 As we stated previously, participants offered rich descriptions of what it meant to be a
11 SBW. Themes transcended differences in generation, marital status, education level, and
12 religious background. Although older women shared more information in reference to their
13 personal experiences with being Strong Black Women, younger women also heavily identified
14 with the construct. Younger women also spoke more, but not exclusively, about strength being
15 present in the context of an absent male figure (i.e., fathers or partners). In contrast, elder women
16 described the existence of strength, in all its forms, being a necessity for a SBW despite having
17 social support from men. In addition, spirituality and religion were concepts more commonly
18 mentioned by older women. Such topics were not discussed as much by younger women. Among
19 the women who did discuss religion and spirituality, there were no differences in perceptions
20 based on age, religious background, or marital status. Characteristics of a SBW were described
21 similarly across all focus groups, indicating a general consensus about the identifying
22 characteristics of a SBW and independent of individuals own characteristics.

23

Discussion

1 Overall, participants revealed that a SBW displays strength asserting independence, being
2 resilient, and assuming leadership in families and communities. These characteristics seemed to
3 reinforce one another in that a SBW needs reliance to be independent and often relies on
4 independence to be resilient. A SBW is also proud to be herself. Her psychological attachment to
5 her identity as a woman and a Black person is evidenced in her confident nature and
6 embracement of Black culture. Having multiple roles and responsibilities is also essential to the
7 identity of a SBW. As she juggles competing expectations and obligations, dedication to care of
8 others and being a woman of spiritual/religious orientation remain top priorities.

9 The primary goal of our study was to integrate overlapping attributes of existing
10 constructs beneath the SBW Schema while expounding upon the schema's defining
11 characteristics. This goal was accomplished by identifying how Black women viewed themselves
12 and other Black women in relation to the SBW Schema. We convened focus groups with a
13 sample of Black women, diverse in age, socio-economic status, and religious affiliation.
14 Participants offered responses consistent with anecdotal accounts of the SBW Schema from the
15 lay community, the media, and a growing body of scholarly literature. Participants also
16 highlighted the necessity of self/ethnic pride and religion/spirituality, qualities not highlighted in
17 other studies.

18 Participant views were garnered from personal experiences and examples set by women
19 in their families, such as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and other extended family members. For
20 the women in our study, intergenerational messages emphasizing the importance of maintaining
21 strength despite social injustices and inequality were most salient. According to participants, they
22 were taught early on by significant others about the importance of exhibiting "strength

1 behaviors.” This type of familial gendered racial socialization promotes the transmission of
2 distinct messages about strong Black womanhood to Black women and girls.

3 In addition to familial messages, women in our study believed that the media played a
4 role in shaping their perceptions and attitudes surrounding the SBW construct. Specifically,
5 participants identified prominent female celebrities who exemplified the SBW persona including
6 First Lady Michelle Obama, actress and former talk show host Oprah Winfrey, actress Halle
7 Berry, and model Tyra Banks. Participants also referenced popular singers/songwriters such as
8 Mary J. Blige, Alicia Keys and Chaka Khan, as well as popular song lyrics such as “I’m Every
9 Woman” and “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.” Thus, a combination of personal, familial,
10 and media experiences appeared to shape women’s opinions and helped to elucidate the
11 complexity of the SBW Schema. Despite the multidimensionality of the construct, four
12 prominent themes emerged as eminent characteristics of a SBW: embodying and displaying
13 multiple forms of strength, possessing self/ethnic pride in spite of intersectional oppression,
14 embracing being every woman, and being anchored by religion/spirituality.

15 The first theme, which reflected women’s perceived obligation to “Embody and Display
16 Multiple Forms of Strength,” is at the core of the SBW Schema, with support from both
17 scholarly work (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003, 2007, 2009; Woods-Giscombé, 2010) and the
18 media (Parks, 2010). The women in our focus groups characterized Black women as strong,
19 resilient, independent, leaders of communities and families. Many women provided specific
20 examples of women they felt symbolize a SBW (e.g., family members, celebrities, musicians)
21 and included themselves among those who exhibited these traits. These women appreciated the
22 contributions Strong Black Women make in the home, community, and workplace. Furthermore,
23 participants believed that women were responsible for taking care of themselves and their family

1 members. While the emergence of strength as a key characteristic was not a surprise (it is an
2 inherent finding in SBW studies), our study moves the discussion of the characteristic forward
3 by deconstructing its intricacies. That is, participants in our study described strength that
4 encompasses both volitional and obligatory independence, learned and compulsory resilience,
5 and matriarchal leadership. In fact, it appeared that a woman could not be a *Strong Black*
6 *Woman* if she did not embody these types of strength. Strength must be either personified or at
7 the very least, put on display.

8 There are several implications associated with viewing oneself as having to be
9 consistently strong across many domains and situations. One implication is that women who are
10 socialized to believe that they are solely responsible for caring for themselves and their families
11 may be less likely to view marriage or a stable partnership as essential or attainable. The fact that
12 Black women are more likely to be single than Black men and women from any other racial or
13 ethnic groups (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010) may be related to these perceptions.
14 Furthermore, the perception that one has to be strong, even under adverse or traumatic
15 circumstances, can be stressful and may also undermine physical health. Indeed, stress is
16 associated with multiple maladaptive health behaviors, such as postponement of self-care,
17 avoidance coping, emotional silencing, reluctance to vulnerability, emotional eating, obesity,
18 cardiovascular disease, and depression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003, 2007, 2009; Black &
19 Peacock, 2011; Williams & Cashion, 2008; Woods-Giscombé, 2010), long-term internalization
20 of the SBW Schema may have heavy physical and psychological costs.

21 However, we would be remiss to cast aside the positive benefits one may experience
22 from embracing Strong Black Womanhood and aspects of strength associated with resilience.
23 For example, resilience factors are predictive of lower levels of psychological distress, higher

1 perceived quality of life, more positive personal beliefs, and less stress and fatigue (Dyrbye et
2 al., 2010; Farber, Schwartz, Schaper, Moonen, & McDaniel, 2000). Particularly for Black
3 women, resilience has also been shown to be protective against depression (Kasen,
4 Wickramaratne, Gameroff, & Weissman, 2012). Yet, women in our study described resilience as
5 compulsory, and it is possible that capacities enabling this adaptive characteristic may be
6 fatigued via overuse (Black & Woods-Giscombé, 2012). Depending excessively on resilience to
7 overcome adversity suggests that SBW consistently experience unremitting stress that
8 necessitates effective and recurrent adaptation. The recurrent expression of resilience may erode
9 psychological capacities and result in distress (Black & Woods-Giscombé, 2012). Thus
10 characteristics that are generally associated with positive outcomes may also be associated with
11 negative outcomes for women who internalize the SBW Schema.

12 The second theme that emerged from the data was “Maintains Self/Ethnic Pride in Spite
13 of Intersectional Oppression,” which described the positive feelings women had about
14 themselves and about being a woman and a person of African ancestry. These women believed
15 that Strong Black Women are confident, have pride in their ethnic group, and are not defined by
16 the views or perceptions of others (e.g., other races/ethnic groups). Other studies of the SBW
17 have echoed the importance of race (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Mullings, 2006); however, rather
18 than strictly discussing race in the context of oppression, women in this study described
19 embracing one’s “Blackness” as a beneficial requirement—one that encourages empowerment
20 and resilience. Essentially, participants believed that a psychological connection with other
21 Black people was necessary in order to fulfill the role of a SBW. Perhaps it is this unity in pride
22 and self-confidence that have allowed Black women and families to survive, thrive, and to be
23 strong in the face of oppression, marginalization, and personal adversities. In fact, research

1 supports that under conditions of racism, ethnic and racial pride support favorable coping
2 strategies and well-being (Ghavami, Fingerhut, Peplau, Grant, & Wittig, 2011; Rowles & Duan,
3 2012).

4 Other research has indicated that socially devaluated groups are more likely to have
5 higher group pride than majority groups (Fiske, 2010). For Black women, internalized racial
6 pride appears to be necessary because positive messages may not come from the larger majority
7 community. It may be advantageous to further explore the relations between high ethnic/racial
8 identity and Strong Black Womanhood. Because numerous studies have found high ethnic and
9 racial identity to correlate with positive psychological and social outcomes (Brook & Pahl, 2005;
10 Hunter & Joseph, 2010; Pierre & Mahalik, 2005; Settles, Navarrete, Pagano, Abdou, & Sidanius,
11 2010; Twenge & Crocker, 2002), it is possible that the self/ethnic pride of a SBW engenders
12 similar benefits.

13 The third theme, labeled “Embraces Being Every Woman,” reflects participants’ beliefs
14 that Strong Black Women assume multiple roles and expectations. A subtheme emphasized the
15 role of a dedicated, self-sacrificial caretaker and further captured participants views related to the
16 SBW Schema. Within the SBW literature, researchers have found the embodiment of multiple
17 roles to be a hallmark characteristic (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010).
18 Similarly, women in this study confirmed that while managing multiple roles and expectations
19 can be positive, it can also be overwhelming. Participants’ comments reflect that women
20 recognized that juggling numerous roles can have negative consequences and can take a toll on
21 health. Whereas multiple roles and self-complexity are generally associated with positive
22 outcomes for Black women, assuming many responsibilities and expending large amounts of
23 energy may lead to psychological distress, especially for maternal caregivers (Davis, Sloan, &

1 Tang, 2011). Juggling numerous roles also can create stress if there are conflicting role demands
2 and expectations and/or if these expectations are out of one's perceived control (Linville, 1985;
3 McConnell et al., 2005).

4 Women who embrace multiple roles and dedication to the care of others may not have
5 time to care for themselves (Black & Woods-Giscombé, 2012). In fact, a woman in the current
6 study indicated that a prominent characteristic of a SBW is to deny her own needs in order to
7 provide for the needs of others. Such neglect has the potential to manifest in a range of negative
8 physical and mental health outcomes, including but not limited to persistent and increased levels
9 of stress, living with undiagnosed/untreated mental or physical illnesses, lack of treatment or
10 care for current illness, or low adherence to medical recommendations (Black & Woods-
11 Giscombé, 2012). Further complicating prevention or treatment of mental and physical health
12 issues is the perceived mandate of strength that influences women to conceal emotions
13 associated with stress or being overwhelmed (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Perhaps these
14 factors influence perceptions of Strong Black Women as self-sufficient, indestructible women
15 who can simultaneously become mother, father, breadwinner, caretaker, leader, and hero without
16 complaint.

17 The fourth and final theme that emerged from the focus group discussions was
18 "Anchored by Religion/Spirituality." Although religiosity/spirituality has been long recognized
19 as a fundamental aspect of the African American community (Beagan, Etowa, & Bernard; 2012;
20 Kasen et al., 2012; Mattis, 2002), within the SBW literature little has been mentioned of the
21 impact of religion on internalization of the SBW Schema. In this sense, our study introduces an
22 additional but equally important characteristic of the SBW Schema. Drawing from the responses
23 of our participants, it appears that religious and spiritual beliefs help a SBW cope with adverse

1 situations, providing the aid needed to maintain strength, independence, and caretaking duties.
2 Religion and spirituality seem to serve as pivotal sources of strength, motivation, and
3 determination—imparting to a SBW the belief that with God anything, even the impossible, can
4 be achieved (Beagan, Etowa, & Bernard; 2012; Kasen et al., 2012; Mattis, 2002). Given the
5 intersectional experiences of oppression endured by a SBW, the perception that
6 religion/spirituality enables one to overcome difficult life challenges is likely a needed and
7 consistently employed coping mechanism.

8 It is possible that women receive “strength promoting” religious messages via religious
9 texts, religious leaders, or in their places of worship and subsequently transmit that information
10 to their daughters—promoting the essentiality of strength for the next generation of Strong Black
11 Women. Thomas and King (2007) found that many Black mothers socialize their daughters to
12 believe that they can “do all things through Christ.” This popular Bible scripture and others may
13 motivate women to take on multiple roles and feel pressured to handle their responsibilities
14 independently, without asking for social support and/or other types of accessible assistance.

15 Prior studies have demonstrated the benefits of spirituality and religiosity on Blacks’
16 mental and physical well-being. For example, religion and spirituality assists Black women with
17 developing adaptive coping skills and offers protective effects against morbidity, mortality,
18 depressive symptoms, and overall psychological distress (Levin, Chatters, & Taylor, 2005;
19 Mattis, 2002; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). The religion and spirituality associated with the
20 SBW Schema may help counteract negative experiences (e.g., stress and feeling overwhelmed)
21 associated with being a SBW.

22 **Future Research**

1 One suggestion for future research is to explore in more detail the themes that emerged
2 from women in our focus groups specifically as they relate to women's health. For example, one
3 area of research may be to investigate how identification with the SBW Schema influences self-
4 care, including health-promoting and health-compromising behaviors. In addition, future
5 research could examine whether internalization of the SBW Schema assists with explaining the
6 overrepresentation of Black women in various chronic diseases (e.g., cardiovascular disease;
7 National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). A follow-up quantitative study of SBW attributes
8 and mental and physical health outcomes may shed further light on this topic.

9 Another suggestion for future research is to investigate whether and how relationship
10 status is related to the SBW Schema. Although this was not the specific goal of the current study,
11 expression of the SBW Schema may differ for women with different relationship statuses.
12 Because of the multiple tasks and responsibilities associated with being in many and in different
13 relationships, there may be more expression of the SBW Schema among women in more
14 relationships, especially demanding relationships like mothering. Additionally, research could
15 explore if the perception of needing to be independent relates to marital status. It is possible that
16 attributes of a SBW influences how she enters and navigates relationships with others including
17 long-term partners. Future research is needed to examine relationship status and dimensions of
18 the SBW Schema in further detail.

19 Future research should also examine the way in which Strong Black Women socialize
20 their children. Do Strong Black Women socialize their sons and daughters differently? What
21 types of implicit and explicit socialization messages do children of a SBW receive? Exploring
22 socialization via vicarious conditioning and role modeling, as well as outcomes associated with

1 such socialization, would prove to be valuable in better understanding the experiences of Black
2 children.

3 **Limitations**

4 There are a few limitations in our study. It is possible that different information could
5 have been gained from interviews compared to focus groups. Also, participants' responses may
6 have been framed by the questions that were asked. The focus groups were conducted for a
7 larger research project to understand Black women's conceptualization of gender roles and to
8 ultimately develop a gender role measure for Black women. Therefore, our questions specifically
9 primed women to think about what women were like and what an ideal Black woman was.
10 Although responses indicated that the SBW Schema was part of the identities of many Black
11 women, perhaps other more general questions or prompts (e.g., tell me about Black women)
12 would have elicited different responses.

13 Additionally, although we purposively sampled diverse groups of women, larger scales
14 studies are needed to better address questions about the generalizability of our findings. For
15 example, it is possible that the SBW Schema may vary in meaning within and between ethnic
16 groups and that other Black women may or may not share similar feelings with respect to the
17 SBW Schema. The women in our study lived in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States and
18 self-identified as Black women. As such, they should not be considered to represent all Black
19 American women, Women of Color, or those living in other geographic locations within the
20 United States.

21 It is possible that conceptualizations of Black women and/or reactions (internalization) to
22 the SBW may differ among women of differing backgrounds or cultures. For example, Black
23 immigrants to America might have different ideas of what a SBW would look like and/or react

1 differently to American ideas of the SBW. Further, some women may have access to expanded
2 social networks or social supports that assist with added responsibilities and/or demands. Despite
3 these limitations, the data presented in our study inform our understanding of how these Black
4 women experience and interpret the meaning of the SBW Schema. Moreover, the data presented
5 here provide a voice to a population that is often silenced or unheard, which helps fill the gap
6 that exists in current literature describing the SBW construct.

7 **Practice Implications**

8 As we learn more about the characteristics of the SBW Schema and piece together a more
9 complete framework for understanding related mental and physical health implications, there are
10 increasing opportunities to use knowledge of the SBW Schema to better understand barriers to
11 optimal health and promote culturally competent care. According to women in our study, being a
12 SBW can influence women to independently manage numerous roles and responsibilities,
13 constantly display strength, mask or suppress emotions, and postpone self-care – all of which can
14 have serious mental and physical health implications when exercised over time.

15 One implication for mental health professionals to consider is the possibility that women
16 internalizing the SBW Schema may present “atypical” symptoms of mental illness. For example,
17 in their description of the Sisterella Complex and its psychological impact on Black women,
18 Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) describe the unique manifestation of depression among Black
19 women. The authors describe a type of functional depression experienced by Black women that
20 may go unnoticed by mental health professionals (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). As such,
21 some Strong Black Women experiencing depression may be misdiagnosed or undiagnosed. It is
22 possible that differential symptomology of mental illnesses among Black women may contribute
23 to higher rates of misdiagnoses among this group.

1 Another implication to consider is that internalization of the SBW Schema may enhance
2 existing cultural biases against mental health professionals and ultimately discourage women
3 from seeking care. For example, a Strong Black Woman may be willing to courageously step out
4 of her comfort zone and into the office of a clinician but therapy and self-care may not rank very
5 high among her priorities. Aside from inducing psychological distress and depressive
6 symptomology (Linville, 1985; McConnell et al., 2005), the role strain that results from
7 independently managing multiple roles may make women feel as if they simply do not have time
8 to seek help. As such, therapy may be viewed as more of a luxury than a priority—especially
9 when there are jobs to be worked, food to be cooked, children to be dressed, and communities to
10 save. Taken together, internalization of the SBW Schema may be a serious impediment to getting
11 Black women into care and should be a consideration of mental and physical health care
12 professionals seeking to serve this population. As Strong Black Women may not be as
13 likely to seek healthcare services, one recommendation for mental health professionals is to think
14 creatively about how to introduce Black women into care. It may be advantageous for
15 practitioners to provide and orient clients to health services in familiar and trusted environments
16 (e.g., churches, community centers, or homes). Faith based institutions may be an especially
17 beneficial location for promoting mental and physical health among Strong Black Women as
18 spirituality and religiosity have been identified as features of the SBW Schema and as a
19 protective factor against mortality and morbidity (Levin et al., 2005; Mattis, 2002), It may also
20 be beneficial to work collaboratively with trusted and well esteemed community leaders and
21 groups to provide culturally tailored education to Black women about the importance of mental
22 health, treatment processes, and the benefits of therapy and/or counseling. It is also important for
23 mental health professionals to consider positive outcomes associated with the SBW Schema.

1 Because embracing one's racial identity has been linked to greater psychological functioning
2 (Pierre & Mahalik, 2005; Settles et al., 2010), professionals should think about ways to
3 encourage and promote racial identity salience.

4 To the extent that traits of the SBW Schema have been associated with mental and
5 physical outcomes (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; 2007; Black & Woods-Giscombé, 2012;
6 [Harrington et al., 2010](#)), understanding its internalization may significantly improve the
7 effectiveness and cultural appropriateness of health care service delivery to Black women.
8 Mental and physical health professionals knowledgeable of the SBW Schema may be better
9 equipped to anticipate setbacks in care and/or recommend culturally sensitive health promotion
10 strategies and resources. The more complete conceptualization of the SBW Schema offered in
11 this study stands to improve the ability of health professionals to meet the uniquely challenging
12 health related needs of Strong Black Women.

13 **Conclusion**

14 In summary, women who were diverse by age, socio-economic status, and religion
15 viewed the SBW as strong, having high confidence and identity salience, and having multiple
16 roles. Findings from the current study expand the existing body of literature on the SBW
17 construct to include the characteristics of religion/spirituality, self/ethnic pride, and matriarchal
18 leadership as a form of strength. Further, findings from our study support the existence of a
19 gendered and ethnically relevant, organized cognitive structure composed of specific thoughts
20 and behaviors.

21 The current study provides vital information about how certain psychological traits
22 combine to create a gender schema unique to the present and historical experiences of Black
23 women—one that filters stimuli in accordance with the SBW construct. Women articulated a

1 complex conceptualization of what it means to be a SBW. She is strong, independent, and
2 resilient, and she has high confidence in her identity. These attributes have allowed her to
3 survive, and sometimes even thrive, under conditions in which she is often the single head of
4 household and living in a context of gender and racial discrimination. On the other hand, she is
5 self-sacrificing, assumes responsibility for others, suppresses emotions and needs, and has
6 multiple roles, which can be physically and mentally demanding resulting in stress and adverse
7 health outcomes.

8

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