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REDEFINING THE BLACK SUPERWOMAN: RACIAL AND GENDER
MICROAGGRESSIONS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Using auto-ethnography, this dissertation shares personal experiences through self-reflection of the use of the Strong Black Woman and Black Superwoman archetypes. This dissertation also uses focus groups to obtain a representative of voices of Black women's experiences at a large Midwestern predominantly white institution. The work explores the relevance of racial and gender microaggressions to the phenomena of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) or Black Superwoman (BSW) archetypes.

Within traditional literature, unique experiences of Black women have been lacking, specifically in terms of microaggressions. Moreover, Black women's experiences at predominantly white institutions (PWI) have been documented as being unwelcoming, where Black women don't feel a sense of belonging. In turn, the archetypes of SBW or BSW have become a response to cope and/or resist instances of subtle racism. As such, the primary goal of this dissertation is to explore the experiences Black female students have at one particular predominately white campus in order to enhance our understanding of the use of SBW and BSW. Findings indicate that the archetypes SBW and BSW are not interchangeable, contrary to previous literature.

Keywords: *strong Black woman, Black superwoman, gendered racism, microaggressions*

Dedicated to my husband and children

In Memory of

My Step-Grandmother, June Marie Davis

My Step-Grandfather, Leonard Davis

My Soror, Carla Z. Peeples

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Chapter 1

Removing the Mask

Historically, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) or Black Superwoman (BSW) notion signified strength and resilience. This ideal has been seen as beneficial for Black women, and during slavery this archetype was used with Black women in contrast to White women. Today, Black women have internalized this notion but to their detriment. The burden we carry has not only been expected of us, but we expect it of ourselves — to be everything to everyone, often sacrificing our own needs and desires. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the ways in which Black women have coped and/or resisted racial and gender microaggressions and how they have used the SBW/BSW archetype.

In this dissertation my auto-ethnography will be woven in through the data connections to my own life. The stories I share about my life serve as a signifier of my use of the SBW or BSW identification and the impact it had on my wellbeing. I choose to share personal narratives as a way to free myself of the archetypes and to empower other Black women to do the same. Lack of vulnerability or void of emotion are often associated as characteristics of the BSW or SBW.

I've always felt that I needed to be the strong one, with an immense pressure to handle everything, fix things for everyone, be everyone's listening ear. I internalized it as my job, and through reflection, I realized that I was performing in order to disprove stereotypes outside of my community but also to demonstrate a value and worth in my own community, which was something that was never acknowledged elsewhere. I not only was trying to be seen physically, but I also was trying to be seen as more than what I'd been labeled.

There are many other instances in which I could have chosen myself over this *super* version. The battle for me to pick and choose when to become super was a difficult one, because, in relation to home life, being super was an easier choice. But out in the world, at a predominantly white institution where I faced racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1995), I often used this super version to combat instances of slights directed towards me, which left me mentally and physically depleted.

An example of how I've strived to be a BSW is how I've dealt with life after having had several surgeries and an injury. Two procedures were due to ovarian cysts discovered while I was in high school. In the first surgery, the ovary was removed. In the second, only the cyst was removed in an attempt to save one ovary for fertility. I've had emergency gallbladder surgery, an emergency surgery due to an ectopic pregnancy, and there is another that it is likely I'm leaving out! The day after my most recent surgery, I had the nerve to attend a Black Greek lettered organization event, a screening of the movie "Annie" at a local theater! I took my oldest daughter with me, then regretted it because I started having pain and had to walk very slowly. My friends told me to sit and wait so they could pull the car up for me.

I also was injured by accident while in a local bar. I received a cut on the back of my left thigh (right under the fold of the leg), which required 15 stitches. It just so happened that this incident was a week prior to a conference I was attending, and of course I didn't let it stop me from going to the conference. Often, I prep meals for my family prior to traveling for work or school, so my husband and children can easily heat and eat. I was always sure to make things convenient for everyone else except me.

While still limping a day before the conference, I decided to prep the food despite my injury. I actually took it further and grilled food outside. Why couldn't I just make something

else? Let them eat pizza while I was gone; there are other options. Instead, I ended up tiring myself out and getting an infection in the wound, requiring antibiotics. My husband cautioned me saying, “Maybe you shouldn’t grill. Don’t worry about it.” But I did it anyhow. Some of my colleagues even suggested I not go to the conference given my injury. I had to be in a wheelchair through the airport and for the duration of the conference! The wheelchair was the idea of one of the colleagues, as they got tired of the slow walking we were doing, so they hailed me a chair. I was doing too damn much, trying to be superhuman and ignoring the warnings of those who care for me, such as my mother, Ph.D. advisor, friends, colleagues, family members and sorority sisters.

Some people were trying to get me to slow down and take a breather, yet it fell on deaf ears. I’d become accustomed to doing too much, to showing everyone how amazing I am and how much I can juggle, how much I can do. This “wow, look at how much I can do” line of thinking led me to believe that it negated the perceptions of the stereotypes of the Black woman, but I was wrong. These perceptions associated with Black women are deeply embedded and woven throughout the fabric of our society, and they do not go away regardless of the accolades we earn or accomplishments we achieve.

But this wasn’t my first encounter with discrimination. There were other instances, such as if I went into certain stores. It is what all of us, as people of color, know of collectively — we are being watched carefully and assumed to be of criminal intent. That frequently happened, because, although I lived in a Black neighborhood, all the stores were owned by some other ethnic group outside of people who looked like me. So this kind of discrimination happened to me all the time, where workers were watching what I was doing to make sure I wasn’t stealing.

For Black women, however, racism comes with so much more. We, as Black women, experience racism, sexism, and classism combined, and these identities don't ever separate, thus we experience the complex issues of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). When shopping in a neighborhood store I frequented and even though the owners and store employees knew me, I encountered sexual assault based on my race, gender, and class. One time during my childhood, one of the store employees followed me to an aisle, pretending to fix items on the shelves next to me. He got closer and closer, eventually reaching down and touching my vagina. I couldn't have been more than 10 years old. I immediately stepped back and asked, "What are you doing?" He responded, pretending to be bewildered, "I'm just trying to reach something."

All my life I've had to fight (pun intended)! And being a Black girl who is treated as much of what has become society's notion of a Black girl, inside and outside of my own community I experienced subtle forms of racism and sexism. I was shushed often in grade school — disciplined for choosing to speak my own mind, my truth. I was inappropriately touched — seen only as a sexual being by both men in my family and strangers. This inappropriate touching — molestation — was my fault according to certain family members, and it was accompanied by the question, "What did *you* do?" Because it's always the Black girl's fault. Black women tend not to be safe or listened to, which often transcends status.

Recently, Black female tennis superstar Serena Williams delivered her first child but experienced complications after delivery. She had a pre-existing condition, blood clots, which were exacerbated by her delivery. She tried to tell the nurses and doctors, and they "hushed" or silenced her, believing they knew better. They did not listen to the Black woman, and she had to fight for her life, convincing them to hear her concerns in order to survive.

These examples — my experiences and Williams’ — are powerful in that they confirm a phenomenon that not only transcends class yet fame as well and is often a collective experience for Black women. My personal narrative and lived experiences related to my intersecting identities is important to note, as they are relevant to this study’s research questions. Through my lived experiences, I am able to answer the research questions. This, and the examples, aided in my rationale for choosing Black feminism as a theoretical framework, as it addresses these complexities of the lived experiences of Black women but not at the expense of other marginalized groups. Black women’s experiences are primarily shaped based on their race, gender and socioeconomic status (Combahee River Collective, 1977, 1995). And my own experiences helped shaped my hypothesis for this dissertation.

In an attempt to navigate these tropes of racism, sexism and respectability politics (Rhodes, 2016; Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018), we tend to overdo, overcommit and over extend ourselves, not saying no to requests, in order to minimize these negative perceptions. I certainly have been a model example of this myth of a Black Superwoman. And guess what? I AM an angry Black woman (Griffin, 2012). Anger or rage is not a strong enough emotion to describe the levels of bullshit that Black women have had to endure over time. Not only do we regularly debunk myths of our Blackness, but we debunk myths specifically as Black about women from inside and outside of our own communities. Stereotypes only prescribed to and unique to us, the labels tattooed invisibly across our foreheads, automatically describe us as angry, attitudish, lacking respect, *ghetto*, *jezebels*, *thots* and *welfare queens*.

Historically, Black women have been called upon to serve others. During slavery we were touted as emotionally and physically superior to white women with the ability to handle societal pressures, life and family problems, and anything else thrown at us, easily.

Black women have always consciously and unconsciously attempted to negate stereotypes to adjust to respectability politics, all the while living up to the fantasy in which society deems us as unbreakable superwomen. My choice to present such vulnerability in this dissertation was an easy one. I find myself to be an open person. I believe we grow more and better when operating transparently with ourselves and others. My open vulnerability also is a way for me to heal and help other women who are experiencing this same phenomenon as literature indicates that Black women do not often show vulnerability and generationally are taught to be strong (Beauboefontant, 2009). As Harding (1997) states, “once we undertake to use women’s experience as a resource to generate scientific problems, hypotheses and evidence, to design research for women, and to place the researcher in the same critical plane as the research subject, traditional epistemological assumptions can no longer be made” (p. 163). Throughout this dissertation I share my personal experiences related to the topic, especially in Chapters 4 and 5. I reveal the generalizability of the project relative to other Black women who participated in the study. Below, I discuss the problem, terms and definitions of my study, as well as the purpose, significance and assumptions/hypothesis.

Statement of the Problem

Black women have been in a tug of war of sorts, in which they attempt to live up to expectations in their own community while at the same time attempting to refute low expectations from society at large, where historical stereotypes of *ghetto*, *welfare queen* and more are expected. Often Black women don’t seek respite or self-care and typically have no place to turn for respite or understanding except other Black women. We are our own rescue, as society has demonstrated over and over again — Black women can only depend on themselves

and each other when society has the mentality that they don't need help. The stress that this constant battle places upon Black women causes both psychological/emotional and physical/medical trauma, as "many Black women fight strength with strength," which is often to their detriment (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Black women suppress fear and weakness, showcase strength, resist appearing vulnerable or dependent, and constantly put others before themselves (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014, as cited in Stanton, et al., 2017). Black women more so have the trait of suppressing emotions as a form of independence (Abrams, et al., 2014). Yet the suppression of these emotions typically leads to health-compromising behaviors such as overeating and over-indulgence in alcohol (Lewis, et al., 2012). And these behaviors are informed by our experiences with racial and gender microaggression.

These issues historically have only been discussed for white women. On the contrary, Black women, as a part of their womanhood, have been taught to work hard and be caring and generous as coping mechanisms. (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). These coping mechanisms are often unhealthy and, over the course of time, the impact on Black women has been disregarded by society both inside and outside of their own communities, including by educators and health care professionals, under the premise that that we are incapable of being *broken*. This became a cultural belief that has been passed down from generation to generation (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009) by grandmothers, mothers, daughters and aunts.

Due to this widely held notion of a magical all-enduring strength, many African-American women internalize these so-called ideals, often to their detriment. The myth of the Strong Black Woman was given to us through slavery, as a rationalization/justification for the inhumane treatment, as African American women were seen as physically strong and generally more resilient mentally than White women (Wallace, 1970), and this notion has persisted

throughout society for centuries (Harris-Lacewell, 2001). Black women have a level of resiliency that has been admired, yet their strength has been categorized as unbreakable, which can be harmful in the same way in which it is admired. The myth of the Black Superwoman or the Strong Black Woman contends that despite detrimental trauma, physically or mentally, Black women do not often express vulnerability for the fear of being seen as inadequate “(Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). This weakness and inadequacy often has no room in academia, especially at a PWI.

Black women must prove themselves as worthy and not display many vulnerabilities, and in the face of conflict, they often are required to be composed or proactive rather than reactive. Should they react, they could easily be labeled as the *angry Black woman*. Furthermore, this perceived super strength can jeopardize Black women’s mental and physical health, which impacts interpersonal relationships, as well (Walker-Barnes, 2009). According to Lewis, et al. (2011), Black women are consistently attempting to prove a different version of themselves than the pejorative stereotypes placed upon them by society.

This is a continuous issue occurring frequently (Feagin, 1998) which impacts Black women’s psychological wellbeing (Hooks, 1993). I argue that this is the case even more so for Black women due to our intersecting identities and the multiple instances of racial and gender oppression we experience in our everyday lives from inside and outside of our communities. Building upon previous works, I define gendered racial microaggressions as subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one’s race and gender (Lewis, et al., 2010). Microaggressions are significantly related to the myth of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman. Racial and gender microaggressions that Black women encounter are founded in historical connotations from slavery such as the

jezebel, mammy, sapphire, etc. In the past, the SBW schema has been perceived both by society at large and by Black women as a positive in order to negate these historical negative characterizations.

[Enslaved] women in their roles as mothers were the central figures in the nuclear family. Mothers helped supplement the family diet, and they served as the critical information link when fathers were sold or ran away. These women did what American pioneer women did on the frontier: They mustered their reserves, persevered, and helped others to survive. These [Black] women made themselves a real bulwark against the destruction of the [African] family's integrity (Giddings, 1984).

Today, research has re-conceptualized the adoption of the SBW, in which Black feminists point out the limitations of adopting SBW and how the use of SBW manifests the Black Superwoman (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hooks, 1993; Nelson, Cardemil, & Adeoye, 2016; Romero, 2000; Wallace, 1990). Microaggressions today reiterate these historical negative characterizations of Black women in subtle ways. Research on gendered racism has derived from two main disciplines, Black feminist theory and sociology. According to Essex (1991), the experience of both sexism and racism simultaneously is *gendered racism*. This joint oppressive experience is not simple, as Black women's experiences are historically founded in pejorative stereotypes, and these stereotypes of Black women tend to be the opposite of the portrayal of white women.

For instance, Black women have been stereotyped as loud, ghetto and sexually inappropriate, whereas white women are perceived as elegant, proper and the status quo (Collins, 1990; Jordan-Zachery, 2009). Not only can these stereotypes be harmful, in that Black women are not given the same opportunities, not heard and sometimes seen as invisible, but they can

manifest into the persona of a Strong Black Woman, where Black women are expected to handle inordinate amounts of stress, contributing to the overwhelming discourse of Black women as superhuman. Adopting this notion impacts their physical and mental health (Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Research on the phenomena of dual oppression has decades of history. The intertwined oppression faced by women of color was coined *intersectionality* — “an analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization” (Collins, 1998, p. 278). Intersectionality allows for the analysis of intersecting identities of Black women while using Black feminism to understand historical oppressions often impacting Black women’s lives.

Hypothesis

I hypothesize that Black women, particularly at predominantly white institutions (PWI) of higher education, experience racial and gender microaggressions (RGMA) and also engage in “super” woman behavior as a defense mechanism both on campus and in their communities. These experiences result in negative emotional and psychological consequences, which, over time, lead to poor psychological and physiological health outcomes. I argue that racial and gender microaggressions and the myth of the Black Superwoman experienced at predominantly white institutions are directly connected to ideas of superiority; whereas, white people treat Black women poorly in order to continue their ideals of betterness, and in response to this treatment, Black women attempt to prove otherwise. In addition to the Black Superwoman mode emerging as a coping mechanism to the ideals of superiority (Lewis, et al., 2013), it also emerges as Black women’s response to sexism and gender roles in their own community and a way to combat gender microaggressions. The ways in which Black women have been labeled historically have been adopted by society, their own communities, and even Black women

themselves, creating and perpetuating the Black Superwoman myth. However, the problematic nature of the Black Superwoman and Strong Black Woman myths are hard to qualify, as, on the surface, they appear to be a desirable quality and often come off as a compliment.

Research Questions

The following questions guide this study:

- 1) How are Black women experiencing racial and gender microaggressions at predominantly white institutions?
- 2) How are Black women experiencing the myth of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman, and are these experiences causing psychological and/or physiological harm?
- 3) How can racial and gender microaggressions help us understand the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman?

I address these research questions by using qualitative data, specifically using reflexivity through auto-ethnography and focus group data.

Assumptions

There has been debate over the most credible and most reliable method of research, that is, quantitative versus qualitative. Quantitative is more scientific based, utilizing deductive reasoning, where the researcher is supposed to remain objective; and qualitative research is inductive (Creswell, 2003), where perspectives of both the participants and the researcher are taken into account. The first underlying assumption in qualitative work is the ontological assumption, in which reality is based upon those who are experiencing the reality, and that neither reality is more or less real than another; everyone has their own truth (Yin, 2009). Crotty (2003) defines ontology as “the study of being” (p. 10), which for this study lends the perspective of experiential reality is truth.

The second assumption is epistemological, in which the researcher develops a closeness to the participants during interaction, which can impact the findings of the work. This assumption also is described as knowledge (Hathaway, 1995). The purpose of the use of epistemology is to ensure knowledge is sufficient and credible (Maynard, 1994) and that it demonstrates, as noted in Pasque (2012), “How you know what you know” (p. 22). The third assumption — axiological — is described by Pasque (2012) as asking, “What is the role of values that undergird ontology and epistemology?” (p. 22). Methodological, like epistemological, also is closeness with the researcher and participants, and according to Hathaway (1995), it typically involves the immersion in activities by “becoming part of the phenomenon of study, and by documenting the understanding of the situation by those engaged” (p. 544), which the auto-ethnography and focus group does.

The third assumption is rhetorical, in that the research tends to be written in first person and aims to correct societal injustices (O’Neil, J. 1998) which often involves the researcher being passionate about the subject matter while reporting the perceived truth of participants. The final assumptions relate to participants, as it is assumed or expected that participants will be open and honest in their communication regarding their experiences of gender and racial microaggressions and/or experiences of the archetypes Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman. To guide readers and offer clarity on terminology, in the following section I review and discuss key terms that provide an understanding for the analysis of the study.

Contributions

The addition of my own voice and vulnerability demonstrated through auto-ethnography, is a unique contributions to previous works. Additionally, other works have done an excellent job of describing the experiences of these phenomena and reported findings that indicate health disparities, both physiological and psychological. However, my work also provides recommendations and solutions for Black women to escape the myth of the Black superwoman or Strong Black woman, explicitly through the use of my own narrative. Finally, my work addresses the politics of Black womanhood through the use of my voice at a local women's march.

Specifically, using an auto-ethnography uniquely contributes to the Strong Black woman or Black superwoman research. Other works do not choose to engage the literature in such a personal matter. This engagement is not only a form of resistance to the notion that Black women don't demonstrate vulnerability, it also allows for other Black women to find validity in my story. This study builds upon the works of Patricia Hill Collins controlling images (Collins, 1999), Beaubonfaont (2009) Strong Black Woman Mask and Lewis et. al., (2012), racial and gender microaggressions unique to Black women. This study also indicates a gap in Racial and Gender microaggression literature, in that Black women's unique experiences in the racial and gender microaggression chart (Sue, 2007) are not included. This study lends a different perspective of the use the SBW and BSW archetypes as the authors named above have used them interchangeably, whereas my findings indicates a distinct difference between the two terms.

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is three-fold: 1) to explore experiences of microaggressions that Black women encounter at predominantly white institutions, 2) to explore the characteristics and

qualities or dimensions of the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman, and 3) to explore the relationship between racial and gender microaggressions and the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman.

I matter. I am real. I have feelings. I am human. While wearing the mask and cape, I didn't acknowledge that I was human. I owned and accepted this superwoman mentality — strong and unbreakable — which diminished my humanity. Often, others enabled this behavior because it frequently benefited them, and when others told me to put myself first, I ignored them.

This study is significant in that it draws attention to the constant and unique battle that Black women endure, regardless of the space they occupy, due to their intersections of race and gender. Oppression, specifically for Black women, has been extreme (Beal, 2008), in that we are faced with overt racism and sexism, and gender and racial microaggressions. In response to this multi-faceted oppression, we tend to respond in a more-than-human manner both as a way to disprove the stereotypes and to cope. The pressure that Black women endure to be superwomen was not originally an internal one. We adopted and later internalized this notion — which has become a core belief and value — due to systematic oppression, white privilege and microaggressions. Either being seen as inferior or not seen at all and not held to high expectations by society at large — or both — have, over time, placed Black women in *battle mode*. This *modus operandi* is one of survival, used to demonstrate our value and worth in an effort to be seen as good enough and to show we have value despite the negative stereotypes. For faculty and students alike, this battle takes place within society at large as well as in the classrooms at PWI's.

Local research at a predominantly white institution revealed high-level perceived experiences of racial microaggressions for students of color (Lewis, 2016), as well as indicated,

through focus groups specifically with Black female students, that they use the strong Black woman archetype as a form of resistance to racial and gender microaggressions. This study builds upon this previous research, in that it seeks to explore the connection between racial and gender microaggressions and the myth of the Black superwoman. My contribution to the literature through this study is to make the connection explicit among the use of SBW/BSW and RGMA by conducting research on both phenomenon. While other scholars address both issues and hint at the relationship, those works do not intentionally address a relationship between the two. Below I provide key terms pertinent to this dissertation.

Key Terms

Racism. I never understood the depth of racism, how deep the rabbit hole went, until I awakened my senses, delved into readings, and applied them to real-life circumstances. Racism is systemic and embedded throughout the fabric of our nation and impacts access to opportunities and resources for people of color. “Racism is a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the humans that have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the capitalistic, patriarchal world (Grosfoguel, 2011), and it is one of the main, deep-rooted reasons why Black Feminism exists as a form of resistance to contradict the racist ideology.

Sexism. I was groped at college parties, and when that happened, I felt violated and used. The idea that people believe they have the right to violate my space and my body is disgusting. Sexism, like racism, is systemic and can be used as a form of power and control to maintain an ideal of superiority. Sexism is defined as prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex. Together, racism and sexism impact the daily lives of Black

women globally, and coupled with classism, have been collectively described as intersectionality.

What occurs when a woman from a minority group tries to navigate the main crossing in the city... the main highway is “racism road.” One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression (Crenshaw, in Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 196).

Misogynoir. Specifically, Black women, due to historical slavery labels, combat both racism and sexism regularly both inside and outside of our own communities. *Misogynoir* was coined in 2008 to describe the unique ways in which Black women are pathologized, specifically in popular culture.

What happens to Black women in public space isn’t about them being any woman of color. It is particular and has to do with the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in our world (Bailey, 2014).

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), provides an analysis of how systems of race, gender and class intersect and cannot be separated. Crenshaw further describes the term as the multiple ways in which Black women are oppressed:

Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as “woman” or “person of color” as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 1242).

While research suggests that Black college women are impacted by both race and gender — specifically their self-perception as well as how others perceive and treat them (e.g., Collins, 2000; Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, & Mazzeo, 2015; Crenshaw, 1994; Krebs et al., 2011; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014) — intersectionality research is limited in relation to historical stereotypes that impact race and gender for Black college women, such as the SBW archetype.

Social Justice.

Social justice is a process and a goal. A commitment to a socially just world and the committed actions to make that world a reality. Or, the goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure... Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live. (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007, p.6).

This sense of agency through social justice is uplifting to Black women.

Matrix of Domination. The *matrix of domination* term originated in the field of sociology and has become an important concept within Black feminism. Collins (1990) states that, “the matrix of domination refers to how intersections of oppression are structurally organized. It explains the way ‘structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression’” (p. 18). It also refers to the structural and systematic hierarchy — the superiority and inferiority model — that is perpetuated throughout society (Collins, 1990; Hooks, 1990). Black feminist thought sees these distinctive

systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination (Collins, 1990). Race, gender and class are the “three systems of oppression that most heavily affect African-American women” (Collins, 1990, p.222) within this matrix that simultaneously oppresses on structural, systemic and political levels. Simultaneity of oppression is discussed as it relates to the dual oppression of black women through labor and class formation, oppression is the systemic and pervasive nature of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. Oppression fuses institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that saturate most aspects of life in our society (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). It is further described it as:

Oppression denotes structural and material constraints that significantly shape a person's life chances and sense of possibility. Oppression also signifies a hierarchical relationship in which dominant or privileged groups benefit, often in unconscious ways, from the disempowerment of subordinated or targeted groups. Oppression resides not only in external social institutions and norms but also within the human psyche as well (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

Strong Black Woman (SBW). I've often used the SBW/BSW as a point of pride. I felt superhuman and even had a mantra of sorts that I used, which listed all of my titles, hats I wore, positions served etc. Colleagues, friends and professors heard me use it and often applauded the use of it. Sometimes the response from other Black women would be, “I need to start using that myself!” This was my frequent way of being until I came to the realization that I was not feeling my best and that it was due to me covering my emotions, believing the facade of the mantra was

a good thing. I realized that I've been wearing a mask, pretending to be handling everything well, when in reality, the struggle was real.

The prevailing image of the Black woman is complex and distorted (Holmes, 2011). The Strong Black Woman archetype is an idealized construction of Black womanhood that personifies strength, independence, competency and self-reliance (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, 2007). For many Black women, the strength persona serves as a defense mechanism against racism and sexism as well as a self-presentational strategy that frees them from the constraints placed upon them by society (Harris-Lacewell, 2001). However, this strength construction limits, rather than empowers, Black women by perpetuating a social schema that de-emphasizes their daily struggles and society's inequities, often leaving Black women physically, emotionally and mentally depleted (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). Works by multiple scholars (Collins, 1990; Jordan-Zachery, 2009; Woods-Giscombe & Black, 2010; Sue, et al., 2007; Sue, 2010; Lewis, et al., 2012; Mendenhall, 2015; Brown, 2014) have highlighted the intersection of race and gender relative to the Black woman experience and have discussed the myth of the Strong Black Woman, yet these combined experiences continue to persist.

Specifically, Black female scholars at predominately white institutions often feel silenced and experience racial battle fatigue (Corbin, et al., 2018). Black women also go unheard and are seen as illegitimate voices, even in their own medical treatment, such as in the case of Serena Williams. Following the birth of her child, she noted prior medical conditions that she believed were being exacerbated, yet her voice fell on deaf ears, which put her in serious physical danger. Williams' case demonstrates the silencing of Black women despite their notoriety, accolades or accomplishments. Furthermore, it demonstrates the perception of how the stereotypes of SBW cause harm to Black women. While SBW is often perceived as helpful, qualitative evidence

consistently demonstrates ways in which SBW is internalized (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Specifically, studies conducted by Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) demonstrate how the characterization and identity of the SBW is passed down from generation to generation, a learned behavior from maternal family members. Again, this internalization is seen as helpful and as an indicator of strength and resilience, but it can be harmful relative to Black women's psychological health.

This identification of an SBW able to endure inordinate amounts of stress and be independent while not asking or believing they need help (Lewis, et al., 2010) has become a staple cultural and social identity for Black women and increases their levels of stress (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Harrell, 2001; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996).

Black Feminism. Uplifting other Black women is an important facet in Black feminism, and this is typically done through empowerment and the practice of love. This is so important, due to the fact that the world treats the Black woman as if they are invisible two times over (Lerner, 1972), and love allows Black women to be seen and heard. "The intellectual work of Black women is not thought to be of enough significance to be engaged with, argued with, agreed or disagreed with," (Carby, 1998, p. 228) which is why Black Feminist "politics evolve[s] from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work" (Combahee River Collective, 1974, p. 234), with the intention of exposing, healing and changing the societal and community expectations of Black women.

Black Feminist Theory has successfully demonstrated the ways in which white privilege has oppressed Black women through intersectionality, where Black women's identities overlap, yet the duality of these identities everywhere else is often ignored. Black feminism has contributed significantly to works about the SBW or BSW syndrome. Therefore, using a Black

feminist framework and research on microaggressions will help us understand and analyze the myth of the SBW or BSW. Furthermore, Black feminism — which addresses issues of race, power, privilege and oppression — can provide a guiding foundation of historical context and analysis of racism and microaggressions.

Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. ... often they experience double-discrimination — the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women — not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

Black feminism is an active form of resistance, refusing to comply with the stereotypical notions placed upon us, specifically as a response to powerful systems in society that are detrimental to the survival of Black women. Coupled with resistance is empowerment through social justice initiatives aimed to enhance social, political and economic power. For the purposes of my study, this framework lends a perspective of the Black woman and the complexities that exist within our intersecting identities both inside and outside of our community. This framework also provides Black women with additional language to give name to these issues, as well as providing validation for the individual and collective experiences of the Black woman. This study extends research by Lewis, et al. (2013), in which focus groups were used as the data collection method to explore how Black women coped with racial and gender microaggressions. In this study, I intend to “capture individual lived experiences of participants and investigate individuals’ varied responses to experiencing microaggressions in their daily lives” (Lewis, et al., 2013, p. 775), as well as collect their narratives in survey form related to their experiences of

performing as a superwoman, with an analysis of how this relates to the experiences of racial and gender microaggressions by women in the same demographic.

These historical misrepresentations of the female character and identity through a combination of the stereotypes are embedded in the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman. As a result, Black women often are burdened with a complex, mental dichotomy of debunking the myth and attempting to disprove the inaccuracies of the stereotypes both inside and outside of our own communities, while still performing and adopting parts of the myth.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2. Provides an overview and brief history of Black Feminist Thought and also provides an overview to racial and gender microaggressions, as well as historical stereotypes of Black women as they relate to both the Strong Black Woman and Black Superwoman. This study is grounded in Black Feminism and intersectional framework. It provides a lens to which to view the historical connotations related to Black women's oppression in various spaces over time.

Chapter 3. This chapter details the qualitative measures employed for this study. Describes the research design, procedures and protocol used to collect and analyze data. Specifically, it outlines the process for collecting and analyzing data for both the auto-ethnography and focus groups.

Chapter 4. Presents a summary of findings from the auto-ethnography and the content of my self-published manual, "Out of Battle Into Freedom, One Black Woman's Guide to Escaping the Superwoman Syndrome." This chapter begins with the overarching themes emerged from the self-published manual with an analysis of those themes. After which, the self-published manual is inserted, which outlines my background, upbringing and experience as a Black woman from a disadvantaged background. Also, in the manuscript I share experiences of racial and gender

microaggressions at a predominately white institution as well as narratives of my experiences of my use of the Strong Black Woman and Black Super Woman archetypes.

Chapter 5. Provides an analysis of the focus group results and discussion of the overall implications based on the analysis, as well as future recommended directions of the work. There are significant findings from the focus group data presented, which provide a different lens for the archetypes of Strong Black Woman and Black Superwoman. The voices of the participants allowed for a deeper understanding of these phenomenon.

Chapter 2

Where Race and Gender Never Separate

Much of the qualitative research on people of color and their experiences of racial microaggressions finds that there is a spectrum of insults and indignities reported, such as feelings of invisibility, assumptions of cultural and communication styles, as well as experiences of being treated as a foreigner or second-class citizen (Sue, et al., 2007; Sue, et al., 2008).

Although the experiences varied by group, some experiences were distinctive and specifically situated around racial identities and stereotypes unique to that group. For instance, Sue, et al. (2007) found that the experiences of feeling like aliens or foreigners in their environment was directly associated with Asian Americans, yet other findings indicated that Latinx and African Americans often described their experiences with microaggressions under the categories of *criminal behavior* and *lack of intellectual capabilities*. Therefore, belonging to or identifying with one racial group can result in varied experiences of racial microaggressions. While these studies have advanced theoretical work regarding racial microaggressions, until recently, the intersection of race and gender has not been explored in depth, especially with a focus on Black women. Some exceptions to this include research by Lewis et al. (2012, 2017) and Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, (2016), who address the dominant stereotype of the Strong Black Woman or myth of the Black Superwoman relative to racial and gender microaggressions.

The broadening or expansion of the theory of racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010) provides a space to specifically address overlapping marginalized identities, including sexual orientation and gender. As the research continues to emerge, it has focused more on sexism and the subtle messages directed towards women in everyday life, but again, lacks the direct focus on Black women's experiences. For example, Capodilupo et al. (2010) conducted a study with

university women from varying backgrounds and found that the women's experiences ranged from being reduced to sex objects to feelings of intellectual inferiority. This study adds to those works by exploring how racial and gender microaggressions specific to Black women aid in their internalization of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman myths.

Over the years, incidents of microaggressions have gained national attention, mostly at colleges and universities. Students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign launched the event, "Being Black at Illinois," during which students covered their mouths with duct tape and wrote corrective responses to assumptions and stereotypes directed toward them on the campus. Harvard students launched a campaign, "I too am Harvard," using video to demonstrate the pejorative experiences and everyday racism they faced. In addition to gaining media and university attention, microaggressions have been used as a tool and theoretical framework to further explore and understand race education (Huber, et al., 2015) as well as oppression overall.

There is a unique type of oppression specific to Black women also can be called *misogynoir* (Gaines, 2017). The experiences that Black women endure both inside and outside of their community are a result of their intersecting identities. In this dissertation, I explore the myth of the Black Superwoman and its connections to racial and gender microaggressions. The three marginalizing oppressions — sexism, racism and poverty — that impact Black women at higher rates than any other demographic, are not a collective issue that impacts Black men or white women. Therefore, Black women are constantly seeking equality for gender and race at the same time (Akasha et al., 1982, 2015).

Stereotypical characteristics placed upon Black women are attributes that continue to impact their intersecting identities, including ideas such as being loud, aggressive and threatening, which often is demonstrated to be in direct opposition to characteristics of white

women. This frequently leads to the invisibility of Black women, also impacting their credibility due to the negative stereotypes. Black women's voices are typically unheard, and their views or opinions are disrespected and disregarded. This chapter provides a brief overview of racial and gender microaggressions and a brief history of intersectionality, including Black feminism.

Racial and Gender Microaggressions

While society has attempted to declare a post-racial era, we have entered into a “new form of racism that (a) is more likely than ever to be disguised and covert, and (b) has evolved from the ‘old fashioned’ form, in which overt racial hatred and bigotry is consciously and publicly displayed, to a more ambiguous and nebulous form that is more difficult to identify and acknowledge” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 167). The term *microaggressions* was originally coined in 1970 by Chester Pierce, an African-American psychologist, to describe covert racist experiences he witnessed, specifically towards Black people.

In recent years, several competing definitions of *microaggressions* have been embedded throughout scholarly literature. *Microaggressions*, as defined by Davis (1989), are “stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority” (p. 1576). In the early stages of this framework, microaggressions were only labeled as a threat or act committed towards Black people. Today, other authors such as Solorzano, Ceja, Davis, & Yosso (2000) define microaggressions as “subtle (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual), directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 146). This definition captures people of color, including Asian Americans, Indian Americans and Latinx. According to Sue, et al. (2007), “Racial microaggressions create race-related stress and can be described as the everyday, commonplace, and often ambiguous forms of racism faced by people of color” (p. 146).

People of color (POC) must live through the indignities and oppression that have been omnipresent throughout the history of our country and continue to the present day. Such oppression has been reflected in our governmental leadership, educational systems, places of employment, and the media. POC do not just occasionally experience racial microaggressions. Rather, they are a constant, continuing, and cumulative experience” (Sue, et al., 2008, p. 174), which often, over time, “contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity and flattened confidence” (Pierce, 1995, p. 281). The cumulative experiences (Smith, 2004, 2010, 2016; Smith, Yosso, & Soloranzo, 2007) of these insults and indignities is inherent in the prefix of the word *microaggression* — *micro*, as in frequency and subtleness, not in relation to the significance of the experience.

For the purposes of this study, I use the most recent scholarly definition of *microaggressions* from Sue (2010) as: “brief and commonplace, interpersonal exchanges — intentional and unintentional — that communicate denigrating and disparaging messages to ethnic minority individuals” (p. 274). I chose this definition because it makes an imperative distinction, indicating that microaggressions are either purposeful or by accident; yet, either way, negative and belittling communication occurs, which can cause emotional and psychological harm to the recipient. Sue (2007) lists *microaggression* in three separate categories as: *microinvalidations*, *microinsults*, and *microassaults*: **Microinvalidations**: “exclude, negate, and nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of” people of color; **Microinsults**: “subtle snubs” in which the contributions of and/or persons of color themselves are unacknowledged, invisible, or marginalized; **Microassaults**: include explicitly racist and demeaning behavior, such as name calling (p. 274). While these categories provide examples that Black women experience, there are additional unique experiences and stereotypes that are subtle

in form which Black women experience that are not captured in the chart. Below I describe some historical controlling image that are still uniquely experienced by Black women in present day, which I would label as microaggressions.

“Yo Mama, Yo Daddy, Yo greasy greasy (gran) Mammy”: Stereotypes of Black Women

Assuming the role of a mother-like figure, a *mammy*, attaches vestiges of slavery and segregation. These notions were placed specifically on Black women as the nurturers and caregivers, not for their family, but of the slave owner’s family, which aided in the submission to dominant white culture. Typically, the *mammy* as a Black woman’s image was depicted as dark-skinned, overweight and serving as the nanny, maid and cook (Thomas, et al., 2004). This imagery and notion of *mammy* aided in the white dominant culture and ideology of the Black woman’s submission to them, as well as aiding in the treatment of Black women as inhumane — like cattle — especially due to *mammy* being the wet nurse for the slave master’s children. *Mammy* was the help, and today a Black woman often is seen as the woman who “makes a way outta no way,” who single-handedly raises her children, works multiple jobs, and supports her extended family (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007), with little to no help from a Black man or anyone else. Collins (2000) also notes that the *mammy* was stripped of her sexuality and seen as asexual.

Black Ho, The Jezebel. Currently, in many Black communities, young girls and women are often whistled at or greeted with catcalling phrases, or frequently called to with the phrase, “Aye shawty,” in addition to the occasional, “Hey sexy,” and “Aye, check it out.” When Black women chose not to engage with the men shouting out these phrases, as they often saw it as disrespectful, that perception was returned with disrespect, resulting in name calling, typically with names unique to Black women, such as “fuck you then, Black bitch” or “Black ho.” When a Black woman did choose to engage or entertain these calls, it was obvious that the men only

wanted to grope and/or attempt to have sex, often drooling over the woman's body or making lewd comments about their appearance. This is especially true for lighter-skinned women specifically, who are viewed as more attractive in the Black community (Davis, et al., 2019) and are often referred to as *red bone*. This over-sexualization of the Black woman's body is characterized through the *jezebel* stereotype.

The depiction or imagery often used to identify the *jezebel* included a biracial identity, with fair skin, slim body type, and other European features (Jewell, 1993). Seen as a more alluring, seductive slave, the jezebel often was sexually assaulted more (Jewell, 1993) and sold at auction at higher rates. This stereotype is one that was used in slavery to sexually exploit and/or control the Black woman's sexuality and reproduction. This control over Black women's bodies became even more systemic through institutionalization (Roberts, 1997). As a result of this hypervisibility, Black women began this type of *acting*, in which their behavior and attitudes appeared open to creating a dissemblance (Hine, 1989), a self-applied invisibility.

Lazy Black Bitch, The Welfare Queen. The notion of the *welfare queen* was birthed in the 1980s in politics during the Reagan administration. The welfare queens were negatively characterized as Black mothers who were lazy, had multiple children, and were living off the government. This incendiary political rhetoric further marginalized Black women (Foster, 2017) and was in stark, direct contradiction to stay-at-home white mothers, single or otherwise. Additionally, this stereotype uniquely placed upon Black women also encouraged the lack of Black men in the household, which perpetuated a notion of the Black woman's independence from their men and a reliance on the system.

Angry Black Woman. The *sapphire* is a pejorative stereotype describing the Black woman as "nagging, emasculating, shrill, loud, argumentative and a master of verbal assaults"

(Thomas, et al., 2004 p. 429). This characterization arose out of the TV show, “Amos and Andy,” and included stereotypes of the Black man as unwilling to take care of his family and the angry Black woman displaying angry and loud expressions of emotions related to that. Today, Black women often silence themselves in an attempt to avoid being labeled an *angry Black woman* (Lewis, et al., 2012), both scenarios of which can be damaging to our mental health. Like Black feminism, intersectionality centers the Black woman’s voice and allows for her narratives to be captured through her overlapping identities. In recent times, Black girls and women have adopted *#BlackGirlMagic* as a celebration of the resilience of Black women while acknowledging themselves and their accomplishments, which can be seen as an extension of Black feminism.

Black Feminist Thought

Black women’s activism is not a recent discovery. Many free and enslaved abolitionists addressed systematic racism, sexism and classism through their writing, manifestos, and abolition missions. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Hill-Collins, 1989, 1998, 2000, 2002) is the theoretical framework that I use to inform this study. Black women scholars have relied on BFT as a primary lens in order to research experiences of Black women in higher education (Borum & Walker, 2012; Gibson & Espino, 2016; Green, 2017; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Johnson, 2015; Patton, 2009; Shavers, 2010; Wilson & King, 2016), and it is an analytical method that aids in capturing the experiences of Black women, including those who are students at predominantly white institutions. BFT uses sociologists’ primary focus of “sociological imaginations” (Mills, 1959,) in which one’s own reality and experiences are connected to broader societal issues. Furthermore, this theoretical model provides useful indications to make sense of the Black women’s experiences as members of a historically underrepresented group, as well as providing

an understanding of the unique marginalization and isolation that often intersect with their identities.

Black Feminist Thought is a critical social theory committed to justice for the collective population of Black women and other oppressed groups. The premise of BFT centers on the empowerment of Black women and the assertion of their voices as central to their experiences (Patton, 2009), which no other framework does.

We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face (The Combahee River Collective Statement, in Home Girls, 1983 p. 272).

Black feminism is a black liberation movement initiated and carried out by free abolitionists in the 1830s (Guy-Sheftall, 1995), addressing systemic racism, sexism and classism (Grote, Bledsoe, Wellman, & Brown, 2007; Kwate, Valdimarsdottir, Guevarra, & Bovbjerg, 2003; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008). “A black feminist ideology fundamentally challenges the infrastructure of the oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism both in the dominant society and within movements for liberation.” (King, D., 1988, p. 61). Although the concept was not coined until 1983, *black feminist activism* has always addressed the invisibility of the Black woman in America as well as the ways in which “black women are subject to simultaneous oppression of patriarchy” (Carby, in Back & Solomon, 2000, p. 445). These Black women sacrificed their lives not only to achieve equal rights but also to live. Black women’s

histories of being queens, warriors, merchants, were largely erased with the horrific confines of slavery and the institutions and daily practices employed to uphold its structures. During post antebellum, World War II, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, Black women still were fighting for human rights, and the concept of Black feminism foregrounded black women's lived experiences through intellectual and radical activism. Black feminism also addresses the ways in which our sexuality has been constructed, often "deviating from those qualities with which white women" possess (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 444). This characterization of the Black woman as deviant and different from white women fostered stereotypes such as those noted by Guy-Sheftall (1995): *mammy, welfare queen, sapphire, whore, bulldagger* (p. 234). In addition to Guy-Sheftall, Collins (2000) notes that, "as long as black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed" (p. 18), both individually and collectively through the use of our voice and resistance inside and outside of our communities.

Collins (2000) contends that, by using intersectional paradigms to explain both the U.S. *matrix of domination* and Black women's individual and collective agency within it, Black feminist thought helps conceptualize social relations of domination and resistance. A wave metaphor is one way in which feminism has been historicized. Between 1920 and 1957, feminism focused mostly on the fight against racism and sexism (James & Busia, 1993), which initially included white feminists who fought against the same. Yet these women, who included Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, at a later time declined to associate their involvement in anti-slavery work and chose to perpetuate racist propaganda in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (White, 1991). At the time, "Black women's activism centered around passing a federal anti-lynching bill, unionizing themselves as workers, achieving economic

independence, securing birth control, enhancing their educational status, and improving the working condition of domestics” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p.78). More work was done from 1935 through 1971 during the Harlem Renaissance when “Zora Neale Hurston’s feminist classic, ‘Their Eyes Were Watching God’ (1937), underscored the importance of Black women finding their own voices and liberating themselves from narrow conceptions of womanhood” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995 p.77), which, for this dissertation, uses auto-ethnography to demonstrate a collective experience of this same liberation. Specifically, I use auto-ethnography to demonstrate vulnerability, which is not always the case for Black women who have adopted a Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman mentality.

Black feminist work continued during the Civil Rights Movement, the same period in which Shirley Chisholm ran for President in the United States (1972). Chisholm is most known for her presidential candidacy and her overall political activism. She viewed Black feminism as a way to gain political power due to the intersecting of social identities (Curwood, 2001). Chisholm was politically attacked by Black men and was very much not supported by white feminist groups. Specifically, due to her womanhood, Black men claimed that she would “sell out Black interests if they came in conflict with those of women” (Taylor, 1998, p. 19). This ideology emanating from Black men was typical, as “the reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. ... realizing they might be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppression of Black women” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 238). This historical knowledge regarding the separation of Black women from the White feminist movement and Civil Rights Movement, respectively, renders itself useful in that many of these behaviors still exist today.

Accusations that Black feminism “divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women’s movement” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 237). The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was founded in 1973 by Margaret Sloan (Taylor, 1998), but it didn’t officially start meeting until 1974, after its inaugural conference in the eastern region. The beginnings of the organization were not successful for both political and personal reasons. They didn’t have as much political clout in their movement, and other white feminists’ organizations were more visible (Taylor, 1998). In addition, Black feminists had “internal disagreements ... the result of class and political differences” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 238), which made it difficult to see and work towards the desired change.

The Black feminist movement formally entered the academy in the late ’70s and early ’80s (Cooper, 2015). Hundreds of Black feminists are worthy of mention as influential contributors during that time, all of whom demonstrated that “our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s” (Smith, 1983, p. 266). According to Collins (2000), “[l]iving life as an African American woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing black feminist thought because within Black women's communities’ thought is validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material and epistemological conditions.” (p. 52). ... Therefore, “black women must be in charge of black feminist thought, but being in charge does not mean that others are excluded” (p. 18), as Black women have consistently demonstrated their willingness and ability to aid all marginalized groups, unselfishly.

Black women often actively respond to oppressions in their personal lives, both directly to microaggressions and to other subtle gender jabs. And Black women also act as advocates when these slights and insults are directed towards other Black women, because, “if not us then who” (King-Taylor, 2017, Women’s March, Champaign IL.). “To me feminism is not simply a

struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels — sex, race, and class, to name a few — and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires" (Hooks, 1981, p. 194). There are many critics of Black Feminism who scrutinize the framework, deeming it not credible.

There are myths about Black feminism being anti-Black-man and stating that it is separatist. These are only false claims, as Black feminism has been at the forefront of social movements that impact all oppressed and marginalized groups due to the work of several scholars who identify with the framework. Black feminists have been the only scholars who have addressed the critical woes of being a Black woman. Allowing for the complexities and barriers that exist only for Black women in facing oppression in both of our identities that overlap and don't

Separately (Crenshaw, 1989), these critical Black Feminists address the issues Black women face, which have been overlooked and ignored by other movements such as women's suffrage, (general) feminism and the Civil Rights Movement. Guy-Sheftall (1995) lists five commonalities in African-American or Black feminist thought for which the first and fifth are particularly crucial in my analysis of the phenomena for this study and are integral to my critique of Sue (2007) failing to include Black women within the microaggression framework.

1. Black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources;
2. This triple jeopardy has meant that the problems, concerns and needs of black women are different in many ways from those of both white women and black men;

3. Black women must struggle for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously;
4. There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate racism and sexism as well as the other *isms* which plague the human community, such as classism and heterosexism;
5. Black women's commitment to the liberation of Blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience.

Black Feminism and *intersectionality* provide a solid foundation for depicting life as a Black woman in America. These frameworks provide historical contexts that remain relevant in present day.

Intersectionality

Sue (2007) contributes to the literature by expanding upon the definition of microaggressions to include other marginalized groups, yet Black women's unique experiences are missing from the chart. While experiences of Black women can be found in each of Sue's categories, there are many other experiences unique to Black women as a group that he does not include. Black women's experience of microaggressions are a direct result of their intersecting identities of race and gender. Sue's chart acknowledges the microaggressions that happen to marginalized groups but leaves out the intersecting identities of Black women. Therefore, the microaggressions framework as it exists excludes the experiential reality of Black women, further marginalizing them. There are two examples above that could be argued are more unique to Black women than to others:

1. *Ascription of intelligence*, specifically, "You are so articulate,"
2. *Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles*, specifically, "Why do you have to be so loud/animated?"

Black women do experience the remaining examples in the chart; however, as a result of our intersecting identities, Black women face other microaggressions that are not captured in the table.

Legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991) coined the term *intersectionality*, which is grounded in Black Feminist Thought. *Intersectionality* provides a deeper and more complex understanding of how both race and gender simultaneously impact the multiple dimensions of a Black woman's experiences. Specifically, the term provides an analysis of how systems of race, gender and class intersect and cannot be separated. Crenshaw further describes the term as the multiple ways in which Black women are oppressed:

Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as 'woman' or 'person of color' as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling
(Crenshaw, 1993, p. 1242).

Research suggests that Black college women are impacted by both race and gender, specifically their self-perception and how others perceive and treat them (e.g., Collins, 2000; Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, & Mazzeo, 2015; Crenshaw, 1994; Krebs et al., 2011; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). Intersectionality research is limited in relation to historical stereotypes that impact race and gender for Black college women, such as the Strong Black Woman archetype.

Crenshaw's (1989) *intersectionality* is defined as "an analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization" (p. 278). Although the term only came into being almost three decades ago, the notions and unique experiences of racial and gender discrimination for Black

women have persisted for centuries. In a speech delivered by Mary Mcleod Bethune in 1933, she stated:

One hundred years ago, she was the most pathetic figure on the American continent. She was not a person ... but a thing whose personality had no claim to the respect of mankind (quoted in Lerner, 1972, p. 580).

This statement is as relevant today as it was then, and intersectionality sheds light on these specific and unique violent and unlawful practices against Black women. “Black women’s experiences are used as a theoretical wedge, designed to demonstrate the shortcomings of conventional feminist and anti-racist work” (Nash, 2008, p. 8). Social work and other disciplines provide some analysis about overlapping identities and intersectionality related to microaggressions. They specifically name cisgender women, trans-Black women and other underrepresented groups, yet still fail to mention Black women (Sterzing, Gartner, Woodford, & Fisher, 2017). While many authors have acknowledged intersectionality and issues for minority women overall (Allen, 2018), there is limited research on microaggressions and the myth of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2016), especially highlighting the unique experiences of this demographic specific to microaggressions. Some authors critique intersectionality as a theory, believing that it should not only apply to marginalized groups (Yuval-Davis, 2015) and that it focuses too heavily on Black women. However, miscategorizing and applying this framework to everyone would be problematic in that the term was specifically coined based on racial, gender and class oppression; therefore, it does not fit for any other group’s salient identity.

As a result of having multiple identities, Black women needed a movement that would fight the issues we face that always intersect and cannot be separated. This is Black Feminist

Thought, which has grown over the years to become a prominent and valuable expression of lived experience, with amazing contributions from many Black feminists. In an attempt to meet expectations around family, the Black community and to combat stereotypical expectations, I argue that Black women pull from the myth of the Black Superwoman, often to their detriment.

The Relationship between Intersectionality and Black Feminism

The Myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman. While Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality*, and academics such as Patricia Hill Collins and Bell Hooks helped make it popular, Black feminism at its core has analyzed the intersection of race and gender specific to Black women since its inception. The very reason that Black feminism began was a result of the Black movements not addressing and including Black women and the feminist movement not addressing or including Black women. To fight racism and sexism at the same time, it was clear that Black women needed a separate movement. Black feminism IS intersectionality and intersectionality IS Black feminism.

For example, the Combahee Collective was formed in 1970 by Black feminists to directly separate from white feminist movements due to the latter's lack of ability and/or unwillingness to address racism that Black women experienced. Even prior to the formation of the collective, during the 19th century, Sojourner Truth spoke to these overlapping racial and gender identities of Black women and the resulting unique challenges experiences in her speech, "Ain't I a woman," . Black female activism, such as the speeches from Truth (1851) and the work of Ida B. Wells (1884), paved the way for terms such as *intersectionality* to carry forward the work towards social justice. This work includes fighting against hypervisibility and invisibility, sexual objectification, assumptions of nurturing and super emotional and physical strength, as well more stereotypical roles that are only characterized through Black women.

The invisibility factor is “typically defined as an absence of, or erroneous representations of, oppressed groups and/or individuals” (Sesko & Biernat, 2009, p. 357). The invisibility factor derives from the focus on Black men when discussing racism and focusing on white women when discussing sexism. These *isms* have and continue to be linear, excluding Black women’s intersecting identities and almost eradicating our existence. Therefore, minimizing and diminishing the impact of these *isms* is a critical factor in Black women’s lives. As a result, Black women’s voices are silenced, along with a lack of recognition of their value and contributions to society, within and outside of their communities. Black Feminism contends that “we were taught that you really didn’t show your feelings that much. You kind of kept things inside and dealt with them. The main thing that was taught, whatever it is, overcome it, deal with it, and go ahead” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, p. 75), and these teachings were passed down from Black woman to Black woman as a way of life. Since emancipation, the lack of steady jobs for Black men has sent Black women into the workforce; their income has not been supplemental but “essential to family survival” (Collins, 2005, p. 199).

Harris (2001) states that “... superhuman women have been denied the luxuries of failure, nervous breakdowns, leisured existences or anything else that would suggest that they are complex, feeling human beings” (p. 12), and we are touted as having — and have internalized having — an unbreakable mentality. This mentality and perception, as a key tool of oppression, arose during slavery and has persisted throughout history based on stereotypes prescribed only to Black women. Historically, the stereotypes played out in the following tropes described earlier: *mammy*, *Jezebel*, *welfare queen* and *angry Black woman*, and they were more overt, as well. Today they are covert and occur frequently, yet subtly, in the form of microaggressions.

These controlling images (Collins, 2000) although not as overt as in the past, can have deleterious effects on the psychologically and physiological well-being of Black women. Other work has even emphasized long term health conditions such as hypertension as a result of stress. In order to look into these phenomena, the third chapter discusses the methods and methodologies employed to collect and analyze data in order to answer this study's research questions.

Chapter 3

Methods

As previously stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this qualitative study is threefold:

1) to explore experiences of microaggressions that Black women encounter at predominantly white institutions, 2) to explore the characteristics and qualities that identify the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman, and 3) to explore the relationship between racial and gender microaggressions and the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman.

The goal of exploring these questions is to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman and how microaggressions may influence that understanding. This chapter outlines and discusses the methods and methodologies that will be employed to answer the research questions. The benefits and limitations of the method and methodologies to this particular study also are shared here. This study is guided by three key research questions:

1. How are Black women experiencing racial and gender microaggressions at predominantly white institutions?
2. How are Black women experiencing the myth of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman, and are these experiences causing psychological and/or physiological harm?
3. How can racial and gender microaggressions help us understand the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman?

In this chapter, I introduce the research design for the study and detail the data collection strategies employed. Specifically, I discuss instrument construction, recruitment, and positionality of the researcher and participant demographics. In this study, I conducted both an auto-ethnography and focus groups to explore and develop a deeper understanding of Black women experiences of racial and gender microaggressions and the use of Strong Black Woman

or Black Superwoman archetypes. I used the auto-ethnography to develop the focus group questions. For this study, I analyzed the auto-ethnography while collecting and analyzing the focus group data, which allowed for an original analysis of the data (Charmaz, 2006).

I simultaneously collected and analyzed the data, which is encouraged in the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2015). This study utilizes grounded theory to address the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman and experiences of racial and gender microaggressions.

Grounded Theory

The term *grounded theory* was created in 1967 with the purpose of developing supposition based on data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and with a primary goal of discovering or producing theory. It has been described as “an inductive, comparative, iterative, and interactive method” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 53). Historically, *grounded theory* was defined as “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 191) through a “systematic method for constructing a theoretical analysis for data, with explicit analytic strategies and implicit guidelines for data collection” (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 347). For researchers and scholars, grounded theory allows the findings to guide the data analysis.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) assert that grounded theory can generate two major types of theory, substantive and formal. They suggest that substantive theories are used as “a springboard or stepping stone to the development of a grounded formal theory” (p. 79). This study adopts the symbolic interactionist perspective with constructivist grounded theory methods. Grounded theory allows for assumptions that multiple realities exist, data collection reflects researchers’ and research participants’ mutual constructions, and the researcher enters the participants’ world and is affected by it. This approach also allows “an interpretive portrayal of the studied world,

not an exact picture of it” (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 18). A constructivist approach takes implicit meanings, experiential views, and grounded theory analyses as constructions in reality (Charmaz, 2000). This approach gives credibility to the exchange and interaction between the researcher and participants, and the researcher’s perspective is accepted as a natural and necessary part of the process. This is particularly important for this study, as I rely on personal understandings and the ability to contextualize the data to make sense of the findings.

All grounded theories share the following attributes in their approaches: 1) simultaneous collection and analysis of data; 2) creation of categories developed from data and not by pre-existing conceptualizations with respect to theoretical sensitivity; 3) discovery of basic social processes in the data; 4) theoretical sampling to refine categories; 5) writing analytical memos and vignettes during the process of data collection, coding, and writing; and 6) the integration of 31 categories into a theoretical framework (Chamaz, 2012). Grounded theory commonly uses focus groups and observation for data collection in research.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to first explore and reflect on my own experiences with race and gender, as well as my use of the Black Superwoman schema through auto-ethnography. The first phase of the study included my own personal exploration of experiences of racism and sexism as well as lived experiences of identifying as the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman, experiences of which were collected through journaling and subsequently a self-published book, “Out of Battle Into Freedom, One Black Woman’s Guide to Escaping the Superwoman Syndrome.”

Qualitative research is important to my study and research on Black women, as the methodologies employed allow for storytelling and examination of narratives not otherwise explored through their own voice via other methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1991, as cited in Denzin

& Lincoln, 1994). Using my voice and my experiences through auto-ethnography not only lends a unique perspective, it validates what I argue to be a collective experience. Specifically, auto-ethnography and focus groups are used as a combined source of main data collection.

Positionality or Role of the Researcher

According to Collins (1991), Black feminism is the ability and choice to be self-aware, which empowers women and men to be a pulse for humanity with a goal of spreading this notion throughout the community. It is critical that I discuss my role “to describe relevant aspects of self, including any biases and assumptions, any expectations, and experiences to qualify [my] ability to conduct the research” (Greenbank, 2003, p. 39). As a Black woman who has identified as a Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman, and as an alumna of a PWI where I experienced many instances of microaggressions, I must discuss this critical lens and perspective in this study. As a doctoral candidate, I shed light on the ways in which Black women are marginalized at PWI’s. Furthermore, I use myself as a participant through auto-ethnography to describe my own experiences as a Black woman who attended a PWI to enhance the richness of the data and explore connections of collective experiences. My initial assumptions were not only that most, if not all, Black women experienced some form of racial and gender microaggressions at PWI’s but that those women exemplify characteristics of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman as a defense or coping mechanism. I also recognize the ways in which my identity overlaps with participants, likely creating a sense of belonging, familiarity and a comfort that perhaps a white male or white female researcher would not have been able to create. These similarities created an evident safe space for participants, as when we began, many of them stated that they were “glad to be there,” or “happy that this type of research was being done” and reiterated how they believed this work is “important and necessary.” Thus, I built a quick

rapport and connection, which I believe aids in the depth of participant responses.

Data Collection Methods

Auto-ethnography (Denzin, 2003, 1983; Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014) is a means of using and exploring self as it relates to broader societal and systemic experiences (Ellis, 2004; Holman-Jones, 2005; Maréchal, 2010). This form of research also lends itself to a way of therapy (Spry, 2001) that could inspire, encourage, and motivate readers to seek help and healing. Along these lines, Camangian (2010) argues that it can serve as a way to promote Black youth to be self-reflective and deny stereotypical notions of who they are, eliminating their “internalized oppressive thoughts” (p. 196), which I argue is just as helpful to Black women, who may constantly feel the need to disprove projected stereotypes and archetypes.

In auto-ethnography, the determination of validity and reliability is based upon the likelihood that the researchers have indeed had the experiences of which they’ve written (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Auto-ethnographic writing resists “grand theorizing” and the façade of objective research that contextualized subjects and searches for singular truth (Crawford, 1996; Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Goodall, 1991a, 1991b, 1998; Neuman, 1996; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Secklin, 1997, as cited in Spry, 2001). It also is important to determine the relevance of results in ethnographic work beyond the study itself (Angrosino, 2007). Qualitative works utilizing ethnography tend to place more emphasis on transferability and analysis (Patton, 2002), that is, determining the meaning of what was found and how can it be applied to other studies.

I use auto-ethnographic methodology to enable interaction and understanding (Mruiik & Breuer, 2003) by sharing my own lens and experiences and exploring the connectedness to experiences of other Black women. However, it has been said that auto-ethnography “violates

generalizability due to [a] researcher's personal bias (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2003, as cited in O'Byrne, 2007, p.1384). Ensuring that I provide research that demonstrates Black women's experiences outside of my own personal experiences provides an in-depth analysis of broader societal issues that Black women face. This may demonstrate that these issues are not only individual, yet collective, and can be seen systematically in various institutions such as "healthcare, financial, education, housing, etc." (Day, 2012, p. 139). To accomplish this, I use triangulation to demonstrate findings from more than my own lens (Cohen & Manion, 2000), in addition to relying on Black Feminist Theory.

After a breakdown at home, crying uncontrollably and for seemingly no reason, I began to re-evaluate my circumstances. I started to reflect on that time of my life — how much I was juggling and acknowledging the toll that it was taking on me. I began to journal these thoughts and feelings. From this journal, I developed an outline for my book, *Out of Battle into Freedom, One Black Woman's Guide to Escaping the Superwoman Syndrome*. This outline was formatted into headings or categories and then questions developed under each. An editor then interviewed me based on the outline and questions, adding her own questions throughout. This interview was later transcribed, producing the self-published autoethnography.

My reflection captures my upbringing, relationships with family members, and pejorative experiences I experienced in my neighborhood, in addition to the ways in which I embodied the identity of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman. All of this shaped how I respond, combat, and resist racial and gender microaggressions. The reflexivity in my study has been deemed persuasive, with the ability to depict and represent collective identities (Denizin & Gardiana, 2013; Wall, 2006). I collected data on myself through a recounting of my

personal experiences relative to identifying as a superwoman and through the racial and gender microaggressions aimed at me.

To capture my experiences, I jotted notes of instances in which I perceived the incidents as based on both my race and gender, as well as instances in which I utilized the identity of the Black Superwoman. Then I developed questions relative to the experiences, after which an editor interviewed me. This interview was recorded and then transcribed, after which I coded the transcriptions and developed themes. These themes were used to develop questions for the focus groups. These themes are described in Chapter 4.

Setting/Context

The setting I selected for this study is a predominantly white institution given a) location of the institution, b) availability of participants, and c) the local institution's reported experiences of racism and microaggressions on campus.

Participants

Eligibility for this study required participants to (1) identify as a Black or African American, (2) identify as woman or female, and (3) be enrolled as a student at a specific large Midwestern university. In Phase 2 of this study, I used my auto-ethnography and reflections as a source of data collection and then pulled themes from my own writing, which helped develop the questions for the focus groups. I conducted a content analysis aimed at categorizing, classifying and organizing patterns in the data to help understand and unveil themes.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through flyers, social media and campus Listservs at a predominantly white Midwestern university. As an incentive, participants received pizza and were entered into a raffle for a free book. Participants signed a consent form, which included

permission for the focus group audio to be recorded. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity.

Scheduling

I created a private Google form that included several dates and times from which interested participants could choose to participate in the focus groups. The dates and times included lunch hour and evenings and selections of preferred location. The form also encouraged children to attend with parents, if needed or desired.

Focus group data were collected in two semi-structured groups. I used dimensional analysis to identify themes throughout the focus group transcripts. Dimensional analysis involves using open coding (categorizing the data using a line-by-line analysis to identify dimensions and develop core categories that help describe the coping dimensions), mapping (creating a visual representation of the core categories and their interconnections), and axial coding (reassessment of the data by making additional connections between core categories) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Ward, 2005). I specifically read the transcript thoroughly, line by line, to identify experiences of subtle forms of racial and gender microaggressions and the use of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman identity. Then I mapped the connection in order to develop the overarching categories through thematic coding.

The first focus group included six participants, and the second focus group included three participants for a total of nine participants (N=9). All nine of the focus group participants were African-American women, undergraduate or graduate students, ranging in age from 26-65.

The focus group participants also completed a demographic questionnaire, answering questions about their age range, educational level, socioeconomic status range, parental status, marital status, and family upbringing (single- or two-parent household). I served as the focus

group facilitator or moderator (African-American woman), and both focus groups were audio recorded. Each session opened with music playing on a computer that was located in the space being used. The music was turned down when I began the session. As an opening icebreaker, participants were asked to draw their idea about what a Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman looks like. (See below, Focus Group Activity and Questions.)

Icebreaker Activity

Participants were asked to draw their idea of what a Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman looks like. They were encouraged to use colors, words, etc., with no limitations.

Participants were then asked to show and discuss their drawing followed by discussion based on the following questions:

1. What are some thoughts that come to mind when you hear the term Superwoman or Strong Black Woman?
 - a. Do you identify as a superwoman?
 - b. Do others identify you as a superwoman?
 - c. Has identifying as a superwoman been helpful for you?
 - d. Do you often feel obligated to help others?
 - e. Do you say “yes” to requests that you want to say “no” to?
2. Think back over your time at the university — what experiences have you had that you believe are specific to your intersections of race and gender?
3. Do you tend to take on more responsibilities than you can manage; how so?
4. Have you ever faked being nice or tried to appear less upset than you were to avoid being labeled an Angry Black Woman?
5. Have you or a maternal family member been diagnosed with heart disease, diabetes or hypertension (high blood pressure)?
6. What are your views on counseling or therapy — could it be beneficial for you? Why or why not?
 - a. Have you ever been to counseling or therapy?
7. What does self-care mean to you? How often do you engage in self-care practices?

Research Questions

The study seeks to provide answers to the following questions:

- 1) How are Black women experiencing racial and gender microaggressions at predominantly white institutions?
- 2) How are Black women experiencing the myth of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman, and are these experiences causing psychological and/or physiological harm?
- 3) How can racial and gender microaggressions help us understand the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman?

Data Analysis Focus Groups

Focus group is “a form of data collection whereby the researcher convenes a small group of people having similar attributes, experiences, or ‘focus’ and leads the group in a nondirective manner. The objective is to surface the perspectives of the people in the group with as minimal influence by the researcher as possible” (Yin, 2009). Denzin and Lincoln note (2011) that researchers Lazarsfur and Merton (2000) conducted one of the first focus groups in 1941, and because it was exploratory, it was not seen as legitimate or as credible as quantitative research, though this focus group and exploratory work set the tone for future quantitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (2010) also demonstrate the various ways that focus groups have been utilized and are beneficial to society, noting the work of Kamberelis and Dimitriadis with market research, Freire and Kozol with collective work, and Madriz with collective testimonies, all of which have contributed to the depth of this methodology for qualitative inquiry, as well as laid the groundwork for giving participants a voice. Suggested sample size for focus groups are 6-9 participants (Krueger, 2000); 6-10 participants (Langford, Schoenfeld, & Izzo, 2002; Morgan, 1997); 6-12 participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2004); 6-12 participants (Bernard, 1995); 8-12 participants (Baumgartner, Strong, & Hensley, 2002).

For the focus group data, I listened to the audio files and transcribed the data, then took notes. I later outsourced the audio files to a transcription service to ensure quality and accuracy of my transcription. Once the files were returned, I began the coding and note-taking process again. The jotted memo notes allowed for me to begin coding for broad themes derived from meaningful phrases and words. Using axial coding (Charmaz, 2006), the broadly labeled themes were reduced to fewer overarching themes and then subcategorized. Below is a list of all the codes and a few examples of the final codes used for analysis, presented as Figure 1. Following Figure 1 is Chapter 4, which discusses the self-published auto-ethnography.

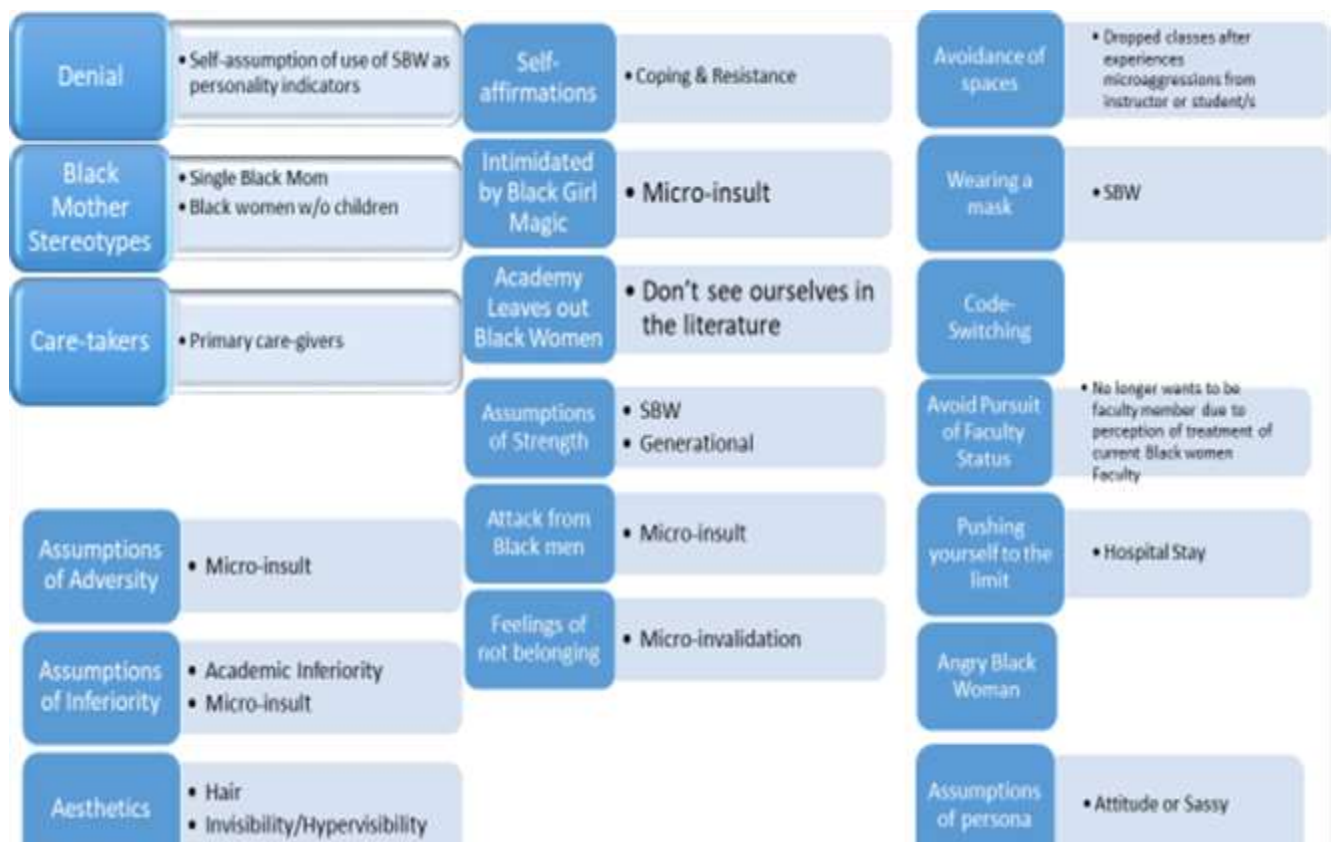


Figure 1. Coding. This figure illustrates the overall themes that emerged out of coding for both focus group transcripts.

Chapter 4

I'm Not Your Superwoman (in My Karyn White Voice)

The text in this chapter is from my self-published book, *Out of Battle Into Freedom: One Black Woman's Guide to Escaping the Superwoman Syndrome*. I wrote the book as part of the auto-ethnography to share in my dissertation. After writing the dissertation, I developed a quantitative survey that included 40 participants, but I did not choose to include it as a part of the dissertation, as it did not yield as data as rich as what resulted from the focus groups. Therefore, I came back to the auto-ethnography instead and then developed the focus group questions.

It was important to me to include my experiences as part of my research, as in my scouring for relevant academic work, rarely did I see those who wrote on similar topics include their own experiences. I believe the author's own experience is a powerful contribution to the literature. Specifically, when writing about the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman, it was important for me to demonstrate vulnerability as well as relatability to other Black women's experiences of these phenomena. First I provide a background and summary of the manuscript, followed by the manuscript itself.

I use song titles as headings to summarize the findings from the auto-ethnography as they depict strong feelings and emotions through both the title of the song and lyrics. Specifically, for me, they represent my feelings as it relates to the archetypes of SBW and BSW. Music as a form of self-expression has always been an important piece in my life. From singing and dancing to Aliyah and Mya videos in middle school through strolling with my sorors at late-night dances, music was a way of healing and validation or confirmation of my experiences. The song titles are used as representative voices of Black women. Songs and lyrics are often indicative of lived

experiences and these songs not only represented some of my feelings and lived experiences but may have been indicative of a collective of intersectional voices.

Me Myself and I (in My Beyoncé Voice)

Through the use of reflexivity, a journey occurred (Palaganas, et al., 2017). I used myself within the research by performing an auto-ethnography through production of my self-published book, *Out of Battle Into Freedom, One Black Woman's Guide to Escaping the Superwoman Syndrome*. I pulled emerging themes from my own encounters with both the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman modes and experiences of racial and gender microaggressions. Below, I use headings to describe the themes that emerged from my voice through my personal narrative. In the book, I provided concrete examples of my experiences as a Black woman, as well as my adoption of the notion of being a Black Superwoman.

The headings for the summary of findings in the manuscript that I used for this chapter came to mind for each theme, respectively. The headings are titles of songs written and/or sung and performed by Black women. These songs and lyrics provide an overarching validation of the plight of Black women in addition to giving context to the dichotomy between the identities and characteristics of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman, which I use interchangeably in this chapter. Note that, in the subsequent chapter, terms are not used interchangeably, based on the focus group participants' experiences.

Beyoncé's song, "Me, Myself & I," on her 2004 album, *Dangerously in Love*, came into my mind when writing this section, as the lyrics demonstrate that — as women and more specifically as Black women — we believe that we only have ourselves and we can only save ourselves. While the lyrics discuss a relationship between a man and a woman, they indicate that the woman gave so much of herself for the man, even taking his three kids into her home.

I believed that being a Superwoman was a good thing, as I wore the cape like a badge of honor, this ideal of “look at all I can do, all I can juggle.” And that mantle was praised by those around me, friends, family, colleagues, so I believed it was a good thing. And I was rewarded, because those around me were benefiting from me running around like a “chicken with my head cut off.” Why wouldn’t I believe that it was a good thing when their praise made me feel good? I often felt good because I wanted to prove that I was more than what I believe stereotypical notions still perceived me to be. I wanted to prove that I was worthy and valuable, and I felt I could accomplish this by taking on any and everything, especially through serving and pleasing others.

I adopted this mentality and developed mantras to go with it as an attempt to try to prove my worth and value to society. I was always getting messages, whether subtle or overt, that I was not worthy. Specifically I adopted a “look mom, no hands” mentality in order to be seen at all. Not only did I often feel unrecognized, but I also felt invisible. As a result of these feelings, I began to subconsciously adopt behaviors associated with the Strong Black Woman and Black Superwoman. See a quote below from the self-published manuscript:

There’s some type of gratitude or expectation that we hope to get from doing what we’re doing, even if we’re suffering in the process. We have told ourselves that something is going to be the outcome of this action. That is likely the value and worth of you; getting that validation and confirmation from these things you’re taking on and the people you’re doing it for. We want that validation and confirmation because we rarely get it. We tend to be invisible even though we’re in the forefront doing all of these things for others. (King-Taylor, 2017, p. 111).

In addition, based on my experiences, the superwoman mentality plays a vital role in the relationships Black women have with significant others, specifically in heterosexual relationships. In the field of social work, I witnessed several Black women choose men as partners who were harmful to both their psychological and physiological wellbeing. It seemed that sometimes those who adopted a Superwoman mentality allowed it to be the strength in harmful relationships. See a quote from the manuscript:

I've worked with a woman before as a counselor when I was still in direct social services practice. Lord help her. She was involved with a man who openly disclosed that he had a sexually transmitted disease, he was an alcoholic, and he was still married even though they had been separated for years. He couldn't drive because he had a DUI. When she spoke about him, it was as if he was the Lord himself. In addition, she would be there for him, but he did not reciprocate in the same way. He wasn't involved in the relationship in the way that she was there for him. He was not reciprocal in anything, simply a taker who was enjoying the fruits of her labor. So, we had to talk about that, and I asked, "The way that you talk about him, the things that you're sharing, the way that you feel about him, how do you feel about you?" She was just holding him in such an esteemed light, it was surreal the way that she saw him. She replied, "I'm honored that he cares for me and loves me" (King-Taylor, 2017, p.111).

I painfully recall conversations with this client in which the significant other was all she would discuss. When attempting to redirect, she constantly discussed their relationship despite her treatment goals and action plans that we were set to schedule. Key qualities and characteristics that she demonstrated and phrases that she used are highly indicative of a

Superwoman mentality. In this case, she was neglecting herself, goals, self-care, etc. for her significant other, and she believed that, as a result of her being in his life, he would change. She also frequently shared feelings of guilt if she would choose to leave him. Similarly, in the manuscript I discuss my feelings of guilt and shame for saying “no” to requests when trying to limit the amount of times I said “yes,” even when I wanted to say “no.”

You are Everything and Everything is You (in My Mary J. Blige Voice)

Selflessness & Sacrifice - People Pleaser. Black women tend to be called upon to serve their community as the nurturers and providers, as characterized in Chapter 2 via the stereotype of the *mammy*. Through my reflection, a consistent theme emerged — this notion of worth and value through serving others. See a quote below from the auto-ethnography:

I remember having the emergency surgery due to the ectopic pregnancy on a Friday. I got home around dinnertime and headed straight to the kitchen to make dinner. I did something simple like oatmeal for the kids. It's one of their favorites. But clearly that could have waited. My husband could have cooked, or we could have ordered out. But NO, I decided fresh out of surgery to do it anyway, then boasted about it (King-Taylor, 2017, 81).

This quote indicates a self-awareness and self-intervention to interrupt patterns of behavior that were not suitable for my own personal growth and wellbeing. It seemed that I took doing for others — being of service first — as a necessary part of who I was, despite anything that I wanted or needed and despite the stress that it caused me. I believe that I did not adopt this on my own, that my community and, somewhat, society “groomed” me to be that way. Another quote from the manuscript depicts how I saw this superwoman schema placed upon me:

As a Black woman, I received the messages that it is your job to take care of home. It is your job to make sure the children are well. It is your job to make sure your husband is well and pleased. It is all incumbent upon you, #nopressure. Being a people pleaser was me putting everyone else's needs before my own. When I took the time to reflect on what I did, how often I did it, and who I did it for, it was like, you know what? I'm fixing to stop this. No! My self-talk became 'It's not okay to want everyone else to be happy at the expense of my own happiness.' Don't get me wrong, my spirit has always been happy because I have the Lord, and I know that what He has for me is for me. However, I wasn't as well as I should have been, and I was neglecting self-care for the sake of others
(King-Taylor, 2017, 69)

I recognized that I had a desire to please people and not necessarily just to help but also to receive acknowledgement as it related to my own worth and value. I attempted to demonstrate that I was great through the helping and doing for others. This theme emerged not only in my community but in my professional world as well. However, in the community it seemed similar to playing a role, such as the role of the *mammy*, in which I attempted to meet the expectations of family and friends through caring for them.

Unbreakable (in My Alicia Keys Voice)

Pushing Yourself to the Limit. The ability to endure inordinate amounts of stress is a key characteristic in the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman. I certainly adopted an “unbreakable” mentality for myself. My goal was always to push through no matter what — don't ask for help, just hold myself and everyone else “down.” This way of thinking was

detrimental, as I often held back my emotions and feelings, which sometimes resulted in an overflow of emotions that later burst after being bottled up for so long.

At one point I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't stop crying. (King-Taylor, 2017, p. 81).

Gradually Black women have internalized the SBW/BSW ideology as both a way to prove and demonstrate their value and worth, as well as to combat or cope with racial and gender microaggressions (Lewis, et al., 2013). While not yet named as such, these microaggressions were birthed during slavery, during which the characterization of stereotypes was placed upon Black women. These grotesque depictions included a somewhat mental superiority in the face of adversity, an ability to endure inordinate amounts of stress, and characteristics of other tropes discussed in Chapter 2. I argue that the internalization of this identity and the microaggressions that co-exist have been and can be harmful to Black women's overall physiologically and psychologically wellbeing (Singleton, 2017), while they attempt to combat experiences relative to the intersection of their racial and gender identities.

Oppression, specifically for Black women, is doubly harmful, in that we are faced with both racism and sexism. As a result of this dual oppression, we have been forced to behave in a more than human manner. The pressure that Black women have to be superwomen was not originally an internal one. This superwoman notion was adopted and then internalized to the point where it has become a core belief and value due to systematic oppression, white privilege, and microaggressions. Over time, we have been seen as inferior or not seen at all; and we have not been held to high expectations by society at large, yet we are expected to be all to everyone in our family, friendships and community. These collective experiences have placed Black women in "battle mode," a way of survival used to demonstrate our value and worth — which I

often exhibited. The stress that this constant battle places upon Black women can cause both psychological/emotional and medical trauma. The coping mechanisms are often unhealthy, and “many Black women fight strength with strength,” which is often to their detriment (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2009, p. 7), leading to unhealthy behavior such as overeating and over-indulgence in alcohol (Lewis, et al., 2012) which may be attributed to diagnosis of hypertension and diabetes.

The myth of the Black Superwoman has become internalized by Black women, leaving us to constantly give and provide to others without respite. I rarely lived for or did anything for myself, and that had to end. Saying “no” to being a superwoman, for me, is absolutely necessary. In this chapter, I share my story of escaping the superwoman syndrome and give other Black women tools to do the same.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and impact of racial and gender microaggressions unique to Black women and explore the identification and characteristics of the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman, as well as any connection between the two phenomena. This chapter provides my auto-ethnography, which shares my experiences through a self-published manuscript. Below, I first describe the relationship between the auto-ethnography and the focus groups, and then I re-introduce the research questions before the manuscript is introduced.

All my life I’ve wanted peace and love for myself. When I was younger I appreciated the birds, trees and earth on a different level, looking to the sky in amazement of our world — the clouds, sun, moon and stars. However, society seemed to tell me at every turn that this view of the world was not me for me as a Black woman. The ingrained message in society was that I was a Superwoman, only meant to exist in order to serve others.

Research Questions

1. How are Black women experiencing racial and gender microaggressions at predominantly white institutions?
2. How are Black women experiencing the myth of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman, and are these experiences causing psychological and/or physiological harm?
3. How can racial and gender microaggressions help us understand the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman?

Below is the self-published manuscript, *Out of Battle Into Freedom: One Black Woman's Guide to Escaping the Superwoman Syndrome*, which guided the questions for the focus group.

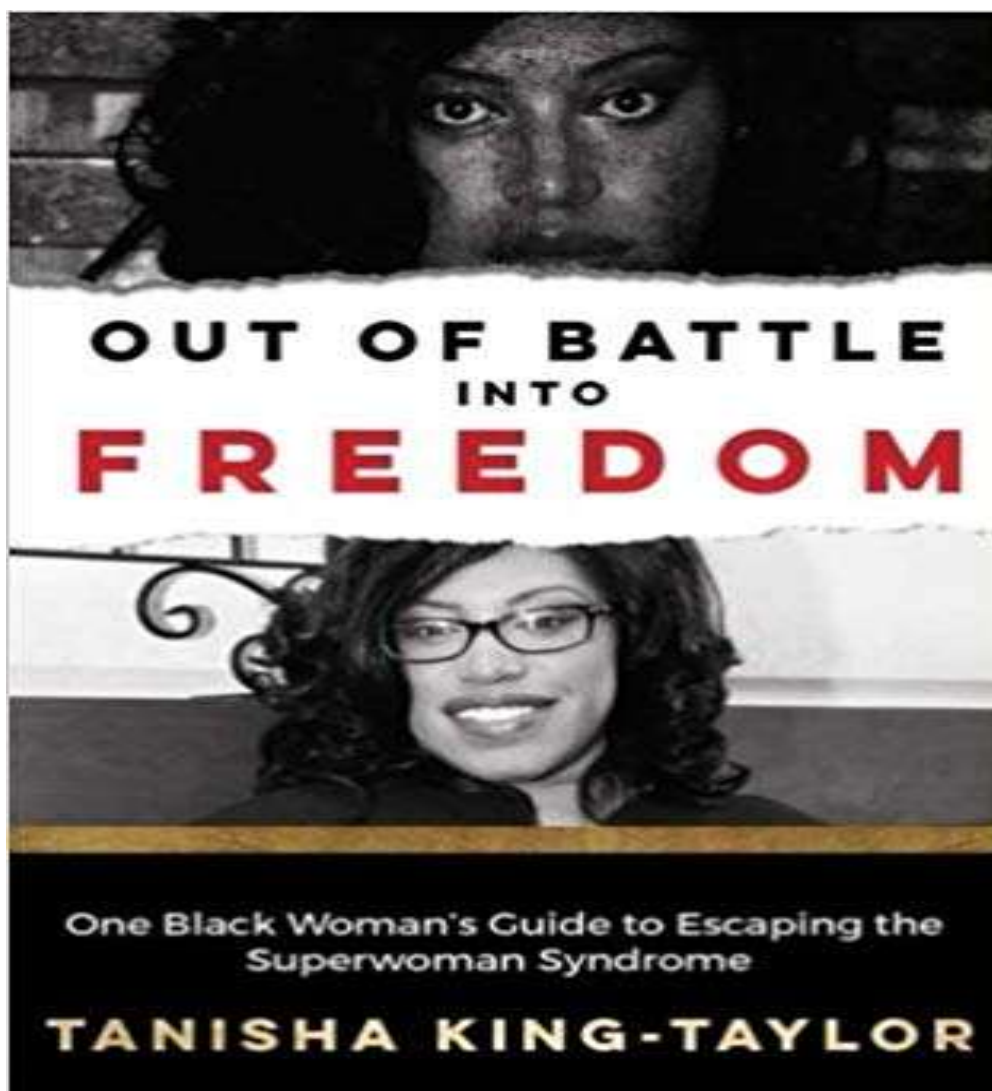


IMAGE 1: COVER OF SELF-PUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT

Truth Be Told: My Story of Self-Love and Confidence

Who is Tanisha King- Taylor?

I grew up on the south side of Chicago. We moved around quite a bit when I was younger, so I attended a few elementary schools and one high school. We moved around mostly due to violence in the area, especially in the early '90s when gang violence was rampant. We witnessed incidents that no child should ever see or be exposed to. As a child, I shopped a lot for my grandmother. I remember walking home from the grocery store one day and there was an altercation that seemed, from a distance, like a one-on-one fight, but it was actually a gang jumping on someone. I saw the blood running from the victim's face, his ripped clothing, and one of his shoes lying in the street several feet away. I made eye contact with one of the gang members who was kicking him, and I quickly looked away because the way that he looked back at me told me that what was happening was none of my business and I needed to keep it moving. So I sped up and got home as quickly as possible. We moved again not too long after that.

About 7th grade, we moved to what was called the "low end" of 39th and King Drive. There were drug addicts and alcoholics on those corners at any given time. It was the norm. There were even classmates accidentally shot by bullets that had missed their targets. I can recall one boy who was shot in the leg right before the start of 8th grade graduation by a bullet meant for his brother, who was affiliated with a gang. The boy lived, but there would be no pomp and circumstance for him, nor for a young friend of mine who missed graduation because she was pregnant.

My childhood involved incidents that aren't considered traditional. These experiences aren't what people would expect of someone like me who has risen to some level of success. People tend to be surprised when they meet me and find out where I grew up. A reaction like that

can be offensive, because it assumes my worth is based on my address. But it's amazing what access to opportunities and resources can do for anyone. That's what people fail to acknowledge. Yes, I'm special, because God made me that way. But others can be successful, too, if given the appropriate resources and the opportunity to do more.

From 1998 to 2002, I attended Dunbar Vocational Career Academy on 30th and King Drive, where we had the option to choose a trade as a major. I think that, at that times I chose computer science because it was known even then that money and success were in the computer field. But even throughout high school, within the very walls of Dunbar, I witnessed a lot of gang violence, poverty, and all kinds of other things. There were even bars on our windows. Metal detectors greeted us at the school entrance. The precautions assumed criminality, and the security guards treated us like prisoners. The very structure of our high school seemed to be set up for criminals.

Every message that I got from every space I encountered, lived in, or interacted with gave me a message of being unworthy, not valuable and disposable. And this doesn't even include media messages via print, TV, and online. At the time, I did not feel the security guards and bars were for our safety. But adults did not talk to youth about why these measures were necessary. They didn't choose to have those conversations to give the kids understanding. The school administrators didn't tell us that we were worthy and valuable, so maybe the bars were there because of what was going on outside, keeping criminals out and us safe inside. They failed to demonstrate to us that we were loved and cared for. Instead, the routine treatment we experienced silently told us something else. Maybe it was a misunderstanding on our part, but no one ever chose to debunk the myth.

Nor did they choose to believe in our capabilities. When you are at a high school of that caliber, and you share with the guidance counselors that you are planning to apply to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the reply should not be, “Um ... hmm, that’s a really hard school. I’m not sure you’ll get in. Maybe you should apply to a community college.” My experience as a Black girl on the south side of Chicago is very much a collective one. The messages that teachers, security guards, community police gave; the tones that they used; the lack of value that they saw in our potential were just ... sad. Because those were mostly the messages that we got: “This is all you are. This is all you’ll ever be. You don’t have the potential to do or be anything else.” Those are the types of messages we received regularly, so it became incumbent upon me and my family to decide otherwise. The environment itself was so immersed in negativity, that I had to choose to actively not believe it. I had to choose to seek something else to not become a product of my environment.

But there were a few educators who chose to be uplifting, wonderful and powerful people. There was Mrs. Norise, our chemistry teacher. Out of all the subjects, I used to love chemistry and physics because they were different; I understood them more than other subjects. You tend to enjoy what you understand. Mrs. Norise was the favorite teacher of the building because she was one of the few who demonstrated her care and concern for our lives overall, which is a holistic approach, and she was a Black woman, too. She chose to speak life into us, which was not the case for most of our educators. Even if they thought it in their minds, they didn’t actively choose to positively reinforce us. So Mrs. Norise stood out, and she was the favorite of most students because her kind of attention was so rare. To this day, Mrs. Norise is still part of conversations with people I went to high school with because she chose to be an inspiration for us when no one else would be. She provided that support to many students in our

school. For some, that was the only place they received it. Not everyone had a mom like I had, one who allowed me to be who I wanted to be, who got involved with whatever I wanted to get involved with, who let me make my own decisions, and allowed my independence to shine.

Some of my friends couldn't get love at home. Some had parents who were non-existent or were drug addicts or alcoholics. Those friends' experiences were very different from my own. And when a child has that kind of home life and a school environment that models the same indifference, with no one to uplift them, what happens to that child? That's what made Mrs. Norise even more special. It's so important to have support from other people. That's how most people make it in this world, even if that support is from just one person. Having a support system is essential to your growth and livelihood, no matter how old you are. It is integral to your self-esteem and self-confidence. Mrs. Norise was that person for a lot of people who didn't get it from anywhere else. I was fortunate enough to have a mom who supported anything I was willing to do. She believed in me and still does today. When I think about others who didn't have that kind of support at home, receiving negative messages from everywhere, I know it had to be extremely difficult to believe in themselves and gain the determination to strive forward in life.

Family Life

I grew up in a two-parent household with my mother and stepfather. I've never met my biological father. My understanding is that he went to prison for the murder of his wife. I'm not sure when or how that happened, but after his release, he did not choose to reach out to me despite his side of the family having access to me. I don't know them well either, but we're friends on Facebook and, at this point in society, that is all that matters — isn't that all that matters? (Did you catch the sarcasm?)

No one ever talked in depth about what happened with my father. I heard just a snippet of the story here and there. It wasn't even until a few years ago that I even saw a photo of him. A lot of times, often in Black families, we don't talk about uncomfortable life circumstances — things such as absent fathers, family members with addictions, etc. Sometimes your questions won't get answered because then you'll know too much. It is a historical thing in the Black community. We warn, "What we say in this house stays in this house. You don't tell nobody about our business." When we're young, we are told, "You're not old enough; stay in a child's place. We just won't talk about that." It's just so taboo to actually discuss and address hardship, past incidents, etc., that it tends to get swept under the rug as if nothing ever happened.

Despite this secrecy and lack of conversations, I've shaped myself and picked my battles like most Black women do. I internally tell my family, "I'm not going to say anything. I'm not going to address the fact that I asked questions and got few answers about my father or the fact that I asked his family, who I had access to anyway, to ask him to reach out and then never heard back. Again, swept under the rug. We won't address it, and we will just move on. But we can be friends on Facebook, though; we can "like" each other's statuses, etc. It's all good. (More sarcasm.) So, even though I grew up in a two-parent household, the father that I had has since passed and wasn't my biological father. As far as I was concerned — and they say, "Don't speak ill of the dead" — he was not a good person. I didn't have the support from him that I had from my mother during my high school years. He wasn't as actively involved. It was more passive than anything. Sure, he worked and helped take care of the household and got us things that we needed, came to my wedding and we did the father/daughter dance, but he had battles of his own before and after my I got married.

This doesn't take away from the support I'm sure he gave my mother nor some positive influence that he likely imparted on my two younger brothers, his biological children, but my stepfather struggled with drug and alcohol abuse at some point. I'm not sure what kind of drugs or when it started, but I noticed when he began stealing from my mother and was out of a job for quite some time, which was abnormal for him. Then, at one point during my high school years, he tried to molest me. I was sleeping on the floor of our bedroom. (My brothers and I shared a room and didn't have a bed.)

My stepfather woke me by pushing my shoulder. I looked up and he motioned with his hand, waving at me to come with him. I immediately thought it was a parent moment, that I was supposed to have done something like clean the kitchen but hadn't. I followed him to the bathroom, which was past the kitchen at the time, looking around, half asleep, attempting to identify what I had slacked on. I entered the bathroom and he followed, but then he closed and locked the door. He stood behind me, breath reeking of alcohol, holding me tightly and attempting to slide his hand down the front of my body. I was horribly frightened and almost had a panic attack. I struggled, so he put his hand over my mouth, but I continued to struggle. At some point, he decided to let me go, and I ran out. That incident became another thing that my family didn't talk about. All that my stepfather was and wasn't doing forced my mother to be a superwoman. She was working two jobs and was barely at home because she likely thought, "Yes, I'm married and I'm living with my husband, but he's taking drugs, stealing from me, is an alcoholic, but I still need to support and care for my children."

In my immediate family, I'm the oldest and the only girl. My brothers' relationships with my stepfather were very shaky and rocky, too, after the addictions. So it became a somewhat dysfunctional dynamic, but I did not live through the height of that dysfunction because I went

away to college. Who knows what else they didn't tell me! While I was in school, no one wanted to stress me out or tell me anything disappointing or disheartening. I've heard this from other Black girls in college, as well. Their families didn't tell them when stressful events happened because they wanted them to focus on their schoolwork. So we didn't find out much, or a story would come out in bits and pieces here and there, or we wouldn't know anything until weeks and months later.

But our young people should be told what's going on. It is a way for them to be a part of the family and a way for us to model the concept of togetherness for them. They need to learn and know what life really looks like. You don't have to hide anything, because life is real and it's okay. It demonstrates to young people that they are a part of life and that they can handle the pressures of life. Otherwise, we are selling them a fake dream, giving them #AlternativeFacts instead of preparing them for potential struggle and teaching them how to cope and find resources for themselves. Sharing what's really going on demonstrates respect for them, and they should see that they don't have to be super, holding back information, not sharing or and trying to take care of problems alone.

When we internalize and hold things in, choosing not to share, that choice is not for the benefit of the other person. It's really to maintain our own façade so we can say, "I can handle it. We're not going to worry about it. I can fix it," and move on in silence and sometimes suffering. We say we have it under control, but far too often that is not the case. We are all out here trying to "fake it 'til we make it," but holding it in is fooling yourself. Not sharing issues, problems and battles you're having with others is a way to convince yourself that you have it together when you don't. You must choose the option of vulnerability, especially with your family because if not, you set yourself up for additional stress. It's best to let it out and let it go because without

doing that, we perpetuate the myth of the superwoman. Because we're trying to be this pillar of strength declaring, "Nope, I don't have to worry about it. I'm keeping it to myself. I'll work it out; it's all good." We do this instead of asking for help, especially Black women, because we are too used to doing it all and doing it alone. Then, when we have children, the cycle continues.

So, I'm very upfront with my children. I tell them when money is tight. If we are going to the grocery store or any store, I tell them, "Just because we might have a dollar on us doesn't mean we gotta spend it." Or I let them know that we need every dollar right now until I get paid again. I tell them that we must pay for things to have things. I instill the value of a dollar. They know we have bills to pay and that money doesn't come from the sky, or I tell them like my mama used to say, "Money don't grow on trees." I choose to openly explain these things to them so that they have a true perspective of life's experiences, especially because they are a privileged group of children. I try not to come down on them too hard, because we don't have control over what we're born into and what we're given, but it's important to have an understanding that not everyone has what they need. My children are blessed to have a roof over their heads, a bed to sleep in, food to eat, and two parents in the home who love them and provide for them.

This is important to me because I see the difference between me not having much money or materials things growing up and them being able to have everything they need. I've seen some of the ungratefulness that might come from that, and I don't like it. So I'm very vocal with them about what money and hardships truly look like and why they need to understand that not everyone has what they have. I am sure to let them know that, while we have everything we need, we are not rich, and also that it's not all about money. It's about values and morals, which I'm attempting to instill in them. I hope what I say sticks with them as they continue to grow and that they are not consumed by the materialism that they encounter in this world.

Neighborhood Life

My neighborhood and school experiences absolutely laid a foundation for who I am today. I always felt that the particular way of life that I witnessed wasn't okay. Shootings, robberies, lack of safety in general, was not what life should look like. This is not how people should live. Once I was at a popular fast food restaurant called Dunes that was around the corner from my house. I ordered my food and began to slide my \$20 bill through the slot, which was surrounded by a bullet proof glass, and before the cashier could grab the money, a tall man reached over my hand and snatched the bill. I was a teenager and dared not to challenge him or get my money back; it would not have been smart. Instead, the cashier decided to give me my food for free.

Another time — when I was even younger, likely when I was in middle school — I was on my way to the corner store. I ended up running into a couple of classmates. They weren't friends of mine, per se, but we recognized each other. They walked to the store with me to get my items. At the time, I was quite naïve and didn't realize that they were scoping me the whole time, paying attention to how much money I had. We left the store and as we walked back, they knocked me down, leaving me briefly unconscious on the sidewalk — not for long I don't think. And they took the change I had left from my purchase. Now thinking back, I can tell they had a plan all along to rob me. As I got up from the ground and picked up the items that had fallen out of my bag, there were cars going by and people walking the streets, but none of them bothered to check on me, a child who was lying on the ground. There were moments such as these when I decided that this situation will not be my life forever. I will be doing something different. It gave me drive, motivation, and determination to choose something different. I declared, "Absolutely not. I won't become a product of this environment. I will seek options and I'm going to choose to

work to get somewhere else better in life.” So, I took on jobs. I’ve been a hard worker for a long time. Like a lyric in a song by Juvenile says, “She get it from her mama.” In the state of Illinois, you’re not allowed by the government to get a work permit until you’re at least 15, but I have been working since at least the age of 12. I sought out opportunities and would get odd jobs in the community. I once went into a laundromat and asked about work. “What do you need me to do? Pay me in cash.” I said. I worked at a local beauty supply store, where I said, “I can work the register. Pay me in cash.” I had little odd jobs, but when I got that work permit, my mother hooked me up with a job at her office. I worked with her at a collection agency called Bonded Collections. I took phone calls and did data entry, all of which allowed me to gain some professional development even as a 15-year-old. I had that job at least a year; it might have been two summers in a row.

I also worked at McDonald’s in two of the busiest locations in Chicago — McCormick Place and Navy Pier. I dealt with racism a lot, especially at the Navy Pier location, because of the tourists and the white people who frequented those places. There were incidents like the patrons not wanting to touch my hand when they were paying for their food. White people would put the money on the counter instead of handing it to me directly, as if my Blackness would rub off on them. But this wasn’t my first encounter with discrimination. There were other encounters if I went into certain stores. It was that thing that all of us, as people of color, know about collectively: being watched carefully and assumed to be of criminal intent. That frequently happened, because, although I lived in a Black neighborhood, all the stores were owned by some other ethnic group. So this kind of discrimination happened to me all the time — the workers watching what I’m doing, making sure I’m not stealing and what not. For Black women, however, racism comes with so much more.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black female author and professor, explained it through intersectionality, which is when we, as Black women, experience racism, sexism, and classism combined and these identities don't ever separate. For instance, when shopping in a neighborhood store that I frequented, even though the owners and store employees knew me, I encountered sexual harassment based on my race, gender, and class. Black women tend not to be safe., we tend to experience sexism and sexual harassment in addition to racism. It was during my time at Dunbar, however, amidst all the poor treatment of us students of color, that I figured out that the way people behaved towards us was deeper than us. I noticed that it was deeper than the high school, deeper than the gangs, and deeper than the neighborhoods in which I was raised.

Once I participated in an exchange program with high school students from Naperville, Illinois, a very affluent community that I knew nothing about until I participated in the exchange program. Some of the Dunbar seniors volunteered to be chaperones or student hosts. We went to the school in Naperville first, and they paired each of us with a Naperville student. Almost all the students and teachers at this school were white. I remember walking into their school and thinking, "Wow, how amazing is this," just from mere aesthetics. Their lunchroom looked like something from a TV show, and I didn't see any bars on their windows. I wondered, "Oh, they don't need to be protected and/or aren't treated like criminals?" I was amazed by the setup of their classrooms, the resources that they had, the type of instructors that they had. The FREEDOM that I witnessed. The feeling of their educational space was totally different. They were not monitored as closely. And that's what I ended up associating with that exchange; they had a different level of freedom that, at that time, I had never experienced.

If a Black boy or Black girl got up from their seats in a classroom at Dunbar, they would be asked, "Where you going? What you doing?" There was automatic questioning of motive or

intention at my school, whereas these high school students seemed to be treated as humans and with respect. After visiting their school, I remember being embarrassed by the time I got back to Dunbar. It was now my turn to host them and I felt subpar, to say the least. The exchange experience made me realize the disparities that exist in the educational system. It was like an awakening. “Why is my school like this?” I wondered. “Why do our books look like this? Why are our teachers like this?” I had questions, but only in my mind. I didn’t ask these questions aloud. For us, it was what it was. When the Naperville students came to our school, I think they were in shock. It was a bit of a culture shock for all of us. I think they were ready to get the hell up out of there. I can’t recall how much time they spent at our school, but I remember them being just as astonished as I was because the reality was that things were just very different. That’s when I think I first noticed racism beyond being followed around in stores. That exchange program and the clear disparities between schools also aided in shaping my mentality and desire to seek out greater circumstances in the future.

A Mother’s Influence

I am who I am not just because of my neighborhood and school, but also because of my mother and her support in all my endeavors. She was my driving force, teaching me to do more, be more, and have more. My mother is pretty awesome. She was the first person I ever looked up to and truly admired. Today, my mother works for an insurance company on the south side of Chicago. Prior to that, she was at the University of Chicago Parking Office. She worked as a clerk or representative serving students, faculty, and staff who needed parking permits. She was there for nearly 15 years before being laid off. It was a very good position, good pay, good benefits, and good vacation/sick time. But she was laid off shortly after the new year in 2013 and was unemployed for about three years. It was very difficult for her because she is a worker;

working was all she ever knew. My mother has always taken a lot of pride in her work ethic, which is where I get mine. But it was very interesting for me, watching that process of her being unemployed, because I wasn't used to seeing her vulnerable. When she lost her job, the adjustment and transition were very difficult for us both. I'm grateful she has another job now, but during the layoff she was not the person I'd always known her to be. I wasn't used to her using defeating language, feeling down, or giving up. Her tone changed from that of "survivor" to the opposite. At one point, she said, "I don't want to work anymore. That's it." That was a shock for me. Now that she is employed again, she has some of her glow back.

I see myself coming into what I always admired about her and what she instilled in me. But, despite her setbacks, what has always been constant is her demonstration of her love for me and the ability to take care of herself.

How Do You Love You?

I absolutely love me. I can't lie. Praise the Lord for mothers who love you, because my love for me comes from my mother's love of me and, together, our love of God. She allowed me to be me. She and my grandmother helped me to know God. My love of me also comes from my choice to acknowledge that I'm already worth more than what my school said I was worth. I'm already worth more than what society says about me or my neighborhood. I've always had an internal drive and feeling that there was more in me, more to me. I wanted to get there and accomplish that because I love me and I deserve it. I know that you deserve it, too. Don't allow your environment to dictate your path. Whatever your circumstances, whatever world you grow up in, you can be more than what you're seeing and what's happening around you. Don't allow your high school guidance counselor or teachers or anyone to tell you that you can't get into a

top state institution. Because #SheDidThat. You shouldn't listen to anyone else but the voice in yourself and wherever else you pull from for your strength. That's what you should listen to.

You may wonder how you get to that point. What if you don't have a mother who supports you like that? How can you overcome the lack of support? That is a million-dollar question. The answer is: It's all internal. It's about the self talk you have with yourself and what your self talk sounds like. It is about how you can rebuke and deny the negativity that comes through everybody's mind at one point or another. It is a choice to actively disengage with the negative and increase and engage with the positive about you and your circumstances. It's about having hope. Seek out your faith — for me, that is God. Getting to that point and overcoming a lack of support may mean doing affirmations in the mirror. It may mean going to therapy. It may mean identifying all the good and positive things you know you are. It may mean writing down your strengths in a journal. It may mean writing down what you've done well. It may mean writing down what your friends, peers, co-workers, and colleagues have said positively about you as a reminder to yourself.

At the end of the day, other people can love you, praise you, and admire you, but it's still about what comes from within you. So even if you don't have people who are choosing to speak life into you, you must speak it into yourself regardless of circumstances. It's about practicing self love and believing in yourself. When you believe that you are better than where you grew up, that you are more than what people have made you out to be, that belief just takes off and begins applying to all areas of your life. When you're owning who you are, where you're going, and what you're doing, and loving what you have to bring without allowing circumstances to determine your fate, you become unstoppable. I'm unstoppable right now, and it feels great.

Whatever the process of self love and growth may look like for you, you have to pull it out and follow the path that you know you're destined to.

You have to want to love yourself and be able to self-reflect and do the work. That's the most difficult thing. Many people don't know who they are because they are trying to be like others. They are all in other people's business instead of focusing on themselves, because focusing on other people is easy. We engage in or become obsessed with social media, celebrities' lives, negativity in general. We gossip at work with co-workers for the wrong reasons. We talk all about what everybody else is doing. But what are you doing? Acknowledge what's happening in your world. Open your eyes to what you're really doing and where you're really going. Start replacing that negative self-talk. We are our own rescue, but sometimes we get in our own way. If we are not making the progress that we want in life, it's because of some type of action that we're not taking. But that first action is self-reflection and loving yourself. Being able to own your stuff. Then take whatever stuff that is and turn it into what you want it to be.

Self-care is how can we get into self-love and love ourselves even more. That looks like being able to build yourself up, being able to say, "I'm beautiful, I'm kind, I'm purposeful, I'm good" — all those things, making sure on the inside that it's a constant. Becoming so confident that you don't even have to say it anymore; you just walk, live, and breathe it. Then you're not worrying about the other people, because you're not trying to be perfect and you don't care if other people see you like that or not. Because it's not about them. It's about how you are seeing yourself and doing the work to get there. It's work to acknowledge and to be able to build yourself up in that way, especially when folks are not used to seeing you in that way. You won't even realize the messages you've been getting from other people to keep you where you've been. That's why you must make sure your squad — the people who love you, support you, are honest

with you, and fight for you — is legit. If your squad is not legit, you will be surrounded by folks who are not going to allow you to grow or have ulterior motives for being with you. You have to choose to be confident and continuously grow in loving yourself.

The Myth of the Superwoman

What is The Battle? My research in my Ph.D. program is about the myth of the Black Superwoman. This myth originated as early as slavery, and it claims that Black women are indestructible, that both physically and mentally we are capable of holding on to the world's burdens. This myth wasn't necessarily born within us; it was placed upon us to be the incumbent for holding everything and everyone together, making sure everything was taken care of. Even when we think back to slavery, that's the role that Black women played. We were wet nursing kids. We were everything to everyone, and we still haven't gotten out of that, unfortunately.

The myth is this notion that Black women are capable of enduring inordinate amounts of stress at any given time and able to take care of any and everything without needing any respite. And that we can handle it, we're good, we'll be ok. This belief has become a large part of us. Now that we have internalized it, we don't even know or recognize that it came from somewhere else. This myth ties into the Black community, the Black church, and how Black women are experiencing microaggressions — those subtle forms of sexism and racism within and outside of their community. This is a constant tug of war for Black women. We are battling low expectations and stereotypes at places like predominantly white institutions. But at the same time, we're battling our own people who constantly pull and tug on us to be everything for everybody. A lot of Black women are not saying "no" to roles in the church and to living up to what they believe they're supposed to live up to at home, even if they know they are overworked

and tired. Then they start resenting it, resenting people, and holding the anger and frustration in instead of just saying “no.”

So the battle is internal. The battle is constantly saying “yes” and taking on too much even though you don’t want to, even though you’re suffering, even though you’re stressed, even though you’re overwhelmed. You’re battling saying “no,” and you’re battling and juggling everything that you are saying “yes” to. This stops you from being free and owning yourself; being who you want to be outside of those other identities and hats that you wear. The battle is choosing whether or not to debunk the myth of being the superwoman. We’ve owned it. We have worn it. We have the cape on, on a regular basis. A lot of us are proud of the cape and use it as a bragging right without acknowledging the pain that it causes. We battle acknowledging and/or sharing this pain with others because we are not sure where we stand with others without it. We are not sure of who we are without it, so we remain in battle.

Choosing a Career

There are a disproportionate number of school suspensions for Black students as a result of microaggressions. Compared with a 4 percent of white students, nationwide, 15% of Black students received out-school suspensions (Fuller, et al., 2016). Many teachers are continuing to treat students of color the way they’ve always been treated — as oppressed underrepresented and marginalized groups. Intentionally or unintentionally, it is causing great harm. That’s how the pipeline to prison happens as well. We need to do a better, more intentional and strategic job of preparing these teachers before they go into our spaces teaching our kids, our Black and brown children. That is a mission I sought to undertake.

I earned my master’s in social work. I always knew I wanted to be in a helping field. My Ph.D. work is now in Education Policy. Being in education allowed me to see that there is a lack

of intersection between social work and education. The issues that are happening with students in K-12 education are very much the core problems on which social work focuses, including the treatment of students often as “less-than” and the disproportionate school suspensions. I noticed that the education of future teachers didn’t provide much training or certification to the mostly white students who will someday teach diverse groups of children.

I didn’t see the degree program giving these prospective teachers the knowledge or equipping them with things that I thought would be necessary for cultural awareness education programs. Social workers have a perspective and insight that can help teachers understand diversity, inclusion and racism. We can prepare teachers to be aware and understand the perspectives of students who come from urban areas. We can show them how to not microaggress them on a regular basis. I believe the proper training on microaggressions is lacking in education.

I could become a licensed clinical social worker, and I could still have my private practice with that, so I didn’t see it as beneficial to pursue a Ph.D. in social work because I have another avenue with social work that I could use. I wanted to be able to broaden my résumé and earn the Ph.D. in another field of interest. Then I will be able to add to the field and say what is lacking in education as the Ph.D. person. So, I can teach and decide to go the professorship route — I am an adjunct in social work right now, but if I decide to continue professorship in any way even in conjunction with entrepreneurship, I want to be able to fill the gap between social work and education.

My background and my own education through high school and college, in addition to my neighborhood experience, did play a part in deciding my career path, because of how it

impacted me, which is why I'm in education now. I wanted to make a substantial difference due to witnessing of the treatment of us.

It was the constant bad treatment and me trying to figure out why that is and where does it come from that helped me decide, "Yeah, I'm going into education, and I'm going to research Black women," the experiences that we have, the racism and the sexism that we deal with. Sometimes, as scholars we're not helping, and the people in the urban areas are not reading our publications because they don't all have access to it. So we're all in this academic bubble, in these elite roles and positions, talking to each other. Writing back and forth to each other what we already know. Well, where is the action? That's not helping much. We're writing about it and researching about us, yet not doing much with it. I just am all about action. I'm like, "What are we doing with this?" Okay, we know this. We've been knowing, hell, for who knows how long. It's not a secret. And most of the people not in the elite or privileged positions that have access and opportunities to things that we have as academic folk, they know more than we do about what we are trying to tell others. What are you doing with the work? Let the work be impactful and mean something and not be a notch on your belt to rise you to where you're trying to go. Because you are still leaving those you wrote about where they are after you found out what they were going through.

Racism vs. Microaggression

Microaggression is, in the shortest terms, subtle forms of racism. These are everyday occurrences and experiences of prejudice and discrimination. The term was first coined by a Black man, Chester Pierce, in the '70s. He was a professor of psychology at Harvard University. He used the term to describe the specific experiences of Black Americans as he saw them. Since then, D.W. Sue, another professor in psychology, wrote a book titled, Microaggressions in

Everyday Life. He expanded the term to include aggressions toward not only Black people but people of color overall, as well as women, LGBTQA, people with disabilities, and other marginalized populations. He broke microaggressions down into three different categories, understanding that not everything that is racist is blatant:

- Microinvalidations "exclude, negate, and nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of" people of color.
- Microinsults are "subtle snubs" in which the contributions of persons of color themselves are unacknowledged, invisible, or marginalized.
- Microassaults include explicitly racist and demeaning behavior, such as name calling.

Microaggressions talk about the subtle, covert ways that racism is displayed but most people fail to recognize. It's a part of the larger systemic racism embedded in our society, yet it happens in everyday life. It's very dominant on this campus that I'm on, as well as some other campuses that have had movements because of racist experiences. For instance, when applying to my MSW program, I worked with a white girl in the office for which I'm now the director. I worked with her as a housing counselor, and I was anxious.

I shared this anxiety with her when we were leaving the office one day, waiting on our respective rides home. I said, "Oh, my God. I've put the application in and I haven't heard back." I told her that I was stressing out because it was going to either be that or Teach for America, and I really wasn't trying to do Teach for America. That was a backup plan for me. As I was sharing all this anxiety with her, she said, "Oh, you'll be fine. You're Black, and you're a woman. You'll get in." In her mind, she was being positive. She was being uplifting. She was making me feel better, giving a compliment even. But that statement was actually a racist comment with serious undertones and not at all true. The fact was my getting into that program was based on my academic qualifications and the personal statement I wrote, not the color of my skin.

That is one example of microaggressions. It sometimes comes in the form of a compliment from well-meaning and well-intentioned people. Some people have taken exception to the term microaggression. “You're being too sensitive,” they say. They don't connect it to these larger societal problems, but it very much is connected. These are just small steps that build up to people being killed in the street. It's all coming from the same place. The way that I think about a group of people turns into the way I treat that group or individuals from that group. Then, if I become a police officer, it determines if I kill people from that group or not. But people don't connect these dots. They think microaggressions aren't real, and they criticize the term itself. Even other scholars have criticized the term, saying there is nothing “micro” about aggressions towards people. This criticism comes from a lack of understanding of the word. The prefix, micro, is derived from the recurring acts. The acts happen so often, they become innocuous, so they are deemed “micro” versus blatant acts of racism such as being called the “N” word in person.

My Work Path

My day job is Director of Community Life and Tenant Services, a unit within the Office of the Dean of Students on the campus of my alma mater, a Big Ten predominantly white university. I am also an adjunct instructor in the School of Social Work on the same campus and have taught General Education and Intergroup Dialogue courses. But for my company, I am a speaker, coach and facilitator. I speak Life. My personal mission is to speak in order to motivate and empower people, not only Black women, to live up to their full potential personally and professionally, but also to help agencies and schools that don't have the information and tools they need to be better.

My goal is to aid these institutions in fulfilling their roles. If you're working with urban youth or people of color, give them the tools and the language, such as microaggressions, and explain what those things look like and where they come from to create a shared understanding and dialogue. What I have done is contract with a local agency in town that works with vulnerable families who have youth in the system. I do some one-on-one coaching with the parents around parenting skills and working towards whatever goals they have. I recently began hiring others that look like me to mentor youth. A lot of that desire to work with vulnerable populations came out of social work and working with an agency in town called Cognition Works, which had its own curriculum that was heavily based on accountability.

We facilitated groups on domestic violence, both perpetrators and victims. We had separate women's groups and men's groups. We talked about domestic violence and held them accountable, and we created a curriculum that we used to do that. I also conducted individual and family counseling in that setting. I felt this connection with social work, which is why I started teaching in social work again part time as an adjunct instructor. But I still wanted a direct connection with the families, because I felt a void from not working with them. I decided I wanted to find ways to tap into that which inspired my entrepreneurial journey. So I contracted with the agency to do some work with the parents, specifically, because there is already a saturation of youth mentors but not much help for the parents.

The Myth Of The Superwoman

You Can't be Everything to Everyone. I once gave a survey to a Black woman for my research about the myth of the Black Superwoman. I did an ethnography in the church, and I sat in on sermons there and took field notes. The male language that was used there very much aided in this notion of the Black woman being super, but without saying so directly. For example, there

would be preaching that the man's job is to bring home the check and the woman's job is to make sure the man is fully taken care of, along with any and everything else related to maintaining a household.

In the survey response from a woman of the church, she said that it was her job to pretty much be everything to everyone. When asked about her ability to choose not to do all these things, she said she wouldn't say "no" because it was her job. She said, "These are all the roles that I wear," and she named 20 different things that she was doing. There was her participation in the church, what she does at home, her full-time job, and her additional volunteer work. She's like, "No, it's my job. It's what I'm supposed to do." These were literally her words. She then connected it to what she thought she was supposed to be, based on the Bible. So, her belief becomes, "The Bible says this is what I'm supposed to be, so this is what I have to do. That's it. It doesn't matter if I'm tired. It doesn't matter if I'm overwhelmed. It's my role, and it's what I'm supposed to do."

And why are we, mostly Black women, the ones most feeling like this? What's going on? Something is not right with that picture. But we don't even want to know and acknowledge that something is not right with it or where that belief comes from. Because we've been conditioned so much to believe that's what we're supposed to do and it's going to remain that way until we choose to say otherwise. No one else is going to choose for us, because they are benefiting from it, even if we're suffering. They won't choose to step in and say no for us, and most of the time we're waiting to be saved, but to no avail. I actually think I saw my own mother as a superwoman without realizing it. I had to engage in that reflection to acknowledge that's why it was hard for me to see her being vulnerable when she lost her job. I did not know how to be there for her in that moment because her demeanor was different. She was showing another side

of her that she had chosen to hide for so long. That dichotomy has made me realize that that is how I saw her because I didn't know anything different. But now I am breaking the cycle and you can too!

Be a People Pleaser for You

Being a people pleaser was about me putting everyone else's needs before my own. When I took the time to reflect on what I did, how often I did it, and who I did it for, it was like, "You know what? I'm fixing to stop this. No!" My self-talk became, "It's not okay to want everyone else to be happy at the expense of my own happiness." Don't get me wrong, my spirit has always been happy, because I have the Lord and I know that what He has for me is for me. However, I wasn't as well as I should have been, and I was neglecting self care for the sake of others. Even if I wasn't doing for others, I was being drained by their energy and that's also not healthy. There was a choice I had to make. Yes, I want everyone else to be well, but I need to be able to be well too. And if I'm truly loving myself, then that means not putting everyone in front of me. It's choosing to not be stressed. It is a decision I had to make that no one else can make for me because they are benefitting from what I do for them. We've been so conditioned, especially as Black women, to do this, and it's hard to break out of this habit without help and self reflection.

It's okay to help, but it's not okay to take on the burdens of others. That is where the superwoman swoops in, takes on others' problems, and takes them home with her. I left the direct practices field because I was tired. I've worked in so many direct practice roles, such as helping adults with disabilities, where I was feeding people and brushing their teeth. I was tired, not just because it was social work but because, in addition to my full-time job, I was taking on family and friends' issues too. I took on their burdens — just took it on and couldn't shake it.

It was incumbent upon me to recognize that, “Tanisha, you have things you have to do. You have to be well. And right now, you are not well because you have taken on so much and internalized the problems of others. And you have family and kids now.” It took me saying “NO” to trying to fix other people and their issues. NO to taking home their struggles and pain, then coming to recognize that I was just simply doing too much. I was not yet ready to be in direct practice, because my heart was not ready. My mind was not ready, because I wasn’t able to shake the experiences of these other people. For me to be well and to be the best that I could be for myself and my family, I had to choose to step away, to go do something that is not going to allow me to take on the burdens of other folks so that I could be well.

So I got a position at the University of Illinois to do one-on-one work with college students whose issues are very different than community member issues. I felt I could handle that work better at the time. While they had their own familial issues back home, helping them address the lack of financial resources and adjustment issues related to culture and campus climate seemed less overwhelming than the issues of the community at large.

It simply came down to choosing and being able to grow and recognize that, even as young as I was at the time, being overworked and overwhelmed at the expense of everyone else is not okay. Now I’m better. If I was in direct social work practice now, I could handle it a lot better because I’ve learned to say “no” in other areas of my life. I had to come to understand that it wasn’t just my job, it was my choice not to turn down other things that were wearing me down! It was finally making that conscious choice to step back, reflect, and recognize that it’s okay to choose me. Yes, these people in my life were struggling, but I had to be okay with what I’m doing and where I’m going, not feeling guilt and shame because they weren’t as happy as I was. You, too, have to be well. If you love yourself, you must choose for you. It’s okay to do

this, and you should accept that it's okay. We've internalized this superwoman myth for so long that it's become hard to shake. Like the woman who took my survey said, "I can't say 'no.' It's my job." She just didn't have any peripheral vision. She thought, "This is what I'm supposed to be doing, bottom line."

There is guilt and shame associated with choosing yourself. "Because that's just selfish, what do you mean? Because I'm supposed to help other people. I'm supposed to help my community. I'm supposed to, I'm supposed to, I'm supposed to!" we say to ourselves. We are going around convincing ourselves and others that it's our role. At the end of the day, we should look around and ask who is helping us? Not everyone will be happy with us choosing ourselves, with us starting to say "no" and putting ourselves first. They will no longer benefit from it and may, as rapper Rich Homie Quan says, "feel some type of way," but that's okay. They may try to act as though we're no longer there for them or we're being shady, but they will get over it because we only have one life. Being the superwoman in our one lives is not going to serve us well. The quicker we start saying "no," the better off we'll be. It could come from a place of being the perfectionist again. We think if we're not doing it the long way, the hard way, that we're not doing it the right way.

I hadn't looked at the perfectionist from the standpoint of the Black Superwoman before. But I think that comes wanting to be seen in a certain light and that people pleaser part. So, if I'm going to please you, I'm going to do it so good and so right that you're going to see how awesome I am and how great I've done this. So I'm just going to be the best as best can be — even if that means suffering in the process.

Don't Be Taken Advantage Of

There are several instances in my life where I've felt taken advantage of. Mostly due to the number of requests that I would get. Despite people knowing how much I had on my plate, they would ask anyway. They knew that I was a "yes" person, always willing to help, always willing to serve and would never say "no." This was constant in all areas of my life — immediate family, work and friends. On a few occasions, I've had friends listen to me vent about how much I had on my plate, how stressed or tired I was, and these same friends would continuously ask more of me. These friends got into the habit of me doing for them all the time. The same people would, for instance, ask me to pick up their children, review their work, help them prepare for an interview, etc. A lot of times, I would only get checked in by these friends when they needed or wanted something. It's funny because, as I think about it, I realize they would try to "butter me up" in advance of making a request, and this became a pattern. Like inviting me out for lunch or dinner and paying, then that night or a few days later asking me to perform a task or babysit or whatever they knew they needed when they paid for my meal in the first place.

In that moment, I thought that I was being a good friend, but was I intentionally letting people take advantage of me? Yes! Because we think that's what we are here to do. That we are servers, but the problem is that we shouldn't be suffering or miserable while serving, and we shouldn't be neglecting our own needs. This especially tends to be the case for Black women who identify as Christians, often translating the word of God into a determination of how we are supposed to serve others. In my eyes, serving God's people was choosing to do what friends asked me to do when they asked me to do it. However, it is possible to serve and still take care of you, too.

To stop this cycle, we need self reflection and to seek some alone time. Get to know you for you without serving others. Only you will know who you are, but if all you've known of yourself is serving others, then you have some work to do. You must be willing to acknowledge how it's not serving you well. You also need support. Find other women who are either going through the same thing and can identify with you, or who have escaped the superwoman syndrome themselves!

You need people to say, "Girl, what are you doing, and why are you doing it?" Have other people who care about you tell you that you're doing too much. I do that for my girlfriends and some of them do it for me, but my husband is the best at it because he is aware of ALL that I do. He doesn't only choose to tell me to slow down because it might benefit him. He does it because he knows my heart and knows that I will sometimes keep giving and keep going despite it overwhelming me. You need others to ask you those important questions. But even with that support, in the end it still has to be a desire within yourself to leave it behind and do what you need to do for you, especially if it's harming or hurting you. The self reflection isn't happening, because you don't see serving and helping others as stressing you out. When others on the outside look in, it's like, "Girl it is stressing you out." Yet you are still choosing to do it anyway. Another aspect is that you don't want to disappoint people. It's that people pleaser part. So, we, especially as Black women, have had our self-worth become diminished because of all these negatives messages we get from the world — since school, your neighborhood, the guidance counselors have been telling you all these things.

We have found our value and worth inside of serving other people, which means that we haven't figured out who we are without serving others. We don't know yet, which is deep. It's so tied into our identity, that we're not able to step back and ask, "What would I be doing with

myself if I wasn't doing this for everybody else?" You don't know — because you have not done the work. Because you've been so used to doing things that way since birth. Black women especially are always like, "That's what you're supposed to be doing. You help other people. You do this, you do that, you do it. And that's it." We get our value and worth from it. Sometimes we only feel self-esteem and confidence with our connection to all of these things that we are taking on for everybody else.

So now we're comfortable in it too, right? Now the comfort and breaking away from it makes you uncomfortable because you don't know who you are when you stop doing this. In some cases, even if we know we're being taken advantage of, we feel guilty or selfish about our time. The guilt makes us go ahead and let ourselves be taken advantage of, too. We will be processing this over in our head. It's an internal struggle and battle. The battle for Black women is so real on so many different levels.

We should know that the world is not going to fall apart if we choose to say "no" to someone and practice little by little learning to say "no." I mean, most of the things we do, yes you can serve someone, but you have to know that you have room for it or you won't even be doing a good job! And Tanisha doesn't like to half do things. For Black women, we want to be able to give our all, do our all, and be the best at everything. We want everything to be perfectly fabulous at all times. But we need to be okay with the lack of perfection. And own that. It is the starting to say "no" that is absolutely one of the first steps to freedom. Number one is finding yourself and knowing who you are. Acknowledging the stuff that you're taking on, why that is and how to get out of it. Then practice saying 'no' to things that do not necessarily serve you well. You have to take an inventory of what you're doing and where anything more could fit.

The more you practice, the better you are. It's going to be a reflection of how much you love yourself that you didn't choose to put yourself under additional duress for anyone.

Stop Pushing Yourself to the Limit

As I constantly allowed people to take advantage of me, in the same breath I noticed that I was overexerting myself. Saying yes to everyone's request left me depleted and not focusing on myself or my goals. My days began to fill up with my family stuff and other requests that I agreed to. It got to a point where I was over- and double booked because I had forgotten what I said yes to. At one point, I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't stop crying. I was on the move so much so that I hadn't paused to rest at all. I've had several surgeries in my life. Two due to ovarian cysts in high school, the first surgery the ovary was removed. The second the cyst was just removed. I've then had emergency gallbladder surgery, an emergency surgery due to an ectopic pregnancy and I'm sure there's something I'm leaving out! LOL. But I remember having the emergency surgery due to the ectopic pregnancy on a Friday. I got home around dinner time and literally headed straight to the kitchen. Like..yea, to make dinner. I only did something simple, like oatmeal for the kids, it's one of their favorites. But clearly, that could have waited, my husband could have cooked or we could have ordered out. But NO, I decided fresh out of surgery to do it anyway.

The next day, I even had the nerve to attend a Black Greek screening of a movie, at a local theater! It was Annie, took my oldest daughter. Then regretted it because I started having pain and couldn't move very fast so had to walk slowly. My friends had to tell me to sit and wait so that they could pull the car up for me. I remember being injured accidentally, a cut on my left that required numerous stitches. It just so happened that this happened a week less than a conference I was attending. Often, I prep meals for my family prior to attending conferences so

that they can heat and eat. I was always sure to make things convenient for everyone except myself. Anyway, while still limping a day before the conference, I decided to prep the food despite my injury, actually took it further and grilled outside. Why couldn't I just make something else, let them eat pizza while I was gone, there were other options. I ended up tiring myself out and getting an infection in the wound requiring antibiotics. I think some bugs outside while I was grilling got on the wound and infected it. My husband cautioned me "maybe you shouldn't grill", "don't worry about it", but I did it anyhow. Some of my colleagues even suggested I not go to the conference given my injury. I had to be in a wheelchair through the airport and for the duration of the conference!

I was doing too damn much, trying to be superhuman. So, how do we stop pushing ourselves to the limit? By taking an inventory of what you have going on and asking yourself if you have room to add a notch of anything else. And look, stop trying to even justify it because if you do, you're going to make room even though you know you don't have room. Sometimes you will make up in your mind that you said no. Then you go, "Well, I could probably do it right here." No, you can't! You're lying to yourself. That is a lie. You have no room. You stop it! You don't have room for it, you just don't. Many times, others will try to convince you to do something anyway after telling them no, then get upset that you held your ground. So, you try not to turn into the "angry Black woman" while being harassed to do or justify something you've already answered. But if you have supportive people who have your best interest at heart, it won't be a problem. When you have the right people with you and for you, then they're going to understand. And then they are going to find someone else who is able and willing, and it'll all be good.

Balance, Not Overwhelm

You can have more balance in your life and not be so overwhelmed. This requires taking an inventory. Weigh how much time and effort specific things take. If you are trying to be a superwoman, then you are not checking that inventory. You are choosing to take on any and everything that's coming your way, and you are just working it out as it comes. To create balance, prioritize where you are going, what you are doing, and what you are choosing to take on based on your priorities. My inventory includes, in this order: God, me, my family, and friends. You have to choose your order of the priorities in your inventory and go from there.

After that breaking point, I began to assess: What does that look like for me? What do I have going on in this moment? Because maybe I can't take on something right now, but if it's something someone has asked me to do that's not immediate, I can say, "You know what? I know what I have going on all the way until May. I know that I'm not taking on anything else before May. So, if you still need someone after May, then I'll be free. But I'm not free right now."

Creating that balance is self-love so that you're well. You know you're not going to be well if you're continually adding and piling things on.

We need to make a conscious effort to not connect and associate what you're doing and who you're doing things for to your self-value and/or self-worth. You are still worthy and valuable despite doing everything for everybody else. You are awesome by yourself. It might be a part of who you are to want to do that, but that doesn't mean you have to overdo it to continually be seen in a certain light. Creating more of a life/work balance may require that you go as far as scheduling family time, relaxation, and enjoyment time. But it won't help if you don't stick to it. For me, I personally don't want to schedule time for enjoying activities.

Sometimes I like it to be spontaneous. If my husband and I are planning a trip that's going to be for our enjoyment, we have to book flights and we have to get a hotel room. But, if it's something like playing games with the kids on Friday nights, we don't necessarily have to have a time associated with it. It's fun! I don't even want to pencil that in! So that's when we can go back to the priorities. If that's a priority, you don't have to plan it.

Now, you are going to plan and schedule some things for your job because you have a time frame and cut off date for you. Because your job may not be as much a priority to you as your family. If you need to start by penciling things in for fun and for self-care to build the habit because of your current process or because of where you are, then go for it. Self-reflection helps you find out what works for you and what that's going to look like. Sometimes it may start off with scheduling and then it might taper off.

But it's really checking in at that moment. Can I take this on now? Do I feel like doing it now? Or do I just need to rest? I know I need to rest. I didn't schedule it, but hell, I deserve to do it anyway because I can and I need it. You decided in that moment that you are tired and have been doing too much, so it is going to be a relaxing day even if that's not what you had planned before. I have struggled with that quite a bit, always committing to something; taking on all kinds of stuff and doing things for people. I've gradually gotten it together. I have chosen not to do that nearly as much. I stopped being pulled into things after saying no. People would try to convince me to do stuff anyway and not listen to what I wanted or needed. It was almost like peer pressure; placing guilt on me to do it anyway despite telling them no already. I've even stopped feeling shame and guilt if I need to step back after I've committed. Obviously, that shouldn't be a habit. You don't want to jeopardize your work ethic and dependability. You want to be a reliable person, so stepping back after you've committed to something shouldn't be a

constant thing. Events that I've uncommitted to have all been social, but folks want you to justify that too. But sometimes it's not about them.

You won't have to un-commit if you know in the first place you probably aren't going to want to do it or you couldn't do it, or you took on too much. I've had to come to grips with this. If I can no longer do something or if it no longer fits into my schedule because it will be too much, I will go back and say, "You know what? Some things have changed. I have a lot going on right now, and I'm just no longer able to do this." And be okay with that. You didn't plan on not being able to do it, but if, for the sake of your sanity and wellbeing, you should step back and say no to have balance and not be overwhelmed, then do so.

From Yes to No

What are the steps to go from yes to no? How do you enhance your life, your relationships, and your career? Going from yes to no requires that self-reflection piece; owning that you are taking on too much and believing that you don't have to be everything to everyone. You acknowledge and reflect that's not who you have to be if that's not who you want to be. Acknowledge and recognize any damage that being everything to everyone has caused you.

Going from yes to no allows room to acknowledge that being over- and double booked is not serving you well. We end up having these unhealthy coping strategies that are not positive – overeating, too much alcohol, etc. Connect that to Black women having the highest risk of heart disease and all these other conditions. We end up getting in a depressed state because of being stressed out. Chile! That's coming from us doing too damn much when we don't have to! Acknowledge that taking on too much is also related to your high loads of stress and that is connected to your mental and physical health. If you start saying no, you'll ease your stress and potentially stop any further health problems from coming along. I don't think we see those things

as connected or we just brush it to the side because we feel like we're doing what we have to do. But you don't have to. We don't own the fact enough that we don't have to do what society has told us since slavery!

Not only has our psychological and physiological health suffered from being a superwoman but other relationships have too. Choosing to say no can keep you from neglecting the people who should be more important to you than those tasks you've chosen to take on for someone else; relationships with your family, your significant other, and your kids, for instance. There are Black women who have been professors and worked in academia, who have been so tired and connected to their work in research that they're missing out on their children growing up. They weren't necessarily being able to attend all their kids events, or do self-care etc. because they were doing some other things that didn't necessarily serve them well, because they chose to say yes when they wanted to say no. This is often the case for many working mothers with demanding jobs. In these roles, we become the "go-to" person, often due to our competence and strong work ethic. We are asked to perform duties and responsibilities that are not in our purview. It is tricky to say no in these instances, but worth it.

Once we start dropping some of that stuff off, oh my God! It's a weight that's lifted. You will begin to feel better, so much better; less stressed. The only place that you can really go is you! So, it starts with you. You have to choose to just say no. We keep looking for other people to make us feel better, to stop asking of us, and to lighten our load, but I'm here to tell you that they won't do that. You have to take that action for you.

God Wants You to be Well

"Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers." (3 John 1:2 NASB)

It's not our job to take care of everything, but the message has been and remains pervasive. The genesis of this mentality comes from slavery; back in the day when the master decreed that the Black woman would do it all for everybody but herself. That mentality has become the norm in the Black community and is expected of the Black woman, especially in the church. It's also so embedded within Black families themselves that the children find it okay, the spouse finds it okay to expect the Black woman to do everything. As a Black woman in the household, everyone expects that you will take care of it all and we've accepted it. It's the norm. You'll cook, clean, do the laundry, schedule the doctor, dentist and eye appointments for the kids. You do all this and no one takes a double look. It's expected. Not only does family depend on you, but society as a whole depends on the labor of Black women. There's even a shirt for sale circulating on social media that exemplifies this belief.



IMAGE 2: SHIRT WITH PHRASE UNIQUE TO BLACK WOMEN

We are often the ones left to do the work in multiple spaces – church, home, office – and it has become an expectation; one that we have accepted because we don't sit like others and do nothing. We don't say no, like others.

Now you have internalized it and made it okay because that's just what has been happening. That's what we've become accustomed to. It's now become what's comfortable, and that's just what it is until we choose to say otherwise. Other people will get in line with your choice. They won't have any choice but to do so. You don't have to be afraid that you might lose “friends” and if you do lose them, they shouldn't have been with you anyway. Set those boundaries for yourself. Protect yourself by those boundaries and choose to say no to a society that has created and perpetuated that you are the go-to gal. She'll do it. She can do it. She'll be alright. Tanisha will do it. No, Tanisha won't; not anymore. “Sorry, I ain't sorry,” in my Beyoncé voice.

I won't be doing it, and I'm going to feel great about it. If I'd said yes to whatever, I would have been stressing and now I'm not. I'll toast to that. Toast with me! When you say no, other people get in line. You're already driving the ship. That's another essential thing to realize. You're already in power. You're already in control. You can choose to turn the wheel and go in a different direction at any time, and they are going with it. Because they have no choice. Make sure you have other ways to relieve stress. We end up doing things the hard way because, again, we're so used to that struggle and think that's what life is. You can even make smaller things much easier for you on a daily basis. You should choose to do that. You can delegate tasks, but we have somehow decided that easy or shortcuts are not for us. I'm not sure what that is or where that comes from, but we sit in that struggle. We are so okay with not taking the shortcut. We embrace doing things the hard way or not trying to look for an easier way. It's very odd.

If you're the only cook in the house, you can find other ways to alleviate that chore. Do you have a crockpot? Cook dinner all day and come home to it. At some point, I decided that pizza was only for lunch on the weekend. Now I've embraced that it's ok to have pizza on a Tuesday! Why was I making that hard for myself? I had set these rules about how things should go, what things should be and look like but now I'm free.

I started asking myself, "Girl, why were you doing all that," then complaining about it the whole time. Or, in your mind, you're cursing. But it's like you don't have to. Why are we so comfortable sitting in struggle and stress? Does it come from whether you love yourself? Does it come from that confidence and self-esteem? Where is it coming from that you are choosing and deciding to allow yourself to be stressed? Because at the end of the day it's a choice. We have other options. The more that I've lived those other options, the more that I've learned how to practice saying no. I've come out of the battle, which I was only fighting with myself. It was me the whole time but I have since taken off the cape!

"Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37- 39)

Your Best is Enough

The only thing telling us that we're not doing enough is ourselves. There's some type of gratitude or expectation that we hope to get from doing what we're doing, even if we're suffering in the process. We have told ourselves that something is going to be the outcome of this action. That is likely the value and worth of you; getting that validation and confirmation from these things you're taking on and the people you're doing it for. We want that validation and confirmation because we rarely get it. We tend to be invisible even though we're in the forefront doing all of these things for others. We're not acknowledged. We get messages of unworthiness. So, we take all of this on in an attempt to be perfect, hoping others will finally see our value and

worth because too many women, Black women in particular, go unseen and unrecognized. What is the impact that the Church has in making a woman feel like she has to be a superwoman? It's the maleness of the language that's typically used in the Church and at the pulpit about women – especially Black women – it is your job to take care of home. It is your job to make sure the children are well. It is your job to make sure your husband is well and pleased. It is all incumbent upon you, #nopressure. The language that I heard even in the research I've done and even in the survey that a Black woman took for me. The language that's preached is, and most of these are exact words, that the man's job and only job is to bring home the check. It's very specific and very direct.

Like this is it. It is the man's job to bring home the check and the woman's job to do everything else. Even if you also bring home a check, right. You can bring home a check too, but it's still your job to make sure everything else is on the up and up. The maleness of the language is just that, you know, they don't have that same responsibility, and they are not taught that. So even in Christian relationships you might find, and I didn't look at this directly, that the myth of the Black Superwoman is probably much more prominent in that area because of the faith related to - this is what I'm supposed to do, this is what the Bible says, and this is what the pastor teaches and so I'm suffering in silence and saying that it is my job to do all things and that's it. I don't question it. Because if I question it, I'm questioning God. Is it possible to separate the two and see that maybe it's just the pastor, or minister, or clerical person themselves who are teaching this based on their age? The difference in age taken from a pastor from when say my mother and grandmother grew up was different, their wives stayed in the home. Their job outside of the home maybe was only to be the First Lady of the church and what that entails. If you compare that time back, then to a pastor in today's world who may have a wife who has a big-

time job. She is a professional or runs her own business, and that pastor may look at things differently and teach things differently in the church.

I know the messages that I found through my research were what more seasoned generations heard growing up in the church. And those teachings stuck with you throughout their formative years. I did hear the same messages somewhat growing up, just not in the same way or same space. My grandmother is a Jehovah Witness, so I grew up mainly in the Kingdom Hall and wasn't introduced to the church, really until college. For me, my God is everywhere, so the only difference was the space and culture. The messages tended to be fairly the same from what I remember. I'm not set up to be a stay at home mom. Staying at home would just drive me nuts. I'm sure there are women that love it or would love it, it's just not for me. I'm a mover and shaker and go-getter. I want to be out, travel, speak and more. Knowing that means I know myself, from reflection. Knowing what I want, means knowing what I don't want.

Interestingly, my grandmother was a stay-at-home mom and raised several of her grandchildren, over 20 of us now. She taught me how to clean GOOD, got the woodwork, under those old metal radiators and how to wash clothes, even jeans by hand in the tub and hung them up outside to dry. And I'm not sure if her choice to stay home was affiliated with the word or not.

Squad Up - The Legit Squad

I talked before about having the right people in your circle. How do you know if your squad ain't legit? You need to surround yourself with friends and other people who are going to keep it real; someone who cares enough for your wellbeing to be like, "Girl, I know you ain't slept. Why are you on this conference call?" You need to SQUAD up! Find those people who will choose to hold you accountable in order for you to be well. It doesn't necessarily mean if

they're not like, "Girl, go home!" then they're not your friend. But you being able to identify the way that they treat you is also for your wellbeing, giving you assurance that they are not taking advantage of you.

Some people are only in your circle and with you because of what you can do for them; because you are not saying no to them. And if it wasn't you, it would be someone else. So, you must do a check. Are they constantly asking you to give of yourself for them?

Be clear on people's motives. Sometimes you just don't know how to discern who is for real and who is just going along with you for the ride. To cut the negative people out of your life, you must pay attention! Do they only talk to you when they are going through something? When they come around, are they only talking about themselves? Do they ask about your world or are they just dumping on you and draining you with negativity?

Don't allow yourself to continually let those people in your space. Shut it down. During these past few years, I have grown out of thinking that it is my job to change negative people or that I need to take on whatever they are feeling, trying to fix it for them. If you have colleagues, friends, or anyone else who is always negative, you just have to shut it down. That energy they are bringing to you is not helpful. I have a person like that who deems themselves my friend. Upon self-reflection, I learned that I don't have a lot of people who I would call "friend." I do have people who are associates, but it means something very different to me for someone to be my friend. I realized throughout my reflection that I am more of a private person than I initially thought. I used to call myself an open book, but at the end of the day it's like, "Girl, no. You're not really!" My circle is very tight and some of them don't even live in the same state as I. There are only a few who live far away, but I know that those are women who care for me and I can call on them whenever. Even if we don't talk all the time, they'll be there. A few years ago, I had

a colleague who called me their friend but who was extremely negative on a regular basis. I think I wasn't paying attention to the fact that negativity was all they were bringing to the table. I didn't choose to acknowledge that this is just who they were. There was never a conversation with this person that wasn't fully charged and drained by negativity. The negative vibes and energy about whatever is going on in their life was extremely self-centered, narcissistic, and negative all together. A few summers ago, they were going through some things, or at least they believed they were going through major things. I felt myself feeling just completely drained. They were consumed with negativity, misery, and despair, and pulled me in with them. I was like, "Oh my God. I'm so drained." I was trying to figure out where it was coming from and I realized it's from one damn woman who I've allowed into my space. So, no. You have to shut that down or your circle ain't legit. And it doesn't mean they can't become legit. Hell, they can get better. She's not a horrible person at all, but she has some work to do.

You still have to be able to protect yourself so that you're well. Since she's not well, she's making you unwell, and that's not okay. She's not legit right now, but that doesn't mean cutting her off and not talking to her ever. It just means talking to her less; shutting down negativity when it comes into your space. She will pick up on the vibe and realize, "Oh, she's not for that." Then they will leave or they will stop. Or you can hit them with the real like, "Let me tell you something. This is just not OK, I feel really drained every time we talk and it's taking a toll on me." Then they'll shut it down and they'll go away, or they'll choose to not bring that to you the way they have been. They want to keep mellowing in this pool of messy negativity. And – because you're in the driver's seat – once you choose to say absolutely not, I'm shutting this down, that's what is going to happen. Voila! Often we just don't even think we're in control or have the power to shut it down. You have the power to control your space, your energy, your

future. You can control everything related to you – what you want to do, how you want to move. You have a choice in what that looks like.

Remember, the people who take advantage of us don't always know they are doing it. Sometimes they do, but often they don't. It's because of what they have come to expect and what's become normal. When things are normal, you don't necessarily see a flaw with it. When you've grown up in it and when you've condoned it, told others that it's okay, and not set any other kind of boundaries, people will treat you how you allow them to treat you. So now it's normal for the both of you even if it's dysfunctional. Even when we think about dysfunctional relationships, hell, it's normal to them because that's all they're used to and that's the boundary they've set until they decide to change it and do something else.

Then we rescind some things and hold it in or maybe we're complaining to someone else. You let it happen, but you can stop it at any time. You can own and embrace the fact that you're in the driver's seat and that you can choose who is on your squad, what they're doing to you, and how they're treating you. That goes for any relationship. You can choose to set that tone and boundary without fear of losing people because, again, if you choose yourself so you can be well and they don't like it, so be it. Then they are not for you.

Savior Complex

Black women have served as the fixer so long it has transformed us into thinking that we are saviors. Sometimes this comes out in the relationships we choose. Not necessarily in friendships but in our romantic partnerships. I have witnessed Black women who are receiving social services help. When I see the partners and the people they choose, it is clear these women are on the wrong path. They tend to have these agencies involved in their life because of the partner they chose to be with. I've worked with a woman before as a counselor when I was still

in direct social services practice. Lord help her. She was involved with a man who openly disclosed that he had a sexually transmitted disease, he was an alcoholic, and he was still married even though they had been separated for years. He couldn't drive because he had a DUI. When she spoke about him, it was as if he was the Lord himself. In addition, she would be there for him, but he did not reciprocate in the same way. He wasn't involved in the relationship in the way that she was there for him. He was not reciprocal in anything, simply a taker who was enjoying the fruits of her labor.

So, we had to talk about that, and I asked, "The way that you talk about him, the things that you're sharing, the way that you feel about him, how do you feel about you?" She was just holding him in such an esteemed light, it was surreal the way that she saw him. She replied, "I'm honored that he cares for me and loves me." That, I believe, comes from a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. That comes from attempting to save this man. Yes, you can be pleased that he chose to share his flaws with you. You can admire his honesty, but you have to develop a healthy boundary and set the tone for what you will and won't accept. We think that because of our goodness, and our awesomeness, and fabulousness, and all this #BlackGirlMagic we have, we just get to sprinkle it on these people and they just become new. But absolutely not, it just doesn't work like that.

That's when we're not choosing to say no to how they treat us. We'll choose to hold back and not say anything. We'll leave it alone and just let it fester for years. And then we'll be mad about it. It's like, "But girl, you could have stopped that at any point you wanted to." You're still seeking something that you can't get from him; that you can't get from doing for him. It doesn't have anything to do with him, but your choosing him has a lot to do with you. It has a lot to do with where you are in self-reflection, as well as your purpose and identity, which you need to

find for yourself to be whole so that you're not attempting to fix a whole 'nother person to fill up your void. That's just not okay.

Now, I'm not saying you can't grow with your partner. I'm not saying people don't change and can't get better. But you should know, acknowledge, recognize, and identify what you're walking into. Know what that looks like and determine if the potential is already there for them to have that self-drive and self-determination to do better for themselves. Again, people only do to you what you allow, and folks can only see growth and change in themselves if they do the work and make it happen. We, as women, can help. We can support. We can give resources. But the action is going to be their own. You just being awesome and present in their life, hell, isn't going to do much. They will just take advantage of how awesome you are as opposed to attempting to match your level. The savior complex, it seems, is very much a part of the superwoman.

Positive Vibes Only

Even though we choose the members of our squad, the people on whom we can depend, who will be real with us, and who have our best interest at heart, they too may lapse into negativity. Or they may be fun to be around, but they have few uplifting or encouraging words to say. So, is it our responsibility to tell them they need to change, or that we can't deal with that negative attitude, or that they need to step back?

The Answer is "Yes."

Look, we just don't want to say anything because no one wants to deal with this discomfort. You can say, "It seems like every time we talk, there aren't a lot of positive things that you're sharing. It really drains me to constantly hear you talking about negative things. It doesn't put me in a good mood, and it doesn't make me feel good, I know things get hard, and I

hate that you're going through so much, but I want to know how I can be of help besides listening?" That's just being honest. What we can tell that person is, "I'm not going to come around anymore. I'm not going to let you come around should you choose to only be negative around me every time."

In my experience, people rehash the same negative stuff every conversation – same people, same place, same problem – without even acknowledging their part. Then they barely wanna stay around to listen to you talk either positively or otherwise. They will try to dominate the conversation with negativity, but when you start sharing with them, they gotta go, running late, etc. Oh, you are just an energy sucker. You don't want to reciprocate. You want to drop all this negativity on me, empty your cup and go? No, thanks. It's about who that person is to you and if you're willing to talk to them and want them in your life. If this is the person who you feel has served their purpose and their season for you, maybe it is time to say goodbye. Maybe you needed this situation to grow and to be able to identify who belongs in your squad and who does not. This is your opportunity to practice making sure your squad is tight and legit. Sometimes you don't have to be direct. You could make this change passively. Shut the conversation down in the middle. That might mean being short in your responses like, "Oh, okay." Don't engage and they'll get the point. Depends on which way you want to go with it.

Freedom - Taking the Cape Off

Getting rid of the superwoman won't be easy. That's because we're scared. We don't know who we are without being the superwoman. If we are not on the board, PTA's, or advisory clubs, if we aren't saying yes and taking on all these projects, we would be confused about what to do with our time. When I did drop things off my load, I certainly replaced them with things for me. When we're doing so much for others, we have failed to do for us. We're used to only doing

for others. We're now vulnerable if we stop doing for others because we don't know what to do. We realize, "I haven't had to do for me. I don't know how to do for me because I've been doing for others so much." So, we wear this cape. It's our point of pride because it stems from the messages that we're getting from everyone about self-value and self-worth. We own it and don't want to get rid of it because it helps with self-value and self-worth. But If we stop trying to be the superwoman, we are still worried about how the other women who do want to be super women will look at us. What will they think about us?

That is about perfection. Being a Black Superwoman is tied to being a perfectionist, doing everything and being there. Everyone else is so used to us doing it all that they don't do nearly as much as we do. Most of the time we feel they don't even get it right, so it becomes incumbent upon us to not only get it done, but get it done right. And if we're not doing it, we worry the other superwomen will see us not doing it when we're supposed to be doing it. We don't want to feel any shame from them. But we have to be okay and comfortable in who we are and the decisions that we make. We can't be worried about other folk. They are not worried about us until we're not doing what they think we should be doing. It's not my job to live for you; it's my job to live for me. We have not chosen to embrace that enough. But Black women have to try to hold back from giving so much of ourselves in order live our best lives because if not us, then who?

For me, I took off the cape. Let me tell you, when you decide to leave the battle and taste freedom, it does trickle to all those other areas of your life, it is amazing! With that one decision, everything else ends up being enhanced. When you take off the cape, you're owning it for you. Now you've shifted it. You can still be super, but you're going to be super for you because you're taking care of you.

That starts impacting the way that you see the world. Your perspective and lens shift. Then your relationships and everything else follow suit. Some of these changes won't be good. You might have to cuss some folks out. But as far as your immediate surroundings go – your relationships, your life, your career – you've eliminated some stress and overwhelm. You've stepped out of something and into something else. Out of Battle into Freedom. When you leave that stuff behind, you become clear in a lot more places because you're focusing on something else now. Your shift has changed because you've dropped this other stuff.

You see greater success from taking off the cape than from keeping it on. The cape is a burden. The cape is wearing you down. It's like a big boulder strapped to your back, and you have to take it off to live. You're not living when you're only living for other people. That's helping them live. Who's helping you live? We don't always recognize that the cape has to come off because it's all we've ever known. It's all our sisters, mothers, cousins, and aunties have ever known. It's all we've ever seen. It's so much intertwined with our identity that when we take it off, we won't know who we are. We would feel naked without it! Like when you go outside without your earrings. We are scared to take that cape off because we think the cape makes us strong. If the cape is a part of our identity and who we are, and we take it off, we are now exposed and vulnerable. If we've only served other people and haven't done the work for ourselves, when we take the cape off, we don't know what to do without it.

So, when you get your freedom, what are you going to do with it? You need to create a plan. Plan on what your course of action is with that freedom because then you get to focus on you; how you want to move and what you want to live your best life. For you, being vulnerable is different because you don't know how to even begin being vulnerable. The cape is almost like a cloak and you don't want to be exposed because you know you haven't identified yourself yet.

You've only identified who you are as it relates to everyone else. Recognizing, identifying, and acknowledging the things you're taking on and the things that you're doing that don't serve you well will help you begin to identify yourself. Then as you begin building the confidence, you will see that you can be more and do more for you. Your value and self-worth can come from you, not by just you doing for others.

Finding Support

Your squad does not have to be your only source of support. Networking, that good old relationship-building technique, is another way. "Freedom Requires Friends." Natisha Willis, Master Coach and Creator of the #CoachYaDamnSelf Movement, branded the term, and she is on point! Get you some freedom friends. You can't expect them to tell you your purpose, where to go or how to do it, but they can support your goals and visions. You have to know what you want and the path you're planning to walk before your friends can help you get there. You need to be clear. You still have to do that work first before you can go into a space of women who have that already. You can get in there, but the self-reflection piece is going to be critical for you even to take on the support that they can give you.

Yes, we are the average of the people we hang around with, but that is because whatever your growth is, it can be stifled if you're around people who aren't happy or are not also attempting live up to their potential. For instance, I've known that I wanted to write a book. I've known that I wanted to be an author for an extremely long time. I know I've always loved to write. I know friends have told me that I've been a great writer and storyteller, even a good actress and poet.

I wrote a speech that I delivered at a women's march in 2017. I've written other keynote speeches that I've given, in one day with barely any alterations. I can free flow and write a

speech and be fine and it will be GREAT. I've known all this for a long time. Still, the question was, "But girl, what have you been doing?" My first keynote was in 2012 to an organization for women of color that I was advising at the time. They asked me to be a keynote for their event. I knew when I stepped off that stage, that's what I was supposed to be doing. So why wasn't I doing it? That self-reflection piece can get you to where you want to go, but it's about the practice, the self-talk, and who you allow into your space. I may be the average of those around me, but it took me this long to get to where I need to be because I didn't act soon enough. Now that I've made the conscious decision to say no to things that are not going to serve me and to not feel bad about it, I have made the conscious decision to join other BadA\$\$ Entrepreneurs (pick up a copy of the "Coach Ya Damn Self" book). I had all the words. That's how quickly they can come. I did have all the papers and the research on Black women and the myth, so I have the work, but why hadn't I moved yet? What was stopping me? Nothing at all! But the support also wasn't there. I didn't choose to have a legit squad. I chose to have folks who were still in the same place.

So I'm making these steps to improve myself, but they are still not doing what they are supposed to do. I had to say who gets a seat at the table with me and why. I knew the greatness was in there and I was ready. You have to be ready for it to come out. Being ready means being determined. You're ready to do the work and you can keep going with it.

Big Impact

I made a conscious decision to become an entrepreneur in April of 2016. When I was conscious of it, there was confirmation on so many different levels. For me, it was like finally listening to what God had been saying for who knows how long. Okay? I just wasn't listening before. There was a position on campus, Director of the African American Cultural Center. We

have four cultural centers: African-American, Asian American, Native American and LaCasa for Latino students.

I've been on campus since '02, so I'm very familiar with the political structure and the space of the campus itself, and I have a decent familiarity with the centers. I still thought I was supposed to be in that space. I was still trying to follow the rules of how you're supposed to live. You get a job and – especially if you're in Student Affairs – you climb the Student Affairs ladder. Right? That's what you do. I was doing that. My work is concentrated on Black women. I have supported the Black students on campus. Even in the unit I'm in now, my position is not directly related to students, but I still have a relationship with them. I respect them, they respect me. They see me as a mentor, and I still learn so much from them. They also keep me young. I was already doing that work, passionate to do that work, so in my mind it was a no-brainer to apply for the role. But that wasn't my original intention. I was just on the search committee the first time. The search was extended, and the hiring officer didn't choose to hire anyone from that initial pool. They reopened the search, and I was pretty much pressured by a number of people to apply for the job. Now, at the time when I made the decision to enter the pool, I didn't see it that way because again, I qualified and I would have done the job well. But that application came from me trying to serve others. I was doing what they wanted me to do instead of what I really want to do. Or at least trying to figure out what I want to do.

I didn't choose to pause and reflect on it. "Is this is what you want?" I just kept going because I was encouraged by multiple people. In my mind, I justified it. Right? We go back to how we justify taking things on. "This sounds good, it looks good. Yeah, you'll make a great Black house director." That doesn't mean that is what you're supposed to be doing though.

All these people are saying, “You need to apply.” So, I applied and I became a candidate, then a finalist. I knew the role was going to be mine. I interview well. My presentation was great and I think I would have had the support of the students and staff. But, on this campus, becoming the director of that center is a huge deal. Due to the political times we are in, because of the student protests that have occurred, #BeingBlackAtIllinois, because of the community that we’re in, the spotlight, the microscope that that particular center is in, it’s much more of a higher level role than any of the other centers on this campus.

The stress that the role would have brought, BABY! It would have been tremendous for me while attempting to finish a Ph.D. too. It would have been insane. But I was going to do it. Mostly because that’s what people told me I should do! Oh my God! I was allowing them to determine my steps instead of choosing to pause and reflect and determine my own course. But the Lord said, “Tanisha, I’m going to pause this for you.” So when I became a candidate, I was scheduled to do the interview. All of the candidates were coming that last week. I was scheduled for Monday, someone Tuesday, another on Thursday, and so forth. That Friday at 1 in the afternoon, I got a call from the Chair of the committee to say, “We’re no longer doing interviews. We’ve decided to close the search and if you’re still interested in the position, it will be posted again at another time.” I have been on this campus since 2002. I have been a full-time employee on this campus since 2009. I have served and chaired on several search committees. I’ve chaired at least two and NEVER, in the history of me being here, has a search been shut down in that manner, ever, to my knowledge.

They had already released the names of the candidates and shared the dates and times publicly with the entire campus and the community. Never has that happened in that manner. But I believe my purpose was different and God said, “Girl, you are not listening. Let me shut it

down for you.” I think this was all God but others may say it was the school’s call. But I decided something else, altogether, even when other people were trying to tell me otherwise, “Oh my God are you okay?” I’m fine because my skills, abilities, and purpose in life do not depend upon one role that I get on a campus. I’m more than that job. I’m more than that title, all of which I knew in advance. So while it may have been disappointing in that moment, I wasn’t feeling like I’m about to go crawl under a rock. Others were attempting to make it feel like that, but I had to choose actively to say, “No, I’m okay.” Then they hit me with, “Are you sure?” Are you trying to make me feel bad? Because I’m telling you I don’t.

That happened in the spring of 2016 and it just keeps getting deeper. I almost didn’t attend a Women of Color in the Academy conference because it was on a Saturday. I was not trying to get up and go to a conference all day, okay? Even though it was right in town. I went anyway, despite how I felt about it. Lo and behold, there was a session on Being an Entrepreneur as a Side Job When Your Real Job is Student Affairs.

I went to this session on April 2. I can’t forget the day. The facilitator showed us GoDaddy and Wix websites, how to do it, what other people’s sites looked like and all kinds of other tools. She had us write down what our goal and purpose was and I talked about being a speaker. I free wrote a poem right there. She asked us if we wanted to share. I sure did. I got up there and talked about it, and I left there feeling so empowered. The people in the audience applauded me and were like, “Girl you need to do this. I’m about to call you from this other school and have them book you to come speak to our students.” In that moment, a free flow poem I did about Black women in that space. I went home that day, bought my domain and made TanishaKingTaylor.com. Right after I posted that to my Facebook page, a very accomplished friend, a New York Times Best Seller, who is just on point!

She told me, “You better get off Wix. It ain’t good.” She is a part of the legit squad. She didn’t have to help me. Look at where she is already. But to choose to reach out, see what I’m doing, congratulate me on choosing to take that step and say that site isn’t good? “Click this link. Get you something else.” I’m on WordPress right now. Baby steps, right? Progress, not perfection! So she gives me the advice to change sites and says, “Okay, make sure you write descriptions for the workshops that you’re doing. Say what folks are going to be getting.” She looked over the descriptions and told me how good they were. She chose to be a part of the legit squad and still is after all these years. But the way everything fell into place because I made a conscious effort and decision to see it in that way. And to build and continually grow in it while doing the self-reflection at the same time. I could have been broken because of not getting the position and the publicizing of it. They shut the position down, but I took that as a sign that job was not what I was supposed to be doing. I trusted the process. Trusted God and it was easy for me. I booked two keynote addresses less than a month after launching. One at a banquet for professionals of a TRiO program.

I received a standing ovation. Right after that, I was booked by a woman’s organization in town. That’s one of the first times that I wrote a speech and said it the next day. They asked me on a Monday at 9:00 am, and the event was Tuesday at 7:00 pm. I wrote it that night because I was at work from 9-5. I wrote it Monday evening, practiced it in my garage after I got home from work that next day on the same day as the event, two hours before it was time to deliver it. I have a different purpose now. Now I’m clear in my reflection of who I am, where I’m going and how I’m getting there. I spoke to over 5,000 women at a women’s march in town on the day of the National Women’s March in DC. The organizer asked me to speak and I proudly accepted. We had a good number of other speakers. It went pretty well. I haven’t even stopped glowing

from all of the feedback. It's just constant confirmation of this is what you're supposed to be doing. And not allowing fear – what does Natisha Willis also say – “don't let the fear punk you! You punk the fear!” Because we're afraid to step into our power. We know it's there, though. That's a part of the battle too. We're battling the power from coming out of us. Stop that and let it free. Turn it loose. You're thinking you're a superwoman, but you ain't even let the superwoman out. You're actually shielding it. You're containing it. Don't contain it let it free. You're afraid to be great. Coming from different neighborhoods and areas, you may have a guilt and shame for the growth and progress that you're making when that may not be the case for other folks. You suppress it and suppress your power because other folks haven't got there yet either.

You're almost making a conscious decision to not sabotage yourself, but choosing not to rise too much. Because everyone is not rising in the same way. You are conscious of that, and you don't want to be seen. You're not ready for that light to be on you in that way because you want everyone else to have that light too. So you're sacrificing yourself and your potential for the sake of other people, and that's not okay. I came home plenty of times from school to visit, and 39th Street was still the same, every single time. The same people were on the same corners. It was like, “um, no.”

This for me was to choose me first, and that would be reclaiming my time in more ways than one. Reclaiming who I was and going after the idea of my life that I wanted and what God wants for me and my family. The following chapter will provide the analysis of the focus group data where participants share their experiences and notions of both the Strong Black Woman and Black Superwoman as well as their experiences of racial and gender microaggressions at a predominantly white large Midwestern university.

Chapter 5

Reclaiming My Time (in My Auntie Maxine Voice)

The literature and research about the Strong Black Woman has demonstrated many problematic issues with the adoption and/or internalization of the SBW schema. My dissertation seeks not only to explore this phenomenon to add to pre-existing research but also to explore other theories that may be related to SBW, such as racial and gender microaggressions. I also seek to share the voice and experiences of other Black women at a predominantly white university. The focus groups provided rich data relative to lived experiences, and participants were excited to share, as they expressed the importance of being able to do so. Specifically, they stated that it is both necessary and worthwhile to create a space such as a focus group in which to discuss their experiences on the topic.

When I began my research I used the two terms, *Black Superwoman* and *Strong Black Woman*, interchangeably. To me they were the same, and much of my research on the topic had validated this. The BSW and SBW terms were conflated in much of the research, and themes often were provided only for SBW and not BSW, yet both terms were used within the themes. Characteristics such as “independent, taking care of family and others, hardworking and high achieving, overcoming adversity, and emotionally contained” (Nelson, et al., 2016, p. 551) are often used interchangeably for BSW and SBW and often without contextualizing intersecting identities.

Before conducting the focus groups, I distributed a survey targeting the same demographic. However, the survey also used the terms BSW and SBW interchangeably. As seen in Chapter 4, I used the terms interchangeably in the auto-ethnography, as well. While listening to focus group participants, I heard a distinct difference; therefore, I added a follow-up question

during our discussion: “Is there a difference between BSW and SBW?” As a result of this question, participants provided very clear and distinct differences between the two terms. See the additional questions I posed to the focus group:

“As I hear you all talk, I’m wondering if you have the same...if you would put Strong Black Woman and Black Superwoman in the same category... is there a difference from a Strong Black Woman?”

My findings indicate that BSW is a foundation for misogynoir and other forms subtle forms of microaggressions, whereas SBW is cultural, passed down from generation to generation. Below are two quotes which serve as my “aha” moment during data collection with the focus groups. Participants describe their notions and definitions of the two schemas, BSW and SBW.

Paige describes her thoughts on the differences between SBW and BSW:

A Black Superwoman is not a title that you give yourself. It is a title that is bestowed upon on you. A strong black woman is something, like you would say, “I am a strong black woman.” I wouldn’t ever say I am a black superwoman, that’s kind of... (group laughter) I would feel strange saying that, but I don’t feel strange saying I am a strong black woman because I guess there is a little bit of fantasy to the whole superwoman notion like, “Oh, you’re a superwoman, I can’t possibly be like you.” And you’re up on this pedestal. Whereas if you’re a strong black woman, you’re not up on this pedestal, you’re just strong. If that makes any sense.

Jackie’s describes her thoughts on the differences between SBW and BSW:

So my list is definitely not exhaustive. I just kind of, you know, wrote the first, the first things that came to mind, but I know there are other things that belong on this list and, um, but I would start with a hardworking, perseverance, ingenious, caring multitasker, selfless and resilient also. And these are things that, you know, when I'm writing and I'm thinking of my mother and my grandmother, who I liked the most important models of what strong women are for me in my life.

Below are the overall research questions for the study.

Research Questions

1. How are Black women experiencing racial and gender microaggressions at predominantly white institutions?
2. How are Black women experiencing the myth of the Strong Black Woman or Black Superwoman, and are these experiences causing psychological and/or physiological harm?
3. How can racial and gender microaggressions help us understand the myth of the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman?

Results

After focus group analysis, two primary overarching themes emerge, in which focus group members differentiated between (1) *Black Superwoman - Historical* (a fantasy projected, bestowed upon, by others; saves the day; others say “I can’t be like you”) and (2) *Strong Black Woman - Generational* (exudes confidence, independence and resilience). Specifically, BSW is a reaction or coping mechanism to experiencing racial and gender microaggressions and derives from a theme of *Historical Factor - Microaggressions*: (1) *Microinvalidations*, including *Invisibility and Hypervisibility; Silencing and Being Marginalized*) (2) *Microinsults*, stereotypes such as *Jezebel* and *Angry Black Woman*, (3) *Microassaults*, *Tug of War* and *Picking and Choosing One's Battles*, *aesthetics*, and finally, *Physiological and Psychological Wellbeing*.

Under the SBW theme, Generational Factor, the following sub-themes emerged: *Resilience and Independence*, *Selflessness and Sacrifice*, and finally, *Mental and Physical Health*. Participants discussed consequences or outcomes with identifying as and/or practicing characteristics associated with both the Black Superwoman or Strong Black Woman. It is important to note that *Mental and Physical Health* is a shared theme among the two factors, *Historical* and *Generational*. As a result of the details of the findings for that particular sub-theme, will be analyzed as one category which will include or represent both factors.

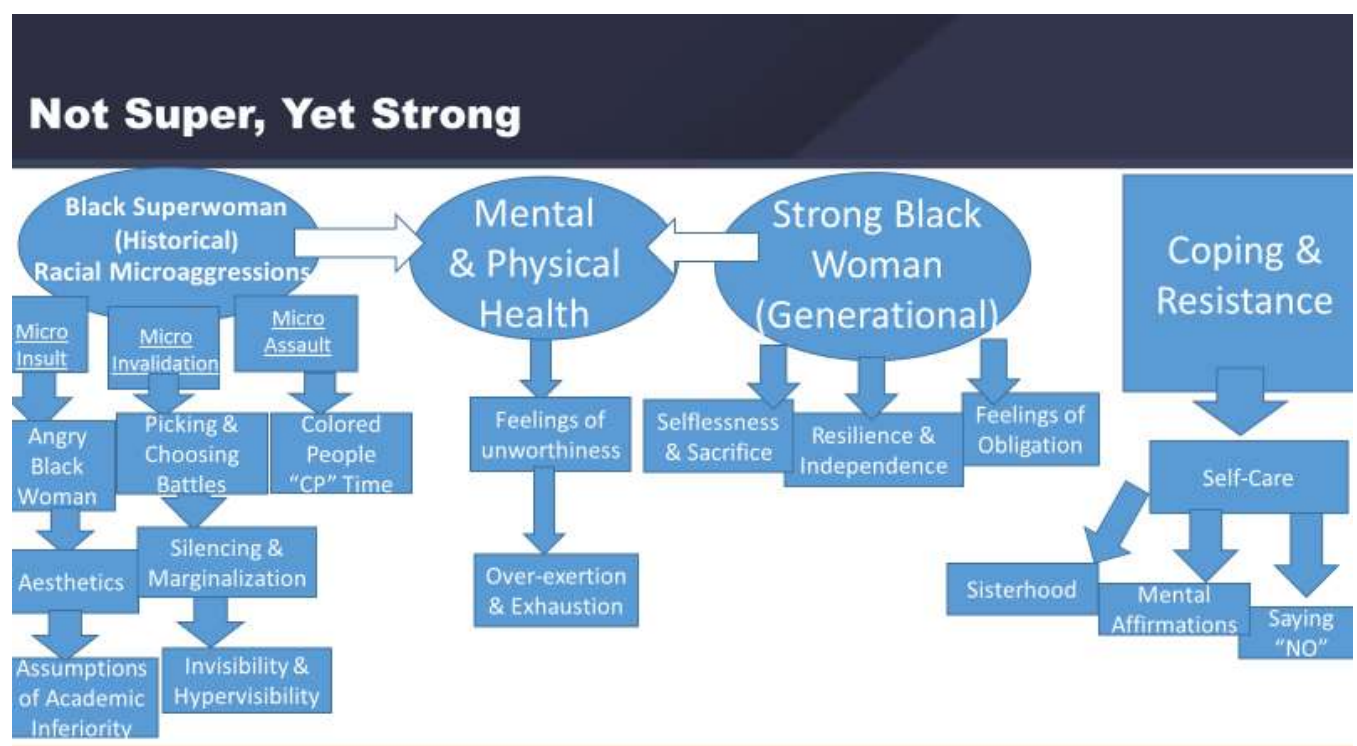


Figure 2. Not Super, Yet Strong. This figure illustrates the characteristics associated with the Strong Black Woman and Black Superwoman archetypes and the connection they have to the mental and physical health of Black women as well as the ways in which they cope and resist both archetypes.

Two sides of the same coin?

Black Superwoman v. Strong Black Woman. Almost all of the women identified a family member, mother or grandmother as a Black Superwoman and/or Strong Black Woman. The groups discussed how they saw the traits of these tropes/stereotypes through their actions or behavior. The women in both focus groups identified different characteristics that compose BSW (historical factor) and SBW (generational factor). Shared qualities and characteristics associated with BSW and SBW included the outcomes of both archetypes resulting in poor mental and physical health outcomes.

Again, initially I used the terms BSW and SBW interchangeably; therefore, my semi-structured initial question for participants was to describe, define or draw what a Black Superwoman or Strong Black woman is, to which participants responded with very clear and distinctive descriptions. Past research confirmed my interpretation of BSW/SBW as an interchangeable phenomenon, and even others' works on Black women's experiences with Racial and Gender Microaggressions (RGMA) were categorized as SBW. Specifically, experiences of racial and gender microaggressions (Lewis & Neville, 2015), and other historical stereotypes unique to Black women such as the Angry Black Woman, have been placed under SBW, whereas my findings indicate these particular tropes belong under BSW.

After a deeper reading, it appeared that previous research had not done an in depth analysis of RGMA as it relates to SBW or BSW, which left their analyses to only include one phenomenon, SBW, specifically as a way in which Black women coped with RGMA. Focus

group participant responses to the initial question provided a clear difference in their perception of the two notions. When hearing the distinction, I specifically asked if there was a difference between the two phenomenon, and the participants provided answers that fit into distinct categories. The first results shared below describe the Black Superwoman, which is categorized as the “Historical Factor.”

Historical Factor - Black Superwoman

Racial and Gender Microaggressions: Stereotypes and *Misogynoir*. The category *Historical Factor* was associated with the Black Superwoman phenomenon, as the focus group participants labeled BSW as something placed upon them due to historical stereotypes (as noted previously), which dates back to slavery. These stereotypes today present themselves in the form of microaggressions. In this section, I provide data from the focus groups that fall under each subcategory of *Historical Factor - Microaggressions*, which includes microinsults, microinvalidations and microassaults).

Microinsults

These “subtle snubs,” in which the contributions of, and/or persons of color themselves, are unacknowledged, invisible, or marginalized, presented heavily in the experiences of Black women in the focus group data. Below, a participant describes her thoughts and feelings about the BSW, which is an example of a microinsult.

“You know, the whole idea of us being invulnerable and I'm impervious to everything and like nothing matters to us because we don't feel or we don't, you know, like that's what I get from that superwoman thing is that we're treated as less than human because of it”.

The participant describing her thoughts and feelings about BSW notes very specifically that, due to the historical stereotype of the BSW, Black women are treated as less than human. This is powerful in that, not only in perception does she feel treated “less than,” but her interactions with others validate these feelings. In addition to participants describing feelings that make them feel a sort of “otherness,” focus group participants also described being misinterpreted or wrongly labeled due to an assumption of their belonging to both their gender and identity as a Black woman. Below, I provide another example of a microinsult, Dominique describes her experience being called “sassy”:

I’ve been called sassy, jokingly, a lot, which I feel like, to most people, unless it’s somebody I’ve known for a long time, I’m not actually very sassy. I’m quiet and demure. So yeah, when people say that I’m like, “What are you seeing and what are you reacting to, cuz I don’t think it’s actually me” (laughter), cuz unless I know someone well, they’re not going to see that side of me. So for someone who I’ve met a few times to call me sassy, you’re definitely just responding to the fact that I’m a Black woman, because nothing I’ve done and said has given you that.

Being labeled “sassy” without demonstrating qualities of “sassiness” is indicative of the *jezebel* stereotype, unique to Black women. This can be dangerous, as rape culture perpetuates a notion of women “asking for it” based on style of dress etc. However, this notion for Black women tends to be assumed even more so regardless of attire. In addition to an automatic assumption of sassy, it was assumed for participants in the focus groups that Black women are angry, ghetto and/or poor.

Assumptions of Angry and Ghetto/Poor Black Woman

Assumptions unique to Black women — microinsults specific to Black women — are a recurring theme from both focus groups. Particularly, assumptions of being an Angry Black Woman were prominent. Corbin, et al. (2018), claim that mass media is a major culprit in the misrepresentation and mischaracterization of the Angry Black Woman archetype. That is, the media continue to perpetuate the notion previously defined. It is the Angry Black Woman myth — that Black women in general are irrational, negative, unreasonable, for any given reason or no reason at all. Descriptions of the Angry Black Woman tend to be masculine, unattractive, and just plain mean (Malveaux, 1989; Morgan & Bennett, 2006). These pervasive stereotypes continue to be standard in popular culture and the media (Jones, 2004). Furthermore, pervasive images, stereotypes and insults of this archetype impact Black women’s psychological wellbeing (2004). Many of these insults, specifically aimed at Black women, are in stark opposition to society’s perception of white women.

In my own experience, while out celebrating a friend’s birthday at a local sports bar, a white male passing our table with his white female friends yelled in my face, “Happy Birthday, bitch!” I didn’t know him, nor had I ever interacted with him. I did not engage him that evening; he was simply passing by, yet my very existence prompted him to use such language with me. Below, a participant describes her experience with a white person using slang with her, assuming that was her dialect and using it to attempt to “relate.” At the very core, this microaggression, specifically a microinsult, stereotyped the participant as a “ghetto Black girl.” Black women pronouncing their words clearly is speaking “white,” an assumption that we are not automatically professional or articulate, that our typical tone of voice or dialect is unprofessional.

The quote below demonstrates that people also feel they can be comfortable with Black women without building rapport.

I had just recently, I was going through the home buying process, and I had a loan processor who had never met me before, called me 'girl' in a conversation like, 'oh gurl,' and I was like, 'I've never talked to you like that so what made you think it was okay for you to talk to me like that?' And I still kind of struggle with that. like the cuz I feel like I should be myself in all spaces and I should be able to talk however I want in professional ways, but I feel I shouldn't have to change my voice for you to think I'm more professional or I'm more qualified than the other person. I still kind of struggle with adjusting myself.

When speaking articulately and pronouncing words clearly, Black women are perceived as trying to behave as something they are not. At the core of microaggressions, they often appear as a compliment (Sue, 2005). In the instances of speech relative to Black women, one might say “You are so articulate”, whereas this is not a compliment they would choose to share with a white woman. These perceptions aid the BSW trope and impact the well-being of Black women relative their social identity. As the participated stated above, due to these interaction she struggles with just being herself. Below, Susan shares an experience with the trope Angry Black Woman

... I definitely have people I'm friends with now and they're like, “When I first met you ...” they were like they couldn't even approach me the first time they saw me. Cuz it just seemed like I was mean, and it's not that I'm mean but I have headphones on not paying attention and just oblivious to the world, so I'm like, “If you would've said 'hi' to me, it's probably that I just didn't hear you or that I

was not aware of my surroundings at all.” But there was definitely an adjustment.

So I try my hardest not to change who I am.

What Susan describes is her experience with peers assuming she is mean, unpleasant or unfriendly. This participant also describes a significant notion when she states, “*I try my hardest not to change who I am.*” This indicates that Black women may be constantly questioned in terms of their personality and are often aware of their mood, demeanor, etc., so as to not portray something different than what they are attempting to portray and to avoid stereotypes and mischaracterizations. Tara, a non-traditional student in Human Resources Education describes her experiences with assumptions of attitude, which also can be assumed as recurrent.

I think, in general, a couple of times I’ve had people say like, “Oh, you got an attitude!” It’s like, “Me speaking my mind is not having an attitude.”

The experience of someone assuming a Black girl has an attitude is more complex than one typically imagines. Having an attitude, specifically a bad or negative attitude, can be contextualized in many ways. Primarily, people who don’t have good or pleasant attitudes are unpleasant to be around, not easy to work with, and are typically those whom you avoid. Therefore, anyone assuming these qualities and characteristics for Black women will not think highly of the individuals in any space, regardless of their social class or academic standing. Perception of a person having a bad attitude has lasting effects and impacts. Susan discussed below an incident of being misunderstood and misrepresented as she is told that she is exhibiting behaviors that are unbecoming:

I was told I had a chip on my shoulder, I was a little egotistical in dealing with that same thing, but yeah.

Similarly, being told that you have a “chip on your shoulder” would indicate that you have a bad attitude, are not agreeable or easy to work with. Again, the message conveyed to the receiver, in this case a Black woman and a student at a predominantly white institution, is that she is not likeable and the person accosting her would rather not interact with her. Furthermore, the accoster is conveying that the Black woman does not belong here, as she is unlike the others — the opposite of the accoster.

Susan is describing a faking it until you make it scenario. Performing or acting differently in order to be taken seriously and respected, because being your authentic self is not acceptable and seen as unprofessional. Making a concerted effort to simply be yourself. This behavior is not unique, as

I kind of feel like I really try to stay true to myself, and it can be hard a little bit because I adjust my tone when I talk to certain people. And, you know, I feel like sometimes when I change my tone, it's kind of considered as 'she talks like a white girl' you know, this kind of thing. But why is it that the Black girl can't pronounce and speak clearly, and I don't understand that. I really work hard at that, you know, because I know sometimes we be seen in a different way...

Paige describes her thoughts on the perceptions of Black women's dialect. This seems to place Black women automatically in an “otherness” category. Assuming not only that a proper tone is not “Black enough” but that we are constantly attempting to decide who we are in certain spaces with certain people.

Paige provides an example of how *code switching* can be exhausting. The examples also describe how others assume that Black women pronouncing their words clearly is “speaking white;” we are automatically assumed to not be professional or

articulate. Given these descriptions, there seems to be an assumption that Black women's typical tone of voice or dialect is automatically categorized as unprofessional — again, often with no prior rationale on an individual level. This standard could set an emotional and skeptical tone, which, over time, may negatively impact Black women's psychological health.

The thing that is so interesting to me is that everybody adjust the way that they speak. I mean you don't talk to anybody; I mean you have the certain group of people, the stranger, you're more detached — everybody does that (group agreement) — yet when we do that, it's highlighted, so now you're talking like a white person....

The examples above provided by focus group participants indicate that, no matter what we do or how we act, we will always be perceived as angry. Additionally, Black women showing any kind of “negative” emotions such as typical human feelings, are viewed as a validation for the stereotype and its perpetuation. Furthermore, these examples provide evidence that the mere essence of being a Black woman is perceived as hostile, that speaking your mind can be perceived as angry or bitter. Another focus group participant shared experience in the realm of Angry Black Woman.

I feel like when you present that, being a strong black woman, a lot of negative things that I have heard is like, “You're too vocal, you're too loud.”

The focus group participant above describes more than just a perception of others. A deeper analysis of her quote indicates that resilience and speaking your mind as a Black woman can be taken as an act of defiance. In an academic setting, this is very harmful, especially because voice and opinion in classroom discussion is essential to any learning environment.

Stifling your voice due to negative perceptions of your speech can impact your ability to contribute to the conversations, and thus, impact your academic work. Furthermore, it may have a chilling effect, impacting your choice to speak at all.

In addition to misperception of tone of voice when a Black woman speaks up, another participant experienced an assumption of class or socioeconomic status solely based on identifying as a Black woman:

Like thinking I had to overcome some type of barrier, like I know I didn't grow up in upper-middle class making hundreds of thousands a year, but I didn't grow up in poverty, and for some reason, people think that because I'm black I had to grow up in the ghetto and overcome something.

The experience described above can be quite shattering, as it indicates that Black women are not seen for who they are. It seems that Black women are lumped into one category, with the stories of their lives assumed as if already known. There is danger in seeing someone from a single perception or story (Adichie, 2009), as it ignores that person's lived experiences and dismisses her or his individuality. Coupled with participants' experiences of assumptions of being angry and *ghetto* is a lack of trust in Black women's competence.

Assumptions of Academic Inferiority

Focus group participants shared that they often felt as though professors and students didn't take them seriously or assumed they didn't have the same capabilities of their white counterparts. One participant's quote, below, provides an overarching experience that captures much of the significance of the other examples.

... I'm concerned with, um, making sure that people realize that I'm intelligent and I'm just as smart as they are. But that's the thing that I feel that I have to

combat sometimes as well. It's that perception that maybe because I'm a Black woman, I don't really know anything.

Assumption of inferiority is an example in the racial microaggression chart that does speak to the experience of Black women. Specifically, this participant is sharing her heightened sense of awareness and slightly describes a fear that people will assume that she is not smart or intelligent strictly due to her intersecting identities.

Below, Susan shares how she witnesses the privilege that her white counterparts have as a result of her identity as a Black woman and the stereotypical perception that she is academically inferior that she feels from her professors.

I know people in my lab — they've gone three years without having a committee meeting, even though it's required. But somehow they've skated through the cracks, and their committee doesn't even know what they're doing.....

Susan describes her experience of being in academia and her committee seemingly pushing for her to engage more. Specifically, in relation to her observations of her peers, there doesn't seem to be the same type or level of check-in requirement. She goes on to share what seems to be a heavy scrutiny of her work, which again is a different process for her white peers.

So, if he says he wants things, any document twice and edited twice, I make sure I give him enough time where he can see my stuff twice. And we'll still have like two weeks left, and he's like, "Okay, let's see it a third time." But then the white people wait 'til the last minute, and he'll only see it once but he'll let them skate by. So I kind of was like, "Does he hold me to a higher standard or does he want me to be the best that I can be?" But there'll be times where I'm like, you said "twice." It's been twice, I don't want to send it again.

The participant above describes her experience with a committee member for her dissertation. She explains her confusion or questioning of different standards for her and her white peers in the reviewing of work. Microaggressions such as these are known to cause additional second-guessing of experiences, a reflection of the psychological harm potentially caused when experiencing these instances on a regular basis. These examples indicate that there is a lack of trust in Black women's academic abilities. In addition to Black women being seen as angry, *ghetto* and incompetent, their appearance — mostly their hairstyles — are also given undue attention.

Aesthetics

White women have always been the norm for standards of beauty. Therefore, Black women's beauty has always been questioned or seen as *other*. Specifically, hair standards for Black women are the opposite of those for white women. Our hair is either seen as “wild,” “unkempt” or “unprofessional.” Susan, shares her experience when her white male advisor commented on her hair style:

...this is definitely with black women but with my hair, that's definitely microaggression I get like, every day... like whether it's in a small afro or a big afro...I said something to my advisor about it, and he was like, he truly didn't understand why him saying, “Oh your hair is big today” is not appropriate. And it's not just cuz you say it, cuz everyone says it, but there is this stigma where you don't get a job because of your hair is not professional and things like that...

The example above depicts not only inappropriate behaviors that are uniquely directed towards Black women, it also demonstrates the seemingly oblivious nature of the offenders. Together, boundaries being crossed regarding aesthetics and being or seemingly being unaware

of the offenses can be exhausting. It also can leave Black women second-guessing themselves and their level of sensitivity. Susan also depicts the way in which Black women are identified or “seen” if at all, solely based on our hair.

There was one time with a student, she was the only black student in the class I was TAing for and my supervisor was like maybe eight weeks into the class, he was like, “Who is that girl? I don’t know who she is.” And he didn’t recognize her because she had her hair different. Like he didn’t recognize because she had a different weave. First of all, she was the only Black girl in class (laughter).

Both of the experiences above relative to hair are similar to the dichotomy of visibility for Black women, in that a change in hair can both increase or decrease visibility. Personally, I have had a male supervisor tell me that “you change your hair so much, we don’t know what you will look like from one day to the next”. This type of monitoring or surveillance of Black women and hair style can be mentally exhausting and defeating.

Moreover, Microaggressions are known to be frequent and recurring (Sue, et al., 2012). The focus group participant above states that she receives these types of messages “every day.” As a result, the frequent occurrence of these slights and insults can impact the psychological wellbeing of Black women. Not only are Black women at predominantly white institution experiencing microinsults, they are also experiencing a denial of their reality. Below I share the focus group participant’s experiences of microinvalidations.

Microinvalidations

Tug of War and Picking and Choosing Battles. This subcategory of microaggressions “exclude, negate, and nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of” people of color (Sue, et al., 2017, 147) and were prominently discussed and highlighted in the

focus group data. The first discussed is the choice to address the accoster where Black women pick and choose whether or not to interrupt stereotypes projected onto them.

Susan, a Ph.D. student in the sciences, discusses her experiences in deciding on what tone/s to use when speaking with her advisor. She describes that she often walks on eggshells with white advisors and committees to not be perceived as the Angry Black Woman and not experience retaliation or jeopardize her standing in program.

Those on my committee are white. So I have to be nice to them...I was able to like, I chose my words carefully to get, so I got what I wanted but I still had my advisor telling me I should have softened a little bit more.

Being a Black woman in a difficult space, deciding if she will speak her mind and or speak up for herself, is not new in academia. It is a recurring historical phenomenon for both students and faculty. Furthermore, this caution to “push-back” or walk on eggshells can be detrimental to one’s identity.

Kaylee, a graduate student in education, describes the same *tug of war* and *battle* but inside the Black community, with Black men.

I just see people attack Black women so much. I mean getting all these posts and statuses and things like that that I see about child support is absolutely ridiculous at this point. That whole thing with that Childish Gambino and dating a white woman, and somehow we're all supposed to be mad or it's because Black women were so mean to him. The same thing with Taye Diggs, and it just gets old. I'm completely fine. Especially like, coming from an interracial relationship like, I don't care; date who you want to date, just do not use us as your reason. Like, stand on your own, dude, claim your actions. Don't do Black women as your

scapegoat like that. It gets old, and I feel like we get scapegoated so much. This is really hard whenever you're having to combat this with white men, white women, and then you have to come home [and] combat it with the Black man.

The following quote demonstrates the perception that the participant was having to continually prove her worth and value, justify her presence, in a sense. She also describes assumptions of poverty and class based on her intersecting identities. Sue (2007), in his microaggression chart, includes an example of “Alien in your own land” (p.147), which mirrors Tammy’s experience.

.....like when you get here, especially in the U of I, it's a good school, and feel like when you're in that department and you're the brown-skinned person and their like, 'how did you get here?' Or... 'Where did you come from?' and want to know your background, your family, they want to know your history, where did you used to work at before then. Did you get a scholarship? You know it's all these questions.

In addition to not feeling like she doesn’t belong, Tammy’s experience demonstrated that people of color tend to be questioned related to their status. This line of questioning could insinuate an assumption that as a result of your intersecting identities as a Black woman, you must prove what you’ve earned.

Invisibility and Hypervisibility. Historically, Black women have been left out of conversations or disregarded in terms of sexism, where white women were centrally addressed, and in terms of racism, where Black men were the focus of attention (Cole, 2009; Hooks, 1981; Silverstein, 2006). Today, both invisibility and hypervisibility are prominent, in which Black women can be both noticed and unnoticed in the blink of an eye.

Below, Susan describes her experiences of hypervisibility for herself but the perception of potential invisibility for her peers, based on hair style.

... I wear my hair natural a lot, like usually it's down in a big ole curly afro, and I feel like all my teachers in my classes always remember my name but they don't remember any of the student's names and it's like they remember me: Is that a good thing or bad thing? I don't know how to feel about it because are you going to be watching me extra because you know I'm the only black student with big curly hair? (group sounds of agreement)

Silencing and Marginalization. Focus group participants discussed their experiences of people not respecting their intellect in an academic setting due to intersections of their race and gender (Gutierrez y Muys, Niemann, Gonzalez, & Harris, 2012). Specifically, participants discussed experiences of microinvalidations, in which their feelings and/or intellect were dismissed. Jackie, shares her experience below.

So, if I'm saying or asking something about a particular theory, his first reaction is to explain the theory to me, when that is not what I [am] asking. He always goes further into his explanation as opposed to actually answering what I'm asking, because he just assumes that my question must [be because] I don't know this topic or I don't know this very basic thing. He doesn't actually, doesn't listen to what I'm saying, to the point where I just stop talking to him or stop asking him questions because there's no communication. I don't get anywhere with him.

Research shows that survivors of microaggressions tend to second guess themselves and reflect on whether what they saw, how they were treated, or what they heard was accurate. Authors have described this as a sting and mentally exhausting. Below, Susan describes

experiences she has had about holding others accountable, sharing experiences with others, or simply speaking her mind, all of which validates previous research.

When you're actually challenging people on what they are saying or what they're doing or their biases, it gets obviously very defensive and very personal. And when you do say something, people, they take back from you. They always treat you like you've done something horrific, even though what they were saying was racist and what they did was sexist or racist. You, by actually addressing it, you're the one who's done something offensive and done something unforgivable (group agreement) by actually showing what they did and how it was wrong.

Tara, describes below an experience she encountered while taking a summer class. The instructor had no previous knowledge of the student yet assumed she was strong enough to handle the course despite her extenuating circumstances. Tara explained to the instructor that she was having difficulties and was looking for an accommodation.

I had a teacher tell me — it was when I was pregnant with my son and we had a summer class and I had actually went into labor like during the class. The class had just started and I was like, "I'm not going to be able to finish this in time for this," and I was asking pretty much just for an extension, and she emails me back and she goes, "Oh you're fine, you're strong enough, you can do it," ... and needless to say I ended up dropping that class, because in those spaces I'm just like, [I] know how the remainder of that class would have gone.

This is not unlike many other experiences that students of color face at predominantly white institutions, in and outside the classroom and, more commonly, with academic advisors (Lewis, et al., 2012). Unfortunately, it is common for students who request additional assistance

to be met with an alternative that is the opposite of their intention. This quote is a prime example of an unintentional microaggression, a statement meant to be perceived as a compliment yet one that is stereotypical and insulting in nature. The instructor's response inadvertently made the student into a superwoman, and the student's perception was that the incident was due to her intersecting identities of race and/or gender.

Micro-assaults

Unlike micro-insults and micro-invalidations, micro-assaults include explicitly racist and demeaning behavior such as name-calling (Sue, 2007). Only one example in the two focus groups could specifically be placed under this category, as micro-assaults do not often come in the form of face-to-face interactions. For instance, the "N" word may be written on the wall of the inside of an elevator, yet the perpetrator will not sign his or her name next to it. Perhaps, if the question was posed about sightings of racists or demeaning phrases, the focus group participants may have shared more experiences. Below is the recounting of Susan's experience of name calling with a member of her working group for a class project.

So I was running late, and so we met at a coffee shop, and of course, I apologized because I came in late. And one of my partners pulled me to the side and said, "I probably shouldn't even say this... "They told me when you run late you're on CP [Colored People] time." (Group OMGs/groans.) And then it felt like I didn't even want to be a part of the group, you know, I kind of felt like I'm isolated, so if she's thinking this, are they all thinking this?

This was the only reported categorization of a micro-assault for one of two focus groups yet it is significant related to Black women's experiences at a PWI, especially as it relates to the response from the Black woman.

Generational Factor - Strong Black Woman

Participants associated SBW with a sense of pride. Many stated that their mothers, maternal aunts, and grandmothers came to mind when they heard the term. A few participants provided examples, such as the number of jobs that their mothers worked to support their family and their ability to overcome obstacles. While research has determined that adopting and/or internalizing SBW leads to and causes stress, the same research places SBW in terms of historical factors — such as dating back to slavery — without discussing the Black Superwoman ideology (Ashley, et al., 2018; Nelson, Cardemil, & Adeoye) which my research indicates are separate categories and should be analyzed as such.

Below, I discuss the two overarching categories of the Generational Factor - Strong Black Woman, which are *Selflessness and Sacrifice* and *Resilience and Independence*. *Selflessness and Sacrifice* includes a subcategory of *Overexertion and Exhaustion*; and *Resilience and Independence* includes subcategories of *Lack of Vulnerability* and *Not Asking for Help*.

Selflessness and Sacrifice. Giving of yourself for others was a prominent comment in the focus groups when discussing SBW; specifically, participants were reminiscent of other women in their family who did the same. They described what seemed to be learned behaviors passed down from generation to generation.

Like when I kind of thought about the question, I kind of thought about — my mom instantly popped into my head. Because, um, she was a single parent who raised two daughters, and I saw how much she worked so hard. She was so strong, she hardly ever complained. She was a fighter; she was a sister. So I thought about, you know, how many people she also took care of and had a big family and there was a lot of them — a lot of

siblings. She was dedicated to her job. She was dedicated to her family. And she sacrificed a lot.

Jackie, a graduate student in the college of education shares her experience of witnessing sacrifices of her mom and other women in her family.

Having a mom who worked, you know, two or three jobs to make it and make it for us, you know — myself and my brother. Just all of those things, you know, I've seen it, seen it, what it looks like, in multiple women, not just my mom or even my grandmother. So many Black women in many of my aunts, friends, and cousins and all of that.”

Jackie identifies several women in her life whom she believed exhibited the archetype of a Strong Black woman. This is indicative of the generational factor, witnessing of behavior passed down from woman to woman in the Black family structure.

Overexertion and Exhaustion. When describing SBW, participants often used positive attributes such as *confidence* and *the ability to persevere*. However, they also frequently mentioned the word “tired.” Below, Paige shares her experience of being tired:

On my list of things, I put “energetic” and “tired” (group laughter). It’s one thing, right? There needs to be a word for that. This thing of always going, always doing something, something is always going on in the brain. But then there comes a time when you’re like (deep breath), “Okay, this is too much. I just need to like, be tired. I need to be allowed to be tired.” And I think that maybe that’s something that’s not a luxury we’re given. So when I think of what other people think of when they think of strong black women, “Well, you don’t get tired, you’re constantly going,” I’m like, “No, really, I’m just a person. I get tired.”

Paige not only describes how she felt internally but also shows that she believes how others perceive her — specifically, as someone who does not get tired simply due to demonstrating strength.

Resilience and Independence. The way in which participants described and defined SBW included several positive connotations. Below, Domonique shares what comes to mind when she hears the term:

When I think of Strong Black Woman, I just think of someone that just has confidence in themselves and they present themselves in a certain way.

Chelsey, a graduate student studying human resources, describes a sort of dichotomy between *resilience and independence*:

Like you have to prove why I'm here, and sometimes I feel I have to go above and beyond to show I deserve to be here. So I work extra hard to make sure, you know, like I have a place here just like you do. And it's been like that, I feel, like my whole experience here actually. Just sometimes I feel like I have to go above and beyond and, like, I can't have a tired day. I take work home or stay late or something, you know. Cuz I'm like, I don't want anybody to have anything to say — "Why you didn't get that done?" I don't want to ask for help, cuz that's how I was raised — not to ask for help, you know, so I'm just going to do it myself and figure it out.

Not only does Chelsey describe her ability to work hard, but the phrase, “I don’t want to ask for help, cuz that’s how I was raised — not to ask for help...” indicates the general tendency of the Strong Black Woman archetype to “go it alone,” and, in Chelsey’s words, “figure it out.” This phenomenon for Black women has been described in other research (Beauboeuf-Lafontant,

2009; Black & Peacock, 2011) but, again, these works used SBW and BSW interchangeably, whereas the data presented here indicates that the terms describe two different phenomena.

This mindset that the participant below describes is unique to Black women. Essentially, participant describes the desire to not look weak or have emotions at all. Holding emotions in is not healthy and can impact overall well-being.

I guess having that mindset where you don't want to show that you're weak. Cuz I guess that would be, like for me when I show that kind of emotion, I feel like I'm considered weak, like, "I don't know, just having that kind of strong mindset, like, "Okay, I've got this, I've got to take care of it!" I try not to show weakness because, people, when I did show weakness, no one helped me... So I don't ask for help because it's like, when I did ask you for help you didn't help me, so why would I ask? this is why I don't ask for help in the first place."

Asking for help is a sign of strength is a slogan that has been promoted, yet this participant clearly describes the opposite. Her belief is that, in order to be strong, you do everything on your own. She also states that when she asks for help, she doesn't get it, so she continues on her own.

Similarly, Dominique shares her perception of self-harm of the use of the archetype SBW when a "go it alone" mentality is adopted.

...Sometimes people will do harm to themselves. They'll take on more than they actually should be; they will do things that are not good for them and excuse it by saying, "Well, I'm a strong Black woman." I think, like, that's usually done because...it's expected of you.... I think a lot of times, Black women don't — we just — we hear it, but we don't actually practice it, you know, setting our

boundaries and saying “no” and only doing what we are really truly capable of doing.

Participants provided significant remarks as they relate to how they have seen the SBW archetype in their household and upbringings. The examples provided indicate that they watched their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, etc. sacrifice and be selfless, which they now have also adopted. Participants also discussed the harm that this mentality has caused to the aforementioned family members and potential negative outcomes.

Physiological and Psychological Wellbeing

According to the trends seen over the past 30 years, Black women consistently have had the highest rates of hypertension when compared to white and Black males, as well as white females. According to D.T. Lackland (2015) in the article, *Racial Differences in Hypertension: Implications for High Blood Pressure Management*, Black women have disproportionately higher rates of hypertension in comparison to Black men, white women and white men.

The trends associated with hypertension for Black women when compared to their counterparts are astounding, especially in comparison to the high number of participants in this study who reported that they or their mothers have had the same diagnosis. This shows a significant relationship between identity of SBW/BSW and a diagnosis of hypertension.

Focus group participants overwhelmingly shared that themselves and their maternal family members suffered from hypertension and other illnesses. Jackie, describes who in her family was diagnosed with illnesses relevant to the SBW schema.

On my mom’s side um I have seven aunts at least six of them have high blood pressure and like three or four have diabetes

Jackie describes six of seven aunts who have high blood pressure on the maternal side of her family. Given that Jackie and other participants describe their maternal aunts and grandmothers as SBW, it can be assumed that the diagnosis of high blood pressure for 85 percent of this participant's aunts can be associated with their use of SBW, including subthemes of physiological and psychological well-being.

Additionally, other works (Shorten-Gooden, 2003; West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016) indicate that Black women are operating with a functional depression which has been discussed as the *sisterella complex*, a further indication that models of SBW and BSW are impacting their psychological wellbeing.

Kaylee, a 26-year-old Ph.D. student in education, describes how she believes the way in which she has witnessed Black women operate are harmful to our sense of well-being.

Mental health and depression and being stressed out and not taking care of yourself first, because we're always thinking about everybody else. Making sure everybody else is taken care of except ourselves.

This sense of responsibility to everyone except yourself also goes against societal norms, where the rule of law is self-preservation. What the participants describe is the opposite for Black women, where they feel obligated to put others first. These feelings of obligations were prominent in the data.

Feelings of Obligations

Participants describe a sort of sacrifice for the sake of sisterhood out of obligation, because no one else understands or takes care of Black women like each other. These feelings of obligation can impact the psychological wellbeing of Black women (Lewis, et al., 2012), which can lead to more serious health concerns.

Kaylee, shares her thoughts regarding the obligatory feelings she believes Black women have to nearly everyone:

You feel this responsibility to take people who, someone under you, underneath your wing and like hold them up and you know, help them out. Even if that sometimes is the detriment.

The obligatory feelings described by participants have been, in previous work, linked to Black women's unique history (Abrams, et al., 2014). However, these data indicate that the behaviors are generational and continue internally in the familial setting. It also is possible that the stress of feeling obligated to help may be adversely impacting Black women's health, specifically by raising their blood pressure.

Lydia, a non-traditional student shares her thoughts on simply existing as a Black woman and the feelings associated with it.

I would say, just from what I went through it being a black woman is it can get really hard, because you have to defend you, your family, your man. You have to just be the defender of everybody.

Lydia's description indicates a deeper issue rooted in the intersectional paradigm that operates within Black womanhood; that is, the complexities which impact our psychological well-being are broad. These complexities occur both inside and outside of Black women's own communities.

Feelings of unworthiness

Focus group participants discussed a type of constant questioning of value and worth, based on professors and other students at predominantly white institutions who questioned their

credibility or legitimacy in occupying a seat at a prestigious university. Chelsey, shares her feelings below:

I think mental health — cuz it makes you feel like “Oh, I’m not like them” — it makes you feel, what’s the word I’m looking for, it makes you feel different about yourself. Like you’re not good enough to hang out with these people or good enough to be on campus...

Chelsey describes an automatic perception of another’s knowledge base and worth based solely on the intersections of skin color and gender. There is a psychological toll that this may take, potentially contributing to the overall *sisterella complex* (Jones & Shorten-Gooden, 2003). Furthermore, this questioning may turn into avoidance, such as not attending class or developing a disdain for academia altogether. Read Chelsey’s decision regarding entering academia:

.... I definitely decided that I don't have a desire to go into academia anymore, um, because, if even at a department that is at a PWI, but the department has a high percentage of students of color, for them to still be under this level of stress ... and for them to still seem like they're being attacked. I mean, I had one professor... She broke down, started crying...I just don't think it's worth it for me. I think, mentally when I think about it and I feel I can't be myself or I need to drastically edit the [way] that I look or I talk, I think that it mentally creates bad spaces for you, and then you dread going to those places like...It's like you naturally don't want to be there.

Chelsey’s thoughts on not entering the academy as a result of her witnessing Black women professors under stress is indicative of avoidance of spaces and the psychological toll that Black women endure at PWI’s. A decision of this magnitude, prior

to completing her degree, demonstrates the impact that these microaggressions have on the future careers of Black women.

In this section, participants discuss ways in which they cope and resist both archetypes, BSW and SBW. Chelsey, above, describes avoidance as a way to cope or resist, by deciding not to enter the academy at all. Other participants also shared strategies they use to cope and resist, which include self-care in the form of mental affirmations, saying “no,” and sisterhood, as well as exercise.

Coping and Resistance

Focus group participants described ways in which they cope and resist invoking both the SBW and BSW. These included maintaining relationships with other women, mental affirmation and saying “no.” Below, Paige discusses the guilt she felt for saying “no,” yet, with practice, she was able to free herself from the guilt, which has interrupted her use of SBW.

Saying “No”

Paige shares that saying “no” has been freeing for her.

I just have learned to say “no” a lot more often. And that, for me, really limits the amount of things that I do, which then give[s] me time to spend with my family to do things for myself. I mean, I am still pulled in a lot of different directions, but it’s manageable. And I don’t feel bad for saying “no,” and I don’t apologize for saying “no.” I don’t say, “I’m sorry, I can’t help you,” because I’m not sorry (group laughter). I just say, “I’m not going to be able to help you this time,” and leave it at that. That, for me, is the biggest thing that I’ve done for like the past five years; it’s really helped me to just say no.”

In addition to saying “no” more frequently, Paige shares that she no longer feels guilty for denying requests. It can be assumed that her new practice of saying “no” allowed for a comfortability, which reduced the amount of guilt she felt.

Mental Affirmations

Participants were in agreement with Jackie who shares how she uses mental affirmation to cope.

I'm always like telling myself, like, "Black is so beautiful. I wouldn't want to be any other color." ... I have a purpose and I keep reiterating that to myself...

There was an agreement from all participants, evident in Jackie's example of how she repeats affirmations to herself in order to cope or resist. With the frequency of microaggressions, typically every day across the spectrum of the categories, this reiteration of self-truth for participants seemed to help deflect the negative stereotypes.

Sisterhood

Sisterhood appeared inherent in the communication among participants during the focus group. They discussed the importance of talking to other Black women about their experiences as validation. Below, Jackie describes her drawing and her choice to write the word “sister.”

I put sister in here because I think that there's a lot of, I don't know, like black women...really need to stick together and it's not necessarily always easy to have that sisterhood

Jackie shares how sisterhood is important for Black women. She states that Black women need to stick together and also states that it's not always easy to create sisterhood.

Discussion

This study explores Black women's experiences of racial and gender microaggressions at a predominantly white institution, as well as their experiences of the archetypes, Strong Black Woman and Black Superwoman. My findings indicate that, while focus group participants differentiated between BSW and SBW, when they state Black Superwoman is placed upon them and Strong Black woman was generational or cultural, they name harmful outcomes associated with both archetypes. Participants also noted that they did not necessarily want to be the strong one all the time but felt that they were compelled to do so, especially because, when they asked for help, they didn't get it, and as a result no longer asked.

There was a lot of agreement in terms of experiences at the PWI that was shared among the focus group participants. There was a resounding agreement in that the participants were strong, not super. However, the PWI environment and experiences in subtle ways every day were perceived differently. The participants shared experiences with ease and provided validation to one another in the space, which was indicative of the creation of sisterhood.

The findings suggest that Black women experience oppression based on their intersecting identities, which are unique to them, whereas, they are experiencing microaggressions that are not experienced by white women or Black men. The findings from focus group participation can be broadly generalized to the auto-ethnography, as there were many similarities in experiences, especially as they relate to the SBW archetype and corresponding coping and resisting strategies. Specifically, the resistance and self-care strategy of saying "no" was a major finding in both.

The findings of this study help us understand the significance of historical factors on present day microaggressions. It informs our thinking of the archetypes and how they are perpetuated uniquely for Black women, which the data suggests causes psychological harm. The findings also help us understand how the two factors, historical and generational, continue to operate. However, this study also demonstrates through coping and resistance strategies how the SBW archetype is being interpreted.

Limitations

There are limitations and critiques of any methodology. Denzin (2011) summarizes some critiques of qualitative research prior to negating them, which include but are not limited to: not being scientific, lacking truth criteria, lacking structure, not demanding, not methodical, and lacking hard evidence. The qualitative method also has been labeled as a default method (Prakash, et al., 2007), having no merit with results or findings produced and lacking rigor (Anderson, 2010). Furthermore, ethnographic research has been said to lack the ability to be “generalized to broader populations” (Sells, Smith, & Newfield, 1995). Charmaz (2007) notes that the tensions in qualitative research are the data gathering strategies, the place of extant theory, the analytic levels of the student, and the writing process. Kilty (2012) notes that there is also a “social distance” (p. 114) between qualitative researchers and participants, which creates a hierarchy that could set a tone not conducive to full openness from participants.

Lu and Horner (1998) write that critical ethnography is unable to take a “neutral stance” (p. 257). In addition, researchers engaged in ethnography should view participants as informants as opposed to subjects (Sells, et al., 1995). Additionally, a feminist approach to qualitative inquiry has been charged by Kilty (2005) as empathizing with “marginalized

research participants without accepting everything they say as ‘the truth’ and without conceptualizing them as one-dimensional victims devoid of agency” (p. 115).

Despite the limitations and criticisms, qualitative research has become a favorable and mainstream method for researchers across disciplines (Yin, 2011). Hundreds of books have been dedicated to the field of qualitative research and the impact it has made in academia. The approach with this particular study is multifaceted, wherein data was collected in two ways — through auto-ethnography and focus groups — which aided in the rigor of the study. One limitation, however, was the number of participants: one for the auto-ethnography, and nine for the focus groups, for a total of 10 participants. This study was limited to participants who were students at one predominantly white institution, therefore lacks voices of faculty, staff and community members that could have added to the depth of the work.

Future Directions

This study was limited to college students — undergraduates and graduates at a specific Midwestern university. Future research in this area should have a broad demographic, including Black women who are not college students. Additionally, works should address Black women in the church and the intersection of faith, male voices and language in the church, and the identity of the Strong Black Woman with experiences of racial and gender microaggressions.

While focus group participants differentiated between BSW and SBW, they named consequences that were associated with both, yet only adopted SBW. Participants also noted that they did not necessarily want to be the strong one all the time but felt that they were compelled to do so, especially because, when they asked for help, they didn’t get it, and as a result no longer asked. Future work should address Black women’s perceptions of help and support, specifically, their belief in whether it exists for them.

Additionally, microaggressions unique to Black women should be included in the microaggression chart. Safe spaces should be developed just for Black women at PWI's. Research should be conducted on racial and gender microaggressions and SBW and BSW ideologies for both community members and college students. Finally, continuous recruitment of Black women scholars should continue. I encourage other Black women scholars as they are comfortable, to share their stories in their research on these phenomena.

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Appendix A

Research Information and Consent for Participation in Social Behavioral Research

The Black Superwoman: Racial and Gender Microaggressions at Predominantly White Institutions

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form such as this one to tell you about the research, to explain that taking part is voluntary, to describe the risks and benefits of participation, and to help you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Principal Investigator Name and Title: **Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, Associate Professor**
Department and Institution: **University of Illinois College of Education**
Address and Contact Information: **1310 S. Sixth St. Champaign, IL 61820, 217-333-2990**

Why am I being asked?

You are being asked to be a subject in a research study about Black women's experiences with racial and gender microaggressions and identify as a Black superwoman or Strong Black woman.

You have been asked to participate in the research because you identify as a Black or African American woman and are a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. **If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.**

Approximately 20 subjects may be involved in this research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

What is the purpose of this research?

1. Explore experiences of racial and gender microaggressions that Black women encounter at predominantly white institutions
2. Explore the characteristics and qualities or dimensions of the myth of the Black superwoman or strong Black woman
3. Explore connections between microaggressions and the myth of the Black superwoman or Strong Black woman

What procedures are involved?

This research will be performed at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

You will need to come to the study site on one of the dates and times provided to you.

The visit will not exceed 90 minutes and the session will be audio recorded. While the focus group sessions will be audio recorded, no one else will have access to this audio data besides the researchers. This audio will not be shared in any form or fashion outside of use in written form for the purposes of the students dissertation, yet will not include any identifying information as pseudonyms will be used.

What are the potential risks and discomforts?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

Are there benefits to taking part in the research?

Taking part in this research study may not benefit you personally, but we [researchers] may learn new things that will help others.

What other options are there?

You have the option to not participate in this study

Will my study-related information be kept confidential?

Faculty, students, and staff who may see your information will maintain confidentiality to the extent of laws and university policies. Personal identifiers will not be published or presented. Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others

What are the costs for participating in this research?

There are no costs to you for participating in this research.

Will I be reimbursed for any of my expenses or paid for my participation in this research?

You will not be offered payment for being in this study. **OR**

Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

Contact the researchers Tanisha King-Taylor at 217-898-6748 or tking@illinois.edu

- if you have any questions about this study or your part in it,
- if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research.

What are my rights as a research subject?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including questions, concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 217-333-2670 or e-mail OPRS at irb@illinois.edu

Remember:

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

I have read (or someone has read to me) the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research. I will be given a copy of this signed and dated form.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent