THE 'STRONG BLACK WOMAN': AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S DOUBLE BIND

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

African American women's endorsement of the 'Strong Black Woman' (SBW) race-gender ideology has received recent attention given its association with harmful health outcomes. However, the ideology's function in the lives of African American women has been under-explored. This study investigated the meaning, expectations, and role of the SBW race-gender ideology in the lives of African American women. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from 13 African American women who discussed the conflicting and competing messages or 'double binds' that African American women experience when internalizing the SBW race-gender ideology. Three double binds were identified: Be Psychologically Durable yet Do Not Engage in Behaviors that Preserve Psychological Durability, Be Equal yet Be Oppressed, and Be Feminine yet Reject Traditional Feminine Attributes. Each theme is discussed with respect to its function and its perceived advantages and disadvantages in the lives of African American women who face multiple stressors, including poverty, racism, and sexism.

Keywords: Strong Black Woman/Superwoman, double bind, racism, sexism, qualitative

To my Eternal Guide (Proverbs 3:5-6). To 'My Vals' whose love, support, prayers, and humor have sustained me beyond measure.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Double binds occur when individuals or groups receive conflicting messages that are inherently contradictory (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1963; Jamieson, 1995). That is, acting in accordance with one message inherently means acting in discordance with another. Because of this, individuals perceive that there are no viable means to successfully reconcile these expectations; thus, they feel forced to fulfill one demand over another, which results in the experience of limited options. Many women experience double binds due to the expectations inherent in dominant gender roles (Crawford & Unger, 2004; Jamieson, 1995; Shields, 2002). For instance, women often experience double binds in conducting caretaking responsibilities (Campbell & Handy, 2011; Climo, Terry, & Lay, 2002) and in working in leadership roles (Koch, 2004; Jamieson, 1995; Meeks, 2012). For example, in terms of caretaking responsibilities, many women who serve as custodial grandmothers report feeling obligated to raise their grandchildren in order to preserve the integrity of their family but feel accountable for dis-empowering their children by confiscating their parenting role (Campbell & Handy, 2011; Climo, Terry, & Lay, 2002). In terms of the workplace, women who are perceived as feminine are often judged as incompetent whereas showcasing competence, given that it is often conceptualized as a traditionally masculine quality, results in women being perceived as unfeminine and cold (Koch, 2004; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002). This showcases that women are penalized when they embody these traditional modes of gender (e.g., nurturers, femininity) and also when they do not conform to these traditional gender norms (Brown, 2011).

The existing double bind scholarship on gender has tended to privilege certain subgroups of women (e.g., White, heterosexual, middle-class women); thus, producing limited research

findings on the nature of double binds, particularly for women who have multiple marginalized identities. For African American women in particular, their marginalized intersected race-gender identity has recently garnered research attention (Cole, 2009; Settles, 2006; Settles et al., 2008), particularly regarding its association with physical health (Giscombé & Lobel, 2005; Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010; Mitchell & Herring, 1998) and psychosocial outcomes (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Black & Peacock, 2011; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). One phenomenon that describes the intersection of race and gender for African American women is the 'Strong Black Women' (SBW) race-gender ideology, which provides African American women with a 'script' on how to enact their intersected race-gender identity. The extant research on the 'Strong Black Woman' (SBW) race-gender ideology has led to binary conclusions that showcase it as either primarily ruinous or beneficial for African American women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Giscombé & Lobel, 2005; Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Less is known about why many African American women internalize and aim to achieve this ideal of strength despite its injurious consequences to their physical and psychological well being. It is necessary to move the research beyond this binary approach and investigate the function of the SBW race-gender ideology in the lives of African American women. The double bind framework facilitates further understanding of whether African American women's experience of their intersected race-gender identity, as encompassed by the 'Strong Black Woman' race-gender ideology, engenders unique double binds. First, we articulate the central role of the SBW race-gender ideology in the lives of African American women. Next, we highlight the current research findings on the SBW race-gender ideology, particularly regarding African American women's health attitudes and behaviors. And, in light of the

pervasiveness of this ideology in the lives of African American women, we articulate the need to further investigate the experienced double binds associated with the SBW race-gender ideology.

African American women's intersected race-gender identity prescribes an exclusive set of expectations, which are encompassed by the 'Strong Black Woman' race-gender ideology. Historically, the SBW race-gender ideology justified and rationalized the enslavement of African American women given that they were perceived as physically and psychologically stronger than White women (Harris-Lacewell, 2001; Thomas et al., 2004). However, contemporarily, it has been worn as a badge of honor, denoting the tenacious spirit of African American women who, historically and presently, have endured and combated historical, political, and societal oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). As a result, many African American women have internalized strength as a necessary attribute of African American womanhood. For example, in a study comparing conceptualizations of womanhood among European American women and African American women, only African American women endorsed 'perceived strength' as a marker of womanhood (Settles et al., 2008). For these participants, inner strength was characterized as the ability to "stand up for oneself, persevere, and refuse to be taken advantage of by others (specifically men and White people)" (p. 463). That is, strong women are understood to be steadfast in the face of trouble and to protect themselves from manipulative others. Similarly, Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) found that the majority of the adolescent African American women participants in their study spontaneously mentioned the terms 'strong,' 'strength,' or 'stronger' in describing themselves as African American women. These findings suggest that many African American women understand strength as a central aspect of their African American womanhood. Thus, many African American women aim to adhere to the SBW race-gender ideology's expectations, which

include showcasing strength at all times, persevering in the midst of obstacles and limited resources, and helping others (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

The empirical work on the SBW race-gender ideology has begun to uncover how these expectations are associated with health outcomes (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Giscombé & Lobel, 2005; Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010; Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). To date, empirical findings have primarily delineated the negative intrapersonal outcomes associated with the SBW race-gender ideology, like increased rumination (Mitchell & Herring, 1998) and maladaptive coping strategies (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010; Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). However, the overemphasis on the injurious outcomes associated with the SBW ideology disregards its complexity and its function in the lives of African American women, particularly given their experiences of marginalization. In fact, many African American women aim to achieve this ideal of strength despite its many associated liabilities (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). The double bind framework may assist in uncovering the contradictory demands inherent in SBW race-gender ideology and reveal how African American women are navigating this paradoxical terrain. And in so doing, psychologists can work to formulate and implement culturally-relevant interventions that aim to reconcile these demands. This study aims to investigate how adhering to the expectations associated with the SBW race-gender ideology simultaneously create sites of opportunity (i.e., advantage) and oppression for African American women. That is, African American women may be adhering to certain demands over others as a strategy to adaptively function in the midst of their marginalized status.

1.1. The Current Study

Traditional research approaches have primarily delineated the detrimental consequences of the SBW race-gender ideology without equally attending to its adaptive function. The double bind concept has been primarily used to explore the double binds experienced by women, but this focus has not attended to the double binds that emerge for different subsets of women. The purpose of the current study was to investigate the double binds associated with the SBW race-gender ideology. An intersectionality analytic approach was introduced in order to consider: (1) "who is included in this category, (2) what roles does inequality play, and (3) where are there similarities" (Cole, 2009, p. 171). Applying both double bind and intersectionality approaches in this study allowed for the empirical examination of the double binds that emerged in light of African American women's intersected race-gender identity, specifically when adhering to the SBW race-gender ideology.

The integration of the double bind and intersectional frameworks moves this research beyond the good *or* bad conceptualization of the SBW race-gender ideology to an approach that considers how its contradictory messages produce adaptive responses to environmental stressors despite its associated liabilities. This nuanced understanding of the ways in which multiple social categories of identity shape individuals' overall experiences serves to broaden the scope of extant research on women's double binds. The investigation was guided by the following research questions: (1) Do African American women experience double binds when adhering to the SBW race-gender ideology? If so, (2) What are the perceived double binds associated with adhering to the SBW race-gender ideology? and 3) What factors, if any, influence African American women's decisions to adhere to certain demands over others?

CHAPTER 2: METHOD

2.1. Research Approach

Qualitative research can emanate from multiple paradigms with its own criteria for conducting and evaluating research (Ponterotto, 2005). Thus, the approach used in the current study was informed by a critical-constructionist paradigm and an intersectionality methodology.

2.1.1. Critical-constructionist Paradigm. Critical-constructivism assumes that there are multiple, apprehendable, and equally valid self- and socially-constructed perspectives (Ponterotto, 2005; Schwandt, 1997). Thus, individuals' perceptions are constructed based on their aptitude to relate a certain meaning to experiences. Therefore, the subject matter of critical-constructionist qualitative research is the ways in which social inequity and injustice shape how individuals experience and perceive the world around them (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). In the current study, we were especially attuned to how participants' understanding of the SBW race-gender ideology's expectations emerged and persisted in light of African American women's social location within various layers of oppression. Thus, the analysis involved special attention to how women explicitly and implicitly discussed their experiences of structural inequality based on their race and gender (e.g., Bowleg, 2008; Greene 1997; Weber, 2004).

2.1.2. Intersectionality Methodology. The current study adopted an intersectionality methodology in order to attend to the ways in which occupying multiple marginalized and intersecting identities is lived by African American women and how this engenders double binds. The intersection of race and gender was primarily considered given that research supports the existence of a doubly-bound race/gender consciousness in African American women that comes with its own set of expectations (Collins, 1990/2000; Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Crenshaw, 1995; Settles, 2006; Settles et al., 2008; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Thus,

the intersection of race and gender was considered across all stages of the research process, including the selection of the construct of interest (the SBW race-gender ideology) and sampling (e.g., selection of African American women). Also, following the guidelines outlined by Cole (2009), the intersection of race and gender as operationalized by the SBW race-gender ideology informed the research questions, data analysis, and the interpretation of the findings.

2.2. Participants and Procedure

Thirteen participants completed face-to-face interviews. Seven participants were currently enrolled in a 4-year university whereas six were not. Student participants were recruited from a university in the Midwest via the psychology subject pool and student organizations. Non-student participants were recruited through various programs that primarily served low-income African American families in a rural Midwestern community. Participants ranged from age 18-65 (M = 30, SD = 15.75). Of the six participants who were not currently college students, four had completed high school, and two had completed 'Some High School.' Further, among the six non-students, three were currently unemployed. Seven participants endorsed having children, with one participant endorsing having two children, and six participants indicating having three or more children. Although participants were not required to meet demographic requirements (Polkinghorne, 1989), they met the criteria listed by van Kaam (1959, cited in von Eckartsberg, 1986/1998c):

> (1) having had the experience under investigation, (2) feeling able to express themselves in written and/or verbal form, (3) feeling able to express inner feelings without excessive shame and inhibition, (4) being able to sense and express the experiences that accompany these feelings, and (5) feeling a spontaneous interest in the experience. (p.162)

All participants completed a survey packet and were informed of the opportunity to complete a follow-up qualitative interview for $10 compensation. Participants who completed the contact sheet indicating their interest in participating in the follow-up qualitative interview were contacted.

2.2.1. The Interview. The interview protocol was an in-depth, semi-structured protocol. It included open-ended questions that sought to acquire information regarding participants' understandings of the SBW race-gender ideology. Although a standard protocol was used, the first author deviated from the protocol as appropriate to the conversation with participants (e.g., presenting the questions at different points in the interview and with different wording), and questions that were spontaneously asked during the interviews were entirely within the spirit of the current protocol and the overall interview. An initial interview protocol was piloted with three African American women and revised based on their feedback. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour to complete.

2.3. Data Analytic Plan

2.3.1. Demarcation of Thematic Moments. The following questions were used to focus the analyses of the interview transcripts were:

1) What does it mean to be a strong Black woman? 2) Should African American women aspire to be strong Black women at all cost? and 3) What are the unique double binds encountered by African American women while adhering to the strong Black woman race-gender ideology?

With these questions in mind, individual transcripts were analyzed using the thematic moment analysis technique (Garza, 2004). This involves demarcating data *moments* (i.e., "sentences, words, phrases, 'voice' or 'tone' of the data that… illuminate a theme of the

phenomenon;" Garza, 2004 p. 133) that ultimately reveal the ways in which participants constitute the phenomenon as being meaningful. A 'moment' in this present study was any part of the transcript where something was revealed about the ways in which participants understand the SBW cultural message and its implications for double binds.

2.3.2. Comparative Analysis. The comparative analyses served to provide a better understanding of similarities in experience of the SBW race-gender ideology and the ways in which it forges unique double binds in the lives of African American women. The multiple transcripts were compared in order to denote 'thematic convergences and divergences' (Cole, 2009; Garza, 2004). Elements of the phenomenon that did not vary were listed as the convergent themes whereas the themes that did vary from participant to participant were noted as divergent.

2.4. Inference Quality of Research Findings

2.4.1. Multiple Perspectives. Multiple analysts were used in analyzing the interview transcripts (Patton, 2002) in order to provide nuanced interpretations of the interview data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Also, the use of multiple analysts allowed us to explicitly demarcate how our interpretations were substantiated by the data.

2.4.2. Member checks. Member checks were used to corroborate our understanding of the participant's narrative description (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Although this technique is often employed at the end of the data analytic process, in this study, member checks were conducted at several points during the interview. This means that during several points of the interview, we would reflect our understanding of what the participant had said and meant and allowed the participant to amend our interpretation if necessary.

2.4.3. Negative case analysis. Negative case analysis was another technique enlisted to ensure the quality of inferences made regarding the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002).

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Although the researcher may formulate preconceived categories in which information from the qualitative cases are expected to neatly fit, negative case analysis involves identifying portions of the data that do not fit within those categories so that those categories can be reworked, revised, or expanded. This ensures that researchers become aware of those preconceptions that are not grounded in the data (Rao & Churchill, 2003) and that findings that emerge from the data are privileged over the researcher's preconceived hypotheses (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Participants consisted of college students and women from the local community who were primarily from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, in addition to attending to African American women's intersected race-gender identity, the data were analyzed with special attention given to differences that arose in light of the women's socioeconomic status. Interestingly, there were no striking differences in how the college students and non-college students discussed the expectations associated with the SBW race-gender ideology and its implications for double binds. Therefore, the themes presented in this study represent convergences across college and non-college students. Three SBW double binds were identified in the analysis: 1) Be Psychologically Durable yet Do not Engage in Behaviors that Preserve Psychological Durability 2) Be Equal yet Be Oppressed, and 3) Be Feminine yet Reject Traditional Feminine Attributes. We report a brief summary of each double bind first, and then describe in more detail the verbatim accounts from participants that illuminate the respective double bind. A summary of each theme can be found in Table 1.

3.1. SBW Double bind 1: Be Psychologically Durable yet Do not Engage in Behaviors that Preserve Psychological Durability

A theme that was overwhelmingly represented in the data was the belief that African American women are expected to be psychologically durable. Equally represented was the belief that, according to the SBW race-gender ideology, African American women should not express emotions or use psychological wellness behaviors, like taking medication or attending counseling. Therefore, the SBW ideal creates a double bind in which African American women are expected to be psychologically durable but are stigmatized if they engage in behaviors that could preserve their psychological durability. In addition, many participants discussed that

engaging in wellness behaviors (e.g., attending counseling, expressing emotions) would hinder their ability to efficaciously handle their life's responsibilities. Thus, this double bind highlights the expectations for African American women on how to effectively fulfill their life demands (e.g., caregiver responsibilities, student responsibilities). Although participants reported a link between emotional inhibition and negative physical health outcomes (e.g., stroke, high blood pressure), they felt that emotional inhibition and non-engagement in wellness behaviors were adaptive given their responsibilities to care for others and to be successful students. Taken together, this double bind reveals that there is pressure for African American women to choose between their mental and physical health and their feelings of self-efficacy.

For many participants, a strong Black woman can "survive anything without break[ing] down and be[ing] weak" (Imani, community member, 59 years old), can "hold [their] head up during tough situations" without "show[ing] any weakness," (Kenya, student, 18 years old), and can "make it appear like [they] don't have any problems that [they are] dealing with at the moment" (Sheila, student, 20 years old). These examples illuminate how the SBW race-gender ideology obligates African American women to psychologically withstand the strain of their various life stressors. In contrast, participants stated that the SBW race-gender ideology discourages African American women from expressing emotions and using psychological wellness behaviors (e.g., medication use, counseling). For example, Ebony (student, 19 years old) stated, "I think it takes away from being independent if you do cry (…) so I think there's stuff that can take away from being a strong African American woman." Also, Barbara (community member, 65 years old) shared, "I see a doctor or something (…) but most of strong black women, they don't need it, they just handle the situation by themselves," illuminating how she does not fully view herself as a strong Black woman because she attends counseling for her

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depression. Tyra (community member, 21 years old) indicated that strong Black women should be able to "handle it by [themselves]", which she explained to mean as handling stress without the use of medication.

Participants noted several consequences of this double bind. Some noted that embodying emotional stoicism negatively affects African American women's emotional and psychological well-being. According to Shandra (community member, 30 years old), emotional suppression leads to "promiscuous attitudes, getting high, going to get drunk" among African American women. Other participants felt that emotional suppression led to "high blood pressure" (Ashley, student, 20 years old) and "stroke" (Sheila, student, 20 years old) among African American women. However, although participants felt emotional stoicism negatively affected the health of African American women, they felt that defying this expectation (i.e., engaging in behaviors that would ensure their psychological health) would exacerbate society's negative perceptions of African American women. For example, some participants believed that society expects African American women to fail in life and that engaging in certain wellness behaviors, like counseling and medication use, confirmed African American women's status as failures.

Further, despite emotional stoicism's negative side effects on African American women's physical and emotional health, many participants discussed their belief that rejecting the emotional stoicism expectation was not a feasible alternative. In discussing the death of a child, Debra (community member, 39 years old) stated, "I don't sit around and feel pity about it. I had to be there for my kids, I had to be strong. I couldn't be sitting there like (*mimics crying)*". According to Debra, extensively grieving the death of her son would thwart her ability to provide continuous financial and emotional support for her remaining children. Even college participants stated that they did not discuss their stressors in depth with family and friends due to their belief

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that "dwelling" on these stressors would hinder their ability to competently fulfill their academic responsibilities. Thus, despite its drawbacks, exhibiting emotional stoicism allowed African American women to successfully care for family members and achieve academic acumen.

3.2. SBW Double Bind 2: Be Equal yet Remain Oppressed

According to the participants, African American women have a responsibility to challenge the stereotypes often associated with their marginalization (e.g., "welfare-queen"). However, they also discussed the responsibility to embody their marginalization (e.g., struggle financially) in order to receive their 'credentials' as authentic African American women. By juxtaposing equality and oppression, the SBW ideology creates a double bind that encourages African American women to defy their oppressive circumstances while simultaneously encouraging them to embrace their oppressive circumstances as necessary markers of strength. Thus, many participants noted having to choose between recognition as an equal and contributing member of society and as an authentic African American woman who "struggles." According to the participants, this double bind functions to challenge society's negative portrayals of African American women and to elicit feelings of pride within African American. Despite experiencing strain and stress due to the pressure to prove themselves as equal citizens, participants positively discussed this double bind in that they believe it showcases their persistent ability to overcome barriers, which, ultimately, elicits feelings of pride and self-worth.

Participants revealed their belief that society holds denigrating conceptualizations of African American women and that African American women have a responsibility to circumvent these negative portrayals. For example, Shandra (community member, 30 years old) mentioned,

We [African American women] are so worried about what other people see and think of us, cause society already to the point where they think less of us, so we trying to make it to the point where society will see us as equals.

For Carolyn (community member, 38 years old), adhering to the expectations inherent in the SBW race-gender ideology, like exhibiting strength, is needed to disprove the messages that African American women are underachievers:

It has always made me want to prove something like oh, I can do this (…) so when a person tell you something negative and then tell you that you are not going to do that or you can't have this… [In] my case it made me a strong woman to get up and want to do and just prove them wrong.

Similarly, Ebony (student, 19 years old) believed that the SBW race-gender ideology encourages young adult women to go to college in order to disprove society's views that African American women are underachievers. Therefore, for these participants, acting in accordance with the SBW race-gender ideology is a strategy used to disprove denigrating representations of African American womanhood. And by disproving these negative appraisals of African American women, they may acquire 'opportunity' by way of hopefully gaining society's acceptance as equal citizens.

On the other hand, although the expectation to exhibit strength is believed to gain African American women equal standing within U.S. society, the expectation of 'struggle' and 'oppression' is what gains African American women credibility as strong Black women. According to the participants' understanding of the SBW race-gender ideology, African American women cannot obtain their 'credentials' as authentic African American women without enduring struggle. For example, when asked about what comes to mind when she hears

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the term 'strong Black woman,' Janelle (student, 29 years old) reports, "You know, see a single mom struggling to make ends meet, [a woman] working 4 jobs and don't need a man for nothing, you know, that kind of ideal (…)." According to Carolyn (community member, 38 years old), she became a strong Black woman by struggling to pay bills and to feed her family. Also, Kenya stated that African American women's strength is fostered by living in a "racist and sexist society" (college student, 18 years old). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that adhering to the SBW race-gender ideology means that African American women are expected to challenge their denigrated status in order to obtain recognition as equal and contributing members of society while simultaneously accepting the struggle in their lives (i.e., accepting their marginalization) in order to obtain recognition as a strong Black woman.

Participants noted that the juxtaposition of equality and oppression, produced by the SBW race-gender ideology, primarily served an advantageous function in their lives. For instance, some participants felt that acting in accordance with the SBW race-gender ideology allowed them to be heard and taken seriously in the class room and the work place and to not be taken advantage of by various institutions (e.g., public aid office). Also, many participants felt that enduring their struggles provided them with a sense of pride and self-efficacy. In other words, overcoming obstacles in the past served as needed encouragement in order to overcome present obstacles. Therefore, for these participants, the juxtaposition of equality and oppression not only demonstrates that they are equally capable of managing their emotions and performing tasks, but that they are also superhumanly capable to endure life's challenges.

It is important to note that participants did feel strain and stress due to the pressure to oppose society's negative appraisals of African American women. However, enduring stress was believed to be a necessary 'battle wound' tolerated in the fight for equality. For many of the

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participants, not adhering to the SBW race-gender ideology in an attempt to alleviate the pressure they felt would only confirm and perpetuate the pessimistic societal beliefs held about African American women. Therefore, although this double bind was experienced as primarily advantages, it showcases that African American women are forced to choose between their emotional wellness and their semblance of equality.

3.3. SBW Double Bind 3: Be Feminine yet Reject Traditional Feminine Attributes

Many participants discussed caring for others, especially children, as a primary expectation of the SBW race-gender ideology. Also, participants revealed that the SBW race-gender ideology obliges women to be independent and handle things "on their own." For participants, adhering to the SBW race-gender ideology means that African American women are expected to fulfill traditional feminine gender roles, like caretaker, while possessing traditional masculine traits, like strength and independence. By juxtaposing traditionally feminine and masculine traits, the SBW ideal creates a double bind that confines African American women to traditional gender roles while simultaneously denying them the benefits of traditional femininity, like support from others. Thus, many participants felt they had to choose between enacting traditional feminine attributes (e.g., dependency) that would allow them to romantically connect with opposite-gender mates and enacting traditional masculine attributes (e.g., independence) that would allow them to effectively care for their children and communities. And for many participants, exhibiting independence was chosen over exhibiting dependency given their understanding that many African American women do not have the option to rely on others for help and support.

The sample included women with children and women without children. Women who were in college and who did not children ($n = 6$) viewed eventually having children and making

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sacrifices for their children as solidifying their position as a strong Black woman. For example, Kenya (student, 18 years old) stated,

> some of the characteristics of the strong Black woman I hope to, you know, embody, just like doing what you have to do over what you want to do since, you'd have to make sacrifices, like once you have children… All that money and the time and the effort. And basically life-long commitment to the child.

On the other hand, for the women who were not in college and who had children (n =6), raising their children engendered strength in their lives. Debra (community member, 39 years old) stated, "When I [initially] had kids, I wasn't strong but as I got older and wiser, you have to be strong," suggesting that, for her, strength is cultivated by one's life experiences over time, including raising children.

Further, many participants expressed that, in addition to caring for others, the SBW race-gender ideology obliges women to be independent and to care for others primarily without assistance. According to participants, independence meant the ability "to stand on your own" (Ebony, student, 19 years old), "handle it by [oneself]" (Barbara, community member, 65 years old), and "not having to depend on anybody and being able to take care of yourself…And your children or whoever-whatever dependents a person might have" (Ashley, student, 20 years old). Thus, the SBW race-gender ideology encourages traditional gender norms, like caretaking, while simultaneously contradicting other traditional gender norms, like dependency.

In addition, participants noted that the juxtaposition of femininity and masculinity, produced by the SBW race-gender ideology, restricted some of their life choices. For instance, some participants felt that acting in accordance with the SBW race-gender ideology was a primary barrier to fostering romantic relationships with African American men. Tanya (student,

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20 years old) stated, "Black men tend to date outside of their race because they feel that Black women, they're just too independent, and like men need to feel like they are needed." According to her, the expectations of strength and independence encompassed within the SBW race-gender ideology is in conflict with the characteristics (i.e., dependency) needed to be a marketable and appealing candidate to potential opposite-gender mates. Further, participants believed that the expectation of independence erodes the heterosexual African American family structure. For example, Janelle (student, 29 years old) stated,

> it [the SBW race-gender ideology] takes away the importance in the minds of Black women of the Black man (…) 'oh we can do it alone, we can do it by ourselves.' (…) I think that has also affected the Black men to feel like he is not an integral part of the Black family.

According to these participants, the expectation of independence perpetuated by the SBW race-gender ideology cultivates beliefs that African American men are not an integral figure in the family and home environment.

Although participants identified liabilities associated with the SBW race-gender ideology, especially regarding the maintenance of heterosexual relationships, many participants discussed their belief that African American women did not have the option to reject the expectation of independence. According to Ashley (student, 20 years old), African American women "don't have a choice but to be independent." This lack of choice regarding the expectation to exhibit independence was elaborated on by Janelle (student, 29 years old) who stated, "(…) at one point, I mean, there was nothing else, you had no other choice, you know you buck up and just suck it up and just move on, there were not that many options and opportunities and stuff for help or assistance (…)." Thus, despite its drawbacks, many participants felt that the obligation to exhibit

independence was fostered by their limited opportunities and resources, and that it provided them

with the necessary efficacy needed to navigate these limited opportunities.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The current study examined how African American women's adherence to the SBW race-gender ideology created double binds. The data suggested that African American women experience three primary double binds when living in accordance to the inherent expectations in the SBW race-gender ideology: 1) Be Psychologically Durable yet Do not Engage in Behaviors that Preserve Psychological Durability 2) Be Equal yet Be Oppressed, and 3) Be Feminine yet Reject Traditional Feminine Attributes. Following, we discuss potential future directions and implications associated with each double bind.

4.1. SBW Double bind 1: Be Psychologically Durable yet Do not Engage in Behaviors that Preserve Psychological Durability

Although women are believed to experience and express emotions (e.g., sadness, shyness, happiness, fear, guilt) more often than men (Plant et al., 2000), the SBW race-gender ideology encourages African American women to *stifle* their emotional expressions (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Black & Peacock, 2011; Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé & Lobel, 2008). In fact, many African American women feel the need to be unaffected by life's hardships and to develop a façade of strength (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Thomas, et al., 2004). For example, Black and Peacock (2011) found that adherence to the SBW script promoted beliefs that African American women needed to conceal vulnerability and mask their distress. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, (2007) found that women who internalized the SBW ideal discussed the need to develop an "exterior wall" in order to appear as if they were meeting others' expectations. In addition, Woods-Giscombé (2010) found that some participants noted that a potential liability of internalizing the SBW ideal is adhering to the "obligation to suppress emotions" (p. 673). And, according to this double bind, African American women are obligated

to endure their various life stressors without psychologically falling apart or breaking down. Yet, they are simultaneously discouraged from engaging in behaviors that could preserve their psychological health and functioning, like showcasing emotion, asking for emotional assistance, or taking medication for psychological reasons.

For many of the participants in the current study, showing emotion was equivalent to "breaking down," "falling apart," and "showing weakness." Therefore, in order to successfully enact their African American woman identity, many participants felt pressured to avoid behaviors that could be construed as 'weak' –behaviors like taking medication and seeking help from mental health professionals. However, avoiding these behaviors, especially among women experiencing distress, can worsen their psychological and physical health (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Giscombé & Lobel, 2005; Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). For example, African American women who reported having to present an image of strength reported higher levels of distress and increased rumination (Giscombé & Lobel, 2005). Also, women who endorsed the SBW race-gender ideology used food to cope to avoid being judged as weak (Mitchell & Herring, 1998), which could result in cardiovascular disease (Thom et al., 2006) and obesity (Wang & Beydoun, 2007). Therefore, this "legacy of strength" (Woods-Giscombé, 2010, p. 669) among African American women might be partly responsible for their current health disparities (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Giscombé & Lobel, 2005; Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

In addition, given that many African American women are the primary care givers and primary financial providers of their households (Massey, 2007), the ways in which they deal with stress influences their ability to successfully fulfill their multiple roles as a parent and a family and community member. Therefore, future studies could examine how the SBW race-gender

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ideology informs help-seeking attitudes and behaviors among African American women. These findings could inform culturally relevant interventions for African American women. For example, if African American women are less likely to seek traditional mental health services for fear of being perceived as weak, interventions that appeal to the ideology of strength may be needed. An effective intervention that could appeal to this ideology while simultaneously promoting health behaviors is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). MBSR cultivates meditation skills that involve purposeful and nonjudgmental attention to current thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations in the body (Bishop, 2002; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Individuals are taught various techniques, like sitting and walking meditation, which they are encouraged to practice on their own. Given this, MBSR may allow African American women to feel as if they are facilitating their own mental and physical betterment without the use of a traditional mental health professional. On the other hand, principles of MBSR, like non-judgment, could challenge African American women's tendency to judge themselves as 'failures' for feeling and experiencing negative emotions. Research findings demonstrate that MBSR can lead to decreased anxiety, disordered eating, sleep disturbance, recurrent depression, substance abuse, and relationship strain (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Winbush, Gross, & Kreitzer, 2007). Thus, future research can investigate the cultural relevance and accessibility of MBSR and whether MBSR predicts similar health benefits among African American women.

4.2. SBW Double Bind 2: Be Equal yet Be Oppressed

The second double bind showcased that African American women feel immense pressure to counteract the negative perceptions society holds of them. Similar to Woods-Giscombé's (2010) finding, the SBW race-gender ideology enables African American women to combat

society's disregard of their competencies and valuable contributions to the overall society. Thus, for many African American women, the SBW race-gender ideology provides them with the sense of self- efficacy needed to challenge society's expectations that they are low achievers.

However, the persistent centrality of 'struggle' represented in the strength ideology has been criticized for normalizing struggle in the lives of African American women and for masking it as an honorable 'rite of passage' into African American womanhood (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Further, struggle, specifically in the form of class oppression, is rationalized by the SBW race-gender ideology as an authentic aspect of the African American woman experience. For example, some African American women participants who were financially successful noted being perceived by others as "livin' the white life" or "white girl" (p. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, p. 38). Thus, African American women have to worry about being judged as inauthentic African American women if they do not struggle financially. The problem then becomes, if enduring struggle is a prerequisite to receiving one's credentials as an African American woman, then struggle, and implicitly, race-gender-class oppression, becomes acceptable and something that need not be challenged.

The tension within this double bind is that while the ideology may normalize struggle, it also reflects that struggle is a pervasive reality for many African American women. In fact, Wood- Giscombé (2010) found that African American women participants felt that obstacles were a commonplace element of African American womanhood. Although encouraging African American women to reject the ideology may be an attempt to liberate them from oppressive forces, it could also leave them vulnerable to being unable to cope with their many life stressors. For instance, many African American women feel the SBW race-gender ideology is still necessary given the many life challenges they encounter (e.g., care-taking, racism, sexism;

Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007).Thus, denying the historical and current reality of struggle among African American women provides a false sense of reality, and it costs them the cultural knowledge regarding how women like them have historically and presently overcome adversity.

Further, given that African American women perceive strength as necessary in order to successfully maneuver various life obstacles and society's negative perceptions of them, studies are needed to examine whether the SBW race-gender ideology is protective, particularly regarding stereotype threat. The ideology promulgates the belief that African American women have the superhuman ability to overcome obstacles; therefore, it may buffer the negative effects associated with stereotype threat among African American women. If so, these findings would experimentally support the notion that, despite the SBW race-gender ideology's associated liabilities, advocating for its rejection is premature given its protective benefits.

In addition, an individual's internalization and expression of her gender can impact her overall self-concept. For example, gender typicality ("e.g. feeling that one is a typical example of one's gender category" p. 455 Egan & Perry, 2001) was significantly associated with global self-worth and self-perceived social competence. Similarly, African American women's esteem may depend on their assessment of themselves as a 'typical' African American woman (i.e., a strong Black woman). Future studies could investigate whether internalization of the SBW race-gender ideology is related to self-esteem. Although Thomas et al., (2004) found no significant predictive relationship between the Superwoman (i.e., strong Black woman) stereotypic role and self-esteem, the measure assessed individuals' belief that African American women *in general* adhere to this stereotype as opposed to individuals' personal internalization of this role. Therefore, studies are needed to assess whether African American women's personal internalization of the role is predictive of self-esteem. If findings reveal that it predicts positive self-esteem, the tasks

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then becomes to preserve African American women's sense of self-worth without accepting the societal structures that marginalize them.

4.3. SBW Double Bind 3: Be Feminine yet Reject Traditional Feminine Attributes

The first double bind inherent in the SBW race-gender ideology was the expectation to fulfill traditionally feminine roles while simultaneously embodying traditionally masculine traits. Although women from various racial backgrounds are expected to fulfill the gender role norms of caretaker and nurturer (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008), African American women are exclusively and rigidly obligated to simultaneously embody traditional masculine traits, like independence. Interestingly, an analysis of the historical legacy of slavery reveals that these multiple role expectations for African American women have been long standing (Davis, 1983e; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). During slavery, African American women were expected to complete strong manual labor while simultaneously expected to adhere to traditionally feminine family and intimate relationships (Binion, 1990; Davis, 1983e; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

By juxtaposing femininity and masculinity, the SBW race-gender ideology locks African American women into traditional gender performances, like selflessness and "deference to others (e.g., children, partners, extended family, coworkers; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, p. 37)" while denying their femininity. Unfortunately, this denial of their femininity forever casts them as the "stark and deviant [opposite] (…) of the appropriately feminine white women" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, p. 31). This tacitly perpetuates the belief that African American women are inherently inferior to White women, which ultimately keeps them in their 'place' at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder of status and power. Thus, the multiple role expectations that have been historically and contemporarily encompassed within the SBW race-gender ideology solidifies

African American women's marginalized status within the U.S.' race-gender hierarchy (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Davis, 1983e).

It is important to note that although African American women are expected to fulfill certain traditionally feminine roles, due to their marginalized status, they often do not have the option to enact other traditional gender norms, like dependency. According to Crenshaw (1995), poverty often pervades communities and neighborhoods of color due to the high unemployment of people of color in general. Because of this, many women of color may be less able to depend on others, like family members and friends for support, specifically financial support (Crenshaw, 1995). Also, due to the high rates of imprisonment among African American men, heterosexual African American women are often the primary care givers and primary financial providers of their households (Massey, 2007). Therefore, African American women's responsibility to 'do it alone' has emerged, at least in part, due to systemic forces that disproportionately affect people of color and women.

Further, women who are perceived to embody traditionally masculine traits experience disadvantages in the work place (Koch, 2004; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002). This may disproportionately affect African American women given that they are often perceived as more masculine when compared to women from other racial groups. For instance, when participants were asked to guess the gender of White faces and Black faces, participants made more gender-errors for Black female faces and also rated Black faces as more masculine than white faces (Goff, Thomas, & Jackson, 2008). Given the importance of assertiveness in African American women's leadership style (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996), African American women may be more likely to be unfairly criticized by employers or overlooked for promotion (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), due to their role incongruity with traditional female

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stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2001). Thus, future studies should examine the psychological costs associated with this double bind among African American women in the work place (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

4.4. Limitations

A key tension in intersectionality research is choosing which intersections of identity to prioritize given that individuals within a group can vary on various dimensions of identity (i.e., women can differ in terms of sexual orientation, SES status, ability, Young, 2004; Warner, 2008). Given that the primary focus of the current study was the intersection of race-gender, information regarding participants' sexual orientation was not collected. Some participants did voluntarily disclose being in committed heterosexual relationships; therefore, it is unclear whether the findings reflect the experiences of an evenly balanced sample of heterosexual and lesbian African American women. It could be that heterosexual and lesbian women share similar experiences of the intersection of race and gender; however, due to the heterosexist bias within our society, lesbian and bisexual women may encounter additional challenges, and thus, additional double binds. Therefore, a study is needed to elucidate the ways in which the SBW race-gender ideology differentially affects the lives of heterosexual and lesbian and bisexual women, and if these experiences engender similar and different double binds for these women respectively.

Further, the current study only included middle-class college-age students and women from lower SES backgrounds who were not in college. Thus, women from middle and upper middle class backgrounds who were not currently in college were not included. Despite this limitation, psychological research is often critiqued for overwhelmingly representing the experiences of individuals in college. Thus, the current study's inclusion of women from lower

SES backgrounds is an imperative addition to the literature on double binds and the SBW race-gender ideology. However, future studies should aim to include a more socioeconomically diverse sample in order to further understand the nature of the SBW race-gender ideology and its double binds for African American women.

Also, the current study represents the perspectives of women recruited from the Midwest region of the United States. Despite this limited geographic diversity, the findings regarding the messages inherent in the SBW race-gender ideology were similar to those found in Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2007) study whose sample came from the southwestern region of the U.S. However, future studies should aim to include a more geographically diverse sample.

4.5. Conclusion

Overall, the current study was able to utilize double bind and intersectionality frameworks to highlight the contradictory demands of the SBW race-gender ideology within the lives of African American women. Through their narratives, participants illuminated that acting in accordance with one expectation inherently meant failing to act in accordance with another expectation. Thus, the double bind framework revealed the "nature of the psychological conflicts" (Campbell & Handy, 2011, p. 433) inherent in enacting one's intersected race-gender identity in accordance with the SBW race-gender ideology. For example, although many of the expectations associated with the SBW race-gender ideology emerged due to African American women's marginalized status and potentially maintain this marginalized status within the U.S. context, these expectations also provide advantageous strategies for African American women to navigate these conditions. Therefore, African American women would experience losses if they did not adhere to this ideology.

In the end, the double binds inherent in the SBW race-gender ideology presented in the current study showcase that African American women are still marginalized within society. African American women's environmental stressors engender the need to be strong, and these stressors persist due to oppressive societal structures that marginalize people of color, women, and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Collins, 1990/2000; Crenshaw, 1995; Davis, 1983e). Thus, the contradictory expectations they encounter are primarily the result of institutional and cultural racism, sexism, and classism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Collins, 1990/2000; Crenshaw, 1995; Davis, 1983e). It is important to note that by focusing this study on the double binds inherent in the SBW race-gender ideology, the aim is not to encourage African American women to reject this narrative. Rather, the objective is to complicate existing conceptualizations that suggest that the ideology is overwhelmingly detrimental to the health of African American women, and therefore, needs to be rejected in its entirety. Despite the ideology's drawbacks, African American women currently have no other viable alternative given that their marginalization still exists (Collins, 1990/2000; Crenshaw, 1995; Davis, 1983e). Thus, the problem to be fixed is not the ideology per se; rather, the persistent social inequity that necessitates the existence of the SBW race-gender ideology (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Collins, 1990/2000; Crenshaw, 1995; Romero, 2000; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Thus, the double bind framework showcases how African American women's intersected identity is informed by societal structures and how this identity is often defined, understood, and expressed in "direct negotiation with institutions and politics" (Collins, 1990/2000; Warner, 2008, p. 459). Therefore, highlighting the factors that maintain African American women's marginalization at multiple levels demonstrates the persistent need for

psychologists to formulate multi-level interventions so that African American women can live

authentic lives unencumbered by oppressive expectations.

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TABLES

Table 1
Double Bind Themes and Consequences

Double Bind (DB)	Expectation 1	Expectation 2	Negative Consequence(s) of the DB	Positive Consequence(s) of the DB
1. Be Feminine yet Reject Traditional Feminine Attributes	Adhere to traditional feminine gender roles (e.g., caretaker)	Exemplify traditional masculine gender norms, like independence (i.e., reject traditional feminine gender norms, like dependency)	Perceived undermining of heterosexual African American relationships and families	Perceived sense of self-efficacy to navigate limited opportunities and resources
2. Be Equal yet Be Oppressed	Challenge the denigrating perceptions of African American womanhood that perpetuate African American women's marginalization	Embrace the economic and societal struggles that perpetuate African American women's marginalization	Increased feelings of strain due to pressure to challenge denigrating perceptions of African American womanhood	Attainment of esteem and respect from others Perceived sense of self-efficacy to navigate life's obstacles and stressors
3. Be Psychologically Durable yet do not Engage in Behaviors that Preserve Psychological Durability	Psychologically withstand the strain of various life stressors (i.e., "do not fall apart")	Do not utilize psychological and/or self-care resources that could preserve psychological durability	Perceived negative consequences for African American women's physical and emotional health	Ability to challenge society's expectations that African American women will fail Attainment of esteem and respect from others