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To Be Black, Female, and Anxious: How can we better implement intersectionality and understandings of gendered racism into therapeutic practice?

by

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Abstract

Black girls were the most likely to report attempting suicide in 2017, and national data suggests that nearly half of all Black adolescent girls in the United States report experiencing symptoms of depression (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). A multitude of research has been conducted to investigate the effect of gendered microaggressions and discrimination on women, as well as the research surrounding the effects of discrimination on Black people. However, within that exists a gap where research has not focused on the effects of both race and gender-based discrimination on Black women's mental health (Doornbos, M. et al., 2012). The issue of intersectionality is not a new one, initially brought forth to define the experience of marginalized people who hold multiple identities that may burden them in their day-to-day interactions with the dominant culture (Crenshaw, 1989). Understanding intersectionality is central to the development of culturally competent treatment plans and practices, especially when trying to discover the impact of these burdens on the psychological state of Black women living in the United States. This article seeks to explore what research has been done to understand Black female mental health, and articulate further needs within the Psychology field to discover root causes of anxiety and depression symptoms among this particular group.

Keywords: Black Women, Anxiety, Depression, Intersectionality, Clinical Psychology

INTRODUCTION

“I lived in a world where women gained strength by sharing knowledge and resources, not by bonding on the basis of being victims.” (hooks, p. 52)

The “Strong Black Woman” (SBW) is a gendered schema that characterizes Black women as strong, resilient, and self-sacrificing for themselves and their communities. Though this could serve as a survival mechanism, there is also a negative aspect where Black women begin to deprioritize their own needs and emotions in order to continue providing for their families and the broader community (Anyiwo, 2021; Castelin & White, 2022). It is important to further investigate the impact of the SBW schema in order to understand how Black women seeing themselves as needing to be strong can negatively impact their mental health and possibly affect their help-seeking behaviors as well. Not much is known about the intersection between SBW and racial discrimination, and it is an important schema to focus on when thinking about the long-term effects of social influence on Black female mental health (Anyiwo, 2021). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, around 30% of Black heads of households were women with no husband present in 2015, a statistic that displays how schemas like the SBW can be important in the ability of Black women to continue to support their communities (U.S Census Bureau, 2015). Intersectionality theory provides an important framework through which researchers can identify and investigate interlocking forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

However, there is a lack of research surrounding the intersections of racism and sexism on Black women, in particular when it relates to their mental health. There has been more research into the physical adverse health consequences of intersectional discrimination on Black

women, but it is important to see how many people are mentally affected by these experiences as well.

Recent research states a need for further investigations into the impact of intersectional microaggressions and race/gender-based discrimination on the psychological development of Black women and girls. In particular, how experiencing microaggressions can cause increased anxiety and depressive symptoms among Black youth, and how aware of these negative feelings they are in general. It is necessary to know which social determinant affects Black women the most so that a focus can be placed on targeting these factors in developing culturally competent treatment plans. By looking at the literature that has previously explored the unique experience of young Black women who grow up in America, it is impossible to not notice the lack of attention that has been given to the predominant issue of depression and anxiety among this group. When conducting research for this thesis, I was able to identify around 20-30 articles that specifically focused on Black female mental health related to topics of anxiety and depression. This is shocking, considering that many of these articles utilize information from the CDC about an ongoing mental health crisis among Black female adolescents. These gaps in the literature are not due to a lack of necessity, but rather an intense oversight by researchers as to what the issue stems from. There exists an influx of psychological research related to Black women's experiences of suffering; i.e. substance abuse disorders, suicidality, and the aftereffects of domestic abuse. This research focuses on the symptoms of issues stemming from constant exposure to negative social factors that Black women experience when navigating American society, specifically related to microaggressions of both racial and gendered racial types. These articles that focus on topics of substance abuse and domestic violence are important, but paint a grim picture of what Black women experience on a daily basis and reveal a further need for

dedicated research on the health and mental well-being of Black women. By addressing the factors that lead to increased symptoms of anxiety and depression, it is possible to help Black women to better their physical health as well.

In order to understand what gaps exist in the research related to Black female mental health, it is important to recognize the important work that has been done by scholars already to investigate this subject.

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION IN BLACK WOMEN

“We have to speak now- acknowledge our pain now, claim each other and our voices now.”

(hooks, p. 6)

For many Black women and girls, this power to speak up is continuously threatened by societal pressures, and while there exist sociological debates surrounding the reason behind this, there is not as much done to investigate the psychological impact of developing under these conditions. The National Institute of Mental Health has collected data on the prevalence of mental health disorders like depression and anxiety on multiple occasions, but there is a noted lack when it comes to the ability to break down these results by race. This lack of surveys that specifically ask about race when collecting data on the prevalence of depression and anxiety creates a void that, if filled, could vastly improve the basis of research across the board when it comes to identifying problem areas among different populations. (NIMH, 2019) Despite the lack of accessibility to wide datasets specifically focused on Black female mental health, it is still known that African-American women experience high levels of mental distress due to anxiety and depression. (NIMH, 2019) While we can identify sociological and public health-related factors that could play into the development of these disorders and symptoms, there is a marked

lack of literature that serves to do this exact thing in the field of psychology. (Harper & Williams, 2021)

Because of the unique nature of SBW as a way to succeed among dominant cultures, it could be considered a positive stereotype and thus a goal for Black women to reach. This message is passed down as Black women look up to other Black female role models (i.e. their mother or grandmother, celebrities, or activists) and admire their strength. However, the pursuit of remaining unshaken even in the face of distressing situations can exacerbate stress and anxiety symptoms. (L.M. et al., 2016) Distressing situations can include exposure to violence, a factor that was discovered to exist in multiple forms throughout the lives of Black women. Importantly this violence not only affects their stress levels but also informs their experiences with depression. In Nicolaidis et. al.'s study, participant attitudes surrounding depression care and healthcare, in general, were informed by racism. Black women who were interviewed also articulated in their responses cycles of violence, depression, and drug use that led to additional violence in their lives. Experiences of racism that deter Black women from help-seeking when necessary affect more than just their physical health, but their mental well-being as well. Winchester et al's (2022) findings suggested that Black girls who receive more frequent negative gendered racial messages about themselves experienced more depressive, anxiety, and stress symptoms. Conversely, a greater frequency of gendered pride and empowerment messages reduced the impact of negative socialization messages on mental health symptoms.

Without significant research into the effects of perceived racism on developing Black adolescents, it is largely unknown how stereotype threat can prevent Black girls from expressing themselves authentically. Knowledge surrounding the unique challenges that Black girls experience when attempting to complete developmental tasks such as identity development has

the potential to change current understandings of how early experiences with adversity shape the mental health of this group. When doing research related to the development of anxiety/depression symptomatology, Black women fall in between the cracks of data, often a minority in large-scale studies which call into question the significance of the results when applied to this specific population. Dedication of research resources to understanding and investigating Black mental health could re-open questions about the structural framework of psychology and the potential to truly impact and change patient lives. Similar to the Black feminists who participated in the Combahee River Collective in the mid-1970s, it is important for Black psychologists to not only identify the roots of oppression in its various forms but also seek powerful solutions to benefit all women of color.

INTERSECTIONALITY

“Not listening to the voices of progressive Black women means that Black political discourse on race always suffers from critical gaps in theoretical vision and concrete strategy.” (hooks, p. 2)

First articulated as a necessary phrase for describing the interlocking experiences of oppression that Black women face in 1977 by the Combahee River Collective, intersectionality is one of the most important factors to consider when conducting research on the mental well-being of Black women. (Combahee River Collective, 1995) Kimberle Crenshaw then coined the term in a paper written in 1989, and later described it as “a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects.” (Columbia Law, 2017) Since its publication, the term intersectionality has expanded beyond its original usage to more broadly identify the experiences of those for whom oppression affects on multiple levels. Though

well-understood as a concept in modern research, intersectionality has not yet been widely implemented in the development of treatment plans and therapy aimed at treating Black women. This lack of implementation is indicative of the lack of research done into the impact of this intersectional living experience on the mental well-being of Black women. While encouraged to enroll in higher education in increasing numbers, African-American women continue to report feeling like outsiders when attending Primarily White Institutions (PWI), and their experiences of feeling as if they are outsiders are spread far. (Howard-Hamilton, 2003) This common experience of isolation that young Black women face in their attempts to receive education tied with the depoliticization of intersectionality acts as a major barrier to the utilization of the term as an active agent of radical change. In particular, the neoliberal idea that all social inequalities have already been addressed by society causes a lack of awareness of the ongoing issues that plague minority communities in the United States. Black women attending PWIs learn about intersectionality and diversity but do not have ample opportunities to apply the concepts interpersonally to improve their own experiences. The depoliticization of intersectionality also serves to dilute the intention of similar terms to a conceptual framework meant for debate and discussion rather than an active call for action. (Bilge, 2013) Instead, intersectionality is being utilized as a way for corporate and academic institutions to diversify themselves on paper and gain legitimacy. The willingness of institutions to adopt intersectionality as a political stance without enacting action to invest in the research and development of appropriate treatment plans for those who experience increased levels of hardship due to their intersectional navigation of structural racism speaks to an additional form of commodification of intersectionality and a powerful misuse of the term to further oppress those who fall under its umbrella. Without actually actively changing or challenging structures that exist in American society,

intersectionality is being utilized by both institutions and individuals for personal gain at the expense of Black women's mental well-being.

Intersectionality is misunderstood in its power, and how the levels of power that it holds can shift depending on the hand that holds it. It cannot be underestimated the difficulty that Black women face in being active in any field, as we navigate not holding power granted by any particular status and minimal access to resources necessary to succeed. (Combahee River Collective, 1977) This struggle for the visibility of highly intersectional experiences of life is one that has been felt since the conception of the phrase, as its meaning expanded beyond Black women and into majority white spaces as a broad concept to be utilized, dissected, and discussed. Centering intersectionality as a part of exploring Black women's psychological states could be an impactful driving force behind a new wave of anti-racist work both in psychological research and practice.

GENDERED RACISM'S IMPACT

“We must vigilantly challenge negative representations of black women, understanding that they both shape public policy and determine attitudes towards us in everyday life.” (hooks, p. 85)

Initially described by sociologist Philomena Essed in 1991, gendered racism plays a salient role in the development of depressive and anxiety symptomatology, as it describes the sexism and racism often embedded into the lives of developing Black women. By understanding the impact of gendered racism, it becomes possible to understand what coping mechanisms are most effective at combating these stressors. (Hargons, C.N., Malone, N., & Montique, C., 2022) While the SBW schema has been found to buffer against anxiety symptoms in the face of

adversity to some extent, the assumption that Black women are tougher and more capable of handling stress can exacerbate symptomology when they believe they are not living up to the expectation of being unshaken by adversity. (Harris-Perry, 2011) There has to be a balance between the empowerment of Black women in times of adversity, the acknowledgment of their strength, and an acceptance by mental healthcare professionals that these women can be strong and still require help. A 2016 study by West et al. surveyed Black female college students about their perspectives on SBW and how they believed it affected them. When asked about how the image of the Strong Black Woman impacted their mental health, 52% responded negatively, with one respondent noting it prevented her from help-seeking and another stating she became stressed when forcing herself to endure and keep going despite hardships. Still, 78% of the respondents considered SBW to be positive. This study provides powerful insight into the ways in which Black women navigate an often paradoxical relationship with themselves due to their intersectional position in society.

Internalized Racial oppression (IRO) is a less investigated consequence for Black adolescents, especially in the development of anxiety, depression, and stress symptoms. IRO is described as the adoption of racist ideology, stereotypes, and beliefs of inferiority into one's psyche as well as the acceptance of their marginalized status as justified and inevitable. (Winchester et. al, 2022) In order to better understand how Black women cope with oppression psychologists must understand the impact of gendered racial biases. In particular, gendered racism displays itself in the form of prevalent representations of Black women that characterize them as hypersexual, verbally aggressive, or emotionally tough. These gendered racial stereotypes play a role in the growth of Black girls' self-concept and thus can impact their mental health later in life. This was studied more in-depth in a 2017 study, where it was discovered that

Black women who were more aware of meta-stereotypes were indirectly associated with less self-care and more substance use, though awareness itself did not directly predict these outcomes. (Jerald et al., 2017) As representation of Black women in media has been challenged and altered in more recent times, it is important to continue to research these impacts to see how new generations of Black women see themselves and build their self-concepts. This is important because while there is a well-established link between gendered racism and adverse mental health outcomes for Black women, there exists a noted lack of literature on the effects of gendered racism upon young post-millennial Black women. This lack of research is in itself an issue, as it means current treatment options are not based on up-to-date sources and datasets.

A more recent study conducted by Winchester et al. in 2022 further explored the interplay between two forms of gendered racial socialization and how this affects the mental health of Black adolescent girls. Additionally, they wanted to know if positive parental messages moderate the relationship between negative socialization messages and depression/anxiety symptoms at all. Their findings suggested that girls who reported more frequent negative gendered racial messages from their parents also reported more depressive, anxiety, and stress symptoms. In contrast, messages of pride and empowerment given to the child by parents created a significant buffer against more negative effects of internalized oppression. (Winchester et. al, 2022)

Studies like Winchester et. al's display the importance of caretaker socialization messages in the development of healthy self-concepts for young Black girls who must navigate an intersectional experience of race and gender throughout their lives. For young Black girls, their developmental tasks are complicated by the fact that they are aware that society will judge them due to their race. (Neblett et al., 2008) Scholars have discussed that racial socialization messages vary, but the most impactful is that of gender differences. Gendered racial socialization

is a form of dual socialization that is meant to address the realities of the female Black experience and prepare girls to cope with the stressors of gendered racism encounters. (Brown et al, 2016 p. 4) Identifying ways that caretakers and psychological professionals can work together to minimize the impact of gendered racism on Black girls could have major implications for the mental well-being of new generations to come.

CARE IMPLICATIONS

Research shows that Black women are underdiagnosed for affective disorders and overdiagnosed and overtreated for psychotic disorders, with Black women in the United States reporting higher levels of generalized anxiety disorder, somatization, and panic disorder. (Brown & Keith, 2013; Holden et. al., 2014) Though many factors play a role in this, the intersectional experience of navigating gendered racism is significant in the development of such disorders. Additionally, structural racism ensures that Black women who seek help may not get the answers they need, or be dismissed completely by healthcare professionals who do not hold the cultural competency necessary to provide appropriate diagnosis and treatment. Having BIPOC mental healthcare providers with lived experiences have been found to buffer/reduce the experiences of negative bias and poor health outcomes for BIPOC individuals in treatment. The increased visibility of treatment as a positive option for Black female youth could also impact institutional trust, and encourage a higher number of young women to see psychological treatment as a viable option for their own improvement. While employing and encouraging BIPOC to engage with and join the psychological field is an important step, there is also a critical need to provide adequate training to rebuild policies and systems that perpetuate structural racism within psychological institutions as a whole. (West et. al, 2023)

This training is essential to lower the impact of cultural incompetency prevailing in psychology spaces and reaching patients. For doctors and therapists working directly with Black women, their lack of knowledge surrounding subjects like that of the SBW schema, IRO, and intersectionality can unintentionally lead to the minimization of patient symptoms and misdiagnosis. This effect was found in professionals whose endorsement of the SBW stereotype was found to unintentionally lead to the minimization of patient reactions to stressors and misdiagnosis. (West et. al., 2016) The open-ended responses of the women who participated in West's study also revealed that the role of the Strong Black Woman schema could have relevance in therapy, further displaying the importance of research focusing on its therapeutic value. In addition, pride and empowerment messages have the potential to create a buffer against the negative effects of internalized oppression for young Black girls during their development. (Winchester et al, 2022) This study also found that the mental health of developing Black girls is positively impacted by the reception of repeated messages of pride and empowerment related to their race and gender identities. It is possible that positive messages surrounding Black womanhood can help facilitate the unlearning of negative gendered racial messages.

CONCLUSION

“We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world.” (Wallace, p. 6-7)

Black women living within the United States are deserving of adequate mental healthcare that accurately reflects the adversities they face and better prepares them for the realities of living in a nation with institutionalized racism embedded into so much of their daily interactions. Therapeutic relationships that seek to empower growth and healing, come from professionals that truly understand the full spectrum of their identities should be a goal not only for Black mental health professionals but a majority of those working in the psychology field as a whole. By improving and updating research on Black women's mental health there is huge potential for the field to reach further and improve the lives of many. Decolonizing psychological institutions and listening to the voices of Black women are powerful first steps to ensuring mental healthcare is a right given to all.

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