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‘I’m good’: Examining the internalization of the strong Black woman archetype

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ABSTRACT
The Strong Black Woman (SBW) archetype incorporates the fusion of strength, independence, resilience, caretaking, and invulnerability which informs behavior and self-perception. Rooted in the enslavement of Africans, the characterization of Black women as innately strong supported the justification of their mistreatment while the embodiment of such characteristics was necessary for personal and communal survival. Moreover, this archetype lends itself to obligatory manifestations of strength and suppression of emotions while simultaneously rejecting vulnerability and dependence upon others. Black women who internalize the SBW narrative often suffer quietly, as they work to meet the expectations of their families, professional arenas, and larger social environments. Using Social identity theory, this article examines the manifestation of the archetype across three social contexts and positions the role of social workers within the context of two grand Challenges to Social Work.

KEYWORDS
Black; women; resilience; strong; archetype; tropes; risk factors

Introduction

“It’s not the load that breaks you down, it’s the way you carry it. Carry it by the comfortable handles of gratitude for what’s positive and that it is not worse, rather than the uncomfortable edges of bitterness for the negatives and that it is not better.” -Lena Horne

Black women in the United States have a unique experience at the intersection of race and gender. The labeling of people using stereotypes has long been a practice of American society (Thomas et al., 2004). Societal perceptions are shaped through the assumption that people will exemplify the prototype of their identity (Kulig & Cullen, 2017; Neel & Lasseter, 2019). The ascribed persona of the Black woman in the United States is misaligned with the societal ideal of women, as Black women are seen as having masculine characteristics (Thomas et al., 2004). Likewise, Black women’s experience racially is complicated by a “dual-minority” status (Thomas et al., 2004). As such, issues pertaining to misogyny, sexism, and reproductive rights have been dismissed and overlooked with regard to Black women (Thomas et al., 2004). The societal perceptions of strength, fortitude, and low vulnerability contribute to the experiences of Black women, as claims of discrimination and harassment are less likely to be investigated (Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Walker-Barnes, 2014). Black women’s existence and experiences are not monolithic, thus the consistent attempts of society to restrict the presentation of Black womanhood is oppressive.
and ineffectual. Social workers are uniquely positioned to dismantle the systems, stigma, and stereotypes that continue to plague many Black women. The ninth grand challenge to the social work profession is to eliminate racism to achieve a just society (Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2020). Within the conceptualization of this challenge the United States’ history and legacy of systemically ingrained racism is acknowledged, and the profession is challenged to disrupt systems that perpetuate these themes within society, and within the profession itself. The “dual-minority” status creates a role that is socially isolating and rigid which leaves little room for vulnerability creating self-silencing and social invisibility. The social work profession’s grand challenges pose to eradicate social isolation through educating social workers to promote deeper social connections (Trahan et al., 2019). Social isolation is defined as having limited social relationships, interactions, involvement, and feelings of loneliness (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Valtorta et al., 2016). The combination of racism, sexism, and the consistent failures of society to recognize the Black woman in her entirety creates this isolation and the need for self-reliance.

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) archetype incorporates the fusion of strength, independence, resilience, caretaking, and invulnerability which informs behavior and self-perception. (Abrams et al., 2019, 2014; Baker et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Etowa et al., 2017; Hamin, 2008; Oflutt, 2013; Romero, 2000; Woods, 2013). Rooted in the enslavement of Africans, the characterization of Black women as innately strong supported the justification of their mistreatment while the embodiment of such characteristics was necessary for personal and communal survival (West et al., 2016). The present-day generational transference of this archetype as essential to a Black woman’s identity proves beneficial during times of adversity while simultaneously producing negative health, mental health, and economic outcomes (Beauboeuf-Lafontant as cited in West, 2016). There are certainly Black women whose strength does not produce negativity; nuance which is directly attributable to the myriad presentation of Black womanhood.

Woods-Giscombé (2010) suggests that the SBW archetype lends itself to obligatory manifestations of strength and suppression of emotions while simultaneously rejecting vulnerability and dependence upon others. Black women who internalize the SBW narrative often suffer quietly, as they work to meet the expectations of their families, professional arenas, and larger social environments (Abrams et al., 2014). Often occurring in a parallel process, Black women experience feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and inadequacy related to failure to meet the SBW expectations while relishing in the appearance of strength and resiliency (Abrams et al., 2014). These outcomes are ill addressed often due to low service utilization and are exacerbated by the perception and perpetration of being “fine” in an effort to maintain the personification of the SBW archetype (Walker-Barnes, 2014). Williams (2008) details the masking of self that happens as a result of attempting to personify fortitude and to appear to be doing better than expected. The reality is, that in many life domains Black women are expected to do better and to do more, to withstand and endure.

An understanding of the nuances of the SBW archetype and the multiplicity of Black womanhood is essential to improving the delivery of services and care to Black women, as well as to advancing the grand challenges for the social work profession. While much of the existing literature on this archetype is focused on the strength and resiliency that lies therein, insufficient attention has been given to the identification with and internalization of the SBW archetype. Using Tajfel et al.’s (1979) Social Identity Theory, this article seeks to
examine the identity formation process of the SBW archetype and discuss its expression within three major life domains: family systems, professional arenas, and friendships. While Black women exist and operate in a multitude of spaces that may influence or be influenced by the internalization of the SBW archetype separate from family, work, and friendship; the focus on these three domains will permit a more focused exploration of the facets of this identity. The key concepts of SIT—self-categorization, social comparison, and intergroup appraisal—will be used as a lens to explain the internalization of the SBW archetype among Black women. Finally, recommendations for practice, research, policy, and education with Black women relative to the SBW archetype will be identified.

**Social identity theory**

Given the polyolithic nature of Black womanhood, the issue of her identity must be explored through the lens of a theory that does not minimize her existence to a race and a gender. Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that individual cognitions and behaviors that culminate in identity can be explained through group processes (Trepte, 2006). This theory asserts that in pursuit of self-esteem and self-enhancement individuals develop in-group favor and solidarity as well as out-group rejection and discrimination. Social Identity Theory is the foundation of many theories of racial identity; however, its breadth allows for identities such as those associated with professions, families, and friendships to be accounted for in examining the SBW archetype.

A social group is defined as a number of individuals who perceive themselves as belonging in the group, and who others perceive as belonging in the group (Trepte, 2006). Group membership requires a reciprocal categorization. The individual must categorize themselves and also must be categorized by the group as belonging. This process is known as Social Categorization. Tajfel (1978) asserts that an individual will belong to numerous groups simultaneously, and that the importance of each group membership is temporally and contextually relative. The prioritization of group membership is SIT’s version of identity salience (Oakes et al., 1991). Finally, membership within a social group is relevant on three levels: the cognitive level, at which an individual is cognizant of their membership with a group or Social Identity; the evaluative level, at which an individual assesses the value of their group membership as positive or negative through Social Comparison; and the emotional level, at which a person develops positive or negative emotions about their membership within a group based on their previous evaluation which translates to Self-esteem (Trepte, 2006). The consistent and repeated experience of each element in different social groups by one individual supports Tajfel’s assertion that social identity is fluid. Each of these concepts is applied to the SBW archetype below.

**Social categorization and SBW**

The concept of social categorization rests on the idea that individuals simplify their environment for better understanding through grouping themselves and others (Trepte, 2006). Attributes and behaviors are ascribed to groups and the ascribing individuals develop expectations of group members based on these assumptions (Tajfel, 1978).

The SBW archetype is a socially imposed “blueprint” of how Black women should perform as it relates to gender and race (Watson & Hunter, 2015). In this regard, the
characteristics of the SBW archetype become the criteria by which a person is categorized. Black women who embody the characteristics thus become a social group.

**Social comparison and SBW**

Social Comparison is used to define the individual’s societal positioning through the comparison of their identified social group to other groups (Hogg et al., 1995). The characteristics of the comparison group must be in opposition of in-group characteristics (Hogg et al., 1995). That is to say that a SBW social group may find social comparison to Strong Black Men, other Black women, Strong or Weak women, and any other groups whose expected behavior is antithetical to the attributes of the SBW archetype. However, comparison is less likely to occur between SBWs and a group of middle school teachers, volleyball players, or a religious group as these categories are not directly comparable and have the potential for overlap with the SBW herself. Through this comparison, the SBW identity is solidified.

**Social identity and SBW**

Social identity refers to the internalization of an individual’s group membership to their self-concept (Tajfel, 1978). This is largely informed by the evaluation of the group membership as favorable or unfavorable and the development of emotions about the group membership (Trepte, 2006). It is during this process that the internalization of the SBW archetype is evaluated as either a risk or protective factor for Black women.

If social identity is evaluated as unfavorable, individuals with social mobility—the ability to move across social groups—will do so using one of the following three options (Hogg, 2016). Exiting involves an individual leaving the group with which they formerly associated with for a more favorable group. This method requires the individual to have the mobility to change groups as well as the ability to adapt to the norms of the new group. Additionally, exiting requires the individual to be accepted into a different group (Hogg, 2016). Passing is a form of group separation that involves pretending to be a part of a different social group that the individual would not otherwise be able to join. This method of group separation implies a moderate level of social mobility (Hogg, 2016). Finally, voicing is a form of group separation that is available when mobility is limited or due to physical representations individuals cannot pass for membership in alternative groups. Voicing is most readily seen as a form of protest for society to redefine the social group (Hogg, 2016).

Therefore, if membership in the SBW social group is appraised as a risk factor by the SBW, she may choose to move to other social groups using one of these mentioned methods. Further exploration of this process will be discussed in later portions of this article.

**Self esteem and SBW**

The individual’s tendency to associate positive aspects of themselves with their group membership and to devalue the alternative characteristic of the perceived outgroup yields a positive self-image (Stets & Burke, 2000). People place less value on the similarities between themselves and members of the outgroup, and on the differences between
themselves and others in the identified in-group (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Trepte, 2006; Trepte & Loy, 2017). Individuals seek validation for their own self-definition and categorization through social comparison (Haslam et al., 1999). In-group alignment is a boost to the individual’s self-esteem and provides the sought validation (Stets & Burke, 2000). Self-esteem can be observed as ever evolving and devolving as social comparisons produce positive and negative evaluations (Oakes et al., 1991).

**SBW’s operational contexts**

The manifestation and exhibition of the SBW archetype differs contextually and the characteristics of the archetype are not always met. The stoicism, unaffected endurance of adversity, and silent suffering of the SBW archetype are represented differently based on the salience of the SBWs identity. The varying pressures and expectations from her family, profession, and friendships yield different representations of the SBW.

**Mothers’ daughters**

Embedded in the identity of SBW is the role of caretaker. Often the needs of others come before hers and she is responsible for the wellbeing of her family and the preservation of the African American community (Beaumoeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010 as cited in Watson & Hunter, 2012). In turn, there is an assumption that Black women are psychologically durable and possess a dichotomous identity which is composed of both feminine and masculine traits (Watson & Hunter, 2012). The juxtaposition of these expectations, vulnerable “femininity” and resilient autonomy, impede the identity expression of Black women leading to frustration, over-functioning and socially imposed self-reliance (Watson & Hunter, 2015). Wilkins (2012) asserts that “controlling images” such as matriarchs, mammies, welfare queens, and jezebels narrow the image of Black women which creates an expectation of behavior within the familial context. The SBW is also often the family’s sole source of spiritual, emotional, and financial support (Donovan & West, 2014). Literature suggests that when Black women recognize the existence of the negative effects of racism, they can better balance the duality of the Black women identity (Marsh, 2013).

Through the observation and comparison of themselves to older women in their families who were able to endure race and gender-based marginalization through the embodiment of the archetype of strength, Black women adapt and align with the SBW archetype (Anyiwo et al., 2018). Black mothers hold high expectations of daughters through socialization practices that include increased responsibilities and demands. Black women hold a deep sense of collective responsibility for their families and communities (Nelson et al., 2016). Perceptions regarding womanhood influence choices that Black women make within their family system (Chaney, 2011). Black women effectively achieve womanhood when they can rear their families and are conscious about how their actions impact the greater community (Chaney, 2011).

Within the familial context, social categorization becomes a generational process in which younger individuals attribute the traits of strength and resilience to the SBW and develop an expectation of how the SBW will behave. Older generations transmit narratives based on cultural heritage, self-pride and coping strategies to manage external stressors (Thomas et al., 2014). Black women in turn are groomed to adopt an identity rooted in
strength as a rite of passage for the preservation of the family system and become the gatekeepers of the greater Black community.

Social Comparison occurs at many levels within the family system and operates as a catalyst for the generational transference of the SBW characteristics and expectations. Young Black girls begin to identify with in-group narratives of strength and adopt those narratives as a part of their self-concept. Black girls are taught to present as emotionally strong as a protective factor against external systems of racism and sexism (Thomas et al., 2014). In this regard, the strength and resilience of young girls is held in high esteem and compared to other girls, whose emotional expression has not been muted. Older generations of SBW will hold preconceptions about what it means to be “Black” in comparison to people who do not meet the criteria of the SBW archetype, and younger generations will learn and utilize the coping strategies in the face of adversity (Dunbar et al., 2017). Adversity is, in this respect, anyone who falls in the out-group. According to the American Psychological Association (2017), 30% of Black families were headed by women who were not married, compared with 9% of white households. The fortitude of the SBW to lead a family on miniscule wages in a society plagued with racism and misogyny is laudable. As such the social identity of SBW within the familial context is reinforced and given a positive appraisal.

The Black woman’s membership in the Black family is determined by her ability to be stalwart in her presentation of unwavering strength and unaddressed maladaptation which leads to malfunction and pathology. The SBW archetype, while serving as a protective factor within the family system, has created patterns of rigidity such as the inability to be expressive or vulnerable when under stress and declining to distribute duties to other family members leading to limitations to the Black woman’s ability to fully express other facets of her identity and her experience. In a study that examined young Black girls in educational settings and the Black women’s identity persona found that their views of womanhood and being Black women were part of a larger “collective struggle” that helped them achieve academically and that success would make their community proud (Marsh, 2013). The expectation that the family creates serves as a protective factor which motivates and drives success. In essence, the persona of Black womanhood becomes one of perceived duty and a resistance to systematic racism.

The price of success is . . .

The historical legacy of chattel slavery has undergirded the origin of the SBW archetype, particularly in the labor force. The expectations for Black women to work despite oppression and violence was rationalized through categorizing Black women as physically and psychologically durable (Abrams et al., 2014; Donovan & West, 2014). The original ascription of these attributes was an external process. Black women’s self-identification with these characteristics is a result of the systemic institutional oppression that has supported the salience of the SBW archetype as an identity needed to preserve Black families and communities (Abrams et al., 2014). Though Black women face higher rates of unemployment, they continue to make strides in attaining post-secondary degrees with expectations to advance in the workforce. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) posits that the SBW archetype holds reverence for persistence through struggle and the ability to appear unaffected. It is the ability to endure adversity and participate in self-silencing that has defined Black
women’s identity; a process many Black women tolerate in the workforce. These expectations and experiences are the criteria by which the SBW is socially categorized in the workplace. Her resilience and the perceptions of invulnerability and high self-esteem have assisted in economic and career advancement. Through social comparison, the assessment of success may outweigh the adverse implications of the archetype. Given the assertion that Black women experience poverty at greater rates than women of other races (Rosette & Livingston, 2012), the experience of success as a result of exhibiting SBW characteristics could produce a positive evaluation of this social identity.

While having a strong self-concept supports professional success (Gardner et al., 2014), the mastery of internalizing the SBW archetype simultaneously has negative implications. Black women’s ownership of the SBW archetype supports taking on greater workloads without proper compensation, refusal to seek help, and prioritizing organizational needs and duties over self-care (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2007; Donovan & West, 2014). The exertion of a strong work ethic—which is essential to the SBW categorization—regularly supersedes getting adequate rest, maintaining a healthy diet, and adhering to consistent workout regimens (Moore-Greene et al., 2012). Self-care is neglected and rejected within this archetype and is attributed to an out-group of the privileged. Social comparison to those who require and are privileged to engage in self-care—the out-group—and comparison to Black women predecessors who have endured extreme oppression to pave the way for career advancements—the in-group—further supports a sense of esteem found within the SBW identity by defining Black women as “strong enough to go without.” This is compounded by Black women being more likely to experience workplace discrimination, such as isolation, assumptions of incompetence, inequitable salaries, and workloads, barriers to promotion, and being micromanaged (Hall et al., 2012). Additionally, they have less opportunities for mentorship, job control, and career development (Linnabery et al., 2014).

Career maintenance and advancement often calls for a compartmentalization of self where Black women must verbally and esthetically code-switch to ensure professional success. Code-switching is the shifting of style of speech and attire to appear non-threatening in the workplace, a transition usually occurring in predominantly white environments (Davis, 2018). This constant shift can be taxing as Black women must exert energy in masking their authentic selves for fear of professional ousting (Hall et al., 2012). As identified by Beauboeuf-LaFontant (2007), the distress that arises as a result of maintaining and internalizing the facade of invulnerability has dire implications for Black women, including having shorter life spans, higher rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and higher infant mortality rates (Griffith et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2012; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Additionally, Black women must mask vulnerability in their personal lives for fear of inability to adhere to group norms (Abrams et al., 2014). The denial of vulnerability to the constant barrage of inequity faced by SBW in her workplace is an example of her social mobility. The SBW has identified that vulnerability is a characteristic of the outgroup, and as such, she masks her own as a way to solidify her group membership. The appraisal of vulnerability in the workplace as an undesirable trait supports the internalization of the archetype. The masking of her emotions allows her to personify the characteristics of the SBW, effectively exiting the social group of vulnerable Black women.

In-group alignment supports esteem and validation and is further supported by limited social mobility for Black women to exit or pass for another social group. Additionally, the indelible racist and sexist fabric of society persists necessitating the salience of the SBW
identity and discourages the return to vulnerability. Feelings of isolation can remain as a consequence of both rebelling against the identity, and compliance with group norms. It is the struggle of compliance in and of itself which supports the archetype’s stoicism. Voicing needed alterations of Black women’s identity to extend beyond the SBW archetype lends to creating more satisfying and equitable work environments (Dow, 2015), and minimizes isolation by fostering inclusivity.

“What about your friends?”

Friendship, between and among Black women, has been given very little attention in scholarly literature (Ellison, 1990). In general, Black people have been found to have fewer friends and, as a result, smaller friendship circles than white people (Ellison, 1990). The idea of friendship addresses the fundamental needs of acceptance and affection, as such it is viewed as an important aspect of human existence and development (Hughes & Heuman, 2006). While the quantity of friendships among Black people have been found to be less than friendships among white people, the quality and depth of the relationships among Black people has been observed as greater and more substantial to individual growth (Goins, 2011). Ellison (1990) suggests that friendships among Black people are often built more cautiously and gradually in the early phases of a relationship and that Black people are more open with one another when they have adjusted and come to trust their friends.

Black women often utilize their non-familial social relationships for support in day to day tasks (Ellison, 1990). However, studies show that friendships among Black women provide moral, emotional and cognitive support as well (Hughes & Heuman, 2006). The literature suggests that Black women experience reinforcement and affirmation of traits associated with the SBW archetype within their friend-groups (Davis & Afifi, 2019; Ellison, 1990; Goins, 2011; Hughes & Heuman, 2006). This in-group affirmation is evidence of social categorization, as she is recognized as a member of the SBW social group.

For Black women who have internalized the SBW archetype, friendship and friend groups become a haven (Goins, 2011). Black women can speak and exist freely, while simultaneously having their existence validated (Davis & Afifi, 2019). Much of the personification of the SBW archetype is rooted in the need to resist oppressive attitudes. Within the context of friendships among Black women, the sources of oppression are positioned marginally, and the need to resist is eliminated (Hughes & Heuman, 2006). In this way, the salience of the SBW archetype is lessened and Black women are able to moderately express their vulnerabilities and experiences. Moreover, in a social situation where the need to resist may arise, the friends act as a buffer for feelings of anxiety or stress (Goins, 2011). Finally, the social identity of the friend group serves as an added layer of security against micro-aggressions, and threats, a source of validation of group members experiences, and provides the opportunity for social comparison that will solidify group membership and increase self-esteem (Davis & Afifi, 2019). The salience of the SBW identity is strengthened and the positive evaluation of the identity is reinforced through interactions with her friends. She may not exhibit the characteristics among her friends; however, she is in a state of social comparison as she assesses the differences and similarities between her and other group members.

Not unlike the SBW archetype itself, membership in a friendship group has a dual effect. The SBW’s friendship group is the only place where she does not have to personify the traits
of an SBW. Within the group, the fear of vulnerability or backlash is alleviated by the decentrality of oppressive entities (Goins, 2011). Simultaneously, the internalization of the SBW archetype is affirmed, and the risks of invulnerability to the mental health and wellness of the Black woman persist (Davis & Afifi, 2019). The haven of friendship is an iterative process through which the SBW is validated in her experiences and responses to societal oppressions such that the internalization of the maladaptive archetype is reinforced and fortified. In spite of the reinforcement of this archetypal identity, the risks of invulnerability, stoicism, and self-neglect persist.

**Recommendations**

The SBW archetype proliferates social isolation through self-silencing and social invisibility. In her workplace she is alone in her efforts to be tireless. In her family she is alone in her caretaking capacity. Her friendship group only exists in isolation, and it is her haven. Is a population of people whose struggles are only recognized within not subject to social isolation? We argue that they are, and that the embodiment and perpetuation of the SBW archetype further push Black women into a state of social isolation. The Grand Challenges for Social Work have tasked the profession with the eradication of this phenomenon (Lubben, Gironda, Sabbath, Kong, & Johnson, 2015). The archetype also has the effect of exacerbating the social isolation of Black women and should be considered a threat to the success of social work meeting this Grand Challenge. Social Workers at every level have a duty to stand with Black women that they may not suffer or struggle alone. Recommendations that support the eradication of social isolation and the elimination of racism with regard to Black women are identified below.

**Research**

Future research should focus on the identity of Black women within the familial context. Moreover, research should seek to understand the experiences of the family members of the SBW, including the social categorization process and the grooming of daughters to become SBW. While there is insufficient research on the professional lives of Black women who actively resist the SBW archetype, research exists that documents the overall experience of Black women in their professional lives. Griffin’s (2016) use of composite counter-storytelling highlights the angst-ridden process of juggling professional morality with organizational hierarchical appeasement all while compartmentalizing self as a requirement for advancement. While mentoring positively contributes to the navigation of the professional journey of Black women (Dowdy, 2008), greater understanding of the toll of the professional journey can mitigate the relational reinforcement of the SBW as a default. More research to address Black women’s professional experiences when choosing to not adhere to SBW group norms can provide a framework for alternative paths to identity construction while broadening the scope of the Black woman’s identity. Scholars should also increase research concerning friendships among Black women through the exploration of communication patterns, provision of informal emotional support, and the strengths and challenges associated with the “haven” of friendship. Additionally, the effects of imposing unidimensional identities upon Black women for centuries should be examined through the lens of theories that do not restrict identity to race and gender.
While this article focuses on the presentation and proliferation of the SBW archetype across three life domains, there is insufficient exploration of the archetype’s personification through several important life domains. Scholars should explore the experiences of Black women in religion and spirituality, romantic relationships, sexuality, education, various life stages, and within myriad contexts of family, friends, and professions. For example, the experiences of the SBW in sex work as opposed to corporate work, as a single parent opposed to not being a parent or cohabitating with a spouse, in close knit friendships with non-Black women or in situations where the strongest friendships span thousands of miles and aren’t readily accessible. There are far too many contexts in which Black women exist and operate to name them all, and yet given the ever-present forces of oppression there is much to be learned regarding her experiences that merit attention from scholars.

Further, researchers need to consider the implications of the SBW shedding the personification of the archetype in her professional life, familial unit, and friend group, and to understand the experiences of the SBW across these and any other domains, including any experiences with vulnerability as a strength or positive experience. These research suggestions create space for discussion about effective ways to eradicate social isolation and opportunities for social integration. Social integration in turn builds empathy toward marginalized populations (Trahan et al., 2019).

**Policy**

Policies relative to maternal mortality, paid family leave, reproductive autonomy, and income equality beg the attention and advocacy of social workers and legislators. The disparities seen in these capacities are often debilitating to Black women meriting the internalization of the SBW archetype. Consideration for policies that allow for surrogate caregivers and increased social support for female heads of household could serve to alleviate some of the stress that SBW suffer with in silence. Greater political efforts to destigmatize mental health and increase mental health literacy could help SBW recognize when their resilience has become a risk factor. The commitment to eliminate racism is incomplete without a commitment to dismantle the systems of oppression that reify what Abramovitz (1992) names the family ethic. That is the push for nuclear families where men and women fill “traditional” roles. Policies that uphold these ideals help perpetuate the SBW’s experiences and should be given significant political attention.

Policies that negatively impact minorities encompass bias and uphold majority norms. Workplace grooming policies often force Black women to esthetically code-switch by deeming their natural appearance as unprofessional. Black women are 1.5 times more likely to be sent home from work and are 3.4 times more likely to be perceived as unprofessional due to their hair (JOY Collective, 2019). Initiatives such as the CROWN Act (2019)—Creating a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair—have been created to combat discrimination in workplaces and school settings. The continued interrogation of discriminatory policies is an essential step toward equity and inclusion, thus allowing Black women the space to be their authentic selves without reprimand.

Media portrayals of detrimental archetypes such as the “Welfare Queen,” the “Jezebel,” and more recently the “Strong Black Woman” have hefty social implications for Black women. As such, policies should be implemented to regulate the perpetuation of damaging
stereotypes. In the past, policies have created systems that have demonized Black women and limited identity expression creating isolation and perceived monolithic identification. The Social Work Grand Challenges pose to eradicate social isolation. It is important to eradicate outdated policies rooted in racism and sexism to implement corrective and inclusive policies, which seek to establish deeper connection and the creation of policies that address the needs of Black women. The social undercurrent of sexism and racism yield a hostile environment for Black women, ultimately requiring the adaptation of the SBW archetype. Stigma is also perpetuated through media outlets and antiquated policies, policies that rescind stigmatizing images and promote vulnerability and openness could be pivotal in encouraging the SBW to deviate from the archetype.

**Education**

As the number of Black women attaining post-secondary degrees climb, so too does the opportunity to cultivate the professional self in higher education. The social work profession’s signature pedagogy, field education, is an opportune time to discuss, model, and role play the ways in which one can resist perpetuating and internalizing the SBW archetype. Learning to negotiate salaries, advocate for equitable workloads, and practice self-care can be integrated into practicum placements and practice coursework. Furthermore, professors should integrate discussions about vulnerability into class discussions. Brené Brown (2015) defines vulnerability as risk, uncertainty, and emotional exposure. The ramifications of displaying this human experience are so acute for Black women, that the decision to limit the breadth of human expression is often preferred. Providing students with the opportunity to assess their perceptions of vulnerability and to gain awareness of the implications of its absence can support the reconceptualization of vulnerability as a strength for oppressed persons.

Social workers should be aware of the historical caricaturization of Black people and the relevance of those images to the experiences of Black people creating environments of isolation. In the spirit of eradicating social isolation, social work educators should be explicit in discouraging the characterization of Black women, as universally “strong,” “angry,” or “mad.” This discouragement should extend beyond the SBW archetype and be applied across genders. Clinical social work education should place an emphasis on variance regarding symptom presentation so that students may recognize the silent suffering of the SBW as a way to cope with social isolation. Students should be prepared to recognize that the manifestation of stress and depression can have different presentations, and that Black women are not just “strong enough to go without” but need the space and time to care for themselves. Educators should also be certain to express the beneficial aspects of resilience, as marked in the SBW archetype, as well as the malefic aspects. Finally, social work education should consider the role of identity when teaching cultural awareness. Specifically, that identity can be both personal and social, and should be explored at both levels to truly understand a person’s cultural values and beliefs.

**Practice**

Social workers are charged with providing culturally competent services, including advocacy for the empowerment of marginalized groups (NASW, 2015). Practitioners within Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) should make concerted efforts to promote mental
health literacy among employees. EAP offices should be certain to employ practitioners of varying backgrounds. Social workers should be aware of how the SBW navigates her professional space and should make sure interventions are contextually appropriate and applicable. The SBW must be able to carry out the intervention in the context of her workplace or at home without causing distress or risk to her stability. As the SBW may experience racial bias and sexism in professional arenas (Hall et al., 2012), culturally aware practitioners can provide support if potential pathology arises due to societal expectations.

Social workers should shift from the idea of “non-traditional families,” to a model of recognition that does not label some families as less than. This shift would prove pivotal in decreasing the perceived threat of Black families and communities. Within practice it is important to understand the multifaceted identity of Black women and the challenges that come with the narrative of unyielding strength. The identity of Black women is non-monolithic. Practitioners should be cautious not to praise or reaffirm the SBW’s toxic resilience; the damaging ability to cope with chronic stress resulting in perceptions of adverse conditions as normal. This reinforcement of toxic resiliency leads to little space for vulnerability and further isolation when addressing the needs of Black women. Conversely, practitioners should create a safe space for the SBW to let down her guard without fear of marginalization or threat. In turn, practice models should consider utilizing the Black women’s social network to strengthen deeper connections and align with the Social Work Grand Challenges. As the friendship group provides a safe space for the SBW, it follows that a practice model in which the SBW could utilize her friends could be effective.

**Conclusion**

The SBW archetype presents both challenges and advances to the well-being of Black women who internalize it. Social Identity Theory is one way to conceptualize and understand the process of internalization and identification with the archetype. The social juxtaposition of Black women at the crossroads of race and gender effectively limits the ability of Black women to express their authentic identities. The larger American societal context is one that favors men, and white people, being a part of neither of the preferred social groups is anxiety-provoking and stress inducing. The SBW archetype acts as a barrier to stress and anxiety. Professionally, Black women internalize the archetype and silence themselves as a result of an underlying fear of being deemed inadequate or inappropriate by any member of the outgroup. The Black family unit exists within the same societal context, in which white male-headed households are considered the standard. As the SBW assumes the role of caretaker as her assumed strength mandates that she provides unwaveringly for her family. Friendships among Black women prove as a safe space for the SBW to express herself freely while validating her experiences and reinforcing the patterns of invulnerability, self-sacrifice, and self-silencing.

The expectations placed upon Black women across their life domains create a pressure vacuum in which they must function above the standard. The rejection of their full identities as central in society invalidates their experiences and leaves little room for their vulnerabilities to be explored. The SBW archetype acts as both a protective and risk factor to this social isolation.
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