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The Experience of Modern Day Marriages for Women Who Identify as Strong Black Women

Arielle Jackson
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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Arielle Jackson

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

The Experience of Modern Day Marriages for Women

Who Identify as Strong Black Women

by

Arielle Jackson

MA, Walden University, 2019

BS, Ashford University, 2016

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema has been explored during the past two decades; however, limited research has been conducted on the phenomenological experiences of Black women who identify with the characteristics of the SBW schema and their impact on Black and African American marriages. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of married African American women in modern day marriages who endorse the characteristics of the superwoman schema. This qualitative study was an interpretative phenomenological analysis and focused on the lived experiences of this population. Individual interviews of 12 married African American women who identified as SBW were analyzed. This study used two conceptual frameworks: the superwoman schema and the suffocation model. Study findings indicated that the SBW identity is deeply ingrained in all aspects of a SBW marriage. Emerging themes included SBW identity: resilience and burden, marriage expectations and models, partnership and intimate communication, resilience and renewal, and a subtheme of military marriage as an amplifier. Implications for positive social change include developing culturally responsive counseling practices, premarital education, and community-based support programs as pathways to sustaining healthy marriages for African American women who endorse the SBW schema.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my boys, La'Zayden and Zamari. Thank you for being my greatest motivation and my reason for pushing forward. I have been in school nonstop since you both were in diapers, and now that this chapter has come to an end, I hope you've learned the power of perseverance. Always chase your dreams fearlessly and never give up on what sets your soul on fire.

To my husband, Lorenzo, my rock and biggest cheerleader, thank you for your endless patience, encouragement, and unwavering belief in me. You've stood beside me through every late night and every moment of doubt. Your love has been my anchor and your faith in me, my fuel. I love you beyond words.

To my mother, my queen, my girl, you are the definition of strength. You've raised four children on your own, and every single one of us became college graduates because of your resilience, faith, and prayers. Thank you for instilling that drive in me. Now go tell your other children that I'm officially the smartest!

To my best friends, my aces, Natasha Holmes and Robin Dorkins, thank you for being my constants. Your encouragement, laughter, and accountability carried me through the hardest days. Natasha, I cannot wait to walk across that Walden stage with you, our dissertations signed by the same chair as we dreamed. I once told you to chase this dream, and now we rise together—two black women who refused to quit walking in our purpose. We are proof that God always finishes what He starts.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) derives from enduring years of systematic, racial, and gender-based oppression (Abrams et al., 2018; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). The SBW embodies many characteristics that she has had to embrace as necessary for survival. The SBW, often referred to as the Black Superwoman, is a self-defined schema (Davis & Jones, 2021). The two terms, SBW and Superwoman, are used interchangeably throughout this study. She is a pillar in many African American communities because she has had to "take on roles of a nurturer, mother, and breadwinner" (Woods-Giscombé, 2010, p.669). Researchers have examined the SBW schema as it relates to coping strategies, depression, and experiences, and have provided an in-depth understanding of the SBW schema (Abrams et al., 2018; Davis & Afifi, 2019; Geyton et al., 2022; Walker, 2020; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Researchers have called for additional investigation into the perceptions and lived experiences of women who endorse the SBW schema in romantic, interpersonal, and marital relationships (Council, 2021; Davis, 2021; Davis & Jones, 2021; Geyton et al., 2022; Lio et al., 2021; Peterson-Rochon, 2020; Thomas et al., 2022; Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

In addition to examining interpersonal and marital relationships, this study explored SBW in modern-day marriages. For a woman who embraces traditional marriage values, becoming the stereotypical traditional wife is often characterized by her willingness to be a stay-at-home mother, bear all household responsibilities, and depend financially on her husband (Teixeira et al., 2021). However, the dynamics of marriage have changed over the years (Finkel et al., 2014), as has the wife's role. Black women,

among the most educated of all ethnicities, are making things happen on their own instead of waiting for their husbands to bring home the bacon (Skipper et al., 2021). A more in-depth discussion of traditional and modern-day marriage is presented in the literature review to follow.

This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of married African American women (AAW) in modern day marriages who endorse the Superwoman or SBW schema based on Woods-Giscombé's (2010) SBW characteristics. This study adds to existing knowledge related to the SBW schema and AAW's perceptions of the characteristics as they present in their marriages. In Chapter 1, I discuss the history of the SBW schema and characteristics of the schema, Black and African American marriages, and the need for additional research and relevant gaps in research. The research problem and research question are also outlined in Chapter 1. Additionally discussed are the conceptual and theoretical foundations that frame the study's assumptions, limitations, and significance.

Background

In the 1800s, the denial of basic rights impeded the ability of African Americans to be recognized as citizens and achieve socioeconomic stability (Hunter, 2017). Marriage was also a topic in the well-known Dred Scott case, and because he and his wife, Harriett Robinson, lived in the northern free states, they could legally wed. In 1854, the couple sued the court for their freedom to live married with the same rights as White people. However, the judge denied the case (Ducille, 2018). This case demonstrates, as far back as 1854, that Black families had to fight for the right to live as a family, a right

granted to White people. Although the rights of Black families have evolved over the years, Black and African American families have consistently had to struggle to remain intact.

As the years progressed, enslavement and other systemic disadvantages experienced by Black families over time forced Black women to step into roles alone to support their families. For example, certain states implemented strict welfare policies. Rakim (2020) explored how the man-in-the-house requirement in New York State forced Black American families to choose between family stability and maintaining their housing. The regulation governed procedures in which federal assistance was halted if social workers found a man residing in the home. The mass incarceration of African American men and the prison-industrial complex posed additional challenges for Black women. Prisons benefited financially when full, and as a result, poor people and minorities were often jailed for nonviolent crimes (Council, 2021). Monterrosa (2021) shared that the criminal-justice systems drastically impact Black women involved in romantic relationships.

Unlike non-Black women, Black women typically have lower marriage participation rates (Council, 2021). Furthermore, the increased number of domestic responsibilities in the household and solely caring for the children impact marital satisfaction (Council, 2021). According to a 2020 census, 47.5% of Black women never married; in 2021, the number of Black and African American children in single-parent households was 64% (Census Bureau, 2022). In addition to having the highest divorce rate, the African American community also ranks first for births to unmarried mothers

(Census Bureau, 2022). When discussing potential obstacles to marriage, Skipper (2021) named income and education as particularly difficult to overcome.

Strong Black Women are well-studied in research. However, the characteristics associated with being an SBW are understudied. Wood-Giscombe (2010) researched the SBW schema and found that characteristics associated with the role include obligations to manifest strength, suppress emotions, resist vulnerability or dependence, be determined to succeed despite limited resources, and help others (p. 672). These characteristics formed the basis of the current study and are highlighted in current literature on SBW. Acknowledging these characteristics is essential when studying the SBW because, to some extent, the characteristics are often ingrained in Black women. The SBW schema is a psychological coping mechanism that reflects the past experiences of AAW (Green, 2019).

While few studies have examined the characteristics of being a SBW, data on the experiences of Black and AAW who identify as SBW and their influence on their marriage are not well understood. To this end, in this study, I sought to learn more about the lived experiences of married AAW who endorse the SBW schema and the perceived impact that the phenomenon has on their marriage. Addressing this topic will enable counselors and social workers to gain effective strategies to support AAW who identify as SBWs and lead them toward a fulfilling marriage. Research focusing on increasing marital satisfaction in the African American community contributes to positive social change; it gives practitioners a forum for discussing and supporting healthy family functioning in the African American community.

Problem Statement

The marital rates of AAW are the lowest among all ethnicities (Council, 2021). The number of single-parent households and low marriage success rates perpetuate cycles of broken families among African American families. The marriage rate for Black women is 13.2% per 1,000 men and women. Of AAW between the ages of 25 and 29, 79% have never married. Of AAW between the ages 30 and 34, 61.6% have never married (Census Bureau, 2022). Several researchers have found that marriage has many benefits such as companionship, emotional support, financial stability, and better physical and mental health (Grover & Helliwell, 2019; Huntington et al., 2022; Lawrence et al., 2019). Factors limiting Black and African women from attaining marital success are societal and environmental experiences that discourage or delay marriage. Strength is a well-known facet of Black and African American women's identity (Walker, 2020).

The SBW schema derives from the history of disadvantages impeding marital success in African American communities. The disadvantages include the legality of marriage, equal rights, and family separations, all of which have hindered African American families from remaining intact. While it is vital to acknowledge and support Black couples who have strong marriages, it is critical to consider how these relationships may make it difficult for some Black women to experience self-love (Council, 2021). The characteristics associated with being an SBW can influence marriage significantly (Geyton et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2020; Walker, 2020). The characteristics of the SBW and their impact on Black and African American marriages are understudied. To provide more information on this topic with African American

marriages, I gathered data to capture the experiences of married AAW who identify as Strong Black Women to explore their experiences of how their SBW characteristics present in their marriages.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological inquiry was to better understand the experiences of married Black women who identify as Strong Black Women and how persons who identify with this phenomenon interpret it. Through semistructured interviews, I examined the experiences of modern day marriages for Black and AAW who endorse the SBW characteristics. The study's purpose was to explore women's feelings and emotions as they relate to how characteristics of SBW present in their marriage. Obligations to manifest strength, suppress emotions, resist vulnerability or dependence, show determination to succeed despite limited resources, and help others were examined.

The strength of the Black woman is an exceptional characteristic. Strong Black Women prioritize the needs of others while enduring challenges often faced solely by Black women. Embracing this schema can impact their well-being and relationships (Watson & Hunter, 2016). Conducting this study was intended to contribute to existing research on marriage in the African American community using married Black women who identify as Strong Black Women as participants. In many African American marriages, the needs of the family are prioritized above the couple's needs (Jeremie-Brink & Chambers, 2020). This study offered solutions for marital therapy to help identify the uniqueness of this population. The findings of this study may provide

therapists with more information to enhance marriage in the African American community and offer insight into perspectives that could address the needs of married AAW. Interpretations of the essence of these experiences illuminated ambiguity in married women who endorsed the SBW characteristics and their experience in marriage.

Research Question

RQ: What are the lived experiences of modern-day marriage for women who identify as SBW?

Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework for the Study

Two conceptual frameworks were proposed to explain the phenomena being researched. The first conceptual framework is Woods-Giscombé's (2010) superwoman schema. This is a conceptual framework that describes the SBW/superwoman phenomenon. The research resulted in a conceptual framework to describe the characteristics of an African American superwoman. These characteristics include obligations to manifest strength, suppress emotions, resist vulnerability and dependence, show determination to succeed, and help others. This framework was selected for this research because it provides a lens through which a researcher may examine the phenomena using a defined set of characteristics that embodies SBW. This conceptual framework is further discussed in Chapter 2.

Finkle et al.'s (2014) suffocation model is based on tenets of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This conceptual model focuses specifically on fulfilling esteem and self-actualization needs to mitigate discontentment from unfulfilled marriage needs to promote a fulfilled marriage. This model is represented in this study because it provides a

conceptual model for need fulfillment in marriage. The model varies from the lower level needs to what is considered the higher altitude needs. Because I intended to explore the experiences of AAW in modern day marriages, the use of this model is an objective approach by which need fulfillment can be viewed as on a continuum. Essentially, the model represents all stages married couples may experience. Chapter 2 provides more information about the suffocation model.

Nature of the Study

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected for this study. IPA is a qualitative research design providing clarity into the essence of a lived experience and how participants make sense of it (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA research operates from an objective approach by which the researcher can view the phenomenon closely. The phenomenon investigated was AAW in modern day marriages for women who identify as SBW. I collected data from semistructured interviews with the guidance of an interview guide. To analyze the data, I became familiar with the data, completed initial coding, clustered and categorized, identified patterns, organized themes, and interpreted the data (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Definitions

African American woman: A female of African descent who was born and raised in the United States.

Black: In this study, *Black* and *African American* are used interchangeably.

Black woman: In this study, *Black women* and *African American women* are used interchangeably.

Determination to succeed despite limited resources: Sacrificing self-care, feelings of having to work harder than others to achieve goals.

Heterosexual marriage: A legally recognized relationship between individuals of different genders, specifically one woman and one man.

Modern day marriage: Marriage in the 20th century.

Monogamous heterosexual relationship: A romantic or sexual relationship between individuals of different sexes or genders, specifically one woman and one man.

Obligations to help others: Feeling the necessity to meet the needs of others and often placing themselves last.

Obligations to manifest strength: Presenting an image of strength for the sake of spouse, friends, and/or children.

Resistance to being vulnerable or dependent on others: Naturally putting up defenses to prevent others from taking advantage of oneself.

Strong Black Woman (SBW): A Black or African American woman who identifies as strong and capable of great things.

Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema characteristics: A schema derived from the work of Woods-Giscombé (2010) that includes obligations to manifest strength, suppress emotions, resist to vulnerability or dependence, show determination to succeed despite limited resources, and help others.

Superwoman schema (SWS): A term used interchangeably with the SBW schema.

Suppressing emotions: Hiding emotions from others.

Traditional marriage: Era is prior to 1965, based on Finkle et al.'s (2014) major models of marriage. A union between two people, where a man and woman are committed to raising a family, sharing responsibilities, and sharing resources. Society, family, and traditions influence the union.

Wedlock: Being married.

Assumptions

An assumption in a research study refers to a belief or proposition considered trustworthy without being proven or verified. These assumptions are a starting point for further investigation (Walden University, 2023). There were four assumptions of the current study. First, I assumed that there is an essence or universally acknowledged phenomenon warranting further study (Merriam & Tissell, 2016). Essentially, there is a culture that exists that is relevant for others to understand. Second, I assumed that due to the history of African American marriage and the emergence of the SBW schema, the SBW influences marriage in some fashion. The next assumption was that the participants would be truthful while responding to the interview questions and the study would be without consequence to their marriage. Third, I assumed that participants in this study would volunteer to share their experiences with regard to the research questions and study at hand.

Scope and Delimitations

The research problem addressed marriage among AAW who identified as Strong Black Women. Marriage is an area of focus due to AAW having the lowest marital rates among all ethnicities (Council, 2021). The focus of the study was chosen because there

are numerous studies calling for additional investigation into marriage and interpersonal relationships of Strong Black Women (Council, 2021; Davis, 2021; Davis & Jones, 2021; Geyton et al., 2022; Lio et al., 2021; Peterson-Rochon, 2020; Thomas et al., 2022; Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

The participants in the study were required to be Black and/or African American women. The women were required to be at least 21 years of age and in a heterosexual monogamous marriage. The inclusion criteria were chosen because they align with socially constructed ideals that are frequently utilized to influence traditional American marriages. Being married for at least 8 years was also a requirement for participation in the study to ensure that individuals had been acclimated to marital life and were not newlyweds.

Lastly, because the study focused on the SBW, each participant identified with at least three of the following characteristics of the SBW as described by Woods-Giscombé (2013): obligations to manifest strength (e.g., presenting an image of strength for the sake of spouse, friends, and/or children), suppressing emotions (e.g., hiding emotions from others in fear of showing signs of weakness), resistance to being vulnerable or dependent on others (e.g., naturally putting up defenses to prevent others from taking advantage of oneself), determination to succeed despite limited resources (sacrificing self-care, feelings of having to work harder than others to achieve goals), and obligations to help others (feeling obligated to meet the needs of others, often placing oneself last).

Limitations

Although phenomenological research focuses on understanding human experience, phenomenological research is not without limitations. This type of research uses a smaller sample size, which could limit the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation of this type of research is based on the interpretations of experiences; bias is an unavoidable risk. When collecting research in phenomenological studies, a potential barrier is the risk of respondents expressing personal experiences, which could elicit emotional reactions. There is a need to address visceral reactions with the participants prior to obtaining consent to participate. Furthermore, historically, recruiting African Americans for participatory research has been a major challenge. The final anticipated barrier was the capacity to dissociate personal experiences from the topic's relationship. In phenomenological research, personal experiences or beliefs about the phenomenon are bracketed or set aside (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Significance

This study is significant in that it contributes to filling a gap in understanding the lived experiences of Strong Black Women and the impact the phenomenon has on their marriages. There are many advantages of marriage, and due to the decreased rate at which AAW are getting married, AAW are not benefiting at the same rate as other ethnicities (Jeremie-Brink & Chambers, 2016) from marriage companionship, emotional support, financial stability, and better physical and mental health (Lawrence et al., 2019). Young AAW are not motivated to marry; this is supported by the declining marital rates among African American families (Hill, 2014).

According to Mouzon et al (2020), there is an absence of literature regarding marital relationships and behaviors among older AAW. This study informs readers and contributes to filling the gap by providing information about the lived experiences of AAW in modern day marriages. I hope this study provides hope to women who may not have had role models for marriage. Practitioners in the field can utilize this research to inform counseling approaches or in creating targeted interventions or programs.

Therapists and social workers are change agents and may use this research to inform and improve their cultural competence by empowering and encouraging open dialogue. Relationship experts and marriage and family therapists could utilize data from this study to incorporate into practice while working with this unique population. Research focusing on increasing marital rates in the African American community contributes to making positive social change; it gives practitioners a forum for discussing and breaking cycles of broken and dysfunctional families in the African American community.

Summary

The concept of the SBW emerged from enduring years of systematic, racial, and gender-based oppression. Black women embraced traits that were essential for survival. This SBW schema is self-defined and has led to Black women juggling the roles of nurturer, mother, and breadwinner. Researchers have explored the SBW schema's impact on coping strategies and mental health, but a significant need remains to investigate its influence on romantic and marital relationships. This study answered the research question: What the lived experiences of married African American women who identify

with the Strong Black Woman schema? The question focused particularly on modern marriages, where the dynamics and roles have evolved significantly. Historically, Black women have faced systemic challenges, such as discriminatory welfare policies and high incarceration rates of Black men, forcing them into primary caregiving roles. Despite their high levels of education and professional success, these women often navigate complex marital dynamics that differ from traditional roles.

AAW do get married despite AAW's lower marriage rates. This IPA focused on AAW who identify as Strong Black Women to acquire knowledge and understanding of their perspectives on marriage. The study's findings aim at satisfying the gap in the research about Strong Black Women's marriages and improving marital satisfaction in the Black and African American communities. By addressing this topic, I aimed to equip counselors and social workers with practical strategies to support Strong Black Women, ultimately contributing to healthier family structures within the African American community and fostering positive social change. Chapter 2 reviews the current and relevant literature on this topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is little information regarding the lived experiences of married AAW who endorse the Superwoman schema and the perceived impact the phenomenon has on their marriage. This interpretative phenomenological analysis aimed to illuminate the lived experiences of married AAW who endorsed the Superwoman schema and the perceived impact the phenomenon has on their marriage. In this study the SBW was defined by five characteristics: (a) obligations to manifest strength, (b) obligations to suppress emotions (c) resistance to being vulnerable (d) determination to succeed despite limited resources and (e) obligations to help others. While Chapter 1 focused on sociocultural and historical understandings of the superwoman schema, Chapter 2 will show why understanding married women who identify with the Superwoman schema within the African American community is critical for meaningfully addressing present research gaps.

Literature Search Strategy

To acquire relevant literature for my research, I conducted an exhaustive search for relevant literature to support my study. I utilized different search engines and databases to identify peer-reviewed sources, published dissertations from Walden University and other institutions, and professional journals. I used many databases accessible through the Walden University library, including Sage Journals, ProQuest Dissertations, Psych Articles, APA Psych Books, EBSCO Host, and the *Journal of African American Studies*. Additionally, I examined peer-reviewed references within the existing literature. The Google Scholar cited feature aided me in finding additional literature. My initial search was comprehensive, targeting articles about AAW and the

SBW schema. I refined my search to articles written between 2018 and 2023, ultimately narrowing my selection to 65 relevant articles. To find scholarly and peer-reviewed articles, I employed a combination of keywords and Boolean identifiers, including *African American, Black women, marital influence, Strong Black women, schema, Black superwoman, relationship, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.*

Conceptual Framework

The Suffocation Model

The suffocation model of marriage in America is a concept derived from Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Finkel et al., 2014). Maslow (1943) divides human needs into five categories and arranges them in a hierarchical order to explain what motivates human behavior. The most fundamental demands at the bottom of the pyramid are physiological necessities such as food, water, and shelter. The second level represents security, stability, and protection requirements. Individuals may then focus on the third level, which is love and belonging needs, such as social contact, friendships, and intimate relationships once these requirements are addressed. Emotional needs, which include emotions of self-worth, accomplishment, and acknowledgment, are the fourth level. Eventually, at the pinnacle of the pyramid, there is self-actualization, which is the recognition of one's full potential and the desire to achieve the highest version of oneself.

The suffocation model explains how individuals in a relationship can feel overwhelmed or suffocated when their need for connection and independence is unmet. The needs as described by Maslow's model are depicted in the form of a mountain. Finkle et al. (2015) coined the concept as mount Maslow, with the higher needs being

placed at a higher altitude signifying a lack of oxygen at higher altitudes. In this model, when one partner senses a loss of individuality or independence within the relationship, they may withdraw emotionally (Finkle et al., 2015). Alternatively, if one partner feels that their emotional needs are not being fulfilled, they may become excessively needy or demand attention from their partner. This may initiate a negative cycle in the relationship, where each partner's behavior reinforces the other's, leading to emotional distance and suffocation over time (Finkle et al., 2014). The suffocation model stresses the importance of balance in relationships, where both individuals can maintain their identity while also fulfilling each other's emotional needs.

The suffocation model has been used in literature to describe the evolution and progression of marriage into the 21st century. A study conducted by Joel et al (2022) utilized the suffocation model which supports the basic premise of the model's suggested principle, harboring unreasonable expectations impedes relationship functioning.

The suffocation model has 6 tenets:

1. Individuals seek to fulfill their needs through marriage
2. Individuals in marriages are no longer looking to fulfill their lower needs such as biological and safety, they are looking to fulfill their higher needs.
3. Insight into their partners' needs is required to fulfill higher levels of needs. A certain level of communication and responsiveness for a sustained period of time assists in achieving insight.

4. The model is based on marriage in America. Finkle et al. (2014) find that Americans are looking to have higher needs fulfilled in their marriage, they have reduced their investment of time and psychological resources.
5. Insufficient investment of time and resources has led to decreased marital quality and personal well-being.
6. To reverse the consequences spouses can either use resources available, increase investment of time and psychological resources in their marriage and ask less of marriage in terms of facilitation of higher needs.

The Strong Black Woman or Superwoman Schema

The Superwoman Schema is a conceptual framework developed by Woods-Giscombé (2010). The researcher sought to study the SBW and the impact that their experiences have on health outcomes such as lupus, obesity, and depression to name a few. Woods-Giscombé (2010) identifies the characteristics of the role of the superwoman as: are obligations to manifest strength and suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, determination to succeed, despite limited resources and an obligation to help others. The model also cited contributing contextual factors that contribute to the role of the Superwoman highlighting both perceived benefits and perceived liabilities which include a strain in romantic interpersonal relationships.

The literature utilizes the theory to convey a message surrounding the disparities AAW face with their health. The researchers sought to highlight the adverse effects that the superwoman schema can have on AAW with regard to stress, depression, and socio-emotional wellbeing. The conceptual framework presents a basis on which the current

study can be built upon. The absence of research on the intimacy and interpersonal relationships of SBW, as highlighted by Woods-Giscombé (2010), underscores the need for further investigation. Furthermore, the lack of literature supports further exploration of the strain in romantic interpersonal relationships among Black and African American women. The research question builds on the theory because it seeks to expand the superwoman schema by understanding and creating meaningful interpretations derived from the lived experiences of those married Black woman that identify with the characteristics of the superwoman schema.

Literature Review

The Origin of the Strong Black Woman

There have been multiple studies that have investigated the origin of the SBW. For example, Nelson (2023) explores the SBW or the superwoman's impact, suggesting that her resilience comes from historical experiences and challenges she has encountered. Wallace (1990) stated enslavement gave rise to the concept of the superwoman while Abrams et al., 2019 and Geyton et al., 2022 posit the SBW schema emerged from adversity and mistreatment such as the system of enslavement (Abrams et al., 2019; Geyton et al., 2022).

Enslavement drastically impacted marriage and it was not always an option for the African American couple. In a study by Miller (2018), the enduring effects of enslavement on Black families in the United States were investigated. Miller found enslavement vastly impacted generations of Black families far after the emancipation of Black people and arguably changed the dynamics of family structures which highlighted

the disparities experienced by couples. Reader (2020) further emphasized the notion that African American men and women were treated as possessions rather than individuals entitled to form enduring unions with their chosen companions. This also resulted in the mistreatment of AAW through sexual abuse and them being forced to be concubines (Reader, 2020; Simmons, 2000). Often, families were deliberately separated by their enslaver for economic reasons, forcing women to raise children alone and leaving their children without fathers (Vil et al., 2019).

Marriage was not legal for African Americans. Jumping the broom was a symbolic consummation of marriage (Reader, 2020). Enslaved and free people were forbidden from reconnecting with their families if they ever wanted to be free (Hunter, 2017; Hunter, 2019). Collier et al. (2017) discussed how enslavers would stereotype Black women during enslavement viewing them as “sensual, lascivious and lewd” to rationalize raping them (p. 92).

Additionally, the mass incarceration of African American men beginning from 1980 had a significant impact on AAW. The mass incarceration period was a period marked by Black and African American males receiving harsher punishments and penalties for offenses (Chaney & Robertson, 2014). Mass incarceration has and continues to devastate families forcing women to raise their children as single parents (Smith & Hattery, 2010). It is important to understand the origin of the SBW to adequately understand their experiences through the lens from which the schema developed.

The Strong Black Woman in Literature

The SBW is an emerging figure discussed in social science and has been well studied throughout literature in various subjects (Thomas et al., 2021). The characteristics of SBW are described by many researchers. Since the SBW and superwoman schema (SWS) are terms that are used interchangeably many of the characteristics such as independence, resilience and vulnerability are characterized in both the archetype and schema. The SWS derived by Woods-Giscombé (2010) lends itself as a conceptual framework in this study as mentioned earlier. Strength is a core tenet of the SBW. AAW developed the SBW persona in response to recognizing historical racial and gender stereotypes or oppression (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Despite the SBW endorsement being linked to negative outcomes as later discussed, the African American community embraces the schema proudly (Anyiwo et al., 2022).

Researchers have found that the SBW archetype has the propensity to affect all domains of life to include professional, family, and friendships (West et al., 2016). Recent research has suggested that the endorsement of the SBW schema affects young Black girls. More Specifically, Leath et al. (2022) share that young Black girls are taught how to navigate a society that will unavoidably oppress them. The researchers examined the adverse childhood experiences of its participants in conjunction with their endorsement of the SWS which was found to have a profound impact on Black women. Anyiwo et al. (2022) examined the topic with respect to the role of sociocultural experiences because adolescence is a pivotal time in the young Black girl's development

in which she becomes more aware of “the Black experience” thereby influencing her to adapt to the schema as a coping mechanism (Anyiwo et al., 2018).

Jones et al. (2020) examined how adolescents cope with stress stemming from racism and noted that during the developmental phase between ages 12-18, proactive approaches to manage stress is more advantageous than avoidance. There has also been extensive research in agreement with the SBW schema as a coping mechanism when AAW are faced with gender inequality, racism and discrimination and sees the use of the schema as pride enhancing (Davis & Jones, 2021, Harris & Reynolds 2020). Furthermore, Knighton et al., (2022) found displaying strength and suppressing emotions heightens psychological distress while experiencing racial discrimination.

Woods-Giscombé in collaboration with other researchers completed a multitude of research in the area of the SWS (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé, 2018; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2019). Primarily her research aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of AAW. Furthermore, she investigated the link between stress and SWS characteristics, discovering that Black women face a heightened risk of “prediabetes, depression, emotional eating, sleep disruption, and sedentary behavior” (Allen et al., 2019; Black & Peacock, 2011; Sheffield-Abdullah & Woods-Giscombé, 2021; Woods- Giscombe,2019).

Abrams et al., (2019) also reviewed the SBW schema in an effort to determine if endorsing the SBW schema led to depression, and found self-silencing was determined to lead to symptomology of depression. Depressive symptomology is prevalent in nearly half of the Black girls in the U.S (Kann et al., 2018). In addition to this study, Geyton et

al. (2022) examined the impact of internalizing the SBW archetype. The study found that Black women suffer as a result of internalizing the schema as they strive to meet the needs of those around them while neglecting their own. The characteristics associated with being an SBW can interfere with marital and relationship satisfaction (Geyton et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2020; Walker, 2020).

The SBW is a well-examined subject in literature, with Woods-Giscombé (2010) establishing the SWS, which encompasses independence, resilience, and vulnerability. This framework illustrates how AAW have adopted the SBW persona in response to historical racial and gender oppression. While the SBW schema is a source of pride, it is also linked to adverse outcomes in professional, familial, and social relationships (Leath et al. 2022). Research indicates that young Black girls use the SBW schema as a coping strategy to navigate oppression, but this archetype can lead to psychological distress and health issues like prediabetes, depression, and emotional eating (Allen, et al., 2019; Black & Peacock, 2011; Sheffield-Abdullah & Woods-Giscombé, 2021; Woods- Giscombe). Additionally, internalizing the SBW schema can disrupt relationship satisfaction, as Black women often prioritize others' needs over their own.

Characteristics and Stigma of the Strong Black Woman

The pervasive stereotype that AAW are strong, furious, and too independent has historically fostered widely acknowledged societal perspectives that Black women are frequently seen as problematic (Geyton et al. 2022; Leath et al. 2022; McGee, 2021; Montle, 2020). Hayes (2012) discussed the former first lady Michelle Obama highlighting how she faced scrutiny and was depicted as controlling in her former

position, despite her achievements and recognition and being considered as an anomaly (p. 18). In various aspects of life, Black women are often anticipated to excel, endure, and handle more (Geyton et al., 2022). In the work by Wood- Giscombe (2010) conducted a focus group, and the outcome of the discussion was the five characteristics associated with SBW. The characteristics and the stigma of the SBW are the stereotyped depictions of the Black women. The next few paragraphs will further explain each characteristic.

Obligations to Manifest Strength

The obligations to manifest strength come from the expectation that Black women are strong despite what they may be facing. The SBW is such a powerful stigma that those who identify as a SBW feel compelled to conform and present an image of strength (Davis, 2015), almost as if they are playing a role for a character for whom they have never auditioned. Davis and Afifi (2019) assert the strength of a Black woman is an ideal which shapes an expectation and perpetuates subordination of Black women.

Furthermore, they assert this expectation of strength is placed on Black women from a young age. Settles et al., (2008) conducted a study in which they offered insight into the womanly perspectives for Black and White women. There were multiple themes that emerged from their study for both women. The theme that only emerged for Black women is inner strength. Specifically, one participant noted her mother raised her to never ask or need anything from a man. Nelson et al., (2016) shares strength for Black women is the embodiment of being self-reliant when facing problems and obstacles and notes their strength comes from their relationships with others and the community. Black

women have an ingrained tendency to embody strength, which frequently leads to suppressing emotions.

Suppressing Emotions

Maynard (2018) discussed the skill of concealing emotions was a mastered technique for Black women during the period of enslavement. While witnessing the separation of their families, Black women had to remain composed, as revealing any feelings in front of their enslavers could lead to harsh punishment. For AAW both romantic and interpersonal relationships are affected as a result of cultural disparities that exist within their communities (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2019). Being strong all the time can be difficult emotionally for those women who identify as an SBW. In fact, 33% of the women in Nelson et al. (2016) study agreed that suppressing emotions or what they refer to as “emotional containment” is essential for protection for the SBW. Debnam et al., (2022) studied the superwoman identity in relation to teen dating violence among young Black women. According to the researcher the superwoman -SBW identity encourages women’s resistance to be forthcoming regarding details of their relationship status and hinders them from seeking necessary support. (Debnam et al., 2022). Liao et al., (2020) discusses the lack of emotional awareness and intelligence that Black women have about themselves because of the way that others view them. Society teaches Black women that they can handle burdens and pain that their counterparts cannot, leading them to suppress their emotions often. Black women naturally experience suppression of emotions since they prioritize the needs of others over their own. Suppression of emotions can lead to resistance to vulnerability or dependence.

Resistance to Vulnerability or Dependence

Protection and guarding the heart from hurt, harm and anguish is a strength of the Black woman. In the African American community Black women are often taught to “never depend on a man for anything” and “keep your business inside the privacy of your own home.” One could suspect that these teachings come from a background of having to be the sole caretaker and provider despite having assistance from their counterparts. Lewis (2023) discusses vulnerability and that due to distrust Black women are more comfortable being vulnerable around other Black women. For many Black women admitting the need for help is often equated with admitting weakness (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). As stated, resistance to vulnerability or dependence on others is often a sign of incapability which pushes Black women to succeed.

Determination to Succeed and Obligation to Help Others

Nelson et al. (2016) found that the obligation to help others is a dominant characteristic when discussing the SBW. Furthermore, the strength of the Black woman is a characteristic that forces others to view them as incapable of having emotions, needs and vulnerabilities (Davis & Afifi, 2019). Black women constantly face the pressure of suppressing their own needs and prioritizing the needs of others, often exhausting themselves and neglecting their own well-being and aspirations. Rochon (2020) discovered that this dynamic impacted their romantic relationships, stemming from the emotions tied to the obligation of protecting Black men.

Suffocation of Marriage for African American Women

The suffocation model suggests when meeting higher altitude needs there must be an investment sought in time, psychological resources and intimacy and passion to improve relationships (Finkel et al., 2014). As earlier referenced AAW have the lowest marriage rates among all races (Council, 2021). Further exploration of the subject is needed to determine the current ideals of marriage and the capacity for AAW to achieve higher level needs in their marriages. Time, physiological resources, passion and intimacy are further explored as they relate to relationships.

Time

Spending time together is crucial for the functioning of relationships. Hogan and colleagues (2021) investigated the impact of time spent together on various interactions and relationship satisfaction. Their findings indicated that couples who devoted more time to each other reported higher levels of satisfaction. Hudson et al. (2020) discusses time and relationships and finds that spending time leads to increased wellbeing. As the suffocation model suggests, a substantial time commitment is necessary for enhancing relationships (Finkle et al., 2014). A focus on minimizing conflicts to enhance marital satisfaction begins with investing time. Couples who allocated more time to communication reported notably heightened relationship satisfaction, an increased presence of positive attributes in their marriage, and a greater sense of desired and experienced closeness (Hogan et al., 2022).

Psychological Resources

Buchanan and Wicklund (2020) note a lack of diversity in the psychology field, with only 13.4% of psychologists being Black. Consequently, this creates a potential for therapists to misunderstand the experiences of Black women, as Burse (2022) suggests, impacting their coping capabilities. This trend is also evident in various areas of psychological study, notably in research concerning African American couples, a population that has been relatively overlooked in the field of relationship research (Urganci et al., 2022; Williamson et al., 2022). This group often underutilizes psychological support. The combination of beliefs, perceived regard and the characteristics of SBW can pose challenges in seeking help.

Heshmati et al. (2022), discussed ongoing research and future directions in relationship science, addressing both interpersonal and personal relationships. One notable focus in this literature review was the importance of examining relationship dynamics across different demographics. The impact of emotional regulation, and vulnerability, on the relationship dynamics of African American couples was examined by (Urganci et al, 2022). The findings indicated that affective variability with respect to adaptability and emotional regulation were associated with a diminished sense of how their partners viewed them (Urganci et al. 2022).

Intimacy and Passion

Intimacy and passion in marital relationships involve acknowledging the influence of various other factors. Milek et al., (2015) conducted a study focusing on intradyadic stress or relationship stress. Furthermore, this study noted that external

stressors, like work and parental obligations, have the propensity to affect intimacy. Interestingly, Bodermann et al., (2010) discussed a notable rise in sexual intimacy among women occurring during weekends. Which could be attributed to their various roles and obligations. Kelly et al. (2020) discussed infidelity and the sex imbalance within Black couple relationships, concluding that the ratio of Black men to Black women may explain infidelity. Moreover, African American men prefer monogamy in relationships and mates that are affectionate whereas, women want an ideal partner that does not prioritize sex (King & Allen, 2009).

Black women were formerly stereotyped as jezebels and are still seen as promiscuous. Leath et al. (2022) found that these stereotypes influence the sexual beliefs and behaviors of Black women (p. 526). Lundy (2018) discussed how that Black women's image was depicted as hypersexual. Perkins et al. (2023) further discussed sexual objectification in relation to the Super woman schema noting that endorsement of the SBW schema more specifically the prioritizing others and resistance to being vulnerable inhibits or enables Black women to sexually cater to the needs of their partners and neglect their own sexual pleasure (p. 763).

This section reviews the suffocation of marriage. The suffocation model posits that fulfilling higher-level relational needs demands significant investment in time, psychological resources, intimacy, and passion (Finkel et al., 2014). AAW, who have the lowest marriage rates among all races (Council, 2021), face unique challenges in achieving these needs. Time spent together is essential for relationship satisfaction, with studies indicating that more time devoted to communication enhances marital satisfaction

and closeness (Hogan et al., 2021; Hogan et al., 2022 & Hudson et al., 2020). Intimacy and passion in AAW marriages are influenced by external stressors and societal stereotypes, such as being labeled promiscuous or hypersexual (Bodermann et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2020; King & Allen, 2009; Leath et al., 2022; Lundy, 2018; Milek et al., 2015; Perkins et al., 2023). Although psychological resources are needed, this group often underutilizes available psychological support. These factors complicate their capacity to meet relational needs and achieve marital satisfaction.

Marriage and Romantic Relationships in Current Literature

Hudson et al. (2020) discusses the importance of social and interpersonal relationships. In a quantitative study, Walker (2020) found relationship satisfaction was negatively impacted by the overall endorsement of the SBW archetype (SBWA). Davis (2021) conducted a qualitative study that explored the perceptions of AAW who endorse the SBW schema and how they cope. The researcher explains that relationship status has a significant impact on the manifestation of the SBW schema. The researcher sought to find alternative strategies to cope as opposed to leaning on self-silence and self-reliance as a primary means to cope. Emery and Finkel (2022) discovered that self-protection when one feels vulnerable in a relationship was linked to diminished relationship satisfaction, which may explain why difficulties faced by people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds might struggle to establish fulfilled relationships.

Furthermore, colorism in American culture devalues the attractiveness and femininity standards of AAW (Leath et al., 2022; Tibble et al. 2019). According to a study conducted in 2019 the ratio of Black males to Black women is approximately 79.0

per 100 (US Census Bureau, 2019). This imbalance increases tolerability when pursuing romantic relationships (Simmons et al. 2021). Despite this AAW value committed relationships and marriage (Barr & Simmons, 2018). The unique position of the African American woman in western culture consistently places AAW in the ranks as being less likely to marry as opposed to other ethnicities (US Census Bureau, 2019; Mouzon et al. 2020). There are significant factors and influences within the family that has historically influenced and perpetuated the cycle of brokenness within African American families. This section emphasized the significance of marriage and romantic relationships in current literature. More specifically it highlights the extent to which AAW face challenges with forming and fulfilling marital and romantic relationships. Such relationships can be influenced by societal stereotypes, cultural dynamics such as colorism and familial influence. These factors combined influences relationship satisfaction, coping strategies, and marriage rates among AAW in American culture. This discussion highlights the challenges and perseverance of AAW despite their lower marital rates.

The Blueprint of Becoming a Wife: Mothers as Role Models

The Black women from the Settles et al., (2008) study shared they learned to be Strong Black women from the examples of their mothers and Black women in their communities. For many single women, they have the responsibility as functioning as both the mother and father in their households (Nelson et al., 2016). The history of systemic disadvantages as it relates to the structure of African American families has historically contributed to AAW dually functioning as both parents. A mother who exhibits strength

and resilience while shouldering the responsibilities of both parents, serves as a compelling manifestation of resilience for her daughters (Zulu, 2016).

According to the US Census Bureau (2022) there are approximately 4.27 million Black families in the US with a single mother. Black women experienced higher levels of stress related to their partners in comparison to White women (Eboh et al., 2018). The stress associated with romantic partners among Black women has been noted in other studies. Moorman (2022) conducted a study that examined the association between motherhood and gendered relationship beliefs. The researchers found that motherhood influences the way Black women perceive and think about relationships.

Nelson et al., (2016) suggests Black women raise their daughters differently compared to their sons. Shambley-Ebron et al. (2016) discusses the importance of the responsibility of the African American mother to teach their daughters to be wise when making sexually intimate decisions. This is often considered taboo within many African American households. The feelings associated with the responsibility of safeguarding Black men within this society generate emotions. Consequently, for Black women, this dynamic often fosters a devaluation of their own worth and an increased tolerance for mistreatment from Black men. Due to the challenges faced by Black men, Black women tend to assume responsibility for their struggles, leading to a downplaying of their own experiences (Blackmon et al., 2017). Too often, Black women are strong by themselves when they do not have to be. One might ask, who has the responsibility of teaching a Black woman to be a wife when her foundational upbringing consisted of generations of single mothers? This section addressed the significance of AAW as having an example of

“wifehood.” Moreover, how AAW frequently takes on the roles of both parents in single-parent homes due to systemic challenges and cultural factors. Their strength and resilience, shaped by historical, familial influences, serve as aspirations for their daughters. Despite societal pressures and stereotypes, these mothers navigate complex dynamics affecting their relationships and self-esteem. Overall, this section navigates the unique challenges faced by African Americans, highlighting the interaction of cultural heritage, gender roles, and societal norms.

The Father: A Woman’s First Love

The father’s role is essential in development, attachment, and romantic relationships for women. Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of the paternal relationship when it comes to shaping interpersonal relationships and mate selection (Jilani et al., 2022; Lark, 2016; Parker et al., 2020). Lark (2016) emphasizes the significance of the absence of fathers in the context of romantic relationships within the African American community. He highlights that many women in this group have encountered challenges such as diminished self-esteem, increased promiscuity, and heightened anxieties about abandonment and rejection. Diminished father-daughter relationships contribute to heightened hypersexuality and difficulties in romantic relationships (Gordon, 2016; Moodly & Lesch, 2023; Nielson, 2014).

Peyper et al (2015) explored the relationship between young women and emotionally absent fathers. They discussed the ramifications of having a father that does not physically express their love through affection. The study revealed a significant desire among the participants to experience affection and love from their fathers. The

article identified five themes, one of which focused on forming relationships with other men as a way of seeking the attention and affection they had expected from their fathers. Another theme highlighted the challenge of trusting others, especially men, given the abandonment by the person meant to raise and protect them.

The study raised questions about how a woman raised without a father could be expected to trust men, giving that the person chosen to fulfill that role had abandoned her. Trust is a core tenet in African American relationships (Jeremie-Brink & Chambers, 2020). The study also delved into the idea that if a father is a woman's first love and he abandons her, it could influence the way she replicates love. Additionally, Peyper et al. (2015) found that women with emotionally absent fathers commonly experience feelings of worthlessness and emotional suppression, aligning with similar findings by Woods-Giscombé (2010), along with a tendency to seek fatherly approval. There are an estimated 4.27 billion Black and African American children raised in single parent households (Censusbureau.gov). In fact, 69% of births for AAW are from unwed couples (McKay et al., 2021).

Sanders (2022) conducted a quantitative study which examined marital satisfaction of AAW with absent versus present fathers. They found there was not a significant difference for women who had present fathers in conjunction with a supportive mother and vice versa for women with absent fathers. These studies indicated that their marital satisfaction decreased with mother support increases. A future recommendation suggested by Sanders (2022) is to explore marital satisfaction and how women who experienced father absenteeism experience healthy and long-lasting

marriages. The relationship between a father and his daughter who identifies as SBW is essential to consider concerning marriage because her knowledge and understanding about love reflects what she learned from the men in her life.

This section discusses the importance of the father- daughter relationships impact on woman's growth, attachment patterns and romantic lives. It explores how the absence or emotional distance of fathers, particularly in the African American community can lead to issues such as reduced self-esteem, increased promiscuity, and difficulties trusting and relating to men (Gordon, 2016; Moodly & Lesch, 2023; Nielson, 2014). It emphasizes how fathers shape their daughters' perspectives on love, trust, and worth, affecting their contentment with marriage and relationships as they age (Jeremie-Brink & Chambers, 2020).

Marriage in the African American Community

Marriage

Many studies have examined African American marriages, exploring the factors contributing to their success. In 2019, only 31% of African Americans were married (UScensusbureau.gov, 2023). Although a small percentage are married, research focusing on strong marriages within the African American community exists. Vaterlaus et al., (2017) conducted a study to understand and strengthen African American marriages by focusing on their positive aspects. The research highlighted the importance of consistent and realistic growth throughout the marriage, emphasizing that the true challenges of marriage become apparent over time rather than immediately after the wedding. Drake (2019) questions what happens after "I do" highlighting that media representations of

married Black couples typically conclude with the wedding, neglecting to shed light on the distinctive aspects of marriage beyond the initial ceremony.

Furthermore, Vaterlaus et al., (2017) emphasized safety and security as being essential for a strong marriage and the crucial role of frequent, open, and honest communication, which Skipper et al., (2021) also validates in their study. Lastly, they found that maintaining a sense of self, autonomy, and acceptance is critical for the functioning of a strong marriage. The research aligns with the suffocation model, proposing that marriages shift their motivation from meeting lower-level needs, to aspiring to fulfill higher-level esteem and self-actualized needs (Finkle et al.,2014),

A healthy and strong marriage will yield lasting benefits for multiple generations of families (Stewart et al., 2020). Specifically, within the context of Black marriages, the benefits of marriage aim to avoid poverty and attain financial security (Skipper et al., 2021). The Skipper et al (2021) study involves successful African American couples sharing valuable marital advice. Noteworthy themes from this research include the importance of open communication, a readiness to exchange roles for mutual benefit, and a shared understanding of financial goals. These findings emphasize the positive outcomes associated with healthy Black marriages.

Divorce

Amidst these dynamics the characteristics of the SBW have increased the awareness among Black women to persevere and survive, even when lacking resources or relying on a man for support. Kulu (2014) introduced the concept of the "7-year itch," marking a period when marriages typically reach their peak. There are a marked number

of stressors that affect marital satisfaction and stability for Black couples (p.9). These stressors include the history of enslavement, discrimination and stereotypes, financial strain, and poverty (Dainton, 2017). Black women are often perceived as being motherly in relationships which could impact the relationship (Bent-Goodley, 2017). Additionally, many of the characteristics of the SBW schema such as being too independent and strong can impede healthy relationships.

Zhang and Sassler (2022) discussed several factors influencing divorce, notably that marriage is increasingly perceived as just another lifestyle choice rather than a necessary life phase. This finding directly contributes to the stance of the suffocation model that the institution of marriage serves different goals now in modern society (Finkle et al., 2014). Subsequently, current literature points to a marriage squeeze impacting the African American community. Kelly et al., (2020) acknowledged an imbalance that is prevalent with Black couples. This imbalance specifically relates to the educational attainment for Black women and the high rate of incarceration of Black men due to the history of social experiences faced for these couples. African American couples are at a higher risk to experience marital discord (Sun et al., 2020). As a result, resources promoting healthy marriages should consider a culturally competent viewpoint to address the history of disadvantages and leading factors contributing to divorce.

Resources

The divorce rate among African Americans is more likely to increase than their marital rates, highlighting the need for resources (Dixon, 2014). The decline in marriage rates among the African American community is an economic challenge. An economic

challenge that has benefitted from government intervention. In 1996 former president Clinton signed the personal responsibility and work opportunity reconciliation act (PRWORA). This act aimed to reform the welfare system (Straus et al., 2002). This act also created temporary aid to needy families through a program now known as TANF. The program provided funds to the states if they supported one of the purposes of TANF. Two of which were to reduce out of wedlock pregnancies and to increase the number of two-parent households in the United States (Nguyen, 2002).

In 2002 former President George Bush proposed the African American healthy marriage initiative as a component of the welfare reform. The main goal for the creation of this initiative was to reduce childhood poverty, which tends to be higher for children born to unmarried parents. This initiative intended to increase marital satisfaction in the African American community and tackle issues such as out-of-wed-lock births and incarceration that have systematically impacted marriage rates (Nguyen, 2002). In recent years we have seen an expansion of this program. Former President Obama expanded the program by adding fatherhood initiatives. Former President Trump wanted to promote marriage as an escape for poverty (Stewart, 2020).

Kelly et al., (2020) discussed effective approaches to counseling and therapy for Black couples. This study suggests considering two lenses through effective therapeutic intervention with Black couples. One approach utilizes a critical race theory lens, which acknowledges that racism is a systemic challenge in the United States and socially constructs oppression for people of color. The other lens is the Bronfenbrenner bioecological model, a helpful construct to view how systems influence racism for Black

couples. This system is also helpful in understanding the challenges and struggles of Black families (Kelly et al., 2020).

Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is a practical approach proposed by Nightengale et al. (2019). This case study sought to demonstrate the effective use of the approach when racial stress is a point of contention with an African American couple. The study found that clinicians could effectively utilize this approach to achieve the desired results. According to Nightengale et al. (2019), EFT has three critical stages. The first stage is de-escalation; during this stage, the couple identifies concerns and assesses their emotions. The second stage is restructuring. It involves their ability to express their wants and needs, and emotions. EFT can help couples access their pain and communicate it to improve the relationship (Greenburg & Johnson, 1988). The last stage is the consolidation stage, in which the therapist assists them with creating alternative solutions. According to Johnson et al. (1999), EFT is a practical approach to marital relationships based on understanding attachment.

This section addresses marriage within the African American community. Specifically, it addresses critical issues affecting marriage, divorce, and resources for increasing marital rates among African Americans. The US government has identified marital rates among African Americans as an economic challenge and a contributor to marital instability for African American couples (Straus et al., 2002). Implementing initiatives aimed at keeping Black families together was viewed as a strategy for lowering poverty rates within the community. Furthermore, it recognizes that EFT is a therapeutic intervention that helps support healthy marriages and addresses the unique issues that

Black couples encounter, emphasizing cultural competency and systemic awareness in therapeutic interventions (Kelly et al., 2020; Nightengale et al., 2019).

The Strong Black Woman in Modern Day Marriage

In the words of the great wordsmith Cardi B, “I don’t cook I don’t clean but let me tell you I got this ring.” Generation Z has been progressively changing the ideals of what marriage should look like. Sitcoms in the 1990s show cased families in a different light. For example, the Huxtables was a show that showcased marriage in a different light. It showed how a successful well-off Black couple navigated raising children and navigated through everyday marriage woes. Additionally, in the sitcom Martin, Martin and Gina were another prime example of a married couple who the viewers were able to witness from the start of their relationship until marriage.

There is a shortage of programs that show happily married and thriving Black couples. The current media focuses on drama when it comes to Black and brown families. For example, the Real Housewives franchise, instead of celebrating Black love the production company focuses on scandal and drama. Nearly every housewife on the show has gone through a divorce and relationships with multiple men. The power couples that most women of this new generation are idolizing follow rap superstars and media personalities that cheat and fail to accurately depict the loyalty and dedication that it takes to sustain a marriage. Marriage has shifted to a more modernized model as opposed to traditional ideals.

Traditional Marriage Versus Modern Marriage

In 1965, the state of Virginia legalized interracial marriage, giving Black people the freedom to marry whom they choose. In traditional marriages, gender-based roles were clearly defined, with tasks like cooking and cleaning primarily falling to the wife. A stay-at-home wife was financially dependent on her spouse, he was referred to as "bringing home the bacon," signifying the provider role of the husband. The husband typically assumed the position of the head of the household, prioritizing the family's needs above his own. Previously, in mainstream media, the traditional Black family was grossly underrepresented. In the 1970s Norman Lear created a Black sitcom with characters who portrayed the Black family experience. Characters like Florida Evans fulfilled the traditional role of a supportive wife despite economic hardships. In this sitcom in times of stress Florida would still follow the lead of her husband James. Florida could often be seen talking to the picture of Jesus hanging on their wall, and blessings would soon follow. Spirituality and religion are fundamentally important to the Black and African American communities' experiences (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Marks et al 2012).

Sacred vows and biblical teachings reinforce the submission of wives to their husbands in traditional marriages. Verses in the bible, such as Ephesians 5:22-23 tell wives to submit to their husbands (King James Bible, 2024). For many Black and African Americans, a successful marriage places God at the forefront. Marriages founded on religious principles are better positioned to prevail (Moore et al, 2021). For traditional marriage divorce was taboo until the early 1970s. While reviewing Stevenson and Wolfers' (2007) article, they note there were specific reasons behind the uptick of divorce

in the 1970s, one of the reasons being the rise of feminism. Additionally, Stevenson and Wolfer (2007) mention the Supreme Court acknowledged marriage as a fundamental right and legalized interracial marriage, while several states recognized no fault divorce.

Divorce was stigmatized, and couples expected to uphold their marital commitments despite challenges. Syrda (2023) discusses Becker's theory of specialization and bargaining theories concerning the wife being the primary earner in the marriage. Becker contends that societal norms and consequences influence the division between household and economic obligations between men and women (Becker, 1991). Syrda (2023) points out that children can increase the domestic responsibilities of the women in the household. Juggling domestic responsibilities, marital intimacy, self-care, providing care for children and maintaining a career simultaneously is a challenge that even the most seasoned spouse struggles to sustain.

As modern marital discussions evolve there are current discussions about whether romantic relationships should be 50/50. Given the traits and characteristics of SBW it is presumed that she will contribute more than her fair share of 50%. Is it possible for a self-identified SBW to only present 50% of herself in a relationship? In fact, in a study conducted by Hurt et al. (2014) the researchers aimed to understand Black men's perspectives on why Black women are single. The men discussed how strong and independent women might make it difficult to develop and sustain relationships in all aspects of the relationship.

Modern marriages emphasize equality, with partners jointly making household and family responsibility decisions. AAW have increasingly recognized their worth and

attained higher levels of education thereby reshaping marital dynamics. This dynamic was captured through characters such as Claire Huxtable from the 1980s sitcom "The Cosby show," who played the modern role of a supportive wife who was also a lawyer. The Cosby Show was so important for Black families because it redefined the Black family. It demonstrated healthy marital dynamics for an affluent AA family. Claire was able to effectively manage her roles as a mother and wife with her husband Heathcliff as a partnership rather than her spouse being dominant in the marriage.

In Hurt et al. (2014), the men also discussed their perception of the submission of Black women. Specifically, because Black women are independent, they might struggle with allowing the Black man to be dominant and fulfilling the submissive role in the relationship. Black women are among the most educated groups and can out earn their spouses (Council, 2021). The ability to remain submissive while Black women are out earning Black men poses a challenge in marriage or long-term relationships. After reviewing relevant research on the topic, it becomes evident that the teachings in the African American community about what it means to be a wife and to never rely on a man stemmed from historical disadvantages and oppressive experiences forcing Black women into self-reliance (Hall, 2018; Council, 2021).

Finkel et al. (2014) address the prioritization of needs in marriages after the year 2000, claiming that we are now in the era of self-discovery and expression. The shift recognizes the value of self-love and self-care while challenging traditional norms. Modern wives often prioritize communication and emotional well-being, understanding that healing and growth come from openness and support. Seeking assistance through

therapy and openly addressing issues have become acceptable, moving away from the silence and secrecy of the past in Black families. Advice from strong married couples from Skipper et al. (2021) share that communication promotes marital stability.

Justification for the Current Study

Declining Black Marriage Rates and the Strong Black Woman Schema

Black marriage rates have historically declined and according to Awosan and Hardy (2017) is becoming obsolete. The field of relationship science exhibits an imbalance in diversity when it comes to conducting studies on marriage, particularly among disadvantaged populations. The available literature on the SBW archetype reinforces the need to study their mental and physical health. Relevant studies such as Geyton et al., (2022); Jones et al., (2021); and Liao et al., (2020), support the need for further exploration of the SBW archetype and marital, intimate, and interpersonal relationships. These researchers identified a gap worth exploring related to the SBW schema or archetype calling on researchers to examine the characteristics of the SBW schema and its influence on marriage for Black and African American women. Davis (2021); Simon (2022) and Walker, (2020) further investigated the SBW schema and found that the schema can deter or influence relationships significantly.

For every 1,000 men and women, the marriage rate for Black women is 13.2% per 1,000 men and women. Of AAW between the ages 25-29, 79% have never married. Of AAW between the ages 30-34, 61.6% have never married (Census bureau, 2022). Williamson et al., (2022) conducted a systematic review of samples utilized in the examination of intimate relationships. Out of the 771 articles reviewed, only 74

encompassed non-Whites, low-income, and/or sexual and gender minority groups. These statistics in general show a lack of understanding of this marginalized group as it relates to how the SBW schema can impact or influence marital relationships. Williamson et al., (2022) criticisms reinforce the dire need for more reliable data focused on diverse populations.

While there is valuable data available on Black or African American marriage, it fails to accurately depict the modern-day experiences encountered by Black women who identify as an SBW. Such data supports the necessity of conducting further study that specifically examines the real-life experiences of individuals who identify with the SBW and modern-day marriage. The need for rich studies coupled with the statistics for Black couples lends itself to future inquiries examining this community. A community which has been drastically affected by lower marital rates and decreased marital success (Council, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020). Among those researchers, Abrams et al. (2018), Guyll et al. (2010), Jeremie-Brink and Chambers, (2019) and Kelly et al. (2020), support the need for future studies.

Relationship Quality, Health, and the Strong Black Woman Schema

Guyll et al., (2010) conducted a study investigating hostility, relationship quality, and health among African Americans. They associated hostility with this community based on African Americans lived experiences. Notably, they identified a need for more research on relationship satisfaction among African American couples due to their elevated rates of divorce and dissolution. They also emphasized the importance of studying positive outcomes for these couples. Although the study's generalizability is

noted as a limitation, it benefits from its applicability to AAW, who often serve as primary caretakers, a characteristic associated with the SBW archetype. Additionally, the results of the research indicate that the establishment of nurturing and transparent relationships among Black couples can help mitigate the harmful health effects of hostility for those predisposed to it (Guyll et al., 2010).

Contrary to Guyll et al., (2010), South (2021) focused her research on understanding psychopathology and romantic relationships. While she acknowledges that marriage goals have shifted towards meeting individual needs (Finkle et al., 2014), she also argues that marriage directly influences psychopathology. The lived experiences of AAW can heighten the risk of adverse health outcomes (Guyll et al., 2010; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). South (2021) provided a comprehensive analysis that examined and presented evidence supporting the idea that psychopathology impacts romantic relationships. The SBW schema functions as a coping mechanism utilized by Black women, and the characteristics associated with the schema are more susceptible to be expressed through romantic and marital relationships (Jeremie-Brink & Chambers, 2019). A key finding of South (2021) is that committed relationships have the capacity to both generate stress and support and can influence an individual's mental health. Similarly, Guyll et al. (2010) found that a strong, valuable relationship could successfully manage stress and promote good health for African American couples. Positive relationships promote health because they are without unhealthy conflict.

Marriage, Self-Love, and Strength Expectations for Black Women

Council (2021) challenges readers to examine marriage and why it matters among Black middle-class women beyond emotional connections. Noting that marriage is not without challenge and the Black women bear the brunt of it all with patriarchy ever-present. The researcher makes an excellent point regarding marriage as a communal effort to advance socially and address inequality. While Guyll et al., (2010) argues that there are advantages to being in a relationship characterized by mutual understanding of shared experiences, Council (2021) contends it is crucial to examine how these connections can generate strain for certain Black women in their journey toward self-love.

Unintentionally, Black women often forget to prioritize self-love. Because of how a Black woman loves those around her, she overextends herself, and her self-love can manifest in the ways she shows up for others. Harris (2021) said “Black women are not the blame.” With such pervasive stereotypes plaguing the Black woman, the world for Black women can be an isolating place. Finding and sustaining the right partner who will reciprocate need fulfillment and safety and belongingness is quintessential for the SBW.

Council (2021) discusses the importance of Black women embracing self-actualization, self-love, and self-autonomy to experience fulfillment. The expectation of strength imposed on women in this community has the propensity to affect how Black women present themselves in relationships. The expectation of strength is learned early among Black women albeit this expectation is not without impediment. Strength regulation may impede the ability for Black women to freely explore and express their

identities and experiences that make human (Davis & Afifi, 2019). Marital and intimate relationships can serve as a refuge for Black women to retreat and reawaken their humanness (Guyll et al 2010).

Abrams et al., (2018) emphasized the significance of comprehending the distinct viewpoint of Black women as it relates to Black masculinity to enhance marital and intimate relationships. Furthermore, they suggest the lived experiences and perspectives of Black women can help researchers achieve a more nuanced understanding of interpersonal and marital relationships involving Black men. A key finding in this study speaks to the significance of the lived experiences intertwined with racism and discrimination. These factors can directly influence relationship conflict which are critical to address when the goal is to increase marital satisfaction (p.159).

Strong Black Woman Schema and Stigma on Marital Success and Personal Growth

The stigma associated with the Black woman can impede marital success. The characteristics of SBW as discussed earlier in the study have the propensity to subconsciously endorse an independent mindset (Jeremie-Brink & Chambers, 2019). Watson et al. (2016) discuss independence as an expectation that aligns with the SBW endorsement. Their study found that women who sought support disqualified themselves since independence is a staple of the SBW endorsement, and a true SBW perseveres through her challenges independently. A participant discussed her challenges associated with being married and identifying as an SBW, particularly with the concept of being both masculine and feminine. This research called for future studies concerning how AAW choose which aspects of the SBW concept to embrace or reject. Previous literature

describes Black relationships as substandard and plagued with contention (Abrams et al., 2018, as cited in Reid, 2014). Furthermore, Davis and Jones (2021) highlight the perception that people view Black women as inept relationship partners and guarded against vulnerability. An inept partner in a relationship is ill-equipped to meet the needs of her partner and needs to gain the empathy, communication, and even conflict resolution skills needed to make it successful. Contrary to popular belief, studies conducted by researchers such as Vaterlaus et al (2017) demonstrate AAW are capable of having successful partnerships or marriages. However, it is essential for the strength of the marriage that they prioritize their personal growth and development.

Education, Identity, and Successful Marriages Among Strong Black Women

Prosperous marriages are undoubtedly prevalent among AAW. A standard reference point for the ideal of a prosperous Black couple's marriage is Barack and Michelle Obama. Michelle Obama is a Harvard Law School and Princeton University graduate. Research indicates that compared to their peers, Black women have more college degrees (Skipper et al., 2021). The level of schooling a man receives affects whether he decides to marry.

Skipper et al. (2021) noticed that Black women prefer "marrying up," which refers to marrying someone with a greater level of education or social position. Throughout Barack Obama's presidency, Michelle Obama found methods to advance as First Lady, launching activities geared at both continental and personal growth. This couple exemplifies need satisfaction in marriage while retaining their identities (Finkel et al., 2014). It is essential to recognize that no marriage is without challenges. According to

widely held beliefs about AAW in marriage and interpersonal relationships, a prominent pair like Barack and Michelle Obama defies the odds. However, the most significant issue to consider is the reason for the disproportionately high number of unmarried AAW compared to their peers.

According to Grover and Helliwell (2019), married couples who view their partner as their best friend report twice the level of life satisfaction as those who do not. The effects of a healthy marriage extend throughout generations in the family. However, Mouzon et al. (2020) note that because older AAW tend to have shorter lives than their counterparts and associate marriage with more caregiving and domestic duties, older AAW are less likely to seek marriage. AAW experience lower levels of marital satisfaction which reduces the benefits as experienced by this group (Alston-Brundage, 2023). Finkle et al. (2014) discuss the deinstitutionalization of marriage, and this study offers rich data in favor of the objectives of marriage in the modern day.

Marital Experiences of Strong Black Women: Exploring Relationship Dynamics

Peterson-Rochon (2020) conducted a recent study exploring the experiences of Strong Black superwomen. Many women shared insights into how the attributes of the SBW influence their romantic relationships. Notably, the conversation encompassed diverse perspectives, with some women perceiving marriage as detrimental to family dynamics, while others embraced this notion. The researcher proposed future studies to delve deeper into all identified themes, emphasizing the significance of the present study. Additionally, Davis (2021) highlighted that the adaptability of SBW schemas is especially evident within romantic and marital contexts due to the intricate nature of

relationship needs. Furthermore, the characteristics of the SBW serve as a framework for shaping interpersonal dynamics. The justification for this study is supported by researchers who have called for further examination of relationship status and the dimensions of the SBW schema.

The existing research indicates that AAW have a lower likelihood of achieving successful marriages compared to women of other ethnicities. There is limited understanding of the marital experiences of AAW who identify themselves as SBW, In essence, the literature concerning the lived experiences of AAW in modern marriages is presently minimal. This study seeks to investigate the experiences of AAW who identify as SBW, specifically focusing on their experiences inside contemporary marriages. An interpretative phenomenological analysis will address this topic. The current study will add more information to fill the existing gap in research concerning this group of women.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter introduces the defining characteristics of SBW and explores the application of the SBW schema within this study. In this study, the SBW is defined by five characteristics: (a) a duty to display strength, (b) a requirement to suppress emotions, (c) a resistance to vulnerability, (d) a determination to succeed despite limited resources, and (e) an obligation to assist others. The suffocation model and the SBW or SWS are introduced as conceptual frameworks guiding the study. Among the things discussed are the origins of SBW which includes a review of current literature. The characteristics of SBW are discussed in detail along with the suffocation of marriage for AAW.

Furthermore, the chapter examines the often-complex dynamics between African American mothers as role models for their daughters and the influence of fathers on AAW in terms of intimacy and relationships. Given that AAW's marriage rates are the lowest among all groups of women, 13.2 per 1,000 (Census Bureau, 2022), marital discussions about other ethnic groups prevail in the literature today. The low marriage rate among AAW compared to all other ethnic groups attributes to a variety of factors, including the systemic disadvantages that people of color experience, the education gap, the lack of available men as a result of incarcerations, and many aspects of SBW characteristics. This chapter also examines marriage, divorce, and resources in the African American community. Additionally, this chapter discussed the role of SBW in traditional versus modern-day marriages... Lastly, included in this chapter is a thorough justification of the need for the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to provide an impartial account of the experiences of married life for Black women who identify as a SBW and how women who identify with this phenomenon interpret it. Using the suffocation model and the SWS as conceptual frameworks, a descriptive IPA was utilized to address the perspectives and insights of women who identify as Strong Black AAW and was willing to candidly share their experiences. This chapter focuses on the IPA approach and presents justification for using the design. I examined and explained the role of the researcher, and methods for professionally limiting biases as they pertain to the topic, as well as constraints and ethical considerations that may interfere with the study.

The methodology section includes a detailed overview of topics such as participant selection logic, a discussion of sampling, and a focus on instrumentation, which specifies the data collecting technique and data analysis strategy. This study thoroughly investigated issues of trustworthiness, including validity, transferability, dependability, confirmability to identify any potential threats that could jeopardize the study's integrity. The discussion is immediately followed by a conclusion conveying the ethical practices implemented in accordance with Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards of practice.

Research Design and Rationale

This study aimed to answer the research question: What are the lived experiences of Modern-day marriage for women who identify as SBW? For this study, SBW is

defined by the self-identification with Woods-Giscombé, (2010) characteristics of a SBW. These characteristics include (a) obligations to manifest strength, (b) obligation to suppress emotions, (c) resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, (d) determination to succeed despite limited resources and (e) an obligation to help others.

Finkle et al (2014) discussed the idea that marriage has shifted to focusing on helping spouses meet their “autonomy and personal growth needs” (pg.2). Self-esteem and self-actualization as reflective of the concept of the hierarchy of needs as presented by Maslow (1943, 1954). The esteem needs include self-esteem, self-respect, sense of mastery, prestige, and respect from others. Self-actualization needs are defined by self-expression, personal growth, autonomy, spontaneity, and a realistic depiction of self-awareness.

The purpose of this study was to better understand SBW in modern marriages. The study sought to understand the unique set of perspectives and experiences of these women. I examined their relationship histories, attitudes on marriage need fulfillment, and the external circumstances that influence their perspectives and experiences. This might include relevant background information that predisposed them to accept the schema, such as family histories of marriage and partnerships, and the examination of the connection with their father or other masculine contemporary figures in their lives. Additionally, I explored how SBW's characteristics may impact their marriages. I examined initial acceptance of the SBW schema, including when they discovered they connected with the schema, what their early experiences were like, and the reported impact on the marital relationship.

The research tradition is a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) the research purpose and questions should connect to the research tradition. Qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed in this study. An IPA was chosen in this study because of its emphasis to describe and understand the phenomena in terms of creating meaning by focusing on the lived experience of the target group (Peoples, 2021). Phenomenology is the study of feelings as they are felt and experienced; it is the way we get access to the world as we live in and through it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Smith et al., (2009) discuss the origins of IPA and shared the methodology began within the field of psychology but has since expanded to many disciplines with a variety of topics to include mental health, emotions, and issues of identity. IPA provides the researcher with the opportunity to have a detailed understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by the individual (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). IPA is an experimental method based on the foundational principle of phenomenology, which examines human experiences. Introduced by Edmund Husserl, a renowned philosopher in the early 1900s, phenomenology emphasizes exploring lived experiences through self-awareness and introspection (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Husserl had a significant impact on IPA and is considered the father of phenomenology (Peoples, 2021). He is responsible for transcendental descriptive phenomenology. Husserl believed when focusing on a phenomenon preexisting knowledge should be suspended (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This process is completed using reduction, through bracketing. Additionally, IPA is an empirical approach, focusing on

the description of experiences for individual participants within the study, separate from others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This highlights their distinct perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation. IPA aims to understand how a specific condition affects an individual's life by combining phenomenology and Husserl's interpretative influence while employing an ideographic approach. This methodology allows for a profound exploration of the subjective experiences of the participants.

For this study, a phenomenological interpretative analysis was deemed appropriate. While exploring alternative methodological approaches, I considered a case study approach, which involves understanding and seeking meaning in either a single case or multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, I discarded this approach because it lacks sufficient emphasis on the lived experiences of the participants. Additionally, I also contemplated using an ethnography approach due to the cultural aspects of the study involving a unique group of people with a phenomenon exclusive to them, known as SBW (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethnography typically focuses on describing and interpreting common cultural trends within a specific group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Nevertheless, I concluded that a phenomenological approach would be more beneficial for the current study as it aims to comprehend the shared experiences among the group and delve into the essence of the phenomenon.

The Role of the Researcher

Researchers may assume different roles when conducting a study. The primary role of the researcher is to comply with ethical standards according to Walden University standards and the American Psychological Association procedures for conducting a

research study (American Psychological Association, 2017). Additionally, I assumed the role of a observer-participant, immersing myself in the community where the research was conducted. This involved joining social media support groups for Black women on Facebook during the study. Participating in these groups was advantageous as it helped me gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Additionally, as a participant observer, I interpreted the data gathered through interactions within the group. By actively listening to the participants, I aimed to capture and understand their lived experiences as described by them.

The researcher maintained a personal and professional distance from the participants in the study to avoid potential researcher bias and preserve the study's integrity. Despite identifying with a SBW and being married, the researcher considered their personal experiences an asset, enabling them to relate better to the participants and establish a genuine working relationship. Building a rapport is crucial in phenomenological studies, where participants may share emotionally charged personal experiences. Historically, recruiting African Americans for participatory research has been challenging.

To address ethical concerns, the researcher strictly functioned as the researcher, avoiding a dual role. I explored alternative methods to find participants and treat them with respect, encouraging their active involvement in the research. I remained mindful of my own feelings and thoughts to prevent any emotional transfer to the participants. Additionally, an interview guide was used to ensure that the data gathered was solely driven by the participants' responses.

Methodology

Participant Logic

IPA aims to understand another person's world and allows the participants to freely express their lived experiences which informs the study's findings (Patton, 2015). The participants in this study were married women of African American descent who identified as Strong Black women. All criteria for this study are for the sole purpose of maintaining a homogenous sample. The participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Smith and Nizza (2022) suggest that purposive sampling method is suitable for use with IPA as it emphasizes selected participants offering valuable insights into the experience under investigation. Snowball sampling is often used to access difficult to reach populations (Vaterlaus et al, 2017). The inclusion criteria for this study required the women to identify as African American to meet the participant selection criteria. African American is operationally defined in this study as a female of African descent who was born and raised in the United States of America and has African ancestry. The terms African American and Black are used interchangeably in the study. The rationale for choosing AAW as participants in the study was to restrict the findings to a particular population while emphasizing the unique perspectives and differences within this group.

For this study's purpose the AAW were to be married and in a monogamous heterosexual relationship for at least eight years. According to Skipper et al. (2021), half of all divorces in the African American community take place within the first seven years of marriage, a phenomenon often referred to as the "seven-year itch." This period

represents a critical time in marriage when the couple becomes acquainted with each other's habits, attitudes, and characteristics, leading them to either endure challenges or choose to pursue a divorce (Kulu, 2014). Therefore, I chose eight years because couples are no longer considered newlyweds and they have surpassed the seven-year itch which is commonly associated with marital challenges, and they are more likely to remain in stable marriages. A monogamous heterosexual relationship is operationally defined as a romantic or sexual relationship between individuals of different sexes or genders, specifically one woman and one man. The study's selection of heterosexual married couples serves two purposes: firstly, to investigate traditional or modern marriage across various time periods, and secondly, to examine relationships between couples of opposite sexes.

In the prescreening process, each potential participant was assessed for eligibility using a survey. However, since there were no pre-existing screening tools tailored specifically for married Strong Black Women and marriage, I developed a survey (see Appendix A). This tool was designed to determine the eligibility of participants based on several criteria. Participants were asked to identify as African American and confirm their involvement in a heterosexual monogamous marriage. Additionally, they need to have been married for at least eight years. To further determine eligibility, participants needed to identify with at least three of the following characteristics of the SBW, as described by Woods-Giscombé (2013):

1. Obligations to manifest strength, such as presenting an image of strength for the sake of their spouse, friends, and/or children.

2. Suppressing emotions, which involves hiding emotions from others due to a fear of displaying signs of weakness.
3. Resistance to being vulnerable or dependent on others, often resulting in the natural inclination to put up defenses to prevent others from taking advantage.
4. Determination to succeed despite limited resources, sometimes leads to sacrificing self-care and feeling the need to work harder than others to achieve goals.
5. Obligations to help others, where individuals may feel compelled to prioritize meeting the needs of others, often placing themselves last in the process.

Smith and Nizza (2022) examine the difficulties associated with maintaining the integrity of an IPA study in their work, focusing on the need for small sample sizes for IPA investigations and contend that 10–12 participants would be the appropriate number for doctorate students. Researchers should continue working until they reach saturation. Saturation is the point at which more data collection no longer yields new findings, signifying a complete understanding of the participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The ideal number of participants is 12-18, however this number may vary depending on when saturation occurs.

Participants in this study were voluntarily recruited through various methods. Social media platforms and forums specifically catering to married AAW were used to identify and recruit potential participants. Additionally, involvement in a community of married African American military spouses and attending events sponsored by Black sororities in the Dallas metropolitan area also aided in finding suitable candidates. Flyers

were posted on forums, containing contact information and a brief overview of the study, to further attract potential recruits. Interested individuals who volunteered received a statement of confidentiality and a thorough explanation of the study's purpose, significance, and eligibility criteria. The next step involved the screening process, where a survey was administered to determine participant eligibility. During this phase, participants were asked about their preferred method of contact, and they were contacted accordingly. Those who met the eligibility criteria participated in the study.

Instrumentation

A survey (see Appendix A) and an interview guide (see Appendix B) were the instruments used for this investigation. All interviews were conducted using Zoom, and were audio recorded with the consent of the participant to ensure the accuracy of the results. According to Smith and Nizza (2022), interviews served as the primary means of gathering data for IPA studies. Semistructured interviews with pre-written questions were utilized (see Appendix B). Active listening and probing are critical skills for the IPA researcher (Smith et al., 2009). Follow-up or probing questions were asked if necessary to ensure clarity and a complete understanding of the participant's experience. If needed the follow up interviews clarified initial data and responses provided until the meaning is clear (Giorgi, 1985).

The participants' real-world marital experiences as AAW who identify as Strong Black women informed the development of the study's questions. An interview guide was necessary. A guide with open-ended questions assisted with eliciting more comprehensive responses to answer the research questions. Content validity refers to how

well the guide effectively covers the constructs associated with the topic (Sanchez-Guardiola et al., 2021). The content validity of this instrument was measured according to the depth of the responses provided by those involved in the study.

Journaling is another form of instrumentation that was utilized. Journaling is an efficient way to document the researcher's experience when gathering data and offers an opportunity for later reflection on potential bias. Heidegger argued that through engaging with and experiencing the world around us, we may grasp and comprehend it (Horrikan-Kelly et al., 2016). Journaling assumptions and thoughts during the study and prior to data analysis is a productive approach of being aware of biases and bringing them to the forefront, as well as a way to visualize and document changes in cognition about the issue (Peoples, 2021).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation and Data Collection

Recruitment

Smith and Nizza (2022) explain crucial elements for conducting an IPA study for the novice researcher. The initial step is locating the participants. I located support groups via social media and contacted the groups' moderators to seek permission to recruit participants for the study. If permission was granted, I posted the flyer which included contact information and details of the study into the group forum in hopes of finding participants. The initial plan was to recruit using purposive and snowball sampling (Alase, 2017). The intended population may be difficult to reach as outlined by the characteristics of what is considered an SBW. With respect to the characteristics of being obligated to exhibit strength, suppressing signs of weakness, and resistance to being

vulnerable (Woods-Giscome et al., 2010) it was necessary to be open to the possibility of the continuous need for recruitment. Faugier and Sargeant (1997) discussed hidden groups with the use of qualitative research design and asserts snowball sampling may be the only feasible method to employ as it enables the researcher to use participant referrals. In this study snowball sampling was selected as a contingency plan in the event of too few participants. However, several participants volunteered for the study, and when scheduling conflicts arose, I moved to the next available participant. Data saturation was achieved with a total of 12 participants.

Participation

Those that elected to participate in the study were contacted and briefed about additional information pertaining to the study and screened for eligibility. Since they met the qualifications to participate and wished to proceed, the participants were given the option to choose the location of the interview or choose to complete a virtual interview. The location was a distraction-free location at the time that was preferred by the participant. Before the interview, I explained the purpose of the study, discussed how the data will be used, and reviewed the informed consent. I notified each participant that the interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder or video recorded using Zoom. Participants were provided with the opportunity to ask questions and voice any concerns about the study. After participants consented to participate, they were provided with a copy of the informed consent for their records. I provided contact details for both me and my chair, should any concerns arise. Building a rapport with the participant is necessary to build trust and reduce anxiety surrounding sharing their experiences. I established a

rapport by explaining the process, addressing any anticipations, and outlining the topics of the discussion.

Data Collection

The data collection method that I utilized in this study was semistructured interviews aimed at answering the research question which was the focal point in the study. The research question illuminated the lived experiences of modern-day marriage for women who identified as SBW. The questions within the guide focused on the current goals of modern-day marriage as described by Finkle et al. (2014, 2015), which are self-esteem and self-actualization. The research question sought to collect data about self-identified SBW and how their needs for self-esteem and self-actualization were met. The interview guide was crucial, as its use ensured that the information collected was rich in substance.

Prior to conducting the interview, I reviewed the interview guide with each of the study's participants to be certain they understood the questioning. This step was crucial so that the participants fully grasped the type of data each question aimed at collecting. The semistructured interview format enabled me to ask questions that delved into the participants' experiences and clarified any uncertainties. These interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes (Patton, 2015). I outlined the expected duration of the process and mentioned the possibility of follow-up interviews for data clarification, if necessary, followed by scheduling the interview.

Immediately following the interviews, a debriefing process was conducted to enhance the likelihood of successful subsequent interviews. Any remaining questions

were addressed to clarify the next steps and the intended use of the data. After the interviews, transcripts were created and emailed to the selected participants to review for accuracy, and it provided them with the opportunity to clarify their responses in effort to improve accuracy. Furthermore, participants received gratitude for their involvement, and each participant was notified that they would receive a link with the study's findings. During the debriefing, a disclosure of the need for follow-up interviews was discussed if there was a need. If any information was missing or inconclusive at that point, a subsequent interview was scheduled to assist in clarifying the data. The last step was to review the data collected from the interviews and lastly to use thematic analysis to discover patterns and themes that emerged from the data.

Data Analysis

Semistructured interviews were the only method of data collection utilized for this study. Upon concluding the interviews, my plan was to transcribe the interviews for further analysis using interpretive phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). I followed the data analysis steps as outlined:

1. Collect data through semi structured interviews
2. Transcribe and review the data
3. Code the data assigning preliminary meaning units
4. Categorization of data
5. Synthesize the data and categorize data by clumping into themes.

An extensive search for software was conducted for the purpose of finding an adequate software system to utilize in the analysis. NVivo is a popular system which

allows researchers to identify themes. NVivo was the selected software for use in this study to assist with the analysis. The approach to handling inconsistent cases begins with actively listening in the interview. In IPA studies the participants are the experts (Alase, 2017). Listening for moments of clarification or watching nonverbal cues could aid in mitigating discrepant cases.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Creswell and Poth (2017) focus on methods aimed at ensuring validity in a research study. These methods are designed to establish the credibility or internal validity of the study's results, a topic also explored by Mirriam and Tisdell (2016). In essence, this validity pertains to the reliability of the research's findings. To enhance the research's reliability, thoroughly screened all participants to ensure a homogenous group. I also utilized member checks to uncover alignment between initial findings and the intended interpretations provided by participants, thereby reducing the potential for misinterpretation. This was achieved by selecting four or five participants who were provided with their interview transcripts and the preliminary findings via email to complete the member checking process. Additionally, strategies like peer assessment was utilized to assess the plausibility of the research, and I continued data collection until a saturation point is reached, where no new or emergent themes emerged, thereby enhancing the study's credibility. The alignment of theory, data collection methods, and analysis, as outlined by Stenfors et al. (2020), contributed to the study's credibility.

Transferability

Transferability pertains to the external validity and encompasses the extent to which the research and its findings can be applied more broadly. Achieving transferability requires the inclusion of "detailed descriptions to make it possible," (Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 254). This requires providing a thorough, in-depth depiction of the study and its participants. The effectiveness of transferability is dependent on the capacity of the researcher to deeply engage with the data and convey it in a manner that offers sufficient justification and rationale for individuals who resonate with the study. I acknowledge transferability may be difficult outside of this population because of the SBW characteristics, but it may still apply to other cultures and marriages that have similar traditions, roles, and values. This allows readers to trust in the study's findings (Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Dependability

The issue of dependability is essentially the consistency of the study and ensures that if another researcher replicated the study the findings would be similar. An audit trail is a common way to establish dependability. With an audit trail an outsider reviews the study to review the study's conclusions in search of finding out if the data collection methods are appropriate for the study. In addition to the audit trail, Stenfors et al., (2020) states the descriptive nature of data collection and analysis should be specified in sufficient detail for someone else to follow the same procedures. The data analysis encompasses a repetitive process by which each interview is reviewed and thoroughly examined alongside its notes. Moreover, illustrating the reliability within this study

encompassed an iterative strategy whereby I consistently kept a journal throughout the entire process. This practice assisted me in staying conscious of my thoughts and potential biases, while also enabling a review of data and its accuracy before progressing to the analysis phase (Patton, 2015).

Confirmability

Confirmability of research is the manner in which the study is able to be confirmed by researchers if the study is replicated (Patton, 2015). An effective strategy to establish confirmability of a study is reflexivity. Reflexivity is a strategy which allows me to reveal any biases concerning the research. Throughout the study I journaled biases and beliefs that have the potential to influence the results. Consciously making myself aware of my thoughts could enable me to revisit data I made assumptions about. According to Stenfors et al. (2020), researchers' capacity to present "findings through detailed descriptions and the use of quotes" demonstrates confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

Human participants were treated respectfully in this study, with a strong commitment to ethical considerations. The institutional review board (IRB) provided specific guidelines for study conduct, and approval from the IRB is mandatory for studies affiliated with Walden. The IRB approval process involved submitting Form A, addressing IRB requests, finalizing documents after proposal approval, and obtaining final study approval. Participants were recruited from social media support groups via flyers. Participant confidentiality is paramount, and each participant received a consent form and an explanation of the study's purpose. Upon agreement, consent was exchanged

via email. The participant consent forms were included in the appendices. Data was password protected and in a securely locked home to ensure privacy, with sole access by the researcher. Additionally, all data will be retained for five years following the completion of the study and then securely destroyed.

In qualitative studies, ethical concerns arise, particularly in recruiting African Americans for participatory research. To address this, the search was broadened to engage a stronger participant pool. In phenomenological research, participants' personal experiences are sensitive. Prioritizing participants' well-being is crucial, as outlined by Smith and Nizza (2022). Virtual interviews, discussed by Smith and Nizza (2022), are acceptable but lack the same duty of care as in-person interviews. The study aimed to balance thorough descriptions of phenomena with ethical responsibility, guided by the principle of doing no harm (American Psychological Association. 2017).

Summary

The method of data collection employed in this study is semistructured interviews. The interviews aim to examine the experiences of modern-day marriages for Black and AAW who endorse the SBW characteristics. This chapter discussed the IPA approach and presented justification for using the design. This chapter also examined the researcher's role, and the qualitative methodology to include a discussion on sampling, recruitment, and participation. Data analysis procedures were presented as well. Lastly, ethical considerations that may interfere with the study, and trustworthiness. All topics discussed in this chapter are aimed at contributing to the gap in literature concerning

Black and African American women who identify as an SBW. Chapter four discusses data collection, data analysis and evidence of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study explored the lived experiences of married Black women who identified as a SBW and how persons who identified with this phenomenon interpreted it. This study posed the question: What are the lived experiences of modern-day marriage for women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW)? The study explored the experiences of modern-day marriages for Black and AAW who endorsed the SBW characteristics. The study's purpose was to explore women's feelings and emotions as they related to how characteristics of SBW presented in their marriage.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the settings that may have influenced the participants' experiences or interpretation of the study's results. Additionally, this chapter also examines the demographics and characteristics that are significant to the study. The demographics were previously discussed in Chapter 3 but are revisited here in terms of their relevance to the study. Following this, the chapter presents evidence to support the trustworthiness of the research. The chapter concludes with the presentation of the results and a brief, transitional introduction to Chapter 5.

Setting

The interviews were conducted via Zoom because many of the participants were located across various geographic regions. There were not any personal or organizational conditions that affected the participants' experiences or the interpretation of the findings. Participants were offered the opportunity to choose the time of the interview so that they were comfortable in a natural setting.

Demographics

This study was comprised of 12 married AAW residing in various geographical regions across the United States. All participants were at least 21 years of age. Each woman had to have been in a monogamous heterosexual marriage for more than eight years. Additionally, each participant self-identified with at least three characteristics associated with the SBW identity. The participants' demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information

Participant	Years married	Number of children	Family structure growing up
Lynn	10	4	Dual parent
Joan	19	2	Single parent
Maya	14	3	Dual parent
Antoinette	11	5	Dual parent
Pam	16	2	Dual parent
Gina	10	2	Dual parent
Justice	19	3	Single parent
Monica	20	2	Single parent
Jada	10	8	Dual parent
Ashley	12	3	Dual parent
Hillary	14	2	Single parent
Vivian	10	2	Dual parent

Note. This table uses pseudonyms for the women.

Data Collection

After IRB approval was given, (IRB approval # 02-04-25-0673968), I conducted semistructured, face -to-face interviews with 12 married AAW. The interviews,

conducted via Zoom platform, lasted between 30-60 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed using the Zoom platform. The researcher adhered to the guidelines established in the IRB approval Process. There were no variations from the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3, and no unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection phase of the study.

Data Analysis

The data was collected through semistructured interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed through the Zoom platform. After the recordings were transcribed, it was then loaded into a Microsoft document in which the researcher reviewed the transcripts to ensure accuracy and to gain familiarity with the data. The transcripts were formatted with margins that provided space to record codes and analytic notes throughout the coding process. The codes were then exported into an Excel document to complete step three assigning preliminary meaning units.

It is important to note that I initially intended to use N-Vivo Software for the analysis, however due to the expense associated with NVivo, I decided to hand code the transcripts and use Microsoft Excel to organize and formulate the data analysis. Once the codes were exported into Excel, I reviewed the codes to reduce overlapping codes and eliminate redundancy. After the reduction of the data, the codes were then placed into categories based on their similarities. A within Case First approach was taken to ensure the researchers' understanding of each woman's lived experience.

This detailed approach was replicated with each of the semi structured interviews. After all of the interviews were completed, the researcher then compared all participants

to identify common patterns and noted any divergent experiences. Emerging themes represented the core lived experiences of participants and included four themes and one sub theme. The results presented in this chapter emerged through an analytic process documented in an audit trail. This audit trail includes the progression from raw transcripts to codes, categories, and themes across all 12 participants, ensuring transparency in how the interpretations were reached (see Appendix D).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Evidence of Trustworthiness in qualitative research, is a critical criterion for ensuring the quality of the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Trustworthiness encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I incorporated each of these components to strengthen the rigor of the study and ensure that its conclusions are trustworthy.

Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data and a systematic coding process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe prolonged engagement as a strategy for gaining deep understanding through sustained interaction with the raw data. In this study, it was achieved by conducting multiple rounds of transcript review, engaging in iterative cycles of coding and recoding, and developing analytic memos that documented and supported the coding process. Member checks were also conducted to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and reduce the potential for misrepresentation. As Birt et al. (2016) note, member checking is a key strategy for enhancing credibility in qualitative research. Credibility was further supported through triangulation, as the experiences of all 12 participants were cross-checked for convergences and any

divergence during cross-case analysis. Direct participant quotes were incorporated into the findings to provide clear evidence for the interpretation. Finally, data collection continued until saturation was reached, strengthening the overall credibility of the study.

The transferability was supported through the use of the SBW Schema as a cultural framework, which outlines the specific characteristics tied to this identity. The participants offered detailed descriptions of their backgrounds, and family influences, providing rich context for their experiences. Purposeful sampling was used to find women who identified with the SBW schema, ensuring the study focused on a population with shared and meaningful experiences. Since transferability may be difficult outside of this population because of the unique SBW characteristics, verbatim participant excerpts are included so that readers can see the depth of participants' voices and determine how these insights may apply to other contexts.

The dependability was established through maintaining a detailed audit trail as described earlier in this chapter. Excel provided the necessary structure to organize transcripts, apply codes, cluster categories, and track how themes developed. Excel proved to be an effective alternative for systematic coding and documentation. The use of Excel did not lessen the accuracy of the analysis; rather, it ensured flexibility and transparency while remaining consistent with qualitative research standards.

The confirmability as indicated in Chapter 3 was supported by reflective journaling and bracketing, which helped to mitigate researcher bias and ensured the findings were only grounded in the participants' lived experiences. Member checks were conducted to validate the accuracy of descriptions, further strengthening the transparency

of the analysis. In addition, direct participant quotes are included in the findings to illustrate and substantiate the themes, allowing readers to see how the descriptions were drawn from the data itself.

Results

The lived experiences of modern-day marriage for women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) were captured in the following five themes: SBW identity: resilience and burden, marriage expectations and models, partnership and intimate communication, resilience and renewal and, as a subtheme, military marriage as an amplifier. The themes derived from data collected in the interviews with 12 AAW. Each theme is explored in depth in the subsections to follow.

Table 2

Categories and Themes

Theme	Categories
SBW identity: Resilience & burden	Inherited SBW identity; Invisible labor; Overfunctioning & overcommitment; Rejecting SBW narrative
Marriage expectations & models	Parental influence; Faith traditions; Media representations
Partnership and intimate communication	Teamwork and friendship; Rejecting rigid 50/50 roles; Flexible role-sharing and intentional communication; Clarity in expressing needs; Love languages; Intimacy as multidimensional (time, touch, rituals, empathy, sex)
Resilience and renewal	Self-care reframed as survival; Marriage evolving; Counseling/therapy as proactive or restorative; Village and community support; Outsourcing help
Military marriage as amplifier	Military life magnifies each theme: SBW burden, role flexibility, intimacy challenges, self-care demands, and adaptation to deployments

Note. This table demonstrates the themes and categories from the participant interviews.

Strong Black Woman Identity: Resilience and Burden

This theme reflects how participants understood and navigated the SBW identity within their marriages. All 12 women described moments when they first recognized themselves within the SBW schema and reflected on how it shaped their marital experiences. Many characterized the SBW identity as automatic and inherited, passed down through family models or reinforced by cultural expectations. For example, Joan shared, “I watched my mother do everything on her own, and I thought that was just what being a wife meant.” Similarly, Pam described the SBW role as a spectrum and states “you can be anywhere along the spectrum,” while Gina explained, “SBW is the pillar of the family... modeled across generations.” Ashley recalled, “My single mom influenced my independence,” and Hillary added, “Self-sacrifice and strength were instilled in youth.” Collectively, these accounts illustrate how many AAW felt they had little choice in endorsing the SBW role.

Participants also emphasized that this identity required ongoing sacrifice, as society imposed unrealistic expectations of strength upon them. Lynn explained the constant “pressure to be strong ... sacrificing needs for the sake of spouse.” Several of the women expressed exhaustion and a desire to distance themselves from the label. Joan stated that she wished to reject the SBW narrative by stating “learning not to subscribe to everything can be healthy too.” Similarly, Antoinette reflected, “You can’t be Wonder Woman, it’s not real, but I’m doing my best.” Justice echoed this sentiment, noting, “It is okay to not portray yourself as a SBW, we don’t have to be everything to everybody all the time.” Vivian also described her “wish to abandon the SBW trope. She states “I wish

black women could just be. Be all of the things without these tropes or ideas, like hanging over our heads or in our minds. And sometimes it's hard. It's hard to separate from that”.

The burdens of the SBW identity were often tied to strain in marriage and relationships, leading to over functioning and overcommitment.

Antoinette reflected on this imbalance:

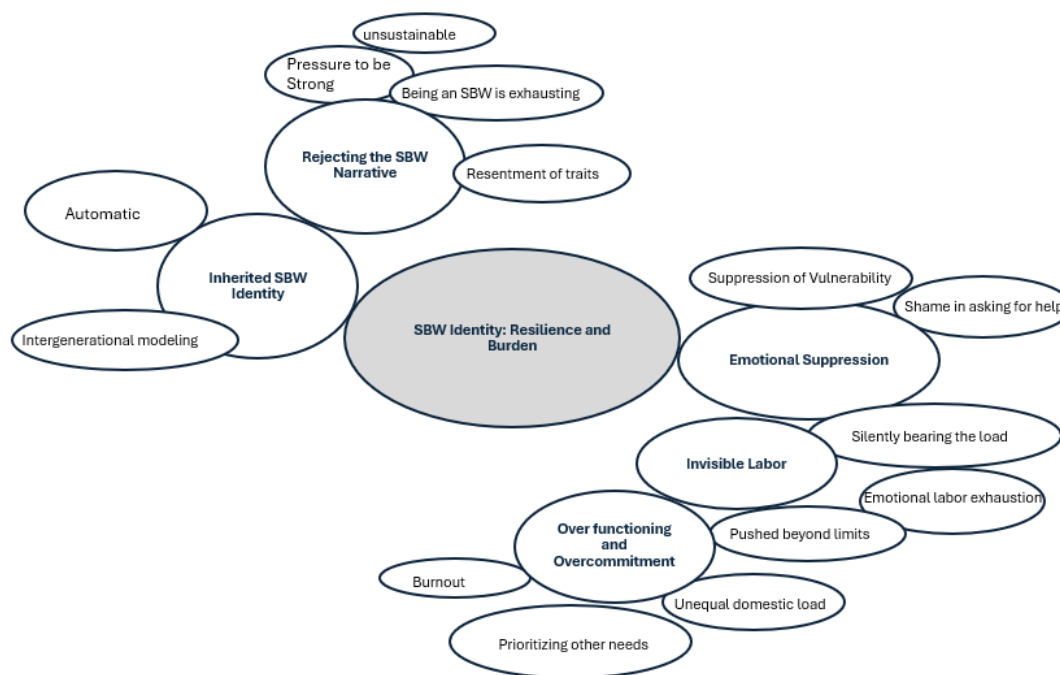
It's important to truly find ... not just purpose in your career, but to avoid overworking yourself, finding true balance where you feel content and not stressed and overworked ... waking up at night thinking about what you've got to do the next day ... that's not really living.

Gina stated, “There is resentment from over functioning ... SBW carry the domestic responsibility load.” Others pointed to emotional suppression as another burden reserved for SBW. Monica described silently bearing the load by stating “when it needs to be done, I'll get it done because of that I have to mute strength”. While Ashley noted “As the strong black woman, there's a lot of things that are put on my plate assuming that I'm just supposed to be able to figure out how to manage it. And that can feel overwhelming at times.” Vivian stated,

I wish the idea of being a strong, bad woman would go away I wish that Black woman could just be ... because we already have this double consciousness of living in this White patriarchal society that we call America it's almost like a triple consciousness, I guess cause you're like being Black you're being a woman, and just so many things you hold into your mind.

Figure 1

Cluster Diagram of the SBW Identity: Resilience and Burden Theme



Marriage Expectations and Models

This theme reflects how participants' expectations of marriage were shaped by early family models, including parental relationships, faith traditions, and cultural media representations. Many participants described growing up with visible representations of marriage that provided a framework for what they believed an enduring union encompasses. For example, Lynn drew from both her mother and media depictions, stating, "I would probably say my mom and honestly, probably Claire Huxtable ... I made a Claire Huxtable life. I'm an attorney. I got like 4 kids so, I guess I was trying to be her."

By contrast, Joan came from a family history of divorce, but she explained how this shaped her determination: “It made me want to do it, do things what I would consider the right way. Try to have a healthy marriage work things out ... Want a long, lasting marriage forever ... Want to do it God's way.”

Several women shared how their fathers also influenced their expectations. Antoinette, for instance, grew up close to her father but saw him as a model of what not to look for in a partner. She shared, “my dad showed me what not to look for in a man to be honest.” Pam recalled that marriage was always inevitable within her family stating, “Marriage was always talked about in my family as the next step; it was just expected.”

Additionally, several participants shared that they often looked at television shows for examples of what a healthy family looked like. Shows like *The Cosby Show* and *Family Matters* were repeatedly cited among the participants. Maya reflected, “We didn't have many healthy marriages around us, so I thought of the *Cosby's* as the example.” Similarly, Gina echoed this reliance on media, sharing,

I come from a family of women who have been married to men ... out of necessity versus maybe preference, no one ever really sat me down and was like this is what a wife encompasses. The wife was based on what I saw on TV like *Family Matters*.

Similarly, Ashley admitted she lacked a clear blueprint and stated, “I don't know if I had a blueprint beyond seeing things on TV maybe the *Huxtables* is what stands out as maybe something that I would have aspired to be.”

When asked about the blueprint and earliest recollections about being a wife Hillary also mentioned the influence of media.

I didn't have it familywise ... seeing the Cosby show. I remember that seeing Steve Urkel show, and the mom being there and being present, and her demeanor and stuff like that is where I learned what a wife should look like, what a wife should be. It wasn't necessarily what I seen at home. But those characters to me.... I looked up to, because that's what I wanted to be one day.

Vivian traced her earliest ideas about marriage back to her church upbringing, stating, It came from the church honestly I'm from the South, grew up in southern Virginia and we went to Baptist church ... I think it came from the church, and that is an antiquated example. But what we were taught is that women are the helpmate and men are the head of the household, the providers.

Similarly, Jada described faith as a foundation to her expectations of marriage: "I always saw marriage as a godly commitment, something you endure."

Partnership and Intimate Communication

This theme captures how participants viewed their marriage as a partnership requiring open communication, emotional connection and flexibility in roles. Across participants, roles within modern-day marriages were defined by teamwork, mutual support, and friendship, which were consistently viewed as critical to sustaining their relationships.

Lynn highlighted how gender roles in her marriage often became blurred: "my husband can cook, clean laundry if he has to, he can at least throw our girl's hair in a bun

the gender roles get blurred.” She also shared the best advice she ever received from her mother was “to not look for 50-50 ... you're just giving the best you have at that time and it's not always equal.” Joan discussed the need to petition for partnership with her spouse, noting that despite sharing responsibilities, she often carried an unequal burden. She reflected, “identifying as a Black woman, I feel like the partnership is definitely a struggle.” She elaborated further:

I'm putting in all this work, working full-time, doing all this work, taking care of the entire household. and wanting the man to be proactive in that role as well,... take the lead in that in some of that stuff as well ... in some stuff ... the woman feels exhausted because you are doing so much and you're not. And then you have to petition for partnership on top of that. That's exhausting.

Similarly, Maya emphasized the importance of acceptance and reinforcing partnership:

“my husband cooks breakfast all weekend he is breakfast man ... I don't even cook breakfast anymore” And “also states I don't think that 50-50 business is legit anymore it doesn't make any sense because we all can't be 50-50, we can't even be 100%.”

Antoinette also spoke about the importance of teamwork and spousal support, while Pam described feeling obligated to work and carrying the majority of household tasks as an SBW. Pam stated,

There is no 50-50 that's a lie that they tell women to get them to get married, he did the 80% and I did 20% because that's what he's good at a lot of times the women end up doing a lot more of it.

Justice echoed this sentiment, stating simply, “it's never 50-50 no matter what you do no matter how much you try.” Monica, a military spouse, rejected the idea of gender roles altogether, saying “military spouse of a person on sea duty. There will be long days and long nights. And you just gotta get stuff done. And the strength will come.” She added, “there's no such thing as 50-50. If I had to tell anybody. That's the equality to me. 100% commitment from him, 100% commitment from me.” Jada took a somewhat more traditional approach, describing her marriage as rooted in equality and collaboration: “it can be equally distributed. Male or female, we equally share; we equally do the same exact thing.” She added, “You work with your spouse, ...you don't work against your husband.” Ashley rejected rigid roles, stressing that balance was key: “I don't know if I believe there's a 50-50 ... I think that when you're in a relationship. There's always gonna be a give and take.” Hillary and Vivian, both military spouses, shared similar perspectives on blurred roles and the rejection of 50/50 ideals. Hillary further explained, “I don't cook. I did the cooking for about a good 10 years, I'm checked out. I'm not doing 50-50, we don't do 50-50.” Vivian also described how military life shifted responsibilities. Vivian stated,

I think those gender roles get blurred because you're doing everything. For the most part, because your service member is so focused on the mission for the military, so you take over the home, you take care of the home, the roles get Blurred at a certain sense.

Communication is framed as a foundation of marriage and the majority of participants discussed the importance of communication as a means of having or

navigating healthy conflict, maintaining balance and supporting need fulfillment within your marriage. Lynn stated, "Having a vision having a dream being able to verbalize that not being afraid of conflict. I think that's hard for women to do to be able to just very bluntly. State what they need from their partner."

Maya stated, "a lot of people are still not communicating in their marriages, and that's why they're. divorce rate is insane right now." Gina recognized love languages as a measure to ensure her needs are fulfilled., Gina stated:

For me it was recognizing his love language to me, because my love language is different or even a relationship, knowing your partner's love language, because they could be doing stuff for you all day long. But if you're not recognizing it as like an act of love. You know it can cause issues.

Justice stated, "Being a better communicator,... I always encourage people to express their feelings and say how they feel and what they're thinking and not hide that part of themselves." Monica stated, "learn the communication style of your spouse and operate with that, it's all about understanding what your spouse needs and adhering to that, leaving your emotions out." Jada stated, "You have to communicate be able to talk to your spouse, you got to communicate, communication is key." Similarly, Ashley stated, "Through communication. We're kind of in a good, steady state in trying to balance the responsibilities". Lastly, Hillary added "communication is key ... communication it's a big part of marriage, and I found that being able to communicate, I don't have many moments where I try to ask for help."

Emotional intimacy, vulnerability, and sexual connection were described as critical for ensuring stability in marriage. For participants, intimacy was not defined by a single act but emerged as a blend of emotional, physical, spiritual, and relational practices. Lynn explained, “every Sunday we sit at the kitchen table, and the kids are not allowed to sit with us, and we drink our coffee and pastries ... We don't really do date nights.” Similarly, Joan reflected,

I think in the beginning we spent a lot of time together. Especially as newlyweds and before children ... as we just grew over time we're not at the same phase we were when we were brand new ... you evolve, and you understand, and you enjoy your own space.

Maya highlighted the ongoing balance of needs, stating the following:

When you have young children ... balancing our personal, professional, physical, and intimate needs has been a labor of love and duty ... he revalidates my attractiveness, he revalidates that he wants to be married to me, that this is a partnership he does that every day.

Antoinette shared how intentional scheduling supports connection: “My husband actually helped me ... I send him my schedule ... we do it on Google Calendar, and he'll put a time in there for us.” Other participants emphasized intimacy as companionship and physical closeness. Justice explained,

You can't have intimacy by yourself,... you could but it's not the same ...I communicate that I need it when I need it, or I just interjected in the day to day.

Monica also noted the role of different love languages:

I cling to the idea of; you show people how to treat you like acts of service. His thing is physical touch and quality, time. So here I am, giving love the way I want and not the way he needs it. And with that being said, I have had to work towards showing him the love that he needs. While realizing I may never get it the way I need it.

Quality time as a means of building intimacy was another recurring topic. Jada shared, “Vacations, quality time ... you need time with each other.” Ashley echoed this, stating,

We may schedule to do like a date night, and one of the couples that we know wants to go out and do a painting ... making sure you're spending time together to maintain that relationship..., being deliberate about planning.

Finally, Hillary described how intimacy also meant vulnerability in moments of need:

At times where I do feel weak I feel like my love meter is low, you know it's okay for me to express that to him, and that's for him to know ... he needs to you know love on me a little bit more.

Resilience and Renewal

This theme reflects how participants sustained themselves and their marriages through self-care, personal growth and ongoing adaptation throughout their marital journey. This process requires continuous renewal, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. For many participants, self-care was reframed not as a luxury but as a necessary strategy for survival within the demands of marriage and family. The women emphasized that

preserving their mental, physical, and emotional well-being was essential for sustaining themselves and, by extension, their marriages.

Lynn reflected on this shift, noting, "I'm about to be 40, and so this is kind of like my year to start taking care of me." Similarly, Joan explained, "I definitely take time for myself and get out. And I mean, even if it's just going up—going to the grocery store, I might be at the grocery store for 2 hours."

Antoinette described reclaiming balance by intentionally carving out personal space, stating, "That it's important to truly find... not just purpose in your career, by overworking yourself, but finding true balance to where you feel content and not stressed and overworked." Pam also highlighted the need for individuality within marriage: "Remain an individual, yes, it's a partnership that you're in, but you are still your own person, and you need things individually that fulfill you, so have some hobbies, have a support system."

Other women described more practical approaches to preservation. Gina shared, "I have also started doing like little getaways, just for myself for a couple of days, not have to worry about anybody else's needs other than my own." For Ashley, self-care was tied to spirituality: "I think I do have protected time for myself things I feel like I'm pouring into myself because I enjoy ... studying and working on myself., I go to church, which I feel like is for me." Similarly, Hillary emphasized reflection, noting, "You also got to reflect on your own self-care ... on yourself sometimes, and that's not a bad thing."

For many participants, marriage was described as an evolving journey. A journey that consistently changes through phases and seasons. Lynn stated, "Different stages have

resulted in different levels of like Togetherness ... we just keep telling each other this is a season, but you know that's kind of where we're at and we know that this is just a season.”

Joan reflected on this shift over time, stating,

I think in the beginning we spent a lot of time together especially as newlyweds and before children ... as we just grew over time, we're not at the same phase we were when we were brand new ... you evolve, and you understand, and you enjoy your own space.

Similarly, Maya described the ongoing adjustments required across stages of marriage: “When you have young children ... balancing our personal, professional, physical, and intimate needs has been a labor of love and duty.”

Gina stated,

Try to see a person through like all seasons of life, which is hard when you're not, you know you're just dating and things like that but like how does this person like, you know, if something traumatic is happening in their life like, how do they deal with stress? How do they you know adjust just through all seasons of life.

Ashley shared, “I think there's just this mutual respect and understanding that. We all have different needs at different phases, and we have to be willing to. Understand, compromise, and meet each other's needs, whatever that may be.” Monica shared,

We're not able to just go ... and just be ... we don't have that, and we are desperately needing a ... moment... but we work with what we have, and we just keep it going. What works well is again, the understanding ... It's not that time for

us yet. Its the understanding ... Of knowing where we are. And just dealing in this moment in this season.

Pam, along with many other of the participants, indicated they would be okay with outsourcing help to preserve time and energy for self-care and to dedicate intentional time to their spouses. Pam stated,

we came up with the solution that we were going to have a cleaning lady ... a friend suggested like, hey, you know, why are you fighting about this in your marriage? Get a cleaning lady, and I was like no, no Black women don't do these things, we don't have women come into our house ... why would I do that? and she literally had to say so, you would rather sacrifice your marriage?

Similarly, Antoinette stated "He cleans up more than I do If he can't clean up ... we'll pay somebody to come do a deep clean of the house." Gina stated, "if you don't have like a lot of women, don't have like a village it's important to build that village or make sure you have access to the resources for support." She stated, "we don't have support, I have my husband and support, but ...I can't burn him out so I hired a postpartum Doula, I hired a birth Doula."

Additionally, therapy and counseling were also viewed as critical tools for sustaining this growth and realigning with their partners. Most women recommended counseling, either as a proactive step before problems arose or as a repair strategy when challenges became overwhelming. Lynn stated "We have actively gone to marriage counseling and stuff, because we were like we do not want this to be our habit." Joan

stated, “I think learning that person and accepting it, and then counseling you need counseling you just do, because neither one of you has the answers to life.” Maya stated,

Please go into therapy. That's one of the things that ... I would say our parents didn't really fully support. It wasn't until ... my parents' marriage was starting to collapse ... we did marital therapy for about a year, and we have like touch and go sessions here. And then, just to make sure that our communication skills are up to snap.

Antoinette described counseling as preventative, stating, “The deeper the premarital conversations, the better prepared you are—therapy is not just for when something is broken.” In contrast, Gina shared that counseling was sought after strain had already taken a toll: “I went to counseling because I felt like we had gotten off track, and it was the only way to help us get back to a good place.”

Pam stated, “I didn't do premarital counseling, and I wish I had so I tell all young Black women to do premarital counseling because there are things that you never think about.” Gina stated, “I would encourage Black women to whether it's therapy or figuring out ...how to cope so that you don't have to take on those characteristics of the strong Black woman in your marriage.”

For some, therapy was framed as part of ongoing marital maintenance. Jada emphasized its role in long-term resilience: “Counseling grows your marriage—it's not just for fixing issues; it's for keeping things healthy.” Ashley echoed this by tying therapy to personal development, stating, “I enjoy working on myself ... therapy is for me, but it also strengthens us as a couple.” Vivian stated,

Counseling, I'm a huge advocate for that so I would say, anybody that's in a relationship would want to get counseling, counseling helps even when you're doing well counseling just really helps you get through a lot of those blind spots or things that you didn't know that you were doing, or things that your partner may not know that they're doing.

Pam also emphasized the importance of connecting and developing friend groups with other couples by stating,

To Black people, Black couples getting together sharing with each other developing friendships. I find that's not that easy to do, it's hard but if you can make those connections, I think it's very important.

Military Marriage as an Amplifier

Although not all participants were affiliated with the military, those who were described how military life amplified the demands of marriage. Lynn stated, "I see a lot of people break up after their spouses leave the military because they got really tied to their Position in life." Maya stated,

We went into the military, not. Truly understanding, the true bucket of sacrifices it's like an unfilled bucket. It's a never-ending bucket, of giving to the military....

I was one that was full time, working gave up my job so he could go to join the military, so he can buffer up his career, so that we'd be on a more even keel.

Monica described the following about military life:

There's a misconception that you come into a life of luxury. You actually come into a life of super reality ... you have to deal with whatever goes on with your

spouse's career while maintaining the home. While maintaining your own growth in your own self, and if you have children ... Many people don't really. Really, understand ... The question then becomes ... Did I marry the right person?

Many of the military spouses who were included in the study discussed the need for a village due to the isolation from friends and family. Ashley stated,

as a military family, when we're geographically separated, usually from our families. Really, it increases the stress because we don't have anybody else, we can rely on like it'd be nice if I could call my mom and say, hey can you come, watch the kids.

Lynn discussed the importance of support and building a village she stated "In the military ... it can be difficult to find a village ... to be able to find support." Joan stated "I have my tribe. I have another group of ladies a group of married friends,... I have these different groups of other Black women that I connect with in different ways." Maya stated, "I need to lean on someone else it's impossible without a village and I mean that's why so many of us seek out villages."

Hillary stated,

there was a point where I was so. Jealous of my husband. Because of his military career. He was constantly getting promotions, and I was constantly jumping from job to job. Never could have anything stable. And I'm like, how do I get ahead. If I'm constantly having to follow you.

Vivian stated,

I think when you identify as a strong Black woman. And you're in a military marriage those gender roles get blurred ... because you're doing everything for the most part, because your service member is so focused on the mission for the military ... I just truly believe that my answers would be totally different or are totally different than someone who doesn't have just have that, added weight of military life.

Forward-Projecting Perspectives

The participants offered advice for young women who identify with the SBW schema, reflecting on lessons they wished they had known earlier in their marriages. During the interviews, four forward projecting questions were asked to capture their perspectives. When asked what the participants would teach young Black women about endorsing the characteristics of the SBW, several of the participants encouraged the younger SBWs to reject the burden of “doing it all” and carrying all the responsibilities alone. They cautioned against subscribing fully to the SBW ideals noting that these ideals discourage women from being open with their spouses. Instead, they emphasized the importance of vulnerability within their marriage. Several women recommended therapy and encouraged building a supportive network to discuss openly, about marital challenges to eliminate the taboo culture of speaking about your marriage in the African American community.

When asked about strengths they possess that younger SBWS need to know about, the women identified a unique set of strengths which included vision, drive and leadership and as well as the importance of introspection. Additionally, they spoke about

having the ability to honor your spouse, accepting one another and having the ability to extend forgiveness as essential to sustaining marriage. The ability to maintain balance in relationships was a common theme; learning when to delegate marital responsibilities, setting boundaries and understanding when it's essential to exercise self-care. Many of the women highlighted the importance of communication, ensuring your marital foundation is built on a mutual understanding such as trust and faith and noting that true strength comes in understanding that you do not have to be strong all the time.

When asked about what you would teach the younger SBWs about Need fulfillment, the participants stated they would teach SBWs about the importance of prioritizing communication. Additionally, the importance of fulfilling your own needs to maintain individuality in your marriage. Many of the women pointed out that sometimes burnout can come from, not realizing that you have neglected your own needs and your spouse should not be expected to fulfill all your needs. The women again cautioned to reject the SBW identity to avoid burnout. The overall message was to be intentional in partner selection, to ask the necessary questions up front to ensure you are committing to lifelong partnership. Finally, when asked about what the women would share with young Black women about how their marriage may be impacted by having or not having a father, many of the women highlighted the influence of paternal presence or absence on shaping the expectations and standards in the marriage. Another was that paternal absence can create a longing for love that may shape partner choices. Several women encouraged therapy to understand how their experiences may create a "father wound" and manifest in their relationships with their spouse. A couple of participants advised, despite

your father's presence, to have awareness of who you choose to marry and to extend grace in the partnership.

Summary

Chapter 4 aimed to describe the experiences of modern-day marriage for women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) by addressing the research question: What are the lived experiences of modern-day marriage for women who identify as SBW? This study highlighted the voices of 12 AAW who were at least 21 years old and had been in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage for at least eight years. Each participant also identified with at least three characteristics associated with the SBW identity. The analysis resulted in five central themes: SBW identity: resilience and burden, marriage expectations and models, and partnership and intimate communication and resilience and renewal. In addition, a subtheme of military marriage as an amplifier emerged, reflecting how military affiliation intensified the experiences of participants within each of the themes. Additionally, marital insights provided by the participants were summarized. In Chapter 5, I will interpret the study's findings, discuss their implications for positive social change, and offer recommendations to guide future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of married Black women who identify as Strong Black Women (SBW) and how they describe the essence of this phenomenon. This study captured women's feelings and emotions, particularly in relation to how SBW characteristics showed up in their marriages. An interpretative phenomenological approach was used to provide deeper insight into the lived experiences of the participants. Study findings suggest the SBW identity is deeply ingrained in all aspects of a SBW marriage. The characteristics associated with being an SBW are present in unique ways in the marriages for women who identify with this phenomenon. The findings from the interviews resulted in seven themes. The themes were the following: SBW identity: resilience and burden, marriage expectations and models, partnership and intimate communication, resilience and renewal, and a subtheme of military marriage as an amplifier. In Chapter 5, these findings are discussed in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section is organized according to the five central themes that were discovered from the analysis. Additionally, the results are discussed in relation to the literature that was presented in chapter 2. Lastly, a discussion of the findings in the context of both of the conceptual frameworks used for the study, The Superwoman Schema and The Suffocation Model.

Strong Black Woman Identity: Resilience and Burden

This theme is relevant in that it depicted the actual experiences of the women in the study and distinguished them along with burdens of the role associated with self-identifying with a Superwoman or self-proclaimed SBW. The experience of modern-day marriage for the participants was often described by the participants as exhausting due to the pressures and expectations of SBW endorsement within the context of their marriage. A common theme among many of the women is that Black women are tired of carrying the invisible load and bearing all the responsibilities on their own when they have a spouse. This exhaustion may suggest that many of the characteristics associated with the SBW endorsement cause unavoidable marital strain. Previous research discussed that the characteristics associated with being a SBW can influence marriage significantly (Geyton et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2020; Walker, 2020). However, it did not determine the SBW schema's influence on romantic and marital relationships. This research provides a firsthand account involving the SBWs characteristics and its influence on marital and interpersonal relationships.

In the current study several of the women described the strength needed to operate in the capacity of an SBW as inherited, genetic and automatically bestowed upon them without a choice. The participants acknowledged that subscribing to the SBW characteristics are not healthy and nearly all the participants expressed wishes to disassociate themselves from the superwoman role or subscribing to the SBW identity. This finding was not discussed in the literature presented in chapter 2 however researchers such as Watson et al. (2016) called for future studies concerning how AAW

choose which aspects of the SBW concept to embrace or reject. This study found that AAW did not perceive endorsement as choice.

Furthermore, Jeremie-Brink and Chambers, (2019) study acknowledged the characteristics associated with the SBW schema are susceptible to manifesting within romantic and marital relationships and can enable women to subconsciously endorse an independent mindset. This current study builds on this literature, as participants in this study describes the endorsement of strength as necessary to sustain their marriages. Several women characterized this strength as carrying what they referred to as an “invisible” or “unequal” load, taking on emotional, domestic, and financial responsibilities that often went unacknowledged by their spouses. For example, Lynn explained that SBW labor was essential for the survival of her family, even when it meant sacrificing her own needs. This account reflects how several of the participants felt the heaviness of the role yet recognized the strength that it requires dissipates her needs and struggles. Additionally, several participants shared that they felt shame in asking for help, as doing so conflicted with their internalized need to present an image of strength. This shame can be understood as reinforcing silence and isolation, extending Woods-Giscombé (2010) findings regarding coping and the perceived liability, relationship strain.

Marriage Expectations and Models

The expectations for marriage were shaped by parents, faith and media across all 12 participants. Lynn explained that her father influenced her spousal expectations and served as a role model in shaping her views of marriage. In contrast, Antoinette reflected

on her father's behaviors as lessons in what not to seek in a partner. This contrast shows how parental influence could shape expectations and serve as a reference point for what should be avoided thus illustrating how paternal presence and absence can reflect marital standards and expectations. Other participants, such as Joan, Justice and Monica, were raised by a single mothers. On the contrary, Maya and Gina for example, grew up with healthy marital examples. Together these accounts demonstrate that fulfilling marriages were possible regardless of family history. Furthermore, the women looked to models or lack thereof as a construct of the ideal marriage.

These findings align with Settles et al. (2008), who found that Black women often learned the SBW identity through the examples of their mothers and women in their communities, and extends this research by showing how these women applied the identity in intimate relationships. Similarly, Zulu (2016) emphasized that mothers who modeled strength and resilience while carrying dual roles set powerful examples for their daughters. Joan reflected this dynamic as she was raised by a single mother who played both roles. Now a mother herself, she reflected on the importance of modeling and the importance of being cautious regarding the parts of the schema she displays to her daughter. This is one example that demonstrates how participants are cautious about transmitting messages to the next generation. Her account reflects understanding that endorsing the SBW schema represents strength yet recognizing that the endorsement is associated with costs.

This study's participants accounts support parental modeling whether through strength, resilience, or absence, shaped their marital expectations in complex ways.

Moreover, these findings support Sanders (2022), who found no significant difference in marital satisfaction for women who had present fathers with supportive mothers compared to women raised with absent fathers. Reinforcing the idea that family structure alone does not determine marital outcomes.

Media portrayals such as *The Cosby Show* and *Family Matters* emerged as a unique similarity among several participants (Lynn, Maya, Antoinette, Gina, and Ashley). For example, Lynn identified with Claire Huxtable, describing herself as a “modern-day Claire” because, like the character, she is an attorney balancing marriage and motherhood. Although these shows aired in the 1980s and 1990s, they continued to shape how participants imagined marriage and family life. The participants accounts suggest that many relied on fictional television families to form expectations of marriage in the absence of real-life models, fictional television families served as symbolic guides. This study highlights how those media portrayals intersect with the SBW identity. Participants not only aspired to the images of stability they saw on television but also carried the invisible labor and emotional burdens that came with trying to live up to those ideals.

Faith as a foundation was another similarity that emerged among participants (Jada, Hillary, and Vivian). These women described faith as central to their marriages, often crediting their spiritual beliefs and church upbringing as the reason their relationships endured challenges. For example, Jada explained that she viewed marriage as a Godly commitment, while Vivian emphasized the influence of her Southern Baptist upbringing on her understanding of marital roles. Their accounts suggest that faith is a

foundation at the core of their marriages as opposed to a personal choice. This finding supports what Boyd-Franklin (2010) and Marks et al. (2012) noted regarding the importance of spirituality within Black and African American communities, where faith is deeply intertwined with daily life and family structures. It also extends Moore et al. (2021), who found that marriages grounded in religious principles are often better positioned to withstand difficulties. In this study, faith not only shaped their expectations of marriage but also functioned as a sustaining force that contributed to marital longevity and resilience.

Partnership and Intimate Communication

Participants in this study consistently emphasized the importance of partnership in marriage. Several women (Antoinette, Pam, Gina, Justice, Jada, Vivian) described partnership as serving as the foundation of marriage, noting that rigid gender roles had little relevance in their relationships. Rather than equating partnership with an exact 50/50 split they described marriage as giving what one can. It is important to note across all 12 participants, there was an agreement that marriage is not about 50/50 equality but about flexibility, mutual effort, and balance. A common example provided by many women, sometimes a spouse may only give 30% leaving your spouse carrying the other remaining 70%. This account reflects how participants understood balance and partnership as not always equal but requiring mutual effort. Teamwork emerged as central to sustaining the relationship, emphasizing relational responsiveness rather than a numerical division of labor or effort.

Maya, Justice, and Vivian highlighted the importance of a spouse being both a safe space and a friend. Similarly, Participants (Joan, Maya, Pam, Justice) described the value of accepting one's spouse and drawing on each other's strengths, while Monica and Hillary emphasized the importance of always including one's spouse in decision-making. These accounts reflect how participants value friendship and acceptance as necessary to support and reinforce safety and resist expectations associated with the SBW from pressures to be strong and resistance to vulnerability.

These results echo findings from Grover and Helliwell (2019), who found that married couples who view their partner as their best friend report nearly twice as much life satisfaction as those who do not. The participants' account similarly credited friendship as a force that sustained their marriages. Their accounts also support Skipper et al. (2021), who noted that successful partnerships are characterized by a readiness to interchange roles for mutual benefit and by a shared understanding of financial goals. Additionally, these accounts suggest that role flexibility and financial unity builds trust and a shared commitment, making them essential to building a strong and enduring marital partnership.

Throughout this study, communication was found to be both central to intimacy and balance in marriage. Participants not only described the importance but also reflected on how they adapted their communication styles to protect and strengthen their relationships. For example, Lynn explained that she often softened her requests to avoid conflict which framed intentional communication to promote harmony. Maya, Hillary and Jada highlighted communication as a foundation of transparency and trust, while

Gina stressed the importance of being vocal about one's needs and setting standards. In an effort to make sense of their experiences, many women viewed communication as more than an exchange of words; they interpreted it as a relational safeguard to reduce conflict, to protect the relationship and to sustain their connection. Although love languages were not discussed in Chapter 2, several participants (Maya, Gina, Monica, Ashley, Hillary) identified understanding a spouse's love language as a necessary form of communication. This indicates that recognizing how a partner gives and receives love was interpreted as a way of strengthening intimacy and building connections.

Resilience and Renewal

In the current study, seven of the 12 women in this study emphasized that preserving their mental, physical, and emotional well-being was essential to sustaining themselves and their marriages. The remaining participants acknowledged that self-care should be a priority but admitted that they were not always able to make it a focus in their current season of life. This reflects the internal struggle between awareness of the need for self-care and the practical application of it. Their accounts suggest self-care was interpreted as not only personal maintenance but necessary to remain present and engaged in their marriage. These findings resonate with Skipper et al. (2021) emphasis on the importance of maintaining a sense of self-autonomy as critical to the functioning of strong marriages, which parallels participants' emphasis on self-care as a way to sustain both individual well-being and marital health. Likewise, Council (2021) argued that Black women's fulfillment requires embracing self-actualization, self-love, and autonomy. The women in this study reflected this perspective by framing self-care not as

a luxury but as a necessary form of self-preservation that allowed them to prioritize themselves, model their own worth within their marriages and resist burnout.

In fact, many participants discussed the importance of surrounding themselves with support, often referring to this as having or building a “village.” This village included friends, family, and extended networks who could help carry the load of responsibilities within the marriage. For women who lacked a reliable support system, several advocated for hiring outside help, such as childcare providers, doulas, or cleaning services, to ease daily burdens. These findings illustrate that outsourcing these responsibilities created more space for couples to prioritize one another and intentionally spend time together. By freeing up time the participants were able to contribute to the reawakening and renewal within their marriages. While community support systems were not directly addressed in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, participants’ emphasis on building a village highlights its role in strengthening intimacy. This finding extends with Hogan et al. (2021), who noted that couples who devote more time to each other report higher levels of marital satisfaction.

In the current study, marriage was understood as an evolving journey that unfolded across seasons of life. Four of the 12 participants explicitly framed marriage as an ongoing evolution which promotes growth. This interpretation resonates with Vaterlaus et al., (2017) study who emphasized the importance of realistic and consistent growth throughout marriage, noting that the true challenges of marriage often become more apparent over time. Nearly all of the women endorsed therapy or counseling as necessary for sustaining marital health, whether as a preventative measure or as ongoing

maintenance. While Debnam et al. (2022), noted that the SBW identity often encourages resistance to seeking support and discourages women from disclosing relationship struggles, participants' account in this study highlights counseling as an important tool for preserving both themselves and their marriages.

Marriage as an Amplifier

Several of the participants identified themselves as military spouses representing the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Although military affiliation was not a criterion, in speaking with these women, it became evident that their military life amplified many of the challenges and dynamics described in the study. These women described their experiences as an active-duty military spouse and referenced personal accounts to include enduring deployments and long separations. Because military life was not an inclusion criterion and was not addressed in Chapter 2, it was not listed as a central theme but rather as a contextual factor that amplified or heightened the dynamics across all themes.

Findings and the Conceptual Framework

There were two conceptual frameworks that guided this study: the Superwoman Schema (Woods-Giscombé, 2010) and the Suffocation Model (Finkel et al., 2014). The SWS served as the primary foundation, as it outlines a set of characteristics that shaped participant selection. These characteristics include obligations to manifest strength, emotional suppression, resistance to vulnerability and dependence, determination to succeed, and obligation to help others. The SWS was used to develop the interview guide (see Appendix B) which resulted in understanding the lived experiences for the Black and African American women that elected to participate in this study. Similar to this study

other researchers have used the SWS to understand the uniqueness of the SBW or Black Superwoman phenomenon (Abrams et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2021; Leath et al., 2022; Lio et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2022; Perkins, 2023; Peterson-Rochon, 2020; Thomas et al., 2022; Watson, 2017). However, researchers had not explored the African Americans women's experiences of modern-day marriages who endorse the SBW characteristics.

The Suffocation Model complimented the SWS by offering a lens to understand the changing expectations of marriage over time. Using this concept allowed the researcher to understand the history of traditional marriage so that the researcher could examine modern marriage. Finkle et al., (2014) describes the goals of marriage shifting from fulfilling basic needs such as security and companionship to meeting higher-level needs such as intimacy, self-expression, and personal growth. The results of the study were supported by this framework as it illuminated how participants defined marital satisfaction in terms of time investment, psychological resources, intimacy, and passion. The current study appeared to be the first to include The Suffocation model as a conceptual framework that is applied to AAW marriage.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations in this study. One limitation of the study is the sample size. This study included 12 participants. The sample size according to Miriam and Tisdell (2015), may prevent the results from being generalized so the researchers emphasize transferability in the study. Transferability was supported through the use of participants' direct quotes to support the analysis. Another limitation is due to the sensitivity of the topic and the potential to elicit visceral emotions. During the

introduction participants were informed should the need arise, the interview will stop, and they could seek help with the national crisis hotline. The last limitation was the need to disassociate from personal experiences. An interpretative phenomenological approach was employed in this study which interprets the phenomenon. To manage the researcher bias I engaged in bracketing to suspend preconceptions and created an audit trail to provide a record of decisions and to monitor biases (see Appendix D).

Recommendations

Recommendations are presented in this section for future research based on the limitations and literature reviewed. Recommendations are also based on the forward projecting questions asked to each of the participants. The first recommendation is tied to the limitation of the sample size. I would recommend replicating the study with a larger sample size to include the spouse perspective to illuminate and account for the relational dynamics this study did not capture.

The second recommendation is based on the conceptual framework, The Suffocation Model (Finkle et al., 2014). This conceptual framework has been applied sparingly in existing research. Future research is encouraged to apply this conceptual framework to married couples to strengthen empirical support and to have relevant research to extend the findings of this study.

The third recommendation is based on the findings of this study. Many of the participants were military spouses which amplified marital dynamics. Future studies could explore a focused study on military spouses to examine how military life impacts marital dynamics across various demographics.

The fourth recommendation is based on the forward-projecting questions. Future research should investigate how these forward-looking perspectives contribute to breaking generational cycles of strength and sacrifice. Studies might also examine the role of premarital counseling or father-daughter relationships in shaping marital expectations, as well as the long-term outcomes of rejecting SBW ideals on marital satisfaction and well-being.

Implications

The implication of this study contributes to positive social change. This study addressed the gap in existing literature. Mouzon et al., (2020) noted the absence of literature regarding marital relationships and behaviors among older AAW. Additionally, researchers called for an investigation into marriage and interpersonal relationships of Strong Black women (Council, 2021; Davis, 2021; Davis & Jones, 2021; Geyton et al., 2022; Lio et al., 2021; Peterson-Rochon, 2020; Thomas et al., 2022; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). The current study addressed the gap in research providing information about the lived experiences of AAW in modern day marriages. The implication is that this study contributes to filling the gap furthering knowledge about marital satisfaction with Black women who identify as an SBW.

The practical implication of this study is that the findings may inform counseling approaches and provide targeted intervention programs such as premarital programs or workshops specifically designed for young Black women. Such programs can emphasize communication, address the pressures of strength and perhaps provide support groups to foster open dialogue about marriage within the African American community. The

evidence from this study may also serve as a foundation for grant writing to develop future programs and interventions. Many of the women recommended counseling for young women and underscored the importance of building a supportive network. Prior research has shown that AAW are not benefiting from marriage at the same rate as other ethnicities (Jeremie-Brink & Chambers, 2016). Targeted interventions can aid in sustaining marriages in the community which is significant given that marriage has many benefits to include companionship, emotional support, financial stability, and better physical and mental health (Lawrence et al., 2019).

Another practical implication is that practitioners such as therapists and social workers may use this research to inform and improve their cultural competence by empowering and encouraging open dialogue. Relationship experts and marriage and family therapists could utilize data from this study to incorporate into practice while working with this unique population. Research focusing on increasing marital rates in the African American community contributes to making positive social change; it gives practitioners a forum for discussing and breaking cycles of broken and dysfunctional families in the African American community.

Conclusion

This aim of this study was to better understand the experiences of married Black women who identify as a SBW and how persons who identify with this phenomenon interpret it. Although SBW has been a central focus in recent literature many studies called for an investigation into marriage and interpersonal relationships of Strong Black women (Council, 2021; Davis, 2021; Davis & Jones, 2021; Geyton et al., 2022; Lio et al.,

2021; Peterson-Rochon, 2020; Thomas et al., 2022; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). This study not only sought to explore these dynamics but also gave voice to the lived experiences of these AAW. Study findings reveal five central themes. SBW identity: resilience and burden, marriage expectations and models, partnership and intimate communication, Resilience and Renewal, and a subtheme of military marriage as an amplifier across all themes.

The two conceptual frameworks used are The Superwoman Schema (Woods-Giscombé, 2010) and The Suffocation Model (Finkel et al., 2014). The practical implications point toward culturally responsive counseling practices, premarital education, and community-based support as pathways to sustaining healthy marriages for AAW. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on AAW's marital experiences and offers insights that may guide future research, clinical practice, and community interventions aimed at strengthening families breaking cycles of broken and dysfunctional families in the African American community.

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Appendix A: Survey

Basic Demographics

1. Age –
2. Ethnicity –
3. Gender Identity –
4. Marital Status –

Are you in a heterosexual marriage?

1. Yes
2. No

Have you been married for more than 7 years?

1. Yes
2. No

Family and Household

5. Number of Children – Include biological, stepchildren, or other dependents.
6. Household Composition – Identify who lives in the household (spouse, children, extended family).
7. Family Structure Growing Up – Assess whether they grew up in single-parent, dual-parent, or other family configurations.

Socioeconomic Factors

8. Educational Attainment – Highest level of education completed.
9. Occupation and Employment Status – Include the participant's and spouse's professions.
10. Household Income – General income ranges or brackets.
11. Geographic Location – Current residence (urban, suburban, rural; state or region).

Strong Black Woman Characteristics

This study is based on Woods-Giscombé's characteristics of the Strong Black Woman. Please select all the following statements that you identify with:

- **A.** I feel an obligation to manifest strength, such as presenting an image of strength for the sake of my spouse, friends, and/or children.
 - Yes
 - No
- **B.** I tend to suppress my emotions, often hiding them from others due to a fear of displaying signs of weakness.
 - Yes
 - No
- **C.** I resist being vulnerable or dependent on others, often putting up defenses to prevent others from taking advantage of me.
 - Yes
 - No
- **D.** I am determined to succeed despite limited resources, sometimes sacrificing self-care and feeling the need to work harder than others to achieve my goals.
 - Yes
 - No
- **E.** I feel obligated to help others, often prioritizing their needs and placing myself last in the process.
 - Yes

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. Can you describe the history of marriage in your family and how it has influenced your views on relationships and marriage?
2. What are your earliest recollections or teachings about what it means to be a wife? Who showed you how to be a wife? (TV, in-house example, cinema, neighbors?)
3. What predisposed you to the SBW schema? When did you discover you connected with the schema?

SBW Characteristics Questions

4. How do you perceive the role of strength and independence in maintaining balance and partnership within your marriage?
5. How do you navigate suppressing or expressing yourself as an SBW within your marriage?
6. Can you share an example of a time when you felt that admitting you needed help was seen as a sign of weakness as a Strong Black Woman, and how you navigated or overcame the perception that needing help makes you insufficient?
7. In what ways do you as a black woman experience and navigate the pressures of prioritizing the needs of others over your own well-being and personal aspiration within your marriage?
8. Does the SBW impact the way you perceive or receive love from your spouse?
9. How are you different from other Black women that are not strong?
10. How is your marriage different from the SBW marriage?
11. What would you teach young Black women about how their marriage may be impacted?
12. What strengths do you have that other young Black women need to know that you might be able to teach them?

Suffocation Model

13. How do you perceive your ability to invest time, psychological resources, passion, and intimacy in your marriage to meet your higher esteem and self-actualized needs (growth and self-worth)?
14. What do gender roles look like for the SBW in marriage?
15. How do you perceive the 50/50 conversation and how does it impact your sense of equality, partnership, and gender roles within the marriage?
16. Now that you are married, how do you perceive the role of a man in fulfilling your needs within the marriage?
17. Is there anything that works well/ not well for your marriage to ensure your needs are being met?
18. What would you teach young SBWs about having their needs fulfilled in their marriage?

Father Absence

19. Were you raised with a father figure present in your life?

1. If yes: A. What lessons did he teach you or show you through actions about dependence/independence or husband-wife relationships?

If no: B. Did the absence of a father manifest in the needs that you have or the desire for treatment in your marriage?

20. What would you share with young Black women about how their marriage may be impacted by having/ or not having a father?

Appendix C: Social Media Flyer

Interview Study Seeks Strong Black Women



There is a new study about the experiences of modern-day marriage with Black and African American women who identify as a Strong Black Woman that could help care providers like social workers, relationship experts and counselors better understand and help their clients. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences as a SBW in modern day marriage.

About the study:

- One 45–60-minute phone interview that will be audio recorded (no videorecording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you
- You would receive a \$20 Amazon gift card as a thank you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- A Black or African American woman in the United States
- At least 21 years old
- In a monogamous heterosexual marriage for at least 8 years
- Identify with 3 of the following Strong Black Woman characteristics:
 - I feel an obligation to manifest strength, such as presenting an image of strength for the sake of my spouse, friends, and/or children.
 - I tend to suppress my emotions, often hiding them from others due to a fear of displaying signs of weakness.
 - I resist being vulnerable or dependent on others, often putting up defenses to prevent others from taking advantage of me.
 - I am determined to succeed despite limited resources, sometimes sacrificing self-care and feeling the need to work harder than others to achieve my goals.
 - I feel obligated to help others, often prioritizing their needs and placing myself last in the process.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Arielle Jackson, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during January and February 2025. Please message Arielle Jackson privately or let me know of your interest.

Appendix D: Audit Trail

Stage	Description	Example Across Participants
Raw Data Collection	Conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with women who self-identify as Strong Black Women (SBW), exploring their lived experiences of marriage.	Digital audio files recorded on Zoom; transcribed verbatim in Word; timestamps and identifiers removed; pseudonyms assigned (e.g., Maya, Jada, Pam).
Data Management	Organized transcripts into Excel spreadsheet for coding. Color-coded excerpts; highlighted significant passages in yellow for coding.	Example: Transcript Pam highlighted excerpt: “We sometimes want to be so strong that we don’t want anybody to see our weaknesses.”
Initial Coding (Open Codes)	Labeled meaning units line-by-line to capture participants’ voices. Codes remained close to the data.	Examples: “Pressure to be strong,” “Sacrificing needs for spouse,” “Communication style conflict,” “Marriage is about protecting each other.”
Code Reduction	Merged overlapping or redundant codes to clarify meaning and reduce fragmentation.	“Silent emotional labor” + “Suppression of vulnerability” merged → <i>Emotional Labor & Resilience</i> . “Acts over words of love” + “Learning to receive love” → <i>Love as Action and Growth</i> .
Categorization	Grouped reduced codes into conceptual categories.	Example Categories: Strength, Sacrifice & SBW Schema; Communication as Core Intimacy; Marriage as Commitment & Protection; Emotional Labor & Resilience.
Theme Development	Collapsed categories into four overarching themes that captured shared and divergent experiences across cases.	Themes: (1) <i>SBW Identity: Resilience & Burden</i> (2) <i>Marriage Expectations & Models</i> (3) <i>Partnership & Intimate communication</i> (4) <i>Resilience and Renewal</i> (5) <i>Military as an amplifier</i>
Cross-Case Comparison	Compared all 12 participants to identify patterns and divergences.	Convergence: All participants described societal pressure to embody strength. Divergence: Some emphasized protection as reciprocal,

Stage	Description	Example Across Participants
Reflexivity / Researcher Journal	Bracketing memos captured personal bias and evolving interpretation.	while others highlighted sacrifice without reciprocity. Example memo: “As a married Black woman, I identify with strength as sacrifice. I must remain aware of my own narrative and center participants’ voices rather than my own lens.”
Verification & Trustworthiness	Applied credibility checks. Member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trail ensured rigor.	Five participants received theme summaries for validation; one participant suggested changing paternal absence to “paternal characteristics” by highlighting characteristics influenced her spouse selection.
Final Synthesis	Drafted results chapter integrating thick description and direct quotes to evidence themes.	Quotes included: “I had a sense of protection. I would save money, because I never knew if he was going to leave” (Theme 1); “Communication is key—it’s the glue” (Theme 4).