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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Keeping Ourselves Sane: A Qualitative Exploration of Black Women's Coping Strategies for Gendered Racism

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Abstract

Black women in the United States have historically overcome extreme hardships and continue to do so. They have survived unthinkable bouts of trauma due to their subordinate racial and gender statuses. Black women's attempts to navigate these circumstances present them with a distinct set of dilemmas, yet existing research gives little attention to how Black women manage adversities associated with navigating entangled systems of oppression. The present study aimed to gain a better understanding of how Black women cope with gendered racism. Individual interviews were conducted with 22 Black women between the ages of 18–69 years-old. We applied a thematic analysis approach for data collection and data analysis. Through in-depth interviews, we identified four themes that underline how Black women manage racialized and gendered status: (a) by redefining Black womanhood; (b) by employing overt and covert forms of resistance; (c) by relying on faith, prayer, and the pursuit of balance; and (d) by expressing their thoughts and feelings in safe spaces. Our study contributes to the larger body of literature by highlighting the complexity of living at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Further, our study includes Black women's perceptions of their lived experiences and examines multiple modes of resistance to gendered, racist stereotypes. Findings can be used to shape programs, interventions, assessments, and tailored messages that provide awareness among Black women and healthcare professionals to promote positive and healthy coping strategies.

Keywords Gendered racism · Coping responses · Black women · Qualitative · Resistance · Oppression

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How do Black women in the United States cope with the collateral consequences of being Black and female? To answer this question, we can turn to Essed's (1991) work on gendered racism. Essed described *gendered racism* as a form of racial and gender oppression that intertwines to create a unique experience for women who occupy a simultaneously racially subordinate position. Research affirms that Black women sit at the crossroads of multiple social categories (Collins and Bilge 2016; Crenshaw 1991; Rosenthal and Lobel 2018; St. Jean and Feagin 2015) and that Black women in the United States at all stages of life are impacted by racism and sexism (Szymanski and Lewis 2016).

Experiences we discuss throughout the present article revolve around two overlapping identities: race and gender. Concurrent with literature, Black women's intersecting identities warrant a closer look at how Black women cope with the challenges that stem from their intersecting marginalized identities (Lewis et al. 2017). Collins (2000) described Black women's specific positionality in society by discussing the

matrix of domination. This matrix determines "how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression" (Collins 2000, p. 18). Consequently, Black women's experiences navigating these intersecting oppressions are complicated (Beatty Moody et al. 2014).

Broadly, the general issue we address in our article is how Black women cope with stressors triggered from their overlapping identities of race and gender. Specifically, Black women's unique daily life experiences, stressors, and coping strategies suggest that they disproportionately face discrimination in their daily lives (Everett et al. 2010; Lewis and Neville 2015; West et al. 2010; Woods-Giscombé 2010). Gendered racism causes psychological distress and has necessitated that Black women develop specific coping strategies to combat feelings of distress and inadequacy (Everett et al. 2010; French et al. 2012; Lewis et al. 2013; Thomas et al. 2008). Belle (1982, p. 138) discussed a "contagion effect" that is the result of frequent negative and stressful life events, as well as exposure to distressing occurrences of discrimination. Consequently, this type of exposure negatively impacts Black women and causes stressors that differ from those experienced by men and non-Black women (Thomas et al. 2008).

Previous works that explored Black women's coping strategies mostly focused on their approach to handling general problems, such as health or financial problems, with little attention to the relentless nature of racism and sexism (Belle 1990; Reynolds et al. 2000). Additionally, the coping strategies highlighted in the literature mostly revolve around Black women's use of social support networks or faith and spirituality (Thomas et al. 2008). Although a few studies (e.g., Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Lewis et al. 2016; O'Connor 2002) have looked at Black women's approach to dealing with gendered racism, studies examining diverse sets of Black women are needed.

Our analysis makes several contributions to previous work on Black women in the United States and their coping strategies. First, we incorporate Black women's firsthand accounts on how they cope with gendered racism. Second, we help make sense of ambiguous conversations concerning how Black women cope with life challenges (Bacchus and Holley 2005; Jenkins 2002). For example, Bacchus and Holley (2005) conducted interviews with ten professional Black women to examine how they handle work-related stress and found that professional Black women often turn to spirituality, mediation, and prayer to cope with work-related stress. Along these same lines, Jenkins (2002) examined existing literature to assess how Black women and their children cope with community violence and reported that Black women most often coped with these issues by praying, staying away from high violence areas, and using political activism. Although these studies are indeed valuable, they neglect to highlight how racism and sexism are often the origin of these challenges. Third, our study introduces Black women's perspectives on how they cope with gendered racism in their words and in various social contexts.

We argue that in order to gain a more complete understanding of Black women's coping strategies, we must first understand how they cope with their marginalized racial and gendered statues. For this reason, we intentionally decided to focus on the similarities surrounding Black women's dealings with gendered racism stressors because of the understudied nature of the topic. Accordingly, Black women's shared experiences, despite demographic diversity, help lay the foundation for future studies on this topic.

Coping with Gendered Racism

Racism and gender discrimination impact Black women's lives at all stages (Szymanski and Lewis 2016). As such, the impact of gendered racism in Black women's lives is a central concern (Thomas et al. 2008). Literature confirms that coping strategies among U.S.-born Black women most often fit within three categories: depending on social support, living "double lives" or "shifting" as needed, and relying on religion/spirituality (Collins 2000; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Mattis 2002; Rhodes et al. 1992; Spates 2015; Stack 1974; West et al. 2011). These strategies do not appear to be exclusively applicable to coping with gendered racism, nor do they appear to be limited to handling life adversities, yet these strategies have been discussed in both contexts. Nevertheless, they appear to act as shields in Black women's individual lives (Everett et al. 2010; Shorter-Gooden 2004).

In regard to social support, research affirms that Black women rely heavily on their networks as a means of coping with life's challenges. This reliance manifests itself through women's family, friends, and church (Piesterse et al. 2010). Some research describes an intricate system of supportive kinship transactions for Black families that may replace personal coping resources (Norris and Mitchell 2014; Stack 1974). These networks may not be equipped with monetary resources but can be a channel for other social supports that appear to bolster one's own individual strategies for coping with stress (Lincoln et al. 2003).

Next, a handful of studies claim that pervasive racism and sexism throughout the United States require that Black women live "double lives" (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Shorter-Gooden 2004; St. Jean and Feagin 2015). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) referred to this phenomenon as "shifting." They defined shifting as enacting a set of behaviors to protect one's most intimate being. Black women portray one way of life to Whites and another in the presence of other Black women and, in certain cases, Black men. Shifting can

take place in the form of altering their appearance or speech to counteract negative perceptions about Black women.

Last, relying on religion/spirituality (e.g., Christianity) is a common coping strategy employed by Black women to deal with gendered racism (Shorter-Gooden 2004), specifically through the acts of prayer, meditation, and beliefs that God has the power and will to change one's current circumstances (Banks-Wallace and Parks 2004; Mattis 2002). For this reason, religion plays an important role in coping with such oppressive circumstances as racial discrimination (Bacchus and Holley 2005). Among other strategies, prayer is noted as a prominent coping mechanism among Black women (Thomas et al. 2008).

Although Black women in the United States are faced with myriad obstacles due to their social location, two points remain unclear from previous scholarship. First, it is unclear if Black women cope with gendered racism in the same ways that they cope with other types of life challenges. Second, to what extent previous findings apply to heterogeneous groups of Black women is uncertain. Adolescent and college-age Black females make up the majority of the research about stress and coping among Black women (Thomas and Hacker 2011; West et al. 2010). Moreover, perhaps because statistics show that the majority of U.S.-born Black women identify with Christianity (Lugo et al. 2008), many previous studies highlight the experiences of Christian Black women who utilize prayer and faith to cope (Bacchus and Holley 2005; Dunston 1990). However, there is limited research on how non-Christian Black women (e.g., Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists) cope with gendered racism (Bacchus and Holley 2005).

Black Women and Negative Imagery

The pervasive dissemination of negative imagery in relation to Black women in the United States dates back at least 400 years in American culture (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003; Gray-White 1999; Neville and Hamer 2001). Most commonly, they have been depicted as Mammies (asexual, nurturers, and caretakers), Sapphires (overbearing, sassy, angry, and emasculating), or Jezebels (sex-crazed, animalistic, and an object of sexual pleasure). Contemporary media remains a primary source of stereotypical knowledge disseminated about Black women, portraying them as confrontational/quarrelsome, promiscuous, or sexually immoral (Feagin 2014). These negatively fabricated images remain problematic for Black women in the United States and have been used as a justification for their mistreatment and oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003; Gray-White 1999; Neville and Hamer 2001).

Accordingly, pervasive negative imagery has been identified as a source of stress for Black women (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Kwate and Meyer 2011; Szymanski and Lewis 2016). Black women's attempts to cope with forms of negative imagery and rhetoric can, and often do, affect their health and well-being (Everett et al. 2010; Feagin 2006). According to Collins (2000), a fundamental step to surviving oppression is for marginalized group members to learn to perceive themselves contrary to how their oppressor perceives them. Collins noted that Black women have played a major role in constructing a much more positive image of themselves throughout the Black community. Their success is due largely to their ability to reconstruct these negative images and redefine perceptions within their social spaces.

Gendered Racism in the Workplace

Research also confirms that Black women in the United States frequently encounter discrimination in the workplace (Krieger et al. 2006; Mays et al. 1996). Racial and gender discrimination affects both professional and nonprofessional Black women in the workplace (Krieger et al. 2006; Wingfield 2007). Linnabery et al. (2014) discussed censoring oneself among non-Black colleagues and being part of social groups in the workplace as coping strategies for Black women, which parallels other studies that discuss workplace discrimination and specific stressors Black women face, including barriers to promotion, stereotypes that they are incompetent, feelings of isolation, lack of mentorship, and labor wage disparities (Dickens and Chavez 2018; Everett et al. 2010; Hall 2018; Hall et al. 2012; Mays et al. 1996). To cope with workplace discrimination, Black women often choose to focus on the aspects that they are able to control—such as dress, speech patterns, and remaining optimistic about their circumstances—to minimize the impact on self (Everett et al. 2010).

According to Harlan and White Berheide (1994), Black women face devaluation and low expectations in society, which channel them into lower-status employments that induce daily stress. Thus, although employment is associated with better health, work may also be a source of stress for specific women because of their rank and status (Mays et al. 1996). Often, Black women's challenges in the workplace are rooted in the social structure that disproportionately affects marginalized group members (Ladner 1986).

Black women's social positions shape nearly every aspect of their lives. Rather than focusing on how Black women in the United States cope with general life challenges or disparate outcomes (e.g., gender wage disparities, maternal mortality, health disparities), we argue that fundamentally, Black women are coping with gendered racism (Blau and Kahn 2017; Cote et al. 2015; Howell et al. 2016). It is nearly impossible to examine Black women's coping strategies without considering the impact of racism and sexism.

Therefore, the current study aimed to gain a better understanding of how Black women cope with gendered racism. The research questions guiding our project were: (a) "What are the major difficulties that you believe that you face as a result of being a Black woman?" and (b) How do you deal with these difficulties?

Method

Research Design

In the present study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 U.S.-born Black women. Interview guides, useful for gathering in-depth data, were prepared in advance. Semi-structured interviews are flexible and allowed the interviewer the abilities to probe participants' responses for additional information and to deviate from the interview guide when necessary to provide context for participants' responses (Fylan 2005; Weiss 1994).

Participants

In order to be eligible for participation in our study, women had to be 18 years of age or older and self-identify as Black, African American, biracial, or Caribbean Black. We recruited and interviewed 22 Black women in the United States. Demographically, the participants ranged in age from 18 to 69 years-old. Thirteen of the participants had children, and nine did not. In terms of education, most of the women had completed at least some college. Specifically, three of the study participants reported not having a high school diploma or GED, four of the women held a high school diploma or GED, one had completed vocational school, three had some college, four held bachelor's degrees, and seven were in pursuit of a graduate-level degree or had already completed one.

Religion was also a common attribute among the women, primarily Christianity. In fact, 18 of the women self-identified as Christian, whereas one self-identified as Muslim, two identified as Buddhist, and two reported that they were atheist. In terms of residence, all but four of the women resided in the state of Texas, with two dwelling in Illinois and the other two residing in Louisiana. For marital status, 12 of the women noted that they were single, five were married, four were divorced, and one was a widow. Last, in terms of household income, four of the women reported a household income of $14,999 or less, five reported $15,000–$29,999, six reported $30,000–$49,999, three reported $50,000–$69,999, one reported $70,000–$99,999, and another three reported $100,000 or more.

Procedure

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval from the first author's institution of affiliation, we began participant recruitment. We employed snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants (Noy 2008; Sadler et al. 2010). Study information was circulated via word-of-mouth, electronic advertisements, and researchers' acquaintances. Communication with interested participants was shared primarily through email, and each participant provided a signed copy of informed consent.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephone at the participants' convenience. The first author, who is a Black woman, conducted the interviews, which allowed for sister-to-sister talk to occur (Few et al. 2003). This produced a more comfortable setting in a variety of neutral environments where the interviews took place (Few et al. 2003). Each interview started with an explanation of the purpose of the study. All participants were provided study procedures and reminded that interviews would be audio-recorded. In order to protect participants' identities and confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms at the beginning of the interview process. On average, an interview lasted between 45 min to 120 min. (The full interview protocol is available in the online supplement.)

Measures

We first surveyed participants to collect demographic information, which included age, state of residence, education attainment, income level, marital status, children, and religious affiliation. The interview guide served as the instrument used to collect pertinent information that focused on each participant's coping strategies. The main questions asked to participants were: "What are the major difficulties that you believe that you face as a result of being a Black woman?" and "How do you deal with these difficulties?"

Data Coding and Analysis

Our research team members, consisting of five Black women who are faculty and graduate students, have different levels of research experience. Our previous and present experiences as Black women have shaped our research interests related to Black women's experiences living at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. The first and second authors have both conducted previous qualitative research using thematic analysis.

For our study, researchers employed thematic analysis during data collection and analysis. Thematic analysis, a multistep process consisting of two stages (open and axial coding), was used (Braun and Clarke 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Prior to beginning open coding, each researcher read through the interviews. After interviews were read, open coding

commenced. During open coding, initial codebooks were created based on line-by-line analysis. Next, data were categorized to create a master codebook that represented all interview data. Each researcher created a codebook independently from others in order to identify patterns and generate initial codes and codebooks, thus strengthening the validity of the findings. We then collaborated and confirmed existing patterns in the data.

Last, we conducted axial coding, the establishment of common themes with respective quotes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We conducted several independent reading and coding sessions to establish intimate familiarity with content. Overall, we went through approximately three rounds of coding before reaching 80% consensus, an empirically validated approach (Creswell and Poth 2018).

Results

Data were analyzed based on input from 22 Black women in the United States. Individual participant demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1. The table presents participant information organized by pseudonyms and includes study-relevant demographic characteristics to offer the reader additional information about the participants.

Our findings demonstrated that Black women in the United States manage racial and gender stressors based on four overarching salient themes: (a) by redefining Black womanhood; (b) by employing overt and covert forms of resistance; (c) by relying on faith, prayer, and the pursuit of balance; and (d) by expressing their thoughts and feelings in safe spaces. Table 2 presents an overview of the results organized by themes and includes theme descriptions, supporting quotes, and frequencies for each theme. The identified themes are then discussed in detail in the subsequent subsections.

Redefining Black Womanhood

Ten (46%) of the women's responses were related to coping with gendered racism by redefining Black womanhood. Interview data coded in this category indicated words or phrases that highlighted intentional acts by Black women to counter negative societal views that stem from their subordinated racial and gender statuses. Redefining what it means to be a Black woman in the United States on their terms was standard practice among the participants. Although the women were aware of society's perceptions about them, they generally responded by focusing on life

Table 1 Participants' demographic characteristics ($n = 22$)

Pseudonym	Residence	Age	Children	Current education	Religion	Income	Marital status
Alisha	Texas	65	Yes	H.S. diploma	Christian	$30,000–$49,999	Single
Ava	Texas	40	Yes	Graduate student	Christian	$100,000+	Married
Bridgett	Texas	25	No	Graduate student	Christian	$15,000–$29,999	Single
Ceva	Texas	19	No	Some college	Christian	$15,000–$29,999	Single
Cheryl	Texas	43	No	Graduate degree	Christian	$15,000–$29,999	Single
Delilah	Louisiana	59	Yes	H.S. diploma	Christian	$30,000–$49,999	Widowed
Donna	Texas	38	Yes	Vocational school	Christian	$30,000–$49,999	Married
Janet	Texas	40	No	Doctorate	Christian	$100,000+	Divorced
Jennifer	Texas	23	No	Graduate student	Christian	≤ $14,999	Single
Justine	Texas	34	Yes	GED	Christian	≤ $14,999	Single
Katherine	Illinois	46	Yes	Some high school	Christian	$30,000–$49,999	Divorced
Kelly	Texas	34	Yes	H.S. diploma	Christian	$15,000–$29,999	Divorced
Kyla	Texas/Korea	26	No	Bachelor's	Buddhist	$30,000–$49,999	Single
Kendall	Texas	47	Yes	Bachelor's	Christian	$100,000+	Married
Nina	Texas	36	No	Bachelor's	Buddhist	$70,000–$99,999	Single
Regina	Louisiana	54	Yes	Some high school	Christian	$50,000–$69,999	Married
Robin	Texas	69	Yes	Graduate degree	Muslim	$50,000–$69,999	Divorced
Sandy	Illinois	28	Yes	Some college	Atheist	≤ $14,999	Single
Shantay	Texas	18	No	Some college	Atheist	≤ $14,999	Single
Tanya	Texas	23	No	Graduate student	Christian	$15,000–$29,999	Single
Tasha	Texas	35	Yes	Graduate student	Christian	$30,000–$49,999	Married
Tina	Texas	42	Yes	Bachelor's	Christian	$50,000–$69,999	Single

Table 2 Description and frequency of participant themes ($n = 22$)

Theme	Description	Example quote	Frequency *n* (%)
Redefining Black womanhood	Words or phrases that highlight intentional acts by Black women to counter negative societal views that stem from their subordinated racial and gender statuses.	"I try my best not to let the negativity get the best of me. Actually, I think it motivates me because I refuse to be the stereotype of what Black women are 'supposed to be.' I try to do better and present myself in a more respectful way and an intelligent way and I bring whatever knowledge I have to the table so that they (Whites) can know that we're not all ignorant, that we do know something, and we are good for something and we can make a difference." (Regina)	10 (46)
Employing overt and covert forms of resistance	Words or phrases that describe the varying ways that Black women respond to bouts of race-based and gender-based discrimination.	Overt: "I usually call it what it is and seek to get some type of resolution either with their supervisors and sometimes the person who is responsible." (Ava) Covert: "For work and school, I accept the fact that having to face discrimination is my reality. I do what I can to make sure that I stand out in a positive way and not in a negative way. I guess, I do more than what is necessary or required." (Donna)	10 (46)
Relying on faith, prayer, and the pursuit of balance	Words or phrases that illustrate a reliance on a higher power and mindfulness techniques to cope with racial and gender discrimination.	"Well, I deal with it by having a space, by making sure I have a private space and it could be conversations with you we're having right now or it could be with my mom or with my sister or my boyfriend. So I maintain the balance, I guess that's what it is, by having a retreat. Having somewhere to retreat to, it can be like just during Christmas or it could be during a holiday because I'm in a different state now so it's harder obviously. But you know, that's the part of surviving; that's the part of that whole survival thing, the middle passage I was referring to earlier was that I may not be able to have those escapes or those retreats as often as I did when I lived at home, but when I do, I can really appreciate them because you have to stay strong longer when you're away from home." (Cheryl)	9 (41)
Expressing thoughts and feelings in safe spaces	Words or phrases that describe the importance of sharing their perspective about life as a Black woman in the United States with others who can empathize and validate their experiences.	"I usually just hang around people that are already close to me, that usually helps to be with the people that already know how I am and are comfortable with me and that I don't have to feel the need to be a certain way around. That's like the best way for me to cope with it or I'll just go ahead and do the opposite, I'll just stay at home, I just won't go around people that I feel judge me too harshly and those are definitely the two ways I deal with that versus going out, because I've definitely done that before. I would just go ahead and go out and be around these people, and then those are the situations that I feel awkward in, and you know particularly you don't like feeling that way so I don't—I try to avoid it." (Shantay)	8 (37)

on their terms. For example, Janet shared: "I don't allow my sense of value to come from other people." Sandy explained: "A long time ago, I made a decision to not live for society, you know? I live for myself." Participants noted that living up to society's expectations is virtually impossible. Consequently, this state of mind resulted in the women experiencing a sense of freedom to be themselves.

This insight resulted in some of the women wearing their hair natural instead of permed, dressing to their standards, and paving their own way. Along these lines, Kelly said:

> You just have to follow your goals, you have to motivate yourself when you have no one to do it; you have to keep it up, you know. If you want something in life, you just have to go out and get it. Just keep on trying because there are opportunities out there to get it. (Kelly)

Another participant, Jennifer, pointed out that educated Black women should not feel obligated to act or look a certain way:

> You have to know who you are first. I think going natural [chemical-free hairstyle] helped me with that process. I am really just being me so that I can explain that to others. So not being ashamed of my hair, my clothes, or my name. Instead, using that as a point of conversation with other people, so when they ask, "Why does your hair look like that?" or if it's your clothes, or your name, using that as an opportunity to explain to them that . . . there are people well educated, and they don't have to dress in a suit and tie or you know wear their hair a certain way or talk a certain way. They're educated people, you know, in all facets of life. (Jennifer)

Similarly, another participant stated that she is less interested in educating her White counterparts than in showing them her worth. In response to the stereotype that Black women are controlling, Kendall shared: "You know, I'll show you.. .. You say I'm controlling. Okay, then I'll become your boss."

Employing Overt and Covert Forms of Resistance

Another 10 (46%) of the women's responses were related to coping with gendered racism by employing overt and covert forms of resistance. Interview data coded in this category indicated words or phrases that describe the varying ways that Black women respond to bouts of race-based and gender-based discrimination. All of the women in the study admitted that they had experienced discrimination at some point in their lives. Some incidents were described as subtle, whereas others were described as explicit. Nonetheless, the women offered insight into some of the tactics that they employ to maneuver their racist and sexist environments. A few women opted to take a more vocal approach to counter the impact of discrimination. Ava shared:

> For discrimination, I'm pretty vocal. I call it what it is. So, if someone gives me an excuse for why they would get something, and I would tell them, "I think that we should stand up as Black women," but I don't just throw that out there without merit. (Ava)

Another woman took on a systematic approach to handling discrimination by tackling the issues in a group setting by garnering media awareness around injustices toward Black women. Kyla stated:

> With discrimination, I try to be part of a group, like within our community. We were a part of a group one time, but it has been dissolved. We'd have meetings and bring the problems to the table and discuss and then try to go by that. I normally write a lot of letters to the editors of newspapers, TV stations, and stuff like that. My friend and I, we always like to write letters or contact people that we think have a way of a line, like negative comments, when it comes to Black people and stuff like that. And we just write letters to, like, the editors if we think there's something wrong with it or if I think I'm being discriminated against. I tell that person, or you know, I make sure that they know that I know what they're doing. (Kyla)

Other women took a more covert approach to cope with the stressors of being a Black woman by adjusting attitudes or behaviors to minimize stress. Some of the women reported that working more hours or going beyond what is "typically required" of a Black women is how they cope with racism and sexism. Whereas some saw this as an effective strategy, others noted that this approach generated more stress. To illustrate, Donna stated: "You create extra stress. Do more than what is necessary or required, I guess." Likewise, Ceva explained:

> You work extra hard. You go the extra mile and you spend a little bit more time at the office. You become friendly, say that you are a friendly face, you're not loud, you're not ghetto. You just do everything possible to make yourself blend in and be accepted as just the person and not the Black woman. (Ceva)

Ceva's decision to take the blend-in approach was a strategy mentioned by a few other women as well. The women's approach to covertly resist racism and sexism was driven by the hope that time would rectify the issue and indirectly positively impact their stress levels. Delilah stated:

> When you face controversy or where you don't get what you want, but you don't stop. You just keep on going and say, "One day this will change," and sometimes there are things set in place where you file a grievance or what have you. I haven't done very much of that. I had the opportunity, but just didn't pursue it. (Delilah)

Relying on Faith, Prayer, and the Pursuit of Balance

We found that nine (41%) of the women's responses were related to coping with gendered racism by relying on faith, prayer, and the pursuit of balance. Interview data coded in this category indicated words or phrases that illustrate a reliance on a higher power and mindfulness techniques to cope with racial and gender discrimination. Several of the women coped with stressors by praying to a higher power and holding onto their faith that things would work out positively. Katherine proclaimed that the only way that she had been able to manage

the unique stressors of Black womanhood was "by the good Lord, and a lot of praying." Kelly stated that the way to cope was to "continue to read [the Bible] and listen to Him [God], and sometimes you have to leave certain things alone and certain people. You have to just follow Him and trust Him, continue to read, study."

It appears that prayer and spirituality helped most of the participants remain optimistic in the face of adversity. Their faith seemed particularly useful in helping them navigate issues outside their control. To illustrate, Tasha divulged: "I get through by using my faith and just really working through the issue. It is one other thing that I know, I'm guided [by God] but also, I'm praying for God to help give me understanding." It is also important to note that the women emphasized the fact that praying relieves stress, but a few of the women also believed that prayer and faith would bring about God's protection, which is an invaluable tool when navigating racism and sexism.

Last, some of the women noted that race-based and gender-based discrimination requires them to stay mindful of their self-care and ensuring balance. Jennifer shared:

> I've been looking at my health lately and trying to figure out how I can make adjustments. I've been really trying to be in sync with all aspects of my life and really take that time to take care of myself, my mental self, my physical, and my social self. (Jennifer)

Expressing Thoughts and Feelings in Safe Spaces

We identified eight (37%) of the women's responses as being related to coping with gendered racism by expressing their thoughts and feelings in safe spaces. Interview data coded in this category indicated words or phrases that describe the importance of sharing their perspective about life as a Black woman in the United States with others who can empathize and validate their experiences. Several participants noted the importance of openly communicating their concerns to others. The women highlighted that they typically reserved these types of conversations for those who are "going through the same things"—specifically Black men or women. They would initiate conversations to vent their frustrations, such as Donna, who said: "I either talk to others that are going through the same things I am going through or get as far away from it [the race- and gender-based stressor] as I can." Cheryl said that she surrounds herself with people who will not question the validity of her experiences. She noted: "Because I'm around people who are family and friends, people who look like me, I tend to be more blunt about it. That's my escape. People who can relate to what I'm going through to some extent."

For some, talking about the stressor was adequate; others worked to develop a plan of action and to minimize the impact of the stress surrounding the issue. Bridgett shared:

> Yeah, sometimes I talk with others to just vent, just taking some time to talk about it, taking some time to really sit down and think about what's going on. . . . Try to figure out some plans on what it is that I need to do, telling myself, "I'm not going to worry about that because I can't control it, I can't control what people think, let them think what they want to think, let them do it." I tell myself, "You know, don't even worry about that." (Bridgett)

Some participants found that speaking directly with the person most responsible for their stress tended to be most effective. One participant's stress centered on a co-worker's perception that the participant had an attitude. Kendall disclosed:

> Let's see. The number one stressor is attitude. Well, sometimes I explain it when they tell us that we have a bad attitude. And you know, I explain to them, "As hard as we have to fight to get what we want, don't you think you [would] have an attitude problem?" We don't, but you know what I mean [laughing]. (Kendall)

Discussion

Our findings provide a unique perspective and demonstrate how Black women cope with gendered racism. Participants' coping strategies consisted of four overarching salient themes related to how they cope with gendered racism: (a) by redefining Black womanhood; (b) by employing overt and covert forms of resistance; (c) by relying on faith, prayer, and the pursuit of balance; and (d) by expressing their thoughts and feelings in safe spaces. Redefining Black womanhood and employing overt and covert forms of resistance were coping strategies on which they most relied, whereas expressing thoughts and feelings in safe spaces was found to be the least salient coping strategy.

These findings suggest that unique coping strategies are associated with being a member of marginalized racial and gender groups. In our study, redefining Black womanhood in the United States emerged as an important coping strategy, with participants valuing the ability to be able to redefine what it means to be a Black woman on their own terms. Although aware of society's perceptions regarding Black women, participants responded by focusing on their own definitions of Black womanhood through self-valuation, the freedom to be one's self, and not allowing their sense of value to come from others. Similarly, literature suggests that U.S. Black women's

culture may help provide an ideological frame of reference, which specifically embraces self-definition and self-valuation that assists Black women in seeing the circumstances shaping race, class, and gender oppression (Collins 1986). Further, Black women are consciously redefining the role of strength and the strong Black woman in ways that are empowering and freeing (Nelson et al. 2016). Based on our results and the literature, attention should be given to how providing the ideological frame of reference, self-definition, self-valuation, and the freedom to be one's self can affect Black women's coping strategies and ultimately influence their overall mental health.

Employing overt and covert forms of resistance also emerged as an important strategy for coping with bouts of race-based and gender-based discrimination in the United States, with all of the women in the study admitting that they had experienced discrimination at some point in their lives, whether subtle or explicit. Some women took a more covert approach to cope with the stressors of being a Black woman by adjusting their attitudes or behaviors to minimize stress. They noted that working more hours or going beyond what is typically required was how they coped with racism and sexism. This strategy is consistent with Hall et al.'s (2012) finding that Black women in the United States commonly shift behaviors and roles in an attempt to mitigate barriers. Further, women in our study covertly coped with racism and sexism using avoidance behavior. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2008) found that Black women are more likely to use avoidance than active coping strategies. Structural and systematic barriers need to be dismantled to assist Black women in coping without having to adjust attitudes or behaviors to minimize stress, specifically in workplace environments.

Although Black women in the United States may confront discrimination as a coping strategy, research has demonstrated that doing so may indirectly contribute to negative health implications, specifically physical and mental health (Jerald et al. 2017). Avoidance coping strategies have been found to be negatively related to self-esteem and life satisfaction (Thomas et al. 2008), and avoidance behavior may be more likely to intensify the relationship between perceived discrimination and negative health outcomes (Pascoe and Smart Richman 2009). Therefore, research should focus on the health implications that confronting discrimination has on Black women. In other words, does confronting discrimination increase or decrease stress levels and probabilities of adverse health outcomes? Additionally, we should work to dismantle and tackle issues of discrimination within society and give further attention to the development of culturally sensitive coping strategy interventions.

Next, in our study, many participants coped by relying on spirituality and prayer. Other research studies revealed that a greater frequency of gendered racial macroaggressions was positively related to the use of culturally specific coping strategies of spirituality and religious beliefs, which were in turn related to more positive health outcomes (Gary et al. 2015; Lewis et al. 2017; Thomas et al. 2008). More attention should be given to coping strategies that include faith-based practices to ultimately improve health outcomes.

Finally, participants coped through expressing their thoughts and feelings in safe spaces, noting the importance of openly communicating their concerns to others. Although the least pervasive coping strategy, women highlighted that they typically reserved these types of conversations for those who were going through the same things—specifically Black men or women. These findings are consistent with previous research by Collins (2000) and others (Gray-White 1999; Hall et al. 2012). Collins (2000) claimed that Black women in the United States have been able to survive such harsh circumstances by redefining themselves due to their creation of and participation in safe spaces. Collins defined safe spaces as social spaces in which Black women can speak freely. Within these spaces, Black women are allowed to be themselves and participate in safe discourse that has been essential to their means of survival. Safe spaces also provide a realm in which Black women are empowered through self-defining and resisting dominant negative ideologies (Collins 2000). Based on these results, researchers should focus on how expressing thoughts and feelings impacts coping strategies, thus influencing health consequences, specifically mental health outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

We acknowledge study limitations. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling in Texas, Illinois, Louisiana, and Georgia. Thus, our sample is not representative of all U.S. Black women. Although our sampling and data analysis techniques resulted in a sample composed of variability in age, income, education, and religion, we focused on broader trends of coping strategies associated with gendered racism stressors among a diverse sample.

In order to counter the impact of gendered racism, we recommend that attention be given to raising societal awareness on this issue. This effort would include developing strategies for non-Blacks, both men and women, to challenge racial and gender-based stereotypes about Black women. Additional investigation of how Black women's coping strategies influence mental and physical health outcomes is also important. We suggest that future studies include mental and physical health components to further understand the implications of coping strategies among Black women. Further, research often looks at Black women in specific organizations or positions, such as religious institutions, service-level employment, or managerial positions; however, we should examine Black women in a variety of positions, with no shared identity except for race and gender.

Practice Implications

Our study's findings have several implications for practice. These implications include shaping programs, interventions, assessments, and tailored messages that provide awareness among Black women and healthcare professionals to promote positive and healthy coping strategies. Specific programs, interventions, assessments, and/or tailored messages are important and may consist of programs such as sister circles and healing circles, support groups, that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found among Black women in the United States (Neal-Barnett et al. 2011). Sister circles have been found to impact many components that Black women desire for interventions and programs (Neal-Barnett et al. 2011).

Additionally, trainings that may help non-Blacks challenge racial- and gender-based stereotypes about Black women in the United States can be developed. These trainings should consist of making non-Blacks aware of the pervasive stereotypes that exist in order to dismantle institutional, interpersonal, and structural barriers. Finally, our study's results can help shape culturally specific ways to develop rapport, build trust, and increase cultural knowledge of groups that occupy multiple subordinate categories by offering an up-close look at commonplace strategies used by Black women in the United States to contend with gendered racism.

Conclusion

Our study contributes to the larger body of literature concerning Black women's coping strategies because it highlights the complexity of living at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Race and gender compounded often relegate Black women to create unique coping strategies to combat structural oppression (e.g., racism, sexism). Our study includes Black women's perceptions of their lived experiences and reveals multiple modes of resistance to gendered, racist stereotypes. Additionally, our study comprises voices from other religious backgrounds that are typically unheard when discussing the plight of Black women in the United States. Although Christianity is a dominant religion within the Black community, religiosity within the Black community is diverse. This understanding is reflected in our study's sample that included Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists, thus allowing for different Black perspectives under the umbrella of Black womanhood.

Black women in the United States have had to be creatively innovative in combating racism and sexism. In doing so, they have exhibited incredible amounts of intellect and resilience at the social and individual levels. Although most would admit that the plethora of strategies that Black women have created is remarkable, the entire phenomenon begets an important question: How does navigating continuous bouts of oppression across the lifespan impact Black women on a mental, emotional, and physical level? Researchers and advocates for Black women's health should consider ways to intentionally disrupt patterns of gendered racism whenever possible.

We hope that findings from our study will help to raise awareness about U.S. Black women's responses to gendered racism. With this knowledge, advocates for Black women's health and wellness should avoid downplaying Black women's experiences and remain mindful of the accumulative effects that strategizing and "performing" can have on Black women in the United States. The knowledge of how Black women in the United States cope with gendered racism is relevant to all Women of Color and others who occupy multiple subordinated statuses (e.g., religion, sexual orientation, disability status, socioeconomic status) in the United States.

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