



# In Their Own Words: The Meaning of the Strong Black Woman Schema among Black U.S. College Women

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## Abstract

Black girls are socialized to be “strong” under the premise that strength will serve as a means of psychological resistance to oppression prevalent within American society. Although research demonstrates that Black women who internalize ideals of strength (independence, emotional restraint, and self-sacrifice) reap some psychosocial benefits, strength is linked to several psychological consequences. The growing understanding of these consequences have put Black women at a crossroads—forced to reconcile the wisdom of matriarchs with the detriments of being strong. This tension has pushed Black women, especially young women, to reconsider their relationship with strength and redefine its meaning for themselves. The current study sought to qualitatively examine Black U.S. college women’s ( $n = 220$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.88$ ,  $SD = 3.96$ , range = 18–48) varying perceptions of strength, specifically focusing on the meaning women attributed to being a strong Black woman and their attributions to others’ perceptions of strength. Our results revealed that although Black college women recognize that strong Black women may be perceived negatively (e.g., angry) by others, they continue to perceive strength as a relevant aspect of Black womanhood and have redefined strength in novel ways. We conclude by discussing how researchers may advance our understanding of strength and the ways clinicians may support women in defining strength for wellness.

**Keywords** Black women · College students · Strong Black woman · Schema · And stereotype

From a young age, Black girls are socialized to be “strong” (Brown et al. 2017; Edmonson-Bell and Nkomo 1998) under the premise that strength will serve as a means of psychological resistance to the various forms of oppression (e.g., racism and sexism) prevalent within American society. In fact, research indicates strength enhances Black women’s self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy to challenge societal oppression and manage life’s stressors (Davis and Afifi 2019; Watson and Hunter 2016; Woods-Giscombé 2010). Also, scholars assert that young Black women who internalize strength are “psychologically healthier” than those who do

not (Shorter-Gooden and Washington 1996, p. 473). The benefits of being a strong Black woman contribute to its appeal among masses of Black women and underscore why strength is a key descriptor of Black womanhood (Jones and Day 2018; Porter 2017; Settles et al. 2008).

Characterized by emotional fortitude, independence, and self-sacrifice, being a strong Black woman (or what scholars refer to as the Strong Black Woman [SBW] schema; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Woods-Giscombé 2010) has been paramount for Black women’s survival in American society—a society that has persistently deemed Black women’s existence invisible and their concerns negligible. Strength is a tool for survival that allows Black women to defend themselves psychologically against oppression (e.g., Spates et al. 2019) and, specifically, to push back against pejorative stereotypes about their gendered-racial group (Dow 2015). However, research points to the negative consequences associated with internalizing the SBW schema and perceiving it as ideal. These consequences include limited help-seeking (Black and Woods-Giscombé 2012; Ward et al. 2009), maladaptive coping (Abrams et al. 2019; Jones et al. 2020; Schreiber et al. 2000), and poor mental and physical health (Donovan and West 2015; Harrington et al. 2010).

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With mounting evidence suggesting that being a strong Black woman is not conducive to wellness, Black women are at a crossroads—forced to reconcile what was taught and modeled by mothers and other matriarchs (Greene 1990; Romero 2000; Thomas and King 2007) with the tangible detriments of being strong in modern times. The difficulties navigating this chasm are nuanced for Black U.S. college women who, for the first time, may have access to the intellectual resources and emotional capacity to engage critically in a process of self-exploration and gendered racial identity development (Commodore et al. 2018; Porter 2017; Shorter-Gooden and Washington 1996), which includes negotiating the meaning of strength for themselves (Brown et al. 2017; Robinson et al. 2013). This negotiation is key because women are challenged with unique race- and gender-related stressors in their academic environments (Corbin et al. 2018; Henry et al. 2011) that may necessitate a strong stance.

Therefore, Black women's relationship with strength is complicated. In the #Blackgirlmagic era (Thomas 2015), some Black women view the embodiment of strength as a key component of their identity and a badge of honor, serving as an indication of their success in spite of societal barriers. Others repudiate the idea and recognize the image of the strong Black woman solely as a harmful stereotype that is distinct from their self-concept. These polarizing perceptions represent a continuum along which Black women may ascribe differential meaning and importance to the SBW schema. To that end, we examine in the current study how Black U.S. college women view the SBW schema. More specifically, we seek to highlight how perceptions of strength are diverse and may diverge from what scholars (and older generations of Black women) have traditionally conceptualized as strength.

## The Strong Black Woman Schema Defined

Before becoming an exemplar of Black womanhood, the image of the strong Black woman was a stereotype used to justify the exploitation of Black women—a group perceived as having emotional and intellectual deficits, but immense physical strength, and thus able to endure abuse by American slave owners (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Collins 2000; Wallace 1990). Since the time of slavery, Black women have re-appropriated the image, thereby redefining its meaning and leveraging it against derogatory stereotypes (e.g., Jezebel and Sapphire; Harris-Perry 2011; West 1995) and other forms of oppression targeting their group. Emergent from this process of re-appropriation is a construct scholars refer to as the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema.

The SBW schema is an archetype of Black womanhood traditionally characterized by three features: emotional restraint, independence, and caretaking (often at the expense of oneself) (Abrams et al. 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009;

Harris-Perry 2011; Nelson et al. 2016; Walker-Barnes 2014; West et al. 2016; Woods-Giscombe 2010). From an applied psychological stance, it may be considered both a social- and self-schema, that is, a cognitive structure that helps many Black women understand who they are and how to interpret experiences they encounter in response to their race and gender.

The schema is developed for many Black women through gendered-racial socialization, a process through which caregivers provide messages to Black girls based on the suspected sociocultural climate they may experience as Black and women (e.g., “Black women must work hard for a good education”; Brown et al. 2017). One study found that Black women, particularly those raised in families who experienced significant trauma and financial hardship, were taught to be self-reliant (take care of yourself) and strong (emotional and physical resilience); such messaging was intended to protect (or “armor”) against racism and sexism (Edmonson-Bell and Nkomo 1998). Modern research echoes previous findings and notes that strength is modeled and covertly communicated to Black girls by their mothers and other matriarchs (Greene 1990; Romero 2000; Thomas and King 2007) as well as affirmed through the media and peers (Anyiwo et al. 2018; Stanton et al. 2017).

Although such socialization practices contribute to Black women reporting strength as a key component of their Black woman identity (Jones and Day 2018; Settles et al. 2008), it is inherently understood that as a schema, perceptions of strength may be widely diverse based on individual differences (e.g., family background; Edmonson-Bell and Nkomo 1998). Moreover, a schema is malleable and may be shifted as women gain more information about how strength manifests in their daily lives (e.g., reading a blog post about the consequences of adhering to the strong Black woman image; receiving feedback from a friend about their lack of vulnerability in the friendship). To that end, we find it necessary to center our discussion on varying perceptions of strength and consider how variations may have distinct implications for Black women's wellness.

## Perceptions of the Strong Black Woman

In recent years, the significance and meaning of the SBW schema have shifted, particularly among younger generations of Black women. For instance, in the context of a study that examined perceptions of the SBW schema across the lifespan, Bailey (2018) reported that across age cohorts the SBW schema was most strongly endorsed and more important to women who were older and middle-aged. Yet, younger women were reluctant to identify with the schema because they recognized the pressures associated with upholding strength characteristics. Across studies, findings suggest that

younger Black women, and specifically college women, are hesitant to identify with the SBW schema as it is traditionally referenced and, in turn, they are ambivalent, rejecting, or seeking to redefine the schema (Nelson et al. 2016; Robinson et al. 2013; West et al. 2016). The various reactions to the SBW schema are most clearly detailed in a study conducted by Nelson et al. (2016) that examined perceptions of the schema in a sample of 30 U.S. Black women (aged 18–66 years-old). Results of their study revealed that although a majority of their sample identified as a strong Black woman, reactions to the SBW schema were diverse, ranging from (in order of high to low endorsement) ambivalence (mixed feelings regarding the benefits and limitations of the schema), to a desire to appropriate (redefining the schema for oneself), to rejection (critiquing the traditional conceptualization of strength). The college women in their sample acknowledged the utility of being strong when faced with adversity, but also understood the psychological consequences associated with the schema. Within this group there was a desire to redefine strength in a way that was more personal and flexible. The ways Black college women are redefining and positively aligning with strength are illustrated in studies that show, in addition to traditional characteristics, college women are defining strength using novel themes (e.g., hardworking/ambitious, educated, self-confident, racial pride, respected, feminine, interpersonally savvy, having multiple roles, and beautiful; Robinson et al. 2013; West et al. 2016) and are associating strength with wellness behaviors, such as self-care (Bailey 2018).

Taken together, these prior studies establish that the SBW schema remains relevant in terms of how Black women see themselves; however, the meaning and significance of this schema differs, particularly for Black college women. Among college women, the SBW schema is thought to be important and positive, yet there are growing numbers of women who find the schema to be less relevant (or even problematic) (Nelson et al. 2016; Robinson et al. 2013). Additionally, many women have sought to redefine strength, expounding its meaning and associating it with wellness and self-care (Bailey 2018; Nelson et al. 2016; Robinson et al. 2013; West et al. 2016). Although the reasons why Black college women may seek to redefine or distance themselves from traditional ideals of strength remain unclear, we suspect that these women, because of the current sociocultural climate, may have more exposure to diverse Black women exemplars and greater access to resources (e.g., culturally responsive mental health support, scholarly literature and media specific to Black women's wellness) that challenge how they orient toward strength. Therefore, we assert that the various perceptions of the SBW schema, especially among Black college women, should be explored because differing perceptions may have distinct implications for how these women pursue wellness.

## SBW Schema: Identity, Stereotype, or both?

The SBW schema is distinguished by the fact that it is an identity (or self-schema) and stereotype. For many Black women, being a strong Black woman is synonymous with their identity as Black women (Jones and Day 2018; Settles et al. 2008). For example, Romero (2000, p. 237) described a woman who was overwhelmed by the demands to be strong, yet struggled to abandon the façade of strength because doing so “was tantamount to getting rid of [her]self.” Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) also explain that because of Black women's fusion with the SBW schema, women may tend to lose sight of themselves—their own gifts, goals, and needs—often at the expense of their mental health. It is the wide acceptance of the SBW schema (as it is traditionally conceptualized) by Black women that also makes it a pervasive, albeit accurate, stereotype.

We argue that for some Black women, particularly those Black college women who reject the SBW schema, it may not be the internalization of the schema, but rather the awareness that others negatively perceive them through the lens of the strong Black woman stereotype, that impacts their wellness. This assertion is derived from research linking Black women's awareness of others' stereotypes about their group to lower mental health and to limited engagement in wellness activities (Jerald et al. 2017). Considering research evidencing that the Strong Black Woman (as a self-schema and stereotype) has implications for Black women's wellness, we found it necessary to examine the SBW schema from two angles, thereby exploring how Black women attribute meaning to the SBW schema for themselves (personal attribution) and assessing how they believe the schema may be perceived by others (attribution of other's perceptions).

## The Current Study

The purpose of the current study is to investigate Black U.S. college women's perceptions of the SBW schema, recognizing that women attribute varying meanings to the schema, which in turn may have direct and distinct implications for their wellness (Jones et al. 2020; Donovan and West 2015; Watson and Hunter 2015). One major contribution of our study is revisiting perceptions of the SBW schema in a large and diverse sample of Black U.S. college women to see whether previously identified findings, which were predicated on small samples, can be replicated. Furthermore, we extend what we know about the SBW schema by focusing on college women, who because of the current zeitgeist, may have perceptions of strength that are starkly different from how the SBW schema was originally conceptualized. Finally, we add to the literature by exploring how Black college women believe others perceive the SBW schema because studies point

to negative implications of stereotype awareness on Black women's wellness and self-care strategies (Jerald et al. 2017). Two research questions guided our investigation: (a) What meaning do Black U.S. college women attribute to being a strong Black woman? How may these attributions be similar or different from traditional ideals of strength? and (b) What meaning do Black college women attribute to others' perceptions of the strong Black woman image?

## Method

### Participants

The present study was approved by our university's Institutional Review Board before commencing. The sample included 220 Black college women between the ages of 18 and 48 years-old ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21.88$ ,  $SD = 3.96$ ). Most women self-identified as Christian ( $n = 172$ , 78.2%), whereas others identified as Muslim ( $n = 4$ , 1.8%), spiritual ( $n = 31$ , 14.1%), agnostic ( $n = 5$ , 2.3%), atheist ( $n = 4$ , 1.8%), or indicated an "other" religious affiliation (e.g., combination of Christianity and other faith-based practices) ( $n = 4$ , 1.8%). In terms of relationship status, an overwhelming majority of women reported being single ( $n = 212$ , 96.4%), with only 3.6% ( $n = 8$ ) reporting being in a married or committed partnership. A majority were undergraduate students ( $n = 148$ , 67.6%), and the remaining third were graduate students ( $n = 71$ , 32.4%). The most commonly endorsed fields of study across the sample included (in order of high to low) social sciences, health professions, and education.

### Procedure and Measures

Black women college students were recruited through convenience sampling, primarily from two large urban and diverse cities located in Eastern regions of the United States. Women were recruited by an electronic flyer that was emailed to listservs targeting Black college students and posted on social media as well as by word of mouth. The recruitment flyer invited women to participate in a study focused on identity, discrimination, and aspects of mental health in Black college women. The flyer included instructions on how to participate in the study and a link to the Qualtrics online survey. Upon clicking the survey link on the flyer, women were presented with an informed consent form that explained the study and asked them to indicate whether they agree to participate. Women who agreed to participate were presented with the survey measures. As part of a larger study, in addition to items assessing perceptions of the SBW schema, women were also presented with measures of demographics, cultural identity, discrimination, and aspects of mental health. The average

completion time for the survey was 30 min. Women were not provided an incentive for their participation.

Demographic information included women's age, religious/spiritual affiliation, marital status, student status (undergraduate or graduate), and field of study. The Strong Black Woman Questionnaire was created by the researchers; the questionnaire consists of three items intended to measure the meaning and significance Black women attribute to the SBW schema. To determine the meaning and significance women may ascribe to the SBW schema, women were asked the following open-ended questions: "In your opinion, what does it mean to be a strong Black woman?" and "How do you believe others perceive strong Black women?" as well as one yes-no question: "Is being a 'strong Black woman' important to you?"

### Data Analysis

The current study aims to highlight the diverse ways Black U.S. college women may attribute meaning to being a strong Black woman, and thus we employed qualitative methods informed by a critical-realist paradigm (Houston 2010; Ponterotto 2005). This paradigm acknowledges that individuals engage in their own construction and meaning-making of reality within sociohistorical and cultural contexts. Therefore, we presumed that women's realities of the SBW schema would be self-constructed, diverse, and shaped by context. Although variations in how the SBW schema is experienced are assumed to be present, within this paradigm there also exists the opportunity to bring together a narrative that reflects the shared reality of the SBW schema for Black college women.

In terms of our data analytic method, typed responses to open-ended items of the Strong Black Woman Questionnaire were analyzed using the consensual qualitative research approach (CQR; Hill et al. 2005). Qualitative data were analyzed by three Black women (two counseling psychologists and one counseling psychology trainee) in four phases. First, the third author thoroughly reviewed the responses to each open-ended question and developed two lists of broad ideas (one list for each question) that were reflected in the data. Second, the lists were discussed by the team and distilled into representative themes that were transcribed into a codebook. The final codebook included a definition of each theme and representative keywords. Third, the team began coding women's responses using the themes outlined in the codebook. Throughout the coding process the team met weekly to discuss responses, including their biases and reactions as well as determine what themes were represented in each response. The CQR method acknowledges the likelihood for differing perspectives in data interpretation. Accordingly, the team discussed all perspectives until consensus was met. For the few cases with no consensus, the codes were determined based on majority vote.



Finally, the first author audited the codes, ensuring that each code was substantially represented. Themes comprising less than 5% of responses were not considered an independent theme, and thus these responses were placed under a second review to determine if another code would be more fitting and re-coded (if warranted); the few responses that were not absorbed into our extant themes were labeled “other.”

## Results

When asked about the importance of being a strong Black woman, a majority of the women ( $n = 189$ ; 85.90%) indicated that being strong was important to them, thereby indicating that there is strong consensus regarding the importance of the SBW schema. In the following sections we expound upon our findings and describe the major themes constituting women’s attributions to the SBW schema (Research Question 1), as well as their attributions to others’ perceptions of the schema (Research Question 2). We use illustrative quotations to describe each theme, and then draw meaningful connections among themes.

### Research Question 1: Attributed Meaning

In response to being asked how they would define the SBW schema the following themes emerged among Black college women (in order of high to low endorsement): Resilient, Hardworking, Independent, Nurturing, Gendered-Racial Pride, New Wave, and Emotionally Contained. Responses not captured in the stated themes were labeled “Other” (e.g., “to be a Black woman living in America”) (see Table 1). We discuss each theme in order of endorsement, with one exception. New Wave responses are described last because they are conceptually distinct and represent a critique or redefinition of the SBW schema.

#### Resilient

“Resilient” was the most commonly used word to describe the SBW schema, and thus it was the most prominent theme that emerged in terms of attributed meaning to the SBW schema ( $n = 98$ ; 30.72%). For women in the current investigation, Resilient meant surviving in spite of oppression (e.g., “discrimination,” “stereotyping,” and “double-marginalization”). A small number of women mentioned “take[ing] life’s lemons and makes[ing] lemonade,” and “making the impossible, possible,” whereas many more explicitly articulated how societal oppression begets resilience. For instance, one woman stated that being “a strong Black woman means...to be tested by societal norms every single day...*but still* remain tenacious as much as she can because she has no other choice” (emphasis added).

#### Hardworking

Hardworking was used to label responses that reflected women’s tendency to work persistently to reach a desired goal (e.g., academic achievement) and the pressures to excel in all domains of life (e.g., work, school, and family) ( $n = 54$ ; 16.93%). Some women noted the importance of “working twice as hard,” and others stressed the importance of remaining motivated and focused on their goals. Across the responses, “goals” and “success” were unspecified, which may be an indication that it is assumed that strong Black women are to excel in multiple areas: “handle everything” and “take care of anything and everything.”

#### Independent

Responses highlighting how strong Black women sustain themselves without the assistance of others were labeled Independent ( $n = 40$ ; 12.54%). Though many women simply used the word “independent” in their descriptions, some women expounded. For example, one woman stated that being a strong Black woman means “Doing everything by myself. Not asking for a break because it is assumed I do not need a break...” Of note is how Hardworking and Independent themes were often coupled together. For instance, one woman shared that being a strong Black woman meant being “able to support oneself, working three times harder than others.” In this way, women perceived their self-sufficiency and work ethic as positive attributes contributing to their success.

#### Nurturing

Another theme attributed to being a strong Black woman was Nurturing ( $n = 40$ ; 12.54%), which was defined as serving as a caretaker, often at the expense of oneself. Women noted that being a strong woman meant serving as “the matriarch of the Black family,” with the proverbial strength to “hold the family (and her community) on her back.” When women mentioned being a caretaker, they also noted the self-sacrificial nature of this role. For instance, one woman mentioned: “it’s not about you, it’s the impact you make on others’ lives,” and being a strong Black woman means “take[ing] others’ needs so seriously that you don’t make time for yourself.”

#### Gendered-Racial Pride

Gendered-Racial Pride captured women’s expressions of confidence, self-esteem, and cultural pride ( $n = 34$ ; 10.66%). A portion of the sample indicated a general appreciation for oneself (e.g., “a strong Black woman is confident in herself”), and others specifically connected this confidence with their cultural identity (e.g., “to always be proud to be Black” and “proud of your culture”). For many, it is this sense of pride that was

**Table 1** Frequency of strong black woman theme endorsement—attributed meaning ( $n = 319$ )

Themes	Definition	Example quotes	Frequency of theme $n$ (%)
Resilient	Being able to withstand and recover from difficult situations	“A Black woman who is able to persevere through times of challenge and thrive.” “To be persistent ...through the obstacles and barriers that come with the intersectionality of being part of two underrepresented and minority groups.”	98 (30.72%)
Hardworking	Capable of working persistently to reach a desired goal or “success”; excelling in multiple domains of life (e.g., work, school, and family)	“Capable of accomplishing your goals and making dreams a reality.” “A strong Black woman is a “Superwoman,” the person who does all.”	54 (16.93%)
Independent	The ability to work and be successful without the assistance of others	“Self-sufficient” “A strong Black woman is independent.”	40 (12.54%)
Nurturing	Serving as a caretaker, often by sacrificing oneself for the greater good of others	“To be a woman who thinks collectively and remembers to bring her community with her.” “...the matriarch of a Black family”	40 (12.54%)
Gendered-racial pride	A sense of confidence and self-assurance	“...willing to embrace burden and wear it with pride because there is no one else who could confidently do the job.” “Someone who is unapologetic about being Black and a woman and carries herself with respect”	34 (10.66%)
New wave	Responses that critiqued or challenged the strong Black women image	“Being a strong black woman is very limiting. It doesn’t give Black women the ability to feel and break out of the necessity to always be strong and unbothered.” “Being strong does not always mean going solo, but it means that you know your limits and know when to call and ask for help.”	30 (9.40%)
Emotionally contained	The ability to withhold emotion and/or perceiving the expression of emotion as a weakness or flaw	“...devoid of sentimental emotions--even in the face of overwhelming problems and fears” “Not easily broken emotionally”	16 (5.02%)
Other	Unusual responses	“I really don’t know.” “To be alive.”	7 (2.19%)

Participants’ responses could reflect more than one category of meaning

thought to protect women from oppression, as stated here: “to avoid internalizing the hatred thrown at you; to always be proud to be Black” and “to be confident. To not care about the war outside.”

### Emotionally Contained

Statements that endorsed the idea that strong Black women withhold their emotions and/or avoid expressing emotions for fear of being perceived as weak or flawed were labeled Emotionally Contained ( $n = 16$ ; 5.02%). Women stated that being a strong Black woman meant, “withholding your emotions as to not appear weak or vulnerable” and “putting on a strong face to the outside world.” One woman specifically shared that being emotionally controlled was integral when she engaged with cultural others, and thus she described being a strong Black woman as “someone who can handle her own

everything without showing weakness in public or in front of a group of non-Black peers.”

### New Wave

There was a subset of responses ( $n = 30$ ; 9.40%) that directly challenged the image of the strong Black woman and/or redefined traditional notions of strength. These responses were labeled New Wave. One woman pushed against this image stating:

It’s an unfair stereotype that doesn’t allow self-care. It means putting others before yourself, whether they mean harm or not (i.e., polite racists in class, well-meaning partners unable to communicate, poor family members, guilt-ridden White women, etc.). This all comes at the cost of our own wellbeing.

Another woman also shared how being a strong Black woman undermines wellness:

We have to put up a façade to the world—we often don't fully allow ourselves to acknowledge or accept any feeling that may detract us from the road ahead, goal or thing we need to accomplish. Resilience is great until it becomes detrimental to wellbeing.

In contrast, there was one woman who articulated a balanced perspective, and she acknowledged the potential consequences *and* benefits associated with strength: “it [being a strong Black woman] can be toxic at times because you are not allowed to feel ‘weak’ and useful in others.”

Because of the noted mental health consequences of strength, there were women who sought to redefine strength in terms of wellness. These women mentioned how strength can be linked to vulnerability, self-care, and help-seeking. For example, one woman mentioned being a strong Black woman means “allowing yourself to express your feelings and say when something is not okay,” and another reported: “a strong Black woman is someone who takes care of herself as well as others. She should prioritize her needs over others.” In terms of help-seeking, one woman noted that “a strong Black woman is someone who embraces the challenges in her life but is never too prideful to ask for help.”

## Research Question 2: Attributions of Others' Perceptions

When Black college women were asked how they believe others perceive strong Black women, the following themes emerged (in order of high to low endorsement): Angry, Independent, Nurturing, Emotionally Contained, Resilient, and Hardworking. Responses not captured in the stated themes were labeled Other (see Table 2). We describe each theme in detail in the following paragraphs.

### Angry

Women frequently noted that strong Black women are seen as angry and aggressive, and thus Angry was the most common theme that emerged ( $n = 116$ ; 42.65%). Additionally, women overwhelmingly linked the image of the strong Black woman with the stereotype of the angry Black woman (Tyree 2011). For instance, one woman shared that “others may perceive ‘strong Black women’ as overpowering or as though they are ‘angry Black women.’” Others mentioned that perceptions of strength are “mainly negative” and strong Black women are seen as “angry, narcissistic, loud, ABW [angry Black woman] basically.” Other characteristics associated with anger and the angry Black woman stereotype included mean, rude, loud, outspoken, having a bad attitude, and never being satisfied.

**Table 2** Frequency of strong black woman theme endorsement—attributions of others' perceptions ( $n = 272$ )

Themes	Definition	Example quotes	Frequency of theme $n$ (%)
Angry	Depictions of Black women as threatening, intimidating, angry, and aggressive	“Angry and bitch-like” “Stubborn, not submissive, loud, annoying, ratchet”	116 (42.65%)
Independent	The ability to work and be successful without the assistance of others	“Too independent to be accepted by Black men and too strong to be seen as feminine.”	32 (11.76%)
Nurturing	Serving as a caretaker, often by sacrificing oneself for the greater good of others	“...she is expected to be a rock for everyone else.” “That the strong Black woman needs to take care of everyone all the time.”	29 (10.66%)
Emotionally contained	The ability to withhold emotion and/or perceiving the expression of emotion as a weakness or flaw	“...put in so much emotional labor without any mental/emotional support.” “Others perceive Black women as someone who is emotionally shut off...”	27 (9.93%)
Resilient	Being able to withstand and recover from difficult situations	“Able to handle anything, no matter how wrong.” “A Black woman who constantly takes a beating from the ‘world’ and can naturally adjust.”	26 (9.56%)
Hardworking	Capable of working persistently to reach a desired goal or “success”; excelling in multiple domains of life (e.g., work, school, and family)	“As a superwoman, someone who can do all...” “To be consumed only in their work endeavors yet still able to help others when needed.”	25 (9.19%)
Other	Unusual responses	“I am not sure. I never thought about that.”	17 (6.25%)

Participants' responses could reflect more than one category of meaning

## Independent

Independent was a second theme used to label responses highlighting how strong Black women are thought to be able to “do it all” and be successful without the help of others ( $n = 32$ ; 11.76%). Women stated strong Black women are seen as “independent, not needing any help, expected to do things themselves” and women who “can do anything... [and] never need support.” Although Independent constituted a standalone theme, our data revealed that independence was often coupled with perceptions of anger (e.g., “independent *and* angry” or “angry, too independent”). For instance, one participant shared that a strong Black woman is seen “as a woman who is aggressive and doesn’t want help from anybody and can do all things for herself.” Therefore, in these instances, Independence carried a negative connotation.

## Nurturing

Similar to women’s attributed meaning to strong Black womanhood, women also thought others perceived strong Black women as Nurturing (e.g., “caretaker for everyone that doesn’t reserve time for herself and gives all her time and energy to saving and uplifting everyone around her”) ( $n = 29$ ; 10.66%). Some women specifically noted how they are thought of as caregivers within their cultural communities and families. Two women mentioned strong women are seen as “a strong matriarch who cares for everyone” and “carry[ing] the Black race, being the center of the household.”

## Emotionally Contained

Emotionally Contained emerged as a theme of personal attribution yet appeared qualitatively distinct in women’s descriptions of how others view strong Black women ( $n = 27$ ; 9.93%). Some women shared that strong Black women are seen as emotionally “cold,” “unfeeling,” and uniquely equipped to “deal with much turmoil, strife, drama, and ache whilst keeping our mouth shut. Suffer in silence and show no emotion outwardly.” Some women linked a perceived lack of emotionality with the perception of Black women as inhuman or “machine-like.” For instance, one woman shared:

In my opinion, I believe others perceive "strong Black women" as almost sub-human. More specifically, I believe folks believe it is natural for us to put in so much emotional labor without any mental/emotional support. It's as if we are robots or something.

## Resilient

Although Resilient was the theme most commonly attributed to being a strong Black woman, it was relatively less common in terms of how women think strength is perceived by others ( $n = 26$ ; 9.56%). Women noted that strong Black women are seen as “women who have overcome many hardships but are still standing” and women who are “able to endure a lot of pain and strife.” Responses suggest that women recognize others as perceiving them as stalwart through life challenges.

## Hardworking

Although women’s descriptions of how others view strong Black women primarily had a negative connotation, women did articulate how strong women were positively perceived as hardworking ( $n = 25$ ; 9.19%). Responses labeled Hardworking highlighted how strong women are seen as “someone who can do all and look good while doing it,” “women that get things done quickly and effectively,” and “someone who is about her business and gets things done.” These responses illustrate how women recognize that others may view them as reliable and able to successfully fulfill multiple obligations.

## Additional Responses

For interpretation, all responses that did not align with the aforesaid themes were labeled as Other. However, we found it important to note that there were a handful of these responses (not enough to constitute an independent theme;  $n = 7$ ) that suggested strong Black women are seen as sexual objects and/or sexually promiscuous. For instance, one woman mentioned that “some may fetishize Black women for their depiction in the media.” Other women noted that strong women are perceived as “promiscuous” and having multiple children (e.g., “single mother raising her kids with three jobs to provide for them”). Comments of this type liken to perceptions of Black women as a stereotypical Jezebel (Mitchell and Herring 1998; West 1995).

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore Black U.S. college women’s perceptions of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema. Across our sample, college women attributed meaning to the SBW schema using six themes: Resilient, Independent, Hardworking, Nurturing, Gendered-Racial Pride, New Wave, and Emotionally Contained. Further, we identified that women believe that others view strong Black women as Angry, Independent, Nurturing, Hardworking, Emotionally Contained, and Resilient. Despite the fact that others may perceive strong Black women negatively (as indicated by the



overwhelming endorsement of the Angry theme), women noted that being a strong Black woman remains an important part of how they define themselves. In the following paragraphs, we revisit the themes that emerged in women's attributions to the SBW schema and conclude with thoughts regarding the impact of the schema on Black U.S. college women's wellness.

The attributed meaning of the SBW schema for Black college women was composed of themes representing traditional (Independent, Nurturing, and Emotionally Contained) and modern (Resilient, Hardworking, Gendered-Racial Pride, and New Wave) iterations of the schema. Findings of the current study align with previous literature which shows that independence, emotional restraint, and caretaking are key characteristics of the SBW schema (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Walker-Barnes 2014; Woods-Giscombé 2010). Although previous research would suggest that each of these characteristics holds equal weight in terms of how women define strength, our findings suggest that among Black college women, strength may be minimally defined by emotional restraint; lower levels of endorsement for this theme may represent women's growing understanding of the negative link between strength and mental health—a finding that has been evidenced in other investigations of Black college women (Robinson et al. 2013; West et al. 2016).

Resilience and Hardworking were the two most common themes women attributed to strength. The salience of these themes for Black college women suggest that the SBW schema does not occur in a vacuum, but rather it is located in a sociocultural context that necessitates women leverage all resources (physical, emotional, and spiritual) and work hard to survive. It is in this way that the SBW schema is problematic—through its internalization it places the responsibility on Black women to survive in society (and for college students, an academic environment) plagued by “-isms,” and in turn minimizes the urgency of addressing such injustice. Harris-Perry (2011, p. 189) states that the internalization of the SBW schema, as it is traditionally recognized, leaves Black women “believing that inequality must be a result of insufficient effort.” It is this belief that may facilitate Black college women's enactment of strength characteristics (resilience and hardworking) that, in turn, may contribute to stress and burn out (Walker-Barnes 2014).

We would be remiss to ignore that identifying as a strong Black woman is associated with Gendered-Racial Pride. This sense of esteem is sustained in spite of attacks to their identity as Black women. The findings of the current study complement the handful of studies demonstrating that the SBW schema may be associated with psychosocial benefits, like pride and positive cultural identity (Harris-Perry 2011; Jones and Day 2018; Watson and Hunter 2016; Woods-Giscombé 2010). Such pride is integral for Black college women's successful navigation of educational environments where their identity is not affirmed (Robinson et al. 2013).

The final novel theme we identified is New Wave, which serves as a direct indication of Black women as constructive agents in shifting perceptions of the SBW schema. Most apparent in women's responses is an understanding of the implications of the SBW schema for wellness, coupled with attempts to redefine the schema for themselves—reactions that mirrored those articulated by college women in previous research (e.g., re-appropriation and rejection of the SBW schema; Nelson et al. 2016). Responses of this type highlight the role of meaning-making as it relates to the SBW schema: Women who define the schema using traditional characteristics (independence, emotional restraint, and caretaking) may experience more distress (because these combined characteristics have been empirically linked to distress; Jones et al. 2020; Donovan and West 2015; Watson-Singleton 2017) compared to those who may have critiqued the image or redefined strength in terms of wellness strategies.

Women's attributions regarding how the SBW schema is perceived by others point to the continued salience of the “angry Black woman” stereotype, which is broadly characterized as a woman who is aggressive, easily angered, loud, and hostile (Tyree 2011). The emotional paradox for Black women is highlighted when they juxtapose other's perceptions of strong Black women as Angry with their personal attribution of Emotionally Contained. In pairing these two themes together, it may be that many Black women understand that only their emotional expressions of anger are recognized and are negatively perceived by others. As such, they may minimize displays of affect or engage in self-silencing (Ashley 2014; West 1995). In accord with the works of Jerald et al. (2017), it may also be the case that negotiating negative stereotypes about one's group contributes to distress (Corbin et al. 2018), which in turn undermines wellness behaviors (e.g., emotional expression).

Although women indicated that perceptions of strength are overwhelmingly negative, a critical mass of women highlighted how others' perceptions of strength are influenced by context—the person *who* and the situation *when* the woman is being perceived. Overall, it appears that women believe strength is positively perceived by other Black Americans, particularly in the home and in their communities, whereas strength is most commonly perceived negatively by cultural others (e.g., “I believe strong Black women are perceived in two different ways. For people of other races, I believe it can be perceived as a threat to them. For women of African American descent, we perceive it as a role model” and “I believe that others who are Black perceive Black women as loyal, powerful and smart. Others who are not Black perceive strong Black women as angry women”). Our findings support others' conclusions that strength is coveted in some contexts (e.g., Black women's leadership in the workplace; Rosette et al. 2016), yet generally perceived in a negative manner by cultural others (e.g., White women peers in college; Donovan 2011).

## Limitations and Future Directions

Contributions of the current study must be taken in consideration of its limitations. First, results of the current study reflect the viewpoints of a homogenous sample of Black U.S. college women who primarily self-identified as Christian, unmarried, and of middle-class status or higher. Findings could be further substantiated through replication studies that include more diverse samples of Black women, namely those who vary in ethnicity, age, marital status, and socioeconomic status, because previous studies suggest that perceptions of strength may vary based on these demographic characteristics (Abrams et al. 2014; Bailey 2018; Dow 2015; Jackson and Naidoo 2013). It is logical that the unique history and sociocultural context for Black women of various ethnic backgrounds and in non-American contexts may contribute to how strength is conceptualized and embodied. For instance, in a study of strength, help-seeking, and depression among Black Caribbean women in Canada, some participants equated strength with seeking formal support (“trying new approaches”; Jackson and Naidoo 2013, p. 233) when in distress, which is the opposite of how many Black American women conceptualize strength. Studies also bring to bear how perceptions of strength may shift as women age and when their multiple roles (wife/mother/caregiver and provider) become more integrated (Baker et al. 2015). For these women, themes attributed to strength such as nurturing, hardworking, and independent may be equally salient.

Second, a limitation of our qualitative approach was our inability to offer and gain clarity about the open-ended self-report items assessing how women attribute meaning to the SBW schema; this is a departure from other qualitative studies (e.g., focus groups and one-on-one interviews) that provide the researcher the opportunity to explain questions that may be prone to ambiguities in interpretation and probe for clarity about participants’ responses. For this reason, we specifically do not know if women’s descriptions of the SBW schema indicate how they define strength from themselves or the stereotype more broadly, nor do we know who (e.g., Black men, White Americans, Women of Color) Black women may have been referencing as they thought about other’s perceptions of the SBW schema. Future studies may consider employing focus groups and interviews to garner more detailed information regarding the SBW schema. In doing so, researchers should challenge participants to consider how they may personally (not stereotypically) define being a strong Black woman, as well as have women think about a specific reference group (e.g., White men) when describing how they

believe others perceive strength. A meaningful next step also would include quantitatively examining how various attributions may be related to Black college women’s coping, help-seeking, and distress.

Finally, we recognize the subjective nature of qualitative research and the influence of the researchers on data interpretation and analysis. Although an argued limitation, we believe, in accordance with Black feminist epistemology (Collins 2000), the involvement of Black women researchers is an asset and contributes to the cultural fidelity of findings. Accordingly, we encourage Black women scholars to spearhead future studies centered on the experiences of Black women, perhaps exploring how variations in meaning of the SBW schema correlate with mental health.

## Practice Implications

Study findings have direct implications for mental health practitioners working with Black U.S. college women. In acknowledging how Black women have different perspectives on strength (and that some perspectives are more consequential for mental health than others), it is the responsibility of practitioners to work with Black women to process and explore the meaning and significance of strength for each woman. This approach includes helping women to critically engage the idea of strength through questions such as, “In your opinion, what does it mean to be a strong Black woman?,” “From whom and how did you learn to be strong?,” and “In what ways is strength benefiting or harming you?” With a more thorough understanding, practitioners can work with clients to shift the SBW schema to that which is more adaptive (e.g., equating strength to help-seeking). It is also the role of practitioners to support women in fostering positive perceptions of self and rejecting essentializing stereotypes. Although marked shifts in the SBW schema have been noted in the context of psychotherapy groups with Black college women (Jones and Pritchett-Johnson 2018), we also believe it would be useful to employ cognitive approaches (e.g., cognitive restructuring) in individual therapy to help women reframe their definition of strength to that which includes wellness strategies. Furthermore, theoretical approaches that highlight self-compassion may be integral in supporting women in acknowledging their vulnerabilities (Smeets et al. 2014; Thimm 2017; Woods-Giscombé et al. 2016).

Although mental health professionals are well equipped to support Black women in exploring and redefining strength, parents, peers, and the media play an even larger role in shaping perceptions of strength. We recommend that parents teach and model Black

women's strength in new and novel ways. This strategy may include parents modeling and encouraging girls' and young women's emotional expression, solicitation of social support, and self-care, in addition to educating them on the necessity of these behaviors for long-term wellness. It is equally imperative that those in relationships with Black women (e.g., peers and partners) support and reinforce the aforesaid behaviors. Further, media should work to reduce stereotypical portrayals of strong Black women (Cox and Ward 2019) and instead display Black women as having emotional depth, social support, and investment in their own well-being.

It is worth reiterating the Black women's embodiment of strength is a direct response to the historical oppression they experience on the basis of their race and gender. The continuation of oppression and the necessity of a strong stance is highlighted in Black college women's descriptions of resilience. To that end, it is also critical that administrators and policymakers continually assess ways to end racial- and gender-based forms of mistreatment, particularly in higher education (e.g., including Black women in decision-making; requiring implicit bias training and diversity seminars for faculty and staff).

## Conclusions

Our study highlights the continued relevance of the strong Black woman ideal among Black U.S. college women, while at the same time showcasing how women have come to understand this image of Black womanhood in ways that are novel and distinguished from previous generations of Black women. Black women are exercising personal agency and taking a stand by distancing themselves from traditional ideals of strength that no longer serve them and by redefining strength in ways that prioritize and facilitate mental wellness. Therefore, rather than discarding strength for its historical and consequential impact on Black women's wellness, we encourage scholars, clinicians, and others to honor Black women's agency and support their efforts to link strength with wellness.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. The study involved research with human participants (adult women aged 18+). All women participated in informed consent and agreed to participate in the study.

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