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ABSTRACT

Although many Americans assume that systemic racism has been washed away through history, research shows that this is far from reality. Across a range of interdisciplinary scholarly research exists a consensus that systemic racism induces Black women's suffering. The main question guiding my research asks how systemic racism facilitates college-aged Black women's mental and emotional health outcomes. The goals of this study included documenting where systemic racism is prevalent, analyzing the mental and emotional impact of systemic racism on college-aged Black women, examining the coping mechanisms that college-aged Black women employ to minimize race-based distress, understanding how media attention to systemic racism impacts college-aged Black women's mental and emotional health, and learning how college-aged Black women value public support for Black lives. Following a semester of quantitative and qualitative research, I assert that by virtue of the policies and practices sustaining the politico-economic exploitation and social marginalization of Black women, college-aged Black women are structurally vulnerable to adverse mental and emotional health. The consequences of the structural inequities burdening Black women's lives deserve comprehensive understanding and solutions. My research advances an emerging scholarly call to action to uproot the systemic racism and structural inequities devastating the welfare of Black lives.

Although many Americans today assume that systemic racism has been washed away through history, research shows that this is far from reality. Across a broad range of interdisciplinary scholarly research exists a consensus that systemic racism induces Black women's suffering. Systemic racism, the structurally rooted policies and practices that manufacture and maintain race-based inequities in access to resources and opportunities, has survived both the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement and continues to sabotage every aspect of Black American life.

Research suggests that structural inequalities are embodied in race-based health disparities (Bell et al., 2018). Structural and social inequalities are biologically reflected among Black Americans (Gravlee, 2009). Moreover, critically examining health through an intersectional lens highlights the simultaneous and interdependent influences of class, race, and gender on Black women's health (Pouget, 2017). An intersectional approach to Black women's health emphasizes that these three interconnecting systems of power require a collective investigation to accurately understand the disproportionate adverse health outcomes among Black women (Mullings, 2005). As a product of their subordinate status in the politically and economically constructed hierarchical social order, Black women are structurally vulnerable to embody their suffering (Quesada et al., 2011). Through a critical medical anthropological approach, structural vulnerability highlights how systemic racism engenders Black women's suffering.

Existing research predominantly focuses on how social and structural determinants of health produce Black women's physical maladies. Bell et al. (2018) assert that residential segregation is embodied in disproportionate rates of HIV among Black women. McLemore et al. (2018) identify that unstable housing, environmental stressors, and food insecurity harm Black maternal and infant health. Furthermore, Gadson, Akpovi, and Mehta (2017) describe how Black women's lack of access to healthcare and transportation encourage poor pregnancy outcomes. Significant research maintains that the chronic stress of systemic racism cumulatively induces Black women's weathering, or premature biological aging (Michaels et al., 2019). Research on Black women's health concentrates on the social and structural forces burdening physical health.

However, while there is ample scholarly work on how the chronic stress of racism facilitates physical health adversities, there are fewer studies examining the implications of systemic racism and discrimination on Black women's mental and emotional health. While Grollman (2012) and Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2008) identify a relationship between Black women's experiences with discrimination and poor mental health, further analysis is needed that examines the structural forces producing these outcomes. This article is inspired by the work of Black female scholars, including Lewis and Neville (2015), Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Browne Huntt (2012), and Woods-Giscombé (2011). Lewis and Neville (2015) identify a relationship between gendered racism and psychological distress. Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Browne Huntt (2012) analyzed the coping mechanisms Black women employ to minimize the distress of discrimination. Woods-Giscombé (2011) determined that the cultural trope of a strong Black woman leads Black women to internalize and embody their stress. To acquire a thorough understanding of Black women's biopsychosocial health, more research explicitly spotlighting the mental and emotional consequences of systemic racism is essential.

The results of this study target an extensive audience including medical anthropologists, Black feminist scholars, public health professionals, policymakers, social science scholars, and laypersons. I believe that this topic deserves universal acquaintance. The purpose of

this study is to bring awareness to systemic racism, its destructive power over Black lives, and its assault on college-aged Black women's mental and emotional health.

The main question guiding my research asks how systemic racism facilitates college-aged Black women's health outcomes in the United States. Following this broad question, I composed three sub-questions: (a) Where do college-aged Black women experience discrimination most frequently? (b) How do college-aged Black women overcome daily experiences of discrimination? (c) How do the current social and political climates and the growing Black Lives Matter movement affect college-aged Black women's mental and emotional health? Accompanying these questions, I crafted a list of objectives. The goals of this study included documenting where systemic racism is most prevalent, analyzing the mental and emotional impact of systemic racism and discrimination on college-aged Black women, examining the coping mechanisms that college-aged Black women employ to minimize race-based distress, understanding how increased media attention to systemic racism impacts college-aged Black women's mental and emotional health, and learning how college-aged Black women value public support for Black lives.

I argue that college-aged Black women most frequently encounter emotionally traumatizing experiences of discrimination where White people determine their access to opportunities or resources. Additionally, I assert that although the strong Black woman stereotype motivates Black women to cope with discrimination through perseverance, it is ultimately detrimental to college-aged Black women's mental and emotional well-being. Lastly, I claim that the growing Black Lives Matter movement and media attention to systemic racism are emotionally triggering and mentally exhausting for college-aged Black women, but public support for Black lives positively impacts their mental and emotional health by providing them an avenue for optimism about a future of racial equality and equity.

METHODS

I employed qualitative and quantitative research methods. I conducted nine interviews over Zoom, eight of which were life-history interviews with undergraduate Black cisgender women attending predominantly White institutions in New York, and one of which was a key-informant interview with an associate professor of psychology with numerous additional professional engagements pertaining to Black mental health. I specifically recruited college-aged Black women for my life-history interviews to answer my research questions with lived experiences. Upon concluding, transcribing, and coding all nine interviews, I proceeded to analyze two data sets from the Pew Research Center and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to accompany and strengthen my qualitative findings. This study received human subjects research approval from SUNY Geneseo's Institutional Review Board.

ALIENATION IN WHITE SPACES

Emotionally triggering experiences of discrimination are most prevalent in settings in which college-aged Black women's access to resources, services, or opportunities is dic-

tated by White people. When I asked Ana, a 21-year-old Black woman from the Bronx, where she recalled experiencing discrimination, she told me about a time when she was denied entry to a fraternity party during the first week of her freshman year at her upstate New York college because she was Black. Following the incident, Ana admitted, “I just went home and cried.” She explained, “even though we’re all college students, and we’re all here for the same experience, they’re denying my chance to experience [college Greek life] just because of the color of my skin.” Ana’s story highlights how white supremacy’s perpetual role in restricting Black people’s access to resources and opportunities is mentally and emotionally stressful for college-aged Black women.

Greek organizations within the American higher education system were originally established to conserve elite White males’ social status (Hughey, 2018). As universities began admitting more diverse classes, Greek organizations were formed to preserve inequality by establishing social hierarchies within educational institutions (Hughey, 2018). While Black women’s access to university and Greek organizations grow, the classist, racist, and sexist foundations of Greek organizations prevail through discriminatory practices such as denying Black women like Ana access to fraternity parties. Whether implicit or explicit, discrimination like this makes college-aged Black women like Ana feel alienated, reminds them of their subordinate ranking within the social hierarchy, and engenders adverse mental and emotional salubrity.

In a nationally representative survey of 6,637 American adults, Horowitz, Brown, and Cox (2019) found that 70% of Black Americans say they are treated less fairly than their White counterparts in restaurants, or while shopping. During my interview with Michelle, a 21-year-old Black woman from Rochester, NY, she described her experience receiving racial microaggressions from White servers at a restaurant. Michelle conveyed vexation when White people at the restaurant gave her family suspicious looks because she knew it implied negative connotations about their skin color. Similarly, Malika, a 23-year-old Black woman from Long Island, NY, voiced that she most frequently encounters discrimination at predominately White, upscale restaurants. “It’s just the way people look at you,” said Malika, adding, “I’m a customer, don’t treat me any differently.” Like Michelle, Malika’s emotional response to discrimination from White people at restaurants was anger. Although Black women have greater access to services like lavish restaurants than in the past, discrimination from White people in these settings is ever-present and contributes to college-aged Black women’s perturbation. Furthermore, Jada, a 21-year-old Black woman from Buffalo, NY, told me that she experiences discrimination when clothes shopping. Jada said that White retail workers oftentimes question her presence, watching her fervently to ensure she does not steal. Jada expressed exasperation when White employees apply unwarranted racial stereotypes to her.

When I interviewed 21-year-old Sasha, a Black woman from the Bronx, she revealed how the unrelenting discrimination at her workplace drove her to such mental exhaustion that she quit. Sasha worked at a high-end grocery store with a wealthy, White customer base. Every time a White person would make a racially-discriminatory comment, Sasha said, “It was just another reminder of where I stand.” She recalled one White man asking

her to roar like a lion from Africa. Eventually, Sasha quit her job because of the persistent, emotionally draining discrimination. According to Horowitz, Brown, and Cox (2019), 84% of Blacks agree that with regard to racial discrimination, the bigger problem is people's indifference or ignorance towards racial discrimination. The data highlights how White-dominated institutions still exhibit and perpetuate racism and discrimination insofar that it fosters Black women's poor mental and emotional well-being.

PRESSURE TO BE STRONG

The strong Black women stereotype entails the perception that Black women are naturally strong and resilient (Woods-Giscombé, 2011). While the strong Black women stereotype comes with a sense of inner strength, Katherine, a Black female psychology professor from an accredited university in Boston, Massachusetts, stressed that the stereotype also inspires a great deal of toxicity and pain. As a Black woman herself, Katherine said that the strong Black woman stereotype means that “we don't get to be pampered. We don't get to be supported. We don't get to cry on other people's shoulders. They're crying on ours. They're looking to us for guidance, us for our energy, us for nurturance.” According to Katherine, the expectation for Black women to be a reliable source of emotional support has psychological consequences including anxiety and depression.

Katherine described that because Black women go through life with the assumption that being Black means that life is going to be challenging, anxiety and depression seem like a guaranteed part of the Black experience. She further elucidated that Black women show up to therapy with more severe depression because they show up decades after the first episode. According to Katherine, research shows that Black women with anxiety show up to therapy on average 30 years after their first symptoms, whereas the national average for seeking therapy treatment for mental health is seven years. During my interview with Michelle, she explained that she would not seek mental health support even if she recognized her need to do so. Katherine expounded that Black women's reluctance to seek therapy treatment exacerbates their mental and emotional health. A study by the CDC found that Black women had the highest percentage of depression among Americans aged 20 and older with depression (Brody et al., 2018). In this regard, upholding the strong Black woman role contributes to Black women's high rates of depression.

Furthermore, when Ana and I discussed the burdens of living in America as a Black woman, she explained her feeling that people expect her to always be strong and emotionally conservative. However, “in reality, I do have those times when I just wanna cry and be fragile and have somebody take control of something for me. I just wish I didn't have all these expectations,” shared Ana. For my participants, the expectation that as a Black woman you constantly have to have it all together is emotionally exhausting. Katherine explained that this is a typical challenge for Black women, adding, “the cost of that plowing through is that we don't have the opportunity to actually sit down and just cry and emote about what we're struggling with.” Katherine asserted that coping with systemic racism and discrimination by internalizing and persevering does not allow Black women to properly deal with the race-based trauma they have endured since childhood.

My data demonstrates the emotionally detrimental influence of the strong Black woman stereotype. This stereotype leads Black women to assume a resilient and reserved persona that can only be maintained by ignoring psychological distress. For many college-aged Black women, the strong Black woman stereotype comes with emotionally burdensome expectations that manifest in adverse mental and emotional health outcomes.

CONSEQUENCES OF MATTERING

A third and final theme emerging from my data regards the impact of the current American social and political climates and growing Black Lives Matter movement on Black women's mental and emotional health. For many of my participants, the rising momentum and support for the Black Lives Matter movement and its accompanying presence on social media has been a source of mental and emotional exhaustion. Within the past year, the largely publicized murders of Black people like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have exposed college-aged Black women to a constant assembly line of graphic videos, hate speech, and reminders that white supremacy constantly works to marginalize them. In spite of this, my participants found solace from public displays of support for Black lives.

During the summer of 2020, protests for and against the Black Lives Matter movement were at an all-time high. While marching in protests empowered some of my participants, it was too emotional for others. Sasha shared that she had been participating in Black Lives Matter protests at her predominately White institution in upstate New York. When I asked her about her experience, she expressed despondence. Sasha explained, "I'm over here on a Saturday night walking and screaming that my life matters and I'm paying to be here. When we were walking through the campus, you'd see all these White kids looking through the windows of their dorms. They get to chill and I'm over here wasting my college time." Fighting for your life and community while watching your White counterparts have the luxury to sit back and go about their everyday lives is alienating and emotionally taxing. The pressure many college-aged Black women feel to be at the front of social change is mentally exhausting, especially when the movement concerns their existence.

On the other hand, Malika expressed that she avoided going to Black Lives Matter protests. "I don't protest because I know it would be too emotional for me," she said. Malika identified that marching in protests would have a negative effect on her mental and emotional health, so by actively avoiding these situations, she was able to manage her well-being.

Many participants shared that they avoided social media over the summer because seeing constant posts regarding police brutality, racial profiling, and the unnecessary and unwarranted murders of innocent Black people was mentally draining. Malika mentioned that over the summer she intentionally avoided Twitter to cope with her anxiety and stress. Jane, a 21-year-old Black woman from Manhattan, shared that she also avoided Twitter because it was too mentally draining, noting, "it is traumatizing to not only watch a person die, but to also identify with them." For many of my participants, seeing

images and videos on social media of police violence against Black people is not just mentally disturbing, it is also personal. Opening social media to once again be reminded of your social marginalization is mentally exhausting for many college-aged Black women. Avoiding social media is a coping mechanism used to protect mental and emotional health.

Although Evelyn, a 21-year-old Black woman from Rochester, NY, identified herself as a social media addict, she told me that it was too mentally overwhelming to check social media as frequently as she regularly would. “Even one little tweet will ruin my entire day,” she expressed. Evelyn added how much of an impact the Black Lives Matter movement was having on her mental and emotional stability, sharing, “there was a period of time for like a week where I was just crying and crying and crying because I was just so emotionally overwhelmed with everything happening.”

Although the Black Lives Matter movement has been emotionally triggering and mentally draining for many college-aged Black women, it has also offered a glimpse of hope for the future. Many participants expressed the positive value of public support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Jada shared that seeing her non-Black friends show support for the Black Lives Matter movement made her feel “on cloud nine.” Similarly, Evelyn said, “I think that it shows that they care and understand and that regardless of what race they are that they’re going to be there for me and others.”

The Black Lives Matter movement, founded and organized by three Black women in 2013, seeks to bring justice and affirmation to Black lives (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). By highlighting the fatal ways that white supremacy continues to afflict the Black community, many of my interviewees expressed the emotionally paralyzing effect that this movement has had on their mental and emotional health. However, they all actively align themselves with the movement whether or not they possess the emotional capacity to participate in protests. Furthermore, social support eases college-aged Black women’s mental suffering concerning the unjust treatment of Black lives in America.

This data illustrates how college-aged Black women’s mental and emotional health is agonized by the systemic racism ingrained throughout the American judicial structure. While the Black Lives Matter movement is necessary, many of my participants feel mentally drained from daily reminders of their subordinate social status in America. Our current social and political climates facilitate the racial tension dividing our country and challenge mental and emotional well-being for college-aged Black women.

SYSTEMIC RACISM AND BLACK WOMEN’S MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Forces of systemic racism expose college-aged Black women to chronic mental and emotional suffering. Applying an intersectional lens to Black women’s distress illuminates the interdependence of classism, sexism, and racism inducing adverse biopsychosocial health. My research findings exemplify that systemic racism engenders college-aged

Black women's distress. Systemic racism cultivates college-aged Black women's structural disadvantage to the point of poor mental and emotional well-being.

College-aged Black women most frequently experience emotionally-traumatizing discrimination in settings in which their presence at White-dominated locales is questioned. This data ethnographically elaborates on research suggesting that chronic stress induced by lifelong exposure to structural racism and discrimination contributes to Black women's poor health. Extant research confirms that the chronic stress of living a life that continually oppresses you via systemic racism fosters Black women's weathering and predisposes chronic physical maladies like hypertension (Michaels et al., 2019). My research concentrates on the mental and emotional consequences of the chronic stress associated with systemic racism and highlights that college-aged Black women's mental and emotional suffering is constructed by systemic racism.

The claim that the strong Black woman stereotype exacerbates college-aged Black women's poor mental and emotional health confirms the works of Woods-Giscombé (2011), Lewis and Neville (2015), and Perry et al. (2013). In her study, Woods-Giscombé (2011) concluded that the way in which the "superwoman role" obligates Black women to manifest strength, suppress emotions, and resist showing vulnerability leads Black women to embody their stress via anxiety and depressive symptoms. My finding that the strong Black woman stereotype intensifies college-aged Black women's mental and emotional health suffering is consistent with this conclusion. Furthermore, I affirm the argument of Lewis and Neville (2015) and Perry et al. (2013) that Black women's internalization of stress magnifies their poor mental and emotional health with my finding that when college-aged Black women repress their experiences of systemic racism and discrimination, their mental and emotional health further deteriorates. My results reinforce existing scholarly research declaring the mentally fatiguing effect of the strong Black woman stereotype. The power dynamics enforcing systemic racism preserve the strong Black woman stereotype and leave college-aged Black women vulnerable to poor mental and emotional health.

College-aged Black women are emotionally exhausted by our current social and political climates. This argument develops a qualitatively deficient research area. Statistical research from the Pew Research Center indicates that most Americans agree that since President Trump was elected, race relations have worsened and it is now more common for people to express racially insensitive views (Horowitz et al., 2019). The results of my study accompany this statistic from the Pew Research Center to prove that growing racial tension in Trump's America facilitates college-aged Black women's psychological distress. Due to persistent marginalizing structural forces, college-aged Black women become vulnerable to mental and emotional suffering. Moreover, my data indicates that public support for the Black Lives Matter movement positively influences college-aged Black women's emotional well-being. When these qualitative and quantitative findings merge, the conclusion that greater acknowledgment that Black people suffer from structural inequities promotes college-aged Black women's mental and emotional well-being

emerges. My finding of the mental and emotional consequences of the prevalence of racial injustice within the media is an understudied area requiring further research.

CONCLUSION

Racial discrimination from White people exacerbates college-aged Black women's mental and emotional health. Moreover, the strong Black woman stereotype forces college-aged Black women to internalize their psychological distress insofar that it is embodied in their poor mental and emotional health. Lastly, the growing racial tension in our current social and political climates has adverse and long-term effects on college-aged Black women's mental and emotional well-being. Evidently, systemic racism is a public mental and emotional health crisis.

The results of this study serve to inspire public policy promising to structurally progress racial equity. First, systemic racism must be uprooted from institutions and practices. Second, college-aged Black women need accessible and affordable mental and emotional health services. Third, all states must require accurate and comprehensive education on mental and emotional health and systemic racism. This research functions to prompt the inclusion of mental and emotional health in the assertion that racism is a public health problem. Further research is needed on the long-term mental and emotional impacts of systemic racism. A future study might look to interview two age demographics, for example, college-aged Black women and elderly Black women, to examine how the mental and emotional consequences of systemic racism develop over time.

It has been 400 years since European colonizers kidnapped and enslaved Africans, 155 years since slavery was legally abolished, and 56 years since institutional discrimination was outlawed. While these systems may no longer exist in their established intent, the racist ideologies supporting them persist. Today, instead of being born into slavery, Black women are born into systemic racism. By virtue of the policies and practices that sustain the politico-economic exploitation and social marginalization of Black women, college-aged Black women are structurally vulnerable to adverse mental and emotional health. The consequences of the structural inequities burdening college-aged Black women's lives deserve comprehensive understanding and solutions. My research advances an emerging scholarly call to action to uproot the systemic racism and structural inequities devastating the welfare of Black lives. Regardless of your race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, ability, socioeconomic status, or political affiliation, join the fight for justice and equity for our Black sisters with pride.

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