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BLURRING THE LINES OF TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES: BELIEFS OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

A thesis proposal submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University

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I dedicate this document to the memories of my mentor, Dr. Linda Keys; grandmothers, Lois Abram and Maggie Daise; brother, Devin De'Angelo Daise and to the futures of my younger siblings, Cashus, Eelisa, and Victoria.

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## **Abstract**

### **BLURRING THE LINES OF TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES: BELIEFS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012.

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Gender role beliefs of African American women in the United States should be investigated in a manner that considers their unique experiences and the distinct background of her cultural sharing group. In this study, gender role beliefs of African American women were examined by addressing the research question: What are the gender role beliefs of African American women for African American men and women? Eight focus groups comprising 44 African American women were conducted. Women were diverse in terms of age, religion, and socio-economic status. An ethnographic phenomenological approach was used to explore views related to gender roles among African American women. Nvivo 8, a qualitative data analysis software program, was utilized to code transcribed focus group data. Eight themes and 11 subthemes emerged from the data and were divided into three categories: gender role beliefs for women, gender role beliefs for men, and relevant contextual factors. Themes for gender role

beliefs about women were 1) Having Multiple Roles, 2) Dedication to Care of Others, 3) Perceived Social Inferiority, and 4) Strength. Themes for gender role beliefs about men were 5) Lack of Commitment, 6) Strength, and 7) Mental and Emotional Immaturity. The theme that captured related contextual factors of gender roles was 8) Personal and Socio-historical Experiences of African Americans. Knowledge of gender role views can help provide a better understanding of human behavior and assist in the development of culturally specific interventions.



## Blurring the Lines of Traditional Gender Roles: Beliefs of African American Women

Who are African American women? In the song “Four Women” Nina Simone (1966), answers this question by describing four different women.

My skin is black, my arms are long/My hair is woolly, my back is strong/ Strong enough to take the pain, inflicted again and again/ What do they call me? My name is aunt Sarah/My name is aunt Sarah, aunt Sarah

My skin is yellow, my hair is long/ Between two worlds I do belong/ But my father was rich and white/ He forced my mother late one night/ And what do they call me? / My name is Saffronia, my name is Saffronia

My skin is tan, my hair fine/ My hips invite you, my mouth like wine/ Whose little girl am I?/ Anyone who has money to buy/ What do they call me? My name is Sweet Thing/ My name is Sweet Thing

My skin is brown, my manner is tough/ I'll kill the first mother I see, my life has been rough/ I'm awfully bitter these days, because my parents were slaves/ What do they call me? My name is Peaches

These lyrics give readers a glimpse of a few of the many gender roles that African American women have assumed in this country over almost four hundred years. The song depicts four very different Black women, describing them as strong, resilient, sexually exploited, sexually motivated, aggressive, tough, bitter, and oppressed individuals. The lyrics provide a prototype of many Black women and help listening audiences to understand that the gender roles of African American women are multifaceted.

Gender roles are social constructs or labels given to people based on behavior, societal and cultural norms, and expectations (Unger, 1979). Gender role beliefs shape and are shaped by childhood and adult experiences (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995); thus these constructs change over time (Twenge, 1997). In this study, I examine contemporary gender role beliefs of African American women as seen through their lenses. I examine what African American women believe are the roles that men and women should have based on their lived experiences.

## **Why are Gender Roles Important to Study?**

Gender roles are inescapable. Americans are constantly bombarded with images of how we should behave, where we should work, what we should wear, how we should speak, and how we should perceive others based on gender. Whether getting married, raising children, starting a new job, or simply partaking in leisure activities, there are sexually biased societal norms from which the majority of individuals operate. Conceptualizations of polarized gender dichotomies influence a range of life experiences and have become a popular topic of interest among scholars. Researchers have highlighted the importance of studying gender roles, indicating that gender role beliefs influence self-concept (Frome, Alfeld, Eccles, & Barber, 2006), mental health (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Broman, 1991), sexual attitudes and behaviors (Amaro, Raj, & Reed, 2001), other health related decisions (Kerrigan et al., 2007), and one's ability to influence others and to be influenced (Carli, 2001). Gender roles beliefs have also been found to influence coping, social support, patient-physician communication, marital relationships, and friendships (Friedman & Silver, 2007).

Gender role beliefs impact identity development and strongly influence the way in which people interact with their environment (Noppe, 2009). Gender role beliefs affect one's choices and judgments with regard to family decision making, couple interaction, childrearing, personal decisions, vocational decisions, aspirations, achievement, sexual behavior, and human behavior in general (Amaro, Raj, & Reed, 2001; Bielby & Bielby, 1992; Eccles, 1987; Gottman, 1993; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley, & Scaringi, 2008; Thompson & Walker, 1989).

Gender roles ascribed by society pressure individuals to behave in gender appropriate ways. These can sometimes have detrimental effects on quality of life. Conforming to societal

expectations or attempting to behave “appropriately” based on gender has been directly and indirectly associated with negative mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Knowledge of gender roles beliefs can provide a better understanding of human behavior, allow researchers to be more specific when selecting directions for research, and assist in the development of culturally specific interventions. To better understand the behavior of people researchers must be cognizant of their beliefs.

In this introductory section, I first provide definitions of key terms and concepts used in this study. Next, I provide an overview of traditional gender roles in the United States. This is followed by an explanation of the importance of examining the specific historical and sociocultural context of African Americans and gender roles.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

To begin our discussion of gender roles, I will first define terms that are frequently used throughout this paper. Gender is different from sex in that gender is a social construct and sex is based on human anatomy. Furthermore, gender is a label that is associated with nonphysiological characteristics that society or specific cultures assign to men and women (Unger, 1979).

When discussing gender roles, terms that have traditionally been used include masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and undifferentiated. Many researchers use the terms as Sandra Bem, a well-known gender role researcher, defines them. Bem (1974) identifies the following characteristics as masculine: acts as a leader, aggressive, ambitious, analytical, assertive, athletic, competitive, defends own beliefs, dominant, forceful, has leadership abilities, independent, individualistic, makes decisions easily, masculine, self-reliant, self-sufficient, strong personality, willing to take a stand, and willing to take risks. Bem (1974) identifies the

following characteristics as feminine: affectionate, cheerful, childlike, compassionate, does not use harsh language, eager to soothe hurt feelings, feminine, flatterable, gentle, gullible, loves children, loyal, sensitive to the needs of others, shy, soft spoken, sympathetic, tender, understanding, warm, and yielding. Androgyny is the combination of both high numbers of feminine characteristics and high numbers of masculine characteristics in one personality (Abrahams, Feldman, & Nash, 1978). Androgynous individuals base their perceptions of appropriate behavior on situations rather than cultural stereotypes (Abrahams, Feldman, & Nash, 1978). These individuals can be aggressive or yielding, self-sufficient or dependent. Undifferentiated is used to describe individuals who endorse low degrees of feminine and masculine characteristics (Major, Carnevale, & Deaux, 1981). These four terms are used frequently in the study of gender roles.

African American, as defined by the U.S. Census, describes people whose ancestry is rooted in Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). These include people who identify as Kenyan, Nigerian, Haitian, Negro, Black, or African American. Throughout this paper the terms African American and Black are used interchangeably to correspond with intention of authors cited.

### **The Shift: Gender Roles in the United States**

Within the last century gender role norms have shifted for men and women. As the number of women entering the workforce continue to increase, the once prevalent view of women “barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen” and men “bringing home the bacon” have changed for many. Numerous historical reasons contributed to this societal change in mindset; however this differs for diverse groups of people considering that historical context varies across ethnic groups.

Gender roles for women began to shift during World War II (e.g., late 1930's to mid-40's) (Burgess, 1994), when the number of women working outside the home increased dramatically (Goldin, 1991). Due to the large numbers of men overseas in the military, women began to hold jobs that traditionally belonged to men. After the war ended many women left their jobs but things didn't return to "normal" as far as mindsets were concerned. Attitudes about women working outside the home began to change for men and women (National Archives at Atlanta, n.d.). This change shaped the way men and women view gender roles today. Whereas maintaining a home had always been considered a woman's job, increases in male contributions to housework began during this period (Sullivan, Gurion, & Coltrane, 2008). Along with a shift in attitudes about the roles and responsibilities of men and women shortly after World War II, research on gender roles flourished during the 1950s. However, this research did not include African Americans until the 1970s, and even later for other ethnic minority groups. It is important to note that research on African Americans has traditionally used Caucasians as a comparison group. However, Black-White comparison studies in this area of research are not valid because the social and historical context contributing to the development of African American gender roles is drastically different from the context of other racial or ethnic groups in this country. Gender role beliefs of African Americans must be investigated separately due to unique experiences and context.

Considering the importance of context when identifying gender roles, this paper first discusses the history of African American gender roles through various time periods. Next, current literature on the gender role views of African American women is examined. This literature review is followed by a discussion of theoretical perspectives including social role theory, gender schema theory, and the theory of intersectionality. The theoretical framework is

followed by an explanation of the paradigmatic framework and research design. Integration of cultural, historical, societal, and theoretical dynamics allow us to formulate a more comprehensive view of the interactions between these factors and their influences on the current gender role beliefs of African American women.

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical View of African American Gender Roles**

A complete understanding of gender role beliefs cannot be realized without understanding the socio-cultural context of Blacks in this country. In fact, to understand gender role beliefs of Blacks in this country, the argument could be made to also include a consideration of gender role practices and beliefs of Africans; however this is not the focus of this paper. Rather, this paper will focus on Africans experiences after their arrival to the United States, being that their arrival marked the beginning of their journey to becoming African Americans.

**Enslavement.** The African American experience in the United States began with hundreds of years of enslavement and oppression coupled with the dismantling of families and forced divisions of labor among men and women. In a creative literary review by Jones (1982), American slavery was defined as “an economic and political system by which a group of whites extracted as much labor as possible from blacks through the use of threat or force” (p. 237). African men and women were controlled by a master thus neither had economic or social power over the other. In a sense, all slaves were created equal: laws prevented all slaves from being property owners or learning how to read and labor was a mandated part of their daily lives (Jones, 1982).

Although there was a sense of equality in the social status of slaves, roles were assigned by masters and if the expectations of a slave master were violated, harsh mental and physical

punishment, death, or familial separation followed (Burgess, 1994; Jones 1982). This type of social reinforcement forced slaves to embrace predetermined gender roles for hundreds of years, the most obvious role being a piece of property. African American gender roles did not naturally develop because the origin of gender roles among this population was dictated by their slave masters; in essence, African Americans did not yet even have an identity as Americans due to their denial for rights of citizenship (Jones, 1982). Thus they will be referred to as African descendants and enslaved Africans.

Based on the master's preference, the role of a slave woman varied. A slave woman could be found working in the fields alongside slave men planting, weeding, picking, hoeing, herding, and doing whatever the master requested. They worked in the master's house, cooking, cleaning, and catering to the needs of his wife and children. After a slave woman's work for the master was finished she then went to work in the slave quarters, caring for her own family and others in the slave community. No matter what the slave woman did, she was expected to be engaged in labor on a daily basis. All things considered, slave women were assigned the role of worker.

Another role of slave women was that of mother. Reproduction among slave women was strongly encouraged; some women were wives but that was not a requirement for them to become mothers. Although husband and wife dyads existed, their union was not legally recognized. Full families were often torn apart for the benefit of the slave master. Typically, men and children were sold more often than women, fragmenting families and emotionally destroying women, who were forced to accept their circumstances no matter the severity of the pain. To the master, slave children were seen as investments that could become workers or sold for profit (Bridgewater, 2001; Burgess, 1994). Law makers during this time placed value on a

child being with their mother until a certain age; in Louisiana it was against the law to sell children under the age of ten separately from their mothers (Schafer, 1981). Enslaved African women not only raised their children but they cared for the master's children as well. These women were also sexually exploited by their masters and in some instances became the procreator of his children (Jennings, 1990). Slave women were also doctors or healers, caring for and healing the sick of the slave community with "magic potions" and traditional African remedies (Jones, 1982).

The distinction between men and women's roles was sometimes blurred as women worked alongside men in many capacities. However, Jones (1982) highlights the fact that in the slave quarters, where African descendants had the most freedom to develop roles, distinctions were apparent. Just like women, slave men were viewed as laborers. They could be found working the fields but they also worked in more specialized areas as carpenters, blacksmiths, coopers, or shoemakers. Slave men were providers for their families; hunting and gathering animals for dinner and making furniture, shoes, and other household items for the slave quarters. As husbands and fathers, they made attempts to protect their women from the angry wrath of the slave master, sometimes at the cost of their own lives. A reinforcement of this distinction also came from masters who would make slave men do "women's work" in an effort to punish them for wrong doing. In order to publically humiliate slave men, masters would have them cook, clean the big house, sew, wash clothes, or even wear women's dresses. This form of punishment sometimes caused men to run away, with hopes of receiving physical punishment over the aforementioned form of embarrassing discipline.

During their first 200 years in the United States, the roles of slave women were workers, caretakers, mothers, sex objects, and wives. There were enslaved women who were privately



considered to be leaders; women who led slave revolts and helped other slaves escape to freedom. Men were workers, providers, protectors, husbands, and fathers, who endured emasculation on a regular basis.

**Post enslavement.** One might assume that once slavery ended African descendants would be free to develop gender roles for themselves. In attempting to form their own gender roles "...Afro-Americans drew upon two sets of cultural resources: those they had developed during the period of slavery, and those of the Euro-American majority" (Patterson, 1998, p. 44). However, other forms of societal oppression, forced African Americans to establish gender roles around limited freedom and opportunities. Though finally recognized as citizens, Jim Crow Laws and Black Codes restricted African Americans from many civil liberties such as being involved in any capacity in political arenas, voting, obtaining certain employment, or pursuing education at various institutions (Roback, 1984). African Americans had trouble securing gainful employment due to employers having to pay extra costs to hire African American employees, limited mobility as a result of transportation restrictions, and the creation of unpleasant work environments due to legally promoted racism. These laws typically promoted a shared responsibility among African American men and women to secure familial financial stability for the well-being of their families. Black men and women were limited in their labor division options and subsequently forfeited traditional patriarchal household arrangements. With laws enforcing separate but equal facilities, which often meant separate and drastically inferior, African Americans were disadvantaged from their early childhoods. They often received substandard educations preventing them from being adequately prepared for the job market, thus forcing many African Americans to work in low wage earning jobs and reinforcing the need for a dual income household (Anderson, 1996).

It was during the 1860s – 1960s that collegiate institutions were founded for the purpose of educating African Americans, now known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The founding of these institutions and other developing boundaries within families and community organizations (Collins, 2000), marked the creation of the stratification of gender roles by socioeconomic status among African Americans. An example of this stratification is described in detail by Brown (2008) in her book *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black community development in the Jim Crow South*. Although Whites identified African Americans as one homogenous group, there were emerging class differences among this population. During this time period of early freedom, class conflicts began to fester beneath the exterior portrayal of unity and the rising prosperity of some African Americans. Differences in African American neighborhoods and educational pursuits of this population reflected the material differences between the “Black elite” and working class and poor families. “Marrying rich” gave some African American women the option of staying at home to focus solely on domestic duties and caring for their families. Higher levels of socioeconomic status also signified a family’s ability to better protect their daughters from the sexual exploitation that was commonplace for African American women. However, because of limited employment opportunities for African American men, Jim Crow laws, racially motivated crimes, and the frequent terrorism of successful Black business and communities, opportunities to achieve a high socioeconomic status were limited. The majority of African Americans were poor or working class. The poor and working class majority is the primary focus in this paper.

Shortly after the surge in HBCU institutions, groups of educated and politically conscious African American women began to collaborate. These women desired to withdraw from the labor market in order to change the negative social, political, and economic climate facing their

people (Collins, 2000). However, the needs of their families outweighed their desires. Due to the limited employment opportunities that were available for African American men, African American women had to work because their families' survival depended on their abilities to generate income (Collins, 2000). In addition to their roles as labors, African American women began to take on other roles within their communities. As members of social organizations, these women joined together with other women in Black Greek Letter Organizations or with men in other change seeking organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Order of the Eastern Star (OES). These groups provided African American men and women the opportunity to publically embody new roles within their communities including roles as leaders, trailblazers, sociopolitical bridge builders, and revolutionaries. These and other civic and religious organizations allowed African American women the opportunity to enhance and define their social status outside their homes and the labor market as community agents, churchwomen, clubwomen, and even prostitutes (Brown, 2008). Though African American women continued to be responsible for the majority of household chores and caretaking, men assisted them with some of these tasks (Trask, 2006). However, the Industrial Revolution and the underpinnings of a capitalistic society compiled with the emancipation of slavery began to plant seeds of individualism in a culture of people who survived dreadful social conditions by maintaining collectivistic mindsets during slavery (Collins, 2000).

**Civil Rights Era and Feminist Movement.** The Civil Rights and Feminist Movements started as early as the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bloom, 1987; Sanders, 2000). However, the substantial results of these battles were not seen until the 1960s (Collins, 2000). The period following World War II (1950s – 1960s) involved a host of changes for gender and racial groups,

which helped to further shape the gender roles of African Americans. African Americans engaged in a fruitful political battle that eventually yielded access to education, jobs, schools, housing, and governmental benefits once only afforded to Whites (Collins, 2000). This seemed to be a triumphant time for African Americans, women in particular. They were beginning to be viewed and publically recognized as leaders. Shirley Chisholm, Angela Davis, Mary McLeod Bethune, Ruby Dee and Dorothy Irene Height are just some of the women who would emerge as politicians and/or activists for the African American community. African American women were becoming more visible and less afraid of occupying roles and positions traditionally held by men.

The Civil Rights and Feminist Movements had more women engaged in political and educational arenas than ever, which meant women were spending more time away from home. Although all Americans did not welcome the Civil Rights and Women's Equality Rights, newfound job and career opportunities for African Americans emerged and gender role stratification by class persisted (Collins, 2000). Higher class women began to become focused on building careers that generated income, rather than accepting any job offered in order to maintain financial stability. However, the majority of African American women were considered working class, working poor, or simply poor. High percentages of African American women were still in the labor force. According to England, Garcia-Beaulieu, and Ross (2004), Black women consistently had higher rates of employment than women of other races from the 1890s to the 1980s. In other words, since their arrival to the eastern shores of this country nearly 400 years ago African American women have been workers.

**Post-Civil Rights and Feminist Movements.** Despite their ever present roles as workers, African American gender roles began to shift. The stratification of gender roles by

class became more prevalent during this time period (1970s – 1990s). There were a host of societal factors that influenced the modifications of African American gender roles. In the 1980's African Americans experienced a decline in employment rates (England, Garcia-Beaulieu, & Ross, 2004; Holzer, 2009). Fewer African Americans were employed due to the shift in requirements of the labor force. For women, education levels explained the difference in employment rates, with African American women drifting slowly to the bottom of this list. Women from more privileged backgrounds began to have higher rates of employment (England, Garcia-Beaulieu, & Ross, 2004).

Increasing numbers of African American men sought illegal employment in the drug market (Collins, 2000) and increasing numbers of African American women became recipients of governmental assistance programs such as welfare and public housing (Collins, 2005). Higher numbers of African American men were falling under the control of the criminal justice system (Allen-Meares & Burman, 1995). The percentage of African American women who were single mothers also increased (Collins, 2005). According to U.S. Census Data, during the 1960's, 22% of African American children lived with a single parent (as cited by Cantave & Harrison, 2001). This number increased to 53.6% in 2000, with an overwhelming majority of African American single parent households (92%) composed of women (as cited by Cantave & Harrison, 2001). This trend continues; according to the U.S. Census Bureau over half (54%) of all African American children were living with a single mother in 2009 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011).

With the rise in female-headed households, many African American women began to consider themselves as both mothers and fathers, caretakers and providers, support systems and handymen; assuming roles traditionally shared by men and women. Lower marriage rates and higher numbers of husbands with unstable incomes further contributed to this new form of

physical and psychological androgyny (England, Garcia-Beaulieu, & Ross, 2004). The strong sense of community once displayed by African Americans during and after slavery was quickly disappearing. The networks of extended families that once knitted this group together were becoming few and far in between, leaving many African American women with the burden of singlehandedly raising families. The idea of the strong Black woman and the weak Black man was becoming more and more prevalent (Collins, 2005).

**Present day.** In the new millennium, African Americans are experiencing personal successes as a cultural sharing group due to increased social and political opportunities (Collins, 2000). However, mainstream culture tends to highlight the public challenges or social disadvantages experienced by African Americans. For example, when compared to other ethnic groups African Americans are disproportionately under the control of the criminal justice system (Coker, 2003; Perry, 2011), disproportionately affected by unemployment and poverty (Perry, 2011), and disproportionately experience health disparities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; Davis, Liu, & Gibbons, 2003). There has been speculation as to what has placed African Americans at such an extreme social disadvantage. Collins asserts:

Chattel slavery established the economic, political, and ideological framework for the treatment of Black people. The rudimentary form of the Black social class system was established under slavery, as were the overall gender-specific forms of its overall organization. The effects of being denied economic opportunities and citizenship rights, and of being plagued by violence and images that justified poverty and powerlessness, continue to be felt... (Collins, 2005, p.60-61).

Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, Black scholar and Georgetown University professor, shares a similar viewpoint, stating that slavery's effects persist and influence the sufferings of millions

(Nelson, 2011). However, Dr. Floyd Hayes, political science professor and coordinator of the Center for Africana Studies at Johns Hopkins University, states that all of the blame cannot be placed on slavery. He does agree that slavery has had some influence on the current state of African Americans (Nelson, 2011). Dr. Hayes believes that the heightened pursuit of wealth among African Americans during the post-civil rights era resulted in parents abandoning the proper training and teaching of their children and subsequently losing a shared cultural foundation. The direct and indirect effects of slavery continue to perpetuate undeniable social disadvantages faced by African Americans. It is important to note that these social realities provide context for African American gender role beliefs.

Disproportionate rates of imprisonment, homicide, and high rates of affluent Black men who marry interracially have contributed to lower rates of marriageable African American men (Childs, 2005; Hill, 2005; Johnson & Staples, 2005; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Tucker & Taylor, 1989). The discontent with these circumstances has contributed to the promotion of the stereotype of the angry Black woman (Childs, 2005) and may provide context surrounding the increasing numbers of African American female heads of households.

In recent years gender roles of African Americans have become of considerable interest to researchers. The following is a review of empirical studies related to the gender role beliefs of African American women. Considering the goals of this study, less attention is given to the literature that focuses on how others view African American women and more attention is placed on literature that focuses on how these women view themselves and how they view African American men.

### **Research on African American Women Gender Roles**

Over the past 20 years more research has been conducted on gender roles of African American women. This literature has primarily been rooted in feminist studies and family, health, or couples research. There have also been studies on the reliability and validity of measurement of African American gender roles. These studies have provided useful information in the establishment of literature surrounding gender role views of African American women.

**Measuring African American gender roles.** When research on the gender role beliefs of women began to flourish many researchers used the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) or the Personality Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ). However, these measures were developed mostly with White women (Bem, 1974; Spence, Helmreich, & Strapp, 1974) and findings using these measures have limited generalizability for African American women (Nguyen, et al., 2010). A study by Nguyen et al. (2010) lists reasons why traditional measures have not been effective in assessing gender role beliefs among African American women. These researchers suggested that the social context is unique for African American women due to the injustices experienced associated with ethnicity and gender. They also suggest that African Americans may have a more holistic way of thinking compared to the dichotomous conceptualizations popularized by Western Europeans (Harris, 1994; Nguyen et al., 2010). In a study of 398 American women, Nguyen and colleagues reconceptualized gender roles using items from the BSRI and the PAQ. Items from these two scales were included in a factor analysis. Three clusters that corresponded to gender role domains emerged from this factor analysis. These included a caretaking/mindful domain (e.g., very helpful to others), an interpersonal sensitivity domain (e.g., feelings easily hurt), and a persistent/active domain (e.g., never gives us easily). Although items from the BSRI and the PAQ were used, the findings from this study demonstrated that the more traditional way



of conceptualizing gender roles as “masculine” and “feminine” may not be relevant for African American women.

Despite these potential measurement problems, researchers have utilized BSRI and the PAQ when assessing gender role beliefs of African American women. More recently, researchers have used qualitative methods to assess gender role views of African American women, a method that has proven to yield consistent results despite the variety in inquiry.

**Views of African American women.** A prime example of the methodology utilizing the BSRI and the PAQ is shown in a popular study by Binion (1990) in which the sex role attitudes of Black and White women were measured. Results of this study revealed that the majority of African American women reported androgynous sexual identities yet had traditional beliefs concerning the role of a woman in the family. The majority of White women identified as undifferentiated and had more liberal sex role attitudes than Black participants. All participants were heavily invested in the mothering role and shared similar beliefs about women being strong and men being weak. The idea of women being strong has been of particular interest to researchers, especially in the case of African American women.

The resilience that many African American women have shown despite personal and historical hardships has caught the attention of many researchers (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). In fact, the public display of strength among these women has prompted much of the research on gender roles of African American women. In a recent study describing the views of African American women as they relate to stress, strength, and health, Woods-Giscombé (2010) describes some characteristics of African American women using the words of the participants in her study. Consistent with literature, Woods-Giscombé highlights the ever-present role of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) or Superwoman, that is well documented in the literature and in

African American culture (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2009; Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2007; Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2003; Black, 2008; Blum & Deussen, 1996; Collins, 2005; Hamilton-Mason, Hall, & Everette, 2009; Jones, 1982; Kerrigan et al., 2007; Mullings, 2006; Romero, 2000; Simone, 1966; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004; Wallace, 1990). The end result of Woods-Giscombé's (2010) study is a detailed description of the SBW. These descriptors include: an obligation to manifest strength, an obligation to suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, determination to succeed (despite limited resources), and an obligation to help others (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). The previous description the SBW, depict African American women as women who do it all, while neglecting themselves.

*Gender socialization of African American girls.* The making of a SBW begins during childhood and adolescence for African American women, with their elders informing them of the need to be strong and refrain from showing weaknesses (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2007). Research has also shown that African American parents raise their daughters with high expectations because they believe she will have greater opportunities for survival and achievement (Staples & Johnson, 1993). This suggests lower expectations among parents for sons. In a study about gender ideologies of African American adolescents, Kerrigan et al. (2007) also found that female participants believed that maintaining emotional strength was part of being a Black woman. These participants also mentioned other gender ideologies for African American women; including caretaking, economic productivity, and independence. Wallace (2007) suggests that African American girls have been socialized to be fathers; self-sufficient, strong, and assertive providers and protectors.

Ultimately, Black women assume both public and private roles (Hill, 2001) and have struggled with defining boundaries of their womanhood in these roles. Research has shown that

African American women have been socialized to be independent and strong but mainstream society shows them that they should be vulnerable and dependent (Crawford & Unger, 2000). As such these women view themselves in a variety of different lights. For example, African American women view themselves as equally androgynous, feminine, masculine, and undifferentiated (Dade & Sloan, 2000).

**Views of African American men.** In terms of how African American women view African American men, research explicitly highlighting these views is limited. Generally African American women view the typical African American man as masculine or undifferentiated (Dade & Sloan, 2000). However, literature in this area presents a common issue related to gendered power in African American relationships. African American women accept more traditional roles in the home as an expression of sympathy or recompense due to perceptions of lack of respect and societal power African American men experience (Cowdery et al., 2009). Further, researchers have found that some African American women modify their straightforward personality types and minimize their successes in order to make men feel more comfortable and confident (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). For example, a woman in Cowdery's (2009) study stated that she allows her husband to exert more power in their relationship "cause no man, no Black man wants a wife, a woman, who knows more than he does" (p. 32).

Taking on a more submissive role in the home has also been shown to be influenced by religion (Cowdery et al., 2009). Despite increases in female leadership, traditional Black churches encourage patriarchal gender roles. Some traditional Black churches argue that men should be heads of churches and families and women should not take on leadership roles as preachers (Collins, 2005). Hunter and Sellars (1998) found that African American men who

attend church more often are less supportive of egalitarian gender roles compared to those who do not. These findings suggest that families rooted in religion-based traditionalism may have beliefs about gender inequalities.

Gender views of men are formed during childhood. Just as African American girls are socialized to assume strong family roles (Ladner, 1971), ideas of men as impulsive, unreliable, and weak are also formed at an early age. This may be reinforced by the large numbers of mothers who are single-handedly raising their families. Furthermore, African American women have revealed feelings of uncertainty when it comes to the dependability of African American men (Cowdery et al., 2009). This lack of dependability may reinforce a Black woman's socialization to be independent. Despite some of the negative views African American women have of African American men, research shows that African American women are incredibly loyal to African American men (Breines, 2006; Stevens, 2002). This suggests that African American women value their relationships with African American men.

**Views of family roles.** Some of the empirical studies related to African American women and gender roles are embedded in family research. In a literary review about the intersection of race, class, and gender in child rearing, Hill (2001) states that throughout history African Americans have fostered flexible gender roles. These flexible roles have primarily been observed in the context of unpaid labor within the home.

Consistent with the gender roles of African American women mentioned in the earlier historical review, Broman (1991) described the main roles of African American women as workers inside and outside of the home, caretakers, mothers, and sometimes wives. African American men were workers, caretakers, fathers, and sometimes husbands. Broman (1991) reviewed literature that suggested role sharing and egalitarianism in African American families.

Hunter and Sellers (1998) found that African Americans displayed a strong support of egalitarian gender roles, with African American men showing the strongest support. Similar results were found in Vespa's (2009) study of gender ideology construction. When compared to Whites, Blacks possessed more egalitarian gender ideologies and marriage exacerbated these beliefs (Vespa, 2009). For married African American women, higher resources enhanced egalitarian ideologies. On the other hand, higher resources and an increase in full time work were associated with decreased egalitarian ideologies among African American men (Vespa, 2009).

In a study of middle class African American couples with children, researchers also found that participants demonstrated equality in their relationships (Cowdery et al., 2009). Assignment of or adherence to rigid gender roles was willingly suspended among participants in order to focus on the well-being of the family (Cowdery et al., 2009). Couples also identified acquisition of traditional gender roles as an achievement, expressing pleasure at the thought of having or attaining traditional roles (Cowdery et al., 2009). These findings suggest a presence of shared gender roles among African Americans in families. However, if these men and women consider acquiring traditional gender roles as an achievement, it suggests complicated cognitions about ideal gender roles versus gender role norms.

In essence, African American women view themselves as individuals who must be independent and strong. These women believe that they need to be self-sufficient and have the ability to provide and care for themselves and others. The way in which African American men are viewed by African American women is complex. Also, religious African American women typically assume more traditional gender roles within household settings. However, these views and behaviors are contradicted by their thoughts of weakness and feelings of uncertainty concerning the dependability of African American men. Though, African American women

have some negative thoughts concerning African American men, they are egalitarian and typically share household and paid labor duties. Gender role views of African American women are complex and multifaceted and are better understood through historical, social, and theoretical contexts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

An understanding of the gender role beliefs among African American women is imperative to comprehending her behavior. As stated previously, gender role beliefs affect every aspect of her behavior. Many theories explain the construction and maintenance of gender roles. According to Coltrane (2000) these theories have been labeled “doing gender” (Coltrane, 1989; West & Fenstermaker, 1993), “gender theory” (Ferre, 1990; Potuchek, 1992), “interactionist” (Pestello & Vodyanoff, 1991), gender on “display” (Brines, 1994; Fenstermaker, 1996), “symbolic exchange” (Brines, 1994; Hochschild, 1989), “relational” (Thompson & Walker, 1989), and “gender perspective” (Osmond & Thorne, 1993; Thompson, 1993). Three gender role theories highlighted in this paper include social role theory (Eagly, 1987), gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), and the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) was developed to help us better understand social functioning and behavior. The theory, used with research on family systems, is built on the premise that men and women behave differently based on societal expectations. These behavioral differences emerge in the home, the workforce, and other social situations. Social role theory explains gender roles, authoritative roles, roles that are specific to situations, role switching, and stereotypes. According to Eagly (1987), gender roles are a reflection of the expectations that are associated with various roles of men and women. For example, expectations

for women are for them to know how to cook and clean and become mothers and caretakers. Expectations for men are to be strong and able to provide and protect.

Gender roles are developed through socialization and because individuals are able to assume a variety of roles, context is a better determinant of behavior than gender (Eagly, 1987). This theory does not undermine the importance of gender roles but helps us to understand that these roles are complex and can be influenced by the social situations people find themselves in. When cultural sharing groups create expectations and form beliefs based on sustained stereotypes, gender roles strongly impact behavior (Eagly, 1987). For example, a stereotype of African American women is that they are strong (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2003). Eagly's (1987) claim is supported by numerous studies, mentioned above, that have highlighted the expectation of strength among African American women. This expectation may lead to suppression of emotions (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2003; Woods-Giscombé, 2010) and role strain among African American women (Lewis, 1989), a prime example of behavior being influenced by the expectations of a culture. Although Eagly (1987) highlights the importance of context as a determinant of behavior associated with gender, she fails to elaborate on the unique interaction of race, gender, and class that have been shown to shape gender role views of African American women. Broman (1991) explains that social role theory has proven to be useful; however, the application of this theory to African Americans is not clear. Role performance and structures of Black families are different from those found in White families.

Gender schema theory (Bem, 1981; 1993) explains the process of gender construction and maintenance through cognitive organization and interpretation. Bem (1981) defines a schema as a mental system of associations that categorizes and guides perceptions. According to gender schema theory, children acquire gender meanings, expectations, and stereotypes from

their cultural sharing group. This learned information is internalized as a core belief, known as a gender schema, which is utilized to organize and interpret experiences. Consequently, experiences and gender schemas interact to produce gendered perceptions of men and women. Gender schemas contain information about the meanings of manhood and womanhood as well as behavioral guidelines for particular circumstances (Levy & Fivush, 1993). Children modify their behavior based on these expectations and perceptions in order to cohere with their culturally specific gender norms. An example is children choosing to play with toys that are sex-stereotyped based on expectations for girls and boys (Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995). This theory postulates that these developmental experiences influence identity construction as a child and as an adult. This theory provides relevant information about the cultural influence associated with gender role beliefs. However, this theory also fails to account for how the combination of race, gender, and class work to influence gender role views.

The complex theory of intersectionality was developed by Crenshaw (1989). This theory examines the relationships between race, gender, ethnicity, disability, class, nationality, and sexuality (Knudsen, 2006). According to this theory, all of the aforementioned social and cultural categories interact together to produce power, processes, and socio-cultural hierarchies (Knudsen, 2006). This theory highlights how the impact of race and gender varies by social class (Hill & Sprague, 1999). For example, different incomes for different races produce different gender role norms among the same populations. African American families who have higher earnings have different gender role beliefs than poor or working class African Americans. For the latter group, working together for the survival of the family is a necessity versus a choice (Broman, 1991; Cowdery et al., 2009). Just as race once dictated and continues to impact gender role norms, the effects of class on gender roles are similarly influential. The theory of



intersectionality is flexible in nature, lacking concrete definition and having the ability to consider any combination of the categories (Knudsen, 2006).

In explaining the complexity of intersectionality theory, McCall (2005) describes three approaches: intercategory (requires adoption of existing analytical categories), anticategorical (deconstructs analytic categories), and intracategorical (falls between the extremes of the intercategory and anticategorical approaches). This paper will focus on the intracategorical approach. This approach recognizes relationships among social categories and pushes the boundaries of these relationships by upholding a critical position. Researchers who operate in this approach are typically focused on minority versus majority groups, in order to expose the complex nature of a group's lived experience (McCall, 2005). This theory provides a more complete picture of the complexity of gender role views of African American women and will be used to guide the current study.

Social role theory, gender schema theory, and the theory of intersectionality all provide useful information for understanding gender roles beliefs. Social role theory and gender schema theory highlight the importance of socialization in the development of perceptions of gender role. These theories also provide relevant information about cultural influences associated with gender role views. Conversely, as mentioned earlier, these theories fail to expound upon the unique combination of race, gender, and class that influences the gender role views of African American women. Despite the omission of age related factors, the theory of intersectionality provides valuable information about the interaction of these socially constructed categories that have been shown in the literature to have the most profound influence on the behaviors and gender roles views of African American women. The theory of intersectionality does not maximize age as an important contributing factor, which may be a variable of interest considering how life

experiences vary across generations. All three theoretical frameworks provide a conceptual framework for understanding gender roles. However, the theory of intersectionality appears to be most useful for understanding the gender role beliefs of African American women.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Much of the early and some of the more recent literature on the gender roles of African American women is rooted in assumptions that the African American gender role norms are comparable to that of Whites. This results in generating research questions, hypotheses, findings, and implications about African Americans from a White perspective (Dade & Sloan, 2000), neglecting the cultural integrity of African American women. However, I argue that African American gender role norms must first be established. Cultural integrity must be maintained along with an understanding of contributing contextual factors. African American women's context and culture uniquely contribute to gender role beliefs. Further, research has not captured the voices of African American women. This study seeks to highlight the voices and context related to African American women's gender role beliefs.

In the developing area of research about African American gender roles, much of the literature focuses on examining the gender role identity of African American women as it relates to stress, health, families, or society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Broman, 1991; Collins, 2000; Kerrigan et al., 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Current literature also focuses on how American history has influenced the way African American women are viewed by society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Collins, 2000) and how they view themselves (Blum & Deussen, 1996). However, there is minimal literature that highlights how African American women's gender role beliefs differ for African American men and women, and this is a contribution of this study. The few studies that highlight differentiation, utilize the BSRI

(Harris, 1994; Konrad & Harris, 2002; Binion; 1990) and the PAQ (Dade & Sloan, 2000; Binion, 1990). These measures were not created with substantial African American populations and findings may not be generalized to this population (Harris, 1994; Nyugen et al., 2010). The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to add to this gap in the literature by assessing the gender role views of African American women from their perspective. Data analysis will be guided by the following research question:

RQ) What are the gender role beliefs of African American women for African American men and women?

Gender roles affect a wide variety of life experiences. Having a better understanding of gender role beliefs of African American women and factors that influence these beliefs will provide a better understanding of her behavior. Understanding these beliefs will also allow us to support her positive social and personal development. Utilizing the theory of intersectionality will assist with creating an accurate view of the contextual factors (namely race, gender, and class) that strongly influence the nature of gender role beliefs. This theoretical framework will guide us in learning about beliefs and experiences of those we seek to understand.

## **Method**

### **Paradigmatic Framework and Research Design**

With the limited literature on how African American women differentiate male and female gender roles, it is important to investigate this topic in greater detail. In order to effectively explore the beliefs of African American women this study will be conducted under the assumptions of the interpretive paradigmatic framework. Research in this paradigm seeks to maximize subjectivity while understanding the social realities. The primary assumptions of this paradigm are that this ever-changing social world is best understood through subjective

experience and personal explanations of individuals are valued from the perspective of a participant versus a spectator (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

A combined phenomenological and ethnographic methodological approach (Maggs-Rapport, 2000) was taken to explore the views related to gender roles among African American women. This combination, described as phenomenological ethnography by Katz and Csordas (2003), was employed to accomplish the goals of the current study. The phenomenological ethnography approach utilized, allows the researcher to focus on the phenomenon of study, while highlighting the perspectives and context of the participants (Maggs-Rapport, 2000).

This approach differs from traditional ethnographies in that data collection processes did not involve prolonged observation in a natural setting (Creswell, 2007). However, similar to ethnographies and according to Denzin and Lincoln, data collection and data analysis were “based on the assumption that context is essential to understanding the lived realities of participants” (as cited in O’Connor, 2001, p. 776). Utilizing the ethnographic nature of this approach is especially appropriate because of the importance of context surrounding the understanding of gender roles among African American women. This particular approach is valuable to use in this study because the goal is to understand the views of the participants while considering the significance of context. A strong point of ethnographic research is that the findings are more applicable to real life and this research avoids problematic issues associated with manipulation (Nurani, 2008).

Denzin and Lincoln describe phenomenological studies as investigating “lived experiences through extensive and prolonged engagement that results in detailed descriptions of the individuals being studied from the linguistic perspective and standpoint of the informants” (as cited in O’Connor, 2001, p. 776). The previous description is aligned with the goals and

methodology of this study, with one exception. Contrary to traditional phenomenological studies, prolonged engagement was not utilized.

There are advantages and disadvantages to combining these methodologies. A primary benefit is that the researcher and participant both play significant roles in data collection and analysis. This methodology provides a well-rounded outlook at the phenomenon and offers context specific description and interpretation of data. Some of the drawbacks are that limited research has been conducted under this combined methodology. Thus, difficulties can arise in obtaining balance between participant descriptions and researcher interpretations, and there exists the risk of attempting to “make meaning” that does not exist (Maggs-Rapport, 2000).

The final product of phenomenological ethnographies allows readers to learn about the group of interest from the words of the participants with interpretation of the researcher (Maggs-Rapport, 2000). This allows meaning to be created for a phenomenon for a specific group of people from their perspectives and allows researchers to interpret those experiences in relation to context. It is important in this methodology that the data and the literature drive the analysis.

## **Participants**

This study was part of a larger study in which the goal is to develop a measure of gender role beliefs for African American women. Eight semi-structured focus groups were conducted with a sample of 44 African American women from the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Convenient yet purposive sampling was utilized in order to obtain a wide variety of perspectives and responses. Recruitment sources were purposely engaged to ensure this diversity (see discussion in next section). Thirteen women identified as college students and 31 were community members. Four of the community members also identified as college students. The participants varied in religious background (e.g., Christians and Muslims), and age, from 18 to

80. The educational background of participants ranged from having less than a high school diploma (6.8%) to having attended graduate or professional school (9.1%), with the majority of participants at least having some college experience (70.5%). Forty-one percent of participants identified as single (never married) and 43% had been married. Of the 43% who had ever been married, 25% identified as divorced, separated, or widowed. The majority (54.5%) of participants were employed in part or full time positions and 13% were retired. Among the community sample, 90.4% were mothers and the majority classified themselves as religious (81.8%). Thirty percent of the women who identified as students were mothers. Demographic data forms were not completed for an elder group because the PI knew some of the women and wanted to maintain the anonymity of their personal demographic information. Demographic information was also missing for the college students in the sample.

Participants were recruited via flyers (Appendix A) and word-of-mouth from community agencies that served African American women, from places African American women frequent, and from the Psychology subject pool at a large urban university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Appropriate consent to post the flyers was obtained and staff members were asked to distribute flyers to African American women. Flyers included the following statement: “Attention Black Women: Would You Like to Contribute to a Study on Being a Black Woman?” Prospective participants were instructed to contact a research staff member via phone or email. Initial communication involved informing potential participants of the purpose of the study. Potential participants were also informed that the focus group session would last for about 1.5 hours and a momentary incentive and or extra course credit (for college students) would be provided. Women were also asked their age to assist with composing groups of women of comparable ages (18-24, 25-39, 40-54, 55 and older). This technique was employed to aggregate

individuals with similar life experiences (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Upon confirmation of their desire to participate women were given a date, time, and location for their session.

Two groups of women (n=16) were recruited from a community based agency that serves low-income African Americans. This agency provides community members with educational and food assistance as well as job readiness training. Although there was diversity in this group, this group was primarily low-income. One group (n=7) was recruited from an at-large group of women who lived and worked in the Richmond metro area via flyers and word of mouth. Most of these women were employed. In order to ensure religious diversity (outside of Christianity), two groups of women (n= 6) were recruited through a liaison in the Muslim community. These women were Muslim and mostly employed. In order to include elder African American women, a faith-based senior citizen program was used from which to recruit women. This group (n = 6) of elder/older African American women was recruited from a senior citizen program affiliated with an African American Church. Younger groups of African American women were recruited from a university campus. Two groups of women (n=9) participated in the Department of Psychology's subject/participant pool. The sampling strategy used ensured that the women were diverse with regard to age, religious affiliation, and employment and socioeconomic status.

### **Procedure**

Focus groups sessions took place in private rooms at the site from which participants were recruited or at a local university, depending on which location was most convenient for participants. Focus groups were conducted by two interviewers, the principal investigator or an advanced graduate student. The Principal Investigator, a middle-age African American woman facilitated six group discussions with the community sample. The two focus groups with college students were facilitated by a graduate student in psychology, an African American woman in

her early thirties. An observer was also present for each session to compose detailed field notes. I, an African American female in my twenties, served in this role for three of the focus groups. Another graduate research assistant, a Vietnamese-American female in her twenties, observed and recorded notes for three of the focus groups. A Caucasian female undergraduate research assistant served in this role for two of the focus groups. For the later research assistants, racial differences were acknowledged prior to the start of the focus group. The Vietnamese-American and Caucasian observers had previous experience conducting research with African American women.

Participants were reminded of confidentiality and completed consent (Appendix B) and demographic data forms (Appendix C). Group sessions lasted between 30 minutes and 1.25 hours. Light refreshments were offered to participants prior to the beginning of the focus groups. Focus groups sizes ranged in number from three to eight participants. Two groups had eight participants, one group had seven, one group had six, one group had five, one group had four, and two groups had three participants. Women were asked to identify themselves every time they spoke and were given the choice to use only their first name, an initial, or a pseudonym. This technique was employed so that women could be identified by their comments during the transcription of the group interviews. Following the focus group, participants were asked to complete a demographic form.

**Focus group questions.** Group discussions were guided by several questions. These questions were written to get women to think about and discuss aspects of being an African American woman. Questions were also written to get participants' views about African American men. These questions included: (a) When you think of women, what comes to mind? (b) When you think of men, what comes to mind? (c) What do you think (if anything) makes



African American women different from women in other racial/ethnic groups? (d) What do you think (if anything) makes African American men different from men in other racial/ethnic groups? (e) In your opinion, what would an ideal Black woman be like? (f) In your opinion, what would an ideal Black man be like? (g) What do you think are some of the roles and responsibilities of Black women? (h) How would you define “masculine”? (i) How would you define “feminine”? (j) What does it mean to be a “strong” Black woman?

The interviewer guided the discussion of participants and encouraged all members of the group to participate. At times member checking (i.e., restating responses and asking clarifying questions) was utilized to ensure a valid understanding of participants’ remarks. After all questions had been asked, the interviewer asked participants if they had any additional comments they would like to share. The interviewer also encouraged participants to elaborate on certain statements.

Participants were thanked and community participants were provided an incentive of \$20.00 at the end of the session. College students were provided with extra course credit. The interviewer also asked participants to provide their names and an address so that findings could be provided if they were interested.

### **Primary Data Analysis**

Focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed by trained research assistants. Initially, all transcripts were reviewed critically by five research team members interested in African American women’s issues. A preliminary coding scheme was developed based on questions asked and common responses among research team members. Another trained researcher and I utilized Nvivo 8, a qualitative data analysis software program, to code transcribed data. The other trained researcher, an African American woman in her twenties, assisted with the

transcription of the focus group data. To begin the primary data analysis, we each created our own projects in Nvivo and coded all of the focus groups interviews. We took an all-inclusive approach and all data, prevalent or not, were seen as relevant and valuable. For the data that could not be coded by the preexisting coding scheme, new codes or “free nodes” were created to capture the entire essence of the data. Data analysis was cyclical and involved constant comparison of themes and subthemes. Once all of the data were coded, this iterative process continued until agreement was reached for all themes and subthemes. We then reviewed and condensed our separate lists of free nodes into one comprehensive list by grouping similar nodes that were used to code the same data in each individual project under one common name. After condensing the list of free nodes, we merged the two separate projects into one document. Again, constant comparison was utilized throughout the entire data analysis process. The coding scheme was continuously revised based on the identification of new themes. This emergent design is essential for capturing the experiences, voices, and beliefs of the respondents (Cresswell, 2007; O’Connor, 2001).

### **Scientific Rigor**

During data collection, purposive sampling and clarification were employed to ensure scientific rigor (O’Connor, 2001). Clarification was utilized for the purpose of understanding the participants. Other techniques were employed to ensure scientific rigor including asking open-ended questions that promote authenticity of the data (Seale & Silverman, 1997), utilizing an emergent research design, iterative processes, and inductive data analysis with a qualitative software package (O’Connor, 2001). The final research product contains a thick description of the data, including extensive quotations, that reflects context (O’Connor, 2001).

### **Results**

This section begins with an acknowledgment and review of potential researcher bias. Next, the criteria by which major themes and subthemes were identified are discussed followed by an in-depth description of gender role beliefs of African American women for men and women. Descriptions of gender role beliefs are guided by themes and subthemes that emerged from the data and supported by illustrative quotes from participants.

### **Acknowledgment of Researcher Bias: Bracketing**

Researcher bias has been documented as a limitation of research studies. To mitigate researcher bias in qualitative data analysis and interpretation, bracketing is often utilized (Creswell, 2007). Bracketing is accomplished by identifying and examining personal experiences related to the phenomenon of study then managing those experiences by putting aside any related biases, presumptions, or assumptions (Creswell, 2007). This technique can also help minimize the risk of creating meaning where meaning does not exist. In other words, the researcher identifies then brackets experiences and opinions, in order to explore the phenomenon with a fresh outlook (Creswell, 2007). In an effort to reduce bias, I provide a description of my personal experiences and predispositions.

As an African American woman in her mid-twenties, I believe that socialization by my parents provided the basis for my gender role views. My mother raised me and my siblings as a single parent during the majority of my childhood. Being raised in a single mother-headed household was the norm for most of my peers and my extended family. My mother raised me to be responsible, independent, and hardworking. For example, she often reminded me that I should never have to depend on anyone (especially a man) to do anything for me. She raised me to be able to provide for myself and often commended my efforts to maintain good grades. I also assisted with caring for my younger siblings, with household chores, and sustained a job when I

was a teen. My experiences with my father were more limited as my mother was my primary caregiver for many years. However, throughout my life my father has always encouraged me to pursue education as a means to be able to provide for myself. These experiences have influenced my belief that African American women have the capacity to independently care for themselves and their families. I believe that they can take on the responsibilities of providing for a family and maintaining a household. However, I also am aware of the hardships that many African American women endure because they have been forced to take on the role “doing it all.” I am also aware of the potential for negative outcomes for children raised in such environments. I have seen my mother struggle just to be able to provide the basic necessities for her children. I have also seen my father do the same as a single parent and primary caregiver for my older brothers. In my opinion, African American women desire stable support systems but often do not feel as if they have support in various capacities, leading them to feel as if they must “do it all.” I believe that both men and women can independently fulfill expected gender roles, but ideally roles should be enacted based on personal strengths.

On a macro-level, I live in a society in which it is possible for me to be a woman whose priorities focus on educational and vocational pursuits. Such priorities are respected, expected, and rewarded in society and influence my desire to attain roles as a leader and a self-sufficient individual. I am conscious of the history of my community (enslavement, Jim Crow, etc.) in this country and feel that we should take advantage of all of the societal opportunities and privileges my ancestors were denied. In sum, my personal views are more egalitarian but I believe everyone should do what works for them which may differ from what works for me.

### **Criterion for Identifying Themes**

The first step in identifying themes involved creating codes. Codes are terms used to identify phenomena. Themes are unifying categories composed of interrelated codes. Themes can be thought of as the umbrellas under which related codes are placed to help illustrate and support a theme. We conducted eight focus groups with 44 African American women. The following findings are the result of our analysis of the data across all groups. A total of 45 prevalent codes emerged from the verbatim transcripts of the eight focus groups. After reviewing all of the transcripts for units of data that stand alone as important concepts, codes were assigned to the data units. The criterion was based on the frequency in which a code was utilized across groups and within groups. For beliefs about women, codes that were considered prevalent were mentioned in at least five of the eight transcripts and were mentioned across groups at least 15 times. For beliefs about men, prevalent codes were mentioned in three of the eight transcripts and mentioned across groups at least 15 times. The selection criterion for men and women differed because codes revolving around beliefs about women's gender roles were utilized considerably more than codes concerning views about male gender roles. Although counting was used to identify prevalent codes, phenomena that was salient to the women was also considered when forming themes and subthemes. Prevalent codes were then grouped by similarity and relevance into eight themes and 11 subthemes. The themes have been separated into three categories: gender role beliefs about women, gender role beliefs about men, and related contextual beliefs.

### **Gender Role Beliefs about Women**

Prevalent codes on gender roles beliefs for African American women were grouped into the following themes and subthemes:

Theme 1: Dedication to Care of Others

Theme 2: Having Multiple Roles

Theme 3: Perceived Social Inferiority

Theme 4: Strength

Subthemes: (a) Resilient Strength, (b) Independent Strength, (c) Cornerstone Strength

**Theme 1: Dedication to care of others.** In all of the focus groups women were described as nurturers, caregivers, and mothers. Women were described as support systems, loving, and responsible. When the women were asked about what came to mind when they thought of women, a 19 year old college student said “I think of a caretaker or caregiver, a support system.” In describing women, roles associated with caring for others were frequently mentioned. Caring for or supporting their children, husbands, friends, siblings, or other family members was central to their identities and the identities of other African American women in their lives. The role of caring for others was constant across generations. A woman in her 50s also gave her thoughts on what came to mind when she thought about women:

... the first thing that pops in my head is mother, I don't know why I, I have a strong association between women and mothers and the responsibilities of mothers and caring for families even though I know all women don't have children that's sort of the first thing that pops in my head. (54 year old married mother)

The apparent expectation to care for those around them superseded the need for women to care for themselves and promoted the idea of sacrificing for others in order to assist with upholding this role.

**Theme 2: Having Multiple Roles.** Living up to the expectation to handle “everything,” multitasking, and embracing multiple roles were described as responsibilities of Black women. Women mentioned that they were socialized to be “superwomen” or “strong Black women” who can handle the responsibilities of running a home and parenting by themselves or with little help from others. Women were described as mothers, fathers, providers, caregivers, nurturers, and support systems all in the same breath. Consequently, taking on a number of roles involves a tremendous amount of self-sacrifice and sometimes perpetuates self-neglect in terms of physical, emotional, and spiritual health. A divorced Muslim woman in her 50s said,

some of the roles and responsibilities of a black woman are just too much ... it's expected that they are to be superwoman, even though they say there is a myth of a superwoman. I think that black women have been trained in their family as well as society to be just that superwoman, that you can do it all and you can't. And in doing it all there's deprivation, and doing it all there's hurt, um there's uh spiritual anorexia that occurs because in doing it all you just neglect yourself so much that by the time the children are grown or you have time to yourself then the health problems come ... it was manifested emotionally first over years and years of doing everything and taking care of everybody else other than herself. So her roles are um varied and a lot of times because she may be single. She has to do everything. She has to make sure that the income is coming into the house. She has to make sure that the household duties are taken care of. She has to work or obtain money some kind of way, that's her duty. She has to make sure the children are taken care of emotionally um academically... but for the most part she needs help. But it's just too many roles and too many responsibilities and that's just how I feel.

This woman captured the views and experiences shared by many other women. In their eyes Black women are individuals who are burdened and overwhelmed with roles and responsibilities but “keep it moving” in order to provide for their families and themselves. Younger women also expressed similar views. “Women like have a lot going on their plate... to like handle and have a lot of expectations... from the family and society, from like the world, like everyone. I think that women should be able to multitask...” (College student her 20s) Women mentioned other ways that “wearing many hats” influenced their lives, stating that African American women had “some aspirations that they put aside so that somebody else can move ahead ...women sacrifice[d] what she wanted to do or achieve...” (64 year old married mother) Deferring personal ambitions in order to care for or support others was another form of self-sacrificing described by women.

**Theme 3: Perceived Social Inferiority.** Women expressed thoughts and feelings related to perceptions of inferiority in comparison to others in society. Women explained that “African American women are kinda like at the bottom. Cause first you have like White men, then you have...Black men, then White women, and then you have a Black woman, and she’s kinda at the bottom ...” (18 year old college student) and “still struggling to become equal.” (50 year old single woman) These views are often solidified by stereotypes that are upheld in American society. A 26 year old student said, “I think that what makes us different is, this is sort of on a negative note ... a lot more stereotypes... I think stereotypes are a big part of what we have to deal with.” Discord was noted between how women feel society perceives African American women and how these women see themselves, with African American women viewing themselves in a more positive light. Women shared thoughts about African American women



being beautiful and educated. On the other hand women believed that society did not see them in the same light. For example, a Muslim woman in her 50s commented;

there are very low expectations of African American women... I would have to say that our community has one group of expectations that don't match our own perception of ourselves. They don't expect us to be married, they don't expect us to, ah, excel, they don't expect us to ... use good judgment.

Another woman in her 20s explained that "... women are always like looked upon as less than men. Then being Black ... there is two strikes against us, we're women and we're Black."

**Themes 4: Strength.** The expectation to have strength was one of the most salient themes. In some regards the strength theme was similar to the theme of multitasking, permeating nearly every aspect of the lives of these women. Women spoke of three different types of strength: resilient strength, independent strength, and cornerstone strength that is seen as "glue to the family." In all forms, strength appeared to be an expectation or mandate in the lives of these women.

*Subtheme: (a) Resilient Strength.* Examples of resilient strength were typically referenced when women spoke of their ancestry.

African American women are much, like much stronger because we have to deal with so much and we have like a strong history behind like what we... as African American women have gone through in the past. So it's like able to build yourself up and be stronger and be able to deal and like cope, I don't want to say cope, but ... able to react in

situations where it's like we won't let it break us down...but like, be stronger. (Woman in her 20s)

Women reported a sense of resilience that comes with being an African American woman. An elderly woman stated that “Black women are more resilient and they have that stoutness [stoutness] that people of other ethnic groups do not have.” Resilience was described by women as having the ability to bounce back after hardships. Women expressed that resilience was unique to them because of their ancestry and current struggles. Their ancestry being “slavery times” in which African American women survived devastating hardships, including but not limited to demoralization, rape, forceful separation of families, physical abuse, denial of education, and eradication of cultural identity. A middle-aged single woman describing resilience in the face of such circumstances commented:

... we had to endure being separated from our families, children taken from us, raped, beaten umm our identity was stolen. We couldn't learn, I mean just reading history we didn't have the opportunity to go to formal schools ... and almost you're beaten to death if you were caught reading or trying to educate yourself.

In reference to resilience following current struggles, a Muslim woman in her 50s stated “... we want to fall back but there was nobody there to catch us... better stand on back up and keep going and that strength has made us resilient. It has made us bounce back and keep on going.” An elderly woman shared her views, “...we have been through a lot of struggles but there are so many that have persevered.” Resilient women were described as overcomers and

survivors who had the ability to rise above life's adversity. Resiliency transcended generations and contexts, suggesting that this characteristic is a staple of Black womanhood.

*Subtheme: (b) Independent Strength.* Independent strength was often seen as coming from a lack of social support, which was commonly mentioned by those who had experiences with or as single mothers.

You have to show a lotta strength and you show it when ... you go out to work every day. As a single parent and you come in everyday and you have the chores and you have to delegate the chores to the young men daily. You know you're showing strength to your child and you know you have to be a mother and a father. You know you have to show that masculine strength and you have to show that feminine... strength. You have to, you have to show both... (Divorced mother in her 50s)

In each of the focus groups African American women were described as self-sufficient, independent, confident, or self-assured. Women were described as breadwinners and heads of households and families. Many women spoke of their experiences of witnessing generations of single parenting by women, being products of such a family structure, and or being a single parent themselves.

I had umm the experience of my mom and she had the experience of her mom and they were single moms and umm great-great-great grandparents all the woman were single ... its sad cause I would have liked to said that that would have changed in generations. It didn't... it didn't ... my mother's mother passed, she had to be the head of the

household...and here I am taking care of my brothers... (Married Muslim woman in her 50s)

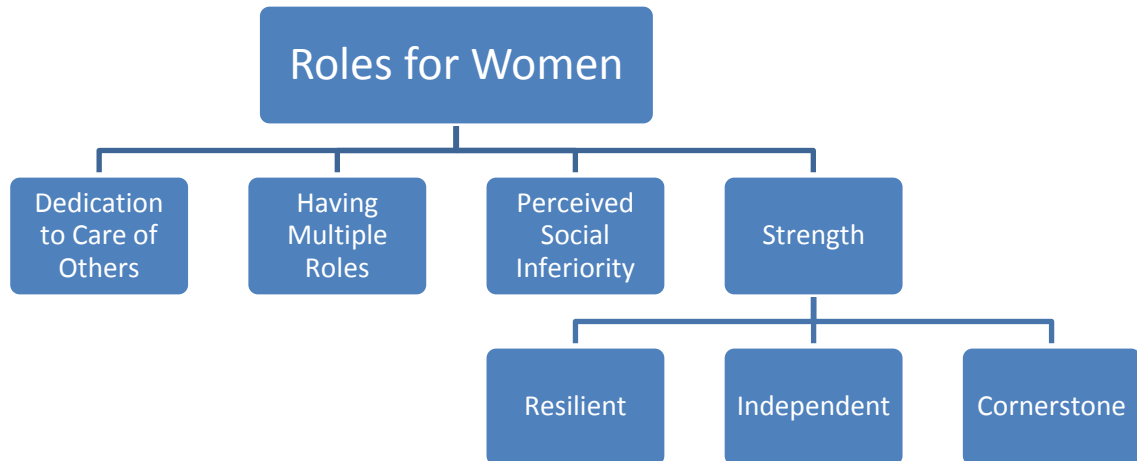
The women suggested that this type of independence stems from not being able to be dependent on others, namely men. One middle aged woman stated, “I am tired of being responsible for myself. Um, I need a partner... someone that I can share responsibilities, someone that can, you know, say don’t worry about it I got that. I got your back.” Due to the perceived inability to be dependent, women learn to be “good providers” not having to “look for a man to supply ...needs” and how to “do it [handle life’s responsibilities] without a man.” As a 40 year old divorced mother stated “I go ahead and do what I need to do as a provider and as a caregiver and as a mother...” The idea of African American women as providers and breadwinners was consistent throughout the focus groups. Black women were portrayed as individuals who are able to single-handedly assume a variety of different roles in order to sustain families. This independence can make women feel as if they “don’t wanna depend on nobody or ask anybody for anything.” The apparent lack of social support seemed to push many women into taking on a number of roles traditionally shared by men and women.

*Subtheme: (c) Cornerstone Strength.* African American women were also viewed as having the responsibility to be the individual that “holds it all together,” allowing others to rely on her for support, taking on leadership roles within family and community settings, consequently yielding a high level of respect. A woman in her 20s commented “I think she holds the man together um in a sense because usually I mean in a successful relationship like the husband always runs things by his wife before he makes any decision.” It was evident that for generations, African American women have displayed this type of strength.

I had a very strong grandmother who was the glue of the family ... that worked... three or four generations within that family all had nothing but the utmost respect for my grandmother. Even though she was a maid who cleaned the floors in a bank, she was the head of the family. She was the matriarchy. To me, as a black woman ... the mothers, the grandmothers are the ones who are the ultimate authority in the family. (Married Muslim woman in her 50s)

Strength was evident across generations. By following in the footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers, women recognized and adhered to the perceived mandate of strength in their lives.

In summary, gender role beliefs for women revealed four themes: (1) dedication to care of others, (2) having multiple roles, (3) low/negative perceived social status, and (4) strength (see Figure 1). African American women assume a variety of roles and have done so for generations. Although women felt that African American women are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they believed that African American women are strong and resilient in the face of hardships. Women were portrayed as self-sufficient and independent caregivers, doing what needs to be done to ensure the survival and well-being of their families even if it means neglecting themselves or becoming both “a mother and a father.”



*Figure 1.* Representation of African American women’s gender role beliefs about African American women. Rectangles in the middle denote themes. Rectangles on the last row denote subthemes.

### Gender Role Beliefs about Men

Prevalent codes surrounding gender role beliefs African American women had for African American men were grouped into the following themes and subthemes:

Theme 5: Lack of Commitment

Theme 6: Strength

Subthemes: (a) Physical Strength, (b) Mental Strength

Theme 7: Mental and Emotional Immaturity

Subthemes: (a) Weakness, (b) Immaturity, (c) Lack of Emotional Expression

**Theme 5: Lack of Commitment.** Women believed that men displayed a lack of commitment to partners and families. A 50 year old single woman explained that she doesn’t “think they have the sense of commitment to family. Because of the history ...they never developed a sense of commitment, not every black man but some still have that um personality that they can’t be committed.” A divorced mother in her 50s also mentioned this lack of

commitment by commenting about how “some of them are out there you know [with] multiple women and children.” Other women shared their thoughts about men, mentioning words like “liars,” “cheaters,” and “dogs.” A woman shared similar thoughts, stating that men should “... take care of families [and] be ... leaders... if he has... responsibilities for the families which a lot of them don’t.” (Married mother in her 60s)

“...So you don’t find many uhm African American men wanting to commit, or knowing how to commit or committing through... to the end.” (Divorced woman in her 50s) Women often attributed this lack of commitment to the African American men not growing up in homes with fathers or father figures, a circumstance that women believed perpetuated a cycle of reduced commitment to women and families.

A man grew up in a family where he didn’t have a father in the home. We tend to pattern our behavior a lot from what you know we learn from our environment. What we see is what we do. And so if this guy didn’t have a father and he had no no uhh father figure, you know be it an uncle, grandfather, or whatever. He’s left in the wind. (76 year old widowed mother)

Another woman shared similar thoughts.

... A lot of them don’t have two parent families, it’s just the woman being the head of the family, and they don’t know who their father are, or the fathers are not you know being responsible, because it’s a generational thing if your father wasn’t there to teach you how to be a man, and you have a woman trying to teach you. Know what I’m saying.

It's a double standard, it's a double standard for them. A woman can't teach a man how to be a man, a woman can't teach a boy how to be a man... I think, our men for so long, haven't had, you know had strong men in their lives, it has just been passed down from the generations to generations... (40 year old divorced mother)

**Theme 6: Strength.** Across groups and generations, African American men were consistently viewed as strong. This strength was described in two ways: physical strength and mental strength.

*Subtheme: (a) Physical Strength.* Men were thought to have physical strength, like that associated with having muscles. When asked about her thoughts on men a college student stated that she thinks “about like words like strong, and fighter, and powerful.”

*Subtheme: (b) Mental Strength.* In addition, women discussed men having a strength that was different from physical strength. This strength was sometimes termed mental strength. An elderly woman shared her thoughts,

when I think of masculine I think of male first and then the strength. The strength of what I'm speaking about is not physical strength, ah stand up when it's time to stand up be a man ... don't be wishie washie ... have a voice, stand up, say whatcha mean and mean what u say. (Widowed elderly woman)

Other women agreed that men possessed such strength. “African American men, some of them are very strong minded and strong willed...” (Student in her 20s) A Muslim woman in her 50s shared that she “... would think of uh strength when referring to men” and she “could associate



power with that.” Other women had thoughts of their fathers, grandfathers, and men in general being “hard working” and “firm” as ways of displaying strength.

Men were considered to be goal-oriented leaders, heads of households and families, and providers. All of the women in the focus group with elderly women, perceived men as such. An older woman shared her thoughts; “When I think of men I think of strength and leadership, providers.” A 63 year old married mother stated that “Black men in the past and even now have worked a lot harder to you know look out for their families and make an earning and see that ya know that their families are taken care of...” Although women of other ages also shared views of Black men as leaders, providers, heads of households, and mentors, at times these views were expressed as ideas or visions of an ideal Black man. An “ideal black man should be first of all like the Bible says the head of a relationship, the head of the house, the head of themselves.”

(Divorced woman in her 50s)

Women also had the tendency of relating images of ideal Black men to men in their lives such as their fathers and or grandfathers. When asked to describe an ideal man, a 19 year old college student shared comments about her grandfather, “he’s such a nice person and tries to help everybody out and really supportive, to me, my mom, and my grandma.”

### **Theme 8: Mental and Emotional Immaturity.**

*Subtheme: (a) Weakness.* Women considered men to be weak, at times highlighting that women were stronger. For example, a divorced mother in her 50s stated that “... men are the weaker sex in this generation.” A single woman in her 30s spoke about her beliefs of women being “stronger because a man can never take what a woman can.” Another woman spoke comparatively about Black men and women and shared that “... Black women work harder ... we’ve always had to ...” (40 year old divorced mother)

*Subtheme: (b) Immaturity.* Men were described as “mamma’s baby boys” (56 year old divorced mother) who were lazy and “spoiled ... rotten.” (40 year old divorced mother) This perception of developmental immaturity was described by a 20 year old college student “... instead of doing all the stuff needs to be done, [men are] just doing what wants to be done.” She also stated that “they’re easily influenced by their peers.” Women described men as being complacent or having stagnant mindsets that prevented them from moving forward in life, attributing such mentalities to a lack of motivation or failure to take responsibility for their actions.

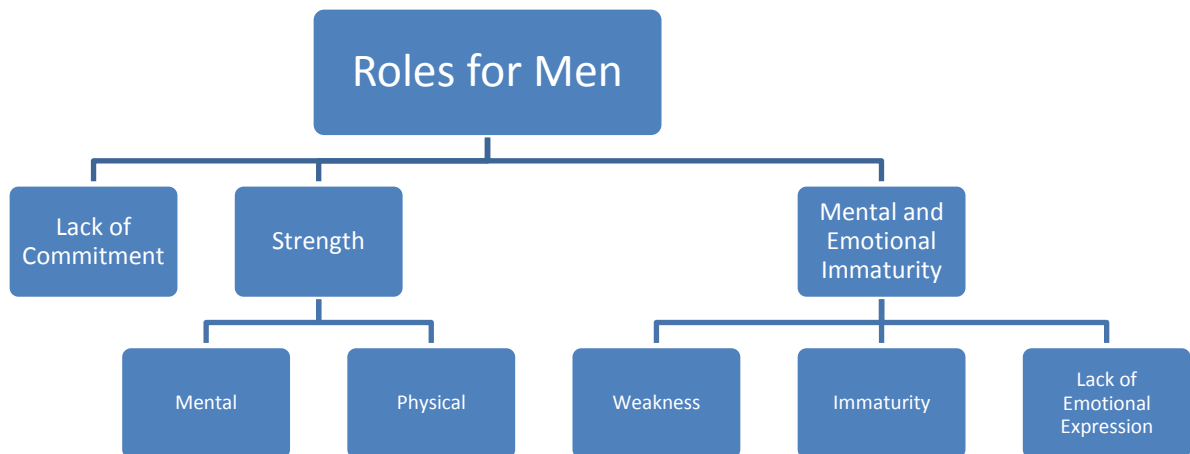
African American men don’t strive to reach their full potential therefore they are always using the blame game for something that goes on in their lives but what they need to do is look in the mirror and see the reflection in there to let them know that there is no one to blame for what’s going on in your life but yourself. (57 year old divorced mother)

Another woman expressed her thoughts about how women neglect themselves in order to care for men in ways similar to how they care for children. She explained that men are “... like big baby boys.” She went further to state that

we gotta put them to bed, wash their face, fix they food. You know I’m tired. When can I get to me ...I want to get to me. When can I get to me as a black woman? We don’t get to ourself we always gotta get to them and if it ain’t done that way it ain’t no way. And by the time we get to ourselves [our] toenails done grown off.

*Subtheme: (c) Lack of Emotional Expression.* Women sometimes considered men to be unemotional. A woman in her 20s stated that men "...are afraid of emotions." Remarks were made about how "...men do come and front like they don't have any emotions..." (College student in her 20s) A Muslim woman in her 50s stated that men "are taught to not address emotions." Women seemed to have a negative disposition when discussing the lack of emotional expression among men and expressed thoughts about the need for men to be more sensitive to the emotions of others. A woman explained that men "need to like really think about how they are saying the things they say to people, what they do to people. They need to be... in touch with people's emotions more."

Overall, gender role beliefs for men revealed three themes: (1) lack of commitment, (2) strength, and (3) mental and emotional immaturity (see Figure 2). These views reflect that African American men are diverse and that they can be strong, weak, lazy/unmotivated, and/or goal-oriented leaders. African American men were described as heads of households and families, fathers, and providers. Women spoke positively about the physical and mental strength displayed by African American men. On the other hand, men were portrayed as unemotional, untrustworthy, and uncommitted to romantic relationships or families. Across the focus groups, seemingly polar opposite views of African American men emerged from the data. These bipolarities will be explored further in the discussion section.



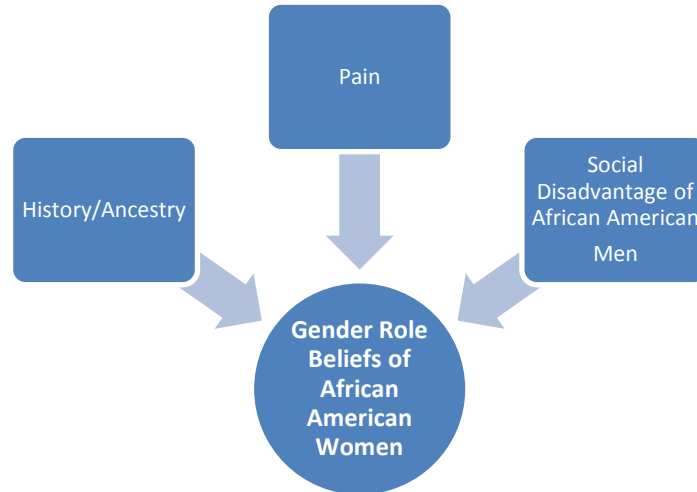
*Figure 2.* Representation of African American women’s gender role beliefs about African American men. Rectangles in the middle denote themes. Rectangles on the last row denote subthemes.

### **Contextual Views Shaping Gender Role Beliefs**

In addition to describing gender role beliefs, women also provided contextual descriptions that contributed to the development and shaping of their beliefs. Women shared perceptions about historical and social factors influencing gendered interactions between African American men and women (see Figure 3). Prevalent codes describing related contextual factors revealed the following theme and subthemes:

#### **Theme 8: Personal and Socio-historical Experiences of Africans Americans**

- (a) History/Ancestry
- (b) Pain
- (c) Perceptions of Social Disadvantage among African American men



*Figure 3.* Representation of personal and socio-historical contextual factors influencing development and maintenance of gender role beliefs of American American women. Rectangles denote subthemes that emerged under the theme of personal and socio-historical factors that influence gender role beliefs.

**Theme 8: Personal and Socio-historical Experiences of African Americans.** Women shared their views of how historical experiences have shaped gender roles among African Americans, highlighting that history presents unique expectations and gendered interactions for African Americans today.

*Subtheme: (a) History/Ancestry.* A woman explained how slavery shaped expectations of hard work for African American women.

I think women, African American women have um... they can look at their past generations and see their um grandmothers and great-grandmothers were slaves so they have no excuse but to work hard in order to succeed in life because their mentors have done the same.

A college student in her 20s furthered the explanation,

That's what makes us a little different than the other women in our society because of the slave uh experience that forced us to do things that we didn't want to do ... but it just has given us a different tent or flavor or essence.

A married mother in her 50s related the slavery experiences of African Americans to the enduring strength that is displayed among African American women. "I think of endurance I feel like we had to endure a lot. You know in our lifetime and just to echo what they were saying going back to in going back in time in slavery time."

Concerning gendered interactions between Black men and women, a woman in her 40s revealed that "culturally the way Black men interact with Black woman may be different."

Another woman explained her views of commitment issues among Black men.

Black men are somewhat different because ...I don't think they have the sense of commitment to family. Because of... the history and that's because of... being separated and sold from your family and never probably meeting up with them again. So therefore they never developed a sense of commitment. Not every black man but some still have that um personality that they can't be committed.

*Subtheme: (b) Pain.* Women explained that pain from historical experiences influences gendered interactions in the African American community. A married mother in her 40s shared her thoughts,

... I think we did endure a lot of pain and uh with that also comes I think a lot of some loss of identity as to ... who we are and ... that presents in itself a whole slew of other problems that we are still dealing with today.

Another woman in her 30s said African Americans,

... have a different experience in America... the history that goes behind the relationships... with African American men and women was so painful that our experience is totally different from another race. That pain permeates to this day in our relationships between each other, between our children, in everything that we do that pain is still there for us... the pain that the family was broken. That was... one of the um deliberate attempts ... the first thing you do is break up the family ... the whole slavery process the middle passage um the Jim crow era all of that even the civil rights era we never... gotten through that to the point where it's okay and it's no pain there. We see that pain in the generations behind us with the prison population and the drugs we can't get behind us it's just there. (59 year old married mother)

*Subtheme: (c) Perceptions of Social Disadvantage among African American Men.*

Women frequently described perceived problems among African American men in situation and historical context. Women often coupled these descriptions with implications that such experiences have for current behaviors among men. Women discussed reasons behind and implications of high incarceration rates, achievement gaps, perceived commitment issues, and stereotypes. In their eyes African American men want to be “good” but limited resources, prejudice or discrimination, incarceration,

disadvantages stemming from childhood, internalized stereotypes, or a combination of barriers prevented them from doing so.

... our men .. get criticized too much and sometimes by the women ...it's not their fault... a lot of our men are locked up, a lot of our men,... have circumstances beyond their control that they were born into just like African American women, and they don't have ... the necessary tools ... to be able to get more. They want to get good paying jobs, and a lot of our men can't. They want to go on to college, but ... it's a stereotype, if you're a Black man you're not supposed to be smart. Black women it's okay for us to be smart, it's okay for us to go to college, but if you're a Black man ... a lot of them play into the stereotypes and a lot of them wind up in jail... they didn't have the resources in order to get a better chance ... a lot of them don't have two parent families, it's just the woman being the head of the family, and they don't know who their father are, or the fathers are not you know being responsible, because it's a generational thing. If your father wasn't there to teach you how to be a man... a woman can't teach a boy how to be a man... he needs a man in his life to really teach him how to be a man... our men for so long, haven't had...had strong men in their lives, it has just been passed down from the generations to generations... (40 year old divorced mother)

...Black men are the way that they are, because a lot of them were not raised with uh, a truly surviving male in the home. They had a female that had to be a dual



role person, and um sometimes that individual had too many kids to raise, and they were tired... that some of the, the boys... just got sort swept up under the rug ... and they were influenced by the wrong individual people. Whether it was neighbors, friends, family ... some of them were forced to go out and to do things that were illegal in order to help raise the family, and so it was like a survival of the fittest sort of thing. (56 year old divorced mother)

... that struggle for African American men is a far greater than that of men of the otha ethnic group but because of the struggles they ... haven't been taught they haven't been trained, they don't know the proper way of doing things and because of poverty they have had to really prove themselves also uh to be twice as good as the other man to survive. (Elderly retired widow)

... African American men always feel they have to prove something to somebody when nobody really telling them you need to prove this, they just feel like have to prove something ... as far as like having the different women and the different children they need to feel like an ego thing... but I feel like they always feel like they have to prove something to somebody. (19 year old single college student)

... African American men are very pressured. I feel that African American men want to be providers they want to be good role models and fathers, but they're pressured not only by the media but by their women, by society... They are not

given the benefit of the doubt where men of other ethnic groups have ... more of a chance to do better... African American men ...don't have as many chances so they feel like they have to fall into the stereotype, in order to be successful or to be ... looked at as a good person by their peers. (20 year old single college student)

Contextual factors contributing to the development, shaping, and maintenance of gender roles were reflected in three subthemes: (a) history/ancestry, (b) pain, and (c) perceptions of social disadvantage among African American men. Women's descriptions of the socio-historical factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of their gender role beliefs revealed interesting information related to how women believe gendered interactions between African American men and women have been shaped. Women spoke passionately about how slavery, Jim Crow, and oppression influenced the roles that African American men and women take on within and outside of the home. They shared their views about how societal pressures and circumstances make African American women feel that they are required to be strong and resilient individuals who wear "multiple hats." The data suggests that social, historical, and racial circumstances are the catalysts by which gendered interactions and gender role beliefs among African American women are established and maintained.

### **Discussion**

Gender role beliefs of African American women have been previously examined using quantitative measures and more recently, qualitative methods of inquiry. More specifically, gender role literature was developed out of studies of Western cultural norms and conceptualizations of White Americans. Gender role research on African American women must

consider that her distinct socio-historical and cultural experiences may influence her conceptualization of gender roles resulting in gender role expectations that may significantly differ from those of Western or White female populations.

This study used the voices of African American women in order to ensure cultural integrity, while exploring perceptions and conceptualizations of gender roles. The aim of this exploratory qualitative study was to identify the gender role beliefs African American women have for African American men and African American women. Gender role beliefs for African American women will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of their gender role beliefs for African American men. Women's perceptions about contextual factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of gender role beliefs will also be discussed. Following this discussion, study limitations, suggestions for future research, training, and program implications will be addressed, followed by a conclusion.

### **Gender Role Beliefs about Women**

Four themes emerged as gender role beliefs for this sample of African American women: (1) Having Multiple Roles, (2) Dedication to Care for Others, (3) Strength, and (4) Perceived Social Inferiority. A prevalent gender role theme was the perceived obligation to take on multiple roles. Participants admitted to feeling overwhelmed by their efforts to meet expectations of being providers, caretakers, homemakers, and leaders. Women expressed pride and more often discontent with meeting expectations for numerous roles, emphasizing the difficulties associated with simultaneously working inside and outside the home, caring for their children, and taking care of significant others or family members. Although women embraced multiple roles, their role as a caretaker seemed to be the most salient.

Another gender role for African American women that emerged from the focus groups was dedication to caring for others (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2003; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Other studies of African American women have also found that they consistently view themselves as caretakers, nurturers, mothers, and support systems (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2007; Binion, 1990; Broman, 1991; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Apparently, this role has been a customary expectation from the period of African enslavement to contemporary times. Caring for others appears to be a staple of African American womanhood. Today, the caretaking role is likely to be at the forefront of the lives of many African American women. Women in the current study assumed roles as primary caretakers for their children (married or not), siblings, and elderly family members.

Role strain theory may help explain the frustration and stress experienced by individuals who are unable to successfully fulfill all of the expectations of multiple roles simultaneously (Goode, 1960 as cited in Lewis, 1989). When working to meet the expectations of one role, expectations of another role may not be fulfilled. Women in the focus groups indicated that responsibilities associated with caring for others can be time-consuming, cause women to use large amounts of energy, and increase already high levels of stress (Black, Murry, Cutrona, & Chen, 2009; Davis, Sloan, & Tang, 2011).

The balancing act of managing multiple roles may lead women to neglect their self-care and negatively affect their ability to initiate and maintain positive and preventive mental and physical health behaviors. Therefore, many of these women may not have the time or energy to make consistent efforts to relieve stress, engage in healthy physical activity on a regular basis, get annual medical check-ups, adhere to medication regimes, or follow medical treatment plans. This may be especially true for women who have low levels of social support. Women with

supportive partners, who have relatives who live close by and who have fewer children are less likely to report role strain than women without these social resources (Lewis, 1989).

Strength was the third gender role belief for African American women. Within the overarching theme of strength, three subthemes were identified: (a) Resilient Strength, (b) Independent Strength, and (c) Cornerstone Strength. This finding is consistent with a growing and on-going discourse about the perceived phenomena of the “Strong Black Woman” (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

On the other hand, African American women’s gender role expectation of strength is often associated with beliefs that seeking help will be viewed negatively by peers and family members and indicates weakness or inability (Amankwaa, 2003; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003). Expectations to be strong can also influence intimate partner interactions, mental health, physical health, and help-seeking behaviors. In Woods-Giscombé’s (2010) study of the “Strong Black Woman” or “Superwoman” schema, participants discussed liabilities associated with expectations to be strong, highlighting strain in romantic relationships, postponement of self-care, emotional eating, poor sleep, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and adverse mental health. Being strong can be a significant contributor to distress among Black women and the costs associated with embodying this strength “may be depression, characterized as a silencing of a range of her human needs (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, p. 47).”

Resilience, another type of strength discussed in the focus groups, is defined by DeNisco (2011) as a “positive personality characteristic that enhances individual adaptation (pg. 604).” Research has found resilience to be a protective factor against negative mental health outcomes (Davydov, Stewart, Ritchie, & Chaudieu, 2010). Similarly, the women in this study perceived resilience as a strength, emphasizing how it helps them cope with adversities. However,

resilience can also be examined from a different perspective. Perhaps, the notion of resilience facilitates the belief that women can “do it all,” consequently promoting a false sense of security while facilitating self-neglecting behaviors.

Gender role perceptions and expectations of independent strength have been reported in other studies where African American women have self-perceptions of being independent, self-sufficient, and not dependent on others (Kerrigan et al. 2007, Woods-Giscombé, 2010). This included expectations that they could independently provide financially for themselves and their families (Kerrigan et al. 2007; Thomas & King, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). While being independent is generally a good thing, it can imply a lack of social support and/or doubt in others’ ability or willingness to provide support, which may put women at risk for elevated stress (Wirtz et al., 2006).

African American women likely socialize their daughters to embrace independent and multiple role behaviors through modeling or vicarious conditioning (Fiske, 2010). Concurrent with socialization by mothers, African American girls also receive socialization messages from religious institutions, family, and extended family about roles of women. The notion of independence and multiple role behaviors for African American women may be associated with a biblical influence upon gender role expectations among African Americans. For example, Thomas and King (2007) found that many African American mothers socialize their daughters to believe that they can “do all things through Christ.” This popular bible scripture may motivate these women to take on multiple roles and feel pressured to handle their responsibilities independently, without asking for social support and other types of accessible assistance. Such socialization may serve as a protective factor by helping young girls to learn to cope with adversity and adapt to change.

It is possible that this socialization may influence sons' current and future expectations of women. For example, young boys who see their mothers and sisters behaving independently and taking on multiple roles may assume that such behaviors are typical of all women. With the number of households run by single mothers increasing, this phenomenon deserves further consideration.

This sample of African American women also described cornerstone strength as being the force that "holds everything together." For example, these women felt that it was expected of them to be strong in ways that helped hold their families and communities "together." Other researchers also report that African American women believe that this strength may be an individual psychological resource that has allowed these women to survive, preserve their families, and the African American community (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

A fourth theme in this study was these women's perceptions of low social status. Women in this study discussed feeling as if they were at the bottom of the social hierarchy because they were 1) Black first and 2) women, suggesting their experience of a unique form of gendered racism. Similarly, in a study of socialization of African American daughters, girls reported feeling as if "I have three strikes against me, being Black, being a woman, and being poor (Thomas & King, 2007, p. 139)." This theme was also reported by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003). Women in their study "reported how difficult it is to survive in a culture that constantly stereotypes Black women as unintelligent, lazy, unmotivated, unattractive, difficult to deal with, and unable to maintain a functional family (p. 13)." Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) described various ways in which Black women spend large amounts of time and energy attempting to refute these negative perceptions. For example, women discussed tolerating prejudice and discrimination in interracial romantic relationships and attempting to overachieve and exceed

expectations in professional and educational settings. African American women may experience increased levels of stress associated with this distinct form of perceived racism, a phenomena worthy of future research.

### **Gender Role Beliefs about Men**

This study adds to the paucity of literature describing the views African American women have about African American male gender roles. Three themes emerged: (1) Lack of commitment, (2) Strength, and (3) Mental and Emotional Immaturity.

One male gender role theme in this study reflected perceptions of a lack of commitment among African American men. Literature on African American women's uncertainty about the dependability of African American men is reflected in this theme (Cowdery et al., 2009).

Women's beliefs that men are uncommitted to families or romantic relationships could be a reaction to increased numbers of African American single mother-headed households. There could be psychological effects to women's perceptions that their father's or significant men in their lives are uncommitted to them. African American women who view men as uncommitted may trust men less, which could reinforce their expectations of African American women being strong, independent, and assuming multiples roles. It is possible that assumption of these roles reflect perceptions that men are unable to be responsible.

This sample of women described men as strong, revealing subthemes of physical and mental strength. Consistent with previous literature, physical strength was associated with musculature or being masculine, a traditional gender role of men (Bem, 1974). Mental strength was described as being assertive, powerful, hardworking, firm, and strong-willed. Other beliefs included expectations of men as goal-oriented leaders, heads of households, and providers. Such views are consistent with traditional gender role beliefs (Bem, 1974). However, some researchers



suggest egalitarian gender roles as a key element of African American adult relationships (Broman, 1991; Hunter & Sellers, 1998; Vespa, 2009). It is possible that preferences and expectations for traditional versus egalitarian gender roles may vary as a function of age, father figure presence during childhood, socioeconomic status, and/or current relationship status among African American women. Although described a bit differently, African American women in this sample considered strength and autonomy to be gender role expectations for African American men and women.

Although men were viewed as strong and autonomous, some women in this sample viewed men as mentally and emotionally immature, the third theme that emerged. Interestingly, some of the prevalent views of men were polar opposites. For example, some men were considered to be strong and weak, and immature and autonomous (often associated with maturity). Further exploration of the data revealed that there were generational differences in the perceptions of men; older women tended to perceive men as strong providers while the younger women often viewed men as immature, uncommitted and weak. When referring to older men such as fathers, grandfathers, or community leaders, younger women's gender role beliefs paralleled the beliefs of older women. These findings suggest a shift in gender role views that may be attributed to the socio-historical context experienced by different generations of African American women. For example, as of 2009, 54% of African American children were being raised by a single parent compared to 22% in the 1960s (as cited by Cantave and Harrison, 2001; Kreider & Ellis, 2011). It is possible that younger women are resentful about having to bear the burdens of parenthood alone and consequently see men more negatively, i.e. irresponsible or immature (Collins, 2005). Younger women raised by single mothers may share similar sentiments.

Beyond experiencing or being a product of single mother-headed household, there are other factors that may shape an African American woman's beliefs about the gender roles of African American men. Another theme of male gender roles in this study suggested that many African American women view men as weak, unemotional, and not dependable (Collins, 2005; Cowdery et al., 2009). Women may believe that men are weaker because of their perceived gender differences in expectations of strength. According to study participants, expectations of strength among women are associated with independence, resilience, and endurance. On the other hand, expectations of strength among men are associated with physical strength and assertiveness. Participants suggested that men are not expected to independently manage responsibilities or endure as much as women. This perception is supported by literature describing the socialization of African American girls and how this socialization differs for African American boys. For example, African American girls are raised with higher expectations than boys and are informed early on of the need to be strong and independent (Staples & Johnson, 1993). Mothers raising daughters with higher expectations imply that they have lower expectations for sons, which may cause daughters to adopt views of boys/men as the weaker sex. Future research should examine these possibilities.

### **Related Contextual Factors**

This sample of women identified personal and socio-historic circumstances that contribute to the formation and preservation of gender role beliefs as another theme in this study. Subthemes included history/ancestry, pain, and social disadvantage of African American men. These factors were perceived to influence the ways in which their gender roles were assigned or emerged within the historical context of African American men. Women in this study discussed examples of the historical effects of slavery and Jim Crow laws on gendered interactions

between African American men and women. More specifically, these women discussed the pain and tension experienced by African Americans which were attributed to destruction of African American families during enslavement and disenfranchisement of African Americans during the Jim Crow era.

In light of the current high rates of incarceration of many African American men, women commented that many children grow up without fathers. They also discussed that lack of employment opportunities for African American men makes it difficult for the men to contribute to the well-being of their partners and families. Women mentioned how African American women have to be resilient and endure painful experiences in order to preserve their families. In contrast, women attributed negative characteristics of African American men to historical and current social disadvantages (i.e., social inequality, limited financial resources, incarceration, etc.) This dilemma may explain some of the apparent conflicts in their perceptions and conceptualizations of African American male gender roles and gender role expectations. For example, in some cases their perceptions of the inability of some African American men to uphold traditional gender roles may be explained by their realization of a host of factors, many steeped in history. On the other hand, some women many attribute these failures to individual factors and not social historical conditions. There is a need to determine under which conditions African American women are likely to attribute perceived shortcomings to external (e. g. historical) or individual factors.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations in the current study. One limitation was the format of the focus group questions. Some of the questions were specific and may have guided participant responses which may have limited emergence of participant views and beliefs. For example,

questions that asked if and in what ways were African American men and women different from men and women in other racial or ethnic groups, may have prompted participants to respond by highlighting negative or positive characteristics. Questions that asked women about gender role expectations of women differed from those that asked about gender role expectations of men. This may have prevented some women from expressing all of their gender role beliefs for both men and women.

Another limitation is related to the sample. The researchers recruited women who were diverse based on age, religion, socio-economic status, and other backgrounds factors. We did not inquire about the sexual orientation of the women in our study. Selecting women who were of varied sexual orientations would have added an additional level of diversity and allowed for us better interpret gender role perceptions of African American women. Also, we used a convenience sample of women who volunteered to participate in our focus groups. These women knew they would take part in a group discussion about African American women and as such may have been more vested in sharing their experiences than women who did not volunteer. Another limitation was the missing demographic data for six elderly women and nine college students.

The nature of the focus group process may have limited the opportunity for women to voice all of their beliefs, experiences, and opinions. Although interviewers encouraged all women to share their thoughts, some women may have felt uncomfortable sharing beliefs if they perceived that they differed in some way from the majority of other women in the group. This may have limited emergence of alternative but relevant views and perspectives. However, our groups were structured to be homogeneous, a technique recommended by Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) employed to group individuals together with parallel life experiences. Conducting one or

two groups with women of mixed religious or generational backgrounds may have yielded different information than was yielded in the homogenous group sessions.

Also interviewers failed to keep a reflexive journal. Such journals give researchers the opportunity to write about interesting phenomena, similarities and differences between groups, thoughts, questions, biases, questions to avoid, etc. This process helps to inform procedures and techniques utilized with future groups and helps researcher stay aware of biases (Creswell, 2007).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Findings from the current study suggest various directions for future research that may help increase our knowledge of gender role beliefs of African American women and how such beliefs influence their lived experiences. Future research might focus on more in-depth exploration of the differences in gender role beliefs based on variability in socioeconomic status including education, type of employment and income. For example, women who are of low socio-economic status might need to rely more on social support networks than women of high socioeconomic status. These differences might affect gender role beliefs about strength and multiple roles.

Many women also expressed views about having multiple roles and expectations to handle “everything,” suggesting a perceived lack of social support among these women. Future research should further explore the differences in gender role beliefs based on perceptions of levels of social support. For example, do women who receive more social support have different gender role beliefs than women who receive less social support? Do themes of independence and strength transcend social support gradations among African American women?

Women highlighted that pain, historical experiences, and barriers to African American men's personal and professional development contributed to the shaping of gender role beliefs. Future research should explore the physical and psychological costs associated with these contextual influences. In addition, future research should inquire about the socialization and family norms and values of participants that may contribute to the development and maintenance of gender role beliefs.

An exploration of the gender role beliefs of African American men would be of interest as well and would contribute new knowledge to the gender role literature. Analyses of gender role beliefs for African American men and women may help improve relationships and intimacy among this population. This information could be also be used to better understand African American family dynamics and parental socialization of boys and girls.

Previous research indicates that traditional conceptualizations of gender roles may not be relevant for African American women (Nguyen et al., 2010). Thus, future studies should utilize reliable and valid measures of gender roles that have been normed on African American women. Development of a new culturally relevant gender role measure for African American women would contribute to research by replacing measures that were not developed or validated for African American females. This measure of African American women's gender roles would offer researchers a better understanding of the beliefs of African American women and provide a more solid foundation for research investigating how gender role beliefs can influence their behavior and attitudes.

Our sample of women also discussed their personal experiences of being and witnessing the behaviors of Strong Black Women. This schema has been explored in the literature and is continuing to gain momentum (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2009; Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2007;

Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2003; Black, 2008; Black & Peacock, 2011, Hamilton-Mason, Hall, & Everette, 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2007; Mullings, 2006; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). More research is needed to better understand the implications, including the costs and benefits, of internalizing or identifying with the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema. Researchers should also investigate how the SBW schema and gender role beliefs influence the socialization of African American girls and boys.

Scarce literature exists that addresses perceived social inferiority reported by women in this study. It would be of interest to investigate the factors that shape this belief and related psychological and behavioral outcomes. Possible research questions could be: What behaviors occur in conjunction with this belief? Do beliefs of social inferiority influence self-esteem and self-efficacy? Do beliefs of social inferiority persist if women are exposed to high achieving African American women or information about high-achieving African American women? Can feelings of belonging and social approval minimize views of inferiority? This concept deserves further exploration. Knowledge of the causes and influences of perceptions of social-inferiority can have implications for research and programming.

### **Implications for Programs**

Researchers have highlighted the influence of gender role beliefs on health behaviors and the importance of developing culturally-tailored interventions that can maximize program effectiveness and increase positive health outcomes (Campbell & Quintiliani, 2006). Because of the unique intersection of socio-historical, racial, and gendered experiences of African American women in the United States, health interventions should be developed in a manner that considers the distinct background of her cultural sharing group.

Using gender role beliefs as a framework, suggestions are provided for the development of culturally-tailored health interventions that may reduce risk and enhance protective factors

that increase positive health outcomes among African American women. Recommendations include: address socio-historical experiences contributing to health outcomes, emphasize cultural pride and identity, teach and encourage adaptive coping behaviors, and identify needed resources including sources of social support.

Interventions that have been cultural tailored for African American women are generally more effective than non-tailored interventions (Campbell & Quintiliani, 2006). Existing interventions for African American women that include activities in line with the above recommendations have been found to be effective. An example is the SISTA (Sisters Informing Sisters about Topics on AIDS) Project, a social skills training intervention aimed at reducing HIV risk behavior among African American women (DiClemente & Wingood, 1995). The SISTA project uses gender and culturally relevant materials and activities to disseminate messages about the benefits and importance of engaging in safer sexual practices. The intervention curriculum uses poems, interactive discussions, and other activities to reduce HIV risk behaviors by enhancing gender and ethnic pride, addressing the socio-historic experiences of Black women, and encouraging adaptive coping skills among other things. Enhancing gender and ethnic pride may help reduce beliefs of social inferiority which may lead to increases in ethnic identity and self-esteem. Addressing the socio-historic experiences of African American women may lead women to be more susceptible to programs, as women see these experiences as factors that contribute to their beliefs and identity development. Teaching and encouraging adaptive coping behaviors may help women to reduce stress experienced from having multiple roles or being strong. The SISTA Project, like other culturally tailored interventions, has been found to be effective among African American women (DiClemente & Wingood, 1995).



Another gender and culturally relevant intervention created by Rimmer, Rauworth, Wang, Heckerling, and Gerber (2009) sought to increase physical activity among obese African American women. Results revealed that intervention groups with higher levels of social support (from other group members and group facilitators) reported the greatest increase in physical activity and reductions in body weight. Increasing levels of social support in interventions programs provides women with a network of individuals that can encourage healthy behaviors. Interventions or programs that incorporate gender and culturally relevant messages and activities are likely to be more effective than non-tailored interventions (Campbell & Quintiliani, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

African American women's childhood and adult experiences influence and are influenced by gender role beliefs (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995), which have been shown to influence mental health (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Broman, 1991), coping, social support benefits, romantic relationships (Friedman & Silver, 2007), and identity development (Noppe, 2009). Beliefs about gender roles can impact family decision making, couple interaction, vocational aspirations, achievement, and other personal decisions (Bielby & Bielby, 1992; Eccles, 1987; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley, & Scaringi, 2008; Thompson & Walker, 1989).

This study's findings suggest African American women's gender role views may be different from women in other racial or ethnic group due to unique experiences with economic, social, and political marginalization. African American women's gender role beliefs contribute to their expectations to be strong and independent women, which have implications for health outcomes. Gender role views of African American women were fairly consistent across generations; however, there were generational differences in views about African American men.

It is imperative that the unique gender role beliefs of African American women be considered when conducting research and programs.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Flyer

# ATTENTION BLACK WOMEN



## WOULD YOU LIKE TO CONTRIBUTE TO A STUDY ON BEING A BLACK WOMEN?

- GROUP DISCUSSIONS ARE NOW BEING CONVENED
- SESSIONS LAST ABOUT 1.5 HOURS
- You must be 18 years old or older to participate

If interested please contact

Julia Foster-Woodson at 828-6261 or [Jfosterw@vcu.edu](mailto:Jfosterw@vcu.edu)

This study is being conducted by the  
Center for Cultural Experiences in Prevention at Virginia Commonwealth University

REFRESHMENTS WILL BE SERVED AND A MONETARY INCENTIVE WILL BE PROVIDED

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

#### RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM COLLEGE STUDENTS



**TITLE: The Development of a Gender Role Measure for African American Women**

**VCU IRB NO.:** Hm12753

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:**

The purpose of this study is to identify beliefs that African American women have about the roles and responsibilities of being an African American or Black woman in this country. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an African American woman.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF YOUR INVOLVEMENT**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered. You will participate in a group discussion with other women. This discussion will last about an hour and a half. The discussion will be tape recorded so we are sure to get everyone's ideas. Only first names will be used so that we can keep track of who says what. A fake name can be used if preferred.

#### **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

We do not see any risks or discomforts from participating in these group discussions. You do not have to talk about any subjects you do not want to talk about, and you may leave the group at any time.

#### **BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS**

You may not get any direct benefit from this study, but, the information we learn from you will help us to better understand African American women.

#### **COSTS**

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the focus groups.

#### **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will receive extra credit through the psychology department's subject pool for participating in this focus group.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of audio-taped group discussion. At the beginning of the session, all women will be asked to use first names or a fake name. The tapes and the notes will be stored in a locked cabinet. After the information from the tapes is typed up, the tapes will be destroyed.

Data is being collected for research purposes only. The findings may be presented at a conference or published in a paper.

#### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Date: 1.28.10

APPROVED

2-24-10/mso/jr

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## Appendix B

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the group discussion.

### QUESTIONS

If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact:

Faye Z. Belgrave, Ph.D., Department of Psychology  
PO Box 842018, Virginia Commonwealth University  
[fzbelgra@vcu.edu](mailto:fzbelgra@vcu.edu)  
804 827-3908

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact:

Office for Research  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 113  
P.O. Box 980568  
Richmond, VA 23298  
Telephone: 804-827-2157

You may also contact this number for general questions, concerns or complaints about the research. Please call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. Additional information about participation in research studies can be found at <http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm>.

### CONSENT

I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant name printed Participant signature Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above) Date

Date: 1.28.10

APPROVED

2-24-10 / mao / JK

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## Appendix C

### Demographic Data Form

Name Used During Focus Group:

**1. What is your date of birth?** \_\_\_\_\_

**2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?**

- Less than High School
- High School or GED
- Some College
- 2 year Associate Degree
- 4 year College Degree
- Graduate or Professional School

**3. What is your current marital status?**

- Single, Never Married
- Married
- Living with partner
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed

**4. What is your main employment status? (Check one)**

- Employed
  - full time or part time (circle one)
- Unemployed and looking for Work
- Unemployed and not looking for work
- Retired
- On Disability

**5. If employed, what is your occupation, that is, what do you do for a living?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**6. How many children do you have?** \_\_\_\_\_ **How many Girls?** \_\_\_\_\_ **Boys?** \_\_\_\_\_

**7. If you have children, what are their ages (Check all that apply)**

- Under 5

## Appendix C

- 5 through 17
- 18 through 21
- 22 and older

**8. Do you consider yourself religious or spiritual?**

- Yes, strongly so
- Yes, somewhat
- No

**9. Are you a student?**

- Yes
- No

## Vita

Jasmine Alexis Abrams was born on January 13, 1988, in Norfolk, Virginia, and is an American citizen. She graduated from Yorktown High School, Yorktown, Indiana in 2006. She received her Bachelor of Science in Psychology with the highest honors from Virginia State University Petersburg, Virginia in 2010.