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**THE EFFECTS OF THE SUPERWOMAN SCHEMA ON AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN RECEIVING THEIR GRADUATE DEGREE AT ROWAN
UNIVERSITY WHILE ALSO HOLDING AN ASSISTANTSHIP**

by

Corrine Smith

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Higher Education
at
Rowan University
March 25, 2021

Thesis Chair: Andrew S. Tinnin Ed.D.

Committee Members:
Diane Dale, Ph.D.
Tyrone McCombs, Ph.D

Dedication

To the women who were strong, so that we could be soft.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my parents and sister for always supporting and encouraging me. Dr. Drew Tinnin for creating an environment where finishing this thesis and graduating were the only option. To Erin Flynn for taking the time to listen to me while I whittled down my list of topics until I settled on this one. Finally, for the Black women who came before me, who paved the way so that I could have a seat at the table and a mic to speak at it.

Abstract

Corrine Smith
THE EFFECTS OF THE SUPERWOMAN SCHEMA ON AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN RECEIVING THEIR GRADUATE DEGREE AT ROWAN UNIVERSITY
WHILE ALSO HOLDING AN ASSISTANTSHIP
2020-2021
Andrew S. Tinnin, Ed.D
Master of Arts in Higher Education

As an African American or Black woman, there is an expectation to be strong at all times. They are often glorified for their resiliency. Unfortunately, that strength and the expectation of it, can prove to be detrimental to African American or Black women's health. The Superwoman Schema, originally studied in 2010 by Woods-Giscombé, is the double edge sword that is handed to African American or Black women at a young age.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to expand Wood-Giscombé's research by examining the perceptions of the impact of the Superwoman Schema on African American or Black graduate students and alumni. Currently Rowan University has nothing in place to support its students of color, specifically Black/ African American women in their Higher Education M.A program. Once analyzed the data suggests that Black/ African American women could benefit from an affinity space supported by their program. To better serve the needs of this population Rowan University could develop a mentorship program within the Higher Education M.A program.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The identity of the African American or Black woman is constantly evolving and changing based on her treatment and the societal expectations placed on her. When enslaved, African American or Black women were charged with being caregivers, mistresses, and the very backbone of the White American family. Although African American or Black women have made many strides from enslavement to present day the root of those expectations has been carried through generations like a curse.

As an African American or Black woman, there is an expectation to be strong at all times. They are often glorified for their resiliency. Unfortunately, that strength and the expectation of it, can prove to be detrimental to African American or Black women's health. The Superwoman Schema, originally studied in 2010 by Woods-Giscombé, is the double edge sword that is handed to African American or Black women at a young age. Wood-Giscombé (2010) found that African American or Black women who identify with the superwoman schema feel an "obligation to manifest strength," "obligation to suppress emotions," "resistance to being vulnerable or dependent," "determination to succeed despite limited resources," and "obligation to help others," (p. 673-674).

Statement of the Problem

Woods-Giscombé (2010) studied the Superwoman Schema. African American or Black women experience more stress than their White counterparts. Woods-Giscombé (2010) explained that a key aspect of African American or Black women stress is racial

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discrimination. This stress has negative effects on their health, such as difficult births and misdiagnosis of mental health conditions. The way stress effects African American or Black women, and their responding coping mechanisms has not been studied fully.

Our experiences with hardships such as discrimination are unique because of how African American or Black women identify as being an African American or Black woman, more than being exclusively African American or Black or solely a woman (Allen et al., 2019). That is why when studying the African American or Black women's experience, it is imperative to examine it through Critical Race Feminism Theory. Critical Race Feminism Theory combines Critical Race Theory and Feminist Theory (Vaccaro, 2017). It is relevant to the studies involving the intersectionality between race and gender because it is often assumed that men and women of color have the same experiences because of their shared race, which is not true (Vaccaro, 2017). Critical Race Feminism Theorist wants women of color to begin to tell their stories so that the previously accepted ideologies will be challenged and contradicted (Vaccaro, 2017). Many scholars believe that what Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) are missing the most are the women of color's perspectives (Vaccaro, 2017). That is why the Superwoman Schema should be examined in the context of African American or Black women who are pursuing graduate degrees, because that experience, that story, has not been told.

The way stress manifests through African American or Black women is different from African American or Black men and White women. It may look different in a classroom or work setting and it is important that higher education practitioners learn to

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identify and understand the Superwoman Schema, so they are not ignoring, praising, or encouraging problematic behavior.

Context of Study

This study focuses on African American or Black women graduate students and alumni at Rowan University Glassboro campus. Rowan University is a public institution in New Jersey. Rowan University's student population is 19,465 of that-9,233 students identify as female ("Rowan University Student", n.d.). Of the overall student population 1,900 (9.76%) identify as Black, and 993 of those are Black women ("Rowan University Student", n.d.).

The graduate student population of Rowan University is 3,345 ("Rowan University's Student", n.d.). Rowan University offers 43 traditional master's degree programs ("Graduate Programs", n.d.). There are 200 African American or Black women currently enrolled in a Rowan University graduate program, which is one percent of the overall student population ("Rowan University Student", n.d.).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to expand Wood-Giscombé's research by examining the perceptions of the impact of the Superwoman Schema on African American or Black graduate students and alumni. The goals of the study are:

1. to provide recommendations on how African American or Black women can find the balance between vulnerability and strength.

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2. to inform those who teach and work with African American women how they can best assist in ensuring that the African American or Black women around them thrive.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of the impact of the Superwoman Schema (SWS) on African American women receiving their master's degree at Rowan University?
2. How can Rowan University support those who identity with SWS?

Assumptions and Limitations

Limitations of the study include the examination of mental health, self-perceptions, small population size, and Covid-19. The sensitive nature of mental health will be difficult for African American or Black women to discuss, since there are negative stigmas are associated with mental health in the African American community (Baoku, 2018). The Superwoman Schema is based on how a person sees themselves in relation to the world around them (Allen et al., 2019 & Wood- Giscombé, 2010). If that perception is skewed, then the participant's answers will be skewed as well. Small population size is a limitation of the study because of the limited number of African American or Black women who graduated or are pursuing their master's degree at Rowan University. Finally, the focus group was meant to happen in person but need to be conducted virtually due to Covid-19.

Operational Definition of Important Terms

Superwoman Schema: A coping mechanism created by African American or Black women to aid in the daily battle against discrimination and microaggressions.

Microaggressions: Lewis et al. (2012) best defines microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environment indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, slights and insults to the target person or group," (p .53).

Stereotype Threat: When a person, typically from a minoritized identity, is aware of a negative stereotype of their community and will intentionally make attempts to contradict said stereotype (Edwards, 2019).

Organization of Remaining Chapters of Study

Chapter II is a synthesized analysis of literature focused on the Superwoman Schema, racial discrimination and other related topics. This information is the foundation of this study.

Chapter III describes the procedures used in this study. Including methodology, research design, data collection and analysis.

Chapter IV will provide the findings and analysis of the study's focus groups.

Chapter V will summarize the results of the study

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Literature Review

Introduction

The researcher was taught at a young age to never let anyone see her cry. When she was an undergraduate the researcher was known for "having it all together all the time". The researcher took pride in that identity and lived up to people's expectations of her to be strong regardless of what happened. No matter the slurs the researcher was called, the backhanded compliments from peers and professors, the researcher was known for handling any situation with poise and grace. Never giving anyone an excuse or reason to think less of her until her mom's cancer returned. Suddenly the coping mechanisms, later identified as the Superwoman Schema (SWS), the armor the researcher had built around herself had a chink in it. The researcher was left vulnerable and the things that the researcher use to let roll of her back began to trigger her. The researcher no longer had the patience and resiliency to be silent when experiencing things like microaggressions. The chink in the researcher's armor challenged her to find strength in vulnerability rather than suppressing her emotions and not reaching out to others. The researcher began learning to ask others for help and not measuring-her strength by the amount of pain she could endure.

This study will examine the perceptions of the Superwoman Schema and how it affects African American or Black who are earning or have earned their master's degree at Rowan University. African American or Black women will share and examine their experiences in the classroom and the workplace. To truly understand the Superwoman Schema, it is imperative to understand the origins or the schema and the negative

experiences (i.e., microaggressions, racial discrimination etc.) that schema was designed to protect African American or Black women from.

Microaggressions

Racism has adapted over time. It is no longer simply blatant acts that were seen before the Civil Rights Movement, now they are more discreet and subtle (Lewis et al., 2012). Lewis et al. (2012) defined microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environment indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, slights and insults to the target person or group," (p. 53). As Corbin et al. (2018) finds, they are "both inconspicuous and difficult to confirm," (p. 630). It is that form of racism that proves more pervasive (Corbin et al., 2018). It is a death by a thousand paper cuts.

In the context of African American or Black women in higher education, many at PWIs have faced stereotypes because of their race from their peers and mistreatment from faculty (Vaccaro, 2017). They are faced with assumptions that they will not do as well as their white counterparts (Vaccaro, 2017). Their counterparts also accept and promote ideologies of colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Vaccaro, 2017). It seems that a shared indifference to race is the norm. These microaggressions lead to women of color censoring themselves and having low self-esteem (Vaccaro, 2017). There is a wide variety of oppression that can be found on a college campus (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). One of the results of said oppression is invisibility (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017).

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Mena and Vaccaro (2017) define invisibility in regard to race as "being treated as if one is not visible, and being dismissed, devalued, ignored, and delegitimized by other because of one's race," (p. 302). African American or Black women specifically feel as though they are not seen or heard. No other group in America has had its identity socially removed. African American or Black women are typically lumped in with African American or Black men and often not grouped with women as a whole, let alone having e their own identity group (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). Although African American or Black women are typically invisible, when they are seen it is under surveillance (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). Scholars have observed that African American or Black women in the workplace will be brought in but then not offered promotions. They are not mentored like their white counterparts and are often given more menial work that will not lead to a promotion (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017).

Another microaggression that African American or Black women face is tokenism (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). African American or Black are seen when an institution needs them to work on a diversity committee, mentor a student of color, and translate or speak on African American or Black issues (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). However, any other time they go back to being invisible (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). One of the many challenging aspects of microaggressions is that it puts the responsibility on the offended to correct and educate the offender. African American or Black women are constantly in an internal battle on whether they should address the microaggression (Robinson, 2013). Microaggressions are just the tip of the systemic racism iceberg. They are one of many in the legion, used to attack African Americans. Amongst the legion are stereotypes.

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Historical Stereotypes

Three historical stereotypes that plague African American or Black are the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. The Mammy was created during slavery, as she was typically the caretaker for her master and his family (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). She is a sexless maternal figure, charged with domestic duties. The Mammy takes care of everyone else before taking care of herself. The modern-day Mammy supports and takes care of their coworkers, they still put the needs of others above everything else (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

The Jezebel was also created in slavery to justify white slave owners raping their slaves. The Jezebel is a temptress, who seduces people with her body to get what she wants (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). She is manipulative (Jerald et al., 2017). The narrative of the Jezebel was created to take away all responsibility and accountability from the men and place it on the victim. The Jezebel narrative fed into the idea that African American or Black women were hypersexual (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Modern-day Jezebels are the women who are seen as sleeping their way to the top.

Finally, Reynold-Dobbs et al. (2008) described the Sapphire as a "talkative, dramatic, bossy Black woman who is full of complaints and mistrust for others," (p.137). The Sapphire is aggressive and often undermines African American or Black men (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). The character Molly from the hit HBO show *Insecure* is an excellent example of this stereotype. She is a lawyer who is known for undermining and stepping over her colleagues particularly her male peers and is inherently suspicious of others.

The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire stereotypes are not as prevalent in modern-day society. However, prevalence and relevance are not interchangeable. These stereotypes are still embedded in American society and covertly or overtly inform some views of African American or Black women. Stereotypes evolve, so when African American or Black women no longer fit into one, society will create new ones (Corbin et al., 2018). Stereotypes can continue to be damaging to those marginalized by them.

Stereotype Threat

A stereotype threat is when a person, typically from a minoritized identity, is aware of a negative stereotype of their community and will intentionally make attempts to contradict said stereotype (Edwards, 2019). Reynold-Dobbs et al. (2008) explained that when you first meet an individual you subconsciously create expectations for interaction based on stereotypes and treat that person as if the stereotype is reliable. Being aware of stereotypes and that other people could be judging or creating preconceived notions is enough to cause stress (Jerald et al., 2017). African American or Black women are always hyperaware of their behavior and how it is being perceived (Robinson, 2013).

Stereotype threat makes people feel as though they must prove they belong. African Americans or Blacks feel as though they need to "overcompensate for negative stereotypes about Africans American or Blacks and about African American or Black women in particular," (Allen et al., 2019, p.106). African American or Black women feel they need to "prove themselves" (Allen et al., 2019). They do not want to give someone the opportunity to discredit them by acting within a stereotype (Robinson, 2013). Jerald et al. (2017) discusses the concept of metastereotypes: "a person's beliefs regarding the

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stereotype that out-groups' members hold about his or her own group," (p. 488). Essentially, the level of stress experienced when facing stereotype threat is based on one's belief in the stereotype itself.

Racial Discrimination and its Connection to Stress

Stress is a normal human reaction. However, when it becomes a long-term or constant feeling it can have negative side effects (Allen et al., 2019). Unfortunately, African American or Black women experience a disproportionate amount of stress and stress-related problems, partially because of racial discrimination (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Racial discrimination triggers a specific type of stress known as Social Evaluate Threat (SET) (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). SET is when a person feels they are being negatively judged or mistreated by someone else or others (Poppelaars et al., 2019). It was originally studied regarding social situations such as public speaking. (Poppelaars et al., 2019). However, Woods-Giscombé, 2010 began to apply it to experiences specifically regarding race, like racial discrimination.

Racial discrimination is one of the main reasons African Americans experience more stress than white people (Allen et al., 2019). However, African American or Black women, in particular, see racial discrimination as a unique and tenacious form of stress throughout their lives (Allen et al., 2019). Experiences with discrimination early in life have even more impact on a person. Those experiences aid in shaping the way a person views the world and their beliefs on how the world sees them (Allen et al., 2019). Experiences with racial discrimination are scarring, they stay with people for a long time. African American or Black women are not discriminated against by their race and gender

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separately, rather holistically, meaning their experiences with discrimination are different from African American or Black men and white women (Allen et al., 2019 & Watson et al., 2015).

African American or Black women at PWI's undoubtedly experience racial battle fatigue when they are constantly trying to contradict stereotypes about themselves and general misogyny (Corbin et al., 2018). Racial battle fatigue appears after energy is spent trying to understand, identify, and prepare for racial microaggressions (Corbin et al., 2018). As a preventative measure, African American or Black women have learned to put on "armor" to lessen the pain racial discrimination causes (Allen et al., 2019). This armor is a means for social survival, it is tactical wear for "psychological resilience" (Allen et al., 2019, p.106).

Superwoman Schema Defined

Schemas are the ways humans internally view themselves in relation to the world around them (Allen et al., 2019). A schema dictates the way we navigate the world and are the foundation for our perceptions. They are based on the person, their culture, and social contexts (Allen et al., 2019). Schemas help create coping mechanisms.

Regarding African American or Black, the Superwoman Schema (SWS) has become a particular coping mechanism to aid in the daily battle against discrimination and microaggressions. The SWS was created to combat negative stereotypes such as the previously mentioned Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). It is a survival method (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). It was created to debunk all previous "negative" stereotypes of African American or Black women. She embodies the

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caretaking and self-sacrificing nature of the Mammy and unlike the manipulative Jezebel or the Lazy Sapphire, the Superwoman is an "overachiever" (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

The Superwoman shows strength in adversity (Abrams et al., 2014). She stands up for herself, helps take care of others, but never asks for help herself (Corbin et al., 2018 & Woods- Giscombé, 2010). Woods-Giscombé's (2010) qualitative study found two themes, the Superwoman feels obligated "to manifest strength and suppress emotions" and to be resistant "to being vulnerable or dependent," (p. 672). African American or Black women who identify with the superwoman schema mentally self-isolate in fear that no one understands how they feel (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). They bottle things up and avoid public displays of emotion because they believe it is a "sign of weakness." The Superwoman wears their armor and puts up their guard because they do not want anyone to take advantage of their vulnerability or mistake a vulnerable moment for weakness (Woods- Giscombé, 2010).

In the Reynolds-Dobbs et al., study (2008), distrust was a common underlying theme of the SWS. Many African American or Black women fear that if they were to open up to someone, they would be taken advantage of, that the information they shared would be used against them later. Because the Superwoman does not outwardly have insecurities like other women, they cannot risk letting people discover otherwise (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

Superwoman schema aids in examining the particular way African American or Black women handle stress by looking at it through a cultural lens (Allen et al., 2019).

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The Superwoman constantly wears a mask of strength to hide trauma and physical or emotional pain (Abram et al., 2018). The Superwoman "has it all together" all the time and she can "do it all" (Corbin et al, 2018). African American or Black women believe that being strong is just part of what makes them a woman, it is part of an African American or Black woman's life (Allen et al., 2019). It is that persistent need to be strong that labeled SWS as a form of "psychological androgyny" meaning that mentally African American or Black women take on typically masculine traits such as resiliency, assertiveness, strength, and independence (Allen et al., 2019).

Mental Health

When a coping mechanism is overused and has gone unevaluated for too long it can become a liability (Allen et al., 2019). That is why SWS has been called a "double edge sword" (Allen et al., 2019). African American or Black women who align with the Superwoman Schema's mental health are at risk (Abrams et al., 2018). The Superwoman feels pressured to be strong by their families and community, even in moments when they are struggling. African American or Black women often do not ask for help because they do not want to be a burden or an inconvenience. They also fear that reaching out for support will be a sign of weakness and or a level of vulnerability they are not comfortable with (Abrams et al., 2018).

The Sisterella Complex is a depressive outcome of the Superwoman s Schema (Abram et al., 2014). Those who suffer from the Sisterella Complex suffer in silence as they become overwhelmed with the unrealistic expectations, they, and society, have placed on them (Abram et al., 2014). Since those who align with the s Superwoman s

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Schema do not ask for help, those who fall victim to the Sisterella Complex internalize their suffering, often blaming themselves. This internal suffering is typically masked with a face of strength consistent with the SWS. African American or Black women are often seen as weak when they are suffering from mental illness (Abrams et al., 2018). So, when the Superwoman, who never asks for help, seeks support, they will be labeled as weak which is the very thing they fear being seen as. Thus, creating a vicious cycle. Despite the negative effects of the Superwoman Schema, being a "superwoman" is still admirable in the African American or Black community and many superwomen wear their coping mechanism as a "badge of honor" long after it becomes problematic (Watson & Hunter, 2015).

Conclusion

All of the literature was in agreement that African American women have a specific standpoint in the world. Their experiences with racism and gendered discrimination are unique. Consequently, their coping mechanisms are also unique. Stereotypes of African American or Black women have evolved over time and African American or Black women have always been aware of how they are perceived (Corbin et al. 2018 & Jerald et al. 2017). In a workplace or classroom setting, this awareness can prove exhausting. African American or Black women have also evolved over the years, their skin growing thicker and thicker into armor. Unfortunately, the same armor meant to protect, is a becoming a detriment to African American or Black women's physical and mental health. Being strong all the time s comes with a price. African American or Black women must learn to find the balance of strength and vulnerability. This balance has not been examined through the literature. The literature was thorough in identifying the

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characteristics of the Superwoman Schema and its origin; however, it did not continue to suggest potential solutions or next steps. The intention of my research is to understand the perceptions of the SWS and how Rowan University can better support African American or Black women who identity with SWS.

<div align="center">**Chapter III**</div>

<div align="center">**Methodology**</div>

Purpose of the Study

This research study investigates the perception of the effects of the Superwoman s Schema on African American women who are graduate students and alumni at Rowan University. African American or Black women are the focus of this study since their experience and perspective is unique, and it must be treated as such. The Superwoman Schema effects the way African American or Black women cope with stress and their mental health. The Superwoman Schema can be so intricately woven into an African American or Black women's identity they may not realize when it becomes a liability. That means that their peers, educators, and supervisors may not realize when the load they are carrying is becoming too heavy for one person, and they need help.

In the context of higher education, the Superwoman Schema can appear in the classroom. African American or Black women may not advocate for themselves in the same way their peers will. What will present as a strong work ethic and dedication may in reality be the result of not asking for a much need extension. It is important for educators, to consider the Superwoman Schema when working with an African American or Black student, and to check in with them holistically as a person rather than simply as a student. Otherwise, they might not be seeing the full picture and will be unable to serve the student to the best of their ability. The hope for this study is to show the way the Superwoman s Schema manifests for African American or Black women. Through this

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study the traditional ideas of strength and vulnerability for African American or Black women will be challenged.

Context of the Study

This study focuses African American or Black women graduate students and alumni at Rowan University Glassboro campus. Rowan University offers 43 traditional master's degree programs ("Graduate Programs", n.d.). There are 200 African American or Black women currently enrolled in a Rowan University graduate program, which is one percent of the overall student population ("Rowan University Student", n.d.).

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of the impact of the Superwoman Schema on African American women receiving their graduate degree at Rowan University?

RQ 2: How can Rowan University support those who identity with SWS?

Research Design

The study will utilize a phenomenological qualitative methodological approach. Patton (2002) describes a phenomenological qualitative study "aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experience" (p. 104). Qualitative methods provide the freedom to examine the complexity of an issue (Patton, 2002). The researcher believes that a qualitative approach for this study will be most effective because the researcher's interest in seeing the way the SWS impacts the study's participants. Qualitative approaches are able to get a plethora of information from a

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smaller pool (Patton, 2002). This will prove useful in this study due to the small population size.

For this study, one focus group was used to collect data. The researcher used a standardized open-ended interview approach with the focus groups. A standardized open-ended approach is when the researcher, prior to the focus group, creates a set list of open-ended questions (Patton, 2002). The wording and order of the questions remain the same for every focus group (Patton 2002).

Population and Sample

The population of this study is African American or Black women enrolled in or graduated from traditional graduate programs at Rowan University's Glassboro campus. The original sample was collected by asking African American or Black women in higher education graduate program if they were interested in participating in the study. The researcher began with this specific program because it is the one the researcher is enrolled in and the potential subjects will be in the researcher's inner circle. After the focus group, the researcher asked the participants if they knew anyone who they believed would be interested in participating in the study. This is called snowballing, a sampling method that allows identification of other participants through existing relationships (Naderifar, 2017). The researcher also reached out to the head of each graduate program at Rowan University and asked if they had any students they would recommend for the study.

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Data Collection

This research conducted at Rowan University with the approval of Rowan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Data collection began in the spring 2021 semester. The focus group was scheduled for an hour and half. Due to the Covid-19 restricting in- person meetings, the focus groups conducted with virtual Zoom meetings. Before the focus group began the participants received and signed a consent form outlining the purpose of the study and that their identity would remain anonymous with an alias being used to identify each participant. (Appendix B). Participants received a demographic survey (Appendix D) asking them to identify their age, program, whether or not they have an assistantship, and whether or not they have a full time or part-time job. The purpose of the demographic survey was to show the diversity of participants even they will had two main things in common, race and education.

With the consent of the participants, the focus group was audio recorded (see full informed consent form in Appendix B). Focus group topics (Appendix C) were adapted from Woods-Giscombé's (2010) interview questions because Woods-Giscombé et al. (2019) found that the questions were reliable in their study. The researcher concluded data collection in the spring of 2021 and begin transcribing and analyzing data in March 2021.

Data Analysis

The focus group was recorded and later transcribed. Once transcribed the data was thematically analyzed through a Critical Race Feminism lens. Thematic analysis is when the researcher is able to find and recognize patterns in the data (Patton, 2002). Themes

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are broad concepts so that data can be categorized under them (Patton, 2002). Critical Race Feminism focuses on the intersection of race and gender (Vaccaro, 2017). A thematic analysis through Critical Race Feminism lens ensured that the data was not categorized by race or gender separately, rather seeing the data holistically. Since the Superwoman Schema is impacts African American women specifically, it is important to analyze it through a lens created for issues that impact race and gender simultaneously.

Limitations

One of the limitations of using a focus groups for this particular subject is that it deals with mental health. Mental health is a sensitive subject and participants may not feel comfortable divulging that information. Another potential limitation is the studying of perceptions. The Superwoman Schema is based on how a person sees themselves in relation to the world around them. If that perception is skewed, then the participant's answers will be skewed as well. The biggest limitation of the study is the small size of the population. Rowan University is Predominately White Institution. Only five percent of the student population identifies as African American or Black women, and only one percent identify as African American or Black women enrolled in a graduate program ("Rowan University Student", n.d.).

Findings

This research study investigates the perception of the effects of the s Superwoman s Schema on African American or Black women who are graduate students and alumni at Rowan University. The methodology of this study allowed for African American or Black women to express their experiences in a group of their peers. Two research questions were developed to guide this study they are as follows:

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of the impact of the Superwoman Schema on African American women receiving their graduate degree at Rowan University?

RQ 2: How can Rowan University support those who identity with SWS?

Context of the Focus Group

One focus group was held with a total of five participants. The focus group lasted about an hour and half. All five participants knew each other and were friends, this created an environment where the participants were more comfortable sharing.

Demographics of the Population

Sasha

Sasha is a 24-year-old African American/ Black woman who graduated in 2020 with her M.A in Higher Education. During her time at Rowan University, she held an assistantship on campus, for anonymity the name of the office will not be disclosed.

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Issa

Issa is 23 years old, African American/Black woman who is currently enrolled in her second year at Rowan University in its Higher Education M.A program. They have an assistantship on campus, for anonymity the name of the office will not be disclosed.

Yara

Yara is a 24-year-old African American/ Black woman who graduated in 2020 with her M.A in Higher Education. During her time at Rowan University, she held an assistantship on campus, for anonymity the name of the office will not be disclosed.

Amanda

Amanda is a 24-year-old African American/ Black woman who graduated in 2020 with her M.A in Higher Education. During her time at Rowan University, she held an assistantship on campus, for anonymity the name of the office will not be disclosed.

Shonda

Shonda is a 24-year-old African American/ Black woman who graduated in 2020 with her M.A in Higher Education. During her time at Rowan University, she held an assistantship on campus, for anonymity the name of the office will not be disclosed. During the focus group Shonda disclosed that she is biracial.

Data Analysis

Lack of Support as a Stressor

All five participants expressed feeling unsupported during their time at Rowan University. As full-time grad students who also held assistantships, they expressed that their supervisors struggled to set boundaries differentiating their student identities and their employee ones. As paraprofessionals Sasha and Issa explained that they had supervisors who when they wanted to delegate responsibilities treated them as "valued employees" but when either of them tried to voice an opinion they were reminded that they are just students.

> "…being supervisors or whoever, the full-time professionals are in your
> assistantships. Um decided when you could be a student and when you were an
> employee, so it just felt like whatever benefited them at the moment that's when
> you were a student. So, when it came to like policy making or changing things in
> the office 'Oh you're a student you don't need to be a part of that conversation
> you just need to be told as you do.' and that never works well with me. And then
> when it went to 'oh we need help in the office, or we need people to fill in now all
> of a sudden you are a full time-- like an employee a *valued* employee to the
> office.' so it felt like they picked and choose in that sense and that could be
> stressful at times."

Many of the other participants echoed in agreement. They felt that it was difficult to advocate for themselves. A lot of times they were told to "go do" which none of them appreciated. Amanda said that most of her stress came from doing more work than she

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should have had to do. Whether it be covering for another grad or her supervisor, she felt that more and more was piled onto her plate without any regard of her wellbeing. She explained that at the end of the day she knew the work still needed to be done.

The acceptance of stress in these positions was a theme consistent throughout the focus group. All participants expressed that before even starting their master's program they knew it would be difficult. That stress was just something that came with the territory. They mostly saw the program and their assistantships as something they needed to get through. Sometimes stress could be a good thing, Amanda noted. The pressure to do a job well motivated her.

Expectations

Amanda expressed that "unrealistic expectations" was a source of stress for her. The idea that things were supposed to be a certain way. Sasha added to the previous point saying that in her roles there was always someone expecting something of her. Whether it be her job, her professors, her family. She had to manage and meet everyone's expectations simultaneously and no group cared about the expectations of the others. She admitted that choosing not to open up to people about things that were causing her stress added to it. "Like I wouldn't go up to my professors and say that yeah my family is a shit show right now, so I have to deal with this or I have to leave and drive two hours and then come back home to do deal with something when you expect me to be in class." This is consistent with the Reynolds- Dobbs et al. (2008) study, in which Black women tended to avoid opening up to others to avoid showing weakness or insecurities.

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There was also the expectation to have it all together all the time. Even if that was not the case. Sasha believes that it is this expectation that keeps Black women in bad situations longer than they should, because they are expected to endure to stick it out. Whether it a job, a relationship,

> "all toxic places that you can think about or even standing up for yourself you just take on more that than a man would do a white woman would do just because you're strong so there comes a place where you can still be strong and walk out of something and i think black women stay longer than they should".

Yara expanded that she thinks it is "competitive", the drive to not wanting anyone to see that they got to you. To exude strength. could be one of the detriments of the Superwoman Schema. Internalized suffering to portray strength is one of the characterizes of the Sisterella Complex (Abrams et al., 2018).

Trauma Bonding

When the group was asked, "do you feel as though there's some sort of trauma bonding that comes with going through this experience?" There was a resounding yes from all the participants. Sasha discussed the "beauty of shared experiences" that everything they endured during their time at Rowan brought the group closer together. All five participants considered themselves friends. However, even before developing a friendship Sasha said that there was comfort from just sitting across the classroom from someone who looked like her. This bonding surpassed graduation year. Of the five participants four were alumni from the Class of 2020. The alumni participants looked out for Issa helping her through classroom obstacles that they had already overcome. Shonda added that assistantships also created this bond.

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When asked, "Do you think that you all being WOC (Women of Color) was an added piece to that, or did you think that you had that relationship with your white counterparts as well?"

> "I'm trying to envision my classes and I'm like who was white and a woman in my classroom like I had to think about it because automatically the people that I attached myself to were women of color. There's just such a safe place when you just see someone that looks like you especially when being in a program where most of your professors are white even if they were women, they were still white women, you just automatically attach yourself to that. Like I completely forgot about other people."

These women sought each other out because of their shared identities. They found comfort surrounding themselves with people who looked like them and understood their experiences. The support that they had found with each other improved their experience at Rowan University and helped them cope with their stress.

Coping with Stress

Some of the traditional coping mechanisms for the Superwoman Schema are drinking and overeating (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). This rings true with the participants. Sasha immediately mentioned going to get margaritas after work. Issa said that eating was her coping mechanism. The one coping mechanism they had in common was venting. "Sometimes I need to vocalize it to move on from it," Amanda said.

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"Monkey See Monkey Do"

When asked, how did you see the women (mothers, grandmothers) in your life cope with stress? All five participants voiced that they would never know their mothers or influential women in their lives were stressed to begin with. "My mom hid it from us. She really didn't want us to know she was going through with something until something traumatic happened." Issa explained. The other four participants all gave similar anecdotes of their mother's hiding the fact that they were struggling. Whether it be from grief, financially, or personally they kept it close to the vest. "Monkey see monkey do, right?" Sasha said, "So that's what I grew up seeing so that's what I do. Thankfully because of education, that's the difference, I know those things are not good for your mental health. You're ignoring things that's going to show up somewhere else in another form somehow." Those other forms are the previously mentioned coping mechanisms. It set the standard that you must not let anyone know what you are going through, that you must appear to have it together at all times.

An interesting takeaway came from Shonda who is biracial with a white mother. She explained that it is always been easier for her mother to wear her stress plainly. That it was acceptable. However, when Shonda was stressed, she was always perceived as angry even when she was not, at home and at work. "I've seen that play out in work, my white male supervisor sees that I'm stressed, and I know that it's a different reaction than my white counterpart who is a white woman and is always wearing stress on her face"

This comparison of white women and Black women expressing stress and frustration continued later in the discussion. Amanda expressed that "it's interesting when

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we have a face, or our eyebrows are up [they say] 'oh she's angry' but if it's a white woman it's 'she's having a day'. Like why can't we have them [days]?" The participants explained that wearing a mask, pretending to have it all together, pretending that things do not get them is not just to exude strength but it is a shield from microaggressions and being perceived as aggressive in the mostly white spaces they inhabit.

The Pros and Cons of Being a Superwoman

There was not an overwhelming amount of response for the pros for being a seen as a Superwoman. Sasha said that everyone wants to be seen as strong and that she will still describe herself as strong Black woman. However, she explained that depending on the circumstance and context it may not be received as a compliment but "internally I think of myself as a strong Black woman". The group all nodded or voiced their agreement.

When it came to the cons of being a Superwoman the group had a lot to say. First, Issa expressed that it was detrimental to be seen as strong all the time, because would be moments when she was not. She felt like the strong Black-woman identity minimized the real stressors in her life. Sasha agreed,

> "I think the thing with that [Issa's comment] is that is dismisses so much more of
> what you are. Yes, I'm strong, yes, I'm Black, but I'm so much more and it gives
> you this expectations I think Black women already think that you need to show up
> places and be whole and be complete and it automatically forces you to be in this
> space that you have to be like I can't break down because I'm already being
> viewed in this way. It just adds an automatic stressor like without it being said
> like that's a loaded statement um especially from who it's coming from."

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It becomes especially stressful when you do not feel strong, and people are continuously saying that you are. Issa talked about trying to advocate for herself. Telling people that she was struggling when no one could see it, no one believed her because she was still showing up in the spaces she was expected to and still being perceived as a strong Black woman. Sasha added that it is about being seen as strong and after being told and expected to be a Superwoman no one sees you as anything else. Even if you are showing weakness, they won't let the image of you in their own heads be disrupted.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Summary of Study

As previously mentioned, schemas are the way humans internally view themselves in relation to the world around them (Allen et al., 2019), they assist in creating coping mechanisms. For African American or Black women, the Superwoman Schema (SWS) has become a particular coping mechanism to aid in the daily battle against discrimination and microaggressions.

The Superwoman shows strength in adversity (Abrams et al., 2014). She stands up for herself, helps take care of others, but never asks for help herself (Corbin et al., 2018 & Woods- Giscombé, 2010). Woods-Giscombé's (2010) qualitative study found two themes, the Superwoman feels obligated "to manifest strength and suppress emotions" and to be resistant "to being vulnerable or dependent," (p. 672). African American or Black women who identify with the superwoman schema mentally self-isolate in fear that no one understands how they feel (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). They bottle things up and avoid public displays of emotion because they believe it is a "sign of weakness."

The Superwoman s Schema aids in examining the particular way African American or Black women handle stress by looking at it through a cultural lens (Allen et al., 2019). The Superwoman constantly wears a mask of strength to hide trauma and physical or emotional pain (Abram et al., 2018). The Superwoman "has it all together" all the time and she can "do it all" (Corbin et al, 2018). African American or Black women

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believe that being strong was just part of what made them a woman, it was a part of an African American or Black woman's life (Allen et al., 2019). It is that persistent need to be strong that labeled SWS as a form of "psychological androgyny" meaning that mentally African American or Black women take on typically masculine traits such as resiliency, assertiveness, strength, and independence (Allen et al., 2019).

A focus group was held with five participants, all African American or Black Women who held graduate assistantships will attaining their M.A in Rowan University's Higher Education program. The participants were asked to share their experiences with stress and how they coped with it. Their responses were consistent with previous studies on the effects of the SWS. The need to exude strength, to have it together all the time, to not exhibit vulnerability.

Findings

An interesting finding during the course of this study was the comradery Black and African American women found within each other. The five participants were all friends to some degree, having met through the program they became each other's support system. The foundation of that friendship was similar circumstance, their jobs and program, along with, their race and gender. This support was an additional coping mechanism that was not previously discussed in SWS research. The relationship of these woman gave unique insight into the research questions.

Recommendations for Future Practice

The compulsion to exude strength continues to plague African American and Black women who are alumni or earning their graduate degree at Rowan University. The Superwoman Schema was present in every participant's life.

My recommendation to Rowan would be to explore the benefits of an affinity organization or space for women of color enrolled in the Master's in Higher Education program. Although this group of women found each other, I believe that the creation of this space would be beneficial. Not only will is create a space for emotional and academic support, but it could also serve as a networking opportunity. Perhaps with a faculty advisor who is also a higher education professional as well as a woman of color.

Recommendation for Future Research

My recommendation for future research would be a needs assessment for this affinity space. The researcher should explore the impact of a mentorship programming for women of color in graduate programs. As well as for professional women of color, staff, and faculty members. It is my assumption that the issues raised in this study are not specific to alumni and graduate students. It would be my hypothesis that African American or Black women in different areas of higher education have similar experiences and in turn, would benefit from an affinity space.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Hello,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Corrine Smith, and I am a second-year graduate student in Rowan University's Higher Education Administration program. I am reaching out to ask if you would be interested in being a part of the focus group for my study entitled "The Effects of the Superwoman Schema on African American Women Receiving their Graduate Degree at Rowan University While Also Holding an Assistantship.". You are being asked to participate because you are either currently enrolled in a graduate program at Rowan University or you graduated from a Rowan University graduate program in May 2020. Focus groups are expected to last between an hour to an hour and a half and I would be happy to work around your schedule. A Doodle poll will be sent to try find a time that works for everyone. If you do not wish to be interviewed for this study, feel free to disregard this email.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to expand Wood-Giscombé' s research by examining the perceptions of the impact of the Superwoman Schema on African American or Black graduate students through focus groups.

Thank you in advance for your consideration, and if you know anyone who you think would be a good fit for this study, please feel free to forward them this email or send me their information.

Have a wonderful day,

Corrine Smith

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Andrew Tinnin

Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study.

Before you agree, the investigator must tell you about

- (i) the purposes, procedures, and duration of the research.
- (ii) any procedures which are experimental;
- (iii) any reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, and benefits of the research;
- (iv) any potentially beneficial alternative procedures or treatments; and
- (v) how confidentiality will be maintained.

Where applicable, the investigator must also tell you about

- (i) any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs;
- (ii) the possibility of unforeseeable risks;
- (iii) circumstances when the investigator may halt your participation;
- (iv) any added costs to you;
- (v) what happens if you decide to stop participating;
- (vi) when you will be told about new findings which may affect your willingness to participate; and
- (vii) how many people will be in the study.

If you agree to participate, you must be given a signed copy of this document and a written summary of the research.

You may contact Corrine Smith at smithc97@rowan.edu any time you have questions about the research.

You may contact Andrew Tinnin at tinin@rowan.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research subject or what to do if you are injured.

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop.

Appendix C

Focus Group Topics

1. When I say the words stress, what does it mean for you?

2. What causes stress in your life?

3. How do you cope with stress?

4. How did you see the women (mothers, grandmothers) in your life cope with stress?

5. Have Woods-Giscombé you ever heard the term Strong Black Woman/Black Superwoman?

6. What is a Strong Black Woman/Black Superwoman?

    a. What are her characteristics?

    b. How did they develop?

7. Is being a Strong Black Woman/ Black Superwoman a good thing?

8. Is there anything bad about being a Strong Black woman?

Appendix D

Demographic Survey

Thank you for wanting to be a part of this study! The purpose of the demographic survey below is to show the variety of participants that although they will have two main things in common (race and education) that there is diversity in that population. Please fill out and submit this survey prior to attending the focus group.

1. Name:

2. How old are you?

3. How do you identify?

    a. Female

    b. Male

    c. Non-Binary

    d. Other

4. Do you identify as African American and/or Black?

    a. Yes

    b. No

5. What year are you in your graduate program?

    a. First year

    b. Second year

    c. Recently graduated (Class of 2020)

6. What graduate program are you currently/were you enrolled in?

7. Where is/was your assistantship?