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Examining the Intergenerational Transmission of the Strong Black Woman Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intergenerational transmission of the strong Black woman (SBW) narrative between Black mothers and daughters, exploring how this transmission contributes to both resilience and psychological stress. Utilizing a collective case study design with 10 participants (5 mother-daughter dyads), the study reveals how the SBW narrative, encompassing pride in identity, community support, and survival lessons, is perpetuated within Black families. It also delves into strategies Black women believe can facilitate healing from generational trauma, emphasizing changing the narrative and fostering new attitudes toward self-care. The findings underscore the importance of utilizing culturally responsive systemic approaches to explore how generational narratives shape identity and mental health. These insights highlight the need for understanding and addressing the complexities of generational trauma and cultural narratives in mental health practices.

As a historical trauma, defined as a massive traumatic event experienced by a group that impacts multiple lifespans and generations (Brave Heart 2003), slavery has given way to generational wounds that can still be felt today. Wilkins et al. (2013) described this phenomenon as residual effects of slavery (RES) to depict the lasting impact of perpetuated racism on generations of Black Americans. Akin to RES, the broader phenomenon of intergenerational trauma has been increasingly discussed in the literature. Initially explored among Holocaust survivors and their descendants, intergenerational trauma refers to the impact caregivers' psychological distress and maladaptive behaviors resulting from trauma of their children (Phipps and Degges-White 2014). More recently, scholars have utilized interchangeable terms such as transgenerational or generational trauma to explore and discuss the phenomenon among other marginalized populations including indigenous (Marsh et al. 2018) and Black (Petion et al. 2023) communities. As Petion et al. (2023) note, scholars are increasingly examining social and epigenetic

mechanisms of trauma transmission; however, there remains a gap in understanding the vast experiences of trauma transmission within Black communities.

Building on the concepts of RES and generational trauma, DeGruy (2017) coined the term post traumatic slave syndrome (PTSS) to begin conceptualizing the enduring psychological and societal impacts of slavery and systemic oppression on Black communities. Proponents of PTSS suggest that there is a lingering traumatic impact of slavery and the resulting dissolution of African culture, manifesting as symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; e.g., angry outbursts, difficulty concentrating, and hypervigilance; Hardy 2013). In line with PTSS theory, historically rooted stereotypes of Black women such as the angry Black woman, jezebel, and mammy have persisted as forms of disenfranchisement and societal control (Collins 2000; Geyton et al. 2020). Among these, the strong Black woman (SBW) narrative has emerged

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from historical depictions of Black women as innately strong, self-reliant caretakers, a survival narrative forged in response to systematic racism and sexism (Geyton et al. 2020; Woods-Giscombé 2010). Over time, this narrative has been framed as a dual-edged sword, fostering empowerment, identity, and pride while contributing to poor mental and physical health (Abrams et al. 2019; Geyton et al. 2020; Nelson et al. 2016; Watson-Singleton 2017). This dual role reflects the complexity of the SBW narrative as both a cultural strength and a source of psychological burden.

When conceptualized as a generationally transmitted response to systemic trauma, it becomes necessary for practitioners to further understand this transmission process to more appropriately work with Black women who ascribe to the SBW narrative. However, there remains a gap in the literature examining how the SBW narrative is intergenerationally transmitted between Black mothers and daughters, particularly regarding its varied functions and impacts. As such, this study explores how Black mothers and daughters understand, transmit, and adapt the SBW narrative, while also exploring efforts to transform harmful generational messages. By analyzing this intergenerational process, we aim to illuminate its influence on identity, resilience, and well-being across generations, offering insights to support healing and growth in therapeutic work with families.

1.1 | Historical Subjugation of Black Women

The subjugation of Black women in the United States began with the transatlantic slave trade, in which an estimated 8 to 15 million African individuals became property of the highest bidder (DeGruy 2017; Graff 2011; Iliffe 2017). No longer seen as human beings, Africans were whipped, imprisoned, and humiliated as they were forced into labor (Penrice 2021). In this dehumanization, African women were seen as physically and psychologically strong, capable of both intense manual labor while simultaneously caring for children. Such beliefs in Black women's innate strength have transcended generations, reinforced by legal and social systems designed to control their environments, bodies, and employment. For example, immediately following the abolition of slavery, Black codes were established to criminalize the behavior of newly freed Black individuals, limiting civil rights such as voting and serving on juries (Black Codes 2015; Penrice 2021). These codes perpetuated the conditions of slavery, positioning Black individuals as inferior laborers and subjecting them to harsh punishments for minor infractions (Woodward 1955). Although the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and subsequent amendments offered some protection, the introduction of Jim Crow laws—such as literacy tests for Black men to vote and laws banning Black people from sharing neighborhoods, schools, and public spaces with White people (Jim Crow Laws 2015)—solidified racial segregation and reinforced the economic and social disenfranchisement of Black communities (DeGruy 2017).

During the Jim Crow era, Black women were subjected to both physical and sexual violence, as well as systemic efforts to control their reproductive rights. Sexual assault was often used as a means to assert White dominance (King 2014), while programs such as Margaret Sanger's Negro Project sought to control Black motherhood under the guise of addressing poverty

and maternal health (Edmonds-Cady 2017). In their interviews with 92 African Americans, 62 of whom were women, raised in the Jim Crow South, Thompson-Miller and Picca (2017) identified key themes that illuminated participants' experiences: the normalization of assaults against Black women, avoidance of Whites, and the contested morality of Black women as their virtue was forcibly taken. The researchers likened the socialization of children in the Jim Crow era to PTSD symptoms, such as avoidance, hyperarousal, and shame (Thompson-Miller and Picca 2017). These findings illustrate the deep psychological wounds left by Jim Crow, which were passed down through generations as coping mechanisms such as avoidance and hypervigilance. These attacks on Black women's bodies and character were justified by the prevailing narrative that Black women were inherently strong and resilient and able to endure these abuses without protection or care.

This exploitation continued into the 20th century with the rise of mass incarceration. As Michelle Alexander (2011) argues in *The New Jim Crow*, the prison system disproportionately affects Black communities, with Black men incarcerated at significantly higher rates than their White counterparts. This not only mirrors the racial caste system of Jim Crow but also places the burden of caretaking on Black women. Left to support their families financially and emotionally, Black women were again expected to demonstrate resilience, often at the cost of their own mental and emotional well-being. Today, matriarchal images depict Black women as domineering and overpowering figures who are threats to traditional family structures (Dixon 2017; Moynihan 1965). Such narratives have historically framed Black women as resilient caretakers, reinforcing the idea that they must bear the weight of familial and societal challenges without showing vulnerability or seeking support. These ideals have shaped and reinforced the SBW narrative that emerged from these historical conditions and continues to shape the lives of many Black women today.

1.2 | The SBW Narrative

The SBW narrative, stemming from historical images of enslaved African women as innately strong to rationalize their mistreatment (Geyton et al. 2020), has evolved into a schema in which emotional suppression is utilized to care for others and achieve success (Abrams et al. 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007). Described as a socialization process into Black womanhood, (Perez et al. 2023; Watson and Hunter 2016), this narrative has been rejected, embraced, and redefined by Black women over time but is often utilized as an empowerment strategy to confront gendered racism (Abrams et al. 2014; Donovan and West 2015; Woods-Giscombé 2010; Woods-Giscombe et al. 2019). Earlier explorations into Black women's conceptualizations of the SBW schema include Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2007) inquiry into how the societal expectation of strength fosters self-silencing, emotional suppression, and the internalization of distress, contributing to an increased risk of depression.

Continuing Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2007) identification of SBW characteristics, Woods-Giscombé (2010) explored how African American women perceive the superwoman (i.e., SBW) role and identified key characteristics including an obligation to manifest

strength, suppress emotions, resist vulnerability, succeed despite limited resources, and help others. Abrams et al. (2014) found similar characteristics, identifying four key themes of the SBW narrative in focus groups with Black women: the embodiment and display of multiple forms of strength, self/ethnic pride despite intersectional oppression, embracing multiple roles often at self-sacrifice, and reliance on religion/spirituality. Nelson et al. (2016) further explored Black women's perceptions of the SBW narrative, finding themes of independence, familial care, hard work, high achievement, overcoming adversity, and emotional containment. A majority (77%) of participants identified with the SBW role, with attitudes toward the narrative ranging from rejection to ambivalence and personal redefinition. Influenced by factors like mother-daughter relationships and socio-demographic differences, the research demonstrates a collective identification of key characteristics of the SBW narrative as well as its influence on Black women's identities.

While the SBW schema has been used as a mechanism to cope with and persevere through intersectional oppression (Donovan and West 2015; Woods-Giscombe 2010), it has also been linked to significant psychological and physical health challenges for Black women. Studies indicate that chronic stress, compounded by self-silencing, emotional suppression and a felt need to display strength, is associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, and low self-compassion (Abrams et al. 2019; Volpe et al. 2024; Watson and Hunter 2016). These mental health concerns often lead to maladaptive stress responses, such as emotional eating, physical inactivity, and poor sleep, which increase risks for hypertension, obesity, and other chronic health conditions (Perez et al. 2023; Woods-Giscombe et al. 2019). Specifically, Perez et al. (2023) found that while emotional suppression and the obligation to help others was negatively associated with psychological distress, prolonged adherence to the SBW schema intensified hypertension risk among Black women. Together, these findings illustrate the double-edged sword the SBW schema wields, fostering resilience while encouraging self-sacrifice, posing significant risks to overall health.

1.2.1 | Black Motherhood and the SBW Narrative

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Bowers and Yehuda's (2016) research on intergenerational transmission can help explain the role of Black mothers in passing down the SBW narrative through observation and imitation in mother-daughter relationships. The transmission of cultural values and identity, evolving since slavery (Collins 1987, 2000; Iliffe 2017; Mitchem 2002), positions Black mothers as symbols of power and resilience against oppressive structures despite the mental and physical challenges of gendered racism (Essed 1991; Geyton et al. 2020; Hall 2018). These experiences are taught to daughters, emphasizing self-sufficiency, education, and community (Goosby et al. 2012; Hall 2018). This transmission process exemplifies gendered racial socialization—a process in which Black families provide varying messages to their daughters and sons based on perceptions of the intersectional challenges each gender may face (Brown et al. 2017; Leath et al. 2023; Thomas and King 2007). Researchers have found that the gendered racial socialization of Black girls involves transmitting values such

as self-determination and reliance, respect, spirituality, racial pride, family responsibility, and the importance of educational and career success (Brown et al. 2017; Leath et al. 2023; Oshin and Milan 2019; Thomas and King 2007). These messages help shape identity and promote resilience but may come at the cost of emotional challenges such as self-silencing and heightened stress (Collins 2000; Leath et al. 2023; Winchester et al. 2021).

Proponents of PTSS theory may frame this particular experience as a generational trauma due to its roots in resilience against historic and perpetuated oppression and disenfranchisement. That is, the messages of strength and independence embedded within gendered-racial socialization of the SBW narrative reinforce survival skills deemed necessary to navigate the unique adversities Black women face, but they may also perpetuate a cycle of internalized oppression (i.e., self-silencing). Further, proponents of PTSS would speculate that because the SBW narrative has, in large part, emerged as a response to the historical and perpetuated trauma of slavery, the survival skills transmitted may be an accommodation and enactment of perpetuated maladaptive symptoms such as hypervigilance, avoidance, and self-destructive behavior (DeGruy 2017). Perceived as a legacy of survival and a significant psychological stressor, further research examining the dual narrative of the SBW as both a gendered racial socialization process and generational trauma within Black communities is warranted.

1.3 | The Present Study

Black communities have depended on Black women as caretakers and purveyors of culture (Collins 2000). This has led Black women to develop coping mechanisms for enduring the dual burdens of this role and the persistent oppression of gendered racism, a struggle reflected in the SBW narrative. Mothers who embody this narrative model know how to interact with the world in a similar manner, a clear example of intergenerational transmission (Bowers and Yehuda 2016). Building on earlier research into the SBW narrative and the socialization of Black women and girls (Abrams et al. 2019; Hall 2018; Leath et al. 2023), this collective case study seeks to expand the literature on the socialization of the SBW narrative within the framework of generational trauma. Further, the study explores how participants perceive their ability to heal from the harmful impacts of the SBW narrative. The following research questions guided the current study:

1. How is the Strong Black Woman narrative transmitted between Black mothers and daughters?
2. How do Black women believe they can heal from harmful generational messages?

1.4 | Method

1.4.1 | Researcher Positionality

Qualitative researchers engage in intensive experiences with participants and can easily interpret data from their lens, oftentimes requiring researchers to bracket their assumptions and biases

(Creswell and Creswell 2018; Hays and Singh 2012). As such, it is necessary for researchers to take stock of their positionality (i.e., social locations and identities) when engaging in the research process. The first author is a Black, cisgender woman who chose to examine the research topic due to her own experiences as a Black woman. Raised by a Black, cisgender woman, the first author identifies with the SBW narrative and has recognized characteristics of the narrative (e.g., invulnerability, strength; Geyton et al. 2020) within her mother and other influential Black women in her life. The second author identifies as cisgender Black woman, who was reared by a Black woman. She learned early in childhood that the SBW narrative was a normal and expected part of being a Black woman. Both authors' research focuses on the identities of Black women and how they navigate the world, which include oppressive and fortifying experiences.

Similar to other qualitative scholars, the authors followed Morrow (2005) reflexivity and trustworthiness criteria that allowed them to reflect on their perceptions and experiences at the beginning, during, and at the culmination of the study. Specifically, the authors discussed their interactions with the SBW narrative and how it influenced their own lives, where it showed up, and how it came to be. The authors also discussed generational trauma and post-traumatic slave syndrome and how it influences the Black community based on their own experiences and knowledge base. Consequently, the authors expected that the participants would be impacted by generational experiences in the Black community related to past trauma and the SBW narrative. Based on the assumptions of the collective case study, the researchers are critical partners in the research process and as such they bring their knowledge and identities into the analysis process, which influences how the participants' lived experiences are derived. The authors' understandings of SBW and generational trauma allowed them to analyze the data through a lens that illuminated the distinct and nuanced experiences of the participants.

1.4.2 | Recruitment and Participants

The initial steps in case study research are to define the case and establish the boundaries of the case (Prosek and Gibson 2021).

As such, to examine the transmission of the SBW narrative between Black mothers and daughters, the researcher defined the case as the mother and daughter pair or relationship. The boundaries of the identified case were as follows: (a) the pair must identify their relationship with one another as a mother and daughter relationship and (b) both mother and daughter must identify as Black women.

After obtaining approval from William and Mary's Institutional Review Board, the researcher utilized convenience and snowball sampling to recruit a sample of 10 (five mothers and five daughters) self-identified, Black or African American mothers and daughters 25 to 66 years old. Recruitment was conducted through professional listservs, community-based social media sites, and other social media platforms. Individuals who volunteered to participate were required to recruit their biological mother or daughter to participate as well. This approach resulted in five cases (i.e., mother and daughter pairs). Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic description of each participant and case.

1.4.3 | Measures and Procedure

Once participants consented to the research study, they were engaged in an audio recorded semi-structured, interactive interview via teleconferencing (i.e., Zoom) and phone. Interactive interviewing involves an open dialogue between the researcher and participant (McMahan and Rogers 1994) and aligns with the case study methodology which encourages researchers to engage in a fluid interview process (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Three semi-structured, interactive interviews (i.e., data points) were conducted within each case: an interview with the mother, an interview with the daughter, and an interview with both mother and daughter. Capturing these three data points allowed the researchers to better understand participants' rich experiences of the transmission of messages through the mother, daughter relationship. Specifically, the researchers were better able to (a) triangulate data within each case, (b) adequately answer the *how* questions which case studies are suited for, and (c) capture the experience of

TABLE 1 | Demographic characteristics of participants.

Case	Pseudonym	Occupation	Age decade	Region	# of parents	Parenting partner
Case 1	Charise	Retired educator	60s	Northeast	2	Yes
	Aniya	Administrator	30s	South	2	N/A
Case 2	Tamika	Program Assistant	60s	Northeast	2	Yes
	Sophia	Banking	30s	Northeast	2	No
Case 3	Mildred	Retired	60s	South	2	No
	Grace	Consultant	30s	South	1	Yes
Case 4	Debra	Associate Director	50s	South	2	Yes
	Sydney	School Counselor	20s	South	2	N/A
Case 5	Brenda	Student	60s	Midwest	2	No
	Briana	Supervisor	30s	Northeast	1	Yes

each participant separately and in relation to their mother or daughter. Demographic data were collected at the beginning of each individual interview, and a description of the SBW narrative as outlined in research was provided at the beginning of each dyadic interview. There was no predetermined order in which the interviews took place; however, most cases followed the following interview sequence: mother interviewed first, daughter interviewed second, and dyad interview completed last. In case three, the daughter was interviewed before the mother, and in case five, the dyad interview was completed first, followed by the mother's interview, and then the daughter's interview. Questions from the individual interviews included the following: "What did you learn about being a Black woman from your mother and/or grandmother?" and "What messages have been passed down between the women of your family?" A separate interview protocol was utilized for the dyadic interview. Questions included "Do either of you identify with the description of the strong Black woman narrative provided?"

1.4.4 | Data Analysis

The primary investigator utilized McLeod's (2001) eight step approach to qualitative data analysis. Before engaging in the formal data analysis process, the researcher utilized a transcription service, Rev., to transcribe the data to text. During this process, all names were changed, and participants were identified by pseudonyms. Because case study data analysis is convergent and all sources of data are analyzed simultaneously (Prosek and Gibson 2021), all transcripts were analyzed simultaneously. Each text was coded to highlight critical ideas and make meaning of participants' descriptions of their experience. From these codes, the researchers identified patterns and themes within each case (McLeod 2001; Stake 1995; Yin 2009). Specifically, the case study analysis technique of pattern matching was utilized in which the researcher identifies patterns within the data that are based on predicted patterns of the examined phenomenon (e.g., the SBW narrative; Yin 2009). After analysis of each case was completed, the researchers performed a cross-case synthesis by comparing the findings of each case study to ascertain patterns across cases (Yin 2009).

1.4.5 | Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to establish trustworthiness throughout the study. First, the interactive interviewing technique (McMahan and Rogers 1994) was utilized for member checking and to engage in continuous dialogue with participants to ensure that their true meanings are being represented (Guba and Lincoln 1989). Second, the primary investigator utilized a peer consultant to remain accountable to the credibility and ethical validation of the participants' voices and the research study (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The peer consulted was an experienced qualitative researcher who is also a Black woman. An audit trail was also utilized to document the data collection and analysis process (Hays and Singh 2012; Whittemore et al. 2001). Additionally, the primary investigator engaged in triangulation of data by utilizing the individual and dyadic interviews as separate data points in the analysis process. Lastly, the primary

investigator utilized a reflexive journal to bridle and document the impact of the research process on the researcher (Hays and Singh 2012). Due to the researchers' positionality, it was imperative that any reflection incorporated bridling as they explored how they were making meaning of the data in relation to their identities.

1.5 | Results

The cross-case synthesis, which allows for more robust data and potentially transferable findings (Yin 2009), resulted in four themes that addressed the research questions. Three themes emerged in response to research question one: pride in identity, it takes a village, and lessons for survival. One theme and one sub theme emerged in response to research question two: changing the narrative and new messages about self-care, respectively.

1.5.1 | Theme 1: Pride in Identity

All participants discussed their love of being Black and the messages they received from their mothers about having pride in their identity. Participants from cases one, three, and four shared explicit messages they received about having pride in their identities as Black women. For example, Charise from case one notes that she "wanted them [her children] to be proud of who they are, proud of where they came from, and they had to know where they [are] from." Her daughter, Aniya, confirms receiving this message from her mother through representation of Blackness in toys and books, "So Cinderella was Black. All my books are Black...It was important to her that White was right was not a thing. It was Black and deep Black was the mantra that was in my household." Further, Grace from case three reflected on the messages she received from her mother about their identity, "She taught me that being a Black woman is such a privilege." Similarly, during the dyadic interview Sydney remarked,

...that's one thing that I think gives me pride as a Black woman, that even though we've always had things... We may have had more going on for us than most, we've still stood the test of time and we're still here.

To stand the test of time, participants also identified characteristics within themselves and the women they have learned from that elicit pride in their identities as Black women. These characteristics, which align with the SBW narrative, include strength and perseverance, independence, and invulnerability. For example, Tamika from case two reflected on the hardships her mother endured and remarked, "So I know my mama was a strong woman." Tamika's daughter, Sophia, also reflected on her mother's work ethic, "my mom was always at work," and noted that because of this modeled behavior, "I got a good work ethic." Similarly, Mildred from case three asserted that despite her mother's employment status, she was a model of a strong woman, "we never looked down at...her because she never worked...Because she was such a strong, strong woman."

Dyads also commented on the independence strength elicits. For example, Debra commented on independence as a characteristic of Black women, “I think it is definitely part of being a Black woman,” and noted her own assertion of independence, “sometimes I have the notion that, you know what? I could just do this. I could just take care of myself.” Sydney, Debra’s daughter, confirmed receiving messages about independence from Debra, “She will like be moving stuff and doing all these things and I’m like, ‘Can you sit down? We are here, we can help you.’” Further, reflecting on the modeled characteristic of invulnerability, Sophia from case one stated, “We don’t talk about emotions,” and discussed her embarrassment when she showed emotion to a colleague, “I kept apologizing.” Lastly, Brenda from case five discussed the lesson she learned from her mother, “not to be crying.” She remarked, “I learned to be strong and I hold it in...she would want me to fight now, she wouldn’t want me to cry.” So, although all participants expressed a pride in their identity as Black women, many also recognized the potential detriment of transmitted characteristics of hyper-independence and invulnerability.

1.5.2 | Theme 2: It Takes a Village

It can be speculated that the messages surrounding invulnerability are a byproduct of the caretaker role endorsed by the SBW schema. The theme *It Takes a Village* encompasses messages participants received about caretaking. As one aspect of caretaking, participants from all cases discussed their experiences of the role of the caretaker. For example, Charise reflected on how her mother modeled caretaking, “being a mother of four, we wanted for nothing...it seemed like whatever we wanted, she gave us.” Charise’s daughter also reflected on her grandmother’s matriarchal presence in their “woman-dominant family,” noting that, “My grandmother was the head of the family.”

Additionally, Mildred from case three framed the caretaking role as one that comes with a closeness between a mother and her daughter,

I loved how I grew up...I loved having that relationship. I loved having that accessibility, knowing that she was always there, as she was always a sounding board...and knowing that...This sounds selfish, but kind of knowing that her life was dedicated to raising us.

Furthermore, as a modeled message she appreciated, “I wanted that for my girls,” Mildred actively modeled this for her daughters,

I worked part-time, and I worked in the school system, so they’re in their school. They were with me. They came to school with me. They didn’t have to go to childcare. They stayed in my classroom until I was done, and then, they came home with me.

Participants across all cases also discussed the notion of other-mothering and being raised by a “village.” Charise from case

one explicitly recognized, “my children was raised by the village.” Aniya confirmed her mother’s use of this village, “I feel like I have multiple mothers...my mother has two sisters. So, they think they’re my mother as well.” Similarly, Brenda from case five noted that her “aunty raised [her] mama” and reflected on her own close relationship with her aunt, “She taught me as a little girl she loved me, she showed me so much. All of us, she would hug and kiss us. I couldn’t wait to see her coming... She was really sweet.” From this, Brenda reflected on her own act of other-mothering through adoption, “They didn’t have no structure, because they was put in foster homes, until I decided, you’re not going to another foster home, you are staying here. I adopted two together”.

Participants from cases two, four, and five also discussed the sacrifice that often accompanies the caretaking role. For example, Brenda reflected on her mother’s acts of self-sacrifice, “Whether she was sick or in pain...she was always listening and wanting to help us and trying to make escape for us, and trying to do everything she could to do for us.” Furthermore, while confirming she identified with the SBW narrative, Brenda explained her habit of putting others first, “Because that’s what I am, that I’ve always put other people first and I am very caring and taking care of everybody else before myself.” Briana, her daughter, also emphasized how she puts her family first,

So in doing all that, naturally, myself [comes] after I get everything else done, or I will feel like I’m not relaxed until my kids are taken care of and everything around me is good, then I can chill out.

Whether they reflected on their own care for others or how others have cared for them, all participants confirmed the salience of the caretaker role as an aspect of the SBW narrative. However, participants noted that with this role comes a sacrifice of self.

1.5.3 | Theme 3: Lessons for Survival

Participants from all cases discussed protective messages they have received and transmitted to combat oppressive structures. General protective messages were about protecting oneself from racism and sexism. For example, Charise from case one explained the lessons she has had to instill in her children and grandchildren for their protection.

It’s like when my parents will tell us, when we go down south, there are certain things we can’t do. Unfortunately, we’re still having to talk with our children on how to behave, how to behave when you are driving a car, how to behave when you are with your friends, that they have to be careful with everything...And you don’t want to teach them fear, but you have to teach them awareness...And in teaching them awareness, you are putting fear in them...So as a Black mother, it’s teaching them all the things that you know is not good for their psyche, but it’s necessary for them to live on.

Additionally, Debra from case four explained the lessons she's tried to teach her children, "I always let my children know as...people of color, that the world wasn't always going to treat them fair." Her daughter, Sydney reflected on her mother's use of toughness as a teaching method, "But I feel like the toughness is never necessarily taken to heart because they're very tough on you and it's more so like a tool to get you to like learn quickly."

Other protective messages were more specific lessons about financial responsibility and the meaning of education. Sophia from case two explained, "So my mom was really responsible financially and taught me how to balance a checkbook and pay the bill and that stuff at a young age." Similarly, Mildred from case three discussed the lessons she is passing to her daughters about financial responsibility.

We just had this discussion about wealth, right? Saving for a house, putting more into your retirement account every month, so that when you retire, you have an extra amount in there because the state will match it. Things that were never said to me because my parents were immigrants.

Additionally, Charise noted the influence of messages about education on the entire family, "We're a family of educators, she's instilled in us education." Similarly, Tamika from case two explained,

my mom, when we were in school, she always told her, 'You put your education first'.

Because I had friends at my age, had children before they graduated from school. And she would always tell you, 'You got plenty of time for that'.

In navigating multiple marginalized identities, participants explained how critical it is to receive and transmit messages about how to safely and successfully navigate the world as Black women. However, in teaching lessons about survival, some participants questioned the potential hypervigilance they are perpetuating throughout generations.

1.5.4 | Theme 4: Changing the Narrative

Although participants highlighted the positive and protective messages they received from their mothers, many also recognized that some messages, such as invulnerability, can be harmful. Participants from cases one, two, four, and five specifically discussed the awareness and intentional change of harmful generational messages as crucial for generational healing. For example, during the dyadic interview, Sophia from case two reflected on her motivation to make intentional changes in generational messages,

And so I think just listening to my mom say that, I think that is why we do this, this new generation, we have to because we're not trying to let this stuff

repeat...One of the reasons being is because of the trauma, the things that we know have happened in both of our families that we don't want to impact the family that we're creating.

Additionally, Briana from case five reflected on her changed behavior as a parent,

What makes me different in my parenting is that I do make mistakes. I said I wouldn't yell, but I find myself yelling at my boys all the time, but I had to be okay with 'okay, I don't need to yell'. I can talk more and if I mess up and if I say a cuss word or something, I go back and I apologize...

Participants from cases one and two also discussed the salience of changing communication patterns to resist transmitting maladaptive messages and intentionally change harmful narratives. For example, Charise noted the changed message about communication she is now passing to her children and grandchildren.

I stress the fact that have more communication with your children...I can say that I could have communicated more with my children, which I did not learn from my parents, other than asking questions, how was your day and things like that. But there are a lot of personal things that I feel that you can do with your children at an early age instead of waiting until they're young adults.

Additionally, in their dyadic interview, Sophia from case two commented on her mother's mantra of "family comes first," "And I think the way to heal from that is if you're going to have that mantra, then you got to add some more mantra to that, that address when there's harm and how we handle that." In agreement, Tamika asserted, "There could be some healing did on all us, but what we have to do as a family is really get together and talk more." Sophia added, "And so a part of doing that is setting better boundaries and not just acting like this stuff didn't happen and that it didn't impact us." From this, it can be gleaned that daughters are interrogating some of the messages they are receiving from their mothers and beginning to shift them toward healthier narratives. Part of this shift involves creating new messages about self care.

1.5.4.1 | New Messages About Self Care. In identifying harmful messages to change, participants from cases one, two, and four specifically discussed the messages they have received about not caring for themselves and having a stigma about mental health. In their dyadic interview, Aniya discussed the impact of being a SBW.

Well, I now have a chronic illness that is [exacerbated by] stress...And when I'm in pain, my mother will just say, "That's just stress. We need to calm down." I've been in the hospital. I've had surgical procedures as

a result of it. And unfortunately, that's usually my wake-up call. Hospital bills...and then I'll just ask one of my colleagues to bring my laptop to me so I can continue working.

Additionally, Sydney from case four explained how the SBW narrative can be harmful,

I guess it can be harmful in the sense of never wanting to be vulnerable or never wanting to be at rest...that goes into the...self-care thing where we just always drive ourselves to the ground and it's like, all right, we got to take a moment to step back from this.

Participants from cases one, two, four, and five explain the new messages about self-care they have adopted and will transmit to future generations. For example, Sophia from case two discussed efforts she has made to establish a new generational message of mental health care.

So the way I talk about emotions with my children is like, "It's okay to have them. Everybody has emotions and everybody has a range of emotions...It doesn't matter what emotion you have. That's fine. It's what you do with that emotion that matters. And so let's make sure that we do things with our emotions that don't harm ourselves or other people." And so I started teaching my children deep breathing and muscle relaxation and meditation probably since they were two.

Additionally, Brenda reflected on the impact of the SBW narrative and the change in caring for herself she is currently making,

I feel it impacted me to know now that since I've taken care of everyone since I've been in the eighth grade that now I feel like I need to take care of me now. So, it impacted me to help others, but to also stop at a point and look at what I need to do for myself and try to do the things that I want to enjoy for myself.

Participants of the present study expressed their pride in their identities as strong Black women; a pride that was instilled in them by their mothers and those who came before. As Sophia commented, "And that's one thing that I think gives me pride as a Black woman, that even though...we may have had more going on for us than most, we've still stood the test of time and we're still here." With this pride also comes a recognition of the detrimental effects the SBW narrative has on the minds, bodies, spirits, and relationships of Black women. Participants of the present study are redefining the SBW narrative to incorporate the pride and strength of their foremothers with the awareness of mental, physical, and relational health needs.

1.6 | Discussion

Analysis of findings across all cases resulted in four themes that answered the research questions. Participants described how they received and perpetuated direct and indirect messages about Black womanhood that aided in the transmission of the SBW narrative, reflecting core principles of gendered-racial socialization (Thomas and King 2007), intergenerational transmission (Bowers and Yehuda 2016), and social learning theory (Bandura 1977). Further, participants related their identities to the SBW narrative, identifying with traits such as strength, perseverance, independence, and invulnerability, as taught by their mothers. Participants discussed how these traits, central to the SBW narrative, often lead to perceived hyper-independence and emotional suppression as previously discussed in the literature (Abrams et al. 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007; Geyton et al. 2020). However, participants also expressed pride in their identity as Black women, another key aspect of the SBW narrative (Davis and Jones 2021; Geyton et al. 2020; Watson and Hunter 2016). Similar to previous research, these findings highlight the narrative's role in fostering cultural pride and resilience against adversity while also promoting self silencing (Abrams et al. 2019; Geyton et al. 2020; Woods-Giscombé 2010).

Caretaking, othermothering, and self-sacrifice also emerged as key aspects of the SBW experience, aligning with researcher's conceptions of the SBW narrative (Abrams et al. 2014; Nelson et al. 2016) and historical views on motherhood and the cultural importance of matriarchy in Black communities (Collins 2000; Dietrich 1975). Participants reflected on the power and significance of Black motherhood and their communal approach to child-rearing, practices rooted in African communalism, where families traditionally supported one another closely (Bell-Tolliver and Wilkerson 2011). African communalism is viewed as a condition for achieving personhood, experiencing dignity, creating one's autonomy, and demonstrating responsibility to the world (Menkiti 2004). These communal practices continued from the 17th century through the 20th century in which Black women often cared for children that were not their own (Hill 1971).

Building on this sense of community responsibility, participants highlighted the tendency of SBW to sacrifice personal wellness for others, illustrating another key aspect of the SBW narrative (Abrams et al. 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007; Collins 2000; Donovan and West 2015). While this communal responsibility has benefited the survival and resilience of Black communities; white, patriarchal, and individualistic cultural systems, which have been amplified as the standard and norm, have undermined the strength and positive impact of these uplifting practices. For instance, participants discussed the transmission of protective messages akin to teachings from the slavery era (Wilkins et al. 2013) about resisting oppression and maintaining safety, highlighting the critical caretaking task of teaching survival skills. These messages not only exemplify the generational transmission of strength and resistance but also protection and hypervigilance illustrating DeGruy's (2017) PTSS theory.

The traits identified by participants as representative of the SBW narrative (i.e., strength, independence, caretaking) highlight the deeply ingrained and perpetuated gendered-racial socialization practices between Black mothers and daughters as a historical response to navigating cultural trauma experiences (Moody and Lewis 2019). Participants discussed the need to make their children aware of their racial and gender identities as well as how the world may perceive these identities. Mothers highlighted that with this awareness, they must teach their children how to behave in various settings outside of the home for their protection. Protective behaviors such as financial responsibility and prioritizing education discussed by participants echo the SBW trait of self-sufficiency as a method to navigate oppressive structures. The lessons for survival highlighted in the present study are similar to Hall's (2018) observation that Black mothers often instill coping mechanisms in their daughters as protective strategies against the persistent threats of racism and sexism.

Such practices underscore how resilience and self-reliance are embedded within the socialization of Black women as essential survival tools that have been generationally transmitted in response to historical trauma. This perspective aligns with DeGruy's (2017) observation that symptoms of PTSS mirror those of PTSD, with hypervigilance recognized as a notable symptom in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association 2013). The strength and perseverance embodied by these traits is both empowering and indicative of a deep-seated survival instinct passed down across generations in response to the longstanding mistreatment of Black women. This lens suggests that the celebrated attributes of the SBW are not just cultural strengths but also markers of an ongoing and traumatic struggle against the enduring effects of systemic oppression, consistent with the principles of PTSS.

DeGruy (2017) postulates, however, that healing generational trauma is a generational process in which adults must capitalize on the function of modeling to exemplify success amidst a society that holds racist ideals. The theme of changing the narrative highlights how the participants of this study are modeling their own successes through intentional change and improved family communication. In this, participants from the present study also noted the necessity of overt messaging in alignment with changed (i.e., modeled) behaviors. As a salient aspect of changing oppressive narratives and modeling counter-narratives, participants identified general and specific communication about expressing emotions and mental healthcare as necessary for change and healing. Aligning with researchers' assertion that strong Black women sacrifice their wellbeing (Abrams et al. 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007), participants recognized difficulties in caring for themselves. Despite mental health stigma within Black communities (Fripp and Carlson 2017), participants noted their efforts toward generational healing by learning, creating, and transmitting new messages about mental health.

1.6.1 | Implications for Practice

Multiple implications for therapy practice can be gleaned from the present findings. First, there currently does not exist a

standard method of assessing the identification with and impact of the SBW narrative. The findings of this study provide preliminary guidelines (e.g., patterns of messaging) to assess the transmission of trauma within the context of the SBW narrative. In lieu of a standard assessment, mental health providers should listen for and consider familial messages about one's identity that have been internalized. Utilizing narrative family therapy techniques, such as the ones outlined by Suddeath et al. (2017), can serve as both assessment and intervention tools until formal assessments are developed.

Further, family systems theory posits that an individual cannot be considered as a separate entity from their system, emphasizing the need to understand familial patterns to grasp an individual's current functioning (Fitzgerald et al. 2020; Nichols 2012; Ballard et al. 2016). In addition, recognizing the link between cultural trauma and identity (Lehrner and Yehuda 2018), it becomes crucial to consider the historical and generational trauma of one's culture in the conceptualization and treatment of Black women and families. Thus, clinicians should be mindful of the intergenerational impact of oppressive family narratives which can be addressed utilizing culturally responsive systemic approaches such as trauma-informed socioculturally attuned family therapy (TI-SAFT; Lee et al. 2023). Although approaches such as TI-SAFT are intended for family counseling, clinicians can utilize such frameworks to support individuals in the deconstruction and re-authoring of harmful family narratives.

Lastly, the participants of the study noted that as Black women start to deconstruct and re-author the SBW narrative, changing behaviors and communication patterns within families is paramount. In addition to using systemic approaches, clinicians should incorporate critical theories like womanism (Walker 1983) and Black feminist theory (Collins 2000) to enhance clients' awareness of existing patterns and support a deliberate transformation in behaviors, communication, and identity. Integrating critical theories with clinical practice aims to empower Black women and their families in their journey toward healing and redefining their narratives.

1.6.2 | Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contribution to the literature, the present study is not without limitations. First, most participants resided in the Eastern region of the United States, limiting the transferability of the findings. Additional demographic limitations include differences in family of origin, educational status, and current family structure. Additional data sources (e.g., additional interviews or an artifact) and participants from various regions may have yielded more transferrable findings. Another potential limitation involves the sequence of the interviews, which varied across cases. For instance, while three of the cases followed a consistent sequence, two deviated, with one dyadic interview occurring prior to individual interviews. This variability in sequence may have influenced participants' responses in subsequent interviews, potentially shaping the way they reflected on their experiences or discussed specific topics. Additionally, despite the use of a reflexive journal and peer debriefer, the researchers' identities as Black women could have led to assumptive conclusions throughout the data analysis process.

Continued exploration of the SBW narrative within the context of intergenerational trauma is warranted. A replication of the present study should strive to obtain a sample that represents various regions throughout the United States as well as various generations (e.g., replicating the present study with teenagers or emerging adults). Being one of few research studies examining intergenerational trauma among Black women, the present study contributes to the foundation for a model of intergenerational trauma in Black women. Additional research is needed, however, to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. A grounded theory study of intergenerational trauma among Black women would be a rigorous method to gain a robust understanding and theoretical foundation. Furthermore, a scale similar to the gendered-racial socialization scale for Black women (GRESS-BW; Brown et al. 2017) can be developed and validated to support a model of intergenerational trauma among Black women. Lastly, additional qualitative research examining beliefs about how healing occurs and specifically how one can heal intergenerational trauma is necessary. By gaining this insight, along with an empirically based model of intergenerational trauma, evidence-based therapeutic approaches that address this phenomenon within Black communities can be developed.

1.7 | Conclusions

The findings of the present study build upon the limited empirical literature on the transmission of the SBW narrative by providing a glimpse into the messaging transmitted between Black mothers and daughters in the United States. Participants also illuminated mechanisms they are currently utilizing to change harmful messages and increase mental wellbeing. Implications of the present study assert the need for a broader and deeper conceptualization of the systemic experiences of Black women and thus challenge the field to enhance current approaches. While this study was not without limitations, this inquiry provided an avenue for additional research on the process of intergenerational trauma within Black communities and illuminates ways in which mental health professionals can utilize family systems concepts to support Black women and families in navigating intergenerational trauma.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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