Living with the mantle of the Strong Black Woman

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ABSTRACT

This research project identifies factors navigated by the African-Caribbean-British woman, such as intersectionality; and identity tropes that encourage emulations of strength and instil shame and stigma. Research garnered predominantly from America, and qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews with six African-Caribbean-British women between the ages of 40 – 49, was used to identify the challenges faced by the displaced African woman, raised outside of Africa and Othered due to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Data was analysed using Thematic Analysis and it highlighted several areas where more awareness was needed. Specifically, regarding the social care, treatment and support received by the African-Caribbean-British woman regarding her wellbeing, responsibilities and the sharing of personal experiences especially surrounding mental health.

Introduction

Following the mass dispersion of African people to the Americas and the Caribbean during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, displaced Africans strive to improve their lives whilst Othered from the dominant races within countries of their dwelling. This article draws upon the experiences of Othered-African women in the United Kingdom (UK), as a major component of her identity seems to be an embodiment of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) stereotype.

Due to a paucity of British academia around the African-Caribbean-British woman, much of the academic research in this article was from American sources. Nevertheless, this study utilised the literature to develop an understanding of the ways in which the portrayal of the Strong Black Woman stereotype is discussed. Specifically, it sought to explore how this stereotype is experienced by the African-Other woman, namely the shame and stigma associated with a failure of being able to live up to the culturally accepted, identifying markers of the trope; and the consequences of such perceived failure.

Rationale

The rationale for study was both personal and social. Over the years I have observed the emotional and mental state of my sister African-Caribbean-British women. I noticed that we tend do everything, whilst it seems to be with ease, it comes at a cost. Many of my female elders have appeared tired and miserable and although they will gladly perform any task requested, it doesn't ever seem to be for self. I managed a house, as a single mother of two, whilst driving trains for London Underground and dealing with the grief of a sudden loss. I thought I had everything covered but when my health failed, I lost all I had amassed including my home. I now understand that I had been sheltering under the mantle of the Strong Black Woman; at times I still do. I watched my mother do it. I thought, 'this is what it means to be a 'Black' woman'. Indeed, the Strong Black Woman

in me had kept me alive and yet, this social construction, nearly killed me. Consequently, this study sought to develop an understanding of the narrative, of the stereotype, and examine ways in which it can be managed without causing embarrassment nor harm to the 'strong black woman'.

Research aims

The aims of this study were to examine the SBW stereotype and to develop an understanding of the coping mechanisms used by these women daily. Specifically, it aimed to:

- Better understand the African-Caribbean-British woman, by understanding the many facets of identity that make her.
- Develop an understanding of how this stereotype affects the daily life of the African-Caribbean-British woman and how she uses it during times of adversity.
- Seek to develop strategies against the pressures of the African-Caribbean-British woman; and consider coping techniques she can use to sustain herself.

Literature review

African-Caribbean people have lived in England prior to the days of enslavement. However, this has been predominantly since 1948, having arrived en-masse at the Tilbury docks, after disembarking from the passenger liner HMT Empire Windrush (Olusoga, 2016). It has been recorded that 'In 2011, there were 594,825 Black Caribbean people in England and Wales, making up 1.1% of the total population' (Gov.uk, 2019a). In comparison the Indian population accounts for 2.5%, Pakistani citizens are at 2.0% and 4.4% of the population in England and Wales are described as White other, this does not include the 0.9% White Irish or 0.1% White Gypsy/Traveller (Gov.uk, 2019b). Statistics gathered from the 2011 Census showed that the Black British population is quite small in comparison to those from other minority ethnic backgrounds.

Smaller still, as Giddens (2017) informs, is the number of the Black British population which, in 2009, were reported as being in marriages or cohabiting relationships compared to those of other ethnicities. These figures highlight, in contrast, the 279,000 Black British families with lone parent status. They are most commonly headed by the mother who, incidentally, is more likely to be employed, and in charge of the finances than any other ethnic group.

This strong work ethic embodied by the African-Caribbean-British woman, has roots in the African holocaust, where her ancestors were made to work on the estate from the age of four. Moreover, "the majority of women in Jamaica between the ages of 19 and 54 worked in the fields. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, women outnumbered men in the fields because of their lower mortality rate" (Reddock, 1985, p. 64). Just as the descendants of Nazi German Holocaust survivors report enduring behaviour reactions to unspeakable traumas suffered by their ancestors during that time (Yehuda et al., 2016); so too will the experiences of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade negatively affect the displaced African.

Additionally, mothers migrating from the Caribbean were keen to instill within their young, Victorian middle-class values that had become the mainstay of respectability after the emancipation of slavery. For many displaced Caribbean women, presenting themselves and their families as respectable, forged a sense of citizenship and a bid for acceptance (Bauer, 2018). Especially as the African-Caribbean family was deemed by the British as being a 'deviant problem' (Higman, 1975), due to the deliberately low economic positioning of the African-Caribbean man (Plaza, 2000). The transmission of ideas about moral superiority and social respect, based on the structure of holy matrimony promoted by European missionaries and priests, ensured the husband officially remained the head of the household. This meant that the roles of nurturer and moral guardian were still very much within the female sphere of responsibility (Bauer, 2018).

The event of slavery was experienced by all who were taken from Africa, and the disenfranchisement of the 'Black' male has been the routine practice of the dominant races ever since (Cottrell, Herron, Rodriguez, & Smith, 2019). Consequently, the construction of the 'Black' female therefore bears unsurprising similarity regardless of her location.

Stereotypes

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) stereotype is an established trope that celebrates the emulation of resilience and self-sufficiency of African-Othered women (Collins, 2000). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009, p. 12) stated that it was "introduced to Black girls through their mothers and women kin". Donovan and West (2015) explain that the two main tenets that serve as foundations for 'Black' womanhood,

are strength and caregiving. Of strength the 'Black' woman is fearlessly expected to handle challenges that produce high levels of stress, upset and trauma with ease. Likewise, in addition to caring for the needs of her immediate family, the self-sacrificing SBW is required to provide spiritual, financial and emotional support to others within her extended family and the community without the display of vulnerability, resentment or expectation of reciprocation.

According to Kenny and Briner (2013) the stereotype is a social construction considered real by those holding it. Thus, they perceive themselves as included or aligned with it, 'members' of the stereotype. Jenkins (2019) asserts that such terms of identity are imagined, but they are not imaginary, in the sense that situations defined as real, are made real, by their consequences. Davis (2015, p. 20) reveals that "Black women regulate strength in themselves and one another. It is re-appropriation of the strength image that enables refuge from and collective resistance against larger oppressive forces, as well as validation and celebration of a distinctive Black woman identity". Davis (2015) has thus revealed that the notion of strength is an iterated rally; it is reiterated by way of encouragement and support through a close and loving network of sisterhood for survival through adversity.

Intersectionality

Running concurrently with the SBW stereotype is the Angry Black Woman trope. Doharty (2019) alludes to this as being the Black woman's burden as any justified feelings of anger are explained away by the dominant race as her having a 'chip on her shoulder'. This form of representation has been a crucial component in the continued marginalization, and suppression of Black women's voices and experiences for over a century (Harrison, Pegoraro, Romney, & Hull, 2019). It is for this reason then that Harrison et al. (2019, p. 3) speak of the "need for a sensibility that attends to the ways social identities of race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect and mutually inform the experiences of particular social groups".

Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). This concept acknowledged that the convergence of social constructions, such as race, sex, age, religion, and ability; for the consideration of impact on 'Black' women (MacKinnon, 2013), within their different social, cultural, historical, and economic contexts. Richards (2019, p. 1) states that 'Black' women "are disempowered when aspects of their identity and

experiences are examined in isolation from one another". This is a situation that commonly occurs within the workplace. Often, and controversially, the Othered African woman is viewed as strong and therefore able to take on added pressure. "We're constantly expected to present to the world a superhuman-like strength when in reality our "game face" is no more indicative of our authentic self as anyone else's" (McLellan, 2019).

This same 'game face' is often perceived as aggressive and contentious, especially when compared to her Asian and Caucasian counterparts. Thus, the Othered African woman is prompted to adopt a form of 'identity shifting', a coping strategy used to diminish the adverse consequences of discrimination and micro-aggressions (Goffman, 1990; Roberts, 2005; Crawford, 2011; Dickens, & Chavez, 2018; Dickens, Womack, & Dimes, 2019). It is the failure to address the Othered African woman as a whole that inevitably produces reactions that can be (mis)construed as aggression or anger; and increase undue experiences of anguish or anxiety. Moreover, consideration is seldom attributed to the fact that seemingly negative reactions to being regularly referred to as strong or aggressive by her counterparts could be an attempt to restore face, self-esteem, status, or power (Felson, 1978). Hence, perhaps, the necessity of the SBW mantle.

Mental Health

There is no other race nor class of people on earth today who have endured the historical injustices and experiences of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. As a result, pride stems from the ability to handle their problems, alone or within their community, with fortitude, determination, and resilience. Their very existence is testament to their ongoing generational strength, and it is for this reason that seeking external help for physical ailments is resisted; and help regarding issues of mental health are avidly avoided (Campbell, 2017). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) explains that the mantle of strength cloaks Black women in a performance of silence and stoicism, within an ongoing battle that impacts their body and mind.

McLellan (2019) furthers this argument, "being labelled as strong renders us less able to show our true emotions and therefore to treat ourselves with the self-compassion that goes hand-in-hand with sound mental health and wellbeing". Adkison-Bradley, Maynard, Johnson, and Carter's (2009) study points out that depression is known to be a common condition among women in the UK. In

African-Caribbean-British communities it is estimated that the occurrence is 60% higher than in the Caucasian population. The stereotype of the SBW is acknowledged, within the study, as a mask that is used to push psychological symptoms into the background. Further, it recognises too the fact that the intersectionality of the African-Caribbean-British woman is not considered with any regard to her mental health. Years later and nothing has changed as Marverine Cole backs the findings of the 2009 study. Whilst writing for the Guardian Newspaper she states that "According to the NHS, black British women are more prone than white women to experience common mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, panic, and obsessive compulsive disorders" (Cole, 2018). Cole then reveals that a study conducted by the University of Cambridge "concludes that black women aged between 16 and 34 are more prone to self-harm than white women, mainly through some form of substance abuse" (2018).

Not to be disregarded is also the valid issue of mistrust held by the African-Other woman due to a history of lawful violence and mutilation against her person in the name of experimentation (Washington, 2006). Such historical trauma has left psychological and emotional injuries that still affect descendants of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Failure to consider these elements that inform the identity of the African-Other present problems that lead therapists who, conceptualize cases from the default perspective of the dominant discourse to diagnose that which "may lead to ineffective treatment or even harm" (Wilkins, Whiting, Watson, Russon., & Moncrief, 2013, p. 14).

It is unfortunate that there appears to be a distinct lack of British studies and data charting the social development of Othered communities. The necessary systems and procedures are not in place to adequately address the needs of the African-Caribbean-British woman. Granek and Peleg-Sagy (2017, p. 384) have warned that "the failure to use culturally sensitive outcome measures in research studies is a form of epistemological violence that may have negative research and clinical implications for African Americans and other ethnic minorities".

Methodology

To fulfil the aims of this study a qualitative methodological approach was adopted. Quantitative research, which depends upon numerical values that provide statistics, projections and predict certain trends (Hodge, 2001) was not appropriate. Specifically, because it does not allow for freedom of expression, the words that are used, to convey personal experiences about culture, beliefs and behaviours that cannot be reduced to numerical values.

Methods

Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling was considered the most time and cost-effective method for the study (Bryman, 2016). Each participant was chosen based on their reliability, cultural heritage, knowledge, ability to converse and personal experience (Bryman, 2016).

Data was collected from six British born African Caribbean women ranging in age from 40 - 49 and located in London and Leeds. Five participants were descended from the island of Jamaica, one participant was raised alongside a Guyanese stepfather and his extended family. The pilot participant is the child of Nevisian parents. All participants considered themselves to be of both British and Caribbean heritage and culture, to varying degrees.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-Structured interviews were utilised to collect data. Each interview lasted between one to two hours and included questions pertaining to identity, stereotype, and support. Participants were invited to answer, reflect, and enlarge upon responses through probing questions. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent.

Data analysis

Data was transcribed and coded following the Thematic Analysis (TA) method produced by Braun and Clarke (2013) to draw out key themes. This allowed the researcher to examine and make sense of the data from coded transcripts, in order to extract the core themes and sub-themes. A pilot interview was used as a template for data coding.

Research ethics

This research received ethical approval from the University prior to the commencement of data collection. This research also adhered to the guidelines set out by the British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice (BSA, 2017). Care was taken to ensure the participants

were respected, this included asking for verbal and written consent to record interviews, use and share data. It was explained to each participant that they could withdraw their data at any time. Participants were reassured that their identities would be kept anonymous and personal information would be kept confidential. It is important to note that there is a much warranted, deep-seated distrust within the African-Caribbean community around the issue of research.

Findings

The key findings reported here are the themes, and their related subthemes, of identity, family, challenges, and support.

Identity

The journey of the African-Caribbean-British woman crosses three continents that leave within her a rich tapestry of cross-racial ancestry. She is infused with a character and will that today see her, the daughter or granddaughter of the Windrush generation; lost in a land she struggles to call her own. This is identity:

> *"I consider myself to be cuckoo in the nest because for me, as this hostile environment has shown us, we really don't belong, we are the [children] of the people they said didn't belong, so if they don't belong, I don't belong. To be honest and truthful I feel that we are tolerated. Britain always likes to say we are tolerant people, but when you look up the definition of the word tolerant it means to put up with against your will, ggrrr it's like gritting your teeth. I feel we are tolerated, I think we bring a lot to this country, and that's the reason why we're tolerated, ie our parents came here to clean up the country but were treated so abominably… and then this whole hostile environment thing, just says we don't belong, they'd like us to leave and that's what Brexit is all about and grrrrr." (Marcia)*

Over the years many titles have been afforded to the African-Caribbean person dwelling in England. However, there still seems no comfortable point of acceptance:

> *"I'm British, quintessentially Black British, but not English, and not Black Other or West Indian, it's something just specific to people like me I think, who have West Indian parent's living in English society. British. …I'm not repelling the English, there is just no emotion to it. Factually I am not English, I am not pretending to be something I am not." (Carroll)*

One participant was happy to acknowledge a British identity without defining herself as 'Black British' but still set herself apart:

> *"My Mum's born in England, my Dad was born in Jamaica, came to London when he was five so they're both quite British, I feel like I'm partially removed from the Caribbean culture, because my parents are kind of British. Although I'm very grateful to have my Grandparents who kept that Jamaican firm and strong. I'm very British, very proud of my Jamaican heritage, but it's quite secondary. It's different to being first generation, where my Mum would see herself as more Jamaican because her parents were Jamaican, I don't see myself like that coz mines aren't." (Janet)*

Family

Hess and Sussman (2014, p. 138) explain that "Afro-American women have always been the primary resources for the maintenance of family stability". Similarly, for the African-Caribbean-British woman, knowing and maintaining one's place within the family structure is of great importance:

> *"There's a hierarchy, there's an expectation. I had the dual role of being the older sister, but also a mother figure in helping to bring [my siblings] up because of how my parents worked. You're told your role from, y'know, you're the eldest. My Uncle Binzi, he always reinforced the fact that I was the elder one, erm… or that I had to be a support to my Mum". Different members of the family, not just him, …that you're the eldest, that you need to be a support. You need to stand up. Because of being born in the early 70's means I had that*

Caribbean upbringing in the fact that I learned to cook, clean, wash, bring up the siblings, change their nappies, wash their clothes - everything. That's what I grew up in. That was my job." (Rita)

The mechanism of the African-Caribbean family; often labelled as deviant because of its distinct variation from the British norm (Rodgers-Rose, 1980), was in place for practical reasons. Reynolds (2001) explains that under slavery and British colonialism and, irrespective of mothering status, it has always been commonplace for African-Caribbean women to work alongside their men folk. Migration to England presented the problem of childcare as white childminders would not look after 'black' children. This meant that the African-Caribbean population had to navigate toward shift work and regularly rely on strong family members and social networks to cover childcare. Such networks were often children tending to home duties and acting as peacemaker and caregiver for cousins and younger children of extended family members (Doghor & Marshall, 2018).

Friendship

African-Caribbean-British women fulfilling the roles bestowed upon them, naturally turn toward long-established networks of friendship when experiencing stressful situations. This theme examines the importance of friendship:

> *"Friends, yeah, [I have] fantastic friends. My friends stepped in and they're not used to me being anything else but a strong black woman. They recognised Carroll's going to shit, let's do some stuff, let's get round her." (Carroll)*

Rita shared her experience of friendship following the sudden death of her younger sister:

> *"The morning after she passed... My four friends came round…, and essentially, they, erm… they picked me up, …they washed me, they dressed me, they cleaned up the house, they fed me, they shopped, and they…um… got me onto my feet so I could go round to my parents house and deal with everything that was going to happen, I believe that's a very black thing to do, my friends hail*

from Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada and Senegal, they were my back bone, they were almost like my own sort of like guard to help me through a really tough time." (Rita)

Rita and Carroll each explained the crucial role of friendship. Such friendships have been nurtured over decades and bring a unique familial dynamic that cannot be easily satisfied by those not cultured within the British, African-Caribbean community. Although the structure of family is changing, the mechanisms of friendship and community remain.

Challenges

The African-Caribbean-British woman faces many challenges; however, the data highlighted two areas of particular concern. These are the perception and justification of her workplace behaviour and the positive and negative aspects of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) stereotype.

Work

There appear to be two main areas that present challenges for the African-Caribbean-British woman as she navigates her environment. The first theme is work:

> *"I'll give an example of myself within work, I have to be acutely aware of how I interact with some people because I have locs and I'm a black woman, and I'm articulate, and in my face, it can show emotion when someone is talking rubbish. So I have to also be aware that if I am being precise in what I was saying, or trying to drive my point across; that I am being looked upon …by white people, …as an angry black woman with locs." (Rita)*

This form of self-monitoring or identity shifting seems to run through the study:

> *"I work in a very erm… white-dominated area, and it's also a high-profile area that I work in, and I work with many people that have gone to Oxford, they're privately educated people. So, it's very …you've got to be very conscious of yourself". (Dawn)*

Such self-observation is an attempt to quell perceptions that are believed to be strongly held by others:

"It's a chip isn't it? You can look at it both ways, for us it is, yes, we're doing, we can get shit done, it's all great and we can go and conquer, but for Joe Bloggs out there, who's had to deal with us in the doctors surgery, [...] Oh look, it's one of them ones, she's got a chip on her shoulder, coz she's all being aggressive and all assertive. I know the way you word things, I work for the government so I interview people and I can see on their appraisals where you'll have words like 'assertive' for maybe a Caucasian and 'aggressive' for a BAME, they're both confident, but one will be in a positive way and one will be in a negative way." (Carroll)

Akala, (2018) speaks of this undefinable 'chip' regarding young 'black boys' who become successful 'black men'. However, as illustrated participants in this study have experienced the same accusation which can be debilitating:

"If a black woman has an opinion, it can be [translated] as aggressive and it's not always the case, she's just saying what she needs to say, it's very kind of… debilitating."(Louisa)

Disempowered, the African-Caribbean-British woman performs the balancing act of impression management (Goffman, 1990), over her personality and cultural norms in order to maintain a form of equilibrium for the sensibilities of her employers and colleagues, who can easily become advocates or adversaries (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). The African-Caribbean-British woman does not wish to be seen as a threat, especially as she is also balancing responsibilities at home, so hypervigilance is a must:

"The aggressive Black woman… How far is she going to go into her career? How far is she going to be able to move up when she's seen as aggressive, when she's seen as a liability? How far can she go when she's got 2,3 and 4 or 5 kids at home to feed and she can't do the late nights, she can't do the weekends…?" (Janet)

Research carried out by Kenny and Briner (2013) shows that the concerns that prompt African-Caribbean-British people to employ 'impression management' in education, social settings and the workplace are valid. They carry a stigmatized social identity that requires the offsetting of racial stigmatization. Even without the performance of much anticipated aggression, the African-Caribbean-British woman is judged, automatically devalued and discriminated against (Richards, 2019).

Stereotypes

The social stigma participants are trying to manage or distance themselves from, is the next theme. The stereotype of the Strong Black Woman (SBW):

"It's something we're all aware of, as black women. You can't get away [from it] can you, it is part of becoming a woman, in the black culture, it is to be strong." (Janet)

Nelson, Cardemil and Adeoye (2016, p. 7), found that their African-American participants "defined the SBW role by five characteristics: independent, taking care of family and others, hardworking and high achieving, overcoming adversity, and emotionally contained". In this study Carroll said:

"It's inherent in most of us, and those who don't display those qualities are looked on so badly by other women. It's a subconscious thing, and I think that's primarily dictated by the way your parents raised you. Primarily by how your maternal side is, your mother, your grandmother because the force comes through them. You're not taught it, you just absorb it from your mother, and your grandmother and your grandmothers, grandmother. It's something that goes through the genes, and that with pride and not wanting to look silly or weak in front of anyone else. I think it's a major factor for us British Black women." (Carroll)

When asked where this stereotype might come from Marcia replied:

"I think it comes directly from slavery, because if you think about what was

done to us, raped, bred, ...breeding machines, seeing our husbands killed, raped, sodomized, and all that stuff. What could we do? We had no power, so it's a lack of power. You either died or you faced up to it every day. So, to me, that's gone and generations and generations and generations [later], we've got kids to feed, children to send to school, we can't be breaking down. Because as we know, and I don't like to even say it, it's a lot of the time because our men are absent, we have to be strong. Black women don't break down, we carry on, we run the family, we are the centre of the family, so that's where it comes from." (Marcia)

This assertion from Marcia, appears to support the work of bell hooks (1981) in that slavery marked the moment the African woman was masculinized and reduced to sub-human status. Janet continues in the same vein:

"It comes from slavery. It comes from the way black people were treated through slavery. In order to get through slavery, we had to... We wouldn't be here if they wasn't strong. They had to be, they had to endure. They had to find God, ...something to support them through such hardship. ...You've broken her, she's gone, she's a shell, so she's gonna be void of emotion, you've taken her bloodline, her dignity, her power, her mate, her protection... What has she got to lose...? We don't have our men, so we've had to be strong. ...Comes from the whole matriarchal culture where the woman's the head of the house, which means she's got to be tough. You've got to provide, you've got to maintain, everyone's relying on you at all times, regardless." (Janet)

Janet makes this interesting distinction:

"It doesn't equate to African women, because African women generally have fathers and husbands, so they're protected and looked after and the women are much more submissive. Whereas with the West Indian ones,

generally we don't have fathers and husbands, we haven't got anybody, we're vulnerable." (Janet)

The position of the African-Caribbean man raises a many important themes for further study. However, for African-Caribbean women:

"The man is the head of the household, now that is from West Indian tradition. The man is the head of the household; but I have no strong black men in my family." (Carroll)

When questioned, participants willingly accepted the SBW stereotype in a positive light:

"It can be good for your health in terms of not going down then ending up homeless and all that, so it's good for your physical health. For your mental health it's good to have strength to do what you need to do for the day." (Marcia)

Whilst it helps maintain social order, the stereotype appears to present a dichotomy:

"It's not unhealthy to be a SBW. It's unhealthy for people to think that because you're strong you don't need help, that's what's unhealthy, it's the association, 'she don't need anyone she's alright, she's tough." (Janet)

Carroll highlights another potentially negative aspect to the stereotype:

"When it starts alienating you from your goal, when you start losing sight of your emotional health and your mental wellbeing for the sake of having to get things done, I think that's when it's detrimental. I've been expected not to crack. I've been expected to have the answer for absolutely everything. Maybe I need to be a bit more honest, I expect to step in and fix everything, it's not so much people asking me, nobody's vocalised it... but the body language intimates that they expect me to and then

I in turn start conditioning myself, I have to do this, because if I don't do it, who else is gonna do it, kinda thing, and I think it's a basic trap that we all fall into." (Carroll)

This assertion appears to support the concept that "The defining quality of Black womanhood is strength", writes Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009, p. 1). This strength along with an apparently aggressive, multi-functional, self-reliant, independent, yet nurturing and self-denying personality is said to be the reality of the female African-Other, whose ancestors journeyed through the painful middle passage. That iteration of strength, therefore, is an attribute of the stereotype that resonates loudly throughout the study:

"You're always seen to have to be strong, always having to be in control, never being seen to break down publicly. Having to have a controlled reaction to things." (Dawn)

Thus, participants have shown that the main challenge for the British born African-Caribbean woman is the trope of the SBW. It has been described as both healthy and unhealthy as she is generally expected to show an unreasonable amount of strength during stressful situations. Originating from the event of slavery, wherein the African woman was forced to undertake both masculine and feminine tasks under extreme duress. Thus, she has adopted this mechanism as her seldom questioned norm and finds it necessary to adapt it to her surroundings so as not to be perceived as overly aggressive in the workplace or flimsy by her counterparts.

Support

Times are changing and there is perhaps scope for new and modernized methods to be created and used for the continued maintenance of mental health for the displaced African-Caribbean-British woman.

Counselling

Historically accepted as a taboo subject within the African-Caribbean community, counselling emerged as a strong theme:

"By virtue of being a strong black woman, you don't talk your business." (Carroll)

"From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, theologians used biblical and scientific reference to suggest that God ordained African Americans the ethnological status as "nonhuman" or as "beast" (Brown, 2018; p.53). Wilkins et al. (2013) therefore explain that "African Americans are wary about participating in therapy because of a 400 year history in which they have been perceived as inferior" (p.15), as well as unable to feel pain or emotion (Washington, 2006).

Likewise, for the African-Caribbean citizen existing in Great Britain today. It is found that the country prospers still, from its historic acts of domination through the enslavement and colonization of the African-Caribbean's ancestors (Hall, 2020). Seeking therapy then, in any country that actively maintains structures of hostility through religion, education, policy, economic mobility, and the gritted teeth of social tolerance; will surely elicit an unnecessarily counterproductive experience.

"Why am I going to talk about it? Or you have that thing. [...]That thing of, we don't speak our business outside. 1 - They don't understand. 2 - You don't want outside interference and 3 - The people are gonna come in and take your children dem away. So, you've got to find a way through it all and just be strong and bury it." (Rita)

These statements are further reiterated by Dawn:

"I don't think it's something that we as black people do. We don't go to erm… external sources to get help." (Dawn)

It is generally agreed that a cultural wall of silence exists around counselling and mental health. This is in part due to a lack of trust in the system. It is also a matter of the practitioners, and their hierarchical obligations, as well as their levels of cultural awareness (Wilkins, et al., 2013), that deter the African-Other from reaching out. Louisa says:

"We've had the upbringing to say (Patois) What are they going to, ...to help you?' We've got a very ignorant way of looking at things. So, it's a case of '...counsellor? counsellor fi wha? ...And where you doing this counselling? ...You do wha? ...Waste of time!' You

know, that kind of mentality. You can talk to me, or you can talk to your auntie. ...Why you talking to counsellor for. So we've had that as well, the older generation just didn't understand that and for them, 'waste of money!' ...It took my mum and gran going for me to actually break at that point, because we've been raised to say, you know what, we've got to get on with it, no point ...ya' know." (Louisa)

Another reason for the situation many African-Caribbean-British people have found themselves in today. Carroll explains:

"There's a lot of mental health issues in my family. Now it's really coming to the fore, they were the children of a strong black woman who was only interested in keeping afloat and doing stuff and making money. That kind of stuff. There was no regard for mental wellbeing for any of those children. And that's what stereotypically happened in that generation. There's a lot of fifty and sixty-year-old men and women, fucking clueless because their mum was trying to make do for them." (Carroll)

Carroll has presented a reason for the apparent break up in today's family unit. Those that were made responsible for the household, in the absence of an adult, are perhaps struggling in later years because of the early, and often harsh pressures placed upon them. They may be unable to talk about those pressures, and as Rita explains; the holding back of one's spirit through the act of impression management in both the back and front stages, has led to issues pertaining to negative mental health:

"If you've grew up in a time when your father hadn't been around, or you had suffered beatings as part of your culture in growing up, or if you had to step in to be that second mother role coz your parents had to do x amount of jobs and it was expected of you to help raise your younger siblings, or if you were born in the Caribbean and then came over here to your parents who also had children over here and then you have to be assimilated into that family and stuff

like that, [counselling] is gonna pull up all of that stuff and if you're sitting down with a counsellor who doesn't have an inkling, or an understanding, or had any training to understand the cultural differences and issues that that might dredge up, I think there's that thing of just soldier on, just get through, they are not going to understand." (Rita)

Naturally, it is the will to soldier on and be perceived as a SBW that produces the undesired feelings of weakness. When suppressed it can trigger biological and psychiatric symptoms (Goldsmith, Morrison, Vanderwerker, & Prigerson, 2008).

Four of the participants had received some form external support, counselling, however their experiences are varied:

"The person that was counselling me, ...there was nothing, there was nothing in common. Different culture entirely, different culture, different age, you couldn't get any more different. So, I couldn't freely talk. When I was talking it was with caveats. I knocked it on the head because it was making me feel worse. So, I had four or five sessions, each time I came away from the lady, I actually wanted to kill myself, literally, physically I had to go and pick up my son from school." (Carroll)

Carroll's experience seems to be common amongst the African-Other dwelling outside Africa. They endure what scholars such as Williams (2018) refers to as 'provider bias', which is the result of a cultural racism that triggers unconscious bias in the care provider. For this reason, one could suggest that there is a huge gulf between the African-Caribbean woman and counselling therapists:

"They were saying, 'you're a really strong woman' and at that time I didn't feel strong, and I was sick of being strong, tired, mentally emotionally, physically. ...I was just over exhausted. This was a stranger hearing what my problems are and the first thing he gets from that is me being a strong black woman, and I said, 'but I'm tired, I

don't want to be strong. I'd like someone to be there and take the reins if possible'. Yeah, just to turn around and help me through that, you know, emotionally, mentally, and when I looked around me. I just felt so alone at that stage." (Louisa)

A difference occurs at this point, when Dawn was asked whether she received counselling she says:

"It just didn't occur to me to take that avenue to be honest, and it was never actually offered as a suggestion. I did go to the doctors to get signed off, but at no point in that doctor's appointment was it mentioned. It would have been nice to be given the information to just know what's out there because we don't hear anything about this at all." (Dawn)

In contrast Janet said:

"The person has to go to the GP in order for the GP to ask them, you have to go! If you go they will ask you, 'do you want some counselling?' And then I went and asked for counselling and then got a letter, and on the letter it had 'SPRINGFIELDS' I said 'Nahhhhhh, No, No, No, No, No! Not realising that that's just where it is, you're not actually… y' know. But the associations like uh uh, nope. Nah, I didn't bother and I was that close to getting the counselling, I had the referral and I had the appointment… but the heading… No, No, No, I'm alright… so that stigma of mental health, when that counselling may have supported you or prepared you, or propelled you to do other things but no, no, no, no, no!" (Janet)

The institution Janet had been referred to had, a terrible reputation within the African-Caribbean community, it therefore carried a stigma for those aware of it. In a study of 251 African American students', Wallace and Constantine (2005, p. 4) "found that greater adherence to Afrocentric values was correlated with greater stigma associated with counselling and other aspects of cultural values". Fortunately, there are some positive outcomes following counselling:

"When I'm helping myself, it helps the situation that I'm in, not necessarily makes it go away but it makes me tackle it and think about it differently, so that's why I went. It was self-referred, but my doctor backed it up. I had counselling at uni, one to one, and It was more about talking to people outside of family and friends who are not gonna judge you. Not saying necessarily my friends judge me in a negative way but they've got, … they know me, so there would be certain things I wouldn't say… to upset them or whatever. You don't have that when you go into someone that you don't know, you can be free, and that's what it was about. I had a lot of anger, grief, stress, loss, loss of health as well so I was grieving that." (Marcia)

All participants unanimously agree that support for the African-Caribbean-British community is urgently required:

"There needs to be some kind of black cultured system to understand what the person is going through and what is needed to help that person. I felt that who I was seeing, could not relate to where I was coming from because they've not had that type of upbringing. Going to sit down with someone who really doesn't have the slightest clue of where I am coming from or might even misconstrue what I've said because they don't understand where I'm coming from. I don't think it helps." (Louisa)

Not wishing for their children to have to carry out the back-breaking work they did, the African Caribbean community had higher aspirations for their young. Unfortunately, these aspirations were not mirrored in the education system.

"We need to have more people from our background as therapists, so that we have access to it, when we were growing up most of the time we weren't encouraged to, y' know, that you can be a therapist, that you can be a teacher, I'm talking about through the schooling system. And I'm finding that there's a lot

of people from my generation who are going into their second careers and are actually recognising that actually, I can go to university. I was told all I would be able to amount to was stacking shelves in Tesco and this was from my head of year. Now there are so many more of us who are professionals, if when we were at school, we had been encouraged there would be even more of us higher up in our professions." (Rita)

Marcia puts the onus back onto the support systems currently in place. Being part of a Professor led incentive in The North of England, Marcia was able to sit in on a diversity awareness session with psychiatric therapists who admitted to being:

"Scared, especially when you've got your mad bad black woman who's gonna [blast wail] and start talking about 'oh me son were murdered'. They don't know how to deal with it and they don't particularly want to, so they would bypass that person and offer talking therapy to the white person who they know the culture. If you only work with your same community all the time, you never learn anything. As Black people we already know this community, we were brought up in it, it's not for us to learn, you need to learn about us." (Marcia)

Analysis of support has shown that whilst the cultural disposition of the African-Caribbean-British woman largely prohibits her from seeking attention for needs pertaining to her mental health, the standard necessary to provide effective support is not in place within the UK. This is reflected in the distinct lack of academic studies from a British perspective. However, what this study shows is that there is an urgent need for support to be provided to the African-Caribbean-British woman as she actively carries a disproportionate amount of stress.

Discussion

Data gathered from the participants in this study shows that there is a distinct correlation with US research. It confirms that the African-Caribbean-British woman struggles to find a true feeling of home as she adapts her personality to manage the sensibilities of those around her whilst embodying cultures of Africa, the Caribbean, and England.

"I consider myself Caribbean British, because in my early years I was brought up by my grandparents and they are from Jamaica. My formative years thought of Jamaica as home, so that's why I haven't thought of myself as Black British. It was more Jamaican British, then Caribbean British, it is something that continues to evolve, because as I'm now looking more into my ancestry and DNA, I'm starting to think of myself as African Caribbean British." (Rita)

Influenced not only by their 40+ years in the UK, but also the survival methods, anecdotes and wisdoms handed down from the elders, all participants explained how they lived with the stereotype. They spoke of the important act of balancing their social identity as they strive to manage perceptions both in and outside of their cultural communities:

Research has shown that the African-Other woman is perceived as head of the household due to the total socially orchestrated displacement of the Othered African man. The result is a level of pressure mounted upon the African-Other woman that is proving to be too much. In her own voice she has detailed the issues she faces, from an uncertainty surrounding her identity and a distinct discomfort in the UK, to issues around the family structure of which she also finds herself having to exemplify the roles of elder and leader. This remarkably candid data reveals much about participants' feelings toward their responsibilities and the role that the SBW stereotype plays in their lives. Fortunately, it seems that she is growing ever open to the once vehemently shunned thought of counselling and recognizes that it may well have positive outcomes for herself and her sister African-Caribbean-British women, if handled properly by those endeavoring to administer genuine care and support.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand better the social makeup of the African-Caribbean-British woman. This aim has been achieved through the research carried out by way of the identification of some of the many issues that contribute to her environment thus affecting her mood. As well as the coping strategies employed to combat increased stigmatization, for example Identity Interviews were carried out with six African-Caribbean-British women who were all in their forties.

The stereotype of the Strong Black Woman was defined, not only in the literature, of which there is a paucity that is based upon the experiences of the African-Caribbean-British woman, but also by the participants who shared their thoughts, feelings and coping methods around its positive and negative attributes. The rich and at times surprisingly candid data has shown that there is much more research that needs to be undertaken in the field of the African-Caribbean-British woman. However, it becomes clear that the primary responsibility for healing the African-Caribbean-British woman and her community, of the generational traumas that have given way to destructive stereotypes, is for the community to rise up and create healing strategies that counteract the continued traits of negative stereotypes that halt meaningful progression.

Recommendations

A positive change of awareness is required by the NHS, Local, and National government regarding access, quality of care, and resource provision. Necessary too is a thorough examination of the social obstacles that prevent the African-Caribbean-British citizen from living the lives their Elders intended for them when they stepped off the Empire Windrush some seventy-two years ago.

Thus, this study recognizes that an overhaul of the available social wellbeing services in the UK would require an unbiased review of the systems in place that actively discriminate against both African and Othered African women in society. Under no illusion, I would suggest that an undertaking of this nature and magnitude would be impossible for the dominant race to achieve. It is therefore recommended that:

- There is a need to employ more therapists from the African-Caribbean-British community. The onus for this is on the members of the community to encourage their young and those seeking a second career in later life to consider obtaining qualifications in psychotherapy, hypnotherapy, counselling, cultural and spiritually based therapies.
- African-Caribbean-British children need to be encouraged to talk about their feelings and issues within trusted spaces. Their parents have been taught many biblical and outdated Victorian values. For example, older generations were trained to be seen and not heard. Communication is, therefore, an area that warrants further research.

- Regular community events dedicated to speaking openly in safe environments are necessary and can be hosted in available community centers. Not all African-Caribbean communities have access to social spaces thus, there is a need to ensure that such spaces are provided. Recognition needs to be given to the fact that different communities heal in their own ways. Therefore, cultural or spiritual healing must be considered or recommended by the NHS in order to cater for the needs of Othered communities who may be affected by negative stereotypes.
- Targeted awareness training is necessary for existing psychosomatic and psychological service providers so that they do not continue to cause added stress to delicate situations, understand where feelings of distrust originate from; and work in line with the needs of the Othered, as opposed to the statutes and dictates' created solely around the needs of the dominant race in the UK.

Such recommendations are suggested to reinstate a strengthened unity within the members of the African-Caribbean diaspora, founded on open communication for necessary social and ancestral healing.

Acknowledgements

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