ARTICLES

Coping with Gendered Racial Microaggressions among Black Women College Students

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Abstract In this study, we explored the strategies that Black women use to cope with gendered racial microaggressions, or the subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender. A total of 17 Black women undergraduate, graduate, and professional students participated in one of two semi-structured focus group interviews. Results from dimensional analysis indicated five coping strategies: two resistance coping strategies (i.e., Using One's Voice as Power, Resisting Eurocentric Standards), one collective coping strategy (i.e., Leaning on One's Support Network), and two self-protective coping strategies (i.e., Becoming a Black Superwoman, Becoming Desensitized and Escaping). The theme of Picking and Choosing One's Battles was also uncovered as a process whereby participants made deliberate decisions about when and how to address the microaggressions they experienced. Findings indicated that Black women used a combination of coping strategies depending on contextual factors, which supports and extends previous research. Implications and directions for future research in the field of African American studies are discussed.

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Many Black women in the United States experience a combination of racial and gender discrimination. Scholars have long theorized that racism and sexism have a deleterious influence on the psychological and physical health of people of color (e.g., Clark et al. 1999) and women (e.g., Landrine et al. 1995). Many researchers have conceptualized racism and sexism as stressors that can lead to a variety of negative psychological and physical health consequences (Clark et al. 1999; Klonoff and Landrine 1995; Landrine and Klonoff 1996; Shorter-Gooden 2004; Geronimus et al. 2006; Green and Darity 2010). Several meta-analyses support these observations with respect to the link between mental health and discrimination in general (Pascoe and Richman 2009) and more specifically between racial discrimination and mental health among Black Americans (Pieterse et al. 2012), Asian and Asian Americans (Lee and Ahn 2011), and Latinos (Lee and Ahn 2012).

Researchers have argued that coping strategies can serve a protective function against the negative effects of racism (Clark et al. 1999; Harrell 2000). Although there is ample research that links racism to mental health outcomes for African Americans and has explored coping strategies that can serve as a buffer to racism, there is a dearth of research exploring the coping strategies that Black women use to deal with the negative effects of the intersection of racism and sexism (for exceptions, see Barnett et al. 1987; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007 and Woods-Giscombé 2010). This study sought to fill this gap in the literature by extending Sue's (2010) theory of microaggressions and using an intersectional analytic framework to explore the ways that Black women cope with gendered racial microaggressions. To contextualize the current study, we first provide a brief review of the literature on subtle forms of racism and gendered racism. Next, we highlight theoretical work on stress and coping. Then, we discuss empirical work on coping with gendered racism and microaggressions, and discuss the purpose of the present study.

Subtle Forms of Racism

The invisible and insidious nature of racism is one area that has received increased attention in the psychology literature (Sue 2005). According to contemporary racism scholars (e.g., Dovidio and Gaertner 1986; Neville et al. 2000), racism has changed from overt acts to more subtle and covert acts as a result of advances during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. These often invisible forms of prejudice and discrimination can operate on an unconscious level for the perpetrator of these incidents (Dovidio et al. 2002; McConahay 1986; Sue et al. 2008; Thompson and Neville 1999). Therefore, White people are often unaware of their subtle and unconscious racist beliefs, which might negatively impact their interactions with people of color.

Sue's (2010) theory of microaggressions provides a way to classify everyday manifestations of oppression and explore the psychological consequences of these experiences for target groups. Racial microaggressions is a term originally coined by

Black psychiatrist Chester Pierce and colleagues (1977) to describe subtle and stunning automatic racial slights against Black Americans. Sue et al. (2007b) expanded Pierce's model of microaggressions with a definition that refers to them as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al. 2007b:273).

According to Sue's (2010) review of the literature, perceived racism, particularly subtle forms of racism such as microaggressions, have a deleterious impact on a range of mental health outcomes for marginalized groups. Specifically, racial microaggressions represent daily and chronic stressors that can have a cumulative effect and can lead to a number of physical and mental health issues (Sue 2010). Sue and Capodilupo (2008) have explored gender microaggressions as a subtle form of sexism on women. They found that women experienced a variety of gender microaggressions that ranged from being considered a second class citizen to being sexually objectified. However, one gap in the literature on microaggressions is an exploration of intersecting forms of oppression, namely the intersection between racial and gender microaggressions. In order to better understand these intersecting forms of oppression, first we briefly highlight the theory of gendered racism.

Gendered Racism

The research on gendered racism has largely come from sociologists and Black feminist scholars. The term *gendered racism* was originally coined by sociologist, Philomena Essed (1991) and refers to the simultaneous experience of both racism and sexism. According to Essed, racism and sexism "intertwine and combine under certain conditions into one hybrid phenomenon" (Essed 1991:31). Gendered racism attempts to capture the complexity of oppression experienced by Black women based on racist perceptions of gender roles. Essed argued that Black women experience gendered and classed forms of racism that are based on the constructed ideologies and stereotypes of Black womanhood. Often, these forms of gendered racism are rooted in stereotypes of Black women. For example, Black women have been stereotyped as strong, hardworking, dominant, welfare queens, and sexually promiscuous, all stereotypes that are in contrast to the stereotypes of White womanhood which include good, ladylike, and proper (Collins 1990; Jordan-Zachery 2009). These gendered racial stereotypes can lead to prejudices that reduce Black women to their race and gender in ways that represent gendered racism. For example, the stereotype of the "Strong Black Woman" could be considered a positive stereotype because it assumes strength, resilience, and perseverance; however, this stereotype can also be harmful if there is a generalization that all Black women are "strong" enough to endure inordinate amounts of stress. Such a belief could impact interpersonal relationships and lead Black women to suppress their emotions and experience negative health effects (Woods-Giscombé and Black 2010).

Theoretical work on gendered notions of race and the focus on the intersections of race, gender, and social class have been in existence for decades. For example, feminist and critical race theories have conceptualized the term *intersectionality* as an analysis of the systems of oppression and social constructions of race, class, and

gender (e.g., Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1993; Andersen and Collins 2007). Collins (1998) defined intersectionality as "an analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization" (Collins 1998:278).

Social science researchers have written about intersectionality theory for quite some time, and some researchers have begun to identify methodology that complements the intersectionality theoretical perspective (Landry 2006). For example, Psychologist, Elizabeth Cole (2009) has outlined ways to conduct psychology research using an intersectionality framework. Specifically, drawing on critical race legal scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw (1993), Cole argues that intersectionality research on Black women can range from a focus on comparing the experiences of Black women with White women's experiences, exploring the "additive or multiplicative effects (*double discrimination* or *double jeopardy*), and exploring experiences specific to their status as Black women" (p. 171). We argue that applying intersectionality theory to Black women's experiences requires a focus on the simultaneous experience of both race and gender, which is the framework we employed in this study.

Using an intersectionality framework, in an earlier qualitative study, we explored African American women's experiences with gendered racial microaggressions. Building on the theory of Sue (2010) of racial microaggressions and the theory of Essed (1991) of gendered racism, we defined gendered racial microaggressions as subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender (Lewis et al. 2010). We identified three core gendered racial microaggression themes that illustrate the intersection of racial and gender microaggressions. The first core theme (Projected Stereotypes) illustrated the ways in which stereotypes of Black women were used to objectify them and reduce them to their race and gender. The two sub-themes included: Expectation of the Jezebel and Expectation of the "Angry Black Woman." The second core theme (Silenced and Marginalized) highlighted the ways in which Black women felt silenced and marginalized in workplace, school, or other professional settings. The two sub-themes included: Struggle for Respect and Invisibility. The third core theme (Assumptions About Style and Beauty) described the ways that Black women were reduced to one's communication styles, physical appearance, and body type in verbal and nonverbal ways. The two sub-themes were: Assumptions About Communication Styles and Assumptions About Physical Appearance. All of the participants reported experiencing these situations as stressful and as having an impact on their well-being. Although this study added to the literature on the types of microaggressions Black women experience, more research is needed to explore the types of strategies Black women use to cope with intersecting forms of subtle racism and sexism.

Stress and Coping

One of the most prominent stress and coping frameworks in psychology is the transactional model of stress and coping of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). According to Lazarus and Folkman's theory, if an event in one's environment is appraised as

threatening or taxing one's resources, then it is considered a stressor. In this transactional model, a two-component cognitive appraisal system is enacted when an individual encounters a potentially stressful situation (Lazarus and Folkman 1987). First, *primary appraisal* deals with determining whether the situation is harmful, threatening, beneficial, or a challenge. If it is determined that the situation will not adversely affect well-being then nothing else occurs. However, if the situation is determined to be a stressor, the secondary cognitive appraisal system is enacted. *Secondary appraisal* consists of evaluating "whether any actions can be taken to improve the troubled person–environmental relationship, and if so, what coping options might work" (Lazarus and Folkman 1987:146). Therefore, the stress and coping process is initiated by situations that are appraised as stressful and the assessment of an individual's options to cope with that situation. For example, if an individual is exposed to racism and perceives it as stressful, the stress and coping process will be initiated.

Clark et al. (1999) adapted Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model and proposed a biopsychosocial model to explain the psychological effects of perceived racism for African Americans. In the biopsychosocial model, coping responses are considered to buffer the negative effects of perceived racism on psychological and physiological stress responses. According to Harrell's multidimensional conceptualization of racism-related stress (2000), individual characteristics, such as cognitive processes, as well as sociocultural characteristics, such as racial and gender identity, can affect the racism-related stress and coping process.

Although traditional stress and coping models have been adapted to explore racism-related stress, they have some limitations. Traditional models of coping were developed within Western and Eurocentric psychological traditions, which emphasized ideals of autonomy and individualism. This emphasis on individual forms of coping does not consider collective forms of coping that may vary based on race and gender. Collective coping strategies include seeking the help of others to cope with a stressor and typically rely on group-oriented activities (Lewis-Coles and Constantine 2006). Many traditional coping models have not been able to capture the diversity in coping based on race and gender (Heppner et al. 2006). For example, research indicates that there are race and gender differences in coping, such that people of color tend to use more collectivistic forms of coping strategies (Heppner et al. 2006) and women tend to use more social support as a form of coping (Banyard and Graham-Bermann 1993). For example, some research focused on the coping strategies of African Americans has found an increased use of spirituality and religious forms of coping compared to Whites (Bacchus and Holley 2004; Taylor et al. 2004). Some of the few studies that have explored Black women's coping strategies have focused on coping with generic stress or context-specific stress (e.g., work-related stress) rather than on race and gender-related stress. For example, Bacchus (2008) conducted a study exploring Black women's coping responses to work-related stress and found that women used spirituality as a form of coping with stress in the work place. Although some researchers highlight the influence of race and gender on the stress and coping process for Black women, very few studies specifically focus on the ways that Black women cope with the intersection of racism and sexism.

Coping with Gendered Racism

Although much of the coping literature has paid little attention to Black women's experiences with the intersection of racism and sexism, there is some emerging research in this area. There have been a few studies that have sought to explore Black women's coping strategies and have found that racism and sexism are unique stressors. This research suggests that Black women use varied strategies to deal with racism and sexism ranging from active strategies (i.e., cognitive and behavioral efforts to deal with the situation), seeking social support (i.e., seeking support from friends, family, or faith), and avoidance strategies (i.e., not doing anything to resolve the situation) (Everett et al. 2010; Shorter-Gooden 2004). For example, Everett et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative exploratory study to examine the daily stressors that impact the lives of Black women and the coping strategies they employ to deal with these experiences. They found that racism and sexism were significant sources of stress for Black women and they coped with these experiences by using both approach and avoidant types of coping strategies depending on the environmental context of the situation. Although these findings add to the extant literature, Everett et al. (2010) focused on exploring Black women's daily stressors and discussions of race, gender, and class emerged from the discussions; however, they did not explicitly seek to examine the intersection of subtle forms of racism and sexism.

There have been a few quantitative studies which have attempted to explore the role of coping strategies in mediating or moderating the relations between experiences with both racism and sexism and psychological distress for Black women. For example, Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2008) conducted a quantitative study to explore the mediating role of culturally specific coping strategies on the relationship between gendered racism and psychological distress among a diverse sample of African American women. Thomas et al. (2008) found that using cognitive/emotional debriefing coping (i.e., coping with stress by avoiding thinking about the situation) partially mediated the relations between gendered racism and psychological distress, such that greater experiences with gendered racism were positively related to the use of cognitive emotional debriefing coping and subsequently heightened distress. Thus, Thomas et al. (2008) concluded that coping with stress by avoiding thinking about the situation was not an effective coping style in reducing the stress of gendered racism for Black women. These findings add to the literature by shedding light on the effect of using avoidant coping styles to deal with gendered racism. However, more research is needed to explore the coping strategies that Black women use to alleviate the negative effects of subtle experiences with oppression, which may require more complex coping strategies.

In one of the few qualitative studies examining Black women's coping strategies when dealing with both racism and sexism, Shorter-Gooden (2004) interviewed 196 African American women and found that participants used a variety of internal and external coping strategies to protect themselves against oppression. Specifically, Shorter-Gooden interviewed Black women and asked them how they coped with racial discrimination and how they coped with gender discrimination. She identified seven strategies which included: relying on prayer and spirituality, drawing on strength from ancestors, maintaining a positive self-image, relying on social support, altering outward appearance and presentation, avoiding contact with certain situations and people, and directly challenging the situation. Although Shorter-Gooden's study

adds to the literature on how Black women cope with racial and gender discrimination, her findings did not explore how Black women coped with intersecting forms of subtle oppression, such as experiences with gendered racial microaggressions.

Purpose of Present Study

Although there is ample research that links racism to mental health outcomes for African Americans and has explored coping strategies that can serve as a buffer, there is a dearth of research exploring the coping strategies that Black women use to deal with the negative effects of gendered racism. It is important to explore the ways that Black women cope with subtle forms of gendered racism to uncover sources of resilience and resistance. The purpose of this project is twofold: (1) to utilize an intersectional analytic framework (e.g., Cole 2009) to explore the unique experiences of the intersections of subtle racism and sexism; (2) to extend Sue's (2010) theory of microaggressions by exploring the ways that Black women cope with gendered racial microaggressions. Given the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative methods were an appropriate way to collect the data. Specifically, we used focus group methodology to provide an in-depth exploration of the construct of gendered racial microaggressions by addressing the following research questions: (1) what types of strategies do Black women use to cope with gendered racial microaggressions? (2) in what ways do these strategies represent resistance and resilience?

Method

Research Design

Consistent with the extant literature on microaggressions, we selected focus group methodology to explore the interpersonal process of microaggressions. Specifically, due to the subtlety and ambiguity of microaggressions, participants are able to share their experiences and receive validation from their peers about whether their experiences represent subtle forms of racism and sexism. Focus groups provide an opportunity to gather a small group of individuals in a socially oriented research design that is conducive to obtaining information about an interpersonal phenomenon (Krueger 1994). In addition, previous research (e.g., Solórzano et al. 2000; Sue et al. 2007a, b, 2008) has used focus groups to explore various types of microaggressions.

Researchers Backgrounds and Perspectives

Each of the research team members had some experience conducting research on race using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods prior to the start of this project. The first author is an African American woman who is a doctoral candidate in Counseling Psychology. She has training in African American Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, and has conducted research in the areas of contemporary forms of racism, racial identity, Black women's issues, and intersectionality. The first author adopted a constructivist paradigm for this study, which placed an emphasis on

situating the findings in a cultural context based on participants' constructions of meaning (Morrow 2005). Her lens was also guided by her Black feminist perspective and grounded in an intersectionality framework.

The second author is an African American woman who is an Assistant Professor in Sociology, African American studies, and Urban and Regional Planning. She uses multiple methods to research racial discrimination in housing, the life courses of Black women, and social mobility. The third author is a White woman who is an Associate Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning. Her research focuses on the emerging field of urban planning for diversity and difference. The fourth author is an Afro Caribbean woman who is a Research Specialist in the Division of Biomedical Sciences. Her research interests include educational inequality and race and ethnicity with a focus on social stratification and mobility, equality of opportunity, and social change. The research team met weekly during the time period of data collection and biweekly during the time period of data analysis.

Focus Group Participants

As a part of a larger study on racial microaggressions, we used inclusion criteria adapted from (Sue et al. 2007a) to screen applicants for the focus groups. The criteria for all participants were as follows: (1) self-identify as African American women, (2) born in the United States, (3) agree that racism and sexism against women of color exists in the United States in order to ensure that "the phenomenon under investigation would be present in the discussions" (Sue et al. 2007a, p. 74). Focus group participants were 17 African American women undergraduate, graduate, and professional students ranging in age from 19–39 ($M=23.59$, SD$=3.54$) years. There were eight undergraduate students in the first focus group and nine graduate and professional students in the second focus group.

The focus group facilitators included the first author (African American woman), a Black biracial woman doctoral student in counseling psychology, and an Afro-Puerto Rican woman doctoral student in recreation, sports, and tourism. Each of the research team members had some experience conducting research on race using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods prior to the start of this project. The focus group facilitators took notes during the focus group discussions and debriefed immediately following each focus group to discuss their observations, reactions, and initial reflections about the content of the discussion. The focus group facilitators discussed these observations and reactions with the entire research team and addressed any issues raised that might reflect biases and assumptions on the part of the research team.

Data Sources

Focus Group Protocol A semi-structured interview protocol was adapted from (Sue et al. 2007a) and used for the focus groups. In addition to the general and interview questions that were used in the study of Sue et al., we added several transition questions that focused on the types of experiences students encountered, the locations of these experiences, how students coped with these experiences, and what impact the experiences had on their experiences as students. Based on our interest on Black women's experiences with the intersection of subtle forms of racism and sexism, we focused our

questions on participants' experiences with intersecting racial and gender microaggressions. Sample items included: (1) What are some subtle ways that people treat you differently as an African American woman? (2) What are some of the ways that you have dealt with these experiences? (3) How did you cope with these experiences?

Demographic Questionnaire In addition to the focus group, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire about their age, gender, year in school, race, and ethnicity.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through a variety of methods including: African American student email list serves, African American Studies courses, and flyers posted and handed out on a predominantly White Midwestern campus. As an incentive, participants were offered $10 cash and were served light refreshments during the focus group as a token of appreciation. Participants signed a consent form that included permission to be audio recorded. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 min. The students' responses were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. We used pseudonyms in place of students' names to protect anonymity.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed to identify core themes using dimensional analysis, which we describe below (Charmaz 2006). The data were also coded for strategies that participants reported using to cope with the intersection of race and gender microaggressions to utilize an intersectional framework (Cole 2009). An intersectional framework includes an exploration of the simultaneous experience of both race and gender oppression. The main steps involved in dimensional analysis are: open coding (categorizing the data using a line-by-line analysis to identify dimensions and develop core categories that help describe the coping dimensions), mapping (creating a visual representation of the core categories and their interconnections), and axial coding (reassessment of the data by making additional connections between core categories) (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Ward 2005). Specifically, the first author carefully read through each transcript to explore coping strategies using a line-by-line analysis. Then, she mapped the themes based on the interconnections and overlap between the themes. Next, the first author consulted with the remainder of the research team who reviewed the mapping and axial coding as a way to provide trustworthiness of the data. After developing the core coping strategy themes, the research team developed three overarching categories based on the stress and coping literature.

Results

Based on the analysis of the Black women's focus group data, we identified five coping strategies: two resistance coping strategies (i.e., Using One's Voice as Power, Resisting Eurocentric Standards of Beauty), one collective coping strategy (i.e., Leaning on One's Support Network), and two self-protective coping strategies (i.e., Becoming a Black

Superwoman, Becoming Desensitized and Escaping). In addition, we uncovered a secondary appraisal process of Picking and Choosing One's Battles, which describes the process of making decisions about when and how to address gendered racial micro-aggressions. Black women reported using multiple coping strategies depending on the context of the situation, and the coping strategies represent interrelationships between resistance, collective, and self-protective forms of coping (see Fig. 1). Figure 1 highlights the primary and secondary appraisal process in addition to the three forms of coping. Specifically, the coping process is illustrated as a dynamic interplay between the primary appraisal process, secondary appraisal process, and the three forms of coping. Many of the participants reported using multiple forms of coping strategies depending on the context of the situation, particularly they considered issues of power and the potential impact on their well-being. Below, we provide a definition of each theme and quotes from participants to illustrate each theme. Next, we highlight the secondary appraisal process of Picking and Choosing One's Battles.

Picking and Choosing One's Battles

After the Black women in our sample encountered a gendered racial microaggression and determined that is was a stressor, the secondary appraisal process of Picking and Choosing One's Battles was initiated. This process involved making cognitive decisions about the best way to deal with a gendered racial microaggression based on the context of the situation, particularly when a Black woman was in a situation where she may not have power or may not know how to actively do something about the situation. For example, Michelle, a 24-year-old graduate student highlights an incident when she tried to pick and choose her battles in a situation with a professor who perpetrated a negative gendered racial slight against her. She stated:

> … This was something that happened last semester and I'm still dealing with how I can address it…it still comes up in my mind. I spoke to so many people about it. [I] spoke to my peers, and I still don't know how to just tell her [the professor], and so I say I'm still coping with it. I'm still waiting for that day to tell her… But you know its building up and sometimes I'm like well, I'm waiting just so that I can confront her when I'm calm, but then I can see myself addressing the issue and getting all riled up because I can see that, so I don't know…

Fig. 1 Process of coping with gendered racial microaggressions
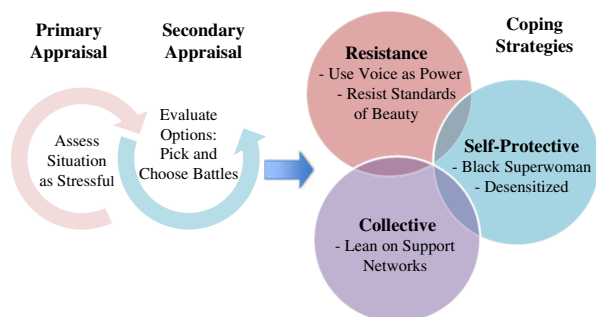
Michelle expended cognitive energy in trying to figure out the best way to deal with the situation. She would like to use her voice to speak out about the situation, but since there is a power differential, she has chosen not to directly address the situation with the perpetrator. Instead, she leaned on her support network to obtain coping strategies and to decrease her feelings of anger. This quote about choosing battles highlights the interconnections between coping strategies (resistance, collective, and self-protective) that Black women utilize to deal with gendered racial microaggressions and to buffer against the negative mental and physical health effects of these experiences. After engaging in the secondary appraisal process of picking and choosing one's battles, Black women discussed using resistance forms of coping depending on the context of the situation.

Resistance Coping

Black women identified two types of resistance coping strategies, which represented active strategies that incorporated both cognitive and behavioral ways to deal with the situation. These two coping strategies are discussed below.

Using One's Voice as Power This theme refers to the process of actively speaking up and directly addressing a microaggression to the perpetrator as a way to regain power in the situation. Alicia, a 26-year-old doctoral student shared her strategies to cope with gendered racial microaggressions. She stated:

> Since I've been in graduate school when folks come at me the wrong way, I try to express myself to them because I recognize that I should not have to manage my feelings and somebody else's. It's not fair to me… what that [speaking up] has done though is it's definitely typecast me as the angry Black woman because I am gonna say something. You're not gonna disrespect me, you're not going to make me feel like less than, and I think that has changed the way in which people perceive me.

This example highlights the active form of resistance that Alicia used to cope with negative experiences related to her race and gender. However, this quote also highlights Alicia's awareness that using her voice as power also has the potential cost of being perceived as an "Angry Black woman," which in itself is a gendered racial microaggression. Thus, Black women have to manage the psychological effects of the gendered racial slights and be aware that if they choose a resistance coping strategy they may be making themselves vulnerable to further microaggressions, which is a "catch-22."

Black women in this study also shared experiences when they spoke up about a perceived gendered racial microaggression and their concern was dismissed by the perpetrator. Penny, a 20-year-old undergraduate student shared an encounter she had (with a friend who is also a Black woman) when two White male co-workers jokingly talked about how they believed Black women are supposed to talk. She stated, "We didn't know how to respond because we didn't want to seem rude but it was kind of like okay, that's not right. So, we said something and then they laughed. They laughed about it. They sort of brushed it off." Penny continued to share that she was upset about her co-workers' comments and their subsequent minimization of her concerns, which invalidated her feelings and the gendered racial insult. Again, this

highlights the struggle that Black women face in trying to use active forms of resistance by speaking up and saying something to the perpetrator based on their perceived status as Black women.

Resisting Eurocentric Standards of Beauty This theme refers to behavioral strategies used to resist the Eurocentric standards of beauty and dominant ideologies that oppress Black women and contribute to their experiences with gendered racial microaggressions. This is a coping strategy in response to the forms of environmental (e.g., institutional, structural, cultural, and societal messages) gendered racial micro-aggressions Black women experience, such as cultural messages about what is beautiful and desirable. Some Black women in the focus groups reported resisting these Eurocentric standards of beauty. Tonya, a 26-year-old graduate student stated:

> I didn't become natural [her hairstyle] until I was an undergrad and for me personally it was taking African American studies courses… my choice to go natural was more to fight against what Black women have to face all the time, being compared to a White European model as sort of the ideal of beauty, and so that was just a personal choice that I made.

Other participants shared similar experiences of making the decision to wear their hair natural. Some women shared that their decision to wear their hair natural was a conscious decision to resist Eurocentric standards of beauty, whereas a few women reported that their decision was more about maintaining hair health.

Another way of resisting Eurocentric standards of beauty came in the form of control over one's body image. Sharee, a 39-year-old doctoral student shared the impact that being in a predominantly White college environment surrounded by a Eurocentric body ideal has had on her. She stated:

> I have gained like 30 pounds since I moved here or something, I almost wonder is it my own resistance, or… am I Black raging or something against this because I do think that I feel bombarded by this Barbie, kind of, environment... and I wonder if these are my own subconscious resistance, or coping mechanisms to this environment.

As Sharee mentioned, she may have developed a "subconscious" resistance strategy as a way to reject the images and messages about an ideal standard of thinness and beauty that she felt bombarded by in a predominantly White college environment. Instead of trying to live up to these unrealistic standards of beauty, she chose to resist against them by not conforming to them. In addition to using resistance forms of coping, Black women in our study also discussed the need to rely on collective forms of coping to sustain themselves in what they perceived as an oppressive environment, particularly when they experienced negative effects of using one's voice as power.

Collective Coping

Collective coping refers to relying on one's social support network and group-centered activities as a way of coping. Specifically, collective coping includes seeking support from friends, family, and partners.

Leaning on One's Support Network This strategy refers to Black women's intentional leaning on their social support network, which includes friends, family, and partners to cope with gendered racial microaggressions. Participants also shared the importance of having people in their support network who are Black women so they can receive validation and normalization of their experiences from other Black women. Tonya, a 26-year-old graduate student shared, "I think my coping mechanism has just been having a support network of friends here, other colleagues who've gone through the same things that I've gone through who have similar experiences that I can talk to." She went on to explain her strategy of leaning on her support network.

> We [Tonya and her friends] started a book club a couple years back… it's typically a book that focuses on Black women's issues and we get together with our bottles of wine, we talk about the book, and we vent and we laugh, and we get angry and we do whatever. We just release all of that frustration and all of that tension that we have in dealing with campus, you know, dealing with issues of race, class, and gender, and all of that. I mean, I think it's really helpful for us to get together; it's a very cathartic experience.

Tonya's sentiments highlight the multiple ways that the book club served as a way to seek social support, particularly in coping with the stress of the intersections of race, gender, and social class on a predominantly White campus.

Although some women found solace in building a support network with other colleagues who shared similar experiences, others found comfort in developing friendships with people outside of their academic community. For example, Rachel, a 24-year-old doctoral student shared:

> One way that I cope is I've made it a point to have a life that does not begin and end here at the [university]… So, I actually have friends and people I communicate with and socialize with and keep company with, you know, kinda vent with who are not in any way affiliated with the university. And that has been very helpful.

For Rachel, it was beneficial for her to develop a friendship network outside of the student body and remain connected to the local community, whereas for Tonya, it was helpful for her to have other students to vent with who had experienced similar gendered racial microaggressions on campus. In addition to leaning on one's support network, some women also found self-protective ways to cope with the stress of gendered racial microaggressions, which involved seeking to minimize the experience to avoid experiencing the costs associated with using resistance coping.

Self-Protective Coping

Self-protective coping refers to inactive strategies used to minimize the stressful cumulative effect of experiencing gendered racial microaggressions over a period of time. These strategies refer to cognitive and behavioral ways that Black women try to protect and shield themselves from the negative effects of gendered racial microaggressions. This type of coping includes two strategies, which are discussed in detail below.

Becoming a Black Superwoman This strategy refers to coping with negative gendered racial experiences by trying to become a "Strong Black Woman" and "superwoman" by taking on multiple roles and responsibilities as a way to exemplify strength and resilience. This form of coping is unique to the sociocultural and historical experiences of Black women and has embodied the notions of independence, strength, and self-reliance as a way to maintain agency in the face of environmental barriers based on race and gender. It also represents a strategy whereby Black women try to protect themselves by re-defining the negative stereotypes projected onto them from the dominant society by trying to show that they are capable of persevering in the face of adversity. For example, Sharee, a 39-year-old doctoral student shared that she has employed a number of strategies to overcome the negative stereotypes about her abilities as a Black woman in her academic program. She has become a workaholic in order to prove that she deserves to be in her program; however, her attempt at becoming a superwoman has taken a toll on her psychological and physical health. She states:

> I've become a workaholic, I actually think that's horrible for me… I'd say like two thirds of my hair broke off last year because I was so stressed… my coping has been horrible…I gained a bunch of weight… I think I'm highly functional in a low grade depression around what this environment represents for me.

Sharee's story highlights the ways that becoming a superwoman can be viewed as a positive asset, but at the same time can have a negative impact on one's health. Nancy, a 31-year-old doctoral student shared that she has been taking on multiple roles, which she recently realized have been taking a toll on her. She stated:

> I understand that my weight gain, particularly over these last couple of years has everything to do with the fact that at one point… I was the president of [a student organization], I was director of [an organization], I was dealing with my sorority, I take care of my uncle who is disabled, I just moved my sister here… I mean, I'm doing all of these things, you damn right I'm gonna eat.

Nancy shared that she has been taking on various roles and taking care of family members, in addition to taking courses, which she realized has taken a toll on her, but has allowed her to avoid dealing with the stress of gendered racial microaggressions. In addition, both Sharee and Nancy expressed the psychological toll becoming a superwoman has taken on them and their attempt to desensitize themselves and escape from their stress by becoming focused on work, caring for others, or indulging in food.

Becoming Desensitized and Escaping This strategy refers to the ways that some Black women adapt to gendered racial microaggressions, namely, by desensitizing themselves to the severity of the experience and seeking to escape as a way to cope with the situation and make the stress more bearable. This cognitive self-protective strategy involves an acknowledgement by the Black woman of the gendered racial microaggression; however, she does not use active coping to deal with the situation. Olivia, a 24-year-old graduate student stated:

> … I don't want to necessarily say I'm desensitized to all of the isms that you see, but I just, they kinda roll off me now, which, I don't necessarily think is a good thing though… but it is something that I've definitely done and I will say

that in doing that I also kept myself sane… and I think that because I relied so much on outside networks, outside of here with friends and family, I never really did get angry.

In this example, Olivia became desensitized as a way to remain "sane" and psychologically healthy despite the negative perceptions of gendered racial micro-aggressions. Becoming desensitized to "isms" has helped Olivia avoid becoming angry about every negative gendered racial slight she experiences. This has been an adaptive coping strategy for Olivia despite her awareness of the potential psychological costs associated with it.

Another way of becoming desensitized and escaping the gendered racial micro-aggressions that Black women experience is by using avoidance strategies, such as eating and sleeping to cope. Earlier, Nancy alluded to this form of coping in reference to her weight gain. She continued by discussing her struggles in making a decision to use a coping strategy to deal with the negative effects of gendered racial micro-aggressions. She stated:

> I think that when I talk about this struggle that we have as Black women, of kinda not trying to feel like we're falling into that norm can definitely move us closer [to] being in that realm of being unhealthy because I don't necessarily want to be put into this stigma of being the angry Black woman. I often find myself feeling like, damn, I want to cuss somebody out right now and because I can't, because I know that will affect probably the rest of my week then I have to hold all of that in and then unfortunately, for one of my friends, they have to hear about it later, or maybe they don't even get a chance to hear about it and so I found myself coping [by] sleep[ing]. My favorite thing to do is to just go home and go to sleep.

Many of the women talked about making decisions about which coping strategies to use based on concern about perpetuating the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype. In addition, the women also relied on friends or used escape strategies such as eating and sleeping as a way to cope with gendered racial micro-aggressions. Many Black women in our study reported using the coping strategy of becoming desensitized and escaping as an intentional way of reducing distress and maintaining their mental health and wellness. Some women felt that if they spent cognitive energy on every daily gendered racial microaggression that they experienced, it would occupy too much mental energy and hinder them from positively living their lives.

Some women reported using this strategy in conjunction with leaning on one's support network. For example, the women discussed experiences where they decided to vent to a friend about a perceived gendered racial microaggression and receive social support, which helped them alleviate acute symptoms of distress and no longer feel the need to use active resistance strategies like saying something to the perpetrator. In addition, women shared their experiences of using one set of coping strategies at one point in their lives, such as the self-protective strategies, but then realizing that was no longer adaptive for them and then switching to more active strategies, such as resistance. For example, Alice mentioned that as a graduate student she has used resistance coping strategies, but she shared,

"I found that in undergrad how I dealt with like, particularly racism and sexism and classism, is that I kept it to myself. And so when I came to graduate school the thing that I promised myself is that never again because I had so many regrets after my undergrad experience."

Thus, Alice realized that trying to desensitize and minimize her experiences was no longer adaptive for her, particularly as she developed greater awareness about various forms of oppression. This highlights the dynamic interplay between the stress and coping process for Black women who are coping with gendered racial microaggressions. Black women used a combination of coping strategies based on the context of the situation, the power dynamic between the perpetrator and the target (Black women), the resources available to them, and the potential impact on the Black women's psychological well-being. In addition, Black women sometimes changed and shifted the coping strategies they utilized as they developed a greater awareness about the impact of gendered racial microaggressions on their well-being.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore ways that Black women cope with intersections of subtle forms of racism and sexism using an intersectional framework. We explored the variety of strategies that Black women use to cope with the stress of perceived gendered racial microaggressions. We extended the research literature on coping with subtle forms of racism and sexism in three important ways: (1) We uncovered Black women's strategies of resistance, collective, and self-protective coping in response to gendered racial microaggressions, (2) We illustrated the role of picking and choosing one's battles in the stress and coping process, and (3) We highlighted the importance of power and context in the stress and coping process for Black women.

The resistance coping strategies consisted of active strategies that Black women reported using to combat perceived gendered racial microaggressions. The strategy of using one's voice as power is similar to other active and direct coping strategies that have been identified in the literature. For example, Shorter-Gooden (2004) found that Black women used the strategy of standing up and fighting back as a specific way to deal with racism and sexism. In our study, Black women discussed their desire to "fight back" using their voices as a way to take back power in a situation where they felt demeaned based on their race and gender. Women discussed the importance of using their voice because they often felt silenced in the dominant culture, such as in their academic department, in the classroom, or in the workplace.

Black women also reported being keenly aware of the dilemma they are placed in when they experience a gendered racial microaggression and decide to use their voice to stand up against an injustice. Often, Black women are further stigmatized as the "Angry Black woman" for standing up and fighting back in the situation, but some women are willing to take this risk to protect themselves against the negative effects of remaining silent. This is consistent with the sentiments of Audre Lorde (1980) in *The Cancer Journals* that even if she remained silent, she would not be safe.

Resistance was also exemplified by Black women's resistance to Eurocentric standards as a way to fight against the pressure of conforming to White standards of beauty. Many Black women in our study discussed their decisions to wear their hair natural as a way to resist conforming to Eurocentric standards of beauty. For example, many Black women in U.S. society feel pressure to straighten their hair as a way to blend in with White culture. In addition, natural hair has historically been a symbol of fighting against the oppressor and asserting pride in one's racial identity, such as the popularity of the Afro in the 1960s and 1970s during the Black Power movement (Okazawa-Rey et al. 1987). The coping strategy of resisting Eurocentric standards of beauty is similar to findings from previous research by Shorter-Gooden (2004), which found that Black women coped with racism and sexism by valuing oneself and sustaining a positive Black self-image. However, our findings differ from Shorter-Gooden in that her participants reported using the coping strategy of "role-flexing," which involved changing one's outer persona to assimilate to White culture; whereas, our participants discussed a form of active resistance to assimilating their appearance.

Although our participants primarily focused on hairstyles, a few women also discussed conscious and (potentially) unconscious efforts to maintain a larger body size as another way to resist conforming to Eurocentric standards of beauty. Resisting Eurocentric standards of beauty is similar to Collins' (1990) notion of the importance of Black women to define themselves. Black women in our study made decisions to reject the Eurocentric standards of beauty that denigrate their natural hair and body type as less attractive and desirable. By doing this, Black women reclaimed their power, self-definition, beauty, and agency in a predominantly White environment.

The collective coping strategy of leaning on one's support network is supported in much of the research on Black women. The notion of seeking social support as a way to cope with the experiences of racial and gender oppression for Black women is well-established in the research literature. For example, the idea of collective coping has been cited in several studies with Black populations (e.g., Lewis-Coles and Constantine 2006), women (e.g., Banyard and Graham-Bermann 1993), in addition to studies that have specifically examined Black women's experiences (e.g., Everett et al. 2010; Shorter-Gooden 2004). In a study exploring the racial microaggressions experienced by Black faculty, Constantine et al. (2008) also identified several strategies that Black faculty reported using to cope with racial microaggressions. Their study uncovered seeking social support as one of the primary coping strategies utilized by Black faculty to deal with racial microaggressions. Shorter-Gooden (2004) identified "leaning on shoulders" as a common external coping strategy used by Black women, which entailed relying on social support. These findings are consistent with the ways that our participants discussed leaning on their support network to cope with gendered racial microaggressions. Many women discussed the importance of having friends and family members to turn to as a way to vent about the frustrations and negative emotions elicited by perceived gendered racial microaggressions. Black women also appreciated opportunities to receive validation about their experiences and have supportive spaces where they felt they could be themselves, experience a sense of belonging, and feel safe.

Black women in our study discussed two common self-protective strategies which seemed to shield them from the negative effects of gendered racial microaggressions

to some degree. Self-protective coping strategies have been understudied in the research literature. In a study on the coping strategies used to combat long term racial discrimination experienced by indigenous people in Chile, Merino et al. (2009) identified self-protective strategies as defensive strategies that consist of an awareness of a discriminatory experience, yet there is an engagement of strategies to avoid directly addressing the experience. Edmondson Bell and Nkomo (1998) initially conducted research with African American women on "armoring," which they defined as a self-protective strategy of psychological resistance. They discussed armoring as an ongoing developmental process that includes racial socialization and serves as a protective shield to buffer Black women against the external world that devalues them. The concept of armoring has also emerged in the psychological literature to refer to an adaptive coping strategy to deal with racial oppression (Greene 1994). Although previous research identifies this strategy as a process of gendered racial socialization, we argue that a part of this process includes Black women's internalization of the "Superwoman" schema, which involves an emphasis on self-reliance and an expectation that Black women should be able to persevere in the face of adversity (Harris-Perry 2011; Woods-Giscombé 2010).

In our study, becoming a Black superwoman developed as a coping strategy to deal with the negative effects of gendered racial microaggressions. Black women in our study discussed the desire to prove that they could be successful in their academic programs, occupations, and personal relationships. Women reported feeling pressure to balance work and relationships and strive to be a "superwoman" in these various roles. In addition, the notion of being self-reliant is a common theme in research on Black women that overlaps with the idea of the *Strong Black woman* (Harris-Perry 2011) and the superwoman schema (Woods-Giscombé 2010). Edmondson Bell and Nkomo (1998) highlight the messages that Black women receive to "become strong to the point of becoming invincible" (p. 291). Coupled with these notions of being a self-reliant Black superwoman is the notion of adapting with pain and suffering by maintaining a code of silence (Edmondson Bell and Nkomo 1998), which can lead to becoming desensitized.

Becoming desensitized to the gendered racial microaggressions that Black women experience is another self-protective or armoring strategy that some women think serves a protective function. This strategy entails not letting microaggressions take a toll on one's mental and physical health by not using direct resistance strategies. This finding is consistent with previous research by Thomas et al. (2008) who found that some Black women cope with gendered racism by avoiding and minimizing the situation. Although the study of Thomas et al. (2008) concluded that this avoidance strategy was not effective for Black women in their study, our findings highlighted a more complex picture. Specifically, Black women in our study reported that they used these strategies as a form of self-protective coping to shield themselves from the cumulative negative effect of these subtle microaggression experiences. Although some researchers have conceptualized inaction as avoidance or passive coping, we argue that these women are making deliberate decisions not to use active strategies, which represents a sense of agency. Black women in our study felt that it was helpful to avoid engaging in situations that could potentially be toxic and unhealthy to their psychological and physical well-being. However, some women also discussed the psychological costs of this form of coping. Our findings indicate that Black women

made conscious decisions not to "battle" each and every perceived gendered racial microaggression they encountered as a form of self-protective coping.

To determine which gendered racial microaggressions to "battle," our findings revealed a dynamic and iterative process of coping. Black women in our study engaged in a secondary appraisal process of picking and choosing one's battles to determine which coping strategies they might employ, which supports and extends the transactional model of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1987). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1987), the secondary appraisal process consists of evaluating whether certain actions could be taken to improve the potentially harmful and stressful situation (e.g., gendered racial microaggressions) and which coping strategies might be effective in dealing with the situation (e.g., resistance, collective, or self-protective strategies). This finding is consistent with previous research by Constantine et al. (2008), which found that Black faculty coped with racial microaggressions by "choosing one's battles carefully," which involved making intentional decisions about how to challenge microaggressions. Our findings extend this research by highlighting the way that picking and choosing one's battles serves as a secondary appraisal process in coping with microaggressions. Black women used cognitive decision-making strategies to determine when and how to address gendered racial microaggressions, which were guided by contextual factors. The contextual factors that influenced Black women's decisions about if, when, or how to respond to gendered racial microaggressions included: the power of the target in the situation, whether certain stereotypes would be perpetuated by the target's response, and the overall impact on mental health and well-being.

Black women in our study shared that their coping responses to gendered racial microaggressions were based on issues of power between themselves and the perpetrator. For example, when a woman experienced a microaggression from someone in a position of power (e.g., professor or boss), she felt hesitant to use a resistance coping strategy out of fear of the potential negative consequences (e.g., receiving a lower grade in a course, losing her job). However, some women shared that they felt more comfortable confronting the perpetrator when they were not in a position of power (e.g., friend or peer). Previous researchers (e.g., Banyard and Graham-Bermann 1993) have highlighted the importance of an examination of power in the stress and coping process and argued that marginalized groups (e.g., based on race, gender, class) have less access to power and thus have less coping resources than dominant groups. Our findings extend the literature and highlight the power between perpetrator and target in addition to societal power based on one's intersecting social identities as important aspects of power in the stress and coping process. We argue that power dynamics are essential to consider in understanding Black women's coping strategies in response to the intersection of racism and sexism.

Black women's coping strategies were also affected by their awareness that certain forms of coping, such as resistance strategies, could perpetuate negative stereotypes about their race and gender. Black women in our study were aware of the costs associated with speaking up, which factored into their cognitive decision-making process about which strategies to employ in a specific situation. Another important contextual factor in the process of picking and choosing one's battles was the perceived impact on their well-being. Many of the Black women

in our study were aware of the consequences of gendered racial microaggressions and the impact on their mental health. Specifically, some women preferred resistance coping because they felt self-protective coping wouldn't help to buffer them against the stress of gendered racial microaggressions. Other women relied on self-protective coping as a way to cope with gendered racism because they felt that it was easier to either avoid potentially hostile situations altogether or to minimize the stress of a microaggression in the moment rather than letting it negatively impact them. Most of the women in our study were aware that each coping strategy had both short- and long-term benefits and costs to their well-being. Thus, most women used a combination of resistance, collective, and self-protective strategies to cope with the stress of perceived gendered racial microaggressions.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study adds to the research literature in important ways, there are some limitations. First, we collected our data on a college student sample, and thus have a limited age range of participants. It is possible that women in this age group have experienced certain microaggressions based on the college student environment that would not occur in other settings, such as workplace or professional settings, and thus have reported coping strategies that reflect unique aspects of this context. In addition, a college student sample captures limited educational and social class diversity, which could affect the results. Also, although a predominantly White setting is a context where microaggressions might be prevalent, it would also be fruitful to sample participants who live and interact in racially diverse settings to explore whether different microaggressions emerge in a different cultural context. Future research should replicate this research among Black women in different environmental and cultural contexts.

   Even though there are several benefits to focus group methodology, there are a few limitations. Although this method allowed for a social discussion about the interpersonal nature of microaggressions in a space that felt comfortable for the participants and sought to reduce the power differential between researchers and participants, it is possible that this method also limited the voices of participants who had divergent perspectives from the rest of the group. In addition, although qualitative methods were helpful in exploring the richness of Black women's coping strategies, we recommend future research using both qualitative and quantitative methods as a way to develop a more nuanced theory of Black women's coping strategies in response to gendered racism. We also encourage future researchers to develop measures of coping with subtle forms of racism and sexism to be able to assess how Black women cope with specific types of stress. Another benefit of developing a Black women's coping measure would be to explore the relationship between coping with gendered racism and psychological health outcomes. Specifically, findings have been mixed regarding the positive or negative effects of using specific coping strategies in response to racism and sexism for Black women. Thus, a coping measure would allow researchers to explore which coping strategies are most effective in reducing the negative effects of racism and sexism.

Conclusion

In summary, this study explored the coping strategies that Black women use to deal with perceived gendered racial microaggressions. Two resistance strategies, one collective strategy, and two self-protective strategies explained Black women's experiences in coping with microaggressions. Our findings are consistent with previous research on how Black women cope with the intersection of racism and sexism. However, our findings are unique in that they highlight how Black women cope with the subtle experiences of gendered racial microaggressions. In addition, we focused on using an intersectional framework to consider how Black women cope with both forms of oppression rather than exploring racial and gender oppression separately. Our study uncovers the combination of strategies that Black women use to cope with the intersections of racism and sexism. These findings underscore the importance of considering contextual factors and issues of power when exploring how Black women cope with gendered racial microaggressions.

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