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Examining the Strong Black Woman schema

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Abstract

Research about the Strong Black Women (SBW) schema shows that it can have harmful outcomes when individuals are given a specific SBW stereotype to consider (Donovan & West, 2015). I examined the benefits of the SBW schema when participants were given a schema description absent of a specific exemplar or stereotype, a description of a person characterized by mostly positive traits related to the schema (as found in pilot data). Participants then attempted to match the description with a Black woman (or not) and reported how inspiring and reassuring the protagonist made them feel. It was hypothesized that the description would be matched more with a Black woman than not and would increase inspiration. Participants did not match the description to a Black woman the most often, nor did they rate a Black woman as the most inspirational.

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EXAMINING THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN SCHEMA

By

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Abstract

Research about the Strong Black Women (SBW) schema shows that it can have harmful outcomes when individuals are given a specific SBW stereotype to consider (Donovan & West, 2015). I examined the benefits of the SBW schema when participants were given a schema description absent of a specific exemplar or stereotype, a description of a person characterized by mostly positive traits related to the schema (as found in pilot data). Participants then attempted to match the description with a Black woman (or not) and reported how inspiring and reassuring the protagonist made them feel. It was hypothesized that the description would be matched more with a Black woman than not and would increase inspiration. Participants did not match the description to a Black woman the most often, nor did they rate a Black woman as the most inspirational.

Examining the Strong Black Woman Schema

Introduction

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema has been classified as a gender-race schema that encapsulates the intersectional oppression of womanhood and Blackness. Although Black women share commonalities of womanhood with women of other races, and with Black men, for being Black, the experiences of Black women greatly differ from their counterparts. This schema draws from cultural expectations of who Black women “should” be.

Due to the historical roots of Black women in America, the Strong Black Woman was birthed out of slavery, and we can see parts of this schema have survived this era. An archetype of the time, the Mammy, was a female slave tasked with the house- and child-care of the master and mistress’ family. Though this life of servitude was not easy work, the mammy was seen as happy with life as a slave. This caricature of the fat, dark-skin, woman smiling so brightly about her life in chattel slavery plagued the covers of cookbooks, advertisements, and product packaging, and was depicted in films, even in the modern age (Wallace-Sander, 2008; Morgan, 1995). This idea of who a Black woman is was ingrained in the minds of Americans for decades to come. The mammy was the first Strong Black woman, and some of her traits have morphed into what we now know as the Strong Black Woman schema. Through the race and gender-based discrimination Black women face; the traits of strength and independence were tools for survival. Many scholars and researchers in this area have come to a general consensus that the Strong, Black Woman schema includes characteristics of unyielding strength, suppression of emotions, and caring for others, often while neglecting herself (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Meaning, Black women should have the strength to endure the turmoil

of oppression and day-to-day stressors, while not letting these intense and complex emotions get the best of them.

Deficits of the Strong Black Woman Schema

Previous research on the Strong Black Woman schema has shown overwhelmingly negative effects for Black Women. Research in this area has found that moderate to high levels of endorsement of the Strong Black Woman schema have been associated with higher rates of psychological distress. This includes higher rates of depression, stress, anxiety, binge eating, and an increase in suicidal behaviors (Castelin & White, 2022; Donovan & West, 2015; Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010). It appears as if these effects can be seen across age ranges, as the studies focused on different age ranges and the results were consistent.

Despite recognizing the hardships of the Black women around them, it is not uncommon for young women to still aspire to be strong, Black women (Watson & Hunter, 2016). Many young women described seeing their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers not showing any emotional weaknesses, yet not doing anything to support healthy coping, such as crying, taking prescribed psychiatric medication, talking with peers or family, or seeking counseling. Several participants in the Watson and Hunter (2016) study also expressed that engaging in some of these healthy coping behaviors “disqualified” them from “full SBW status”. Many Black women hold the belief that they should be able to cope with stress on their own.

Additionally, research has found that the Strong Black Woman schema can lead to difficulties in seeking help and receiving appropriate care for mental health issues. Black women who strongly endorse this schema may feel pressure to appear strong and independent and may be reluctant to seek help or disclose their issues to others due to fear of being perceived as weak.

This can result in delayed or inadequate treatment for mental health issues, leading to further negative consequences (Taylor & Kuo, 2019).

Benefits of the Strong Black Woman Schema

Although there are negative physical and psychological outcomes related to experiencing racial- and gender-based discrimination, traits related to the schemas about Black women, specifically strength and suppressing emotions were found to be protective against some of these health risks (Goosby & Heidbrink, 2013; Allen, et al., 2019; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & L'Heureux Lewis, 2006). It is thought that these traits act as a buffer against the emotional and psychological effects of these types of discrimination. If a woman believes she is strong, she may build enough resilience to continue to face these adversities, without experiencing as much negative impact on her mental health. Moreover, these traits may also have positive effects on a woman's overall well-being by increasing her self-esteem and self-efficacy. The belief in one's own strength and ability to handle difficult situations can lead to a sense of empowerment and control. Additionally, the ability to suppress emotions can be a valuable coping mechanism in certain situations, allowing individuals to remain calm in the face of stress or adversity. Overall, while discrimination and prejudice can have harmful effects on health, traits related to the Strong Black Woman schema may provide a form of resilience and protection against these negative outcomes. By embracing their strength and independence, Black women can find a sense of pride and confidence in their identity. This can lead to a sense of empowerment and control over their lives, which can have a positive impact on their overall well-being.

Role Models

Despite the drawbacks, generations of Black women continue to endorse traits related to the Strong Black Woman schema. The Black women in the Watson and Hunter (2016) study saw traits related to the schema, especially independence, and strength, as something they wanted to embody. Young girls may see these traits in older women they admire and want to grow up to be like them. The Strong Black Woman schema is notorious for its negative impact, but women do look up to those who embody the positive areas of the schema.

There is much research speaking to the benefits of role models. Stereotype threat, the belief that stereotypes of one's member group will impact others' judgment of their performance and that their performance will reflect poorly on the person's group, can be combated through role models (American Psychological Association, 2023). Awareness of stereotypes such as lower academic performance among African American, poor driving among older adults, or women being bad at math, have all been found to result in lower performance in these areas for these groups (Harrison, Stevens, Monty, & Coakley, 2006; Lambert, et al., 2015; Spencer, Steel, & Quinn, 1999). Dasgupta (2011) writes that having role models from one's ingroup can act as a "social vaccine" against stereotypes and stereotype threat, by increasing one's feelings of social belonging and protecting one's self-concept against stereotypes. As previously mentioned, stereotype threat negatively impacts performance, though seeing the success of a member of your ingroup can counteract some feelings of not belonging or stereotypes associated with one's ingroup.

There is an additional benefit to specifically, ingroup role models. Data collected by Birdsall et al. (2017), shows that for female law students, having a male instructor, and for racial-minority students, having an instructor from another race, reduced the likelihood of earning an A in a course. This effect was strongest amongst non-white female students. Marx et

al. (2009) found that in the months during the 2008 presidential election and following Barack Obama's inauguration, Black participants showed a significant increase in scores on exams scores, compared to White participants. Even if negative racial stereotypes persist, having an ingroup role model, even if you have no direct connection to them, can act as a buffer against the effects of stereotype threat.

This could explain some of the endorsement of the Strong Black Woman schema. Many stereotypes about Black women are negative, so when a young Black girl sees the accomplishments of an older Black woman, she is likely to want to embody some of the traits the older woman has.

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to further understand traits related to the SBW schema. It was hypothesized that participants will be able to match the traits related to the SBW schema to a Black woman. This study also sought to understand how participants feel inspired by someone we deem a Strong Black woman. It was hypothesized that if participants match the traits to a Black woman, they will be more inspired as compared to matching the traits to a person of a different race or gender.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through the Eastern Michigan University SONA System, which is accessed by undergraduate students who are enrolled in a psychology course. Eligibility for this study required potential participants to be aged eighteen or older, and be able to provide

informed consent. Of the 135 participants, 57.78% identified as White, Caucasian, or European American, 20.74% identified as Black or African American, and 18.51% identified as a racial minority other than Black or African American. Of the Black or African American participants, 67.85% identified as women. In total, 67.4% of all participants identified as women, while 25.92% identified as men, and 2.9% identified as non-binary.

Measures

Inspiration related to the protagonist was assessed using a five-point Likert scale, with 5 indicating high levels of inspiration and 1 indicating low levels of inspiration. Participants were asked about inspiration, admiration, affiliation, identity, and success related to the protagonist (see Appendix A).

Participants were given four people to match the biographical passage to. Options included, two White, two Black, two women, and two men (see Appendix A). Participants could choose from Barack Obama (Black man), Hillary Clinton (White woman), Michelle Obama (Black woman), and Bill Clinton (White man).

The biographical passage's relation to The Strong, Black Woman Schema was measured using a five-point Likert scale, with 5 indicating the protagonist's high association with a trait related to the SBW schema, and 1 indicating low association with a trait related to the SBW schema. Nine traits, both positive and negative, related to the schema were evaluated by participants. The traits include diligence, persistence, fearlessness, strength, independence, helpfulness, perfectionistic, stoicism, and being overly knowledgeable (see Appendix A).

Demographic variables were assessed by a brief set of questions on racial identity (White, Caucasian, or European American; Black or African American; American Indian, Native American or Alaskan Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; or self-describe), age,

gender (Male; Female; Nonbinary/third gender; self-describe), employment status, marital status, political affiliation, and educational background (see Appendix B).

Procedure

Participants read and signed a statement of consent. Participants then read a biographical passage about a protagonist, following their childhood into adulthood (as seen below). The passage is void of any personal identifiers, such as gender, race, or name.

Please read carefully.

As part of this research, we are examining how descriptions of people do two things. The first is how these people make perceivers think and feel. The second aspect is to determine how easily people can identify an individual, based on their traits, experiences, and behaviors, without the use of the person's name or identifying features (e.g., age, gender, race). In the description below, please read over the details and try to get a sense of how this person affects you, and also try to get a picture of who this person really is.

Biographical Description of our Research Subject

The subject (X) is from a working class neighborhood, where their family has lived for several generations. Growing up in this environment was hard for X. X's family all shared a small space in a house their parents rented from X's aunt. Money was tight, so X didn't grow up with new toys or fancy clothes, and finances were usually spent solely on bills. X's family helped develop a sense of both diligence and persistence in their children. Times were hard, but one's hustle could be harder. X's family emphasized that education could propel their children into success. Though X worried that appearing too

uppity or overly knowledgeable would invite bullying and harassment from their peers, X remained fearless in the quest for education and a better life.

Despite a challenging upbringing, X excelled in school. X was a top student, took advanced classes, was a member of the National Honor Society, and served as a member of the student council. X had their sights set on attending college. Teachers labeled X as an "overachiever" despite all of their success. They were poor, and neither of their parents had even graduated college themselves, so teachers dissuaded them from applying to college. X remained strong in the face of discouragement and was able to attend a top university.

University was quite difficult for X; this was a completely new environment than what they knew back home. But X was destined to succeed. X was independent as they felt the need to prove them self in this foreign environment. Although this was a hard time, X was stoic while remaining optimistic about their future. With a perfectionistic work ethic, X also excelled in university, and later received a professional degree.

Within the workforce, X became a helpful member of the community. It was at this time where X met their future spouse. Within the following decade, the couple would happily marry and welcome several children, while they each worked hard at their careers.

Note: Please read the description carefully. In a moment (about the time it should take someone to read the passage) you will be allowed to move forward in the study.

Participants were asked five questions were asked about inspiration, admiration, affiliation, identity, and success related to the protagonist. Participants rated the protagonist on the dimensions on a scale from 1= not at all or strongly disagree, to 5= extremely or strongly disagree. Following this, participants were asked to choose one of four protagonists (two males and two females; two Black and two White) they believed best matched the biographical passage. Protagonist options include Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton, Michelle Obama, and Barack Obama (see Appendix A). Following this, participants rated the protagonist on a scale from 0= not at all to 5= very much, on how much they showed or demonstrated traits related to the schema. Participants were asked to provide demographic information including their racial identity, age, gender, employment status, marital status, political affiliation, and educational background (see Appendix B). All participants were provided with a debriefing statement detailing the nature of the study (see Appendix C). If participants were interested in receiving SONA credit to be used as extra credit in their psychology course, they were asked to share their name and email address.

Results

To determine the relationship between the inspiration of the protagonist and the positive and negative traits associated with the Strong, Black Woman schema a correlation test was done. There was a strong positive correlation between positive traits and protagonist inspiration; $r(103) = 0.714, p < .001$. There was no significant correlation between negative traits associated with the schema and how inspirational participants rated the protagonist. There was also a positive moderate correlation between the negative and positive traits associated with the schema, $r(98) = 0.585, p < .001$.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare the effect of participants' scoring of positive traits on who they believed the protagonist to be. The ANOVA examining positive traits was statistically significant, $F(3,101) = 3.392, p = .021$. As seen in Table 1., the post hoc comparison found that when participants believed the biographical passage was describing Barack Obama, they rated the protagonist higher in positive traits compared to when they believed it described Michelle Obama, Bill Clinton, or Hillary Clinton.

Table 1. Mean difference in positive traits toward different exemplars believed to be described by a vignette containing traits typical of the Strong Black Woman Schema.

		Mean Difference
Barack Obama	Hillary Clinton	0.897
	Michelle Obama	-0.098
	Bill Clinton	0.323
Hillary Clinton	Michelle Obama	-0.995
	Bill Clinton	-0.574
Michelle Obama	Bill Clinton	0.421

An ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of participants' scoring of negative traits on who they believed the protagonist to be. The ANOVA examining negative traits was not statistically significant, $F(3,94) = 1.373, p = 0.256$.

Table 2. Mean difference in negative traits toward different exemplars believed to be described by a vignette containing traits typical of the Strong Black Woman Schema.

		Mean Difference
Barack Obama	Hillary Clinton	0.944
	Michelle Obama	0.184
	Bill Clinton	0.037
Hillary Clinton	Michelle Obama	-0.760
	Bill Clinton	-0.907
Michelle Obama	Bill Clinton	-0.147

When completing an ANOVA to test the relationship between whom participants believed the protagonist to be and how inspirational they believed the protagonist to be, the test yielded no conventional levels of statistical significance, $F(3,100) = 2.226, p = 0.090$. However, as seen in Table 3, when participants believed the protagonist was Barack Obama, they rated the protagonist as more inspirational, as opposed to participants who matched the biographical passage to Michelle Obama, Bill Clinton, or Hillary Clinton.

Table 3. Mean Inspiration toward different exemplars believed to be described by a vignette containing traits typical of the Strong Black Woman Schema.

	Barack Obama	Michelle Obama	Bill Clinton	Hillary Clinton
<i>M</i>	3.713	3.970	3.244	3.114
<i>SD</i>	1.093	0.758	0.951	0.951
<i>N</i>	55	33	9	7

Questions involving inspiration, admiration, affiliation, identity, and success were grouped using a principal component analysis (PCA) to determine how the biographical passage inspired participants. The PCA determined that these questions loaded onto one factor (loadings > 0.624) accounted for 66.2% of the score variance. Positive traits related to the schema (perseverance, diligence, strength, fearlessness, independence, and helpfulness) were grouped using a PCA. The PCA determined that the six positive traits loaded onto one factor (loadings > 0.567) accounted for 59.9% of the score variance. Negative traits related to the schema (perfectionism, stoicism, and being overly knowledgeable) were grouped using a PCA. The PCA determined that the three positive traits loaded onto one factor (loadings > 0.785) accounted for 66.2% of the score variance. Lastly, all traits related to the schema were grouped using a PCA, which determined that the nine traits loaded onto one factor (loading > 0.537) accounted for 50.2% of the score variance.

Linear regression was used to test if the negative traits and positive traits related to the schema significantly predicted protagonist inspiration. It was found that the negative traits did not significantly predict protagonist inspiration ($\beta = -0.086$, $t(93) = -0.994$, $p = 0.323$). It was found that the positive traits did significantly predict protagonist inspiration ($\beta = 0.781$, $t(93) = 9.06$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine traits related to the Strong Black Woman schema, specifically to understand how these traits can be identified in others, and how inspirational those who fit the schema tend to be. It was hypothesized, that when the identity of a protagonist was anonymous, a protagonist who had traits related to the schema could easily be identified as a Black woman. It was also hypothesized that participants would match the

protagonist to a Black woman and would rate her high in inspirational qualities. This hypothesis was not fully supported.

In terms of which protagonist was matched the most, 51% of participants matched the biographical passage to Barack Obama. 35.5% matched the passage to Michelle Obama, 7.4% matched it to Bill Clinton, and 5.9% matched it to Hillary Clinton. In assessments of inspiration and rating of positive traits, Barack Obama was rated the highest and was also rated the lowest on negative traits. Similarly, Michelle Obama was rated the second highest in inspiration and positive traits, and the second lowest in negative traits. Although traits related to the Strong Black Woman schema aren't exclusive to this demographic, this could suggest that these traits are more identifiable in Black protagonists compared to White protagonists. The stark contrast of the percentage of participants matching the passage to Black protagonists compared to White protagonists could support this hypothesis.

Previous research on the Strong Black Woman schema emphasizes negative outcomes, which was not consistent to the findings of this study. The Black woman protagonist, regardless of how she was identified as by participants (Black or White, woman or man) was rated highly overall in terms of her positive traits and her levels of inspiration. When looking at people to admire, we tend to focus on their positive qualities, while ignoring their negative qualities, which is largely what participants did.

In terms of traits related to the Strong Black Woman schema, results of this study were consistent with results of previous studies. All traits chosen to be included in this study were determined by participants in a pilot study, who were asked to rate a longer list of traits that could have been associated with the schema. Traits with the highest rating were used in this study. Research by Jones, Harris, and Reynolds (2020) found that college-aged Black women

most often associated strong, Black women as strong, resilient, independent, and emotionally contained, which was also found in this study. Abrams et al. (2014) also found that participants emphasized independence, resilience, and strength, when identifying strong, Black women.

Study Limitations

Although there were promising results in this study, there were some limitations. Given the age range of the participant pool (a large majority being 18-24 years old), participants may have been more familiar with Barack Obama or Michelle Obama, due to the timeline of participants' potential awareness of politicians and Barack's last presidency. Although Hillary Clinton had a more recent presidential campaign, she was matched the least often. It could also be argued that participants may be familiar with the biography and know whom to match it to. Although the biography described Michelle Obama's life, more participants matched it to Barack Obama. Also, it may be difficult for participants to guess the race and gender of a made-up protagonist. An additional limitation of this study was the order of the questionnaire. Participants were asked to match the biographical passage to a protagonist, then answer questions about them, which could have affected how participants rated the protagonist. How the participant feels about the matched protagonist may have impacted their ratings, instead of the passage having a sole impact.

Conclusion

In a quantitative research setting, deleterious outcomes have been associated with women who endorse the Strong Black Woman schema, while qualitative research has shown that women were able to find empowerment in qualities related to the schema. This study attempted to understand these qualities and understand how participants feel inspired by strong Black women.

Although a Black Woman was not identified the most often by participants, nor was she seen as the most inspirational, the Black protagonists were matched the most often and seen as the most inspirational by participants regardless of racial background. For Black women who see these qualities in the women around them, or others who admire these qualities in Black women who make history, it is crucial that we all can see more Strong Black women. Changing the narrative of what makes a strong Black woman, by erasing the stigma of seeking help while keeping qualities related to strength and independence, can potentially diminish some of the harmful outcomes we tend to see in women who endorse the schema.

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Appendix A

1. To what degree do you feel inspired by X?

	Not at all inspired	Extremely inspired
--	---------------------	--------------------

	0	5
--	---	---



2. X is the type of person I would want as a mentor or peer.

	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
--	-------------------	----------------

	0	5
--	---	---



3. I admire an aspect about X and their story.

	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
--	-------------------	----------------

	0	5
--	---	---



4. I would like to be like X in some aspects.

	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
--	-------------------	----------------

	0	5
--	---	---



5. After reading X's story, how confident do you feel you can also succeed?

	Not at all confident	Extremely confident
--	----------------------	---------------------

	0	5
--	---	---



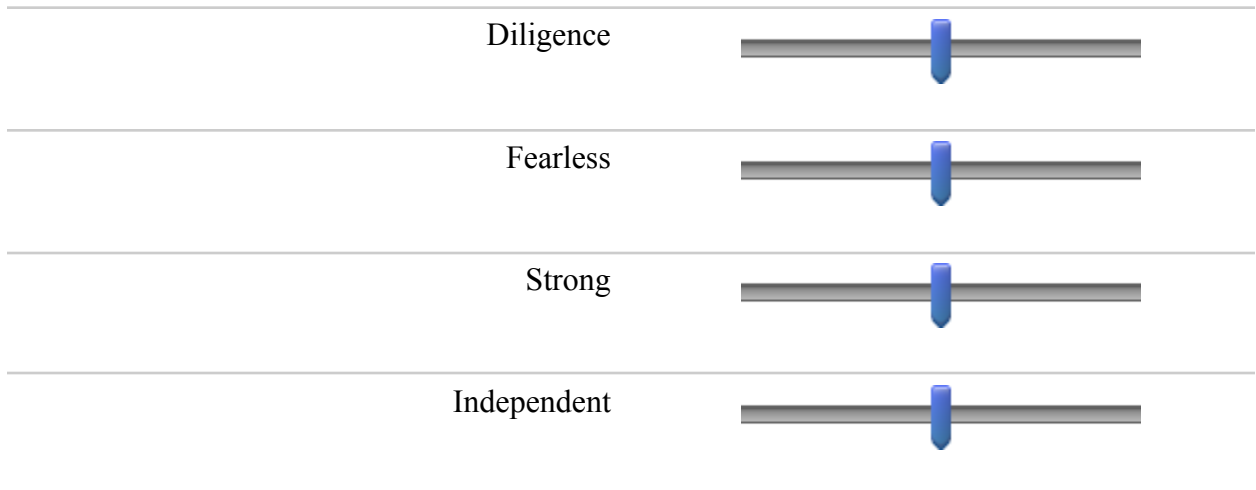
Now that you have read the biography of our selected individual, we want you to do your best to identify who you feel this biography was about. Please indicate which of the individuals below you feel best matches the biography.

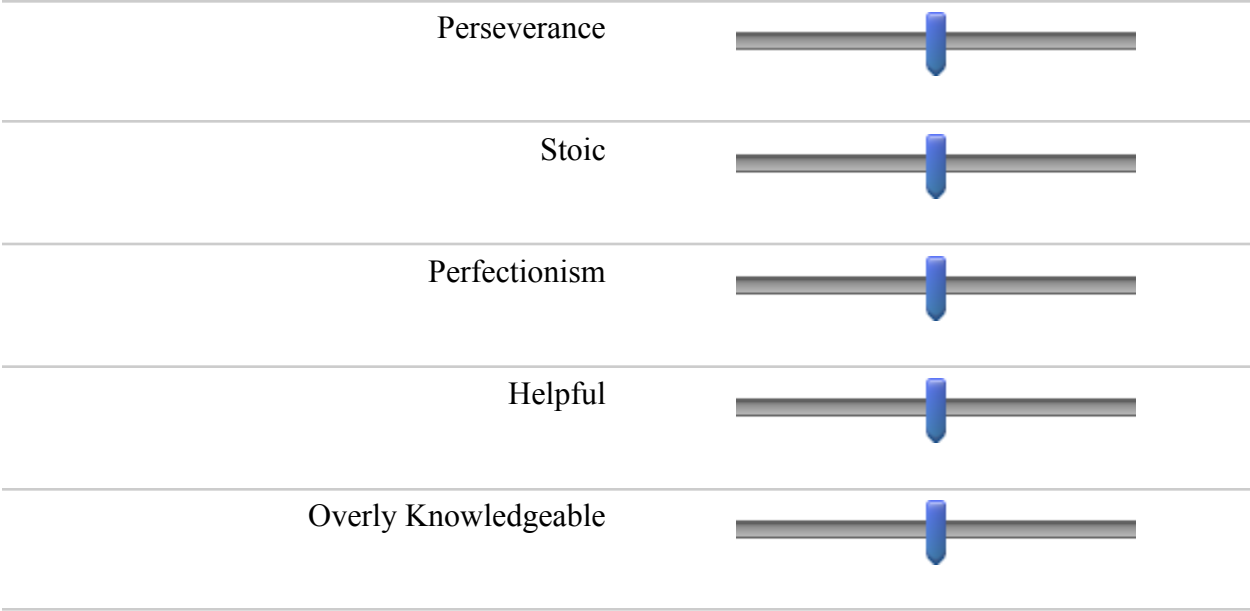
- Barack Obama (1)
- Hillary Clinton (2)
- Michelle Obama (3)
- Bill Clinton (4)

Based on the biography, please rate how much the exemplar showed/demonstrated each of the following traits.

	Not at all	Very Much
--	------------	-----------

	0	5
--	---	---





Appendix B

Which race(s) do you identify as:

- White, Caucasian, or European American (1)
 - Black or African American (2)
 - American Indian, Native American or Alaskan Native (3)
 - Asian (4)
 - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
 - Latinx (6)
 - Prefer to self-describe (7)
-
- Prefer not to say (8)

What best describes your employment status over the last three months?

- Working full-time (1)
- Working part-time (2)
- Unemployed and looking for work (3)
- A homemaker or stay-at-home parent (4)
- Student (5)
- Retired (6)
- Other (7)

What is your current marital status?

- Married (1)
- Living with a partner (2)
- Widowed (3)
- Divorced/Separated (4)
- Never been married (5)

What is your political affiliation?

- Democrat (1)
- Independent (2)
- Republican (3)
- Apolitical/ Not interested in politics (6)
- Other (4)
- Prefer not to answer (5)

What is your current major (list only 1)?

How many credit hours have you completed?

- 0-24 (1)
- 25-50 (2)
- 51-75 (3)
- 76-100 (4)
- 101-124 (5)
- More than 124 (6)

Appendix C

Debriefing Statement (Please read).

Thank you for participating in this study! We hope you enjoyed the experience. This form provides background about our research to help you learn more about why we are doing this study. Please feel free to ask any questions or to comment on any aspect of the study by emailing the faculty advisor for this project, Dr. Rusty McIntyre, at rmcinty4@emich.edu.

As you know you read a generic description of an individual without any identifiers to whom the person may be and then rated that person on a series of questions, including matching up the identities of the person with the stories. In this research, the description of the person was a generic description based upon the typical traits that other people expect that strong black women might possess. These traits should provide people with a stronger indication of who the story might be about and how the person makes the feel. This work is important in understanding how people might view others, and how those others could serve as role models or a exemplars for members of the social category under study, in this case African-American Women.

It is important to note that sometimes people can feel a bit upset, anxious, or even distressed when completing research of this nature. If you feel that you are upset, or would feel better speaking to someone please consider contacting either the Primary Investigator (Rusty McIntyre, at 734 536-4105; rmcinty4@emich.edu) or contacting the professionals at the Counseling and

Psychological Services Center (CAPS) at 734 487-1118; counseling.services@emich.edu; or going there directly at 1075 N. Huron River Drive (CAPS is in the new buildings at the North end of EMU's main campus).

The data from this study will be presented in research journals, however we want to assure you that no identifying information will be used. All data will be kept secure, only to be analyzed by trained researchers. Nonetheless, if you feel uncomfortable with this study, your participation in this is still voluntary. If you wish, you may withdraw after reading this debriefing form, at which point all records of your participation will be destroyed. You will not be penalized if you withdraw. You can also feel free to contact the investigator with any further questions.

Investigator Contact Number/Email: Rusty McIntyre (734)536-4105 rmcinty4@emich.edu If you want more information about your rights as a participant or want to report a research-related harm, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at (734) 487-3090.