Listening to Myself, Those Before, and Those Around Me:
A Black Feminist Investigation of Strength and Intimacy in a
Black Women's Virtual Support Group

by

Haley Lillian Sparks

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Doctoral Committee:

     Associate Professor Sara I. McClelland, Chair
     Associate Professor Rona Carter
     Barbara M. Eagle, The Women's Center of Southeastern Michigan
     Professor Isis H. Settles
     Professor L. Monique Ward

Haley Lillian Sparks

hasparks@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-0242-9447

DEDICATION

To my mother. I'm me because of you.

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PREFACE

Writing What I Do Not Yet Fully See

Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive

standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a multifaceted,

African-American women's intellectual tradition. . .if such a rich intellectual tradition

exists, why has it remained virtually invisible until now? Why are African-American

women and our ideas not known and believed in?

–Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*

   In this dissertation, I uplift the intellectual traditions (i.e., ways of knowing) of

myself and other Black graduate student women in a virtual support group entitled,

Sister Space. The objective of this project is to investigate virtual support group work,

emotional intimacy and strength for Black graduate student women. In doing so, I offer

insights and recommendations to both researchers and clinicians (e.g., support group

facilitators) working with Black women. I largely rely on Collins' Black feminist thought

(1986, 1989, 2000), endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000, 2008) and those

who also rely on these approaches to conduct the current investigation. Black feminist

thought is a field of knowledge that "[places] Black women's experiences and ideas at

the center of analysis" to uplift and make visible those who "occupy societally

denigrated categories" (e.g., Black women) (Collins, 2000; p. vii). Within Black feminist

epistemology, Collins (2000) highlights the lived experience as a valid (and previously

undervalued in white, western structures) criterion of meaning, dialogue as a rigorous

form of knowledge production and Black women as premier agents of knowledge. This

dissertation is grounded in the notion that my lived experiences as a Black woman and the dialogues I had with other Black women within this Sister Space project are invaluable forms of knowledge. Endarkened feminist epistemology centers the values of African ascendant people, such as spirituality and reciprocity, "to take into account new possibilities in our work, to remember intuition, and to pay special attention to what [Black women] can offer in terms of concrete ways to read/re-read our current situations in the world—and write them as well" (Dillard, 2008; p. 277-8). Within this epistemological approach, Dillard (2008) offers that centering "living Black voices" is key to producing liberating and affirming knowledge. By honoring the voices and lived experiences of Black women, Black and endarkened feminist principles provide means to liberate historically marginalized populations (e.g., Black women) (Collins, 1990, 2002; Dillard, 2000, 2008; Gist, 2016). Through my conduction of Sister Space, observations of and interviews with Sister Space group members, and analysis of my own experiences, I center Black graduate student women's voices and perspectives on virtual support group work, emotional intimacy and notions of strength. I encourage you to listen.

Within Black feminist thought, the Black woman has been described as the "outsider within," someone who has "a special standpoint on self, family, and society" but still might not feel as though her experiences have been centered in many contexts (e.g., traditional eurocentric academia) (Collins, 1986). In recent Black feminist accounts, Black women still report feeling out of place and restricted in academic spaces (e.g., feeling "misunderstood, misused and perpetually exhausted"; p. 19) resulting in them feeling the need to "shapeshift" (Overstreet, 2019). Similarly, the

women in Sister Space, report needing to "play different roles" or "wear many hats" to survive in many environments in the US (e.g., academia). They are brilliant thinkers across STEM fields, social sciences and the humanities in world-renowned academic programs. And yet, they speak on restrictions still stemming from traditionally upheld norms and standards of professionalism that center whiteness (Orelus, 2020; Pennington & Prater, 2016). As a Black woman graduate student, I too feel those restrictions and will further reflect on my experiences in this dissertation.

The women of Sister Space were all Black women in graduate school. At the time of this project's data collection, at least some parts of them were deeply steeped in academia. Academia has often been identified as a particularly restrictive and invalidating environment for Black women (Bell et al., 2021; Evans, 2008; Grey & Williams-Farrier, 2017; Harris, 2020; Henry, 2017; Miles, 2012; Pitt et al., 2015; Rasheem et al., 2018; Robinson, 2013; Walkington, 2017; Washington et al., 2021). In her Black feminist investigation of her experiences in academia, Overstreet (2019) observes:

> The intersection of multiple marginalized identities is a challenging space to navigate within the larger space of academia. Academics who are not White, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender men will inevitably find themselves Othered in complex ways. I am a conglomeration of marginalized identities. As such, I often find myself in spaces in which I simply do not fit. I am a woman in a patriarchal society. I am a Black woman, surrounded by White women.

At the present moment, Black women in academia and clinical spaces still report having to leave their bodies to function in these systems (e.g., the classroom; therapy)

(Johnson, 2020; Osei, 2019; Overstreet, 2019). Despite scholars such as Collins (1986) and Dillard (2000) imagining, theorizing and writing in pursuit of further liberation for Black women within and without academia, some Black women currently do not see themselves leading fully liberated existences. I am one of those women. So often, we still simply do not fit (Overstreet, 2019).

As I listened to and interacted with Black women of noteworthy educational privilege in Sister Space (i.e., in various fields of academia), I found that we are not at "home" here. Boylorn (2016) offers that "home" is a place where Black women can "not be under surveillance. Home is a place we create with our own hands and experience when nobody is looking" (p. 45). Black women are so often not at home. Here in graduate school. Here in primarily white institutions. Here in this nation. The nation that many of us were born in and whose ancestors built. We are not at home. Collins (2003) observes:

> Because Black women have had to struggle against white male interpretations of the world in order to express a self-defined standpoint, Black feminist thought can best be viewed as subjugated knowledge. The suppression of Black women's efforts for self-definition in traditional sites of knowledge production has led African American women to use alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for articulating the core themes of a Black feminist consciousness (p. 48).

Oral narratives have long served as a tradition for Black women to self-define and center their stories (Davis, 2016; Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Henry, 2017; Nkealah, 2016; Patterson et al., 2016; Robinson, 2005; Robinson, 2013). In this dissertation, I will

present the complicated and lengthy stories of the women of Sister Space, myself included. I will not allow Black women's accounts and brilliant interpretations to be further lost. When I can, I will present my complex and layered reflections. I will do so in the midst of my unresolved fears. I am writing this so we can continue to strive to be more at home. I am writing this for the burgeoning Black women scholars and clinicians behind me who still do not see fully liberated spaces in which they can conduct their work. I am writing for Black women, so that they may see, live and be their most authentic, uninhibited selves moving forward.

River/Lineage of Knowledge

The inception, data collection, intellectual labor, translation and presentation of this Sister Space project are grounded in the idea of a shared lineage or river of knowledge. In her description of an Afrocentrist feminist epistemology, Collins (2003) offers that "all views expressed and actions taken are thought to derive from a central set of core beliefs that cannot be other than personal" (p. 65). That is, there is a notion grounded in a shared knowledge among individuals. Afrocentric perspectives (Shiele, 1996) are grounded in the understanding that the human identity is a collective identity and that all human beings and our forms of knowledge are connected to each other. In this approach, the spiritual nature of these themes is not grounded in one religious tradition, but rather a collective and inclusive framework (Jackson, 1995; Shiele, 1996). Endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000, 2008) emphasizes both spirituality and community. In this approach, "self-definition forms one's participation and responsibility to one's community", and "research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose" (Dillard, 2008, p. 280).These perspectives have been used

in qualitative inquiries of Black women's experiences, in addition to clinical approaches to social work with Black individuals (Hopkins & Meyers, 2018; Jackson, 1995; Rodgers, 2017; Shiele, 1996, 1997; Stewart, 2004; Williams, 2017). I will further use these perspectives in my investigation of my own experiences as well as other Black graduate student women in Sister Space.

In a 2020 conversation on "Permission to Imagine Radical Love and Pleasure," Sonya Renee Taylor observed, "I am part of a spiritual lineage, and if I tune into the frequency, I will receive it." In that same conversation, adrienne maree brown noted that there are rivers of our ideas; we do not own them. She offers that there is a collective of ideas, notions and intrinsic knowledge that is deep within us by virtue of being human. If we are listening closely, we will find that that intuitive knowledge is already within. Throughout the process of conceptualizing, birthing, interpreting and writing this project, I have been plagued with the notion that I will be taking that which is not my own. That the thoughts and interpretations that I have as I swim through Black women's experiences with virtual support group work, emotional intimacy and notions of strength will somehow reveal themselves as stolen from greater thinkers before me. Am I unknowingly plagiarizing the thoughts and ideas of those very beings that I claim to admire and uplift?

The very week that I expressed this concern to my advisor, I later attended the aforementioned talk on radical love and pleasure that Taylor and brown offered. In that talk, Taylor expressed the very fear of reading bell hooks and panicking that the profound thought that she had had a week prior was somehow taken from hooks without her knowledge or consent. In endarkened feminist and healing methodologies,

Dillard (2008) highlights the sacred phrase, "full circle," "primarily a practice ordered by the spirit, or authorized by spirit and executed by someone who recognizes that she cannot, by herself, make happen what she has been invited towards" (Some, 1997, as cited in Dillard, 2008). My fears had come full circle. Quite quickly, I might add. Both deeply validated and further concerned that I had now somehow taken Taylor's idea of the very same concern, I was quickly calmed by what I knew I already knew: This knowledge—intuition; insights; inner wisdom; ways of knowing; the epiphanies that strike us in the middle of the night—is neither Taylor's, nor brown's, Collins' nor Dillard's, nor my own. It is ours. And no one can give it to us or take it away. It is inside of us, and it always has been. This type of deep spiritual knowing cannot be imparted; it can only be uncovered from within. That is to say there is a shared knowledge that flows through us as a collective being (Dillard, 2008). This knowledge is deeply ingrained in us by nature of existing as beings in this universe, and it is immensely powerful.

In her 2017 book, *Emergent Strategy,* adrienne maree brown speaks of our "collective full-bodied intelligence" and how she is intrinsically aware that the concepts and ideas she is speaking on are nothing new. It is the knowledge that has flowed in our shared intellectual river since our beginning. It is not the objective to obtain this knowledge that is already within. Rather, it is the journey to uncover it, recognize it and somehow translate it (brown, 2017). My hope is that the way I translate and communicate what I know and what the Black women of Sister Space know may help you to further uncover some of what you already know as well. Above all, I hope that a glimpse into my process of giving myself permission to know what I already knew may help you to do the same.

As you read this work, know that these are the personal experiences of myself and Black women who participated in the virtual support group (i.e., Sister Space) for this project. They might not be your own. As I offer my recommendations, know that they might not resonate. Oftentimes, marginalized women in scholarly spaces are expected to be able to speak to and for all marginalized groups and individuals (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012). In this work, I offer my personal experiences and recommendations and some insights from Black graduate student women who have entrusted me with their words. I do not claim to speak to all experiences, including those of other Black women. Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986, 1989, 2002) highlights the importance of "self-definition" and "self-valuation" in the communication and the presentation of the "authentic" experiences of Black women. Collins (1986) argues:

> when Black women define themselves, they clearly reject the taken-for granted assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to describe and analyze reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects (p. s17).

For me, the process of self-defining in this project involved giving in to the inkling deep inside. The one that has gently nudged me in a direction that didn't quite make sense in contrast to what the white, eurocentric, patriarchal educational systems I often existed in were telling me. The nurturing voice not in my head, but deep within my soul. This process involved *listening* to that voice, above all. Listening is key in this entire project. Listening to that inner voice and listening to Black women. My hope is that through listening, those who this dissertation resonates with will allow themselves to connect to

and trust their intuition. Their own essence and intrinsic brilliance. The inner wisdom and knowledge that stems from their humanity, their personal "self-definitions," not the various roles they play or hats they wear. Throughout this project, I myself play a number of roles: researcher, graduate student, social worker/clinician, listener, strong Black woman. What started as an attempt to merge those roles for this project resulted in me connecting to my humanity as I watched and learned from other Black women connecting to their own. Through listening to this piece, I hope you further connect with something from within as well.

Self-Study

In her Black feminist investigation of systems in education, Cressler (2020) employed a qualitative self-study to use student focus group interviews triangulated with her personal experiences. Self-study is a method which centers on the self and her personal experiences (LaBoskey, 2004). Self-studies are interpretive (Crotty, 1998) such that they are used to understand the author's own experiences. This work is not linear, but recursive, meaning it requires going back to the beginning several times in order to make sense of the data. Consequently, data analyses and interpretations are intertwined (LaBoskey, 2004). For this Sister Space project, I employ self-study to weave my experiences with previous literature and the experiences of the other Black graduate student women in a virtual support group. This weaving is a very concrete demonstration of my analytic process for this group. It was both deeply personal and painstakingly iterative. In order to honor that process, I present my reflections, recommendations, analyses and findings as my authentically and intricately woven tale. In *Black Feminist Thought,* Collins (2000) offers that our attempts at making sense of

our personal experiences often "are characterized by internal instability, are contested,
and are divided by competing emphases and interests" and can be seen as "shifting
mosaic of competing ideas" (p. x). In this dissertation, I present to you my own mosaic
of competing ideas.

Historical Context

In her Black feminist scholarship, Collins (1990, 2000, 2002) asserts that we
cannot conduct scholastic inquiries without considering the historical context in which
they occur. Sister Space was a direct response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, a
very key historical context. Originally an in-person support group for partnered Black
women, I shifted to a virtual support group for Black graduate student women to
eliminate risk of exposure to the potentially deadly virus. COVID-19 disproportionately
affects Black individuals in the US (Shah, Sachdeva, & Dodiuk-Gad, 2020). In an
investigation on racism, COVID-19 and health inequities, Abbasi (2020) reports:

> In the Chicago area, the parts of our area that have high numbers of essential
> workers—on the South Side, the southwest side, the western suburbs—match
> very well with low-income working-class communities and black and brown
> communities. So I would argue that all of these structural factors, the things that
> force people to have hypertension like racism; the jobs that people are forced to
> have; the fact that if a member of the family gets sick, they don't have a guest
> house or a basement for someone to stay in; that you have multigenerational
> households in relatively small spaces…. All of these structural factors really help
> account for these horrible differences in case rates and death rates (p. 427).

Given that Black women, in particular, face financial, physical, and emotional challenges (Chandler et al., 2021; Walton, Campbell and Blakey, 2021) and women academics face particular challenges (e.g., invisibility) (Gabster, van Daalen, Dhatt, & Barry, 2020) during the age of COVID-19, the global pandemic is an important historical context in which to understand the experiences of Black women academics.

The week before the women of Sister Space met as a group for the first time, George Floyd was killed by a white male police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Footage of Floyd's murder circulated the internet, months after the shootings of Breonna Taylor in her home in Louisville, Kentucky and Ahmaud Arbery on a jog near Brunswick, Georgia. In this moment, I acknowledge that these are some of the names of the Black individuals that we know. I want to honor those whose names we do not know as well. They deserve to be seen, and they deserve to be heard.

In response to continued police brutality, the murders of [unarmed, not that this should matter] Black people, and anti-Blackness in the US and worldwide, protests erupted across the globe. The Black Lives Matter movement of summer 2020 is a historical context that cannot be ignored when considering the lives of Black women in academia (Thompson, 2020). Despite a long history of Black women academics' activism against anti-Blackness, including the current Black Lives Matter movement, anti-Black racism and white supremacy are still prevalent in academia and have negative effects on Black women's wellbeing (Bell, Berry, Leopold, Nkomo, 2021).

When reflecting on the impact of historical contexts within her own work, Collins (2000) reflected:

When I considered that Black feminist thought is currently embedded in a larger

political and intellectual context that challenges its very right to exist, I decided

not to stress the contradictions, frictions, and inconsistencies of Black feminist

thought. Instead I present Black feminist thought as overly coherent, but I do so

because I suspect that this approach is more appropriate for this historical

moment (p. x).

Collins (2000) went on to express her desire for future Black feminist scholars to be able

to present their work in a way that can "emphasize disjunctures." Despite writing this

dissertation decades after Collins expressed her hesitation to present a disjointed

narrative in *Black Feminist Thought,* I still at times feel apprehensive and tense about

presenting inconsistent or unpolished conclusions. In a country and world where Black

lives mattering is still up for debate in the eyes of many, I don't always feel safe

exposing the complexities of my findings. When my very existence and experiences are

still questioned, I do not always feel that I can present the full depth of my complicated

cognitions. At times, you will see the vulnerable sides of me and my further

investigations of complicated, nuanced topics within Sister Space. In this dissertation, I

push myself to engage with contradictions within myself (e.g., competing roles I play)

and those things I set out to further examine (i.e., virtual support groups for Black

women; strength; emotional intimacy). If it ever feels that I do not, know that this was a

very deliberate choice to prioritize my safety above all else. As Collins (2000) reflects,

"safety" "is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance" (p. 111). This

dissertation is a demonstration of my own resistance. I now invite you to listen.

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ABSTRACT

Black and endarkened feminist epistemologies are grounded in the understanding that Black women have ways of knowing and knowledge production that have been overlooked and undervalued in patriarchal, white systems (e.g., academia) (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2008). In this dissertation, I uplift those ways of knowing. Sister Space is a virtual support group in which I aimed to investigate emotional intimacy, notions of strength and online support group work for Black graduate student women. Using my personal experiences and insights facilitating Sister Space, I center the knowledge and experiences of Black graduate student women. I highlight the various roles I have played in my own life as a Black academic woman in the US, including the support group facilitator (i.e., clinician) and Strong Black woman (Abrams et al., 2014). I highlight complicated scenarios that arose for me conducting Sister Space (e.g., addressing latecomers to group) and offer my recommendations for facilitating virtual support group work (e.g., working with a co-facilitator). I present some of the ways in which "strength" was instilled in me through past experiences (e.g., my mother's passing) and the tensions in conceptualizations of strength for Black graduate student women (e.g., finding comfort in being "strong," even if it means caring for others in spite of oneself). Despite previous literature suggesting that pressures to be strong may inhibit emotional intimacy (i.e., intimacy) among Black women (Davis, 2015), I observe and present the ways in which Black graduate student women establish, demonstrate, and conceptualize intimacy (e.g., having another Black woman who one can "really talk to") within Sister Space. Throughout this dissertation, I stress the importance of listening

to Black women and valuing their ways of knowing, including intuition, and knowledge

production.

Keywords: Black women, Black feminist thought, virtual support groups, strong Black

woman, emotional intimacy

CHAPTER I

Introduction

I knew that when an individual Black woman's consciousness concerning how she

understands her everyday life undergoes changes, she can be empowered. Such

consciousness may stimulate her to embark on a path of personal freedom, even if it

exists initially primarily in her own mind. If she is lucky enough to meet others who are

undergoing similar journeys, she and they can change the world around them. If ideas,

knowledge, and consciousness can have such an impact on individual Black women,

what effect might they have as a group?

--Patricia Hill Collins, Preface to the Second Edition of *Black Feminist Thought*

Black and endarkened feminist epistemologies (Collins, 2003, Dillard, 2000,

2008) center the lived experiences of Black women in pursuit of healing and liberating

historically marginalized populations. These methodological approaches are grounded

in the notion that we as Black women have our own ways of knowing and knowledge

production that have historically been undervalued in white patriarchal systems of

education (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2008). This project centers that way of knowing. It

centers my knowledge as a Black woman, the knowledge of other Black women in

graduate school, and the knowledge of Black women scholars before me.

Black academic women have had to "shapeshift" and play multiple roles to

survive in the US (Overstreet, 2019). This is often because we do not feel "at home" in

eurocentric environments of primarily white institutions, white supremacy and the larger

US context (Boylorn, 2016). One of the roles many Black women play is the strong

Black woman, exhibiting what has been identified as the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema (Nelson, Caremil, & Adeoye, 2016). The SBW schema is a phenomenon that compels many Black women to appear indestructible and care for others at one's own expense, avoid help-seeking, and self-silence (Abrams et al., 2014; Watson & Hunter, 2016). Although the SBW schema is not a given for all Black women equally, there is some evidence indicating that most Black women in the U.S. may identify with the image to varying degrees (West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016). Recent investigations of the SBW schema report novel notions of strength for Black women in higher education (e.g., help seeking) and encourage further investigation of potentially evolving definitions of strength for Black women (Jones, Harris, & Reynolds, 2021). In this dissertation, I examine the nuances of Black graduate student women's conceptualizations of strength by listening to their personal experiences (e.g., in one-on-one interviews). I also investigate the tensions within my personal experiences with traditional demonstrations of strength for Black women (e.g., avoidance of help seeking; Watson & Hunter, 2016) and highlight that many of these demonstrations might not stem from a desire to be strong.

Some literature suggests that in response to the pressures to appear strong (e.g., emotionally invulnerable) Black women may struggle with emotional intimacy (i.e., intimacy) even amongst other Black women (Davis, 2015). Emotional intimacy is defined by trust, personal validation, and mutual self-disclosure and expressions of affection (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Garfield, 2010). While emotional intimacy has been identified as a construct that the SBW schema may impede among other Black women (Davis, 2015), it is seen as integral for interpersonal well-being

(Dandurand & Lafontaine, 2013; Schoebi & Randall, 2015; Yoo et al., 2014). While emotional intimacy has been previously defined and examined in social science literature (Brown, 2015; Yoo et al., 2014), little social science research investigates how Black women conceptualize and demonstrate the construct. In this dissertation, I investigate how Black graduate student women (including myself) establish, determine, and exhibit emotional intimacy both with others and within themselves. I do this by both asking in one-on-one interviews (e.g., "Can you tell me about a relationship you have that feels emotionally intimate?") and observing in a virtual support group (i.e., Sister Space). I present my personal experiences creating and at times disrupting emotional intimacy with others within Sister Space and my steps to emotional intimacy with myself.

In-person group therapy or support groups have been identified as a viable and beneficial therapeutic intervention option for Black women who may feel the pressure to be strong or "invincible" (Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018). These groups are useful in fostering connectedness when women may feel alone or isolated, developing women's social networks beyond that of their current environments, enhancing women's understanding of their intersecting identities, and empowering women through mutual sharing that may lead to support of their specific experiences (Jones, 2004; Short & Williams, 2014). The support gained in a group setting might be particularly useful for Black women during this time as Black women have felt unsupported and isolated both before and during the current COVID-19 pandemic (Walton, Campbell, Blakey, 2021).

In response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic, a multitude of outpatient healthcare practices transitioned to virtual care (Mehrotra et al., 2020). Virtual or online groups have been identified as spaces that offer support and care for a number of

communities (e.g., healthcare workers) (Andalibi, Haimson, De Choudhury, & Forte, 2016; Davis & Calitz, 2016). While in-person groups have been identified as useful tools for the support of Black women (Jones & Warner, 2011), little research exists investigating remote options for Black women's mental healthcare (Walton, Campbell, Blakey, 2021). This is a particularly notable gap in social science and clinical literature regarding telecare in relation to COVID-19, as there has been some research indicating that COVID-19 disproportionately affects Black individuals in the US (Shah, Sachdeva, & Dodiuk-Gad, 2020), and Black women, in particular (Chandler et al., 2021; Walton, Campbell, Blakey, 2021). Walton, Campbell and Blakey (2021) observe:

> Black women, in particular, are facing challenges financially, physically, and mentally during this unprecedented time. Between serving as frontline workers, being concerned about contracting the virus, contributing to their families financially, and worrying about their loved ones' health, Black women are experiencing great strain on their mental health and well-being (p. 247).

Consequently, Black women may need specific resources tailored for their mental health, well-being and support during this time (Walton, Campbell & Blakey, 2021). This project offers some detailed considerations for the creation and facilitation of a virtual support group centering the care of Black women.

In the current study, I present Sister Space, a virtual support group for Black graduate student women. As I facilitated and participated in Sister Space, I used Black and endarkened feminist values of prioritizing the specific perspectives and ways of knowing of Black women (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2000) to examine notions of strength and intimacy among Black graduate student women, including myself. Aligning with

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Black and endarkened feminist epistemologies (Collins, 1986, 2000; Dillard, 2000, 2008), I weave together my personal experiences with those of other Black graduate student women to offer insights on virtual support group work and the various roles Black women play in their lives. I have always been a listener. In this project, I listen to the wisdom of the women in Sister Space, I listen to Black women who came before me within and without academia, and I listen to myself. This project specifically addresses how Black women establish, exhibit, and define strength and intimacy with others and within themselves and what virtual support group work might look like for Black graduate student women. This investigation may contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of strength and emotional intimacy for Black graduate student women. Additionally, it might provide some important clinical considerations for those hoping to conduct virtual support group work with Black women. Above all, this project emphasizes listening to Black women and honoring their personal experiences and invaluable ways of knowing.

CHAPTER II

The Group Facilitator and Her Facilitation

For the Clinicians

This chapter is for the Haley who designed and co-facilitated a virtual support group for Black women in graduate school. In an effort to center Black women's "lived experiences" (Maseti, 2018; Patterson et al., 2016) and inner wisdom, I will primarily focus on my own insights and those of the women of Sister Space. In her offering of Black feminist epistemology, Collins (2000) observes:

> Epistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge. It investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or *why* we believe what we believe to be true. Far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why (252).

I am tempted to put here how long I have been conducting support groups for Black women and how successful they have been. I am tempted to try to convince you to believe me. I am tempted to prove the worthiness of what I have to offer. However, I will align myself with previous Black feminist scholars to resist oppressive standards of knowledge production and "validity," often based in white supremacy, by centering the experiences of those marginalized by these very standards (e.g., Black women) (Collins, 1989, 2000; Dillard, 2000; Griffin, 2012; Matandela, 2017). That is, I will shift the focus from whiteness to prioritize the lived experiences of Black women (Collins, 2000). I will center the "living Black voices" (Dillard, 2008) of Black women through dialogue (Collins, 2000) within Sister Space and one-on-one interviews. The brilliance of the Black women of Sister Space deserves to be listened to and heard. I deserve to be

believed, and my clinical recommendations deserve to be taken seriously in their own right. My lived experiences and the lived experiences of the women of Sister Space deserve to be voiced and seen as valuable knowledge. I demonstrate this knowledge in this chapter and chapters to come. I invite you to listen to our voices.

I am writing for clinicians just getting their start. As we discussed what would become this chapter, my advisor encouraged me to consider what I would have wanted years ago when I was just starting to facilitate Black women's support groups. This chapter is a manifestation of that consideration. The Haley just starting out would have wanted a detailed description of not only group processes but the steps leading up to that group. I would have benefitted from a personal glimpse into the complexities of support group work. I could have used a description of complicated scenarios that have come up for other group facilitators. I could have used intimate accounts of how facilitators might attempt to address latecomers or the background work that goes into naming a support group. I could have used someone explicitly telling me that not only is trusting your intuition ok in group work, it is paramount. A meandering and authentic narrative of someone's experiences conducting a virtual support group for Black graduate student women in the midst of a pandemic would be both compelling and informative. That is what I offer to you. I hope it helps those just starting out to consider not only how to design and implement a virtual support group but also some complex situations that may arise during those processes. By presenting my own experiences with complicated scenarios, I encourage those just starting out to proactively consider how they might address similar situations in advance.

A word of caution: Please do not mistake the clarity with which these scenarios are written for simplicity. This clarity stems from the labor I have undertaken to communicate intricate and important clinical considerations clearly. Collins (2000) states, "the theme of how hard Black women *work* is often overlooked" (p. 46). I encourage you to not overlook my hard work. Please do not undervalue my labor. Please do not mistake the straightforwardness of this chapter as obviousness or a lack of a contribution. As a clinician who was just starting out at one point, I know these considerations are not always obvious. As a mentor to clinicians just getting their start now, I know these are choices and situations people are not considering. These are the "I never would have thought about that" scenarios. I know these are the steps group facilitators skip over and wish they hadn't. I know this because I have seen it. What I have seen and how hard I work to communicate those things are contributions in themselves. I hope you will engage with my contributions in this chapter and chapters to come.

Overview and Objective

The objective of this chapter is to provide an in-depth look into Sister Space's facilitator (me) and some of my facilitation procedures. "Facilitation" is not just the conduction of support group sessions but a larger process of intentional group design and decision making. I provide background on myself, the Sister Space project and varying examples of complex situations that may arise during the conduction of virtual support group work for Black graduate student women. Aligning with Black women qualitative scholars and social workers considering research and clinical work for Black women during COVID-19 (Walton, Campbell, & Blakey, 2021), I am guided by my

personal experiences and insights to offer suggestions for current and future researchers and practitioners to prioritize Black women. I present pertinent information about me, the co-facilitator of the support group, Sister Space, and the primary investigator in this project. With this background, I ground readers in my own experience throughout the conduction of this work and encourage readers to be more aware of their perspectives in their own work. I highlight how some of the key factors in the project–the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema, listening and conflicting notions–play out in my own life. By authentically showing some of who I am and how that comes up in my work, I encourage others to do the same when they can (e.g., when it feels "safe" for them).

I offer background on the Sister Space support group and the project as a whole. I then offer specific recommendations and insights for support group facilitation, from naming a group to recruitment to prescreening to working with a co-facilitator, using my own and group members' personal experiences with Sister Space. Throughout this and subsequent chapters, I weave in my own experiences with the insights of Sister Space group members to offer recommendations to facilitators hoping to do support group work with Black women and researchers hoping to authentically include themselves in their scholastic pursuits. This chapter offers a glimpse into the intricacies of creating and facilitating a support group. Through vulnerable sharing of my own triumphs and missteps facilitating this support group, I demonstrate how other clinicians and researchers may better inform their design decisions–decisions that are often informed by personal intuition and inner wisdom. Although this is not a comprehensive list of all

the decisions a group facilitator or project coordinator may have to make, I hope it may illuminate some of the factors to this work that can often go unsaid.

Background on Me

The Basics

By providing details on my personal background, I demonstrate lived experience as a "criterion of meaning" (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) offers, "for most African-American women those individuals who have lived through experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who merely read or thought about such experiences" (p. 276). Therefore, I provide some of my lived experiences as criterion for credibility and perspective when offering my knowledge claims. At the time of this project, I fell squarely in the demographics of its participants: Black graduate student women between the ages of 22 and 35. I am a twenty-seven year old cisgender able-bodied Black woman pursuing her PhD in psychology. I received my Master of Social Work (MSW) two years ago, and with this degree, I see clients and groups for therapy. I am able to practice therapy through my degree in clinical social work, not psychology, which is a research degree. I often have to make this distinction to people.

I grew up in Houston Texas, the youngest of four, in a family that highly valued education. My mother, seeing the importance of education and the potential drawbacks of the American education system (e.g., eurocentrism) (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 2014; Shujaa, 1994), homeschooled my sister, my two brothers and me. My grandmother recently told me one of the many instances that compelled my mother to homeschool her children. My older sister and brother, just eleven months apart, attended a pre-

kindergarten school where children were supposed to be welcomed as "honored guests." Despite this promise, my sister would come home wondering why she and her hair were different from her white classmates. She wanted her hair "long and pretty" and in a flowing ponytail. My mother had a distinct distaste for how her daughter's being around so many white people was disrupting her self-esteem. My mother and father pulled my siblings out of the primarily white school, and my mother created an intentional homeschool curriculum and environment that centered her Black children. By the time I was born, half a decade later, my mother had an established multicultural homeschooling program (e.g., including oral history projects, a recognized form of knowledge production for Black communities; Muñoz-Muñoz, 2019; Nkealah, 2016) for my siblings and other families.

Tragically my mother's monumental influence in her children's growth and learning was cut short. On a family trip to Nigeria, an educational venture that exposed us to primarily nonwhite cultures, my mother was killed in a car accident involving me, my three siblings and my mother's mother, Granny. Before this trip, my sister, Whitney, had what she describes as an "intense premonition" warning her that we should not go. Perhaps stemming from our own internalized undervaluation and dismissal of spiritual ways of knowing, we did not listen. I often wonder if we had listened to Whitney's inner knowing would my mother still be here today. It is extremely painful for me to write this. My heart aches for the fourteen year-old Whitney who knew and was not listened to. I offer this as a concrete and poignant example of how Black women and girls not being listened to, and their wisdom not being take seriously can have devastating

consequences (Barlow & Johnson, 2020). I encourage us all to listen more, both to our inner spiritual knowing and to each other.

After my mother passed away, I was primarily raised by my father and Granny. My father was also quite dedicated to his children's education, but that took a much different form than the approach my mother spearheaded. After feeling academically unprepared himself when he arrived to school at Stanford University, my father was determined to have his children steeped in academic excellence early on. After my mother passed, he searched for schools that boasted rigorous academic curriculums. We ended up at some of the best private schools in Houston. Unsurprisingly, they were overwhelmingly white. Data from the most recent US Department of Education report on characteristics of private schools show that private school enrollment is 68.7% white and only 9.3% Black (Broughman, Kincel, & Peterson, 2019).

As a Black child who was recently involved in an accident that killed my mother, I quickly learned that my peers (i.e., primarily white six and seven-year-olds) were not equipped to hold space for my complicated experiences and emotions. They could neither comprehend my Blackness nor my motherlessness. As my siblings and the adults in my family simultaneously attempted to cope with the loss of my mother, I often felt that they did not have the capacity to sit with my emotions either. They needed the space to grapple with their own. From a young age, I learned not to ask for help or to share my most vulnerable feelings. I wanted to spare my father, reeling from the sudden loss of his wife and being left with his four young children. I wanted to spare Granny who lost her best friend and daughter. Even as I write this, the twinge of guilt for making my reader feel uncomfortable as I describe my pain is close to trumping my need to

write it. I learned to spare others rather than sharing. I learned to protect others over asking for help. As much as this was a measure of empathy for others, it was also a way to protect myself. Oftentimes, the sting of not feeling seen or heard was more painful than attempting to cope on by myself.

Years later, my oldest brother, Brandon, asserted that I chose to be "the strong one" in the family. This was neither a compliment, nor expected. At that point, my learned habits of neither expressing my feelings nor asking for help were so ingrained in me, I did not know others were functioning in notably different manners. And I certainly did not know the ways I learned to behave were perceived as strong. I saw them as inherent, not strong. They were who I was. Through this project, deep reflection and recent comments such as my brothers, I have found that I also fall squarely within the snares of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema. Due in part to the SBW schema, Black women often feel the need to stand up for and rely solely on themselves and care for others (Abrams et al., 2014; Abrams, Hill & Maxwell, 2019; Watson & Hunter, 2016). Although this schema has been found to be a key aspect of womanhood for many Black women (Nelson, Caremil, & Adeoye, 2016), I did not identify with it until this very project.

In addition to my personal life, my educational pursuits somewhat reflect aspects of the SBW schema. Many Black women have been shown to identify with the SBW schema as they progress in higher education (Corbin, Smith & Garcia, 2018; Overstreet, 2019). In her Black feminist exploration of her own experiences with the SBW schema in academia, Overstreet (2019) felt she needed to appear as a superhero with superhero strength, independent of all others. In my pursuit of a doctorate, I too

feel these pressures. As a Black woman who has felt she needed to advocate for herself since no one else can or will, I thought perhaps those three letters at the end of my name might give me some power. Collins (2000) reflects on her own decision to get a PhD:

> In 1978 I offered a seminar as part of a national summer institute for teachers and other school personnel. After my Chicago workshop, an older Black woman participant whispered to me, "Honey, I'm really proud of you. Some folk don't want to see you up there [in front of the classroom], but you belong there. Go back to school and get your Ph.D., and then they won't be able to tell you nothing!" (p. 103)

For me, my PhD could validate my belongingness at the front of the classroom or other positions of authority. With that power, I could rely solely on myself. Nobody could tell me nothing either.

On the other hand, my MSW reflects my need to care for others through therapy. In the second year of my doctoral program, I started a concurrent degree in social work as I worked on my PhD to do clinical work with individuals and groups. Recent investigations of the SBW schema show that the strong Black woman is still seen as a "nurturer" who "gives all her time and energy to saving and uplifting everyone around her" (Jones et al., 2021). Girl, did I give up my time and energy. For two years, I ran from the psychology department to the social work building on campus, overloading my schedule with courses in both disciplines. I would eat lunch on the bus to make it in time for my clinical internship after lab meetings. I would stay evenings to host groups and see clients after a full day of classes and meetings. Despite my exhaustion, I felt

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fulfilled. Clinical work seemed to come naturally for me, both because of my need to help others and my ability to listen. While I do feel a natural curiosity, joy and fulfillment from hearing other people's stories, I sense some tension surrounding my love of listening. I suspect my comfort with being a listener also stems from the lessons I started learning at age six: people cannot hold space for you and your complex emotions. I found that if people could not hold space for me, I would hold space for others. The comfort and joy I feel from my profession as a listener (i.e., therapist) is in some ways intertwined with not feeling seen or heard myself.

The Good Listener

I have been told I was a good listener since before I can remember. Starting in primary school, my friends would joke that they needed time with their "therapist" when they wanted to speak with me privately. The idea of a "good listener" was always a bit unsettling to me, particularly if I was considered to be one of those good listeners. It concerned me because it implied that there were "bad" listeners, which even at a young age, did not sit right. I thought to myself, "we should not simply accept that there are folks who are bad at listening or, even worse, do not listen at all. How can not listening be an acceptable thing to do when someone is sharing?" The fact that people often felt inclined to identify that I was a good listener, their voices sprinkled with surprise, also implied that good listeners were hard to come by. In fact, most people's listening was unremarkable at best. The observance was perhaps the most perplexing to me, though, because I did not feel like I was doing anything noteworthy when simply hearing what someone who was speaking to me was saying. Listening did not seem like a skill that I

had honed; it was simply something I did from the core of who I was. It was something I intrinsically knew how to do.

Since I did know how to listen, was apparently good at it and enjoyed doing it, I decided I wanted to be a therapist early on in my life. This desire stayed with me until an encounter with a friend's mother in the seventh grade. We were in her living room, and she was telling me about her early career as an art therapist. What started as fascination and excitement to gain a glimpse into a career that I was destined for soon turned to horror as she described just how emotionally taxing the work was. She recalled coming home every evening distraught and exhausted. She was finding more and more that both investing in and engaging with people in the darker days of life was not sustainable for her. She walked away from therapy and into her husband's jewelry business to work with him. She concluded the story noting that individuals purchasing jewelry were much happier than those seeking therapeutic services, and therefore, she was much happier as well. What I now recognize as an attempt to assure me that we all end up where we are supposed to end up left me feeling deflated and discouraged at the time. If the adult sitting before me could not endure the challenges of being a therapist, I, a mere twelve-year-old, surely couldn't do it either. I quickly repressed the notion that I could engage with people and their complex life situations as the therapist I wanted to be. This is another example of me not listening to my inner knowing. I *knew* listening aligned with my spirit. I *knew* I could make people feel seen and heard as a therapist. But I did not listen. At least until many years later, in graduate school.

My inner knowing surrounding doing therapy remained repressed and unheard until the first year of my doctoral program in psychology (remember, this is a research

degree, not a clinical one!). Despite continuing to be told that I knew how to hold space

for people in a way that made them feel heard, I quelled the idea of doing therapy or

any type of collaborative healing work. It was only halfway through my first year in my

PhD program that I began to give myself permission to know what I already knew. I

knew how to hold space for others in a way that made them feel embraced and

validated. I knew how to engage with strangers in a way that made them feel

comfortable to open up. I knew how to honor the softer parts of people as they showed

vulnerability. I knew how to cultivate environments that made people feel valued, cared

for and prioritized. The people who I particularly appreciate creating these spaces for

are those who often make me feel the same: Black women.

Competing Roles

As I started to uncover what I intrinsically knew, I added my Master of Social

Work (MSW). The MSW allowed me to engage with Black women and others in a way

that felt more explicit in helping me to further uncover my inner wisdom. As part of my

social work requirements, I started interning at the Women's Center of SE Michigan,

where I still do therapy with individuals, couples and families today. As I did this work, I

could feel myself growing in my intrinsic spiritual intelligence. I increasingly trusted my

instincts and saw how clients responded to feeling more embraced by my approach to

therapy. I felt more like myself as I centered the client's complex personhood, let my

own humanity and intuition guide my methods and let go of a rigid adherence to

"evidence-based" practices (EBP). The history of mental healthcare in the US, including

many EBP, is grounded in institutional racism and discrimination (McKenzie & Bhui,

2007). For example, in 1851, physician Samuel Cartwright proposed two "psychiatric"

disorders, draeptomania and dysaesthesia aethiopica, to explain the tendencies of enslaved people to run away or to resist enslaved labor as mental illness (Osborne & Feit, 1992). Cartwright also claimed that enslaved people exhibited child-like simplicity and lacked complex emotional capacity, which characterized all Black individuals. These claims were used as justification among mental healthcare professionals for a lack of therapeutic treatment for Black patients (Osborne & Feit, 1992). Although these claims were altered with Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s, we can still see the lasting effects of these racist origins in many areas of mental healthcare decades later (McKenzie & Bhui, 2007). Unsurprisingly, EBP in the field of mental health work have been found to be limited in their scope for diverse populations in their narrow approaches, exclusion of communities of color and discriminatory assumptions (Aisenberg, 2008; Danso, 2015; Danso, 2018; DelVecchio Good & Hannah, 2015). Over time, I, sometimes clumsily, attempted to let go of eurocentric, often racist standards of mental health practice in favor of more intuitive clinical care.

My clinical work in social work felt at a distinct contrast to the work I was doing in psychology for my PhD. In her 2000 *Black Feminist Thought,* Patricia Hill Collins observed:

> I found my training as a social scientist inadequate to the task of studying the subjugated knowledge of a Black women's standpoint. This is because subordinate groups have long had to use alternative ways to create independent self-definitions and self-valuations and to rearticulate them through our own specialists (p. 252).

Due to existing in primarily white educational environments since the age of six, I felt

that scholarly pursuits had to be done in a very specific eurocentric way. Ways that

required a detachment from my Black womanhood. Collins (2000) expands:

> because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validation,
>
> their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional
>
> scholarship. As a result, US Black women's experiences as well as those of
>
> women of African descent transnationally have been routinely distorted within or
>
> excluded from what counts as knowledge (p. 251).

Consequently, I felt compelled to remove myself from my research. This removal

resulted in what felt like an extraction of my spirit from the work, and an extraction of

Black women as an extension of myself. This was the case even if it was Black women

that I was doing the research with. There was a noticeable detachment between myself

as a researcher and myself as a human. Consequently, both my research and my

humanity were disserviced. In both clinical and research spaces, scholars have

identified that the self (i.e., therapist; researcher), is in fact, inextricable from the work

(Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017; Aron, 2000; Crawley, 2012; Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-

Day, 2012; Spry, 2001). Adams, Ellis and Jones (2017) posit that by intimately including

ourselves in our methodologies, we can "[humanize] research by focusing on life as

"lived through" in its complexities; showing that you as readers and we as authors

matter; and demonstrating to others who are involved in or implicated by our projects

that they matter, too" (p. 8). Spry (2001) offers:

> I have begun creating a self in and out of academe that allows expression of
>
> passion and spirit I have long suppressed. However academically heretical this

performance of selves may be, I have learned that heresy is greatly maligned and, when put to good use, can begin a robust dance of agency in one's personal/political/professional life. So, in seeking to dis-(re)-cover my body and voice in all parts of my life, I began writing and performing autoethnography, concentrating on the body as the site from which the story is generated, thus beginning the methodological praxis of reintegrating my body and mind into my scholarship.

Following these self-reflexive and Black feminist approaches, I began to explore what including my inner wisdom and deeper humanity might look like in my scholarship.

Somewhat ironically, it was through my doctoral studies that I was able to take a crucial step into myself and towards further uncovering my inner knowledge. I will forever be grateful to my experiences and opportunities in my PhD program for this. After giving a presentation to my area of psychology that meekly hinted at my struggle to merge my roles of researcher and therapist, a colleague reached out to me. She, too, was a psychology researcher and clinician, and she wanted to collaborate on a project that integrated our trainings. By speaking to my challenges combining my clinical and research training, I was able to begin the work that led to a monumental uncovering of a piece of my intrinsic knowledge and the eventual creation of this dissertation. I began to facilitate and investigate support group work for Black women. Everything was coming "full circle" (Dillard, 2008).

The Current Project

Group Background

I began constructing what became Sister Space the summer of 2019 for my dissertation. I had facilitated four Black women's support groups prior, starting with the support group that my colleague solicited my help with after giving my talk to the psychology department. That support group, entitled "Invincible Black Women," was part of a research study investigating the efficacy of the group for the mental health of Black undergraduate women (Jones & Sparks, in prep.). This group, in addition to my subsequent groups, was in person. When I started planning for my dissertation, my intended support group was also going to be in person. I proposed an [in-person] therapeutic program that combined group therapy for partnered Black women and couples therapy for the women and their partners. With this original project, I aimed to highlight and build off the notion that supportive social networks have been found to be associated with romantic relationship wellbeing (Porter & Chambless, 2017; Skomorovsky, 2014; Soulsby & Bennett, 2015). That is, the support the Black women received from the support group, in conjunction with therapy with their partners, might benefit their romantic relationships.

Additionally, I focused on how the pressures of the SBW schema might result in many Black women struggling with emotional vulnerability (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Davis, 2015). Emotional vulnerability, defined as uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure, has been found to contribute to positive relationship outcomes via emotional intimacy (Brown, 2015). Emotional intimacy is defined by trust, personal validation, and mutual self-disclosure and expressions of affection (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Garfield, 2010). Social science research has posited that the ability to be emotionally vulnerable can lead to emotional intimacy (Livingston, 2004). While emotional intimacy

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has been identified as a construct that the SBW schema may interfere both in romantic relationships (Simons et al., 2012) and among other Black women (Davis, 2015), it is seen as integral for relationship well-being (Dandurand & Lafontaine, 2013; Schoebi & Randall, 2015; Yoo et al., 2014). Consequently, I offered that emotional vulnerability and emotional intimacy, although factors that may distinctly oppose the effects of the SBW schema, might be important components of programs tailored specifically for Black women (and their romantic relationships).

At the time of the inception of my original project, I never needed to specify that the group and couples work would be done in person. The in-person aspect was simply implied. However, the month following the defense of my proposal for that in-person study, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US in increasing numbers. Soon, virtual interactions were the norm, and in-person support groups were a much less viable option. After seeing another one of my ongoing support groups successfully translated to a virtual forum in response to COVID-19, I began to reconstruct my dissertation project. In order to account for restrictions on in-person support groups and my personal capacity in the midst of an evolving pandemic, I removed a substantial portion of the study and participants (i.e., couples therapy and the partners) and designed a virtual group. While the romantic aspect of the project was omitted, emotional intimacy, emotional vulnerability and the potential influence of the SBW schema remained. In the current project, I aimed to investigate emotional intimacy (at times, by way of emotional vulnerability) and notions of strength for Black graduate student women. I did so by observing and listening to their lived experiences (Collins, 2000) and "living Black

voices" (Dillard, 2008) in a virtual support group and in one-on-one interviews. I named the group Sister Space.

Sister Space

Sister Space, consisted of nine self-identified Black graduate student women between the ages 22 and 35 (mean age, 28 years old). The women were notified of the project via word-of-mouth, virtual flyers (Appendix A) and social media in the state of Michigan. The project consisted of an eight-week virtual support group (i.e., Sister Space) that met on a weekly basis and three one-on-one interviews with participants and myself. All group and individual sessions occurred on Google Hangouts. Google Hangouts was chosen because it is HIPAA compliant and served as a confidential means for the group to congregate online. I facilitated this group along with another Black woman co-facilitator, Najeia. Najeia and I both have our limited licenses in social work (LLMSW) and practice individual and group therapy. She and I were familiar with the dynamics of co-facilitating support groups with one another and have a loving and warm relationship. We have a very close friendship. We had done three support groups for Black women prior to Sister Space and enjoy collaborating together in this type of work.

Sister Space used the "Whole Black Women" (WBW) support group format, which was derived from the "Invincible Black Women" (IBW) support group (Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018). The Invincible Black Women (IBW) group is a support group constructed to intentionally promote self- and sociocultural-awareness, bonds with other Black women, and wellness strategies in Black college women (Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018). While the group was developed for individuals who self-identify as

Black and women and are enrolled in a college where they are not the racial/ethnic

majority, this group is said to be applicable for Black women across a number of

contexts (Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018). Although the group format was originally

intended for in-person care, my co-facilitator and I were familiar with the group format

and had seen it successfully translated to an online forum in response to COVID-19.

Although the previous virtual group did not officially provide data for my dissertation, its

group members have informally reported feeling that the WBW support group format is

a meaningful source of virtual support during COVID-19, and they hope to continue the

group indefinitely. I hope that too.

My conduct of the Sister Space group consisted of four phases: pre-

recruitment considerations, recruitment, prescreening, and group work. My dissertation

project also included a pre-group interview, a midpoint interview (after four weeks of

group work) and a post-group interview. I conducted these one-on-one interviews to

assess emotional intimacy, their previous lived experiences and the women's

experiences in the virtual support group as a whole. I would not have included these

interviews in the virtual support group process if it was not part of a larger research

study.

Pre-recruitment Considerations

Group Name

Before the recruitment for Sister Space began, there were a number of factors

that I thought through. Firstly, I had to consider if the group would have a name. The

group could simply be advertised as "a virtual support group for Black graduate student

women." I found that having a name for a group for Black women helped them identify

more with the group than simply calling it a support group. One participant in Sister Space, Mia*, 31, noted, "a support group sounds like we're grieving or something. And I guess in a lot of ways we are, but that's not just what the space has to be about." This might not always be the case; when working with different populations or surrounding different commonalities (e.g., grieving the loss of a loved one), calling it a group for that thing might be appropriate (Robinson & Pond, 2019). In the case of Sister Space, naming the group seemed to help some women identify more with the space.

As I did decide to name the group, I had to be conscientious about what that name might be. Certain words may carry connotations that might make potential members less inclined to join. For example, the first group I co-facilitated was entitled "Invincible Black Women" (IBW) (Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018; Jones & Sparks, in prep) as an intentional attempt to subvert the symptoms of the Invincible Black Woman Syndrome (e.g., overworking; Childs & Palmer, 2012). As my co-facilitator and I prescreened for this group, we explained to potential group members that the name was purposefully drawing attention to some of the pressures Black women feel to maintain a strong facade, help others at one's own expense, and not ask for help. We wanted to create a space where the women did *not* have to feel as though they had to be invincible, though they might portray that on the outside.

Although potential members understood the meaning once explained to them in the prescreening consultation, I later met a woman who had seen flyers for the IBW group in the past as I recruited for a different group. The new group I was prescreening for was entitled "Whole Black Women." The woman noted that she had been looking for a group for Black women earlier in the year, but the IBW group name gave her pause.

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She knew the pressures and markers of the IBW syndrome all too well and was put off by the group name. She wanted to distance herself from a group that potentially further encouraged Black women to present themselves as invincible when that image could cause harm. I found that while I could explain group names once potential participants were "in the door," group names have the potential to chase away some interested parties before they even have that chance. Consequently, I put thoughtful consideration into the group naming process.

When choosing a name for a group, I found it helpful to consult others, so they could identify any connotations or factors I was overlooking. For example, a name that was considered for the current group was "My Black Magic." After discussing with Najeia, we agreed that although the name could be considered positive, similar to the popular phrase "Black girl magic," black magic also has negative and often gendered associations with witchcraft and malice. This could be a particularly unwanted connotation considering black magic can sometimes be contrasted with white magic, which is seen as a more benevolent use of supernatural power. I did not want the name to increase the chances of the group being seen as a comparison to groups primarily consisting of white women. I did not want to contribute to a problematic history of measuring Black women up to white women (Collins, 1987). Instead, I wanted the group to serve as a place for Black women to just be, independent of comparison.

Eventually, I decided on the name "Sister Space." "Sister" is a culturally-specific term often used in Black communities to demonstrate kinship or closeness to Black women (Few, Stephens, Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Harris-Perry, 2011). The use of "space" explicitly commented on the environment I wanted to create with the other group

members, in addition to hinting at the virtual component of the group. I chose the name "Sister Space" to signal to Black women that the group was a place specifically for them in this increasingly virtual world.

Group Demographics

Because Sister Space was part of a research study, I selected specific demographics required for participation (e.g., age; student status). I felt some pressure to make this choice. This pressure stemmed from the traditional notion that researchers conducting groups should recruit participants based on common demographics, experiences or axes of social identity (Greenbaum, 1998). There is even some research indicating that investigations of strength for Black women specifically should account for particular demographics, such as age group, to increase chances of participants having more similar perspectives (Hunter & Watson, 2016). This recommendation is often grounded in the notion that the more shared demographics, the more shared experiences, the more optimal group functioning (Greenbaum, 1998).

In my first research project involving support groups for Black women, I remember the pressure my colleague (i.e., co-facilitator) and I felt to limit the group to students at one specific university (i.e., a required shared demographic) to ensure participants had similar experiences. This resulted in us having to turn away Black women from other schools who sought support. This is a specific example of how traditional standards and expectations in research might produce harmful results, particularly in marginalized populations (Hamilton, 2020). As my co-facilitator and I struggled to fill up the group with participants who qualified for participation, we turned away Black women from other schools and walks of life who reported needing support.

As a newer clinician and researcher, I felt pressured to ignore the distaste within me for choosing "cleaner" data (i.e., people with more shared demographics) over the needs of Black women asking for help. Although I have grown in many ways in my clinical and scholarly work, I felt a similar pressure with Sister Space. I limited the group to Black women in graduate school ages 22 to 35. Given these design decisions, I myself qualified to participate in Sister Space. The researcher in me hypothesized that perhaps my shared demographics (i.e., Black graduate student woman between the ages of 22 and 35) with group members would allow for an opportunity for me to fairly seamlessly engage with group members in a way I might not have been able to otherwise had the group been of women say, out of my age cohort (Watson & Hunter, 2016).

My intuition and experiences as a Black woman and clinician told me somewhat differently. My intuition told me that being Black and a woman were the demographics that were paramount for Sister Space (I recognize that this may not be the case for all groups where other demographics might be important to select). My inner knowledge and previous experiences told me that other demographics that I selected (e.g., age; in graduate school) did not have as much consequence as traditional research guidelines might have me believe. In groups that were not part of larger research studies, I have had group members (still all Black women) who were over twenty years apart in age. I have had groups of Black women within and without graduate school. This is to say, I have facilitated groups that have had Black and woman be the only required demographics. Members of these previous groups have commented on gaining insight from those who have different life experiences, stemming from varying demographics. Similarly, a member of Sister Space, Hilda*, 31, commented in one of her interviews:

I don't have the same experiences as some. I'm not a mother. I don't have

struggles in my program with other people. A lot of people in my program were

remote before COVID, so I didn't really have to interact with them. But I still feel

very connected to everyone.

Like Hilda, a number of Sister Space members did not feel that varying experiences

from varying demographics resulted in feelings of disconnect or invalidation. In fact,

some women in Sister Space reported that having intimate glimpses of the experiences

of group members in other social locations (e.g., mothers) resulted in feelings of

closeness within group. This may in part be because even with many varying

demographics and experiences, "in the comfort of daily conversation, through serious

conversation and humor, African-American women as sister and friends affirm one

another's humanity, specialness and right to exist" (Collins, 2000, p. 113). This

affirmation, Collins (2000) observes, "often operates among African American women

who do not know one another but who see the need to value Black womanhood" (p.

113). Rather than shared experiences, Collins observes that the valuing of others'

humanity is what connects Black women. In my experience, I have observed similar.

Both Black and endarkened feminist epistemologies offer "alternative" (Collins,

2000) approaches to research that adheres to more traditional eurocentric standards,

such as requiring multiple specific demographics for participation. In Black feminist

epistemology, Collins (2000) emphasizes "the ethics of caring" in knowledge production

that includes the capacity for empathy or "understanding each other's positions" (p.

283). In endarkened feminist epistemology, Dillard (2008) foregrounds the principles of

love and compassion in which we should invoke "deep listening" and strive to

"[understand] deeply the humanity of those with whom we engage in the research endeavor" (p. 287). I strive to implement these principles both in my scholarship and in my clinical work. When I tell people I am a therapist, the question I get most often is about the demographics of my clients. Subsequent questions are about the credibility of my work: How can I possibly be of any help to a woman in her 70s going through a divorce when I am several decades younger and have never been married myself? How can I possibly affirm a woman in her mid-thirties deeply steeped in traditional gender roles and vocally critical of feminism when I myself align with many aspects of Black feminist thought? For me, the answer is empathy, not shared demographics. The answer is listening, not assuming I know everything. The answer is valuing people's humanity and their experiences, regardless of if I have had similar ones. With permission, I share a pervious client's feedback with whom I had much more variant demographics than shared:

> Hi Haley, many thanks to you for all your good advice, patience, flexibility, and concern you've shared with me. You got me through a series of troublesome events (divorce after 49+ years, a house fire, his dividing our family, then his death) to a much more manageable life. You are extremely good at what you do, and I benefitted greatly. Know you will have a satisfying career helping others turn their lives around. I wish you the very best in life.

I share this neither to be self-serving nor say that demographics or social location do not matter at all. As I made design decisions for Sister Space, group members being Black and women felt important. Black women's experiences (e.g., with notions of strength) have at times been found to vary based on social group membership (e.g.,

age; Collins, 2000; Watson & Hunter, 2016). Consequently, co-facilitators might want to

consider certain aspects of identity when constructing virtual groups (McKenna &

Green, 2002). Particularly, in a context (i.e., a support group) where individuals (e.g.,

Black women in academia) might desire to feel seen and validated in their specific

experiences (Henry, 2017; Jordan-Zachary, 2013), it might be helpful to tailor the group

to people who are more likely to be in similar walks of life. Rather, I share this to say

that, in my experience, I find that empathy and listening are just as important, if not

more, as the shared experiences selecting demographic criteria might result in. Of

course, I only speak for myself and what I have observed. Collins (2000) claimed we:

> cannot and should not [speak for others] because each of us must learn to speak
>
> for [themselves]. In the course of writing [*Black Feminist Thought*] I came to see
>
> my work as being a larger process, as one voice in a dialogue among people
>
> who have been silenced (p. x).

I encourage clinicians to speak for themselves based on their observations and

determine what demographics might feel important to include in their particular work.

Rather than succumbing to pressures of traditional eurocentric standards of

practice (or other external factors) like I did, I encourage clinicians to consult their own

intuition and previous experiences. My intuition told me Black women in Sister Space

might be able to connect regardless of being in the same age cohort through valuing

each other's Black womanhood. My previous experiences in and outside clinical

settings have told me that I can affirm Black women of a wide variety of social identities

through empathy and listening. Although I did not observe substantial negative

consequences selecting for demographics other than being a Black woman, I present

my reflections here to encourage clinicians just starting out to trust their ways of knowing (e.g., intuition; previous experiences) as they make their design decisions. My inner knowledge tells me that having as many shared demographics and experiences as possible within a group is not as important as listening and being empathetic. My intuition tells me that I could have countless shared experiences with another person, but that would not matter for an interpersonal connection if I was not extending empathy, listening and valuing that person's humanity. Once I considered factors such as group name and demographics (despite falling short of fully listening to my own intuition), I started the recruitment phase for Sister Space.

Recruitment

Preparation for recruitment for the Sister Space project looked similar to the recruitment preparation phase of groups I have done in the past. I designed the flyer (Appendix A) for recruitment with the specifics of the study in mind. I included photos of women who were of similar age to those being recruited and attempted to include images of Black women with diverse appearances (e.g., hair texture; skin tone). The flyer included the requirements for participation (i.e., Black graduate student woman between the ages of 22 and 35), what participation included (i.e., eight weekly group sessions and three one-on-one interviews), what the study was about (e.g., emotional intimacy), compensation (i.e., up to $220) and emphasized that the study was virtual/remote. The flyer was disseminated via email to Black student groups, groups for students of color, and the Women's Center of SE Michigan's listserv.

While the preparation and flyer dissemination for recruitment were similar to previous group recruitment I had done, the outcome was quite different with Sister

Space. While I knew recruitment for groups to take several weeks, recruitment for this project took approximately two hours. While getting sufficient numbers for group participation is known to be a challenge for many groups during the recruitment process (Brown, Adeboye, Yusuf, & Chaudhary, 2018), in this case, there were more women interested than there were available spots in the Sister Space group. Oversampling for participants is a common practice for online groups to account for a couple individuals not being able to participate for the duration of the group for one reason or another (Chung, 2014). Even with oversampling (I spoke to 13 women for a desired group of 8-10), I still had to inform a number of interested women that the group had already reached capacity.

The overwhelming interest in the group during the recruitment phase must be considered in the context in which I was recruiting. As Walton, Campbell and Blakey (2021) remind us:

> Context matters! We cannot say this enough; as Black women, we are living with unimaginable stress. The need to address the historical impact of racism and discrimination in the United States is vitally important. Black women were struggling before COVID-19. This pandemic only exacerbates the disparities and stressors for Black women (p. 250).

In this virtual Sister Space group, Black women reported contending with issues including romantic relationship conflict, intergenerational trauma when quarantining with family, loneliness, financial stress, navigating dating with social distancing measures, parenting and homeschooling, school stress, racism, and fear of contracting COVID-19 itself. In response to these stressors, Black women reported that they sought a number

of ways to cope, including joining Sister Space. Clearly, Black women were in need of comfort and support. As a Black woman, I knew I needed support too (and sought it through means such as my own individual therapy). Although this conclusion might seem obvious, it stands to be highlighted. Black women, myself included, need support as we continue on in a world ravaged by systemic and interpersonal racism and a global pandemic, in addition to numerous other gendered racialized stressors (e.g., trying to care for and protect Black men; Walton, Campbell, & Blakey, 2021). I saw Sister Space as a one way to give and receive support among Black women.

Prescreening

Consultations

Once women contacted me expressing interest in Sister Space, I conducted prescreening consultations. These consultations were 15-minute informal phone calls to help me get to know the women, tell interested women more about the project and participation requirements, and to answer any questions they might have. As previously mentioned, I intentionally spoke to more women than there was space in the group, since it was likely that not all the women would be able or interested in participating after receiving more information about the study. I have found that the prescreening consultation is crucial to the recruitment process to ensure that there is no misunderstanding about the information provided on the flyer or about what participation might entail. For example, prescreening helps to lessen the chances that someone who does not identify as a Black woman mistakenly participates until sometime into the project (I have seen this happen before). Additionally, prescreening allows facilitators to evaluate for potential members' group readiness. For example, at the time of the

prescreening, it appeared that one woman might benefit from more individualized

mental health care, rather than being in a group setting. I provided this woman with

referrals for individual therapists. Additionally, as I recruited participants and had a

better feel for the group members, I would assess potential group cohesion (e.g.,

considering if person A, person B and person C seem like they will remain respectful of

each other's perspectives and take up appropriate amounts of space, respectively).

Point of Contact

With virtual support groups, I find that a prescreening consultation is an important

step in establishing first contact with group members. To me, entering a virtual space

can feel both daunting and isolating at first. There may be concerns about discomfort

surrounding not knowing anyone in the space. The prescreening consultations can

serve as a way for group members to get to know the facilitator more, so they might feel

more comfortable entering the virtual space for the first group session. As facilitator, I

can serve as group members' familiar point of contact during the initial discomfort of a

virtual group.

In order to prepare for the first session, it was helpful for me to specifically ask

potential group members if they had concerns about participating in a virtual group

during prescreening. This may help potential group members consider and prepare for

the potential challenges of participating in a virtual group (e.g., not being able to make

direct eye contact) if they had not done so previously. This also gave me an idea of

factors that participants might be contending with before group (e.g., never having

participated in a virtual group before and nervousness about not knowing what to

expect).

Intuition

With endarkened feminist epistemology, Dillard (2000, 2008) encourages Black women to work from "in the spirit," emphasizing the use of intrinsic ways of knowing Though somewhat tricky, I found that it was particularly important for me to trust my inner knowing or intuition when prescreening for a group. In the past, it has felt uncomfortable and exclusionary to suggest that an interested party might not be the best fit for a group. To contend with these feelings, I consider that a few moments of discomfort might be worth it to improve the chances of successful group functioning down the line. (I recommend saying something along the lines of, "I'm wondering if we might be able to find some even better-fitting resources for you." I also recommend researching additional resources prior to prescreening, so you have those resources on hand for prompt referrals.) Through personal experience, I found the decision to help an interested party that might not be the best fit find other resources might be in their best interest, other group members' best interest and my own best interest.

For example, during prescreening for Sister Space, one woman, Tina*, 31, used an impossibly high, syrupy sweet voice when speaking with me. I immediately wondered why she felt she had to present herself in such a cloying manner. My instinct felt an inauthenticity–like she was trying to hide something, but I quickly silenced that concern. I did not listen to what my inner knowing was telling me. As she spoke, Tina sweetly noted that she knew how to get her way and get what she wanted from other people. This was in specific reference to white people at her institution. I understood that she might be trying to appeal to me as another Black woman at a primarily white institution, but it occurred to me that her attempts at manipulation might not end there. I

asked her about close personal relationships, as I was interested in emotional intimacy for this project. Tina spoke about her best friend who just "got her" and flippantly remarked that most people did not. Interactions with most others proved to be complicated in one way or another. All of these factors raised concern for my inner knowing, but my role as a researcher and my role as a social worker overtook what I suspected as a human being.

My role as a researcher told me that I should not let my personal feelings interfere with the work. Underneath these assumptions were oppressive white standards for research (e.g., upholding rigid boundaries) (Pennington & Prater, 2016) that Black women have been shown to feel pressured to operate under (Burstow, 1992; Goode-Cross & Grimm, 2016; Minnett, James-Galloway, & Owens, 2019; Williams, Reed, & George, 2021). These standards had been ingrained in me for over two decades of existing in educational spaces that center whiteness. My role as a social worker told me that Tina was a Black woman who needed connection and support. Walton, Campbell, and Blakey (2021) reflect, "as mental health social work. . .practitioners, we have to create the space and the opportunity for Black women" (p. 250). As a clinical social worker myself, I uphold these values. In this case, it was to my detriment.

It is important to note that what I was casting off for the sake of research was *not*, in fact, a personal feeling. As a therapist, I have had personal feelings come up when working with clients. These experiences remind me there is never any guarantee that I will like those I work with in a clinical setting. I have had times where I do not like my clients. I actively identified them as people I would not like to spend time with outside of

a therapy room. I work to manage those personal feelings (e.g., in my own therapy; in clinical supervision) in order to continue my work. I have had clients behave in ways that I deemed hurtful to other people, and I had personal feelings about that. That does not mean I stopped working with them. What I mistook in this instance for personal feelings (i.e., not liking an individual) were actually my instincts. This was not a matter of liking her or not; this was an opportunity to truly consider if this individual would likely do well in a support group setting. In this instance, I needed to ask myself if someone who openly spoke about manipulating and not getting along with others might be the best fit for a support group. These factors offered me an opportunity to consider that Tina might not do well in a group, but pressures related to the roles I was playing (i.e., researcher; social worker) won out.

One of the first times I saw Tina "in person" virtually was for our first Sister Space session. She was several minutes late, but she looked magnificent. Flawless makeup complete with a bright pink lip, stunning gold jewelry, jewel-toned blazer, perfectly done hair, all in front of a stylishly decorated pink and green backdrop. She certainly stood out in a sea of exhausted graduate students finishing up their days working from home. She did not stand out in appearance alone. Her contributions were nothing short of brilliant. She did not talk frequently, but it was clear she reflected deeply before she spoke. She came to each group with a journal ready to take notes and would often shift her eyes up or to the side, deep in thought. Whenever she unmuted herself to speak, the group very quickly learned to hold their breath in anticipation. I held my breath as well. Her insights about the themes (e.g., self-exploration) were well thought out and profound. Some of her words of wisdom are still ringing in my head. How I *loved*

listening to her. Her insights were dazzling, and she knew it. She was performing for us, and she seemed to relish the acclaim she received. Perhaps even on that first day, Tina planned on assuming the role of the stunning and sage group member. As someone who was a bit mesmerized by her myself, I can say she played the role quite well.

Latecomers

As the weeks went on, Tina continued to play her role well, arriving to the group late each session, making a noticeable entrance. The brilliance of her presence seemed to dim for some, as she arrived later and later each week. By the midpoint interviews four weeks in, a number of women, though they did not say names, admitted that latecomers could be a bit distracting for the flow of group. Carrie*, 24, observed, "I can feel bad if someone comes in late, but we have already started talking about a theme, and then they don't know the theme, and we have to disrupt things to catch them up." Carrie offered that punctuality might be particularly important in virtual groups since catching someone up might not feel as fluid in a virtual space. The person sitting next to someone in an in-person group can quietly update a latecomer on what has happened thus far. This is not as feasible in a virtual space. Additionally, group members observed that body language is more difficult to read over video call. Consequently, they offered that it might be more difficult for latecomers to use context clues, such as body language, to get up to speed on group ongoings.

Of course, individuals might come in a few minutes late every once in a while. Najeia and I made a point to start five to seven minutes after the hour each session to account for a margin of tardiness as people transitioned from their daily work to Sister Space. However, in the case of Tina, she was consistently and significantly later than a

few minutes. When attempting to address concerns in virtual groups, I found I had a couple options as group facilitator. Since the group is remote, briefly speaking to a group member after a session in person was not viable. I could reach out (e.g., via email) directly to the group member to address a concern or reach out to the entire group and generally and gently remind folks of group etiquette (e.g., "I just wanted to send a friendly reminder to everyone to please try to be on time when possible!"). For me, it felt like the general approach might have been more useful if multiple group members were doing something that I would like to address (e.g., arriving late). In this case, sending a general reminder felt like a public and pointed scolding, since only one group member was arriving late, and everyone knew who that was.

Consequently, I opted for reaching out to Tina directly via email. I attempted to be empathetic (e.g., I truly do understand that life gets in the way sometimes with timing!), rational (I am asking that to the extent you can, you tune into the space at 6 pm, so check in and theme sharing can go smoothly for everyone!), and gracious (e.g., thanks for your understanding and, as always, your wonderful contributions to the space :). It did not work. She promptly responded requesting a phone call. In that phone call, she reprimanded me by saying she felt reprimanded. She accused me of directly attacking her and asserted that I should have sent a general reminder to the entire group rather than singling her out. She accused me of doing both my clinical work and research inappropriately. By that point, we had two sessions of Sister Space left. In both of those group sessions, she kept her camera off and made passive aggressive comments. Tina went from her role as insightful contributor to grievance generator. While Najeia and I attempted to empathize with and address her concerns, her

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disruptive discontentment continued. People noticed, and people were frustrated. In a post-group interview, Renee*, 31, expressed that she felt Tina's passive aggressive comments "were unfair. It felt like an inappropriate use of everyone's time." Anne*, 31, noted she was "disappointed that she had to do that during group. There are ways that things can be brought to a group that can cause harm, and that's what that felt like." Anne's comment highlights just how disruptive one group member can be to group flow. Though Tina was just one woman in a group of eleven, group members felt the harm of her discontentment.

It is important to note that I believe my approach to addressing other group members' concerns about latecomers was an appropriate one. I do think concerns should be directly addressed (often in private with individual group members), and I will continue to try to be empathetic, rational and gracious in my approaches. In this case, I do not see my approach to addressing the concern as much of an issue as close identification with roles within the group was. Until my email, Tina seemed to comfortably sit in her role as an entrancing source of sage wisdom. I suspect she quite enjoyed the praise and affirmations from other group members in response to her life insights. I also gave her that praise during group. My email, however, might have served as a notification that some group members did not entirely cast her in the role of the brilliant beauty. My email might have threatened a role she enjoyed playing and started to identify with. Now, Tina's role was the latecomer.

Through deep reflection on this incident, I have found that when the roles I intimately identify with and help to define myself by are threatened, I can sometimes break down or lash out in attempts to protect my self-concept. (I will speak more to the

roles I play in Chapter IV: Section: De-Identifying with My Roles to Humanize Myself.) If Tina did, in fact, identify so closely with the role she was playing, by that point, I do not think I could have done anything to get a significantly different outcome. I believe no amount of careful email construction would have mitigated her subsequent vexation. I explicitly say this so other clinicians just starting out might not second guess some of their decisions, like my decision to directly reach out to this group member. Although Tina communicated that she felt attacked and that I should have reached out to the group as a whole to address latecomers, I stand by the specific decision I made to reach out to her individually. While her assertion that my decision to reach out to her individually was the wrong one was tempting for me to guiltily admit to making a grave mistake, upon further reflection, I do not think this decision was a misstep. I encourage others to grapple with some guilt they may be feeling over decisions they have made and seriously consider that some controversial decisions still may be the right ones for them. My standing by this specific decision does not mean I cannot reflect and improve on other decisions I made. What I certainly could have done differently is listen to my instincts during that very first prescreening consultation with Tina. I could have trusted my intuitive feeling that just as she struggled with others outside of group, she might struggle with others in Sister Space as well. Through this experience, I found that although decisions such as not inviting an interested party to join a group may be difficult to make, the groundwork I set during prescreening may significantly affect group proceedings. I learned that the hard way and share this with you so you might learn from my missteps, in addition to the tricky decisions that I stand behind.

Group Processes

Once prospective members were recruited and screened, Sister Space was officially ready to commence. Sister Space consisted of eight 120 minute semi-structured, process-oriented group sessions. The group met on Thursday evenings to accommodate the women's work schedules during the day. The general format of the support group each week was check-in, theme presentation, interpersonal reflection and response, individual sharing, and check-out. During check-in, each group member and co-facilitator shared about their week, how they felt that day or anything that was on their mind. Check-in served as an overview for how a group member was doing that week. During check-in, individuals indicated if they needed "time" as well. Needing time meant that if a group member had something she wanted to speak more in-depth on and/or seek advice or support (e.g., a conflict with her romantic partner), some time would be reserved for that group member following theme sharing. So, during check-in, a group member would share about her week and state whether she needed time or not. For Sister Space check-in, either Najeia, or I called on each individual to share. Since the group was virtual, there was no physical circle creating an obvious order for women to check-in. Consequently, it was important for me or Najeia to call on people, so everyone could check in. Each week, depending on who was calling out names, Najeia or I also had to remember to call on each other and check in ourselves. We deliberately engaged in check-in to better integrate into group. Rather than simply observing, we actively participated.

After check-in, one group member shared a theme of her choosing for the week. For example, a theme one week was "worthiness," and the leading group member asked other members to share what worthiness looked like for them. Group members

reflected on the theme, and the group processed responses and reflections together.

Theme sharing and group reflection over that theme felt finished to me as a co-facilitator

when there was a comfortable silence. Group members would smile at one another

through their screens, and I would let the silence settle. As co-facilitator, I had to allow

silence to sit. Sometimes silence felt uncomfortable or like something I was responsible

for filling. However, I found that silence sometimes allowed group members to further

process their thoughts. One member specifically expressed, "I'm sorry I'm not saying

much, it just takes me some time to think about what you guys are saying. I am

listening, and I'm just processing my thoughts to respond." In a virtual space where it

might not be as easy to participate in a fluid manner, I found that allowing silence was

important.

Once I allowed several moments of silence, I would ask if there were any final

thoughts on the theme. This signaled to group members that we were about to

transition, but it also invited group members to contribute any lingering thoughts that

they might not have had the chance to contribute before. After reflecting on a theme

together, those group members who said they needed time would share what was on

their hearts and minds. If more than one group member indicated they wanted time, I

directed the sequence order in which people share (e.g., asking one group member to

share first and another to go after her). This was an intentional choice, so group

members might not feel discomfort surrounding deciding amongst themselves who gets

to take their time first. (I initially observed visible hesitance (e.g., putting one's hand over

her mouth) to interrupt among group members.) Lastly, the women of Sister Space

checked out. During checkout, Najeia or I once again called on group members to share

what they got from group that week, how they were feeling, any gratitude they wanted to extend and/or any takeaways they would leave with. Najeia and I participated in checkout just as we did in check-in.

Group Expectations and Norms

In addition to the usual group components described above, the first group session of Sister Space included a "group expectations" conversation. The "group expectations" conversation in a lot of ways introduced members to each other, the co-facilitators, and the culture of the group. In this conversation, Najeia and I introduced ourselves and reminded group members that what was shared in the space would stay in the space (with some legal exceptions). We additionally shared what we hoped to get out of group (e.g., a sense of fulfillment after feeling seen by other Black women). We then invited group members to share what they hoped to get out of group (e.g., "I hope to build up my community of Black women in Michigan for grad school."). Finally, Najeia and I invited group members to share what they expected or what they did not expect within the space of group (e.g., Can group members cuss? Do I have to say something specific if I feel like I need to leave my computer for a second? Are we all expected to be sitting upright, not in bed? Can my child sit in on a session with me? Can I be in my pajamas? Can I have my scarf on?). This conversation started to help form the culture of Sister Space. Additionally, it provided some insights into considerations for virtual support groups specifically (e.g., dress code; location of group members when they attend group; expectations surrounding lateness). Some women reported that being included in the group expectations and norms conversation helped them feel a sense of agency in co-creating group culture. Rather than coming to group and being told the

ground rules for participation, the women were included in creating those group guidelines together. I intentionally made this choice to demonstrate that group members' opinions and input were valued from the start of Sister Space.

Co-facilitation

Najeia

Professionally, we know that we must respond to and help mitigate the impact of the pandemic on Black people's lives or soothe those who COVID-19 has already injured and scarred. However, the responsibility to do so must be a shared one. As Black women, scholars, and qualitative researchers, we can no longer, no matter how willing or how "strong," shoulder this task alone.

—Walton, Campbell and Blakey (2021, p. 248)

At the time of Sister Space, my co-facilitator, Najeia, would also qualify to participate. She is a brilliant Black woman clinician who was working towards her Master in Social Work and Public Health when Sister Space was meeting. We met during our time working as therapists at The Women's Center of SE Michigan. At the time, I needed a co-facilitator for another Black women's support group. Najeia was proactive about her interest in doing support group work.

I often watch in awe at Najeia's ability to support and validate her loved ones and clients. She is a fierce advocate for many, including me. She pushes me when I say I'm doing just fine; she consistently checks in on me, even when I am somewhat unresponsive due to dissertation stress. She is thoughtful and intentional about providing care in a way that I am constantly learning from. She knows when to validate

and when to give someone their space. She knows when to make a joke and when to offer a hug. We text each other memes and howl with laughter over the phone. She often tells me, "the world doesn't deserve you." I feel the same about her. Over our years of friendship and co-facilitating groups together, Najeia and I have become adept at playing off of and reading each other's cues. Within the virtual environment of Sister Space, this was particularly beneficial in our co-facilitation (e.g., she could pick up when I was at a loss for words and jump in to build off of a comment that was just said).

Debriefing

After each Sister Space group session, Najeia and I met to debrief. As we debriefed, we discussed how the processing of that week's theme went, if any group member(s) seemed "off," and if we should follow up with them, and dynamics we picked up on. As I took more of a lead in facilitation, Najeia was able to take more of an observatory role of intragroup dynamics. Subsequently, these sessions allowed for us to share things we observed that the other missed and deliberate on any assumptions or experiences we had. These debriefing sessions were recorded so they might inform my facilitation choices and recommendations moving forward.

Co-facilitation in Session

As Sister Space progressed, I increasingly saw the benefits of having multiple Black women facilitators doing this more personalized and immersive work. Some were apparent when I designed this project, including the decision to include the specific co-facilitator that I chose. As previously mentioned, Najeia and I had worked with multiple groups prior to Sister Space. Our rapport and comfort with each other helped to make other group members feel comfortable in the virtual space of the group. We made jokes

with one another to ease discomfort and were familiar enough with one another to read

each other's' body language through our computer screens. Because I was taking more

of a lead in the facilitation, Najeia could take notes and more intricately observe

nonverbal dynamics (e.g., snapping at the screen) as I took more of an active role

engaging with participants verbally. Additionally, Najeia and I have different strengths

that we use in conjunction with one another. For example, Najeia is more adept using

the chat function during Sister Space meetings (e.g., typing "welcome" to a latecomer;

noticing when someone wrote a question or pressing comment in the chat). While I

focused more on verbal cues and gave verbal affirmations, Najeia worked to help the

women who preferred to participate more in the chat feel seen and included.

Different Connections

Just as Najeia and I have different strengths, we might relate differently to

various group members in the same way. As clinicians, Najeia and I know we will not

connect to every group member the same. While I may really click with one group

member, I might really struggle to resonate with another's contributions. I know that

these notions might be those personal feelings that neither Haley the researcher nor

Haley the facilitator should allow to significantly interfere with the group work. While I

can attempt to manage those personal feelings as best as possible (e.g., with a clinical

supervisor or therapist), Najeia might not have those feelings to process before

engaging with that group member. Over our many groups, it has been helpful for Najeia

and I to work together, so group members have an increased chance of having a

facilitator they connect with.

Varying Perspectives

Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) reminds us that although we as Black women have shared identities, our experiences are varied and complex. Debriefing with Najeia helps me to feel less isolated in my own work with virtual groups in addition to considering perspectives I might be overlooking. For example, while Najeia and I are both Black women, we come from different backgrounds. During our debriefing following a week where "pleasure" was the theme, Najeia and I realized we had different experiences with the concept, one laden with intergenerational shame and silence and one with unrestraint. Fortuitously, the following week's theme was intergenerational patterns and trauma. With the previous week's debrief in mind, I asked participants if intergenerational patterns and pleasure were connected for them. Similar to Najeia and my discrepancy in understandings of pleasure, group members diverged in their experiences with pleasure and intergenerational patterns. Allowing myself to be informed by debriefing with Najeia, in addition to group members' contributions, led to a richer discussion than if I had simply relied on my own experiences and conceptualizations. I found that listening to the varying perspectives of Najeia and the other Black women of Sister Space was invaluable for my facilitation processes.

Group Decisions

The decisions described here offer some examples of the complications that may arise when doing groups or other projects. Of course, I cannot offer a comprehensive list of all the scenarios that may arise when conducting work with other individuals. Just as my experiences are complex, the experiences of others will vary and inform what may come up in their work. My hope is that by sharing some decisions I had to make within the context of Sister Space, you may reflect on how you might handle these

situations or others that are likely to come up in your work. I offer insights on scenarios such as these and encourage you to do the important pre-work of considering how and why you might make decisions in advance. I was not able to predict what came up in Sister Space. My hope is that by sharing some of my experiences, you are made aware that complicated scenarios do come up, and having a firm grasp of where you stand may help you to make those [sometimes quick] decisions in a way that aligns with your goals and inner wisdom.

Changing Group Structure

A number of circumstances arose requiring me to make specific facilitation decisions during the duration of Sister Space. Sister Space sessions were originally supposed to be 90 minutes, as opposed to 120. About halfway into check-in on our first day of group, I realized that 90 minutes was not enough time for a group of that size (i.e., nine group members plus two co-facilitators). As we started running low on time, I saw the women start behaving in ways many women and girls are socialized to behave in the US: taking up as little time and space as possible (Bowles Eagle, 2015). Black women, specifically, have been given little time, space and visibility in academia and throughout US history (Noble, 2013; Pitt et al., 2015; Sesko & Biernot, 2010). Hosting another space where Black women felt pressured to limit their time receiving support was my last intention with Sister Space.

I presented the idea of extending our time to two hours at the end of the first Sister Space session. Rather than asserting that the time would be changed to two hours without their consent, I sent group members an anonymous poll to see if the time extension would work for their schedules. I also made it clear that if people did need to

leave after 90 minutes, they could since that was what they originally agreed to.

Renee*, a thirty-one-year-old mother of three with an understandably tight schedule, commented on this decision in her midpoint interview: "it was very democratic of you to ask people if we could do the extra half hour. It was so simple, but it really made me feel included and respected in a way I guess I wasn't expecting." Just as I played the roles of facilitator and researcher in Sister Space, the women played the role of participants. As a participant, Renee was not expecting to be included in any research design decisions. This expectation aligns with predominantly western, male, patriarchal, capitalistic approaches to scholarship (Dillard, 2008; Collins, 1990). As Renee highlighted to me her acknowledgement of her role as a participant, I realized my negligence of my role as the traditional researcher. For a moment, I had abandoned the eurocentric approaches to research that told me that participants could not be involved in design decisions.

This was not a radical demonstration of my shedding the oppressive standards of eurocentric research. Instead, in the moment I asked participants their input on extending group time, I had forgotten Sister Space was a research study at all. I was acting as I would with any other group I facilitated outside of a research context. In a group that wasn't part of a research project, I would ask group members if a time change worked for their schedules. Considering their schedules would have been a no-brainer to Haley the clinician. Had I remembered Sister Space was a research project, I cannot firmly say I would have made the same decision. This highlights a disturbing assumption I had within myself: when I am playing the role of researcher, the interest of the participants might take a backseat to the research (i.e., needing more time to collect

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data). Only when I am playing something closer to the facilitator/clinician role would I somewhat effortlessly center the needs of group members. In fact, I asked group members consent so naturally that I did not even remember making the decision until Renee brought it up in her one-on-one interview. I would argue that that decision was made from my intuition more than my role as a clinician and certainly more than my role as a researcher.

Endarkened feminist epistemologies (Dillard, 2008) emphasize reciprocity where we "[remove] the boundaries between ourselves and others" (p. 288) and center the community's (e.g, Sister Space) best interest. Dillard goes on to note "as long as we continue to value an academic agenda for research as more important than the needs and desires of the community, we cannot be in. . . reciprocal relationships with others" (p. 288). When I asked for consent to extend the duration of Sister Space sessions, I am thankful I forgot the research. I am thankful my intuition served as my auto-pilot. Otherwise, I do not know if I would have taken the endarkened feminist methodological approach. By Renee bringing up my decision to ask for consent, I was reminded that the researcher steeped in more traditional eurocentric expectations might not have made the same choice. To this day, I wonder if I would have prioritized my own academic agenda over the needs of Sister Space members. I cannot say for sure. I share this truth to encourage clinicians (and researchers) to consciously center the needs of clients (or participants). In this case, I feel fortunate that my intuition somewhat unconsciously guided me to the decision that I made. Perhaps in the future, rather than solely considering my own needs as a clinician [or a researcher] needing more time [to

collect more data], I can consciously center my participants' needs as well. I encourage others to do the same.

Previous Relationships in Group

Reciprocity (Dillard, 2008) was further demonstrated in Sister Space when a situation arose where two group members had a previous relationship. Immediately following our first Sister Space meeting, I received an email from a group member, Willa*, asking to speak over the phone. She noticed that another group member, Hilda*, was a previous therapist of hers. As a Black therapist in the area in which many of the women of Sister Space attended school, I was well aware that Black women therapists were limited and that many Black women saw the same few Black women therapists available. To a certain extent, I attempt to help prospective group members consider that seeing someone they recognize in group might be a possibility during prescreening. In my experience, when potential group members consider that they might know someone previously, they are usually not concerned. Many, including Willa, reported feeling comfortable with the possibility of seeing someone they knew. However, as a therapist myself, I know the dynamics between a therapist and client/previous client can certainly be complex.

While many women reported wanting similar benefits out of Sister Space as one might seek in individualized therapy (e.g., a place to vent personal challenges with understanding parties), the dynamic between group members and a previous therapist-client relationship is quite different. One of the assumptions inherent in endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2008) is power relations manifest in our work (e.g., clinical work; research), and we must pay particular attention to those power

imbalances. I have observed a dynamic in one-on-one therapeutic relationships that often yields more power to the therapist. While I have also observed a power dynamic between facilitators and group members, I see such a significant power dynamic between two group members much less often. In my experience, the flow of information and sensitive details shared is almost primarily one way from client to therapist. Consequently, as the previous therapist, Hilda, had potentially sensitive information about Willa before the group began meeting. This is information that Willa claimed that she did not plan on sharing with the group. She did not expect that one group member (i.e., her previous therapist) would already have that information. Willa admitted that these factors might make her adjust how she participated in group (e.g., not sharing as much or as often; not feeling like she could comfortably respond to something the previous therapist said; fearing other group members might find out about their previous therapeutic relationship).

Furthermore, in this specific case, this was not just a client-therapist dyad; it was a previous therapeutic relationship, meaning they had stopped working together. I suspect because Hilda was respecting therapist-client confidentiality, she did not approach me about this matter. Her approaching me about the situation without Willa's consent would alert me to her going to therapy in the first place, which would be a breach of confidentiality. Consequently, I only communicated with Willa to understand the circumstances surrounding their termination. I contended with a number of complicated questions: Does anyone need to leave the group? Who should it be? Both of them? If only one, which one? Don't both deserve to be there?

In this case, Willa reflected herself and decided she did not feel comfortable continuing in group. The outcome was a successful one in that each member made their own decision about participation without my having to intervene. When I do group work, the desired outcome often centers the needs and care of the participants, in addition to my best judgments. This scenario was an important reminder that although I have power as group facilitator, I do not always have the most information or expertise. Endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2008) reminds me to pay particular attention to power relations in any given situation (e.g., my being group facilitator) and use the value of reciprocity to dismantle my power and center the inherent value and knowledge of others. I did not know the circumstances surrounding their termination, nor did I have access to the dynamics between the two women in their therapy sessions. Instead, Willa had this knowledge. Consequently, it was preferable for her to make her own decision with her considerable knowledge and better understanding of the scenario at hand. In this case, my intrinsic knowledge could have told me something, but Willa's could tell her much more.

In their review of online support groups, Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler (2008) highlight the importance of group member empowerment. They argue that successfully-led support groups center group members' experiences and their autonomy in many of their choices about group. This emphasis on participant empowerment may increase a sense of shared responsibility. In their descriptions of "not-knowing" and client expertise, Anderson and Goolishian (1992) argue that clinicians approaches to working with clients "[require] that our understandings, explanations, and interpretations in therapy not be limited by prior experiences or theoretically formed truths, and

knowledge" (p. 28). They encourage clinicians to understand that our understandings are always interpretive, and if there is an understanding that is privileged, it should be that of the client. They explain further:

> The excitement for the therapist is in learning the uniqueness of each individual client's narrative truth, the coherent truths in their storied lives. This means that therapists are always prejudiced by their experience, but that they must listen in such a way that their experience does not close them to the full meaning of the client's descriptions of their experience. This can only happen if the therapist approaches each clinical experience from the position of not-knowing. To do otherwise. . .may validate the therapist's theory but invalidate the uniqueness of the clients' stories and thus their very identity (p. 28).

As I continue to honor and follow my own inner wisdom, I must also honor the inner knowledge of those I am working with as well. I must center reciprocity and value others' wisdom as I want them to value my own (Dillard, 2008). I must listen to and affirm other Black women's experiences and intrinsic brilliance. As Collins (2000) reminds me, "for African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman. . .if we will not listen to one another, then who will?" (p. 104).

Conclusion

To the Haley and other clinicians just getting their start: Listen to my experiences and interpretations. Allow them, in addition to your own inner wisdom, to guide you.

To everyone: Listen to Black women. Believe their knowledge in its own right.

CHAPTER III

Strong Black Women

For the Strong Black Women

This chapter is for the six year-old Haley who would later assume the role of a strong Black woman. Sister Space was always imagined to be an environment that centered the validation and care of Black women in academia. One of the ways I attempted to do that was by naming and describing a phenomenon that some of them might identify with, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014). The idea was that acknowledging the certain pressures Black women face to be strong as an established phenomenon might feel validating to those that feel those pressures (Grey and Williams-Farrier, 2017). Some women in Sister Space reported feeling validated with the identification of the SBW schema. I was not one of those women. Despite knowing about the SBW schema for years, I did not see my experiences reflected within the schema's confines. Only through my recent experiences in Sister Space and a deep exploration of a defining life event, the passing of my mother, did I start to see how much I exhibit some characteristics of the SBW schema (i.e., avoiding vulnerability; lack of help-seeking; self-silencing). This chapter is for the Haley who is still trying to contend with falling firmly within some descriptions of the SBW schema but not feeling very much like a strong Black woman herself. This chapter is for my ever-evolving notions of strength, along with those of other Black women in academia.

Overview and Objective

The objective of this chapter is to present Black graduate women's experiences with and perceptions of strength and the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014). Seen as a key aspect of Black womanhood, the SBW schema is characterized by independence, lack of help-seeking, self-silencing, emotional containment, and caring for and nurturing others (Abrams, Hill, & Maxwell, 2019; Jones et al., 2021; Woods-Giscombé 2010). I present previous investigations of the SBW schema and argue that an explicit naming of the SBW schema may contribute to validating the experiences of Black women who feel a pressure to be strong (Grey and Williams-Farrier, 2017). In the current study, I aimed to create a validating environment (i.e., Sister Space) that centers the care of Black women. I name and describe the SBW schema as a way to create this environment. I present the pertinent historical contexts (i.e., the Black Lives Matter movement of summer 2020; the COVID-19 pandemic) in which Sister Space took place and discuss how group members experienced strength during that time. I offer my own personal history and how important life events (e.g., the passing of my mother) might have led to demonstrations of the SBW schema within myself. I discuss ways I modeled subverting the SBW schema (i.e., asking for help) within Sister Space and how our notions of strength might be evolving. I conclude by presenting tensions within the SBW schema (Watson & Hunter, 2016), and offer that in addition to a survival tactic, perceived demonstrations of strength might be sources of comfort and joy for Black women.

Previous Investigations of the Strong Black Woman Schema

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014) has been identified as a key aspect of womanhood for many Black women

(Nelson, Caremil, & Adeoye, 2016). It is characterized by the pervasive beliefs that

Black women must assume multiple identities of breadwinners and nurturers, all

independently of familial or social support (Abrams et al., 2014). Other aspects of the

schema include defending oneself, depending solely on oneself, and caring for others,

all while maintaining a strong facade (Watson & Hunter, 2016). The SBW schema has

been found to inhibit demonstrations of emotional vulnerability (i.e., vulnerability) due to

the pressure to appear strong (Abrams et al., 2014; Davis, 2015). The hindrance of

vulnerability might disrupt feelings of intimacy and closeness with others for Black

women (Davis, 2015; Watson-Singleton, 2017). Emotional vulnerability and emotional

intimacy have been linked in part because one's ability to be emotionally vulnerable has

been associated with one's ability to sustain intimacy with another (Edwards, 2014;

Levine, 2016). The SBW schema is directly associated with decreased perceived

emotional support and increased psychological distress (Watson-Singleton, 2017), and

it has been found to increase Black women's susceptibility to depressive symptoms

associated with stress (Donovan & West 2015). Internalization of the SBW schema may

aptly associate with decreased wellbeing, as social support has been found to be

associated with wellbeing, particularly when self-help coping is low among Black women

(Linnaberry, Stuhlmacher & Towler, 2014).

In their 2015 theoretical framework, "The Strong Black Woman Collective"

(SBWC), Davis asserted that while Black women coming together as a group may

promote resistance against gendered and racialized mistreatment and validate the

Black female experience, it may also distinctly hinder vulnerability and emotionality. This

barrier to vulnerability and emotionality amongst a group of Black women, Davis (2015)

argued, may result from the pressures of the SBW schema. Because of the socialized

pressure to be strong for many Black women, demonstrations of weakness, such as

vulnerability, may not seem viable in front of other women who may feel equally

obligated to appear strong (Davis & Afifi, 2019). In the SBWC theory, Black women

communicate strength through the use of distinct communication practices (i.e., code

switching and culturally nuanced speech codes; Davis, 2015), none of which explicitly

address the pressures of the SBW schema itself. In other words, although the SBWC

includes women directly demonstrating strength, the theory does not include scenarios

where Black women explicitly discuss the expectation of strength or their resulting

displays of strength.

An explicit discussion about the expectations involved with the SBW schema

might result in the naming of the SBW schema. While this distinction may seem

inconsequential, the impact of explicitly addressing or "naming" something has been

found to have significant impact on people in a variety of environments (e.g., school;

politics; Caraco, 2018; Graham, 2011; Moradi, 2019; O'Brien, Leiman, & Duffy, 2014).

For example, Mooney-Somers, Perz and Ussher (2008) found that some women

experiencing premenstrual distress found that explicitly naming their symptoms (i.e.,

PMS) significantly validated their experiences. That is, the particular identification and

naming of their distress as a recognized syndrome was particularly affirming for women

who experienced those symptoms (Mooney-Somers, Perz, & Usser, 2008). As Grey

and Williams-Farrier (2017) offer, "it is through the naming and voicing of these

narratives that we [are reminded] of the humanity of Black women" (p. 507). A portion of

the current project was grounded in the notion that the naming of the SBW schema and

how it may manifest in Black women's lives (e.g., not being able to ask for help) might play a key role in validating and supporting a group of Black women. While there is some evidence that suggests that most Black women know the SBW schema and identify with it to a certain degree (West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016), the current study did not assume that all the Black women participants knew the pressures of the SBW schema. Along with the explicit naming and description of the SBW schema, there was a direct acknowledgement that not all Black women relate to the image.

More recently, Jones, Harris and Reynolds (2021) identified that some Black women in academic spaces define the SBW schema by resilience, hard work, independence, nurturance and emotional containment. In their qualitative investigation of academic Black women's definitions of the schema, they also found that Black women were redefining traditional notions of strength, such that strength can include self-care and help-seeking (Jones, Harris, & Reynolds, 2021). Consequently, Jones and colleagues (2021) encouraged clinicians to help Black women explore potentially novel notions of strength. In the current study, I further identify ways in which Black women are conceptualizing and redefining strength.

Sister Space

In the current project, I investigate Black graduate student women's experiences in a virtual support group (i.e., Sister Space) explicitly meant to center their care. Among my deliberate attempts to support and affirm these Black academic women is an explicit naming and discussion of the SBW schema. The naming of the SBW schema serves as an example of the concrete ways in which I aimed to validate Black women's experiences within the virtual group. Aligning with Jones and colleagues (2021)

recommendations, I observe longstanding as well as evolving meanings of strength for

Black graduate student women. I designed this investigation to follow Black feminist

researchers before me (Collins, 2002; Few, Stephens, Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Hamilton,

2020; Patterson et al., 2016; Taylor, 2018) and previous inquiries about the SBW

schema (Abrams et al., 2014; Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018; Miles, 2019; Nelson,

Cardemil, & Adeoye, 2016; Watson & Hunter 2016; Woods-Giscombe, 2010) to use

data from groups and semi-structured interviews to examine other Black women's

experiences. In this Sister Space project, I investigate Black graduate student women's

experiences in eight virtual support group sessions and three one-on-one semi-

structured interviews with each of the nine participants. Cressler (2020) presents a

Black feminist self-study in which she analyses student group and interview data, in

addition to her personal experiences, to examine Black women's positions in academia

and larger society. I similarly use methods of self-reflection and "self-valuation" (Collins,

1986) to investigate my own and other Black graduate student women's experiences,

particularly in regard to intimacy and strength. In this chapter, I focus on notions of

strength.

Naming the Strong Black Woman Schema

I aimed to validate and affirm the Black graduate student women of Sister Space

by explicitly naming and describing the SBW schema. After introductions in our first

session, I noted that, "the Strong Black Woman schema is a set of societal pressures

that compels Black women to present an image of strength, suppress their emotions,

resist vulnerability, and to help others, even at their own expense." I additionally clarified

that while many Black women identified with at least some components of the SBW

schema, some Black women did not relate to the image at all. Aligning with Black feminist approaches to qualitative research, I did not assume that all Black women would have the same experience (i.e., identifying with the SBW schema), and I attempted to honor each women's individual perspective (e.g., "Everyone's experience is varied and honored in the space.") (Collins, 2003, 2016; Dillard, 2008; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Smith, 2013).

Although an identification with the SBW schema was not a criterion for inclusion in the current study, all nine participants reported that they identified with at least some components of the SBW schema (e.g., "I know I can't let my family down") and identified other women in their lives who exhibited traits from this image (e.g., "My mom, she's a single mom, she never let us see her worry, never let us know we were struggling."). Previous research indicates that strength is taught to Black girls by their mothers or other maternal figures (Green, 1990; Romero, 2000; Thomas & King, 2007), potentially indicating that some Sister Space group members had strength in Black women modeled for them from an early age. Additionally, these comments appropriately align with some research indicating that the SBW schema has been partially defined by Black women in academia being seen as caregivers within their cultural communities or families (Jones et al., 2021). Some Sister Space members did, in fact, observe that the naming of the SBW schema did make them feel validated. After naming and describing the SBW schema in our first session, Cynthia*, 24, reflected:

> There is this burden to be strong and resilient. Only recently did I start to
> consider that if I feel like that, there are probably other Black who feel like that,

putting a mask of strength on all the time. But it is nice to have that confirmed. I

don't think I would have had the courage to ask.

The SBW schema is largely a phenomenon addressed in social science and

clinical forums (Jones et al., 2021; Liao, Wei, & Yen, 2020; Watson & Hunter, 2016).

Consequently, Mae*, 27, a group member outside of those disciplines (i.e., in

engineering) observed, "You know in STEM we rarely talk about these things, like I'm

just learning. So, to hear that this is a thing that people actually study, like it's crazy.

Crazy, but good to think about. Now I can go home and tell my friends we're not crazy."

Although this study did not aim to test if the naming of the SBW would affirm Black

women's experiences, but rather to center their care and experiences through this

naming, these responses are compelling. Black feminist thought is deeply grounded in

the acknowledgement and validation of Black women's experiences (Collins, 1989,

2002, 2016). Those (e.g., clinicians; scholars) looking to affirm, support and validate

Black women who might have experiences with the SBW schema may want to explicitly

name that phenomenon. Furthermore, shared aspects of identity (e.g., Black

womanhood) do not always imply shared knowledge (Collins, 2003, 2016; Smith, 2013).

Previous Black feminist literature both emphasizes the importance of transdisciplinary

communication and the use of "direct speech behaviors" (i.e., direct communication) to

avoid misunderstanding (Woodson, 2020). Those in any given discipline may do well to

directly communicate about what is largely known or recognized in their fields to inform

and perhaps even affirm those outside of those spaces.

Strength in Summer 2020

After naming the SBW schema, I gave the women specific examples of the SBW

schema that might resonate in their own lives. For example, I explained that the SBW

schema is what contributes to the feeling of needing to be the one someone can turn to,

even when you're hurting yourself. It is the obligation to support people who are

mourning, even when you have lost a loved one yourself. It is the need to feign not

needing anyone, when you really just want to be held. These examples were particularly

poignant as the week before we started Sister Space, George Floyd, a Black man in

Minneapolis, was murdered by a white police officer. Black feminist methodologies

contend that we cannot fully understand specific phenomena without acknowledging the

historic context in which they occur (Collins, 1990, 2000, 2002; Rousseau, 2013). As

Sister Space met for the first time on a Thursday in early June 2020, Black Lives Matter

protests against anti-Blackness and police brutality erupted around us. We were scared

for ourselves and scared for our loved ones. Carrie*, a twenty-four-year-old mother with

a newborn at home, reflected:

> I have a Black father and a Black husband. And I have a Black daughter, and I
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> can think about all the moms I know who I have connected with on various
>
> websites who have Black sons, and it's so sad. I want to be there for them, and I
>
> need to be there for my family, and sometimes I'm terrified I can't protect them
>
> from everything.

Adherence to the SBW schema has been identified as a coping mechanism in the face

of historic trauma (Black & Woods-Giscombe, 2012). The summer of 2020 has been

identified as a time period of significant racial trauma for Black people in the midst of

increasingly visible anti-Blackness and police brutality (Mosley et al., 2020). In

response, I observed the women of Sister Space attempt to be strong for themselves, their families and their communities. This strength often manifested as a desire to care for others, which is a key aspect of the SBW schema (Abrams et al., 2014; Watson & Hunter, 2016).

In the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests and increasingly visible police brutality against Black people, another Sister Space member, Anne*, offered her experiences. Anne, 31, taught English at a middle school before returning to graduate school. As she witnessed protests both near her in graduate school and at home where she used to teach, she reflected:

I have a habit of numbing when I feel like things become over the top, and I'm also a first year, and the amount of summer work I have was surprising to me, and so that enables me to numb in ways that I don't really even want to. My therapist and I are working on it. And I think I've been struggling particularly this weekend because I am from Philadelphia, from West Philadelphia, and I was watching, I was on Twitter, and I saw the Philly protests, and it was like a block away from the house that I grew up in. And it just shook me to my core, when I had been in a place of being pretty numb, and so my response to that, I am also an educator, so what I did was I was just reaching out to my former students and kids and just talking to them and being there for them and doing that, and that feels good. But I still haven't dealt with a lot of things personally that I need to deal with. And so, I'm kind of in that space between everything's fine and everything could come crashing down maybe.

The racial turmoil prevalent in the summer of 2020 has been shown to have negative effects on the mental health and wellbeing of Black individuals (Dave et al., 2020; Weine et al., 2020). Anne similarly struggled as she attempted to cope amid the increasingly visible anti-Blackness and resulting protests. Consistent with recent conceptualizations of the SBW schema, she felt she had to contain her emotions in order to be strong (Jones et al., 2021). Watson-Singleton (2017) offers that the association with the SBW schema and low perceived emotional support might imply that Black women are very often giving rather than receiving support. Similarly, rather than contending with and obtaining support for her own emotions, Anne opted to care for and hold the emotions of others. As Collins (2000) offers, we must consider Black women's experiences in the historic context that they are in. Anne's demonstrations of strength (i.e., "numbing"; caring for previous students) was in direct response to a major historic and political event. That is, strength looked like numbing and reaching out to previous students for Anne because of the BLM protests. This highlights a potentially important contribution to existing conversations of strength for Black women. Previous investigations have focused on more macro-level stressors (e.g., family stress) that might contribute to Black women needing to be strong (Watson & Hunter, 2016). Anne's response to country and world-wide BLM protests highlights that ideas of strength may be dependent on both micro (e.g., interpersonal challenges) and macro (e.g., political turmoil) factors. Demonstrations of strength and the SBW schema being historically and politically-dependent adds to a body of literature that previously centered the more micro-level contexts of Black women's lives. With Anne's account, I offer that

demonstrations of strength for Black women may vary depending on historic context, in addition to inter and intrapersonal factors.

Black women in academic spaces have previously identified emotional containment as a marker of strength (Jones et al., 2021; Watson & Hunter, 2016). Conversely, Anne saw the tendency to "numb" her emotions as a lack of strength within herself and a personal failing. Rather, strength, to her, would be her "being able to feel [her] feelings." Previous descriptions of the SBW schema included working with a counselor as a "failure" in that some Black women did not view themselves as strong Black women because they attended counseling for their mental health (Watson & Hunter, 2016). That is, seeking mental health treatment disqualifies one from being a strong Black woman (Nelson, Shahid, & Cardemil, 2020; Watson & Hunter, 2016). Throughout our time in Sister Space, five women mentioned having a therapist, often indicating a sense of pride in the work they had done in therapy. Mia*, 31, triumphantly declared how long she had stuck with going to weekly therapy and reflected, "it's painful, but there is strength in committing to growth. I'm getting better in that virtual therapy room." Contrary to previous conceptualizations of strength (Nelson, Shahid, & Cardemil, 2020; Watson & Hunter, 2016), these findings offer that therapy may serve as a context in which strength can grow for some Black women. This contributes to the existing body of literature on the SBW highlighting that therapy may play a role in how some Black women conceptualize and build strength.

Strength for Clinicians and Researchers

Jones and colleagues (2021) offer that clinicians working with Black women have a responsibility to help each Black woman explore and process her definitions and

experiences with strength and to help Black women critically engage with those

ideologies. With this support, Black women may start to embrace more adaptive notions

of strength (e.g., help-seeking; Jones et al., 2021). Consequently, clinicians working

with Black women may help to dismantle the idea that Black women must resiliently

persevere regardless of the circumstances by asking for help and accepting care. While

Jones and colleagues (2021) identify "help-seeking" as a novel aspect of strength for

Black women, they do not identify specific forms of help or support. Some women in

Sister Space offer that therapy is a viable form of help for them. I recommend that

therapists working with Black women first ask about their perceptions of being in

therapy. This aligns with the Black feminist notion that not all Black women have the

same experiences or outlooks (Collins, 2003, 2016; Smith, 2013). Additionally, Watson

and Hunter (2016) observed a "tension" between Black women's conceptualizations of

the SBW schema, such that they observed both positives and negatives in the image. I

recommend clinicians first ask Black women about their notions of strength to better

understand the nuances of their experiences. With a better understanding of client's

perceptions of both strength and therapy, they may help clients explore how therapy

can be an environment of strength in itself.

Similar to clinicians, researchers may face tensions or conflicts in their work

surrounding concepts such as strength. That is, there might not be straightforward

definitions for many of the complex concepts we are investigating for our scholarship. At

times, I have felt a pressure to present a cohesive narrative in my research examining

conceptualizations of various constructs. Collins (2000) reflected on this tension in her

construction of Black feminist thought: "in order to demonstrate the existence and

authenticity of Black feminist thought, I present it as being coherent and basically complete. This portrayal is in contrast to my actual view that theory is rarely this smoothly constructed" (p. x). The pressure to overlook tensions in scholarship may be due to feelings of unsafety within a given historical or political context (Collins, 2000). As a Black woman in the US, I often do not feel "safe" enough to fully expose the contradictions in my research. Collins (2000) notes, "historically, safe spaces were "safe" because they represented places where Black women could freely examine issues that concerned us. By definition, such spaces become less "safe" if shared with those who were not Black and female" (p. 121). (It is important to note here that since *Black Feminist Thought* was published, the term "safe space" has been identified as potentially inaccurate such that it may offer false promises, such as comfort, physical or emotional safety (Arao & Clemens, 2013). When I use the term "safe space" I am quoting Collins in previous literature.) By producing and publishing our scholarship, we are opening ourselves up. We are potentially exposing ourselves to those who are not Black women, to those who are "less safe". To the Black women researchers, I honor that presenting tensions and paradoxes in your research may feel unsafe. I at times feel that unsafety as well.

I will not encourage you to expose yourself in the face of unsafe feelings in the name of research. Endarkened feminist epistemology calls for us to "more clearly recognize humans in our various ways of being,. . .honor. . .[and] better ensure our collective survival and contributions to the world" (Dillard, 2008, p. 289). To the researchers, I recognize your humanity and your worthiness of various types of safety. If exposing tensions in your research feels safe for you and like a necessary contribution

to the world, please share it. I hope I have the opportunity to listen to what you have to say. If presenting those contradictions in your scholarship does not feel safe for you, I encourage you to recognize your own humanity and act towards your own self-preservation. This may mean choosing not to present all the paradoxes you see in your research. To the researchers, I encourage choosing your safety when you need to as a necessary form of resistance (Collins, 2000).

How I Came to be "Strong"

Here, I share some of the ways I came to exhibit aspects of the SBW schema myself. By sharing some of the intricacies of my experiences, I hope to highlight that not all Black women's demonstrations of "strength" stem from a desire to be strong, as previously problematic assumptions assert (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). I assumed aspects of the SBW schema (i.e., avoidance of vulnerability, a lack of help-seeking and self-silencing; Abrams, Hill & Maxwell, 2019; Abrams et al., 2014; Black & Woods-Giscombe, 2012) long before I identified with my Blackness and long before I became a woman. I was six years old when I was in the car accident that suddenly killed my mother. In the face of trauma, Black people have been shown to develop protective measures to cope throughout their lifespans (Jones et al., 2020). Strength has been identified as one survival tactic for Black women to psychologically protect themselves (Black & Woods-Giscombe, 2012; Spates, Evans, Watts, Abubakar, & James, 2019). In fact, Black girls have been found to be socialized from a young age to be strong specifically to serve as a psychological protective measure against various traumas (e.g., gendered racism; Brown et al., 2017). Although I did not explicitly name it as strength at the age of six, I identified ways to help me survive the loss of my mother at

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such a young age. These survival tactics were neither voluntary nor conscious; instead, they were vital to my continued existence. Similarly, strength has been identified as an imperative means of physical and psychological resilience, allowing Black women to survive traumas preserving themselves, family and communities (Black & Woods-Giscombe, 2012).

Avoiding Vulnerability

Abrams and colleagues (2014) identify that a potential byproduct of the SBW schema is a strong aversion to vulnerability. The car accident that took my mother left me feeling vulnerable in many ways. One of the most immediate and evident ways was a broken femur. For months after the car accident, I sat helplessly in a cast that stretched from my upper torso to the tip of my left foot. Unable to move on my own or fully comprehend my mother's death, I felt powerless. After the cast was removed, I then had to relearn how to walk. Attempting to take my first steps as adults spectated from the other end of a cold hospital corridor is my earliest and perhaps most painful memory of vulnerability. Mullin (2014) explains that vulnerability implies a certain level of exposure. Both being unable to leave my bed and then being observed as I attempted to learn how to walk left me feeling humiliated and exposed. Although I knew my observers were attempting to help and support me, being watched as I slowly learned something a toddler could do (i.e., walk) almost felt unbearable. The loneliness consumed me as it seemed like everyone watched my every move. From learning to walk, to going to the bathroom to going to sleep, I was watched. In public, I was gawked at as the little girl who needed a wheelchair and later, a walker. The constant

surveillance left me feeling vulnerable and intruded on for months on end. I soon associated vulnerability with feeling violated.

Mullin (2014) found that "since children depend heavily on care provided by a limited number of intimate caregivers, they are particularly vulnerable in relation to those who provide their care" (p. 266). The person I lost in that car accident was my mother, my teacher and my best friend. She was the person I spent the most time with and my primary source of emotional intimacy and care. Losing her made me feel a level of vulnerability that first broke me and I then came to despise. I hated feeling abandoned and susceptible to anything, both physically, as I could not walk, and emotionally. Losing the person who signified care and safety for me at six left me feeling more vulnerable than ever. This experience led me to internalize an avoidance of vulnerability.

Avoiding Help-Seeking

Similar to vulnerability, the SBW schema is associated with avoidance of help-seeking (Black & Woods-Giscombe, 2012; Liao, Wei, & Yin, 2020; Ward, Clark, & Heidrich, 2009). For me, not asking for help stemmed from a desire to protect those around me, not as a demonstration of strength or the absence of weakness (i.e., needing help). Parents and other caretaking role models have been identified as primary sources of help for children (Siegel & Hartzell, 2013). In the aftermath of my mother's passing, my caretakers were father and my mother's mother, Granny. The first time I remember attempting to ask my father for help was on a plane from Lagos to Paris days following the car accident that killed my mother. We were en route to a hospital with more advanced medical technology to address my injuries. My dad was

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asleep, and I was scared and in pain. The only other people on the plane were two

doctors sent to observe me on our journey. Again, I was being watched. As I attempted

to wake my father up to comfort me, one doctor stopped me. She explained how

emotionally and physically exhausted he was after losing my mother and attempting to

tend to me and my three siblings. She suggested I not wake him up. I was told not to

ask for help as a means of protecting him. I didn't wake him. I literally suffered in

silence.

In the days, weeks, months and years following my mother's passing, I watched

my father and Granny be overwhelmed with grief and the prospect of raising four

children who had suddenly lost their mother. Despite their efforts to conceal it, Dad and

Granny were clearly in immeasurable pain. In the face of this pain, I learned not to ask

for help. I wanted to protect them. I wanted to add as little burden to them as possible

amidst their monumental sorrow. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) argues that among the

problematic assumptions rooted in the construction of strength for Black women is the

notion that "being strong accurately characterizes Black women's motivations and

behaviors" (p. 31). In this case, my lack of help-seeking did not stem from a desire to be

strong or appear strong myself. I simply wanted Dad and Granny to be ok. Soon, not

asking for help went from a conscious choice to an ingrained behavior that I was not

aware I exhibited.

Self-Silencing

Self-silencing has additionally been identified as a manifestation of the SBW

schema (Abrams, Hill, & Maxwell, 2019). Conceptualizations of the SBW schema often

include a lack of self-care (Abrams et al., 2014; Watson & Hunter, 2016; Watson-

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Singleton, 2017). Incidentally, after the loss of my mother, I learned to self-silence as a way to care for myself. Going to school after my mom's passing resulted in more stares. Concerned for me after my mother's passing, my teachers often glanced over at me during lessons. Going to school in a wheelchair made everyone double take. Although I did not tell them, my classmates knew my mom had died. They stared at me too. In an attempt to lessen the stares, I tried to make myself as small as possible. In a wheelchair and with a walker in a room full of second graders, the amount of space I physically took up was quite large. Instead, I made my voice small. I self-silenced as a way to protect myself from the stares.

Although I constantly felt stared at, I hardly felt seen. As I attempted to grapple with losing my mother, I quickly learned that my peers were not equipped to deal with death. My peers did not seem to like my answers when asked, "what happened to you?" or, "where is you mom?" They quickly looked away or gawked in disbelief. I was met with stunned silence or audible gasps. Second graders don't have a lot of tact when it comes to finding out someone doesn't have a mother. Over time, I found that twelfth graders do not either. Nor do twenty-five-year-olds. After years of being met with astounded disbelief and subsequent personal discomfort for making others feel uncomfortable, I turned to self-silencing. I found that figuratively suffering in silence was often less painful than being the girl whose story no one knew what to do with. Black girls have a long history of feeling painfully invalidated in their experiences, particularly in school and among peers (Carter Andrews, Brown, Castro, & Id-Deen, 2019; Haynes, Stewart, & Allen, 2016; Hines & Wilmot, 2018). To summon the courage to share the most tender parts of myself only to be met with invalidating silence was unbearable. It

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brought forth feelings of vulnerability in addition to bitterness that no one seemed to

know how to hold space for my complex sorrow. Silence was the lesser of two evils.

Validating My Experiences with "Strength"

My experiences demonstrate ways in which various aspects of the SBW schema

(i.e., avoidance of vulnerability; lack of help-seeking; self-silencing) can become

inherent in Black women and disrupt the notion that Black women always exhibit

components of the SBW schema because of a desire to be or appear strong

(Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Strength has been identified as a viable form of

psychological resistance to the various forms of oppression (e.g., racism and sexism)

prevalent within American society (Knighton et al., 2020; Spates et al., 2019).

Presenting as a Strong Black woman has been identified as crucial for Black women's

survival in American society—a society that has persistently overlooked and

undervalued Black women's experiences (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Before I knew I

existed in a society that would denigrate and ignore my experiences, I lost my mother. I

lost the person that many Black women learn the most about Black womanhood from

(Collins, 1987, 2000). The deeply-rooted manifestation of the SBW schema within me

started from an intimately personal and individual experience, not necessarily in

response to societal or chronic patterns. While noteworthy discussions of the SBW

schema identify the media (Anyiwo, Ward, Day Fletcher, & Rowley, 2018), social media

(Stanton et al., 2017), and gendered socialization (Brown et al., 2017) as

communicators of strength, there is considerably less discussion on how a specific

incident might contribute to this phenomenon. Primarily contributing aspects of the SBW

to larger societal issues (e.g., racism) and overlooking more micro-level events may

contribute to the exclusion of Black women like me in pertinent discourse surrounding strength for Black women. Just as the naming of the SBW schema was affirming for some women in Sister Space, further investigation and dissemination of the personalized origin narratives of strength might be monumental for Black women of varying experiences (Harris, 2015; Porter et al., 2020).

Help-Seeking

In their investigation of the SBW schema, Jones and colleagues (2021) recommend role models demonstrate Black women's strength in new and novel ways, such as emotional expression, seeking social support and modeling self-care. While I set out to do many things in the current project (e.g., provide clinical recommendations for co-facilitating virtual support groups for Black academic women), modeling help-seeking was not one of them. As previously described, I have a poignant and painful relationship with asking for help. Furthermore, as someone who felt she fell firmly in the "helper" role as the support group facilitator, I did not anticipate needing help in the context of Sister Space.

However, increasing and unexpected impacts of the global pandemic forced me to ask for help. A few hours before our third Sister Space session, I learned that a family member had contracted COVID-19. As a Black woman in the US, this experience was certainly not unique to me as Black families have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (Shah, Sachdeva, & Dodiuk-Gad, 2020). Nor was the notion to continue on as my family and the world was being ravaged by the pandemic. In a conversation of COVID-19, racism and health inequities, a Black woman doctor reflected:

I think people know intuitively that we are an underresourced community. People

also have other realities. If I go to the doctor and I can't work for a week, what

does that mean? Especially early, before unemployment stipends were put in

place, this was a real problem. It will continue to be a problem. People have lots

of real-world reasons. Who's going to take care of my mother if I go in the

hospital? Who's going to take care of my children? (Abbasi, 2020, p. 429).

I myself was feeling notions associated with the SBW schema to carry on for others

(i.e., group members). This feeling, however, did not stem from a need to be strong, but

rather, a lack of awareness of any other option. Asking for support or even recognizing

that I needed support was something I had learned not to do since I was six years old.

According to how I was used to showing up, poised and under control, no options other

than facilitating group even crossed my mind.

I entered into the session planning to conduct business as usual. However, as

soon as we started the session, my mind went blank. It was as if my body would not

allow me to continue with business as usual. A single drop of sweat slid down my arm's

underbelly. Although I willed myself to concentrate, my brain would not allow it.

Although I was still speaking, I did not know what I was saying. My mind was

overwrought with fear. In the middle of a sentence, I cut myself off and whimpered, "I

just can't today; can you?" I asked Najeia to take the lead. Without skipping a beat,

Najeia facilitated check in and guided that day's conversation.

Previous investigations have painted the strong Black woman as someone who

can "survive anything without break[ing] down and be[ing] weak" (Watson & Hunter,

2016, p. 433). "Breaking down" is precisely how I would describe my experience in

Sister Space that day. My understanding of how I conducted business (i.e., clinical work) as usual broke down in front of my (and other Black women's) very eyes. Sometimes, for whatever reason you (or your body) decides, you may not conduct business as usual in your work. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) observed that for many populations (e.g., Black men; white women), Black women breaking down or "falling apart" is "intolerable." Black feminists have long centered resistance to oppressive assumptions (e.g., Black women cannot fall apart; Alinia, 2015; Collins, 1989, 1990; Griffin, 2012; Matandela, 2017) and the significance of spiritual, intuitive needs (Collins, 2003; Dillard, 2000, 2008). In her Black feminist-womanist storytelling, Baker-Bell (2017) asks herself, "how did I exist and resist?" In this moment, I resisted by acting "in the spirit" (Dillard, 2008). I did not override my intuition. I listened to it. My intuition allowed me to resist my learned behaviors (i.e., not asking for help). My intuitive needs guided me to model help-seeking, aligning with Jones and colleagues (2021) recommendations for clinical work with Black women. Although Jones and colleagues (2021) recommend modeling strength in new and novel ways for parents (e.g., asking for help) and active exploration of strength for clinicians working with Black women, I found that these suggestions can be interwoven. Alternative demonstrations of strength (i.e., modeling help-seeking) can incite active exploration and redefining of strength among Black women. Publicly asking for help actively defied some of the more traditional manifestations of the SBW schema (Abrams et al., 2014), spurring some women in Sister Space to reconsider their original notions of both strength and weakness. This redefining of strength may contribute to less distress for Black women (Jones et al., 2021).

Evolving Notions of Strength

In response to my admitting to needing help in group, Cynthia*, 24, reflected in her individual midpoint interview, "I realized being transparent about whatever you're going through. Whatever you're feeling, that is strength. Being able to share with others and get support for that. That is strength!" Iris*, 27, noted, "I realized, you will have those moments where you feel like you cannot get to the top, and those don't make you weak." In their investigation of the SBW schema, Jones and colleagues (2021) similarly found "novel" notions of strength such that, "a strong Black woman is someone who embraces the challenges in her life but is never too prideful to ask for help" (p. 353). Through my experience asking for help in Sister Space, I found that the demonstration of help-seeking by a facilitator in a group setting can help Black women critically examine their preconceived notions of strength and their previous understanding of what makes a person "weak."

The rejection of the idea of what is "weak" may be particularly important to consider in the current situation. People around the world have been found to be struggling with psychological and emotional fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fofana et al., 2020; Morgul et al., 2020).This fatigue leads to burnout and significant decline in mental health and productivity in many areas of life (e.g., work) (Fofana et al., 2020). Consequently, "[getting] to the top" might be more strenuous than ever. As time progresses, there might be a temptation to expect people's productivity and output to return to that which was before the pandemic, despite the pandemic persisting. Iris lamented in group, "now that it's been a few months [with COVID-19], you know, my advisor is giving me deadlines and just expecting me to go back to a normal

workday." However, the extended effects of the pandemic, in conjunction with little

information on when the pandemic might be contained, might further contribute to

burnout (Chen, Kaczmarek, & Ohyama, 2020; Daumiller et al., 2021). People's output

will likely continue to dwindle overtime, not rebound simply because an arbitrary amount

of time has passed.

Facilitators working with Black women who might be operating within the SBW

schema might remind them that it is not "weak" to fall short of a goal, particularly when

facing immense stressors, such as those brought on in the age of COVID-19 (e.g.,

burnout). There has been some research indicating that COVID-19 disproportionately

affects Black women mentally, physically, and financially (Walton, Campbell, & Blakey,

2021). In her recommendations for doing womanist therapy with Black women Sanchez-

Hucles (2016) stresses the importance of considering intersecting identities as well as

the contexts in which Black women are in. Black women have not failed to be strong

because they need help in the midst of a global pandemic or hyper-visible racism and

police brutality (Walton, Campbell, & Blakey, 2021). This reality might be particularly

difficult to remember if a group facilitator or clinician presents herself as an invincible,

strong Black woman herself. As clinicians working with Black women during COVID-19,

I recommend that we redefine and reimagine both strength and weakness to match the

innumerable stressors Black women face in our homes, communities and the world

around us (e.g., having a family member get COVID). We can do this by modeling more

adaptive images of strength (e.g., asking for help; Jones et al., 2021).

Tensions, Comfort and Joy in Strength

Investigations of the SBW schema have often focused on its detrimental mental and physical health outcomes (e.g., psychological distress, depressive symptomology, obesity, and cardiovascular disease risk) (Abrams et al., 2014; Abrams et al., 2019; Liao, Wei, & Yin, 2020; Watson-Singleton, 2017; West, Donovan & Daniel, 2016). Watson and Hunter observe (2016):

Despite the scholarly contributions regarding the SBW race-gender schema, there has been an overemphasis on its associated injurious consequences. This has encouraged premature binary conclusions that show it as primarily a liability or a benefit as opposed to a schema wrought with tensions.

To demonstrate these tensions, Watson & Hunter (2016) observe that despite being aware of some detrimental outcomes of the SBW schema (e.g., depression), Black women see aspects of the SBW schema (e.g., avoidance of help-seeking; emotional constraint) as necessary to effectively addressing their life demands (e.g., caregiving; schoolwork). I extend this by offering that aspects of the SBW schema might offer comfort, fulfillment and joy, in addition to being a survival tactic.

In group, Hilda*, 31, commented on her own tensions surrounding perceived demonstrations of strength as a Black woman:

I have to make sure I don't step into a therapist or caretaker role, which is very easy for me to, in general, as a Black woman, to take things on for other people, but also to listen. I found myself doing that, I was at a grad school where I applied, and I was talking to another student, and he was like, "tell me about yourself." And I want like, "No! Tell me about *you*" because, like, I will step into that role quickly. It does feel good to do that, even though maybe as a Black

woman, I shouldn't. I know that's a thing among Black women, but it's also where

I feel most comfortable or even comforted sometimes, you know?

I did know. Like me, Hilda was a therapist. We connected from the beginning of Sister

Space over loving our clinical work with clients. From a very young age, I've felt like

caring for others by listening fed my soul. Other Black feminist scholars have observed

the "nourishment" that stems from connecting with and caring for others in this way

(Overstreet, 2019). It feels antithetical to my spirit to say my tendency to care for people

solely stems from a desire to be strong, as previous conceptualizations of the schema

have implied (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Instead it can stem from a pursuit of

enjoyment.

Romero (2000) observed:

Strong Black Woman is a mantra for so much a part of U.S. culture that it is

seldom realized how great a toll it has taken on the emotional well-being of the

African American woman. As much as it may give her the illusion of control, it

keeps her from identifying what she needs (p. 225).

On the contrary, despite exhibiting many aspects of the SBW schema, I do know what I

need. Sometimes what I need is comfort. And sometimes aspects of the SBW schema

(e.g., shifting the focus to care for others) can feel comforting and fulfilling. Caring for

others, even ahead of myself, can feel joyful and delightful. Being a support for

someone can leave me with a sense of fullness and warmth. While caring for a group of

Black women, in the midst of a global pandemic, increasingly visible racism and other

stressors, may appear to some as a clear demonstration of the SBW schema, I saw it

as an act towards my own joy.

Jones et al. (2021) offers, "rather than discarding strength for its historical and consequential impact on Black women's wellness, we encourage scholars, clinicians, and others to honor Black women's agency and support their efforts to link strength with wellness" (p. 357). Sometimes what is seen as strong to the outside world is my creating wellness and comfort for myself. Sometimes caring for others makes me feel joyfully and intimately connected with them. Sometimes sitting in silence is delightful. Sometimes putting others before myself is fulfilling. In her Black feminist description of Black women's experiences, O'Neale (1986) offers, "beyond the mask, . . .in her psyche, is and has always been another world, a world in which she functions—sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy…—by doing the things that 'normal' black women do" (p. 139). Oftentimes, caring for others feels very "normal" for me. In fact, caring for someone who admits they need support is much more "normal" for me than not offering help at all. As O'Neale (1986), other scholars and the women of Sister Space observe, there will be tension (e.g., both sorrow and joy) in our conceptualization of many concepts. Despite tensions surrounding the SBW schema, and certainly other aspects of Black womanhood, at times, I choose to listen to and honor that joy that I know I feel. These types of choices, Collins (2000) observes, "form prime locations for resisting [dominant narratives]" (p. 111), such as Black women primarily acting out of a desire to be strong.

Conclusion

To Haley and other "Strong" Black women: Choose your safety. Ask for help. You may not necessarily want to be strong or even identify as strong at all. I am listening you and your personal stories.

To everyone: Listen to my story, and know that I do not want to be strong. Listen to the women of Sister Space and see the tensions surrounding their established and evolving notions of strength.

CHAPTER IV

Intimacy

To honor love as a methodology in the spirit, we must also embrace the intimate nature of research, which ultimately forces us to surrender our sense of separateness, to see ourselves in the lives of others.

—Dillard, (2008, p. 288)

For the Researchers

This chapter is for the Haley setting out to research emotional intimacy (i.e., intimacy) for Black graduate student women. In some ways, this chapter feels the "safest." It is the most straightforward in answering a straightforward research question: How do Black graduate student women conceptualize and demonstrate emotional intimacy? How did I investigate intimacy for Black graduate student women? Another straightforward answer: I asked them in interviews, and I observed them in a virtual support group. I listened to them. Less room for holes to be poked into my methodologies. Less questioning of my knowledge production. My role as a researcher feels safer, though never totally safe. Collins (2000) contends "a scholar making a knowledge claim typically must convince a scholarly community controlled by elite White avowedly heterosexual men holding U.S. citizenship that a given claim is justified" (p. 253). Neither white nor heterosexual nor male, I have often felt my role as a researcher precariously depended on the whims of strangers. Strangers who had to be convinced of my humanity, in addition to my legitimacy as a scholar.

This chapter was originally supposed to offer me comfort in the midst of a terrifying project. A project that both forced me to look within the depths of my spirit and felt like a tremendous obstacle to something I have been working [at times, dragging myself] towards for the past five years (i.e., a PhD). This chapter was supposed to be straightforward knowledge production (i.e., intimacy for Black graduate student women looks like x). This chapter was supposed to be the safety net for a skittish researcher just trying to pass her dissertation defense. In my efforts to demonstrably prove myself as a researcher investigating intimacy, I started to uncover the Haley that has no pretense. The Haley that is working to de-identify herself with the various roles she plays (e.g., the researcher; the clinician). The Haley that is more intimately connected to herself and her inner wisdom. I suspect you will see her a bit later around the section entitled, "Disruption of Intimacy." For now, I reassume my researcher role to give you a better idea of what's to come in this chapter.

Overview and Objective

In this chapter, I present the various ways I and other Black women graduate students described and found intimacy during our time in Sister Space. Emotional intimacy has been defined by mutual self-disclosure, personal validation, trust, favorable attitudes, and mutual expression of affection (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Garfield, 2010; Hook et al., 2003). Emotionally intimate connections might be particularly important for Black women at primarily white academic institutions because the social support from those connections has been shown to be integral to their wellbeing (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Jones, Ford, Pierre, & Davis-Maye, 2020; Rasheem et al., 2018). In this study, areas of intimate connection for the Black graduate student women of Sister

Space included family, motherhood, our relationships with each other (i.e., other Black women) and with ourselves. Due to gendered and racial barriers in higher education, intimate spaces, such as close relationships, have been shown to be complex and complicated for Black women in academia (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Davis, 1991; Moses, 1989). Factors restricting Black women's intimate connections include traditional, often white, standards of academic and clinical professionalism (Burstow, 1992; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Goode-Cross & Grimm, 2016; Minnett, James-Galloway, & Owens, 2019; Williams, Reed, & George, 2021). I show that due to the emphasis on distance and a lack of intimacy in traditional white academic and clinical professionalism, these external pressures may not be culturally relevant to many in Black communities (Dixson, & Dingus, 2008; Mahabeer, Nzimande, & Shoba, 2018). I argue that for many Black individuals, togetherness and intimate connection is an ingrained cultural norm (Asante, 2009; Hickey-Moody & Wilcox, 2019; Patterson et al., 2016; Van den Heuvel, 2008). Therefore, emphasizing togetherness and intimacy might be culturally appropriate for Black women in a variety of settings (e.g., support groups; academia) (Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018; Mahabeer, Nzimande, & Shoba, 2018; Van den Heuvel, 2008).

In light of my experiences in Sister Space, I outline what intimacy looks like between me and my co-facilitator, Najeia. Despite there being scant extant literature on the relationship between support group co-facilitators, I argue that intimacy within group starts with that bond. I reflect on some of my challenges and triumphs when creating intimate space between myself and Sister Space group members, and I highlight how a group of Black women can be an intimate space in itself (Collins, 2000). Extant Black

feminist research has identified both family membership and motherhood, as particularly intimate and important roles for Black women (Collins, 1987, 2000, 2005; Nash, 2018, 2019). I present some of the intimately painful intergenerational patterns the women of Sister Space observed in their families, such as normalized fat phobia, and reflected on how we might continue to disrupt those patterns. I present the intimate role of motherhood and how intentional choices made by mothers in Sister Space and the mothers of those in Sister Space might create lasting change for future generations. I highlight some of the ways the women of Sister Space engage in processes of self-exploration and growth to become more intimate with themselves. In light of a pursuit of intimacy with myself, I conclude by offering my step-by-step recommendations for how to be further introspective and trust one's intuition.

Boundaries and Togetherness

Black feminist thinkers acknowledge that while imagining a different world is both revolutionary and crucial for progress, so is acknowledging the world as it still exists for many Black women today (Collins, 1989; Griffin, 2012; James-Gallaway & Turner, 2021; Osei, 2019). Both academic and clinical work have established sets of traditional regulations and behaviors to guide working with others (e.g., rigid boundaries) (Cheng, 2012; Eccleston, Hayes, & Furedi, 2005; Francis & Dugger, 2014; Ibrahim, Mansor, & Amin, 2012; McInnis, 2010; Shaker, 2015). Black women inside and outside academia report feeling pressured to operate under these traditional, often eurocentric, guidelines (Burstow, 1992; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Goode-Cross & Grimm, 2016; Minnett, James-Galloway, & Owens, 2019; Williams, Reed, & George, 2021). Despite being deeply steeped in Black feminist thought, Hamilton (2020) still felt constrained by professional

standards in academia. When reflecting on her own experiences conducting research, she observed:

> As researchers before me have described and advised, I tried to dress professionally when recruiting and conducting interviews. Perhaps as a reflection of the difficulties of navigating graduate school and the transition to professional adulthood it implies, I made an effort with my clothes and hair in order to be taken seriously as a young researcher and to convey respect to the women who had taken time out of their clearly busy schedules to talk to me.

I too have been affected by traditional expectations in professional settings. Early in my career as a clinician, one of the first forms I created was my "professional statement" (Magnuson, Norem, & Wilcoxon, 2000). Professional statements are commonly recommended in traditional clinical spaces to inform clients about a therapist's professional background and the limitations of the professional therapeutic relationship (West et al., 2006). My statement outlined how I would interact with clients and the level of distance I intended to maintain in our therapeutic work. I intended to hand these to clients along with informing them that I did not plan to acknowledge them if we ran into each other in public at the very beginning of our very first session together. Aligning with my traditional, eurocentric training, this was considered professional. I thought these were the boundaries necessary to conduct therapy.

The Black feminist concept of "interdependence" has been shown to help Black women exist both within and outside of the academy, relying on those who came before and are around them (Armstrong, 2007; Collins, 1986, 1989, 2016; Griffin, 2012). In her 2016 Black feminist exploration of freedom, Angela Davis emphasizes that we must use

our "combined spirits, our collective intellects and our many bodies" in order to progress. Traditional values in Afrocentrism emphasize cooperation, interrelatedness, interdependence and collaboration (Balakrishnam, 2020; Ebersöhn, 2019; Mekoa, 2018; Ntseane, 2011). One of the first books my mother read to me when I was young was *It Takes a Village*. The full phrase, "it takes a village to raise a child" is a proverb attributed to many African cultures. In my earliest years of life, my mother breastfed me. During this time, she also pumped milk for another mother who had recently adopted a child and could not produce milk herself. As I came into and was nurtured in this world, it was through the lens of being intimately connected with others. The idea that people become who they become through the assistance and cooperation of many is ingrained in many Black communities (Alexander, 2020; Kernodle, 2014; Muñoz-Muñoz, 2019; Ramdin, 2017).

As the women of Sister Space met, we reflected often about the significance of connection in our lives and self-concepts. Mia*, 31, remarked, "I need to see and feel connected to Blackness. It makes me feel more connected to me. More like me. It *is* me, if that makes sense." Mae*, 27, whose family lived down south, reflected about the lengths she would go to for togetherness: "driving 12 hours both ways, that may seem like a lot for some, but that's just me. It's what I have to do to be with family." Both women speak to the idea that togetherness and connection is not just important, it is weaved into their definitions of themselves. Communality, for many Black women, cannot easily be disentangled from who we are (Kernodle, 2014).

As the first Sister Space session crept more into focus, so did ongoing police brutality and systemic racism on national and global levels. Black people across the

country were being inundated with the reminder of their positions in the eyes of the law and many systems in the US. We were being further reminded of our disconnection to so many others in the country and of the losses of those we were intricately connected to in our communities. We did not have to know Breonna Taylor or Ahmaud Arbery or George Floyd personally to see ourselves and those close to us in them. At the time of Sister Space, our village and our togetherness were being dismantled before our very eyes. With this destruction serving as a salient context in which I was beginning and conducting Sister Space, the rigid boundaries of white traditional professionalism that I had grown up with became less and less of an option. Although these restrictions still affected and haunted me, I knew those pressures could not outweigh my need to center intimate connection. I would have to find another way to conduct my clinical and scholarly work that not only accepted but further invited the intimacy of togetherness within Sister Space.

Intimacy as Co-Facilitator

Intimacy Between Co-facilitators

Although there is considerable social science and clinical research on relationships between group members in women's virtual support groups (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Holbrey & Coulson, 2013; Ki & Jang, 2018; McCaughan et al., 2017), there is little investigation on dynamics between support group co-facilitators. In my experience facilitating previous support groups and Sister Space, intimacy within group starts with co-facilitators. I met my co-facilitator, Najeia, in a professional setting years before Sister Space was conceived. We were both training as clinicians, and I needed someone to help me run a group for Black undergraduate women. When we

first met, I had fairly set professional standards and boundaries myself, largely based on

my past experiences in white educational spaces. Since Najeia had never done support

group work herself, I planned to train and relate to her in the same professional way my

mentor did me. Unlike myself, Najeia did not straddle the line between research and

therapy. She sat comfortably in her position as a clinical social worker. In some ways,

Najeia started as my mentee. I was tasked with training her to do group work. However,

I soon realized she had many lessons to teach me.

The first time Najeia texted me "I love you," I thought she had the wrong number.

We had been working together for about a year in irresistibly intimate contexts (i.e.,

groups), yet I was disoriented by such an intimate gesture. I still rigidly clung to

perceived eurocentric professional standards, despite those feeling contrary to my

authentic self and inner wisdom. Her gesture was entirely appropriate. We had had an

emotional session where a group member let us further into the depths of her

depression. In hindsight, I can see no more appropriate of a response than reaching out

in love. Connecting with someone on a human level, not one based on fabricated

expectations.

With her gesture, she showed me the courage she had to show herself at the

most intimate-level—a step I had yet to take in either research or clinical spaces. She

was also acknowledging a truth that just like our group members, we too might be

affected by this emotional work. We too deserve to have human reactions to the

injustices that we as Black women face. We too deserve to be loved on, cared for and

held in those moments. And it is ok to hold each other as co-facilitators. If I want

participants in my group to show the tender sides of themselves and safely allow others

in, I needed to do the same, including in the contexts of groups. I'd have to let Najeia in.

The process of establishing intimacy with anyone is a difficult one to describe. In their recommendations for establishing intimacy within support groups, Drebing (2016) states, "leaders who push members to make connections. . .often have the opposite effect. Pushy leaders also often reduce the sense of trust the group feels. Inviting and encouraging sharing and connection is very different from forcing it" (p. 16). Similarly, my challenge with describing an intentional process of establishing intimacy primarily stems from the notion that true intimacy can only be achieved organically. It feels ingenuine to attempt to provide instructions for something that is supposed to come naturally over time. I also acknowledge that there is no set rule to what intimacy looks like. Most conceptualizations of emotional intimacy include mutual self-disclosure, personal validation, trust, favorable attitudes, and mutual expression of affection (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Frost, 2013; Garfield, 2010; Hook et al., 2003). However, Giddens (2013) offers that intimacy, in fact, is an ever-evolving construct that changes with individuals, historical contexts and larger societies. Rather than a set definition, I offer a description on what my increasingly intimate bond with Najeia started to look like over time and some of my reflections to go with it.

Firstly, I started to let Najeia a bit more into my world. It is important to note that I identified Najeia as someone safe to invite in. In their investigation of individuals' definitions of intimacy, Birnie-Porter and Lydon (2013) found that "feeling safe" is a key component of intimate connections. Collins (2000) similarly identifies "safety" as integral to establishing intimacy for Black women and specifically identifies Black women's

relationships with one another as a location commonly seen as "safe." I use my inner knowing or intuition to determine who is safe for me. For me, safety points to someone who can receive my vulnerability and not abuse it. Safety feels like open arms—empathy, non-judgement, and understanding reception. Everyone has the right to determine who is safe and not safe for them to create intimacy with. In fact, for me, true intimacy is only attained with bi-directional feelings of safety.

When Najeia asked me how I was, I started responding wholeheartedly. I told her when I was stressed, concerned, tired or down. I told her about my family, my friends and my fears. I told her about losing my mother. I let her see me genuinely laugh, and I let her see me cry. We text each other memes and words of encouragement before events that have nothing to do with the groups we run together. I let her help me. For me, accepting help is one of the greatest indicators of intimacy. It means I trust you to do the task I need help with, and that I trust you with the knowledge that I cannot do it all on my own. I trust you to see the absence of "strength" within me (Watson & Hunter, 2016). I trust you to see my light but also what is shadowed within me. For me, it is in those shadows that true intimacy lies.

For some, the feeling of intimacy may be evoked when considering whatever is 'home.' Imagine the feeling you get when you arrive at home after being out. It doesn't have to be after a long or stressful day; it can simply be after being in public for a period of time. Imagine tension you didn't even know was there melting off your body. Imagine the comfort of being embraced by something so familiar. Now, imagine the person you get to be at home. Imagine finally getting to be the most *you* you've been all day. Imagine how entirely accepted and at peace you are. In her endarkened

epistemological (Dillard, 2000) exploration of "home," Boylorn (2016) offers, "home is supposed to be a place of vulnerability and surrender. A place where we can be our full-bodied selves" (p. 45). This is what the space of intimacy feels like for me.

While the weeks leading up to Sister Space had me reflecting on closeness and togetherness between myself and group members, I knew that intimacy first began with me and Najeia. The intimacy between us was the first and, in some ways, most important step. Having Najeia in the space already created an environment where I was a held Black woman. I was supported and embraced. I was already loved. So, I could show up that way. I didn't always have to hold myself up or present myself as completely poised because there was already someone who was uplifting me. I could publicly ask for help and know that it would be given. I didn't have to constantly portray myself as "strong" because Najeia could be my strength when necessary. The intimacy Najeia and I share allowed me to feel at home and work to help others feel that way too.

Co-facilitator and Group Members

In order to help people feel more at home Sister Space, I had to consider what might be important to group members. In a context when group members might intrinsically value togetherness and specifically reported seeking a place to connect where others had "an intimate understanding of why I may be doing what I am doing without explanation," I could not act removed and as if their experiences were simply an enigmatic phenomenon. I could not act as a distant researcher solely attempting to collect data. Despite being aware of more involved approaches to research (and clinical work), I still felt somewhat haunted by the notion of rigid boundaries. Long before I

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came to graduate school, I had an understanding that those in power in academic and clinical spaces were distant. Although my first ever teacher was my very own mother, her hands-on approach to homeschooling is a distant memory. After she passed away, the vast majority of my instructors were white. The therapist my family briefly saw to cope with losing my mother was also white. The way I saw the majority of people in power moving in professional (e.g., school; therapy) settings outside of my home were in distant, sterilized manners. By the time I arrived at graduate school, where I had more power to control how I conducted my scholarly and clinical work than ever before, the notions of white professionalism had somewhat calcified. This project is a small glimpse into my ongoing process of unlearning detached ways of conducting my work.

I am not alone in feeling the pressure of cold and distant standards in academia. In her construction of Black feminist autoethnography as a methodology in which she uses her emotions and experiences to critically examine power structures within academia and in the US, Griffin (2012) reflected:

> I suspect, feeling rather queasy myself about this venture, that our absence is perpetuated by multiple forces. Not only have Black women been taught and told via dominant discourses that our lived experiences are insignificant, but we have also learned hard lessons around the consequences of speaking our truths to power (p. 144).

Despite knowing that there are ways to approach research that centers the voices and experiences of Black women (Collins, 1986, 1989, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989), I and other Black women in academia still feel the crushing weight of white and eurocentric expectations. As she considered more liberating practices for Black women, Audre

Lorde (2011) admitted "of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (p. 42). This work is scary and vulnerable and uncomfortable and perilous. It can so often feel unsafe. As an academic, I know I need to write more here to demonstrate the extent of my confinement. As the Black woman that I am, I know I cannot. That's how restrained I have become within the context of academia (i.e., the construction of my dissertation, what in some ways feels like another demonstration of rigid academic expectations). I neither have the energy nor fortitude to write it. That energy has been spent even telling you this in the first place. That energy was spent overturning my fears to resist more eurocentric expectations throughout Sister Space.

In Sister Space, Iris*, a twenty-seven-year-old in an overwhelmingly white department in STEM, plainly demonstrated the dangers of detached and traditional expectations in academia: "I'm just so tired of calmly explaining myself and being looked at like I'm crazy." To uplift Black women, we must resist the conventional guideline to remain somewhat distant and detached in our work. We cannot take the outside looking in approach to research when working with a population that already feels excluded and misunderstood in primarily white academia and in this country (Collins, 2003). I am telling you this as much as I am often telling myself. Rather, empathy and indicating a level of personal understanding might ground and validate Black women in their various social contexts. Endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000, 2008) offers that we must engage with people in "intimate and authentic ways." This "removing of boundaries between ourselves and others" is done through the emphasis of love, compassion, reciprocity and gratitude (Dillard, 2008). In their recommendations for qualitative work

with Black women, Few Stephens and Arnett (2003) suggest showing care in the research process by recognizing your own limitations and showing your humanity to participants.

Over time, I continued to challenge myself to show up as my authentic self within Sister Space and with its members. Along with the aforementioned recommendations, I pushed myself to reciprocate the vulnerability that Sister Space group members were showing up with (e.g., sharing about the painful loss of a friendship). Showing up as my full self could be seen in group check in when I admitted I was having a sad day for no apparent reason or that I sometimes needed to turn off my camera to cry during required Zoom meetings during my days. It was admitting that sometimes I get frustrated with my clients as a therapist. It was talking about my own experiences in therapy. I tried to show just how human I was.

Engaging in intimate and authentic ways within Sister Space was not easy, and I did not always succeed. I could encourage group members to show up in their hair bonnets while still in bed, but I would never show up that way myself. At times, I would still put on a happy face and casually joke about feeling misunderstood by my own family. I would nonchalantly mention a breakup as if the thought of it doesn't still make my heart tremble with sorrow. Most times, I wasn't even aware of when I wasn't showing up. As a Black woman who has existed in many primarily white spaces (e.g., primarily white schools), I had been so trained to appear completely composed all the time. For me, it is not even a matter of deciding whether to be vulnerable or not, I don't even know how to identify when I should attempt vulnerability in the first place. It does not align with how I have known to move through the world. Looking back at my time

with Sister Space, I can say fully showing up as myself was an area I at times fell short in.

Disruption of Intimacy

The most salient and painful instance in which I failed to create intimacy within Sister Space was when I attempted to address a group member, Tina's*, 31, tardiness. After some group members mentioned to me in individual interviews that latecomers could be distracting in a virtual space, I reached out to the group member who had a pattern of arriving late. On multiple occasions after my emailing her, Tina expressed feeling hurt and singled out and claimed, "time was a construct" that was a culturally insensitive expectation to hold people to. She accused me of weaponizing my research. She reprimanded me and scoffed at my work. In times like these, it can be tempting to entirely shift blame. It can feel much more comfortable to look outward than to reexamine how I was showing up. When Tina expressed her anger to me initially, I did show up as a researcher. I was concerned about my project continuing to run smoothly.

As she pointedly expressed her disapproval in a phone call following my email, I left my body and observed the situation with noteworthy distance. I profusely apologized for asking her to arrive at a time she previously committed to arriving at every week. I was presented with a choice, and I did not show up fully as myself. With this choice, I believe my detachment furthered Tina's pain. I did not react as she attempted to provoke me. This was my inner academic. This was the trained clinician. This was years of learning in white spaces that separation was the most appropriate way to relate to someone outside of the comfort of my own home. This was me leaning into the implicitly

white standards of professionalism that I had been steeped in that encourages distance and rigid boundaries (Pennington & Prater, 2016).

My choosing to detach my true self in a lot of ways protected me. The distance I placed between us served as a shield between me and her accusations. This distance might have also reminded Tina of the distance she had been met with in her past. She recounted being reprimanded in her youth and asserted I made her feel that way now. She told me she had been suspended six times in her early years of school and likened my treatment of her to systemic violence and unfair treatment of Black girls in school. She accused my sterilized approach to interacting with her as a clear indication of the colonized way I went about research. She was not feeling at home in the space I had created. What feels home-like or intimate can vary considerably from individual to individual (Birnie-Porter & Lydon, 2013). Boylorn (2016) observes that "situated knowledges that begin at home (with ourselves), are organic to the lived experience of black women" (p. 46). Of course, each Black woman's lived experience is varied and complex (Collins, 2000). Despite my attempts to establish an intimate environment for all the women in Sister Space, I was being told in no uncertain terms that I had failed another Black woman.

Endarkened feminist methodology requires "developing the practice as a researcher of looking and listening deeply, not just for the often self-gratifying rewards of the research project, but so we know what to do and what not to do in order to serve others in the process of research" (Dillard, 2008, p. 287). In this situation, I was faced with two devastating questions: 1) who should I listen to in order to make my decision on what to do or not to do and 2) who should I attempt to serve? Dillard (2008) offers

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"understanding deeply the humanity of those with whom we engage in the research endeavor–whether ourselves, our participants, our students, whomever–is a necessary prerequisite for qualitative work in the spirit" (p. 287). Along those lines, perhaps I should have engaged more with Tina's humanity. Perhaps I could have considered that her experiences *had* led to her reacting the way she did to my requesting she arrive on time. She *had* felt unrightfully attacked and reprimanded and unheard in the past. Perhaps I could have engaged with her more as a human than a research participant.

Womanist therapy with Black women contends that we pay particular attention to the "soul wounds" (Duran, Firehammer, & Gonzalez, 2008) of Black women (Sanchez-Hucles, 2016). Integrating the concept of "soul wounds" (Duran, et al., 2008) into therapy with Black women reminds us that women of color often have deep, tender emotional lesions "stemming from cultural trauma that incorporates ungrieved losses, learned helplessness, and internalized oppression. . .[that] can lead to unpremeditated outbursts" (Sanchez-Hucles, 2016, p. 77). God, was Tina having *outbursts.* From a phone call where she reprimanded me to the final two Sister Space sessions where she kept her camera off and made pointed and aggressive remarks towards me and my work, something within her was causing a *fit*. (Debriefs with Najeia after these sessions where I could still decompress and laugh and express frustration and confusion were particularly important for my care.) In the face of Tina's fits, I could hear her words, but in those moments, I was not hearing her pain. I was not acknowledging her soul wounds, despite her telling me about her painful experiences with punishment in school as a girl. She hadn't felt listened to in the past. And that is what some Black women have come to implicitly expect in so many spaces (Griffin, 2012), even in a research

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project claiming to be about them. In some ways I might have reaffirmed that for Tina. I did not fully listen.

In her emphasis on compassion, Dillard (2008) reminds us that we must not "suffer the same to remove suffering from others" (p. 288). Grounded in an approach that encourages reciprocity (Dillard, 2008), I recognized the conundrum of attempting to engage with someone who did not seem to be treating me with the same care I was attempting to treat her with. She interrupted me, and she belittled me and my project. She kept her camera off in the final two Sister Space sessions and only unmuted herself to contribute passive aggressive comments (e.g., "let's think about how we weaponize research"). She publicly accused me of causing harm without taking responsibility (though I apologized to her individually and in a group session). Almost a year later, as I think about how she interacted with me (and other group members), I am met with sharp feelings of unsafety.

In her recommendations for sustaining and supporting Black women in academic spaces, Baker-Bell (2017) emphasizes the importance of self-preservation. In her Black feminist-womanist use of storytelling, she asks herself, "how did I learn to balance my commitments to my academic career and family with my commitment to self-preservation?" (Baker-Bell, 2017, p. 533). In response to the potential dangers of conducting qualitative research, McClelland (2017) recommends that researchers implement self-care strategies that prioritize physical and emotional safety. In many ways, I had practices in place to care for myself during Sister Space (e.g., write thoughts and emotions down; take time away from interviews; prioritize self-care; McClelland, 2017). I had my personal progress journal as a forum in which I could

document my emotions and personal experiences. I had a therapist. I had Najeia to debrief with. (I'm so thankful for our laughs together, regardless of the circumstance.) I had my advisor and clinical supervisor to consult. I had scheduled time away from the work to engage in intimate connection with my Black women friends. As someone who identifies as someone who is fairly adept at taking care of myself in the first place, I thought I was more than prepared.

However, I was not prepared for the unsafety I felt with Tina. I was not prepared to be accused by another Black woman of causing harm. I was not prepared for what my intuition was telling me I had to do in the name of "self-preservation" (Baker-Bell, 2017). Following our final group session in which she publicly attacked me, I sent Tina the following note. I had individual final interviews with all the participants the following week, but I knew I could not further expose myself to the harm I knew I felt when interacting with her:

> I wanted to reach out with some of my thoughts. Perhaps we have both felt unheard and misunderstood, which is really unfortunate. I know that I deserve to be treated with the same dignity and respect that I show other people, and I do not feel you have shown me that. After trying to be empathetic, listen, reflect, and apologize, I am neither willing nor able to do much else. When it comes to decolonizing research, I will be putting my wellbeing as a Black woman first, rather than exposing myself to further potential harm by engaging with someone who I feel like has not shown me respect. I hope you can understand that. Consequently, I will not be engaging in a one-on-one interview. As I have said, I do value your contributions, and I would be happy to send you the interview

questions. You could have the choice to 1) write your feedback down and send

back in an email 2) record your responses and send back or 3) you can choose

not to engage with the questions at all. Completely your choice, but I do want to

give you an opportunity to give your thoughts and feedback, if you would like.

It feels empowering, triumphant, vulnerable and shameful to share this note. I have not

read this note since I sent it last summer. Those same feelings come up for me now as

when I originally wrote it. In some ways, this note is an admission that I am not the

invincible Black woman clinician that I thought I was. Up to this point, I prided myself on

being a good listener. I saw myself as the Black woman who had the ability to "see"

people, regardless of their situation. I was the Black woman that could make anyone

feel held and heard. Particularly after so many experiences following my mother's death

where I did not feel like people knew how to hold space for me and my emotions, I

prided myself on knowing how to create those environments for others. This was a role I

defined myself by. If not the Black woman who could make people feel at home, who

was I? Having that image of myself attacked by another Black woman felt shameful and

disorienting. While I feel plagued by feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome in

larger white academic systems (Breeze, 2018; Edwards, 2019), I had never questioned

my ability to connect with others on an intimate individual level. Having what felt like a

personal failure on public display in an area that I was accustomed to excelling in (i.e.,

doing clinical work) left me feeling humiliated and dysregulated.

    While I sat with this discomfort, I also felt a sense of pride within myself. In a lot

of ways, my refusing to conduct a final interview with Tina was a powerful and

triumphant rejection of what I understood to be traditional research protocols. At times,

during the process of Sister Space, I tried to contort myself into the role of the detached researcher. Although I was aware of my discomfort with attempting to conform to oppressive eurocentric research standards (Collins, 1986, 2003, 2016), I often slid back into a notion ingrained in me since I was six: there are certain ways you *have* to do things in white educational spaces. For some time, I really thought I was going to "have" to do that final interview with Tina. I thought I *had* to get that data. I felt a distinct tension between my deep spiritual intuition and the eurocentric, patriarchal research standards that had subtly but consistently been etched into me over the years. Dillard (2008) asks:

> What can happen when Black feminist epistemology and research are experienced in ways that explicitly make the "project" that of liberation and affirmation? The outcome of such research is humanizing and healing process that counters historical marginalization of African ascendant people's ways of knowing and being, particularly Black feminist knowledge (p. 281).

This project started as a way to affirm other Black women in academia. That project turned into a process of deep unlearning and healing within myself. One of liberation and recognizing my own humanity. One of self-preservation and centering my way of knowing. One of rejecting and overcoming rigid, contrived and harmful expectations. Those expectations told me to do that final interview. Those expectations told me to lay myself down in harm's way for the sake of this project. My inner wisdom, however, told me to stand the fuck up. I feel the grip of eurocentric academic professionalism squeeze tightly around my chest as I write the word "fuck" in an academic paper, but I'm leaving it the fuck there.

De-identifying with My Roles to Humanize Myself

In her 1982 address, "Learning from the 60s," Audre Lorde stated, "if I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive." Sometimes I can be so entrenched in any given one of my roles that I feel like the "other person" in this scenario. If I assume the role of the researcher, that Haley's fantasies of myself can consume the other aspects of my humanity. My fantasies of being the person who could make everyone feel at home almost consumed me in the aforementioned conflict with a group member. If I allow my fantasies of being the perfect researcher in white academia or the perfect therapist to overtake my authentic self, I can lose myself completely. In pursuit of the preservation of our authentic selves, Baker-Bell (2017) encourages Black women scholars to ask themselves:

> In what ways do you navigate, negotiate, or resist the culture of academia that expects you to embody [caretaker] and strongblackwoman characterizations and forces you to splinter yourself, your life, your work, and your politics to better fit within the academy? (p. 541).

The various roles I play—the researcher, the clinician, the strong Black woman, the listener—in some ways represent how I have had to "splinter" myself to survive. To survive white academic spaces. To survive the loss of my mother. Like me, other Black academic women have identified that the various roles they play are means for survival (Overstreet, 2019). Considering the trauma and oppression many Black women face in the US (e.g., gendered racism), ceasing to play those roles (e.g., the strong Black woman) all together is not feasible for many Black women (Watson & Hunter, 2016).

However, I offer that identifying and critically examining the roles we define ourselves by might be a viable alternative. In the aforementioned scenario, I was forced to confront a role I defined myself by (i.e., the good listener; the one who can hold space for others). When that role was threatened, I had to take a look at my own "self-definition" (Collins, 1989). Why was an experience with someone else threatening to how I saw myself? I had to come to understand that the person that makes people feel at home is a role I *play,* not who I *am*.

I found that a de-identification with the various roles I play is crucial for my own process of "self-definition" (Collins, 1989). Through this process, I had to work to de-identify myself with the eurocentric researcher. I had to de-identify myself as solely a caretaker. I had to de-identify myself as the invincible clinician. This aligns with the emphasis on "the distinction between work and measures of the self" in Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000, p. 48). It is up to you to determine for yourself what work you do and what roles you closely define yourself with. Consistent with Baker-Bell's (2017) offering questions for Black women's self-preservation, I ask you to reflect on: "Who would I be without this role?" If that reality scares you, perhaps that is a role you can work to de-identify with. Intentionally reflect on what makes you *you* without that role. Is it joy? Love? Compassion? Laughter? Wisdom? Sexiness? I intentionally include terms like "sexiness" that have been historically problematized by others such that "Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a "void" or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible (exposed) and invisible and where black women's bodies are always already colonized" (Hammonds, 2004, p. 321). Collins 2000 observes, "Black women's sexuality is either ignored or included

primarily in relation to African American men's issues" (p. 124). I include such terms so

we may reclaim these matters for ourselves and how we choose to define ourselves.

(Sexiness is one of the things that makes me *me*, so I included it. ;) At the end of this

chapter, I offer tips on how to identify inner wisdom that may help with reflections on

what makes you you. With time, ask yourself again, "who would I be without this role?" If

it becomes less scary as you reflect, you could be on the right path. This de-

identification process does not mean you can no longer play those roles at times. For

example, simply because I am working on not defining myself as a caretaker does not

mean I cannot care for someone when necessary. I *enjoy* taking care of others. It can

bring me comfort and fulfillment. Rather, it means that I can still be me without that role.

I am not my roles; I play those roles when necessary. (When I want qualifies as

necessary.)

In her description of endarkened feminist epistemology, Dillard (2008) asserts,

"as long as we continue to see ourselves as "researchers" and the other as the

"researched". . .we cannot be in loving, compassionate, or reciprocal relationships with

others" (p. 288). I cannot get so lost in my role(s) (as facilitators, researchers, etc.), so

identified with my positions, that I forget the very core of myself and those I am

experiencing. I cannot forget that at my core, I am a human being first, as are those

around me (Dillard, 2008). I cannot lose others' humanity by simplifying people into

categories such as clients, patients or participants. I cannot lose my humanity by

simplifying myself. I am not a researcher; I am doing research. I am not a co-facilitator; I

am co-facilitating. I am not a caretaker; I am taking care. At times, when de-identifying

with my roles, I admittedly feel lingering constraints of white eurocentric standards

implying lesser value and vigor of the work. Perhaps if I don't totally immerse myself (i.e., my identity) in this work, I will not do it as "well." At other times, I find when I summon the courage to separate my self-concept from the work, I am able to give the work the space it needs to flourish. When I started to disentangle my sense of self from the work, I found I did not cling so tightly to how I thought things *should* be (e.g., needing to conduct a final interview with someone I felt disrespect from). I followed my intuition. I did the work "in the spirit" (Dillard, 2008). I was able to adapt (e.g., listen to my inner wisdom), switch directions (e.g., protect myself by asking someone to leave a project) and humbly be surprised by outcomes (e.g., humanizing myself). Our shared humanness, not the roles we play: this is where the beauty and the brilliance lies (Dillard, 2008). This is where we can truly and intimately connect.

Intimacy in Group

Intimate Space Among Black Graduate Student Women

For the women of Sister Space, an important factor in the cultivation of intimate connections was being in a group of other Black women. Gabriel and Tate (2017) find that the solidarity and connection found amongst women of color is a key strategy for surviving the whiteness of academia. Spates and colleagues (2019) similarly found that in response to sexist and racist environments, Black women turn to their intimate connections with other Black women in order to cope. Similar to myself, the women in the group were often in primarily white academic environments. Consequently, even being in a space with other Black women started to introduce a level of comfort and intimacy for some women in Sister Space. Iris*, 27, commented:

I have to see Black people to be happy and be content in this place. This has

been the longest I've been in this predominantly white town, and part of the

reason I'm ok and not going crazy is that I haven't been seeing the white people,

I've just been in my space and looking at me and spaces like this, like you guys!

Particularly when existing in predominantly white spaces, environments specifically

curated for Black individuals can feel intimate and necessary (Maseti, 2018). Mia*, 31,

reflected on the challenges of being in white spaces by virtue of being in her graduate

program:

You don't even realize how much those interactions truly drain you. So even like

departmental events, like, "I have been code-switching since 9 am! I'm not code-

switching from 5 to 8 at a happy hour! No thank you, I want to go home!" And I

want to talk to someone I can like really talk to!

Mia identified that for her, a certain level of comfort precedes feelings of emotional

intimacy. Goode-Cross and Grim (2016) offer that there is an "unspoken level of

comfort" that is often both present and necessary when Black individuals connect in

particularly intimate settings (e.g., therapy). Conversely, there is considerable social

science research indicating that existing in primarily white environments or in the

absence of many other people of color can complicate and hinder feelings of emotional

intimacy for Black women (Bell, Berry, & Leopold, 2021; Davis et al., 2021; Maodzwa-

Taruvinga, M., & Divala, 2014; Maseti, 2018; Pitt et al., 2015). Women in Sister Space

reported that there is something about sitting in spaces that are inherently not for you

that can be exhausting. I myself have found that being surrounded by whiteness is

draining. However, Black women connecting about our experiences, even the ones of

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exhaustion, can create a level of intimacy to reclaim our power (Collins, 1990, 2000; Davis, 2018; Farmer, 2017). Overstreet (2019) reflected on the intimate connections she shared with other Black women in academia:

> I do not quite remember how it started, but after gathering for dinner and drinks with a Black colleague I knew from some of my doctoral courses and a new Black faculty member, the BGB (Black Girl Brigade) was born. We met about once a month to eat, drink, vent, and brainstorm. It was nourishment for my soul (p. 30).

Mia further reflected on feelings of intimacy among people who she suspected were familiar with fatigue stemming from existence in white spaces:

> It's not even talking to people that can create intimacy, it's just even seeing people. And I didn't even know I needed that until I moved to [a predominantly white town] and didn't have it. It caused me to reflect on "what do you need right now. Why do you feel this way?" And it would just be comforting to see people who look like me on a regular basis. That can increase feelings of intimacy within myself.

Intimacy can be created through multiple avenues (e.g., friendship) (Alinejad, 2019). Even the familiarity of another Black woman's face can create feelings of comfort and safety (Collins, 2000). Women in Sister Space reported that when being in white spaces so much, seeing other Black people can serve as a reminder of your own humanity. It can remind you of your needs and what makes you feel good. It can remind you to pour back into yourself when so much has been drained. It can remind you to come home to yourself (Boylorn, 2016).

Not only can the familiarity of Blackness serve as a reminder of yourself, women in Sister Space observed, hearing other Black women's stories can be further humanizing. One week, our theme was multiple truths existing at the same time, which some group members reported feeling particularly validated by. In her final interview, Cynthia*, 24, reflected, "when we spoke about multiple truths existing at once. It made me feel like I wasn't crazy. It was like an opportunity for a sounding board to hear other people say what I've been feeling or struggling with." In some ways, some Black women in white academic spaces are forced to create ways to protect themselves (i.e., being in "safe space" with other Black women) (Collins, 1986, 2002). Recent mental health scholarship offers that in environments that Black women identify as detrimental to our mental health and very selves, we have to identify survival techniques (e.g., social and institutional support) (Walton, Campbell, & Blakey, 2021). I have found that I have to be consciously curious about my needs. For some, joining Sister Space was an attempt to address a need for connection, particularly in the face of white academic spaces. "They don't know how therapeutic this can be," Mia reflected in reference to connecting with other Black women in academia, "this can be a healing medicine." The intimate spaces between Black women, some group members reported, allowed for growth and healing, even in increasingly broken systems and worlds. I will now elaborate on some of the topics that group members connected on to further their intimate bonds. Though I will continue to offer my insights and reflections, I want to share the women's longer accounts of their experiences. It is in those experiences that other group members and I saw ourselves. I encourage you to listen, make yourself at home in their accounts and further connect with yourself in the process.

Intergenerational Patterns

When reporting on feelings of intimacy in group, every woman in Sister Space brought up some aspect of family (e.g., intergenerational patterns; motherhood). "Speaking on what is often kept behind closed doors within a family," Carrie*, 24, reported, "with others who might have similar patterns through the generations of their own families resulted in both validation and emotional intimacy within group, I'd say." Collins (2000) identified that family dynamics are "simultaneously confining and empowering for Black women" (p. 46). As we began to connect on more intimate levels within Sister Space, we began to slowly uncover intergenerational patterns within our families. That is, women in Sister Space reported that being able to reflect and connect on tensions surrounding family increased feelings of closeness and intimacy with the other women. The following accounts of intergenerational patterns the women of Sister Space speak on offers a further glimpse into the intimate lives of some Black women and the dynamics within their families.

Because family was so important to many of us, it could be very painful to observe some historical patterns. These patterns were becoming more salient for some as they were at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Iris*, 27, commented:

> It's been really hard being home, especially at the size I am now. My mother is getting. on. my. nerves. And it's like, when I came to grad school, I got really depressed and gained a lot of weight. So, then my aunt was like, "oh! You've gotten fat!" And then my sister was like, "that's mean!" and my aunt said, "well at least I tell her. If I didn't tell her, it means I didn't love her. It's for her health." One thing I know I want to stop with my future children is I'm not going to make my

children feel as if they cannot love the body that they're in because I wouldn't

want my kids to grow up with the relationship with food that I've had. . .I don't

want those same types of relationships with my children.

In her 2019 book, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, Sabrina

Strings identifies:

> The phobia about fatness and the preference for thinness have not, principally or
>
> historically been about health. Instead they have been one way the body has
>
> been used to craft and legitimate race, sex and class hierarchies. . .the fear of
>
> the imagined "fat black woman" was created by racial and religious ideologies
>
> that have been used to. . .degrade black women (p. 17).

Despite the anti-Black origins of fat phobia (Strings, 2019), many women identified fat

phobia being passed down in their Black families. Hilda*, 31, observed that the culture

of respect in the Black community can perpetuate unchecked body shaming:

> My weight has been up and down for decades. What I struggle with is
>
> intergenerational, I think especially in the Black community, you know, respect
>
> your elders. I think it was last summer, my mom's boyfriend of, I don't know,
>
> fifteen years, looked at me and said, "you've put on some weight, sweetie." I feel
>
> like that's a very common remark in the Black community, just like saying, "hello."
>
> And I'm like, "what the fuck?" He's a seventy-seven-year-old Black man, so like
>
> that's yes . . .so I said, "don't ever say that shit to me again" and walked away.
>
> And I was super hurt because I've struggled with weight throughout my life. And
>
> my mom was there and thought it wasn't ok but was like "you don't need to curse
>
> to get your point across." And I'm like, "get that shit out of here!" You know I've

struggled, and I just told that man it was rude, and now I'm being painted as

"respect my elders," when they are being super disrespectful. . .so the struggle of

how can you break the intergenerational thing, but older folks don't get that's not

a proper greeting.

Fatphobia, some women observed, is so normalized in their families and communities

that comments about weight can be acceptable greetings. What compounded the pain

of recognizing some intergenerational patterns was feeling misunderstood by family

when attempting to communicate about these patterns. It is not simply observing a

concerning pattern, Hilda observed, it is not feeling heard when addressing that pattern.

Hilda further expressed her frustrations, "it's tough for me when you have parents who

do not understand the concept of boundaries or toxicity, they make me sound like I'm

the crazy person; I'm the millennial." Along with the crazy-making associated with

communicating between generational norms, there can be a cultural norm that

contributes to additional pressure within Black families: "There are these really unhelpful

assumptions that there should be no boundaries in family, and when you try to set one,

it's like sacrilegious or you're ruined their lives something." At times, the culture of

togetherness, some women observed, in Black communities can be harmful. When

togetherness implies the absence of any boundaries, "toxic" behaviors may go

unaddressed. Both Black American and first generation African American (i.e., having

African parents and being born in America) women in Sister Space observed in cultures

where togetherness is overemphasized over boundaries, those who attempt to

communicate their boundaries might feel invalidated in their needs. They might feel

isolated in their own communities for attempting to care for themselves. While minimal

boundaries might be implied in cultures of togetherness, some women in Sister Space offered that respecting healthy boundaries might actually contribute to people feeling closer. Boundaries, some women identified, serve as self-care. When we feel more cared for, we might feel more comfortable allowing others in. When those boundaries are being respected, we might naturally draw people closer. When a boundary feels threatened, we might be likely to push people further away. Within Black communities where togetherness is highly valued, boundaries might need to be highly valued as well (Hine & McLeod, 2001).

Observing intergenerational patterns in real time gave some participants the opportunity to practice dismantling longstanding patterns they observed in their families and larger communities. Mia*, 31, shared about a recent family get-together:

We do not have very good conflict resolution *at all.* And my being a first gen student. I have five siblings, and I am the only one to kind of leave where I'm from and kind of go away. And I've learned so much, and I feel a lot of guilt about not taking that knowledge home to my family and the people I love who I know could benefit a lot from this knowledge that I have attained. But I have definitely encountered some challenges with that. So, last year, we were having a conversation. . .after the documentary *Surviving R. Kelly* came out. So, I came home, and I didn't even bring it up. My brother brought it up as a discussion at a gathering we were having as a family. And here I am like, "think about the way that you treat Black women, how you think about them," and it just turned into this me versus everybody in my family argument. And I found it's challenging but still rewarding to stand my ground on the views that I have about the way that

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those women were treated and in general how we treat Black women in society. And directly challenging the views of both elders in my family and the peers in my family. While I don't think my delivery was the best, I think there was something to be gained from that in every experience.

In her own response to R. Kelly's abuse of young Black women and the evident lack of concern for Black women survivors Davis (2018) observed:

First, [popular discourses] position black women and girls as existing outside of the bounds of respectable womanhood and therefore less worthy of protection from sexual abuse. Second, this diminution of black women's humanity, combined with racial disparities embedded in the justice system, have positioned black men, particularly those who have attained a significant degree of influence, as more worthy of the protective resources of community institutions (p. 495).

For Mia, engaging with her family on a very painful and longstanding pattern (i.e., the mistreatment of Black women at times at the hands of Black men) was monumental. She felt she had an opportunity to identify an important issue in her family and community in a way that felt triumphant. Though Mia acknowledged the issue was far from remedied, she reported that allowing herself to speak on a particularly personal and insidious intergenerational pattern felt important. It brought to light an issue that she had felt the ramifications of personally but was not as apparent to others in her family. Mia reported that this experience was gratifying to start communicating her needs more and remaining firm on a larger societal issue affecting Black women. In this way, speaking on and holding her ground on a painful intergenerational pattern contributed to feelings of personal empowerment.

Identifying intergenerational patterns allowed the women of Sister Space to imagine a future where some of these patterns were further addressed. They considered the complexities of addressing some of the deep-rooted issues, such as fatphobia and misogynoir. To them, it was not as simple as attempting to create new patterns for future generations, it required an active engagement with peers and those who came before us. Mia offered:

> Something about addressing intergenerational patterns and overcoming them, for me, it's not just as simple as teaching the next generation differently, it's also been grappling with the current generation and some of those ideas they have already been socialized to believe. And trying to challenge them and say, "hey maybe think about this in another way." It's much more challenging than sometimes we're led to believe. Sometimes we just think it's ourselves, our children and we're gonna do it that way, but I don't think limiting what I know to myself and my children is fair to the community that I come from. I think that I owe it to them to also pass that laterally. . .it's this kind of community-level, community-based approach to breaking into generational traumas, especially being the only person, the only sibling, out of the six of my mother's children who doesn't have children. Being that one to say, "hey I know these are not my children, but I want to talk to you about XYZ that's going on and unpack that." So, it's been super difficult. I lowkey want to hire a therapist to come to our next gathering. . .just to like guide the conversation so we don't get so, you know, things can get ugh! I want to keep it here, and I just want us to talk to each other and understand each other and build a bridge between your thinking and my

thinking so we can meet somewhere in the middle or maybe you can meet me on

my side, which would be like. . .but everyone's on their own journey, and you

can't like force people into another part or piece of their thinking. It's a journey for

everybody.

Intergenerational patterns persist through generations for a reason. These are deeply

rooted beliefs and understandings that are not easily overturned (Jacob & Davis, 2017).

While intergenerational patterns have been identified as stemming from oppressive

systems (e.g., racism) for Black families in the US (Graff, 2017), this woman's account

offers something slightly less overwhelming and potentially more empowering: we are

not too small to play a part in addressing intergenerational patterns within our families.

Through deep self-reflection and disruption of the ways she had been socialized and

might have been perpetuating unhelpful patterns within herself, this Sister Space

member found she was able to identify ways to disrupt those patterns amongst others in

her family as well. At times complicated, complex and painful, I see these processes of

self-exploration as pursuits of intimacy with oneself. I describe the women of Sister

Space's experiences with this pursuit of self-intimacy as well as my own in two following

sections (Self-Reflection and Growth; My Steps to Self-Reflection and Self-Intimacy).

Motherhood

In addition intergenerational patterns in family more broadly, a number of Sister

Space women identified that speaking of their experiences with their mothers or being

mothers was a noteworthy area of emotional intimacy. Iris offered, "speaking about my

own mom and that relationship. It made me feel much more connected to folks to hear

that they've gone through some of the same things with their own mothers. That feeling

of "you're not alone," that feels like emotional intimacy." The relationship between Black

mothers and their children has been identified as a particularly intimate one in pervious

literature (Collins, 2005; Hill, 2005; Nash, 2018; Nash, 2019). Collins (2000) notes, "the

mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women" (p.

102) that results in feelings of empowerment, essential life skills for survival, and

liberating values. Collins (2000) offers:

> The institution of Black motherhood consists of a series of constantly
>
> renegotiated relationships that African American women experience with one
>
> another, with Black children, with the larger African American community, and
>
> with the self. . .Black motherhood as an institution is both dynamic and dialectical
>
> (p. 176).

One of the most intimate spaces group members reported reflected on was their

relationships with their mothers and being mothers themselves. Of the nine women

participating in Sister Space, three were mothers. Each reported feeling a particular

connection to the other mothers in the space. In one of her interviews, Tina*, 31,

offered, "I definitely relate to the other moms. . .how I parent my little ones, how I

process it, how I go about it, how I wear multiple hats. It's nice to hear from others as

well." Group members without children also noticed their bond and appreciated being

able to witness it. Iris commented, "I know I'm not a mother myself, but it helps me to

think about how I want to parent my kids in the future." The intimate reflections mothers

offered not only grounded other mothers in their experiences but helped those without

children to imagine and explore motherhood for themselves.

Mothers within Sister Space sharing their experiences offered varying perspectives. While some women without children primarily felt loss surrounding the effects of COVID-19 (e.g., not being able to go onto campus), Tina offered a glimpse into her world prior to the pandemic:

As a parent, there are a lot of spaces, especially in academia, that are not accessible to me. When things are in the evening, when things are happening and I don't have a babysitter, all of those different kinds of logistics that have to be worked out. I haven't necessarily had access to a lot of things happening on campus, and I didn't have access to as many of the organizing events in the communities, and I feel like now, in some ways, the playing field has been leveled. So, everyone has access to everything virtually, not *completely* leveled, but as a parent, I have gained more access to spaces through things being virtual than I had before. I can be a little bit more active than I was before, it's taking me *out* of what felt like isolation before.

Student parents report feeling 'time-poor' and often attempt a "balancing act" between child-rearing and school. This "balancing act" can lead to decreased mental health and feelings of isolation among other students (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Tina speaks to a potentially larger structural issue within academia that proved inaccessible for parents. Before many systems were widely restructured to accommodate remote work, she as a student parent faced barriers to many academic spaces. Mothers in Sister Space spoke about the inaccessibility of evening classes, social events and academic presentations due to childcare. These conflicts, the mothers reported, contributed to less opportunities to network, engage academically and make social connections. Considering

togetherness and social support may be particularly important for Black women (Collins, 2000), the inaccessibility of certain academic spaces for Black mothers is problematic. Certain virtual accommodations made for COVID-19 presented more access for the Black mothers in Sister Space. These perspectives, some women without children reported, felt like an intimate glimpse into the lives of Black mothers before and during COVID-19 that contributed to feelings of closeness with their fellow Sister Space members.

Not only did accommodations for COVID-19 allow mothers in Sister Space more access to professional and academic spaces, they identified that it allowed more access to personal spaces as well, aligning with longstanding Black feminist considerations of "private/public" spheres for Black women (Collins, 2000b). The mothers reported feeling like the era of COVID-19 presented a unique opportunity to spend more time with their school aged children while they both learned from home. Along with having more time with children at home during the pandemic, complicated feelings arose. Renee*, 31, shared:

> There is this tension between I probably won't get another time like this to spend with my kids, they're really at a fun age right now for the majority of the time, it's pretty fun. But then I also have work to do, so I hate this feeling of being pulled in multiple directions where I'm not showing up well in either one.

Moreau and Kerner (2015) identified that student parents often contend with "feelings of guilt, possibly because care is not only a set of social practices but a strongly gendered one with deep moral connotations and because caring for children is often presented as a purely enjoyable experience" (p. 225). The mothers of Sister Space affirmed that

motherhood was an immensely rewarding experience. However, they still contended with guilt surrounding balancing work and feeling like they weren't being fully present as mothers.

Despite these feelings of guilt, the mothers overwhelmingly appreciated having more time with their children due to increasingly remote affairs. Tina further reflected on how quarantining during the COVID-19 pandemic offered her opportunities as a mother:

This is a revolutionary space for me as a parent to be able to simultaneously do the work that I need to do and also to be able to love on my babies all day. For them to be able to take a break from class and just come give me a hug. I feel like I've hugged my babies so much more since they've been home, and that's amazing. So, I feel like I have the best of both worlds in that regard.

Although parents have reported challenges related to accessibility (e.g., lack of online resource organization), lack of child/student motivation, and balancing responsibilities, (Garbe et al., 2020), Tina reflected positively on remote learning with her children at home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the women participating in Sister Space reflected on some challenges presented by living through a global pandemic. However, this pandemic provided these mothers an important opportunity to enjoy tender moments with their children. Their reflections show the complexities of motherhood, even independently of a global pandemic. Collins (2000) reflects on these complexities stating, "ongoing tensions characterize efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood to benefit intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation and efforts by African American women to define and value our own experiences with motherhood" (p. 176). The mothers in Sister Space wanted to engage

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with other scholars and make better friendships. They wanted to play with and "love on" their children. They wanted to be better partners. They wanted to be better researchers. These mothers carry with them tension that they reported often goes unnoticed by the people around them. Their reflections provided me and other childless women in Sister Space a generous and gracious look at their multiple truths that contributed to feelings of intimacy among us.

Despite the complexities of multiple truths, Sister Space women in both mother and daughter roles reflected on ways in which they experienced the intentionality of motherhood. While these Black mothers contended with guilt and often feeling like they weren't fully showing up for their children, they did identify areas in which they were proud of their approaches to parenting. Renee reflected on the careful considerations she gave to speaking about bodies with her children:

> I have three daughters, they are twelve, ten and eight. Myself, I'm a fat woman, but my whole thing, since they were little, much to my family's "ugh she's so excessive with it," we are not going to disparage other people's bodies *ever,* including our own, in front of my kids. That's a firm boundary I've had. I had my first kid at 19, but that's one I have maintained. I never ever do that about myself in front of them. . .My mom is also a fat woman and has talked about herself in negative ways and made herself a punchline, which I know is a coping mechanism especially at this time, but in front of my kids, I will be quick to jump on that ass and say, "no, no we don't do that.". . . I don't want that for my own daughters.

In a world where fatness, particularly for Black women, is still seen as a trope, a moral failing and inherently inferior (Murray, 2019; Strings, 2019; Taylor, 2019), this mother remained firm in her rejection of body-shaming with her children. Even when others made judgements about her commitment to body acceptance, Renee identified the importance of disrupting a narrative of anti-fat discourse with her daughters.

Freeman (2020) argued that fat phobia is a matter of justice that requires an in-depth understanding of the intersection of different axes of identity (e.g., gender; race) that might leave Black women feeling particularly vulnerable. She observed:

Feelings of shame and vulnerability—as well as the sense of futility fat people experience in trying to counter the standard assumptions about them—have psychological, epistemic, practical, and health consequences, which culminate in the delay, avoidance, or forgoing altogether of care out of fear of being mistreated. Not surprisingly, this avoidance and mistreatment is more common for women than for men (and more common for Black women than for white women) (p. 12).

These complexities plus societal norms contribute to body image and fatness being a particularly vulnerable topic for many Black women (Strings, 2019). Unsurprisingly, speaking about and defending one's body can feel particularly intimate and exposed (String, 2012). Renee reflected:

Talking about body image is very vulnerable for me. Being fat is still highly stigmatized. . .folks don't want to touch fatness, especially for non-fat folks. It fucking sucks to be a fat woman in society sometimes. I can talk about sizeism, but I'm not going to make it about me and my own personal failings or disdain for

my body. And so, do I feel personally healed with my body image issues or food issues? Absolutely not, but that is something I have actively tried to not tack on. . .It's been such a struggle and such a waste of my energy fighting against my own body for so many hours and years.

Renee asserted that fatness is so taboo that some people will not even address it. Consequently, she felt that being a fat woman and even speaking about her body and struggles with body image left her feeling exposed. Exposed to judgment, exposed to critique, exposed to the stigma she had to swim through since she was young. Speaking about such vulnerable topics with and feeling "seen and held" by Sister Space members contributed to her feeling intimately connected to her group mates.

Mae*, 27, a group member who did not have children of her own, reflected on her own mother's intentional acceptance of her children within an overwhelmingly anti-fat world:

My mom was honest about weight because she was heavier too, but it wasn't like to tear you down or anything. And she was the type of mom that jokingly, we could never do any wrong in her eyes. So, no matter how big we got, no matter how small we got, she loved us anyway. If we were failing or not, she loved us anyway. I think the intergenerational trauma that she experienced from my grandmother was the lack of love as a child. And then from sibling to sibling, so my grandmother and her siblings, she has like ten. They never got along as people. They never supported each other or lifted each other in any type of way. Then my grandmother passed that down to my mother and her son, where my uncle is the favorite. My grandmother would plant little seeds in my uncle's head

to create drama between the two of them. That's what my mom was like, I'm not

going to do that between my kids. In our eyes, it was crazy to us to see siblings

fight. That was not happening in my mom's house. That's one of the things I'm

glad she decided to break. That lack of love or pitting us against each other.

Over generations, Black women notice such familial patterns as those described

previously (e.g., sexism; fatphobia) (Lewis, 2012; Strings, 2019). In response to these

patterns, I observed Black mothers in Sister Space purposefully disrupt harmful

behaviors. I learned of them pouring into future generations by using observations from

their pasts and the worlds around them to inform their parenting decisions moving

forward. Black mothers engage in complex environments (e.g., academia) and arduous

exchanges (e.g., confronting family on anti-fat rhetoric) to do better for their children

(Collins, 1987). This is a clear act of love.

Loving, nurturing and caring for the next generation is integral to many Black

women and mothers (Beauboeuf-Lafontan, 2002; Collins, 1987; Edwards, 2000; Smith,

2016). This commitment to care can result in self-sacrifice (Abrams, Hill & Maxwell,

2019; Elliot, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Mendenhall, Bowman, & Zhang, 2013). Loving

others may only take us so far in our pursuit to do better for future. Tina reflected, "not

only do I want my babies to know that their mother loved them, I want them to know that

she loved herself as well." Through my observations in Sister Space, I found that Black

graduate student women and mothers leading by example. If we want to raise

individuals and communities that are fully embraced and embodied, Tina offered, we

cannot solely show them what loving others is. She emphasized that we have to show

what it means to fully love ourselves too. Aligning with the theme of togetherness

(Dillard, 2008), family, community and giving back were commonly identified values for the women in Sister Space. These were some of the intimate spaces in which the Black graduate student women of Sister Space connected in. In order to more fully invest in these things, some Sister Space members remained committed to investing in themselves first. For a number of Sister Space women, this investment looked like an intentional process of self-reflection, resulting in feelings of intimacy with themselves in addition to those around them.

Intimacy with Oneself

Self-Reflection and Growth

Previous literature has conceptualized intimacy as a multi-directional process between at least two people (Mirzanezhad, 2020; Šević, Ivanković, & Štulhofer, 2016; Štulhofer, 2020; Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, & Gangamma, 2014). However, the women of Sister Space seemed to be engaging in very intentional attempts to increase self-intimacy, or knowledge and intimacy with oneself, *in addition to* others. It quickly struck me that among a group of such high-achieving women (e.g., doctoral candidates), the women of Sister Space all seemed to be in a very purposeful pursuit of self-exploration and self-growth. This pursuit looked like deep personal reflection, going to therapy, identifying their shortcomings, contemplating past experiences and challenging themselves to improve. For many, joining Sister Space was an active step in their journeys to explore and be intimate with themselves. Mia*, 31, explained, "I have been going through a very intentional process of growth over the past five years. Yeah, it's been really painful at times! Growth is work." Despite the work projects, school assignments, home schooling, family conflicts, increasingly visible racial trauma and

misogynoir, and a global pandemic, a number of Sister Space women were committed to "doing their work." Despite some women reporting it being challenging and uncomfortable, at times, I observed a clear dedicated to introspection and self-improvement. While already being notably accomplished in their professional/academic lives, they saw the necessity to keep pushing themselves personally as well. They saw the importance of integrating their private and public spheres in their commitments to self-exploration and self-growth (Collins, 2000b).

Through these pursuits of self-intimacy, the women identified painful and complicated conclusions. A number of these reflections centered around barriers to joy that they found within themselves. Anne*, 31, reflected:

In my therapy, we talk about the window of tolerance and what feels comfortable, and I know that joy, for example feels a little uncomfortable for me, and I think pleasure is in that space as well. That is both related to my own experiences and the ways I've seen other folks deal with their pleasure in circumstances. It's a hard one to sit with.

Carrie*, 24, commented on her own experiences with internalized conflicts and inhibitors to happiness:

My therapist always says, "can we hold both of these things?" I have a collage that I made in my apartment, and one of the things in the middle says, "dare to be happy." And I think sometimes when I'm experiencing really great feelings there is like a sense that it's going to run out. Like it can't really be this way. So even pleasurable experiences sometimes become almost defeated by an experience like, "well this can't really be reality. Or it can only last for so long."

Similarly, Mia*, 31, identified that she exhibited specific personal barriers to her joy:

> I think that sometimes the things that obstruct me from being active about
>
> pursuing my pleasure is an idea that "oh well, I haven't done whatever I need to
>
> do, so this pleasurable thing feels excess or it doesn't feel like something I'm
>
> allowed to have. It's often something that I sacrifice, and I think that's connected
>
> to worth, but that's something I'm still unpacking.

These processes of self-exploration revealed the complexities surrounding enjoyment for some of the women in Sister Space. These complexities do not simply stem from individual experience. There are long-standing constructs that inform these complicated truths for Black women. Dr. Kristian H. (2017) offered:

> Historically, Black women in America haven't been allowed to be happy. Black
>
> women are taught to be strong and resilient. We are taught to be independent,
>
> hardworking, and sacrificial. We are taught to distrust other women and to be
>
> skeptical of men. We are taught that the world is tough, nothing will come easy,
>
> and only the strong survive. We are taught to take pride in the struggle and to
>
> take pride in adversity. Simply, we are taught to be "strong, independent Black
>
> women" (para. 2).

Because strength and independence are woven into the fabric of so many Black women's beings, happiness or joy can feel out of place. Due to the gendered, racial mistreatment Black women in primarily white institutions face, due to the whiteness we swim in, we may be more accustomed to sitting with discomfort than we are with the joy we deserve. Kacey Bonner (2020) reflected:

For Black women, joy is never simple and never just about being happy. Our joy

is complex like the coily textures of our hair and the way our skin both reflects

and absorbs light. For us, joy is happiness, but it is also a critical act of

resistance to love ourselves and find pleasure in bodies that far too often the

world tells us we should hate. For us, it's finding strength where others only

expect to find pain. For us…joy is defiance personified (para. 4).

Through a self-exploration journey, some women worked to sit more comfortably

with their joy. Aligning with established Black feminist notions, they worked towards

resistance and defiance (Alinia, 2015; Davis, 2018; Harris, 2020). In the face of

conflicting realities, Carrie identified the strategy of asking herself, "What's gonna make

me most sane? What's going to make me most joyful? What's going to bring me closest

to God?" She admitted that guilt had been something she struggled with, particularly in

setting boundaries with family members. These questions served as tools to remind her

to definitely put her joy first.

Iris*, 27, reflected on what she has found to bring her that joy:

One thing I get pleasure from is communicating. Like I had issues with

communicating in the past. And now I'm more informed with recognizing my

feelings and identifying them and working through them, like imma need you to

communicate with me and imma need you to communicate with me fully and if

you don't know how to, we're going to learn. That brings me a lot of joy.

Communication has been identified as a powerful tool used by Black women to create

space for themselves (Davis, 2015, 2018, 2019). In the past, this woman had learned

that people did not know how to hold space for her when she did try to communicate.

Similar to my own experiences, she felt from an early age that people did not want to sit with her complicated emotions as a Black girl, and soon she learned she should not sit with those emotions either. Despite previous struggles with communication due to past hurts and intergenerational avoidance of communication, Iris reported feeling a certain level of self-intimacy by re-identifying her voice through self-reflection. This journey and the resulting improvement in communication brought her joy. In response to her newfound joy, Najeia offered something I would like to leave you, myself and many Black women with as they continue to find intimate spaces within themselves:

> Things are a journey, and even if you didn't have an upbringing where joy was talked about a lot or even currently you still aren't having conversations about it or you don't feel completely comfortable or you feel shame about certain joys, that's ok. There is opportunity, it's not like you got somewhere, and you're too late. It's never too late.

My Steps to Self-Exploration and Self-Intimacy

Recent accounts steeped in Black feminist thought pose that it is important to present examples of how Black women are "playing with" and following their own "ways of knowing" (Evans-Winters, 2019). Here, I offer some insights to my own self-exploration and pursuit of self-intimacy. As I have demonstrated in the previous section, this process can be a complicated one. Just as individuals might need a certain level of comfort to establish and maintain feelings of emotional intimacy with others (Goode-Cross & Grim, 2016), I have found that I must feel comfortable enough to "go there" and attempt to cultivate intimacy within myself. Darrell, Littlefield and Washington (2016) identify that establishing levels of emotional comfort for Black individuals in academic

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spaces may require nurturing environments that foreground "compassion, empathy and understanding." In these environments, they argue, "self-actualization or realization" may occur through a process of "self-discovery" (Darrell, Littlefield, & Washington, 2016). Be patient and compassionate with yourself as you explore whatever self-intimacy may look like for you.

I have identified two or three steps in my process of self-exploration. Step one is to identify my inner wisdom. This can look like asking myself, "what feels good to me right now?" To answer this question, I often look to what information or decision gives me a sense of peace. Peace can feel like a release of tension in my muscles, a lack of mental resistance, easy breathing, a gentle settling into my body like I might settle into a comfy chair, or an overwhelming sense of calmness. Peace can feel like how I previously described "home." I often remind myself that this sense of peace is not the same as the feeling of assuredness I might feel when I have weighed pros and cons of a situation and made a sound decision. This peace is not the result of carefully considering outside factors. This peace comes from entirely within. When I feel this sense of peace, I may be focusing on what aligns best with me naturally: my inner knowledge/wisdom, my intuition, or my instincts. I will use these terms interchangeably. For me, these things come from deep within and are intrinsically spiritual. Dillard (2008) observes the influence of spirit in Black people's lives:

> While difficult to define, we hear ourselves speaking and singing and testifying because we *must.* We are moved to do so. Engaging methodologies in the spirit of gratitude responds to our need to remember, to put back together the pieces and fragments of cultural knowledge of Africa and her diaspora in ways that give

thanks for all who have witnessed and worked on behalf of the humanity of Black

people and the inclusion of our wisdom in the world's grand narrative (p. 289).

My wisdom often feels like a gentle nudge in a specific direction, again,

independently of outside factors. In fact, when I consider outside factors, that internal

nudge might not make much sense. The nudge might be contrary to what outside

considerations might have me leaning towards. For example, it might feel like getting to

a fork in the road where a road sign indicates I should go right, but my nudge is saying

to go left. While this nudge might feel unsettling at first, if I allow myself to pay attention

to that nudge directly (rather than avoiding it, which might feel more comfortable at first),

I might find myself becoming more at ease. Paying loving attention to that nudge often

ultimately brings me back to feeling peaceful. If I do end up feeling peace through giving

my nudge direct consideration, I usually know where that nudge was coming from all

along: my inner wisdom.

Step two is processing that inner wisdom. In the processing stage, there is an

embedded step of believing whatever it is that my intuition is telling me. Believing one's

inner knowledge can have varying levels of difficulty. For some, the idea of not listening

to our intuition is entirely foreign. It is contrary to how they understand living life. They

simply know what their intuition is saying and organically follow it (Liebowitz et al., 2019;

Shelden, 2018). For some, they have become distanced from their intuition in that it

may sound like no louder than a faint whisper (Cartwright, 2011). That whisper can be

difficult to take seriously when external factors can be much louder (Eisenkraft, 2013;

Klein, 2004). For others, there is a complete disconnect from the inner knowledge (Ma-

Kellams & Lerner, 2018). There is no need to judge your current relationship with your

inner wisdom. We all have one, and we can all work to see it more clearly, believe it more deeply and act on it more effectively (Dörfler, V., & Ackermann, 2012; Franken, 2020).

At this point, I am using peace as the indicator of the instinct I have. I allow my thoughts to slowly settle. I quiet my mind. Sometimes I do this by observing the rise and fall of my breath. Then, I focus my attention on the instinct that is giving me peace. I remind myself there is no need to question *why* that intuition. To the best of my ability, I try to trust that feeling of peace. After all, it is coming from deep inside of me. I did not choose to create the peace, something inside of me instilled it. I remind myself to trust that place from deep within myself. It is there for a reason. That reason is not something I actively chose; it just is. I trust the deepest parts of myself to be working for my best interest. I try to embrace every part of myself and where that instinct is coming from. For me, this feels like connecting with where warmth and affection come from within me. I try to make friends with that instinct. I lovingly welcome it, and I try to surrender and allow it to guide me.

Once I have processed and embraced my inner wisdom, a third optional step is communicating that inner feeling to others. This step has proven to be the most difficult for me. While identifying what my inner wisdom is telling me and processing it might come more easily for me, finding the words to communicate that knowledge is still quite challenging. This difficulty was made the most apparent through writing this very dissertation. Interestingly, the instinctual message that I struggle to communicate the most is just how to identify and process my instincts. How do I verbalize a step-by-step guide to doing something that I do not need distinct directions to do myself? How do I

communicate identifying something that may feel like a whisper to some but a clamor to me? I had to use my inner knowing to identify external means of support. That is, I allowed what feels instinctually good to me to steer my pursuit of useful guides for communication.

To guide the communication of my inner knowing, I read things that make me feel good, that make me feel peaceful. The subject matter can be anything. I simply try to read writing that feels like it's truly resonating with my spirit at any given moment. I read things that describe an experience I never really knew I had until I read it. I read things that are written about feelings I've had deep down but have never been able to articulate. I read things that speak to who I am (this can change from one moment to another, as I hop from one role to another). I read things that I am excited to keep reading. Then I look at how it is written. I try to allow that writing to be my guide in my own writing.

Similarly, if I want to communicate orally, I try to find someone who I think communicates well. Someone who I admire in the way they thread words together. Someone who articulates points in a way that I feel intrinsically relates to me. I attempt to learn how to more effectively communicate by carefully paying attention to how that other person verbalizes concepts. I talk something through with people I feel effortlessly understood by. I speak to people who I have noticed have similar instincts to me. I have conversations with people who know my inner wisdom or who my inner wisdom is telling me will understand. I explore concepts with people who I suspect are intimately familiar with whatever I want to articulate. I speak with people I feel instantly peaceful around. At

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times, these conversations help me to further clarify what I want to communicate and how.

Above all, when possible, I only write or speak when I feel peace within myself. I've spent many hours, days, weeks and months attempting to override unrest in my soul to write. I have stared at the screen of my computer, completely stifled for words but compelling myself to write something anyway. Only when I felt fully at peace, was I able to more freely articulate even this very paragraph. When the peace is flowing through me, the words often flow out of me. The process of identifying, believing and, at times, communicating my inner knowing has been monumental in my conduction of Sister Space and my feelings of self-intimacy. This process is crucial in conducting the work I do. Endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2008) offers:

> There can be no doubt that introducing spirituality as a real and important topic in the research process invites us to reconsider deeply our positionalities in the research endeavor, to take into account new possibilities in our work, to remember intuition, and to pay special attention to what marginalized cultures can offer in terms of concrete ways to read/re-read our current situations–and write them as well (p. 277-8).

I align with this notion and offer that our intuition is a crucial tool in work that uplifts the marginalized. I leave you with an intricate look at my processes of self-reflection in pursuit of self-intimacy in hopes that you may discover your own. I invite you to identify your intuition, as I have, and work to believe it. Remember it. Use it. Not just in your private sphere, but in your public ones as well. If you feel it, that inner wisdom, that nudge, is there for a reason. Listen to it.

Conclusion

To Haley and other researchers: Research can be a deeply intimate space. Sometimes you can fall short of creating intimacy with everyone. Listen to your intuition and take care of yourself, just as you strive care for others in the intimate spaces of your work.

To everyone: Create intimacy within yourself and listen to what comes up in that intimate space.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

To be able to use the range of one's voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a

recurring struggle in the tradition of [Black women] writers.

−Barbara Cristian (1985, p. 172)

Guided primarily by Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) and endarkened

feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000, 2008), I have attempted, and at times struggled, to

express my very self within this dissertation. I have shown the roles that I play (e.g.,

researcher; clinician; strong Black woman; listener), and I have described my attempts

to de-identify these roles from my "self-definition" (Collins, 2002; Dillard, 2008). I did this

within the context of conducting Sister Space, a virtual support group that I designed

and facilitated for Black graduate student women. With Sister Space, I aimed to

investigate Black graduate student women's experiences with virtual support group

work, emotional intimacy and notions of strength. I conducted my investigations through

observation in Sister Space sessions and one-on-one interviews with group members

(n=9). I presented my findings as somewhat cohesive narratives for clinicians (Chapter

2), strong Black women (Chapter 3) and researchers (Chapter 4). Similar to Collins

(2000) in her description of Black feminist thought, I do not feel that my experiences or

other Black graduate student women's experiences can realistically be portrayed

through cohesive narratives. They are rather winding, complicated tales, speckled with

tensions and contradictions. Along those lines, I do not feel that the individual chapters

of this dissertation can only be useful for the populations that I primarily address. I

believe they can be applied to a variety of people playing a variety of roles. Instead, these dedications are used to demonstrate my oscillation between these roles throughout my time in graduate school and life.

In Chapter 2, I present my personal background and experiences designing, implementing and facilitating Sister Space. From naming a group to recruitment to working with a co-facilitator, I offer specific recommendations for conducting virtual support group work with Black graduate student women. I present complicated scenarios that I ran into (e.g., conflict with a group member when attempting to address tardiness) to help others consider how they might address complex situations in their own work in advance. I found that acting "in the spirit" (Dillard, 2008) or trusting my intuition (e.g., listening and relying on empathy) in my work with Sister Space might benefit group processes, group members and myself. I conclude by offering that in addition to considering my own inner knowing, my work in Sister Space benefitted from honoring the inner wisdom and value of other Black women (e.g., when a client has more information and is the expert; Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Barak et al., 2008; Dillard, 2008). I hope these reflections may help others to honor their intuition in addition to others' intrinsic expertise when necessary in their own work.

In Chapter 3, I address longstanding and evolving notions of strength for Black women (e.g., avoidance of help-seeking; Jones et al., 2021). I present previous investigations of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema (Abrams et al., 2014), describe some of the ways the women of Sister Space exhibit traditional notions of strength (e.g., "numbing" or emotional containment; Jones et al., 2021), and how they were exploring new aspects of strength (e.g., going to therapy to "feel their feelings").

This project contributes to a body of literature on notions of strength for Black women by offering that previous behaviors that precluded Black women from being seen as "strong" (e.g., seeking counseling; Watson & Hunter, 2016) may currently be seen as demonstrations of strength. Additionally, I offer that demonstrations of strength may be context-dependent, such that strength presents itself differently based on historic (e.g., political) context. I describe the events surrounding losing my mother and explain how that experience contributed to my demonstrations of behavior that are traditionally identified as "strong" (i.e., avoiding vulnerability and help-seeking; self-silencing; Liao, Wei, & Yin, 20202; Watson & Hunter, 2016). I provide these examples to debunk previous assumptions that Black women primarily adhere to the SBW schema out of a desire to be or appear strong (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). This account calls for further investigation of the origins of traditional demonstrations of "strength" for Black women (i.e., stemming from specific personal events). I recount my own modeling of "novel" (Jones et al., 2021) conceptualizations of strength within Sister Space (i.e., help-seeking) and offer that this modeling might help other Black women to contend with their own evolving notions of strength (e.g., seeking support). I conclude with how in addition to being a survival tactic (Watson & Hunter, 2016), traditional demonstrations of strength (e.g., caring for others) might be a source of comfort and joy for Black women. This further complicates existing examinations of "strength" for Black women (Abrams et al., 2019) and offers that what may be seen as attempts at "strength" for outsiders might be a source of enjoyment for the Black woman exhibiting those behaviors.

In Chapter 4, I present Black graduate student women's' experiences with emotional intimacy (i.e., intimacy) in a virtual support group, amongst each other and

within themselves. This chapter offers that among considerable discussions about close relationships among group members (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Holbrey, S., & Coulson, 2013; Ki & Jang, 2018; McCaughan, 2017), intimacy within virtual support groups might, in fact, start with the group's co-facilitators. I demonstrate how support group facilitators might contribute to feelings of intimacy within a group by showing their authentic selves (e.g., admitting when they are struggling) and how being in a space with other Black women might contribute to feelings of intimacy within itself (Collins, 2000). I show my missteps in attempting to maintain intimacy within a group and show how this experience caused me to grapple with the roles that I defined myself by (e.g., the one who could make everyone feel at "home"). I offer that a de-identification of ourselves from the roles we play might help us to further establish intimacy with others and within ourselves. I present the accounts how women found emotional intimacy amongst themselves in Sister Space, through sharing their experiences with intergenerational familial patterns and motherhood. I reflect on group members intentional processes to establish intimacy both with others (e.g., mothers; children) and with themselves. Through my observations in Sister Space, I present that in addition to previous descriptions of intimacy being between two or more people (Mirzanezhad, 2020; Šević, Ivanković, & Štulhofer, 2016; Štulhofer, 2020), intimacy can be established within oneself. I conclude by providing my own processes of establishing self-intimacy in hopes that others may embark or continue on similar journeys themselves.

Throughout the chapters in piece, I address a number of audiences: clinicians, researchers, and strong Black women. To the clinicians just getting their start, I hope you engage your own humanity as you connect with the humanity of your clients. For

me, this engagement is done through listening to my intuition. Listen to yourself, keeping in mind that sometimes your clients will have more information than you. Listening to yourself and the experiences of your clients can and should co-exist. You are more than your role of a therapist or listener. To the researchers, take care of yourself and take care of those you are doing this work for. Your intuition is a valuable and valid source of knowledge. Sometimes you will fall short of your expectations, and those experiences can contribute to your knowledge production as well. You are more than your role as a scholar. To the strong Black women, it is ok to be strong, and it is ok not to be strong. Surround yourself with people who listen to and honor the complexities of your strength. You deserve to have others in your life who feel safe enough to ask for help. You deserve to feel at home. You are more than your role as a strong Black woman. As I reflect and offer key takeaways for each of my audiences, I acknowledge that these roles are not mutually exclusive. I know they can co-exist because that is this Black woman's experience. I am a combination of these roles and many more. To the reader and myself, I encourage us to first accept and then engage with the complexities of our various roles. I encourage us to further investigate our personal experiences and how those experiences might inform the work we do in our various hats. This dissertation is a very small slice of that process. My hope is that by showing you a bit of my experiences with myself, my various roles and the women of Sister Space, you may be encouraged to listen further.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I present Black graduate student women's experiences with virtual support group work, notions of strength and emotional intimacy. Primarily guided

by Black feminist thought and endarkened feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2000; 2008), this account centers Black women's invaluable ways of knowing to offer a more nuanced understanding of how to design and facilitate virtual support groups, conceptualizations of strength and aspects of intimacy for Black women. Throughout this study, I foreground my personal experiences to highlight my inner wisdom and to encourage others to center their own intuitive knowledge in their work. "Listen to Black women" is a commonly used phrase in both academic and nonacademic spaces (Barlow & Johnson, 2020; India, 2020; Oluo, 2020). Throughout my life, playing the roles of researcher, clinician, strong Black girl/woman, and many others, I have tried to listen. Through this dissertation, I hope I can be heard. I hope that you were able to listen.

Sister Space:
A Virtual Support Group

Are you a Black graduate student woman, between the ages of 22-35?
You can earn up to $220 for participating in this VIRTUAL study!

The project investigates emotional vulnerability and emotional intimacy for Black women in the context of a virtual support group. **Participation includes eight weekly virtual support group meetings and three 30-minute one-on-one interviews.**

Participants must be in the state of Michigan.
Starting June 2020.

Questions? Want to know more?
Please contact Principal Investigator:
Haley Sparks, MS, MSW, University of Michigan
hasparks@umich.edu

Figure 1. Recruitment Flyer.

APPENDICES

Pre-group Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Haley Sparks, MS, LLMSW
Interviewee:
Date:
Time:
(30 minute virtual recorded interview in Google Meets)

Pre-Group Consultation

Introduction: Hi, _____, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today. As you know, this interview is part of my larger dissertation research investigating emotional vulnerability, emotional intimacy and virtual support groups for Black women. Before we start the actual support group sessions, I love to know a bit more about you and your experiences. At this time, I would like to remind you that your answers will be recorded. You are not obligated to answer any questions you do not want to. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

1. Can you tell me a little bit about what you hope to get from participating in this virtual group?

2. Can you tell me about a relationship you have (it does not have to be romantic) that feels emotionally intimate?
   a. Can you tell me a bit about what makes it feel emotionally intimate? What specifically allows you to know it's emotionally intimate?

3. Can you tell me about a time in your life when you felt emotionally vulnerable?
   a. What indicated vulnerability to you?
   b. Do you feel comfortable with being vulnerable? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B

Midpoint Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Haley Sparks, MS, LLMSW
Interviewee:
Date:
Time:

Midpoint Check-in

Introduction: Hi, _____, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today. As you know, this interview is part of my larger dissertation research investigating emotional vulnerability, emotional intimacy and virtual support groups for Black women. At this point, we're halfway through Sister Space, and I'd love to hear about your experiences. At this time, I would like to remind you that your answers will be recorded. You are not obligated to answer any questions you do not want to. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

1. How is group going for you thus far?
2. Are there things about the group that are standing out to you in regard to it being virtual, rather than in person?
3. Has there been a time in group where you felt particularly emotionally vulnerable?
4. How do you feel like you are relating to your other group members?
5. Any feedback for group overall?

Post-Group Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Haley Sparks, MS, LLMSW
Interviewee:
Date:
Time:

Post-Group Consultation

Introduction: Hi, _____, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today. As you know, this interview is part of my larger dissertation research investigating emotional vulnerability, emotional intimacy and virtual support groups for Black women. At this point, we have finished with Sister Space, and I'd love to hear about your experiences. At this time, I would like to remind you that your answers will be recorded. You are not obligated to answer any questions you do not want to. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

1. I just want to check in about our last session. I know it was definitely a departure from usual group sessions and I wanted to make sure you're ok? Process anything that might have come up for you?
2. How would you describe your experiences in a virtual support group for Black women to a friend?
3. Was there a time in group that stood out to you as particularly emotionally vulnerable?

Was there a time you felt emotionally intimate with one or multiple group members? Any lingering thoughts or feedback about the group?

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