Continuing the Conversation:
Sojourner Syndrome in Black Women PAs and Patients

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PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT PROGRAM

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Objectives

- Discuss active contributors to adverse health outcomes in the target population – Black women in the United States.

- Examine the "Sojourner Syndrome" and "weathering" process in relation to health outcomes in Black women.

- Introduce conceptual frameworks to enhance societal considerations and patient interactions in order to decrease health disparities.

Ground Rules

4 Agreements

1. **Stay engaged** : Staying engaged means "remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually, and socially involved in the dialogue."

2. **Experience discomfort**: This norm acknowledges that discomfort is inevitable, especially, in dialogue about race, and that participants make a commitment to bring issues into the open. It is not talking about these issues that create divisiveness. The divisiveness already exists in the society and in our schools. It is through dialogue, even when uncomfortable, the healing and change begin.

3. **Speak your truth**: This means being open about thoughts and feelings and not just saying what you think others want to hear.

4. **Expect and accept non-closure**: This agreement asks participants to "hang out in uncertainty" and not rush to quick solutions, especially in relation to racial understanding, which requires ongoing dialogue.

4 Conditions

1. Focus on personal, local and immediate

2. Isolate race and gender

3. Normalize social construction & multiple perspectives

4. Monitor agreements, conditions and establish parameters

*Adapted from Glenn E. Singleton & Curtis Linton, Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools. 2006. pp.5865. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Setting the stage . . . SURVIVAL!

Slavery

Economic subordination

Family dissolution

J. MARION SIMS: GYNECOLOGIC SURGEON

Sexual exploitation

Forced childbearing for commerce

Medical experimentation

The legacy of the Black woman in America is one defined by countless dehumanizing and health-degrading experiences endured throughout generations → Led to a spirit of resilience/perseverance forging culturally-affirming survival behaviors for protection of self, family, and community.

Stress and Coping

- The processes of stress and coping are informed by appraisal of the perceived threat.

- Prolonged stress and being ill-equipped to employ proper coping mechanisms are contributors to adverse health outcomes.

- The accumulation of stressors over one's life can lead to an increased allostatic load resulting in unfavorable health outcomes.

- The burden of continuous stress often results in fatigue, illness, social problems, and psychosomatic disease.

(Awa et al., 2010; Lazarus, 1990; Gomez-Gascon et al., 2013; Wethington et al., 2015; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Maslach, 1978).

Gendered Racism

- Black women in the United States are subject to increased levels of discrimination resulting from structural racism and sexism.

- Unique experiences stemming from the intersection of race and gender → systemic oppression from societal subjugation of Blackness and womanhood.

- The result → detrimental consequences regarding health and access to care for Black women.

- INTERSECTIONALITY

Gendered Racism

- Acknowledging & exploring gendered racism provides a framework for understanding the way Black women experience racism and sexism simultaneously.

- These interactions may affect how Black women live and interact with the world.

- This topic is important as Black women may continuously and simultaneously experience both acute and chronic stressors due to the burden of navigating a racist and sexist society.

How do Black women cope with gendered racism?

- *Sojourner Syndrome* (more to come): Describes Black women's responses to intersectional discrimination by deploying resilience to cope with adversity.

- *Strong Black Woman Script*: Highlights the internalization of social expectations that the Black woman's role is to care for everyone else before caring for themselves

- *Superwoman Schema*: Offers details regarding characteristics of the role of "Superwoman"
    - Help others before helping self
    - Achieve success no matter the cost
    - Appear strong
    - Suppress feelings
    - Avoid being seen as vulnerable or needing others

- *Sisterella Complex*: Internalized racism and sexism combined with harmful coping mechanisms can lead Black women to develop depression and other mental health issues.

Sample Health Disparities among Black Women

- Despite scientific innovation and advances!

- Higher incidences, prevalence, mortality, and morbidity
  - Heart disease
  - Breast cancer
  - Poor birth outcomes → infant mortality
  - Mental health

- Exploring Black women's health disparities is a compelling issue for clinical practice and public health.

- Health disparities come in varying forms occurring at every level of care and in all practice environments.

Leading Causes of Death – Females – Non-Hispanic Black – United States, 2018

Non-Hispanic Black[1], Female, All ages[2]

Rank	Disease	Percent
1)	Heart Disease	23.0%
2)	Cancer	21.2%
3)	Stroke	6.5%
4)	Diabetes	4.5%
5)	Alzheimer Disease	3.9%
6)	Unintentional Injuries	3.7%
7)	Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease	3.6%
8)	Kidney Disease	3.0%
9)	Septicemia	2.2%
10)	Hypertension	2.0%

Who was Sojourner Truth? (1797 – 1883)

- An abolitionist

- Sojourner was first sold into slavery when she was 9 yrs. old, and several times afterwards for approximately $100 each time.

- She escaped slavery with her daughter in 1826 and went to court to recover her son in 1828 … First black person to win a case against a white man.

- Changed her name to Sojourner Truth (formerly Isabella Baumfree) in 1843 and began her journey preaching the truth about the abolition of slavery.

- "A'int I a Woman" speech in 1851 - Akron, Ohio. Demanded equal rights for all women.

- She dedicated her life to fighting for women, voting rights, property rights, rights to have possession of one's children, and abolition . . . all women have benefitted from her suffering.

I am above eighty years old;
it is about time for me to be going.
I have been forty years a slave and
forty years free and **would be here**
forty years more **to have
equal rights for all.**

— *Sojourner Truth*

Sojourner Syndrome (SS)

- Serves as a framework and understanding of the high rates of morbidity and mortality associated with Black women as compared to white women.

- Also may be known as "The Strong Black Woman Syndrome" and "Superwoman Schema." It highlights the intersecting effects of gender, race, and class on the health and wellbeing of Black women.

- SS describes how Black women respond to intersectional discrimination by engaging resilience to cope with adversity (Lekan, 2009; Mullings, 2005) as they navigate the unlawful and horrific oppressive conditions associated with racism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009).

Strong Black Woman

- Who does the perception of a strong black woman benefit?

- Do you think this is a good perception?

- In what ways does it harm or benefit Black woman?

https://about.kaiserpermanente.org/who-we-are/our-history/image-of-rosie-broadens-to-embrace-african-american-women

"Historically, Black women's greatest social currency has been their reputation for being strong……but strength is no substitute for power"

~Sandra Finley,
President and CEO, League of Black Women

CHANEQUA WALKER-BARNES

TOO HEAVY A YOKE

Black Women and The Burden of Strength
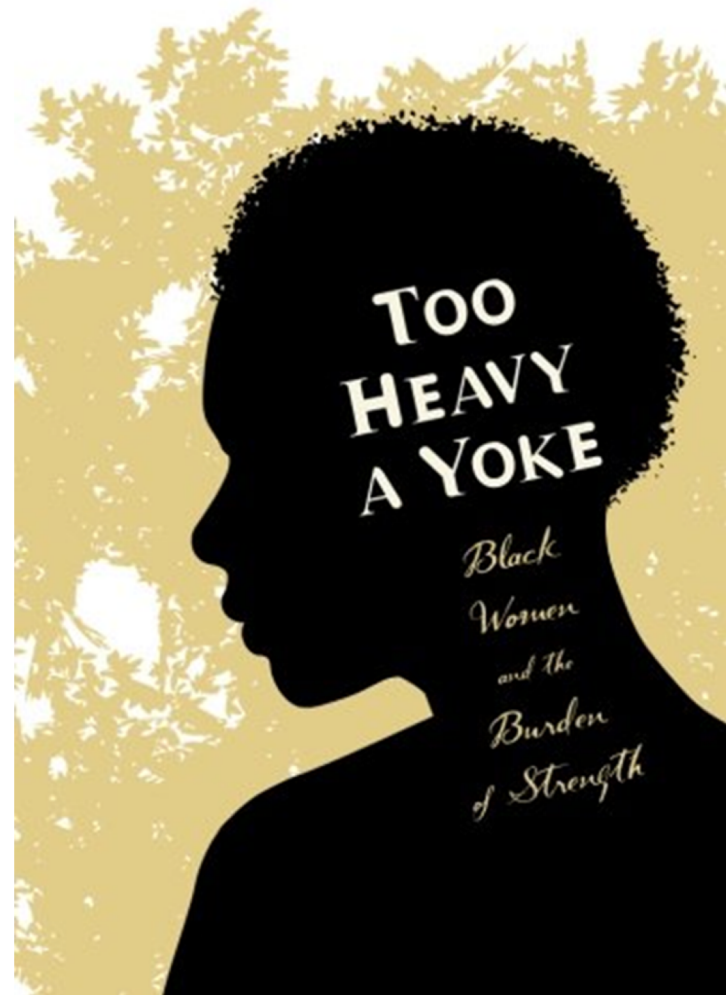
Stress, Coping, and Weathering Theory

> "The stressors that impact people of color are chronic and repeated through their whole life course."
>
> _____
>
> Arline Geronimus

- Among Black women, coping cultivates strength and resilience, but also leads to weathering. (Lekan, 2009)

- Weathering "includes the physical cost of engaging actively to address the structural barriers to achievement and wellbeing." (Geronimus, 2001)

- "The weathering effects of living in a race-conscious society may be greatest among Black people most likely to engage in high-effort coping." (Geronimus, 2001)

- Black women experience early health deterioration due to the cumulative effects of social, economic, and political exclusion.

- Weathering has been most studied in Black Americans.

Weathering and Allostatic Load

- <u>Weathering</u>: environmental and social contexts that affect allostatic load; prolonged high-effort coping → premature aging and deterioration of health.

- Maladaptation (coping) to stress causes "wear and tear" over time.

- <u>Stressors</u>: biological, psychological, environmental, social, and/or political

- <u>Inputs</u>: neuroendocrine, autonomic, metabolic, and inflammatory responses

- <u>Outputs</u>: turbulent coronary and cerebral artery blood flow, increased BP, atherogenesis, cognitive dysfunction, decreased mood, DEATH

- Occupational stress leads to burnout symptoms (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, decreased personal achievement), which leads to decreased job engagement, which then may result in decreased retention.

Women and Stress

- Women indirectly feel the stress of others, whereas men more likely feel stress that happens to them.

- Men are more likely to do battle with whoever or whatever is causing stress or they simply remove themselves from the situation.

- White women seem more likely to find stress relief by devoting time to their children or seeking support and friendship from others - a *"tend and befriend"* response.

- Black women seem to *"tend, befriend, mend, and keep it in."*

Disparities in Black Women's Health, Network for Public Law

- Black women are 3-4x more likely to die in pregnancy and five times more likely to die from pregnancy-related cardiomyopathy and blood pressure disorders than white women.

- Black women die from breast cancer at a 40% higher rate than white women, and are 3x more likely to die from COVID-19 than white men.

- Historic examples of medical experimentation further exacerbate Black women's distrust of the health care system.

https://www.networkforphl.org/news-insights/racial-disparities-in-womens-health/

Systemic Racism & Health Disparities

A STATEMENT FROM EDITORS OF FAMILY MEDICINE JOURNALS

Racial Differences in Weathering

Sarah Forrester[a,*], David Jacobs[b], Rachel Zmora[b], Pamela Schreiner[b], Veronique Roger[c], Catarina I. Kiefe[a]

- Black people had a BA (SD) that was 2.6 (11.8) years *older* than chronological age.

- Black people weathered 6.1 years faster than white people.

- Lower SES and more depressive symptoms were associated with more weathering among Black people than among White people.

- The study confirmed that racial differences in weathering existed and documented the greater toll on the biological health of Black people compared to white people.

Act of Profound Self-Preservation

- Crippling workload

- "Playing the race and gender cards"

- Lack of meaningful support

- Lack of respect and empathy for Black people, especially Black women

'A Profound Act of Self-Preservation'

City College of New York's new dean of architecture quits after 10 months, saying that structural racism and a lack of support made for a crushing workload and climate.

By Colleen Flaherty   // October 13, 2020

Work Environment → Coping Overload

- Lack of Black women in executive leadership
- Workplace wage gap
- Often carry the burden of being "the one"… the solution and the problem
- Making strides, but often falling short of career goals
- Lack sponsorship… not encouraged to build careers
- Stereotypes and discrimination remain a factor.
- Duplicitous colleagues in the workplace

League of Black Women Risk and Reward Survey

IN HER WORDS

Return to Office? Some Women of Color Aren't Ready

After more than a year of virtual work, employers are making plans to get back to the physical workplace. That has many workers worrying about the return of microaggressions and bias, too.
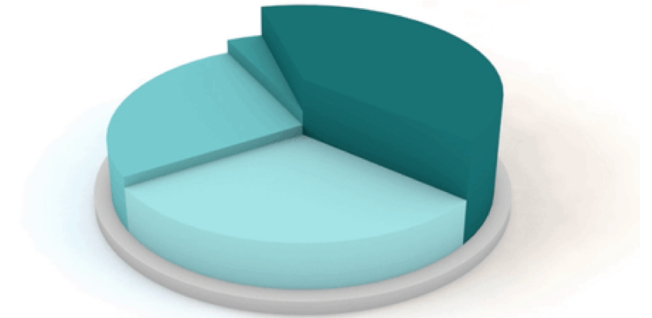
70% of PAs are women, 3.3% are Black,

NCCPA 2021 Statistical Profile

"I actually like not having to go into the office and be constantly reminded that I'm the only Black woman there."

— *Courtney McCluney, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at Cornell's ILR School*

A survey conducted by the Gallup Center on Black Voices between Nov. 6 and Dec. 1, 2020, found that Black women are less likely to feel they are treated with respect in the workplace. They are also less likely to feel like a valued member of their team and that their coworkers treat everyone fairly.

Conceptual Frameworks

- Disparities are a result of racism

- Structural racism is REAL! Representation Matters.

- What are some of these frameworks??
    - What works?

Health Equity Framework

- Acknowledge that racism and discrimination exist

- Socioeconomic status

- Education

- Stress and trauma

- Structural barriers to health

- Healthcare and health inequities

Structural Health Equity Framework

- Social, political, physical, economical environments and systems levels require change

- Addressing social determinants of health such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to healthcare and education.
  - Embed equity through a quality and safety lens
  - Create systems that ensure accountability

- Access to preventative care: access does not equal equity

- Representation

- Culturally Responsive Training

Patient-Centered and Reproductive Justice Framework Interventions

- Influence of racism on patient-provider interactions
  - Acknowledge that racism and discrimination exist
  - Mistrust

- Listen - Safe and Brave Spaces
  - Impact decision-making and advocacy

- Validate and acknowledge experiences of Black women

- Building trust and partnerships

- Promote and support autonomy
  - Empowerment
  - Informed consent

- Reproductive rights are human rights

Interprofessional/Holistic Approaches to Care

- Use of doulas and other professionals

- Self-care and mindfulness-stress based practices (culturally appropriate)

- Encourage physical activities

- Engagement - community (participatory)

- Mental health and wellness support

Centering lived experiences

- "Housekeeping is downstairs"

- "Black Woman PA"

Next up:
Lets hear from you.

Reflections
&
Questions/Answers

Thank You!
It has been our pleasure centering Black women.

Listen to Black Women

black women are *essential*

STAND WITH BLACK WOMEN

Foundational references:

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