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# The “Strong Black Girl” Dilemma: Reflections on Young Black Women’s Mental Health during Dual Pandemics

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## Abstract

This article explores the mental health of a group of young Black undergraduate women during the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and gendered anti-Black racism in the United States. Drawing on intersectionality as a theoretical framework, the research participants reflected on how race and gender interact to shape their struggles and coping strategies during a period of racial unrest and a global health crisis. With support from the African American Policy Forum and using youth participatory action research, the student researchers undertook a qualitative study utilizing focus group discussions to answer the question: how did the dual pandemics impact the mental

health practices of young Black women student researchers? The article analyzes their written reflections on their mental health and self-care practices, including barriers and bridges to community and professional mental health support. The research holds implications for scholars and practitioners interested in intersectional research and ethics of care in higher education, as well as mental health advocates committed to protecting Black girls and young women.

*Keywords:* Black girls, Black feminism, COVID-19 pandemic, higher education, intersectionality, mental health, self-care

### **Introduction**

A robust intersectional discourse acknowledges both the common threats that we all face, along with the fact that the dramatic maldistribution of survival resources is part of this crisis. Those conditions include permissible isolation, access to affordable food, and accessible healthcare. Yes, we are all equal in this Orwellian nightmare, but some of us are more equal than others. (Crenshaw, 2020)

In the *Under the Blacklight* podcast series, in the episode “The intersectional vulnerabilities that COVID lays bare,” Kimberlé Crenshaw (2020) introduced listeners to racialized inequalities magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. In investigating these inequalities, we identified March 2020 as a watershed moment in the United States; one that presented unique hardships for Black girls, femmes, and gender-expansive youth situated at the margins of society. Like much of the world’s youth, Black girls living in the United States entered a new normal as businesses shuttered, students transitioned to online learning, and people followed mandates to stay at home. New restrictions on public life did little, however, to prevent the rising death toll as the virus claimed millions of lives, and not equally. Data began to show that the elderly, immunocompromised people, and our nation’s most vulnerable populations were most susceptible to the virus. What we are still learning is that Black women students were particularly vulnerable—left unprotected and erased from public discourses of safety.

However, what we *do* know is that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) have been hardest hit. As the United States grappled with mounting deaths, societal issues that had long boiled below the surface began to bubble over. For instance, on May 25, 2020, the violent murder of 46-year-old George Floyd sparked national outrage over racism and police brutality. Ignited by Floyd’s murder, the “clarion call for racial equality and racial justice for Black people” (Watson et al., 2020, p. 1363) reached a crescendo, and an “unprecedented worldwide mobilization of tens of millions of Americans of all races [emerged] to demand institutional accountability and reform” (Crenshaw, 2021). As many of us witnessed first-hand, Black girls and young women were civically engaged in demanding that #BlackLivesMatter and that we #SayHerName to recognize Black women and girls killed by police violence.

These discussions around police brutality led to the framing of anti-Black racism in the United States as a parallel pandemic (Laurencin & Walker, 2020) that mimicked the COVID-19 virus and that would continually reshape the lived realities of Black girls who exist at the intersections of race and gender. For instance, an earlier case of police violence resurfaced in the news: that of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Louisville, Kentucky resident who was fatally shot in her apartment on March 13, 2020, during a failed police raid. Breonna's case made headlines as even more incidents of police brutality came to light. These blatant incidents of state-sanctioned violence against Black people, massive protests, and the Black Lives Matter movement forced the United States to grapple with persistent racial inequalities and its deep-rooted anti-Black racism (Watson et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, publicity around these cases led to hyper-exposure (Weissman, 2021) to images of injured or dead Black people (i.e., videos and pictures circulated via mass and social media), which only exacerbated the toll on Black people's mental health (Grooms et al., 2021). Between school closures, stay-at-home orders, mass hospitalizations, and ongoing police violence against Black people, Black girl and Black women students were thrust into roles and responsibilities that challenged their mental health. In particular, they were forced into caregiver roles at home, school, and in the workplace with few buffers.

In this article, we discuss the vulnerabilities that college-going Black girls and women faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the onset of the pandemic, many young Black women,<sup>1</sup> like those involved in this study, were forced to adjust to online learning while also assuming additional responsibilities in their households and, at times, leadership roles in their communities. Here, we build upon the African American Policy Forum's (AAPF; 2015) "Black Girls Matter" report, which illuminated what critical race feminist scholar Crenshaw referred to as the "knowledge desert that exists around the lives and experiences of Black women and girls" (2015, p. 8). In particular, we are interested in how the *caregiver* role, coupled with the dual pandemics of racism and COVID-19, left Black girls unprotected across spaces (Morris, 2016). We problematize the taken-for-granted role (and myth) of the self-sacrificing "strong Black woman" that is often foisted upon young Black women as they navigate the terrains of White supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism within their families, schools, and society at large. Of the growing body of literature on Black women in college, little explores Black women students' experiences through the lens of student researchers themselves. This article enables us to examine what happens when young Black women have the tools to research their own realities as students, women/girls, and Black people.

Our research did not necessarily seek to explore younger Black women's experiences in higher education because that literature is well documented; however, we aimed to learn how this cohort of Black girl students straddled the line between home and school during the dual pandemics—keeping in mind there were no studies that looked at younger Black college

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<sup>1</sup> The collaborators in this study were over the age of 17 at the onset of data collection; thus, at times we refer to participants as "Black girls" or "young Black women." We use "Black women" throughout the article to generalize across age categories when a person is over the age of 17.

women’s survival strategies during the global pandemic and widespread racial violence. With support from the AAPF, a social justice policy think tank, this study explored Black girl student researchers’ experiences and reflections during these dual pandemics.

In the study, participants in the AAPF’s 2020 Young Scholars Program (YSP) hosted focus groups and engaged in written reflections regarding their mental health and self-care practices, as well as barriers and bridges to community and professional support. For the purposes of this article, the student and adult researchers centered the theme of the “strong Black girl” caretaker, which aligns with historical narratives of “the mammy” or “the help” framed and problematized by Black feminist scholarship. Questions raised include: How do respondents characterize the stereotype of the emotionally secure and mentally capable Black girl? In what ways do Black girls resist or counter the so-called strong Black girl caregiver role, if at all? What is the responsibility of adults during the dual pandemics in protecting Black girls from not only viruses, but also adultification, which challenges their overall mental health and well-being?

### **Literature Review**

Though COVID-19 affects the lives of most people indiscriminately of age, race, and gender, government data reveals that Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people disproportionately bear the brunt of the dual pandemics (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020, 2022). According to the CDC (2022), Black people are 2.5 times more likely to be hospitalized and 1.7 times more likely to die of a COVID-related death than White people in the United States. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 is linked to historical and social patterns of inequality. For example, Black people in the United States continue to be affected by the traumatic and epigenetic legacies of slavery (Liu et al., 2019) and mass incarceration (James, 2021), as well as police violence (Alang et al., 2017; Bor et al., 2018; Boyd, 2018; Watson et al., 2020) and maternal mortality.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, we do not yet know how the pandemic impacts the health and well-being of Black girls living at the intersections of racial, gender, and social class inequality.

However, we do know that “due to the prevalence of single-wage-earning families headed by women” in Black communities (Crenshaw et al., 2015, p. 27), Black women in the United States continue to shoulder household financial responsibilities while facing obstacles posed by COVID-19. Black girls also share some of the household responsibilities with their female caregivers due to gendered expectations inside and outside of the Black family. Further, Black people disproportionately hold positions as government employees, and domestic and service industry workers (declared as “essential workers” at the height of the pandemic). As such, many Black women, including adolescents and college students who contribute to household income were forced to work throughout the period of stay-at-home orders, increasing their risk of exposure and compromised mental health.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2018, Black women were at 2.4 times higher risk of maternal mortality than White women (Singh, 2021).

Grooms et al. (2021) found that in the United States, Black essential healthcare workers suffered disproportionately higher rates of anxiety. Additionally, Black women experienced significant job losses due to occupational segregation in the healthcare and social services sectors (Holder et al., 2021). More research is needed to examine how occupational segregation and job loss impacted Black girls financially as student workers and as contributors to household finances. Given their intersectional positionalities, it is important to explore how young Black women and girls have balanced school, family, and work responsibilities while coping with historical and contemporary systematic oppression such as school segregation, economic inequality, and gender inequity in the United States. To that end, we call for more research from Black girl researchers *themselves* to help contextualize their experiences with racism and gender oppression during COVID-19.

### **State of Black Girls' and Young Women's Mental Health**

As the virus spread in early 2020, many educational institutions quickly moved to close campuses to in-person learning and evacuate students from campus housing. With little thought given to the multiple vulnerabilities that students from racially minoritized and working-class families confronted, many young Black college women were relocated without any transitional plan. In this article, we consider how the lack of planning impacted Black girl researchers and participants. Since little empirical data is available on the mental health status of Black female adolescents from an intersectional perspective, we extrapolated the state of Black girls' mental health during the dual pandemics from the research reflections, field notes, and focus group responses of college-aged researchers and participants. In the spirit of youth participatory action research, we did not attempt to legitimate the youth researchers' claims, but we affirmed their feelings, observations, and lived realities (Evans-Winters, 2017; Evans-Winters, 2019).

The AAPF/YSP research team consisted of Venus Evans-Winters—a university professor (and mother of a high school and college student)—and five novice YSP student researchers, aged 17–21. With the objective of centering Black girls in policy advocacy and research, the student researchers set out to explore how Black women undergraduate students coped as they transitioned from traditional campus learning to at-home learning during COVID-19. In particular, the research team sought to understand how Black girls were coping and negotiating the liminal space between physical and mental safety (Evans-Winters, 2019). Evans-Winters conceived of such liminal moments as “the possibilities of and methodological tensions in qualitative inquiry” (2019, p. 30) that help us locate the agency, vulnerability, resistance, and resilience of Black women and girls in the face of structural failings. Black-girl-centered research helps us articulate the possibilities of policy research for and by Black girls while unveiling how institutional research does not always permit adolescent voices to shape institutional practices. Yet, this youth-led research project documented student researchers' vulnerabilities, as well as their coping and healing processes during a period of racial reckoning and institutional failures.

Despite sharing in collective trauma and grief, Black girls and women, historically, have not been considered in conversations around structural racism (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Only

more recently are Black girls becoming a part of research that centers their socioemotional and educational concerns. For instance, in the United Kingdom, Imkaan (2020) found that quarantine measures such as lockdowns increase all forms of violence against women and girls, including racial discrimination against women and girls of color resulting from existing inequalities. In particular, Imkaan attributed increased domestic violence against women and girls to restrictions that confined them to residential living spaces during lockdown periods.

A leading race and gender scholar, and guest on AAPF's *Under the Blacklight* pilot episode,<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Roberts, also explained that social and political structures make some people more powerful than others (Crenshaw, 2020). We need more research on how Black girl students' social and political power increased or decreased during the dual pandemics. As youth activists demanded justice and state accountability in the face of racial violence, their political power seemed to be recognized, if not actualized. However, with quarantine, how did young women activists adapt their strategies of power and influence? From this study, we learn that many Black young women felt powerless and demoralized during the time away from their peers.

Our research suggests that even after 2 years, there is still a need for more research to contextualize the impact of the dual pandemics on Black girls' safety and well-being. One such study was conducted by A Long Walk Home (ALWH), a Chicago-based organization that empowers young people to end violence against girls and women. ALWH surveyed members of their leadership institute, a group of 32 Black girls and gender-expansive youth, and produced *Black Girls During the Pandemic and Protest*. The report—the first of its kind—spoke to the unique pressures and liminality of Black girlhood. It highlighted Black girls' roles as essential workers and caregivers for family members infected with COVID and younger siblings, all while participating full-time in online learning (Allen et al., 2021).

Despite ALWH's recognition of Black girls' particular vulnerabilities, few other studies exist that examine the mental health impact of COVID-19 on Black girls. Even before COVID, Black girls' and young women's mental health had been in sharp decline. Price and Khubchandani (2019) cited suicide as the third-leading cause of death for Black adolescents aged 15–19 from 1980 to 1995. In the 1990s, suicide rates increased by more than 233% for African American youths aged 10–14 and 126% for youths aged 15–19 (Price & Khubchandani, 2019). At the turn of the millennium, suicide rates among Black girls aged 13–19 continued to rise at an alarming rate, increasing by 182% between 2001 and 2017 (Price & Khubchandani, 2019). Though not disaggregated by race, a study based on data from the National Syndromic Surveillance Program also revealed that emergency room visits for suspected suicide attempts were 50.6% higher for girls aged 12–17 in the 4 weeks ending March 20, 2020, compared to the same period in 2019 (Yard et al., 2021). This contrasted with the rates of suspected suicide for adolescent boys of the same age and young adults aged 18–25, which had remained stable since 2019 (Yard et al., 2021).

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<sup>3</sup> The episode from which the epigraph cited in this article emerged.

In addition to shedding light on Black girls' intersectional role as caregivers and students, ALHW's study also offered more recent data on Black girls' mental health. They found that 59% of respondents between 12–17 and 18–26 reported having depressive thoughts, while 69% reported feelings of anxiety during the pandemic (Allen et al., 2021). More than a quarter (27%) of the respondents experienced suicidal thoughts or had attempted suicide. ALWH's report also noted a deepened sense of uncertainty and political activation among youths, as 85% of respondents reported increased engagement in activities like attending protests and community cleanups or hosting virtual mental wellness support groups for youths. Another 55% spent more time on art-making (Allen et al., 2021). Overall, ALWH's report underscored the resilience of Black girls and young women during the dual pandemics. Similarly, this article highlights not only the challenges faced by Black communities, but also the ways in which Black girls and women cope and resist.

### **Intersectionality and Black Girl Research**

Intersectionality, a Black feminist intellectual and activist framework, regards self-determination and social critique as essential to Black women's survival in the face of systemic oppression (Collins, 2002). As a framework, intersectionality enables us to grasp how overlapping social and political identities like race, class, gender, age, and sexuality interact to influence Black girls' and women's experiences of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). We draw on intersectionality in this article to spotlight how race, class, gender, and age shaped the ways in which these college students struggled and coped with the socioeconomic, educational, and political shifts that occurred during a period of racial volatility and health crisis (i.e., spring 2020–summer 2021).

Through an intersectional prism, mothering and daughtering were focused in the research process. We looked to Evans-Winters' concept of *daughtering* to appreciate Black girls' responses to these structures and power dynamics, and their research experience. Drawing from Black feminist qualitative inquiry, Evans-Winters wrote:

As an ethic of love, daughtering conjures creative expression. Daughter data representations might be shared through dance, a poem, a piece of prose, a song; or perhaps it would present itself as a hair pattern adorned on top of a girl's or woman's head—or present via a sharp tongue or an act of refusal. (2019, p. 282)

We posit that daughtering represents a form of self-care, and by pairing daughtering with intersectionality, the youth researchers were encouraged to center race, gender, class, and age not only in understanding the mental health status of young Black women during the dual pandemics, but also in the recognition of the creative strategies they employed to navigate COVID-19 and gendered anti-Black racism.

There is a burgeoning body of literature on the coping strategies that Black girls and women employ in and outside of school to resist racism, gender-based violence, and class inequality (Butler-Barnes et al., 2021; Evans-Winters, 2005, 2017, 2019; Greenberg & Barton, 2017; Jones et al, 2021; Walton, 2021). We contribute to this scholarship by exposing the strong

Black woman schema (Collins, 2005; Jones et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2020; Wallace, 1999), and illustrating how Black girl students were forced into strong Black girl roles as caregivers during a period of racial reckoning and COVID-19. Stemming from Black girls' unique intersectional positionalities (as students, Black people, girls/women, and researchers), this research acknowledges the ways that young Black women simultaneously engaged in daughtering (a source of power and vulnerability) and mothering (a coping strategy that may threaten resilience) practices during the pandemic. Their research reflections reveal that they were forced to take on traditional mothering roles, despite their student identity, age, and lack of sociocultural power—therein positing the strong Black girl dilemma.

Moreover, the youth researchers' interpretations of their shared experiences also underscore the expectation that Black women and Black girls alike must draw upon unlimited reserves of strength and resilience to “serve as a means of psychological resistance to [the] oppression prevalent within [U.S.] American society” (Jones et al., 2021, p. 347). Black girls perform this emotional labor, often at the expense of their own mental health. We recognize the strong Black girl as (1) a sociocultural construct that burdens young Black women and (2) blocks them from accessing adequate care and support, and (3) we juxtapose it against healthy self-soothing,<sup>4</sup> self-care<sup>5</sup> and daughtering practices that Black girls and young women adopt to support their own well-being. With these observations in mind, we believe that institutions, systems, and governments have a responsibility to assist in the care and protection of Black girls, femmes, and gender-expansive students (see Figure 1).

## **The Research Context**

In this qualitative study, we set out to answer the central research question: How did the dual pandemics of racism and COVID-19 impact the mental health practices of young Black women? The study itself consisted of two phases. The first phase involved recruiting participants for the YSP<sup>6</sup> across various AAPF partnership networks. Out of the pool of prospective participants, finalists were selected based on schedule availability, age, educational background, student status, extracurricular activities, geographic location, and self-identification as Black. The five study participants were part of the larger 2020 YSP cohort. During Phase 1, participants (whose stories are shared in this discussion) used Black feminist theory and intersectionality to conduct research projects with a pool of Black girls during the first summer of the pandemic. The participants used research skills gathered from their YSP education and kept individual reflection journals for 1 year (i.e., summer 2020–summer 2021). It should be noted that the youth

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<sup>4</sup> In this study, self-soothing constitutes actions that make one feel better in reaction to external or internal stressors. Self-soothing intends to provide one with comfort and distraction. Examples include talking to a friend, journaling, braiding your hair, taking care of a pet or a plant, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Self-care consists of individual practices of health management without the aid of a medical professional. The purpose of self-care is to encourage personal growth and ground oneself. Examples include drinking water, taking a walk, etc.

<sup>6</sup> The YSP prepares Black girls to conduct research for and by Black girls with policy advocacy in mind.

researchers were introduced to Black feminism, critical race theory, and intersectionality as a part of the summer research project.

In Phase 2 (summer 2021), the YSP Ambassadors<sup>7</sup>—five young Black women university students ranging in age from 19 to 21 years—reflected on the first phase and participated in their own focus group. Thus, data presented here come from an online, five-person minigroup,<sup>8</sup> focus group discussion that lasted roughly 1.5 hours. The focus group specifically concentrated on the state of their short- and long-term mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For feasibility purposes, and due to COVID-19 mandates, the focus group took place in August 2021 via the Zoom video-conferencing platform. Participants were encouraged, but not required, to leave their cameras on and microphones unmuted to simulate the dynamic of an in-person focus group discussion. Additionally, their Black woman research instructor (and mental health professional), Evans-Winters,<sup>9</sup> served in multiple capacities to support them as the dual pandemics left us all emotionally, mentally, and physically vulnerable. The online research experience became an educational and mental health intervention.

Since the online component made it easier to convene geographically dispersed participants (Williams et al., 2020), the discussion included participants from major regions of the country: the East Coast, West Coast, Midwest, and South. The Ambassadors co-created the focus group questions themselves with guidance from Evans-Winters, who conceptualized intersectional youth participatory action research for the purposes of the YSP and this study. Participants reflected on and shared their experiences concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, university closures, housing insecurity, police, and racialized gender violence, with particular attention to mental health, self-care practices, and community and professional mental health support. They also considered how they sought out and defined community before and during the dual pandemics. All the participants were at least in their second semester of college at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (which meant that they all had experienced college pre-COVID-19) and shared the experience of returning home and continuing their studies online. For the research record, the young scholars were selected due to their gender and racial consciousness and previous organizing and activism efforts.

While participants all attended predominantly White institutions (PWIs), they had varied elementary and secondary schooling experiences. Some grew up outside the United States, while others had been schooled in private and public schools in the United States. Some also had the unique experience of being brought up in predominantly Black communities of color and later studying at PWIs. This variance was especially important in exploring different transitions and levels of comfort at PWIs and some of the challenges related to discriminatory policing in BIPOC neighborhoods (McFarland, 2018). Participants also had diverse home structures during the COVID-19 quarantine period, ranging from multigenerational to single generation households, independent living, and single-parent to two-parent households. Their family

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<sup>7</sup> These young scholar ambassadors were participants of the 2020 YSP cohort.

<sup>8</sup> A “minigroup” focus group discussion has four to six participants (Greenbaum, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> AAPF’s Black Girls Research Initiatives Coordinator

structures helped us to understand the household responsibilities that participants negotiated amidst the dual pandemics, alongside their studies and community engagement. The participants' responses and journal reflections were coded thematically and analyzed according to the article's intersectionality–daughtering framework with guidance from two postdoctoral-level research fellows.<sup>10</sup>

## Researchers' Positionalities

As multidisciplinary Black women scholar activists from diverse geographic backgrounds who are “interested in the overall education and emotional development of girls and women of color” (Evans-Winters, 2017, p. 3), Black feminist scholars Venus Evans-Winters, Nolwazi N. Ncube, and E. Gale Greenlee co-authored this article in collaboration with the young researchers.<sup>11</sup> In so doing, the AAPF/YSP research team modeled daughtering as researchers and interpreters of Black girlhoods while being mindful that the mental health of young Black women is an emotive topic, connected to a long history of “strategic silences of antiracism and feminism” (Crenshaw, 1990, p. 1253). It was our collective view as a research team and authors of this article that the study's “Blackwomen-centric” (Shange, 2020)<sup>12</sup> lens created a safe space for other Black girls and women to learn, heal, and express their truths.

Thus, our aim for the focus group was to foster emotional support and comradery during the data collection process. Evans-Winters, Ncube, and Greenlee did not come to the process with the intent of being the *all-knowing* researchers; instead, we fostered a sense of community and belonging in the research context with the overall objective of making space for Black girl researchers to become producers of knowledge. In fact, the Black girl researchers drafted the research questions, methods, and initial write-up. We assert that other researchers, educators, and mental health professionals can learn from such methodological maneuvers especially as we attempt to decolonize research.

Together, the intersections of our own Blackness and womanhood shaped the study's research methodology by building a sense of solidarity in the safe space of the focus group as a form of radical self-love (Figure 1) where we conceive of self-care and self-love, and state responsibility as aspects of good mental health outcomes.

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<sup>10</sup> Nolwazi N. Ncube and E. Gale Greenlee joined AAPF as Black Girls Matter Research Fellows in summer 2021 and triangulated research processes of the participant–researchers, building rapport with them by engaging in discussions and their own reflections on the mental health of Black girls and young women in the United States during the dual pandemics.

<sup>11</sup> The young researchers were also participants in both the YSP and this study. This is why they are also referred to as participants in this study.

<sup>12</sup> In an intersectional approach, Shange “combine[d] the words ‘Black’ and ‘women’ in order to highlight how race and gender cannot be treated as mutually exclusive for Blackwomen” (2020, p. 18).

## Figure 1

### *Three Prongs of Positive Mental Health Outcomes*



Figure 1 highlights the various levels of care that Black girls should be able to draw upon during periods of social change or chaos. These levels offer different forms of protection and care. Each level fills a void when systems are unstable or when girls need race- and gender-diverse communities that may not be readily available.

For instance, outside of spaces with other Black women and girls, we do not always feel seen and heard in conversations about societal issues and Black liberation struggles. Similarly, Black girl researchers are not always viewed as legitimate researchers, especially because they do not necessarily cite the “right” people or write in ways deemed acceptable by the academy. Moreover, they are expected to rely upon adult researchers from outside of their communities to validate their experiences. This study resonates with our core values of extending love, developing self-care routines, and working towards community healing through an intersectional youth participatory action research prism.

In reflecting our commitment to unlearning harmful practices, uplifting ourselves, and supporting others within and outside of the focus groups, the intimate but collective setting of the youth-led focus group normalized vulnerability, making it possible for participants to share narratives of stress, trauma, and mistreatment that the strong Black woman schema or Black girl caregiver role would ordinarily silence. We challenge readers to set aside their institutional socialization to listen to our young researchers/participants as they strive to make sense of and meaning out of their own precarity despite the protocols and presuppositions of (adult-centered) Eurocentric research traditions.

## **Black Girl Interpretations: Mental Health and Dual Pandemics**

The major themes emerging from our research are: (1) the intersectional identities of young Black women college students, (2) mental health and coping mechanisms, and (3) reconnecting with self and others. We acknowledge that the sample size of the focus group was by no means representative of all Black girls and women in the United States. However, we believe that the findings contribute to the existing literature around the experiences of college-aged Black women.

### **The Intersectional Identities of Black Women College Students**

This youth-led Black girl research project took place at a time of heightened racial violence and during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the focus group participants reported that they experienced negative mental health symptoms even before the onset of the pandemic. However, after university closures, Black girls were left without mental health support and began to experience symptoms associated with coping with racial terrorism and uncertainty caused by the global health pandemic. More specifically, most participants faced challenges related to their identities as young Black women in what one student described as “the context of the United States.” For example, a senior studying in the Midwest qualified this context as one marked by pervasive anti-Black sentiment. She recognized that as a Black woman, “just being at a PWI can be difficult.” The research participants were often isolated on campus and negotiated racial tension on PWI campuses with little support from faculty. Consequently, many Black girls relied upon their peer group, which became invisible or fractured during the pandemic.

Another student, a third-year college student from the East Coast, also discussed the experience of attending a PWI. Pointing out the barriers to accessing community and mental health support on campus before the pandemic, she stated:

It was hard finding, like, counselors or people I can talk to. So, I kinda relied a lot on the community and other students for a long time. It was more of having somebody to vent to which allowed me to tap into what was bothering me, if that makes sense?

COVID-19 intensified the challenge of gaining access to culturally responsive mental health services on college campuses. It is unsurprising, then, that when asked if their existing mental health issues were exacerbated during the pandemic, all the participants answered, “Yes.” For instance, a fourth-year college student attending college on the West Coast remembered the pandemic and stay-at-home mandate as a time when she began to “spiral” into a stream of “self-destructive habits [that] started coming in, just to cope.” As hinted at in the above quotes, all the focus group participants were conscious of how pre-pandemic challenges were exacerbated by pandemic lockdowns. Students from already economically vulnerable families and racial groups were forced to sit in past trauma and cope with chronic stress, alone and in isolation.

Another participant, for example, who was a third-year college student in the Mid-Atlantic region, recalled that the dual pandemics brought up questions of community and her

sense of belonging. This forced her into “simultaneously grappling with racial microaggressions and issues of identity,” she proclaimed. Most would agree that a large part of the college experience for students, especially racially minoritized young women, is about young people developing gender and racial consciousness. For the study participants, who were undergraduate students and just beginning to learn how to identify their racial and gender politics outside those of their parents or primary culture, the lockdown period not only interrupted their formal education, but also disrupted their racial and gender socialization.

Studying via home-based online learning meant that the young Black women students could no longer lean on the sociopolitical communities (e.g., feminist, LGBTQIA+, African American, religious, etc.) that they had established on campus for peer support as they came into their own self-identified and shared identities. In isolation, Black girl college students were forced to contend, alone, with interrogating both racial hierarchies (i.e., racial microaggressions and violence), gender and sexual oppression (i.e., past sexual trauma and heterosexism), and fears surrounding COVID-19. These Black girl research reflections point to the urgent need for age-appropriate, gender-inclusive, and culturally responsive mental health support in colleges and universities as Black women students confront the dual pandemics of White supremacist violence and COVID-19.

### **Mental Health and the Strong Black Girl**

In this section, we share the study participants’ reflections on their experiences in their families and communities of origin during the study period. Specifically, focus group participants reflected on their home communities and considered how their overlapping roles—as student, sibling, daughter, worker, and community leader—affected their ability to care for themselves and, at times, others in their families or peer network. Their ruminations cast a light on the theme of the strong Black woman or superwoman archetype. For our study, the strong Black girl archetype surfaced as all study participants described assuming the role of young caregivers and being *expected* to place others’ emotional and physical needs ahead of their own comfort, mental health, and student responsibilities.

On the superwoman archetype, Wallace wrote that the strong Black woman is seen as “the epitome of the selfless, self-sacrificing ‘good woman’” (1999, p. 166). Too often, society adultifies Black girls by regarding them as emotionally and mentally strong and not in need of protection even in the face of racism, physical unsafety, and times of uncertainty (Morris, 2019). Their needs are set aside as they are required to help take care of adult family members, siblings, and their own material needs. One participant, a college senior in the Midwest, articulated that she felt as if she was “decenter[ing] self-care in favor of caring for everyone else.” For her, the pandemic became a time of self-sacrifice, and eventually a long period of self-neglect. Other participants also reported that their own caregivers still required them to pay for school, take care of household chores, and care for younger siblings or elders. Meanwhile, their professors and employers also held expectations of them during the pandemics.

Still, these times of uncertainty were also defined as moments of self-empowerment and coming to voice. One participant, a senior on the West Coast, recalled that she needed to simply

“Say no and not care! You are not going to take another piece of my soul. I have been working to get to the point where I can say no and not feel bad.” Establishing clear boundaries with others became inevitable to promote the college students’ mental well-being. The abovementioned student studying in the Midwest noted that “Th[e] unlearning portion is so difficult, especially when people react negatively” to the new, healthier boundaries that are set. A senior attending school on the West Coast supported this realization, stressing that “When you set boundaries, you’re always gonna get push-back, but you have to push forward.” Reflexively, boundary-setting became a necessary part of Black girls’ self-care practices during the dual pandemics as evidenced by their shared disclosures that they learned to ask for help rather than just “do[ing] it for somebody else” (college senior, East Coast). Similarly, a second-year college student reported “Black women are naturally seen as sacrificial. By the time fall hit, I felt like I had nothing left. I don’t have to be everything for everyone if I’m nothing for myself.” As her comment suggests, participants recognized that there is a finitude of emotional support they can offer others. Notwithstanding, their need to center “self” often contradicted expectations placed on them, giving rise to the idea of self-care as a form of resistance. These expectations represented a superwoman baton passed down to them from the older Black women and impressed on them by the society around them.

Yet despite familial and social stressors, self-love emerged even within the context of caregiving. The college senior from the Midwest mentioned above, for example, fondly recalled her experience of becoming a “dog mom” during the pandemic:

Getting a puppy made me have to get up and be better in order to be better for him. I had someone to take care of. Where is this love coming from [I wondered] because I wasn’t giving it to myself?

She saw her own care in relation to the care she offered to the puppy. In her reflections, she revealed that the puppy became her motivation for taking better care of herself. She also admitted that she was providing herself with little love and care at that time.

Resistance to the strong Black girl/woman schema by way of self-care is in opposition to the presumed expectations of the ever-self-sacrificing Black woman caregiver placed on Black girls’ shoulders. Individually, participants resisted the schema for the sake of their mental health, but they still found themselves at odds with the intergenerational transmission of their collective responsibility as female protectors and caregivers. They found themselves locked in a tug-of-war between self-care and the social reproduction of mothering and daughtering.

As Evans-Winters described, “Daughtering is not passive. In fact, it is quite subversive, watchful, and clandestine for the sake of survival” (2019, p. 280). The young women in this study are a testament to the agency embedded in daughtering, for they allowed themselves, even if momentarily, to be daughters and center their self-care as a part of the research process and in their journey as students—embracing a racial and gender consciousness in the midst of social chaos and stress. At times, daughtering meant that the students had to choose to put themselves first without feeling guilty or succumbing to false notions of unwavering strength in the face of

precarity and fear of the unknown amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to daughtering, when mothering, young women are placed at a higher risk of adultification, leaving them unprotected and underserved due to caregiving responsibilities.

### **Reconnections and Self-Care**

Even though participants periodically challenged gender-based roles and responsibilities, they also actively sought out opportunities to foster community and solidify family bonds. One participant from the South fondly remembered lockdown as a time of “being at home and spending a lot of good time with my family.” During times of racial unrest and feelings of vulnerability, spending time with (s)kinfolk is a form of self-care. As one participant shared, “I surrounded myself with the people I care about, activists in the community, and strong people of color.” The participants also identified Blackwomen-centric, daughtering spaces such as the AAPF’s YSP, as a place where they could participate in self-care. One participant from the Mid-Atlantic region recalled that:

[In] May [2020], I was not dealing with it very well. ... Being a part of the Young Scholars Program saved my mental health. Being in a space for me and people like me. Journaling, breathing, and meditating helped me cope and salvage my mental health.

Likewise, another participant from the Midwest described the YSP as “a gift ... It’s like a spiritual warmth. There is something so special about Black women—about all of us.” Both participants characterized the program as a space in which they were able to connect with their spirituality and explore their creativity with people who looked like them. This kind of communal bonding was especially important for the participants during the dual pandemics.

The idea of self-care in relation to caretaking re-emerged in their accounts of self-soothing practices. For example, a senior from the East Coast talked of “Doing things for myself, by myself. I started braiding my own hair. I started, like, going to the grocery store.”

Another example of self-soothing practices is when a senior from the West Coast referred to plants and “having things that I choose to take care of [as] a good meter to let me know whether I’m taking care of myself.” Another participant took time to nurture her “childhood love of reading,” saying, “My books are extensions of myself.” Similarly, a senior from the Midwest embraced literacies like reading and journaling to cultivate her sense of self-worth. For her, “Actively recording my thoughts and my days made my *self* important to myself. Made me feel like I am worthy of having myself recorded.” It made her visible, even if only in her own eyes.

Many participants learned to do meditation, breathwork, and journaling during the YSP and noted that it helped them to engage with their feelings while navigating institutional racism, social isolation, and gender expectations. Family relationships and purposeful community bonds also served as buffers to adversity and negative coping. Within communities of care, these Black girls learned to thrive and resist being fenced into the strong Black girl stereotype. More research is needed on what types of familial and community bonds are nurturing, and which kinds of socialization threaten Black girls’ well-being and coping skills. Nevertheless, we believe that

other Black girl researchers, educators, and mental health practitioners can learn from the micro-narratives explored in this article.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

This article spotlights the mental health and coping strategies of Black girls and young women in the United States amidst the dual pandemics. The results of this study are consistent with those of Allen et al. (2021), who found that Black girls and young women increasingly took on the caregiving roles within their communities during the pandemic. We add to this discussion by acknowledging that Black girl students were navigating the health pandemic at the same time that the nation, including institutions of higher education, reflected on a racially violent past and present. We issue a call to action to prioritize interventions to mitigate the economic, social, and health disparities that force Black girls and young women into familial and communal caregiving roles with little support from the state. We also call for resources that support them in sharing and healing from experiences caused by the pandemic and systemic racism. At the same time, we honor their daughterhood and celebrate the self-care practices they employed to promote positive mental health while facing barriers to professional support services.

As evidenced by the participants' reflections and discussions, the young women daughtered in myriad ways: through caregiving, reading, journaling, and braiding their hair. The participants in this study at times completely subverted the strong Black girl/woman schema by centering themselves in their pursuit of good mental health. For these young Black women students, their daughter data representations also constitute what Jacobs defined as *Black girl critical literacies* that:

use particular competencies to recognize, process, and respond to messages that they receive connected to their status as Black adolescent females in U.S. society while simultaneously crafting their own sense of their Black girl identities. (2017, p. vi)

The abovementioned creative outlets, alongside community activism and Black girl spaces such as the AAPF's YSP, materialized as pathways to cultivate and refine these critical literacies. They became literacies of resistance (Young et al., 2018) for the study participants to consciously explore and challenge the gender stereotypes and racism surrounding them. Young et al. (2018) stressed the need for counternarratives for Black girls in education. Daughtering, or learned self-care, is one such counternarrative that can be taken up as a literacy of resistance in which new imaginings of Black girlhood and young womanhood can emerge.

This article concludes that poor mental health outcomes were a pre-existing condition that affected Black girls and young women long before the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also reveals that the strong Black girl archetype interwoven throughout the Black community and society in general poses a dilemma for Black girls and their advocates, as Black girls are expected to be emotionally strong and mentally resilient in the face of adversity. Yet, developmentally, they still need a level of protection and care not afforded to them as Black *and*

girl (in a culture that reveres the unyielding Black woman caregiver). The strong Black girl dilemma thus poses the following question: Mental resilience at what cost?

We call for a holistic consideration of mental health as self-care, radical love, and a responsibility of the state<sup>13</sup> through integrative approaches that are mindful of the intersectional roles that Black women and girls play as daughters, student researchers, and caregivers in a predominantly White society. Local and state governments as well as the federal government have a duty to protect the mental health and well-being of all of its young people, including girls, BIPOC, and low-wealth communities.

Our youth-led research has implications for scholars and practitioners interested in educational equity in higher education and mental health advocates committed to protecting Black girls and young women. We assert that the intensely competitive environment of higher education places students *at risk of compromising their well-being* in the face of these intersectional positionalities (Henning et al., 2018). Black girls are presumed to be emotionally strong and are depicted by media and institutions as adults with little need for care, advocacy, and equitable resources of protection. This erasure of Black girls' needs has left many Black women college students without adequate and safe housing, at higher risk of domestic violence and neglect, and economically vulnerable. All these risk factors threaten Black girls' abilities to positively cope during the dual pandemics.

The participants each reflected on the indivisible intersections of their race and gender identities throughout the dual pandemics as students. The article underscores the need for involving Black girls and young women, who are already gender- and race-conscious, as co-producers of knowledge in the research process (Ncube, 2022). It also illuminates how young Black women students' role as caregivers is intensified by the collapsing of the boundaries between home and campus due to the switch to online learning and stay-at-home orders.

All the study participants reported barriers to accessing appropriate mental health support services before the pandemic. Based on their reflections, we suggest that institutions of higher education explore how to meet the racial and gendered needs of Black women students. What would it look like if colleges and universities centered the needs of its most vulnerable students living at the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression? Returning home for online learning increased the need for such resources as the participants were now physically distanced from the campus communities that they had become a part of.

In response to this need, the participants managed to engage in spaces where they could explore their Blackness by bonding with other Black girls, women, and family members. Their self-soothing and self-care practices were recurrently positioned in relation to other things and people as an extension of their own radical self-love and a barometer against which they measured self-care. Additionally, they testified to experiencing joy in solitary activities such as reading, journaling, and hair-braiding. These practices of joy and self-care represent daily acts of defiance in an oppressive society. In the spirit of individual and collective agency, which is centered throughout the YSP journey, the young women students/daughters/activists/researchers

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<sup>13</sup> See Figure 1.

cultivated joy (online and in-person) with others, even in the face of pervasive anti-Black racism and a global pandemic.

These reflections on joy can inform our university practices and how we center Black girl experiences in higher education curricula, support services, and leisure activities. In conclusion, we need further research conducted *with* Black women students, to better align their mental health needs with the expectations of educational institutions as all levels of education grapple with anti-Black racism and an on-going health pandemic that is slow to subside. Intersectional approaches would benefit Black women students and faculty as well as other marginalized populations seeking to thrive in U.S. institutions of higher education.

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