

Superwoman Schema: Implications for Physical and Mental Well-Being in African American Women



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Thank you for your interest in this research!

- The following slides have been selected from Dr. Cheryl Woods-Giscombé's paper presentation at the 2008 National Black Nurses Association Annual Conference held in Las Vegas, Nevada.
- Specific study results and participant quotations have been removed, but will be included in a paper that will soon be published to illuminate a more comprehensive version of this research.
- Please contact Dr. Cheryl Woods-Giscombé if you would like more specific information about this study or its findings at Cheryl.Giscombe@unc.edu or 919-966-0455.
- If you would like to cite material from the presentation, please use the following reference:

Woods-Giscombé, C. L. (2008, August). *Superwoman schema and emotional suppression: Implications for physical and mental well-being of African American women*. Paper presented at the National Black Nurses Association Annual Conference, Las Vegas, Nevada.



The Problem

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, African American women experience disparate morbidity and mortality related to various *stress-related* health conditions, including:

- Adverse birth outcomes (Giscombé & Lobel, 2005)
- Cardiovascular disease (Krieger, 1990)
- Obesity (Walcott-McQuigg, 1995)
- Lupus (Bricou et al., 2006)



Program of Research

Mechanisms and pathways of stress & health outcomes:

- **Stress-related coping strategies impact health behaviors**
 - **Excessive or inadequate food intake**
 - **Substance use/abuse**
 - **Sedentary behavior**
 - **Emotional suppression**
- **Direct stress-responses that dysregulate allostasis**
 - **Neuroendocrine**
 - **Cardiovascular**
 - **Immune**
 - **Metabolic**



The Problem

In order to *effectively* study the influence of stress on health in African American women ...



The Problem

...we must use culturally-relevant definitions and operationalizations of stress (Woods-Giscombé & Lobel, 2008)



Program of Research

- **Focuses on social determinants of health.**
- **Examines the contributions of psychological distress (stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms) and coping to existing health disparities using both sociohistorical, cultural and biopsychosocial perspectives.**
- **Focuses on *developing culturally- and gender-relevant conceptualizations of stress and coping for African American women.***



Presentation Content

Today I will:

- **Describe Superwoman Schema (SWS).**
- **What are the sociocultural and historical factors r/t this phenomenon?**
- **What are existing literary and empirical descriptions of SWS?**



Presentation Content

5. **What are the benefits and costs of SWS in terms of coping and responding to stress?**
6. **What are the potential health effects?**
7. **What is the process of developing a theoretical model and an instrument to study SWS and health?**
8. **What future research is needed/planned?**



SWS in African American Women

Superwoman Schema:

(preliminary definition)

- **The intersection of stress, strength, and emotional suppression, and health.**




SWS in African American Women

Superwoman Schema:

(preliminary definition)

- The intersection of stress, strength, and emotional suppression, and health.
- Perceived obligation to remain silent about feelings of distress or vulnerability, to present an image of strength for families and communities, and to take on the needs of others while neglecting one's own needs
(Beauboeuf-LaFontant 2003; Hooks, 1993, Lovejoy, 2001).



What is Superwoman Schema, and what do we know about it?

Sex and Racism in America (Hernton, 1978)


“Throughout the entire span of her existence on American soil, the Negro woman has been alone and unprotected, not only socially but psychologically as well. She has had to fend for herself as if she were a man; being black, even more so...And it has been this quality of austerity in the Negro woman which has enabled her to survive...”



SWS in African American Women


Existing theory includes associations between SWS and:

- Historical events
- Sociopolitical environment in the U.S.
- Economics and Social Status
- Race and gender discrimination



What is Superwoman Schema, and what do we know about it?

- **The climate of racism** during and after legalized slavery forced African American women to take on the roles of mother, nurturer, and breadwinner **out of political, economic, and social necessity... a necessity for survival** (Mullings, 2006).
- **SWS characteristics also arose as self-definition and affirmation to overshadow negative characterizations** of African American womanhood (such as Mammy, Jezebel, Welfare Queen) and to affirm and highlight unsung attributes that developed and continue to exist despite oppression and adversity (Harris-Lacewell, 2001; Williams, 1990).




What is Superwoman Schema, and what do we know about it?

One quote about being strong from Thompkins, *The Real Lives of Strong Black Women: Transcending Myths, Reclaiming Joy* (2005, p. x)

“Our legacy as black women began in Africa and it was built upon a very real strength....we call upon that infrastructure of strength...

One of the challenges of being a Strong Black Woman is *living the legacy of past strength*. Often times, our strength is misinterpreted in mythical terms by those we love and those who want to love us.”



What is Superwoman Schema, and what do we know about it?

“Living the Legacy of Past Strength”

- The literature refers to *upward social comparison* to African American women who are considered to be historical legends.
- Could this be helpful or problematic for women to do?

Examples: “Living the Legacy of Past Strength”

Sojourner Truth



- Born into Slavery
- Women’s Activist
- Abolitionist
- Famous Speech “*Ain’t I a Woman*”

Examples: “Living the Legacy of Past Strength”

Harriet Tubman



- “Moses”
- Conductor of “Underground Railroad”
- Freed 300 slaves
- Nurse to Union Soldiers

Examples: “Living the Legacy of Past Strength”

Mary McLeod Bethune



Born into slavery

- **College founder (Bethune-Cookman College) in 1904**
 - **Consultant to the U.N. on interracial affairs and understanding at the U. N. charter conference during the Jim Crow Era**

Examples: “Living the Legacy of Past Strength”

Cicely Tyson



Highly regarded actress because of her loyalty to only portray strong, positive images of Black women

Examples: “Living the Legacy of Past Strength”



- **Grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and sisters also demonstrate examples of strength, after which African American women may model their lives.**



Is SWS an Asset?


African American women's strength in the face of social, personal, and historical challenges has been commonly viewed as a *positive character trait or asset* that has contributed to resilience and fortitude among this population.

(Angelou, 1978; Giovanni, 1970).



Is SWS a vulnerability?

“[however] an overused asset that develops uncritically without ongoing evaluation and attention to changing needs and demands runs the risk of becoming a *liability*.”
(Romero, 2000)



What is Superwoman Schema, and what do we know about it?

Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman
(Wallace, 1978, p. 107)

“a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men.”



Is SWS a Vulnerability?

1. The “superwoman/matriarch image may produce a sense of failure and frustration” (Barbara Warren, 1994, p. 31) and limit self-enhancing activities

Additional references

2. James, 1983
3. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought (1991)*
4. Harris, 2001, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors : Strong Black Women in African American Literature*
5. Mullings & Wali, 2001
6. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005



Is SWS a vulnerability?

Women who suppress emotion because of this schema may assume that they have “*built-in capacities*” to deal with all manner of hardship without breaking down physically or mentally” (Hooks, 1993, p. 70).



Is SWS a vulnerability?

A problem of the SWS may not be that it requires African American women to exhibit strength in the face of adversity, but that the endorsement of this role is often accompanied by the *suppression* of emotion.



Guidance from existing literature?

- A growing body of literature suggests that the association of stress, strength, and emotional suppression may result in undesirable mental and physical health outcomes for African American women (e.g., Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2007; Greene, 1994; Thompson, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004).
- However, a well-defined conceptual framework and an instrument to assess the characteristics of this phenomenon would facilitate empirical research that can more concretely identify how this contributes to adverse physical and mental health outcomes.



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Guidance from existing literature?

Related Theories

- John Henryism (JHAC; James, 1983, 1994) – “High-effort coping”
- Sojourner Syndrome (Mullings, 2006)
- Weathering Hypothesis (Geronimus, 2006)
- Link history, culture, sociopolitical environment to health outcomes and health disparities
- Highlight racism, limited institutional resources, and cost of resilience



Guidance from existence literature?

Limitations of existing theory:

JHAC includes 12-items that capture three themes:

1. Efficacious mental and physical vigor
2. A strong commitment to hard work
3. Single-minded determination to succeed

Does not explicitly address gender-specific issues or *emotional suppression* suggested to intersect with stress in African American women



Potential Adverse Outcomes of SWS: Literature on Emotional Suppression

Emotional Suppression has been associated with:

- elevated emotional distress
- interpersonal conflict
- physiological stress responses
- maladaptive coping strategies and health behaviors
- elevated health risks and outcomes

(Krieger, 1990; Petrie, Booth, & Pennebaker, 1998; Smyth, 1998; Steffen et al., 2003)



Potential Adverse Outcomes of SWS

These factors (and outcomes of emotional suppression) have been investigated as contributors to current stress-related ethnic disparities in health:

- Adverse birth outcomes (Giscombé & Lobel, 2005)
- Cardiovascular disease (Krieger, 1990)
- Obesity (Walcott-McQuigg, 1995)
- Lupus (Bricou et al., 2006)



Goals of SWS Research

- Synthesize and extend what is known about the phenomenon of stress, strength, and emotional suppression in African American women.
- Provide a formal, comprehensive framework that can be used to:
 - Understand how SWS may contribute to adverse health conditions
 - Develop interventions to enhance health in this population



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What brought me to this area of research?

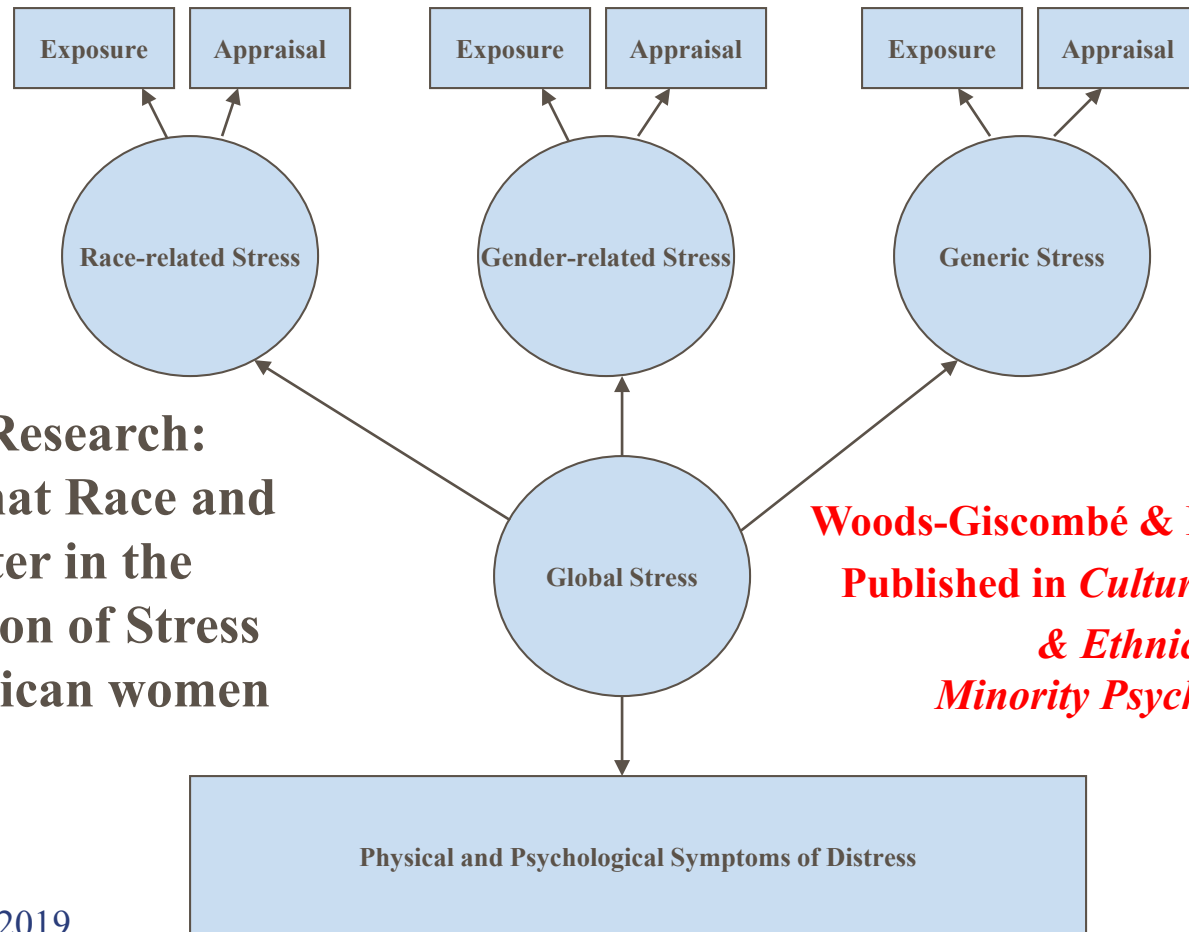


Doctoral Research

(Advisor: Marci Lobel, PhD)

- Stress and Coping
- African American Women
- Health Disparities
- Adverse Birth Outcomes, Obesity, & Distress
- Multidimensional & culturally-appropriate conceptualization of Stress

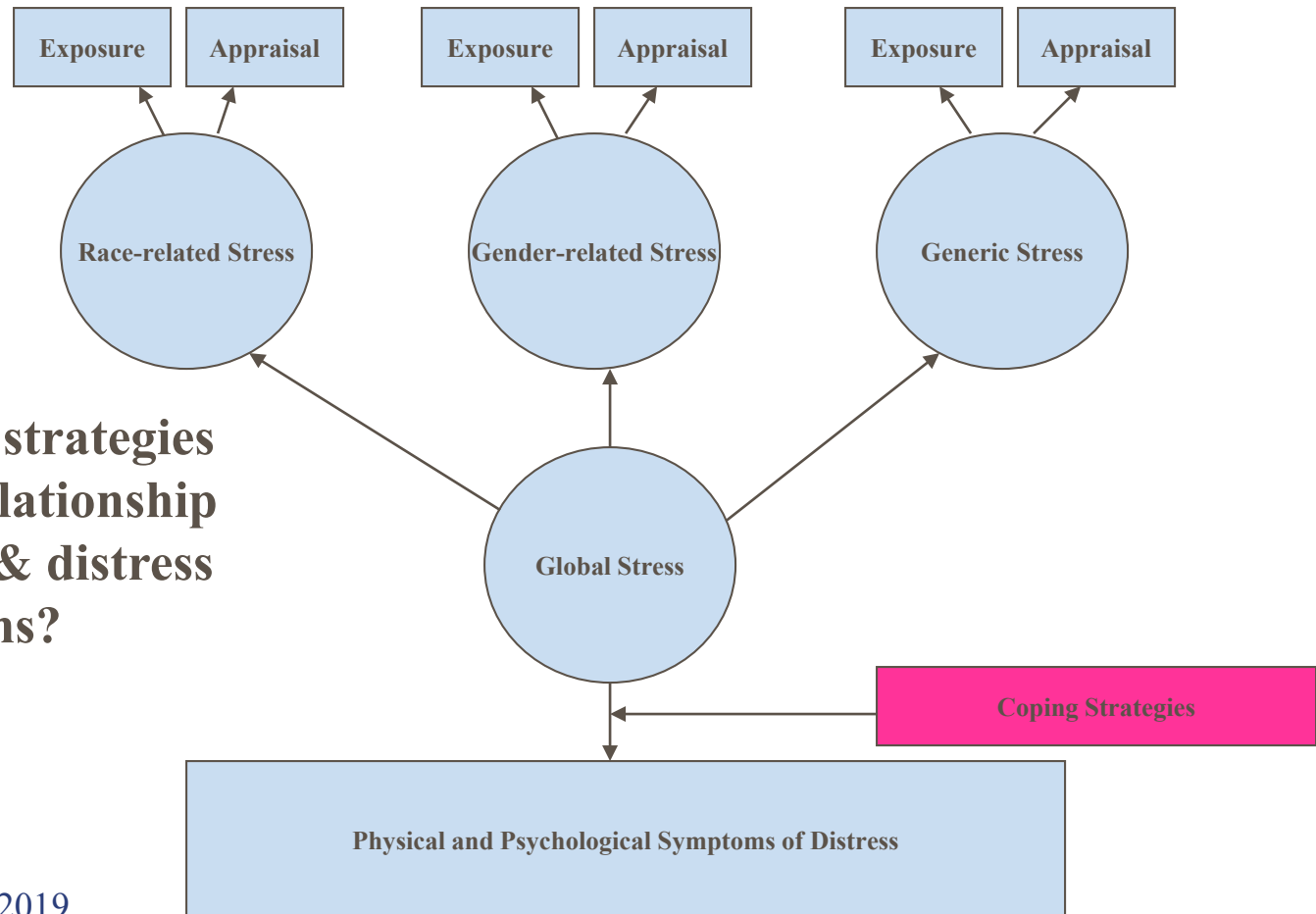
What brought me to this area of research?



**Dissertation Research:
Demonstrated that Race and
Gender Matter in the
Conceptualization of Stress
in African American women**

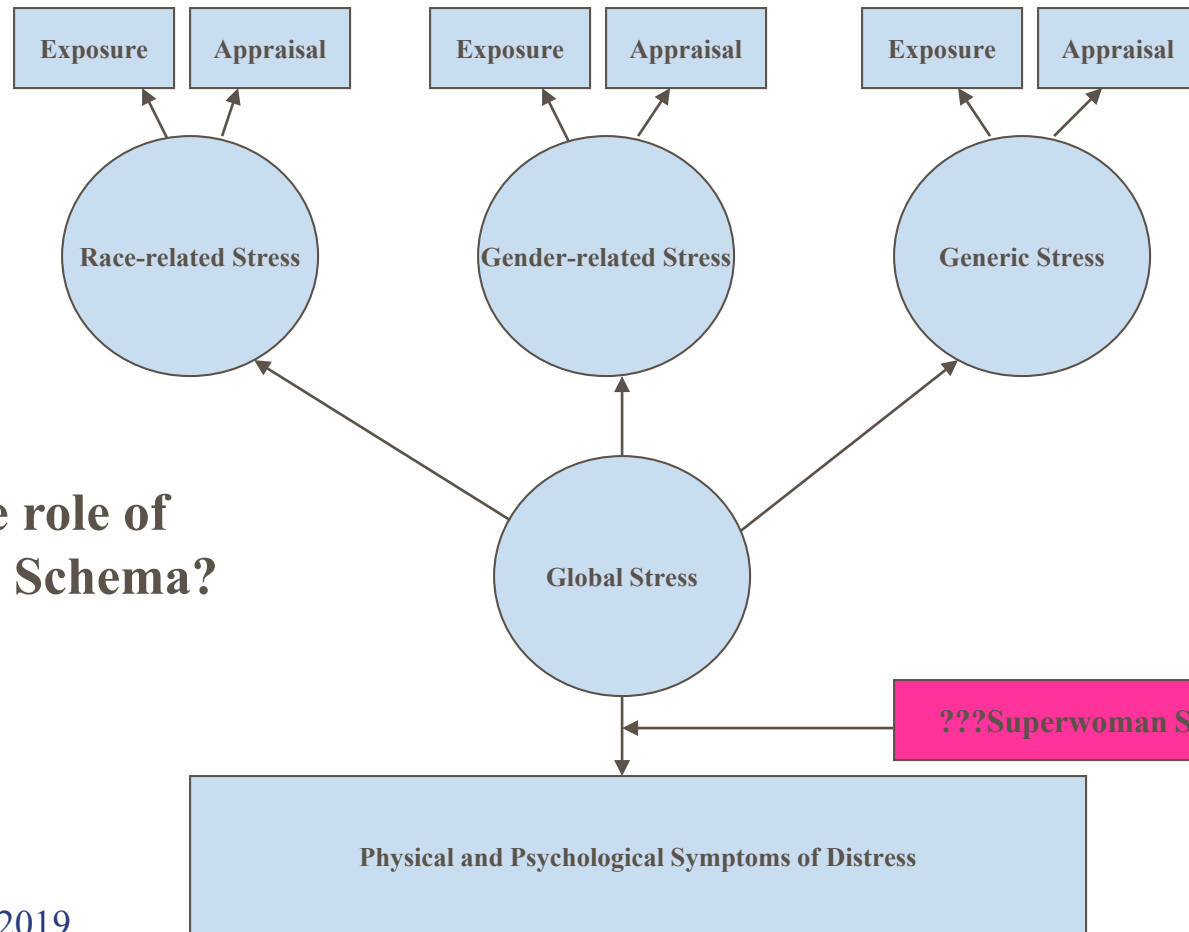
**Woods-Giscombé & Lobel, (2008)
Published in *Cultural Diversity
& Ethnic
Minority Psychology***

What brought me to this area of research?



How do coping strategies influence the relationship between stress & distress symptoms?

What brought me to this area of research?



What is the role of Superwoman Schema?



The topic of SWS was difficult to dismiss!


“Throughout my life I have had bingeing buddies. Many of the girls or young women were like me—**defined as strong and responsible** by their peers — and we would **binge together voraciously....** **Instead of crying or dealing with our anger, depression, and pain,** my binge buddies and I **laughed while throwing all our emotions into taking mouthfuls of death. Yes, death.**” (Powers, 1989, p.75).



What made me want to continue examining SWS?

Terrie Williams, author/celebratory publicist

“Few people knew that I struggled with depression. **I had become so good at pretending everything was okay.** By day I was the **quintessential superwoman**, the sister others called on to handle the details. In people’s eyes, I had “made it.” But when I drooped home after 14-hour workdays **filled with meeting everyone else’s needs but my own**, my soul and spirit whispered otherwise” (Williams & Burford, 2005)



What made me want to continue examining SWS?

Terrie Williams, author/celebratory publicist

“We live in a society that is already inclined to think less of us, so once we make it into the big league, the last thing we want is to **show chink in the armor.**

The myth of the **Invincible Sister** leaves us **little room to show weakness.** As a result, I hid my battle with depression for years...” (Williams & Burford, 2005)



SWS Research Objectives:

What will my research contribute?

- Identify critical components and important contextual elements of Stress, Strength and Suppression (SWS) in order to extend existing theory and develop a **more comprehensive conceptualization of SWS.**



SWS Research Objectives:

What do I hope contribute?

- Identify critical components and important contextual elements of Stress, Strength, and Suppression (SWS) in order to extend existing theory and develop a more comprehensive conceptualization of SWS.
- Identify concepts and preliminary items that will be used in the development of a better instrument to measure this phenomenon.



SWS Research Objectives:

What do I hope contribute?

- Identify critical components and important contextual elements of SWS in order to extend existing theory and develop a more comprehensive conceptualization of SWS.
- Identify concepts and preliminary items that will be used in the development of an instrument to measure this phenomenon.
- Examine empirical associations between SWS and outcomes related to health and well-being.



Funding for Pilot Research & Training in Qualitative Methods

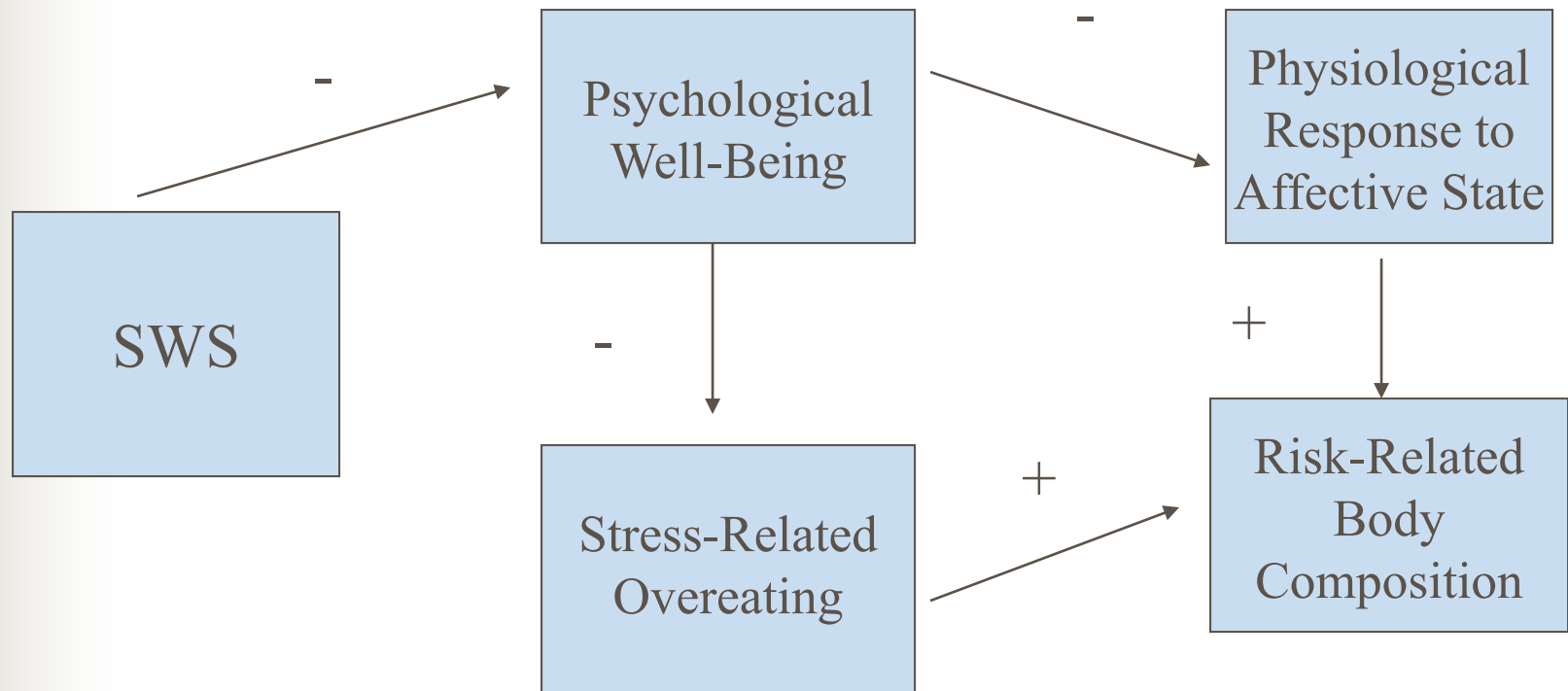
UNC-Chapel Hill School of Nursing:

NINR P20NR8369



Superwoman Schema - Emotional Suppression

Example of Potential Health Effects





Methods

- **Phenomenologically-focused**
- **Qualitative focus group methodology**
- **PI as group moderator**
- **Research assistant as note-taker**
- **8 planned groups**



Recruitment Plan

1. 18 to 24 no college
2. 18 to 24 college
3. 25 to 45 no college
4. 25 to 45 college
5. > 45 no college
6. > 45 college
7. Terminal Degree/Professional
8. *Initially planned:* African-born women

Actual: Repeat group 1

Purposive Sampling
Diverse Sample of African
American Women

Incentives
\$30
Refreshments/Meal



Analysis Plan

1. **Analytic Induction (Frankland & Bloor, 1999)**
2. Data indexing facilitates comparative analysis
3. Index codes – **data management (ATLAS.ti, version 5.2.8)**
4. Non-exclusive approach
5. Data may fit more than one index code
6. Systematic comparisons, which data pieces most relevant to index code
7. Preliminary items identified
8. Data validation with participants



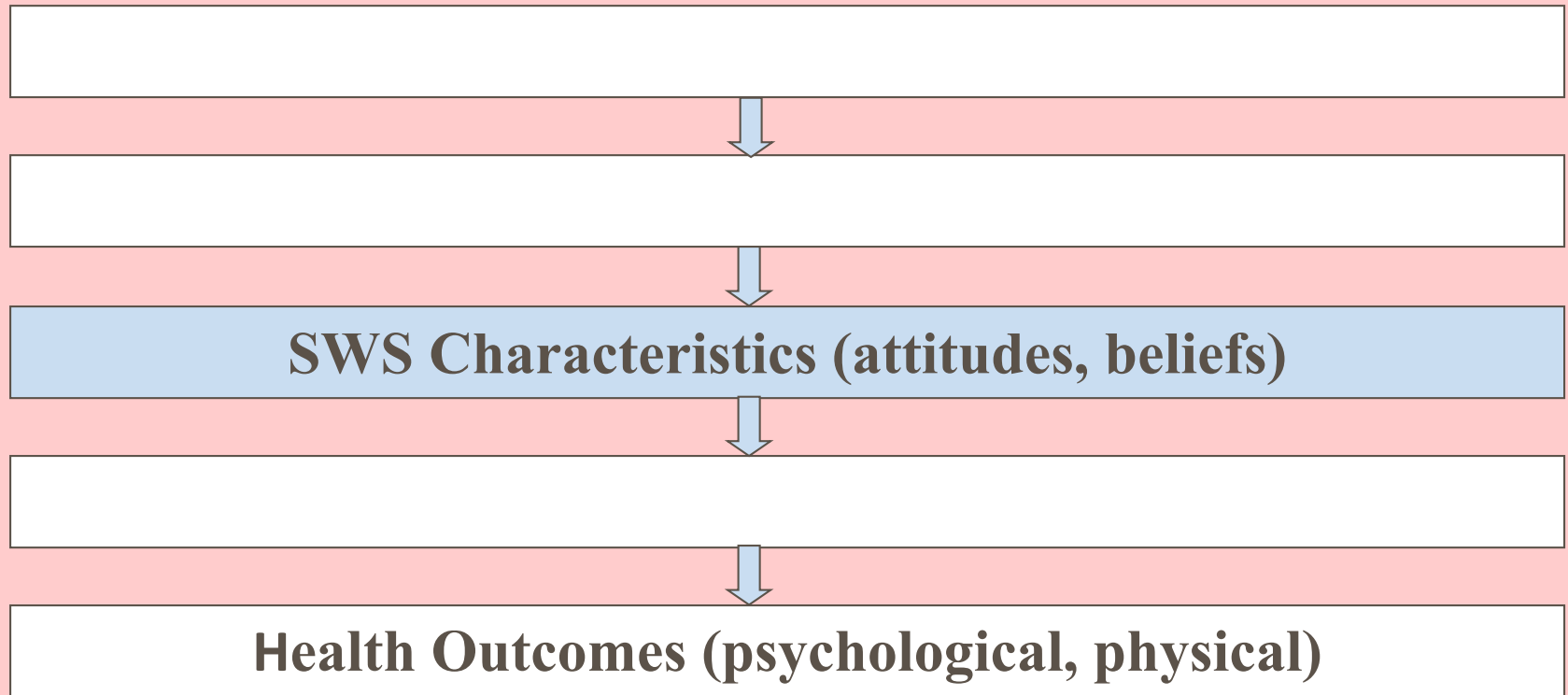
Study Stats

	<u>Range</u>
• <i>n</i> for each group	2-12
• Age	19-72
• Education	10 th – post-doc
• Group duration	2 hours
• Income	<15K to 100K +

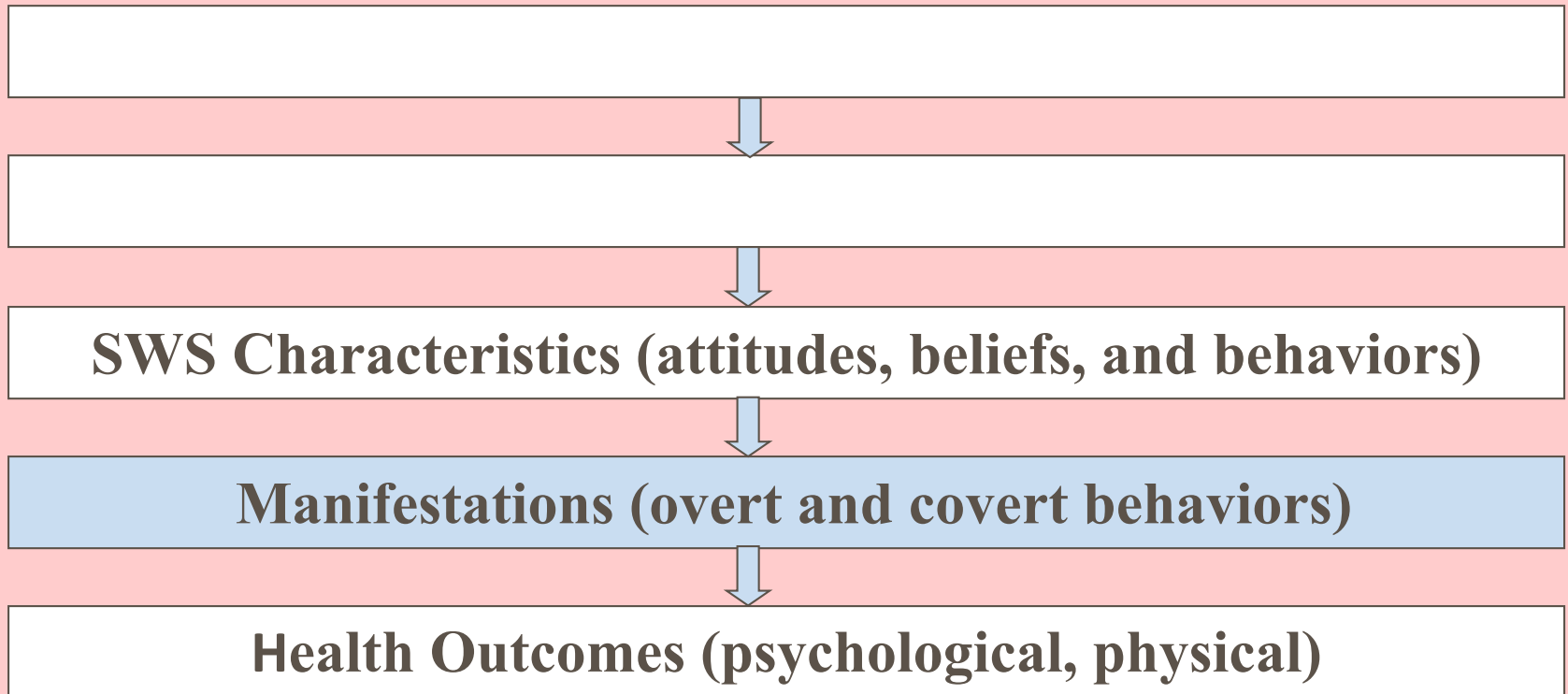
SWS Conceptual Framework



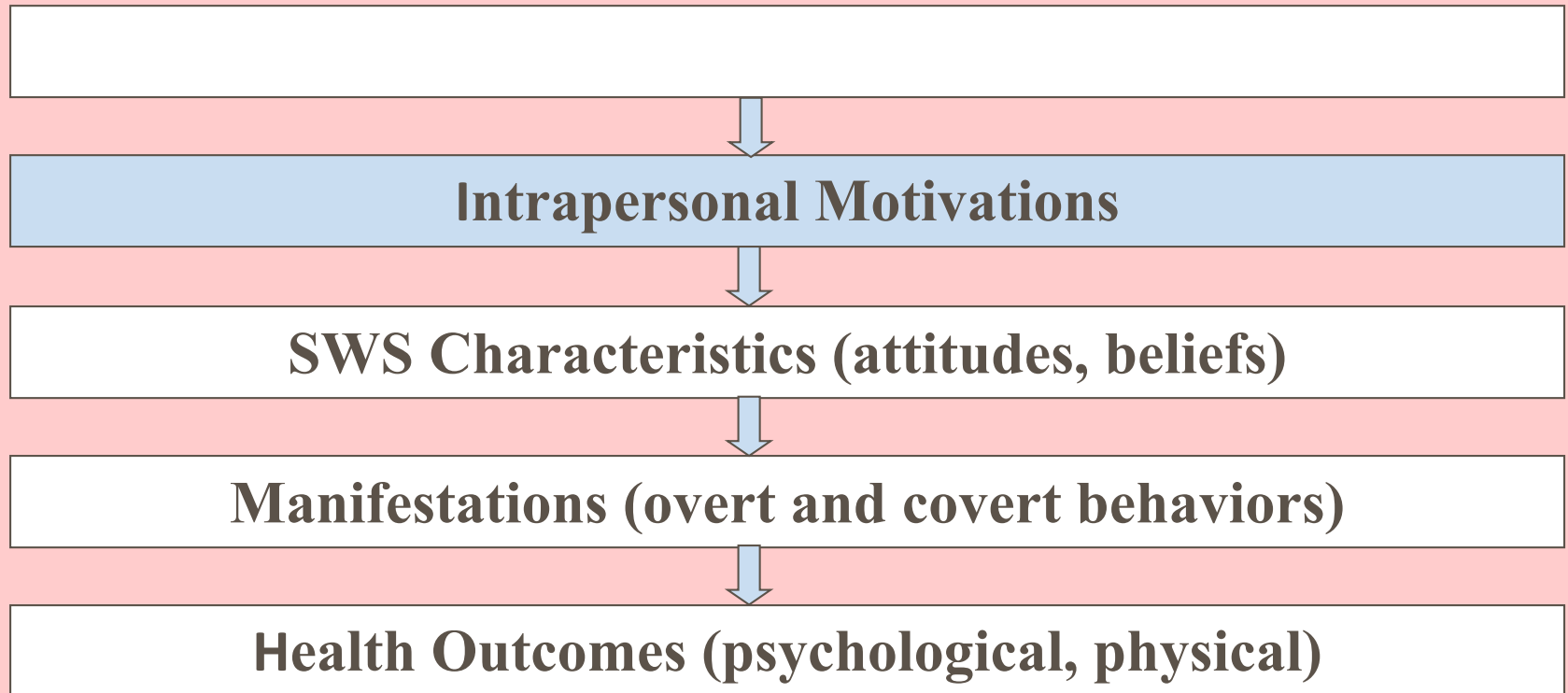
SWS Conceptual Framework



SWS Conceptual Framework



SWS Conceptual Framework



SWS Conceptual Framework

Antecedents to Motivations (proximal and distal)



Intrapersonal Motivations



SWS Characteristics (attitudes, beliefs)



Manifestations (overt and covert behaviors)



Health Outcomes (psychological, physical)



SWS Conceptual Framework

Antecedents to Motivations (proximal and distal)

Intrapersonal Motivations (essential motivation)

SWS Characteristics (attitudes, beliefs, schema)

Manifestations (covert and overt behaviors)

Health Status (emotional, psychological, physical)

Relevant Research:

Embodiment (Krieger, 2005)

Social Determinants of Health (Wilkinson & Marmot [WHO], 2003)

Biopsychosocial Model (Engel, 1977; Clark, Anderson, Clark, Williams, 1999)

African Worldview Theory (Kambon, 1992, 1998)

African American Womanist Model (Williams, 1999)



Conclusions

- **Superwoman Schema (SWS) in African American women involves the association between stress, strength, and emotional suppression and includes feeling obligated to remain silent about feelings of stress or vulnerability in order to project an image of strength.**
- **This method of responding to stress may be detrimental to the health of African American women as a result of increased psychological distress, heightened physiological stress responses, or the use of maladaptive coping behaviors (e.g., stress-related overeating) to manage the circumstances that are internalized.**
- **In order to determine how SWS relates to negative psychological and physiological health outcomes, more effort needs to be placed on clearly conceptualizing and empirically measuring this phenomenon.**



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What was Learned?

- **Generational/ Developmental patterns**
- **Who endorses SWS and who doesn't?**
- **Is SWS good or bad?**
- **Proximal causes of SWS**
- **Multidimensional concept**
- **Ideas for intervening**



Project Trajectory

- **Eight Focus Groups 2006-2007**
- **Focus Group Data Analysis 2007-2008**
- **Data Validation with Participants 2007-2008**
- **Conceptual Framework Development 2007-2008**
- **Item identification for preliminary instrument 2007-2008**
- **Pilot testing/Validation & Clarity Assessment 2008**
- **Field testing**
- **Mixed-methods research: SWS and health (e.g., Lupus, obesity, birth outcomes, screening behavior)**
- **Intervention research**



Caveats/ Things to consider

1. Marjorie Hansen Shalvitz
The Superwoman Syndrome (1984)
2. The Superwoman Syndrome: A comparison of the “heroine” in Denmark and the UK (Newell, 1996)
3. Alice Hochschild: “The Second Shift”
4. Michelle Justic: “Eishet Chayil and the Jewish Superwoman Syndrome”



Caveats/ Things to consider

- **People attracted to the study were experiencing stress**
- **Avoid Overgeneralization: SWS is not applicable to ALL African American Women**

Acknowledgements:

- SAMHSA/ANA MFP
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- Recruitment Sites
- Participants
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 - Shalette Woods, RA
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Thank You!!

Questions???



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