

## **Multiple Resistance Strategies: How African American Women Cope With Racism and Sexism**

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*This qualitative study of a community sample of 196 African American women aimed to identify the coping strategies that Black women use to manage the stress of racism and sexism. The findings reveal that they use multiple resistance strategies: (a) three ongoing internal coping strategies (resting on faith—relying on prayer and spirituality; standing on shoulders—drawing strength from African American ancestors; and valuing oneself—sustaining a positive self-image); (b) one ongoing external coping strategy—leaning on shoulders, or relying on social support; and (c) three specific coping strategies (role flexing—altering their outward behavior or presentation; avoiding—diminishing contact with certain people and situations; and standing up and fighting back—directly challenging the source of the problem.*

**Keywords:** *African American women; resistance strategies; coping*

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, African American women continue to be confronted with racial and gender oppression (Essed, 1991; Greene, 1994; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; St. Jean & Feagin, 1997, 1998). They are challenged to find ways to manage the impact of racial and gender bias in its various forms—whether, for example, it occurs in individual

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instances of being made to feel invisible, being sexually harassed, or hearing racial slurs; in encountering biased hiring and promotion practices; or in the onslaught of negative and stereotypical cultural messages about Black women that are rife in the media. Yet in spite of the centuries-long legacy of racial and gender discrimination directed at African American women, little is known about the strategies that they use to cope with and handle these ongoing threats.

There is ample evidence that racial and gender prejudice and bias often have a deleterious impact on psychological and physical health (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Krieger, Rowley, Herman, Avery, & Phillips, 1993; Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning, & Lund, 1995). Using a stress and coping model, a number of researchers have conceptualized racism and sexism as stressors and coping strategies as a key factor in mediating the negative impact of these stressors (Clark et al., 1999; Harrell, 2000; Landrine et al., 1995). Aldwin (1994) builds on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) widely adopted model of stress and coping and defines *coping strategies* as "cognitions and behaviors that are directed at managing a problem and its attendant negative emotions" (p. 82). She sees coping as a way of solving or minimizing problems and thus reducing stress. Thus, an understanding of how people cope is one important avenue for minimizing the damaging health consequences of oppression. The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the coping strategies that African American women use to resist racism and sexism.

In this article, racism is defined as a system of oppression based on racial differences that involves "cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals" (Tatum, 2000, p. 80). In a parallel fashion, sexism is defined as a system of oppression based on gender differences that involves cultural and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals. *Stereotypes, prejudice, bias, and discrimination* are used to refer to different manifestations of racism and sexism.

Most of the research on how African Americans cope focuses on strategies that are used to deal with general problems, such as interpersonal and financial problems, rather than strategies that are invoked for racial or gender bias specifically. Much of this literature asserts the importance of two coping resources—social support and religiosity. Social support has to do with the informal network of extended family and friends—that is those who provide advice, emotional support, and/or material support (e.g., childcare and transportation). Relying on social support has been found to be a central coping strategy for African Americans and particularly for Black women (Christian, Al-Mateen, Webb, & Donatelli, 2000; Neighbors, 1997; Taylor, Hardison, &

Chatters, 1996). Religious faith and participation in a congregation or spiritual community also appear to be central coping strategies for African Americans and, again, particularly for Black women (Broman, 1996; Christian et al., 2000). Whereas social support is an external resource that women are able to harness to mediate the negative impact of stress, religiosity is an internal resource—a belief system that helps women to overcome difficulty.

In one of the few studies that focused specifically on how African American women cope, Smyth and Yarandi (1996) administered the Ways of Coping Questionnaire, which was developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1988), to a sample of 656 employed African American women living in the southeastern United States. Using factor analysis, they determined that three factors explained two-thirds of the total variance: (a) active coping—aggressive efforts to change something, including talking to someone about the problem; (b) avoidance coping—wishful thinking and efforts to escape or avoid the problem, for example, daydreaming or trying to feel better by eating or drinking; and (c) minimizing the situation—efforts to detach oneself from the situation, for example, going on as if nothing happened or refusing to get too serious about the problem.

The research on the coping strategies that African Americans generally use is instructive and valuable, yet it does not tell us whether these same strategies are used to manage racial and gender stressors or whether different strategies are invoked for these challenges. In a study using data from the National Survey of Black Americans, Broman (1996) found that the type of problem encountered (e.g., interpersonal vs. financial) determined the type of coping response. Thus, one cannot assume that how Black women cope with general problems is identical to the way they cope with the stress of oppression.

There is limited research that focuses specifically on how African Americans cope with the stress of racial discrimination (Clark et al., 1999; Feagin & Sikes, 1994). Notably, sociologists have made some important contributions in this arena, and using qualitative methodologies, they have often been successful in capturing a phenomenology of the actual lived experience of oppression and coping. For example, in an interview study of 209 middle-class Black men and women throughout the United States, Feagin and Sikes (1994) learned of an array of responses to racial discrimination, including making a careful assessment before acting, withdrawal and avoidance, resigned acceptance, verbal confrontation, physical confrontation, and taking legal action. The researchers also learned of “broader personal philosophies” and “protective defenses,” such as wearing a defensive “shield,” “overachieving” to prove oneself, buttressing one’s self-image, consuming African American literature, relying on religious resources and social support,

and using humor, that serve to insulate the person from the sting of bias and prejudice. Feagin and Sikes do not, however, explore gender differences in coping or how women cope with gender bias.

Psychologists, too, have conducted research on how African Americans cope with bias and prejudice, generally with a focus on racial rather than gender discrimination. In a study of African Americans and Whites, the majority of whom were students or employees at a predominantly Black university in the South, Plummer and Slane (1996) investigated the coping strategies used for both "general stress" and "racial stress". They modified instructions for the popular Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988) and found that African Americans frequently used seemingly contradictory coping strategies, often using both problem-focused coping—for example, aggressive measures to change the problem—as well as emotion-focused coping—for example, detaching oneself cognitively from the situation or suppressing one's feelings. The researchers believe that this speaks to the complexity and flexibility in the ways that Blacks cope. Plummer and Slane also found that fewer coping strategies, whether problem or emotion focused, were used to deal with racial stress than with general stress. This suggests that racial stress is more challenging to manage and that finding adequate coping strategies is difficult. Alternatively, this finding might speak to limitations in measurement because the respondents were constrained by the items on the Ways of Coping Questionnaire. It is possible that this questionnaire, which was developed to assess general stress in the general population, not racial stress in African Americans, might be inadequate for determining coping in response to oppression. Though their study included both male and female participants, Plummer and Slane do not report on whether they did any analyses by gender, and they do not provide data on whether Black men and Black women coped in similar or different ways.

Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, and Cancelli (2000) modified the Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI; Amirkhan, 1990), a paper-and-pencil measure based on Lazarus and Folkman's model of stress and coping, to determine how African Americans cope with the stress of racism. The researchers believed the CSI to be more appropriate than the highly used Ways of Coping Questionnaire for assessing African Americans because it is influenced less by gender, SES, and age. The CSI has three factor-analytically derived subscales: problem solving, seeking social support, and avoidance (Utsey et al., 2000). In a sample of Black college students from North Carolina, New York City, and Louisiana, students who were primarily from predominantly Black colleges and whose median age was 20, the researchers found that African American women were significantly more likely than were Black men to use social support in response to racial stress and that, unlike Black

men, women's coping response to racism varied depending on the type of racism—whether it was individual (a personal experience of discrimination), institutional (laws and policies that discriminate against Blacks), or cultural (societal messages and practices that devalue Blacks). Women were more likely than men to use an avoidance strategy in response to individual than in response to institutional or cultural racism.

As evidenced by the studies that have been discussed thus far, most of the empirical research on how African Americans cope with bias focuses on racism specifically; only a few studies tackle how Black women cope with sexism as well. However, there is a rich literature that speaks to the “double jeopardy” (Beale, 1970) that African American women face in contending with both isms and the particular challenges, given the legacy of slavery, of being both Black and female in the United States (see, e.g., Collins, 1991; hooks, 1981; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; St. Jean & Feagin, 1997, 1998). In fact, a number of scholars assert that, for Black women, racial and gender discrimination are often intertwined and that the nature and form, for example, of the racism that a Black woman experiences is often colored by gender. Essed (1991) coined the term *gendered racism* to refer to the racial oppression of Black women that is influenced by narrow and biased views of gender roles. She believes that many, or perhaps most, of the personal experiences of racism that Black women encounter are forms of gendered racism. Thus, it is difficult to disentangle racism and sexism in the lives of African American women, and to understand how Black women cope with oppression, it is important to explore their experiences of gender as well as racial bias.

Several theorists and researchers emphasize the importance of a particular worldview or belief system in Black women's ability to resist racism and sexism. They talk of internalized values and beliefs, handed down through the generations, that provide African American women with a standpoint that allows them to cope more effectively. Jackson and Sears (1992) highlight the value of an Afrocentric worldview for managing the myriad stressors that African American women face. Scott (1991) writes about the “habits of surviving,” the long-standing adaptations that Black women have made to cope with economic, racial, and gender exploitation, adaptations that help to reduce anger, enhance a sense of self-control, and facilitate hope. Greene (1994) and Bell and Nkomo (1998) talk about the so-called armor that African American girls and women are socialized to wear—a strategy for self-protection and psychological resistance that provides a way to diminish the threat of racism and sexism. Like religiosity, these beliefs and worldviews provide internal resources or internal buffers with which African American women counter the stress of oppression.

Although a few studies, mostly outside the field of psychology, explore African American women's experiences of racism and sexism (see Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Essed, 1991; Scott, 1991; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998), it appears that only two studies focus on the particular coping strategies that Black women use. Using oral histories of 35 highly successful women who had made significant contributions to the Black community in the 1940s and 1950s, Lykes (1983) studied Black women's coping responses to racial and gender discrimination. She categorized coping responses as involving one of four approaches: (a) direct instrumentality—direct action to confront the source of the problem; (b) indirect instrumentality—indirect action to solve the problem, as in choosing an alternate route to achieve the same goal; (c) purposeful indirect coping—responding deliberately but in a way that does not relate to solving the problem (e.g., changing one's goal and finding solace in a different pursuit; and (d) passivity—taking no action. Lykes found that Black women who worked in predominantly White institutions often successfully confronted experiences of personal prejudice by ignoring them or finding an alternative means to achieve their ends. Lykes concluded that African American women most often used more than one coping strategy and that they tended to be very flexible in their coping styles.

Using a structured phone interview with a random community sample of 101 women in a county in Northern California, Krieger (1990) investigated Black and White women's coping responses to racial and gender discrimination. Participants were asked two forced-choice questions about how they respond to unfair treatment—first, whether they accept it as a fact of life or, alternatively, did something about it; and second, whether they talked to other people about unfair treatment or, conversely, kept it to themselves. Krieger found that 70% of the Black women said that they typically responded to unfair treatment by taking action or talking with others; however, Black women were significantly more likely than White women to say that they accepted unfair treatment and kept quiet about it. Notably, Black women who were accepting and quiet about biased treatment were 4.4 times more likely to report hypertension than Black women who acted and talked with others. Thus, there was evidence that accepting unfairness and not talking with others about it might be an ineffective coping approach. Although the results of this study are quite striking, it is limited by the small sample size and by the use of only two forced-choice questions to assess coping strategies. Moreover, whether the women responded differently to racial than to gender discrimination was not explored.

In summary, though there have been a number of studies of how African Americans cope in response to stress, the empirical research on how Black

people cope with racial discrimination, and specifically on how Black women today cope with racism and sexism, is quite limited. A couple of research samples have been comprised primarily of college students or of people affiliated with a university (see Plummer & Slane, 1996; Utsey et al., 2000). The participants in Lykes's study (1983) were interviewed about experiences that they had had 30 to 40 years earlier, in the 1940s and 1950s. Krieger's more contemporary study (1990) includes a sample, that though random and from the general community, is small in number and narrow in geographical location. Most studies have used modifications of preexisting paper-and-pencil measures of coping, such as the Ways of Coping Questionnaire and the CSI, that were not originally designed to assess the stress of racial or gender discrimination or to measure coping in African Americans (see Plummer & Slane, 1996; Utsey et al., 2000). Moreover, Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1993) have critiqued the typical nomothetic approach to research on how women cope—where female respondents' voices are constrained by a priori categories and items that are determined solely by the researchers. Given these limitations, the aim of this study is to develop an understanding of the coping strategies that a broad and diverse group of African American women use to manage racism and sexism through careful attention to the women's own ways of constructing and communicating about how they cope.

## METHOD

### AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S VOICES PROJECT

The participants in this study are from the African American Women's Voices Project, a qualitative study of African American women's experiences and perceptions of racial and gender stereotypes, bias, and discrimination (see Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The sample for the study reported here is a subset of the 333 women who completed open-ended questionnaires.

The aim of the questionnaire study was to learn about African American women's experiences of racism and sexism through an inductive, phenomenological approach to data gathering, where the women's own voices and constructions of their experiences were the focus (see Patton, 1990). Women were asked to talk about their awareness of negative stereotypes of Black women, their experiences of racial and gender discrimination, and what was difficult as well as what was joyful in their lives. Although

some questions could be answered with “yes” or “no” responses, most questions called for brief comments or examples. Demographic information was also solicited.

Participants in the questionnaire study were a convenience sample; however, the explicit aim was to sample widely and broadly to generate a sample that was diverse. (See Morse’s 1994 discussion of the value of so-called maximum variety sampling in qualitative research.) Any self-identified Black or African American woman living in the United States who was 18 years or older was eligible to participate, and participants were recruited by the author and a network of research assistants, all of whom are African American women. Each participant was given a research packet that consisted of a cover letter, the questionnaire, a stamped and addressed return envelope, and a bookmark as a token of appreciation. In most cases, participants received questionnaires directly from one of the research assistants. In a few cases, questionnaires were mailed to them, and in a couple of instances, there was a group administration during an alumnae sorority chapter or book club meeting. Occasionally, a participant returned the questionnaire in a sealed envelope to the research assistant who gave it to her; however, most participants mailed the questionnaire directly to the author. The data were returned anonymously with no names attached. Seventeen hundred questionnaires were distributed, and 333 were returned for a response rate of 19.6%.

Questions about awareness of stereotypes and about whether and what sorts of discrimination had been experienced were coded. The author and two research assistants developed a coding manual and conducted a check on interrater agreement using a sample of the data. All three coders agreed 95% of the time, and the rest of the data were coded by one of the three researchers.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

The participants in this study were a subset of 196 participants of the 333 questionnaire respondents in the African American Women’s Voices Project. Because the aim of this study was to learn about how Black women cope with both racism and sexism, the sample was restricted to those (65.3% of the valid cases) who indicated that they had experienced both forms of bias. Of the total sample of 333, 89.7% said that they had experienced racial discrimination, and 68.6% indicated that they had experienced gender discrimination.

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 77, with a mean age of 40.3 and a median age of 38. They resided in 21 states of the United States and Washington, D.C. They were a highly educated group, with 94% having attended at least some college. Sixty-one percent were or had been professionals,

managers, or administrators. Forty-six percent had worked mostly in settings with very few Blacks. Ten percent had an annual household income of less than \$15,000; 52% had family incomes of \$50,000 or higher. Ninety-two percent were heterosexual, 5% were lesbian, and 3% indicated *other* to the question about sexual orientation. Thirty-seven percent were single and had never married, 34% were married, and the balance was divorced (19%), widowed (5%), separated (3%), or living with a partner (3%). Eighty-six percent identified as Christian, and 72% were active in church or a religious group.

#### **INSTRUMENT**

Seven items from the African American Women's Voices Project questionnaire were the focus of this investigation. Two questions were used to learn about how Black women cope with racial discrimination: "Have you ever had to deal with prejudice or discrimination because you're Black? Please give examples"; and "Have you ever felt that you needed to change the way that you act in order to fit in or be accepted by White people? Please give examples." Two questions were used to determine how African American women cope with gender discrimination: "Have you ever had to deal with prejudice because you're a woman? Please give examples"; and "When you're around Black men, do you ever feel that you need to downplay your abilities and strengths? Please give an example." In addition, three questions were used to learn about overall strategies for coping with bias and oppression: "How have you been affected by these negative stereotypes?" "What are the major difficulties that you face as a Black woman? Please give examples"; and "As a Black woman, what helps you to 'make it'? What helps you to get through difficult times?"

#### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Participants varied in how they responded to the questionnaire items. Some participants gave detailed examples; others did not. Some respondents addressed the issue of coping directly; others did not. However, the relatively large sample size helped to compensate for the unevenness in the depth of the data. A common strategy with qualitative data is to use as many cases as are needed to reach saturation—the point where one has a sense of certainty about one's findings and where additional cases begin to yield information that one has already discerned (Morse, 1994). The large sample size of 196 allowed for more available cases to achieve saturation.

The data analysis strategy was a qualitative inductive analysis, where the researcher looked for patterns and categories that emerged from the data

(Patton, 1990). The author and a research assistant analyzed the data. The research assistant, who is an African American female doctoral-level student in clinical psychology, had previously worked as part of a research team that coded data for the African American Women's Voices Project. Independently, she and the author each reviewed the questionnaire data from a random group of 50 of the 196 participants, and each developed separate lists of the coping strategies that were used to deal with racism, with sexism, and overall. We also noted those coping strategies that were used by many of the women and those that were used less frequently. We then met to discuss our analyses and to develop three shared lists. There was substantial agreement on what the various coping strategies were; however, there was discussion about how narrowly or broadly to define certain strategies and whether some strategies would be better construed as two separate strategies. Out of that meeting, we developed a list of strategies that we were sure about (where we agreed that the data pointed to a clear way of defining and circumscribing the particular coping strategy), and we developed a list of strategies where we felt the definition and boundaries of the strategy were less clear.

We then each reviewed a portion of the remaining questionnaires, with a focus on any new coping strategies that we had not identified earlier and on clarifying the boundaries of the coping strategies that we were tentative about. In a final meeting, we compared notes, discussed the strategies we were unsure of as well as new strategies that we felt needed to be considered, and developed a comprehensive list of the coping strategies that the participants used, with attention to those that were more prominent and those that were less common.

## RESULTS

Based on the data analysis, African American women appear to rely on an array of coping strategies to manage the stress of oppression, including three strategies that serve as ongoing internal resources, one strategy that serves as an ongoing external resource, and three strategies that are invoked in response to particular discriminatory acts or to specific racist or sexist situations or environments. The internal and external resources seem to function as the woman's everyday buffer against oppression, whereas the specific coping strategies are more situation specific, more like a set of tools that are available and drawn on as needed. A description of each of these coping strategies follows.

### INTERNAL RESOURCES

The internal resources or coping strategies are worldviews or belief systems that help shape how the person feels about herself and how she defines her relationship to the larger world. Three internal resources were identified: resting on faith, standing on shoulders, and valuing oneself. These inner resources might not tell us much about the particular response that a woman has to a specific incident of bias or prejudice; however, they do address the philosophical and emotional context from which she responds. They often guide or even determine her choice of a specific coping response. At times, they provide a sense of solace when there are few or no other coping options available. These internal resources provide the platform or foundation from which she invokes specific responses to racial or gender stress.

*Resting on faith.* Many of the research participants relied on prayer, their spiritual beliefs, or their relationship with God as a central strategy for coping with the challenges of being Black and female. One woman said that what helps her is “my faith in God. I pray every day at one time or another for God to give me strength to make it just one more day.” Another shared that she relies on “faith and belief in a higher power (God). Knowing He dwells in my heart, soul, and spirit, and He will sustain or keep me in any situation I encounter.”

*Standing on shoulders.* A number of participants spoke of the importance of their connection to their heritage, to African and African American culture, and particularly to their ancestors—Black men and women, sometimes mothers and grandmothers, who had fought for freedom and justice. These women were keenly aware of standing on the shoulders of their forebears—of benefiting from their hard-won battles—and this awareness became a tool that these participants used to deal with oppression. One respondent wrote that what helped her was

knowing that I come from a legacy of strong women, and that history says I should not be where I am, but I am. That I have people who came before me who had to endure more and they survived to make sure that I would.

For some, there was both an awareness of standing on others' shoulders as well as a desire to build shoulders on which Black children and youth could stand. One participant said that “just knowing how hard other Black women fought and endured has allowed me to feel at ease and make it through. Also, knowing that my presence will make a difference for young Black girls that

will come after me.” What seems helpful to this woman is a sense of continuity and connection over time, with her past as well as with future generations. For women who use the strategy of standing on shoulders, there is an appreciation of the strengths of the African American community and of what they have been given and, in some cases, a commitment to giving back through their own work and life examples.

*Valuing oneself.* The third internal resource involves beliefs and feelings that the woman has about herself and, sometimes, a commitment to engaging in behaviors that help her to develop or nurture herself. For some women, the emphasis here was on loving oneself, feeling good about oneself, respecting oneself, and working hard to not take in the negative stereotypes or damaging views of Black women that are perpetuated in the larger society. One participant wrote that what helps her is “staying true to my nature. Knowing that I’m more than a label, a stereotype. Doing the things that give me joy, no matter what people may think of it.” Some women focused on their belief in their abilities and skills and their determination to make it. One woman wrote, “I believe in what my parents taught me, and that is, believe in yourself and you can conquer the world. No one is better than you!! You can and will make a difference.” For some women, valuing oneself involved attention to ongoing self-development and self-care, as in the following example: “I believe that it has been necessary to fight some of these negative images [of Black women]. Fighting via self-development, education, spiritual growth, as well as, giving an opposing view to those who state these views.”

The strategy of valuing oneself helps women to resist the prevailing negative perceptions of African American women by allowing them to hold on to and bolster a positive self-image and support their ongoing personal development and growth.

#### EXTERNAL RESOURCE

*Leaning on shoulders* is the one external resource that was used by the participants. Whereas the internal resources are belief systems and worldviews that are internalized and thus part of the person, leaning on shoulders has to do with relying on resources outside of oneself. It is a strategy of developing and using social support as a way of coping with the stress of racial or gender bias. Many respondents talked of relying on mothers, husbands, other family members, and friends as a way of dealing with the challenges they face. By surrounding themselves with caring people who often had experienced similar trials, they learned to buffer the sting of oppression. One woman reported, “I have a very strong family unit which includes my extended family of

friends. This is my support base because it helps me realize that I am never alone when adversity arises.”

#### **SPECIFIC COPING STRATEGIES FOR RACISM AND SEXISM**

The specific coping strategies differ from the internal and external coping strategies because, in general, rather than being ongoing tools, they are used to deal with immediate, particular instances or situations of bias. Three specific coping strategies, (a) role flexing, (b) avoiding, and (c) standing up and fighting back, were used to resist the impact of racism and sexism.

*Role flexing.* Role flexing, a term used by Wilson and Miller (2002) in a study of the coping strategies of African American gay and bisexual men, has to do with altering one's speech, behavior, dress, or presentation to fit in better with the dominant group and to diminish the impact of bias and negative stereotypes. Role flexing was widely used by our research participants.

One woman wrote as follows:

Everyday I cater my behavior to the fact that I live in a predominantly White society and environment. The best example I can give is that there are two me's: one who interacts with Whites and one who interacts with people of color.

Another woman offered a couple of specific examples:

I would love to grow dreadlocks but there is such a negative connotation by White people associated with them, and I feel that it would stifle my growth careerwise. Another example is I have an African-made coat that I love to wear. Every time I wear it to work, I feel as though I have made a mistake, so I stopped wearing it to work.

A third participant said, “I am quiet and professional. I never reveal my true feelings, express little anger, and prepare myself always.” In addition, a fourth woman said simply, “At work, I have to talk the talk and walk the walk.”

Role flexing often included the notion of *proving them wrong*. A number of women indicated that having to prove themselves and having to disprove stereotypes was the motivation behind altering their looks or behavior. For example, one respondent wrote, “I always felt I had to speak better and try to know a little something about everything so they wouldn't think of me as being inferior.”

With respect to gender bias, role flexing often took the form of downplaying one's abilities and strengths. One participant wrote, "I have sometimes not let Black men know how intellectual I am, because some take it as being a put down towards them and feel intimidated. Some think you may feel you are better than them." Another respondent summed it up as, "You can't be too smart, strong, or self-sufficient." In contrast, in confronting gender bias, some women used a *proving them wrong* strategy, such as that used to counter racial bias. These women talked about highlighting their strengths rather than diminishing them. One woman said, "If anything, I feel that I have to 'upplay' my abilities, to show them [Black men] that I am a well-educated Black woman who knows her stuff."

Sometimes, role flexing was associated with caution and hypervigilance about one's behavior, about how one was perceived, and about the environment that one encountered. One respondent wrote, "I am more cautious about my perception by others in the workplace." Another shared, "I observe extra care in my approach in order to avoid negative responses."

In a couple of cases, role flexing seemed to become internalized, and the person's inner sense of self was affected. Role flexing, which has to do with changing one's outer behavior or persona, seemed to yield to assimilation—giving up one's sense of self to belong to the dominant group. For example, one woman wrote, "When I was much younger, I was ashamed of my Black experience and tried to not act so 'Black.'" This assimilative strategy was used only rarely in participants' responses to racial bias and was not evident in women's responses to gender bias.

*Avoiding.* Avoiding, another specific coping strategy, is a strategy of staying away from people, situations, or topics of discussion that are likely to stir up biases and prejudices. This strategy was sometimes used in response to racial oppression, though rarely used in response to gender oppression. One participant wrote, "Until recently, I would not discuss my heritage with Whites. I kept the discussion to subjects that I thought Whites could relate to." Another woman offered, "I would never change my actions if I felt I was in the right; the only change I would make would be to stay out of their way until they saw the light." In a rare instance of the use of this strategy in response to sexism, a woman wrote, "I worked for an ad agency after college where men were given the accounts which derived greater revenue. It was frustrating. I left the firm." Leaving a situation is, of course, the ultimate use of avoidance.

*Standing up and fighting back.* A third specific coping strategy was to refuse to role flex or to capitulate in any manner and/or to challenge directly

the source of the bias and stereotypes by actively fighting back. In referring to White people, one respondent said, "Personally, I will not change to fit in with anyone. If they cannot accept me the way I am that's their problem and their loss." Another participant wrote, "Being an opinionated Black outspoken woman cost me a number of pay raises. I refused to be the welcome mat! I found out the dirt could be shaken out!" Another woman spoke about standing up to gender bias:

The men (some men I mean) that I know are intimidated by my goals and ambition, but I never downplay my abilities to make them feel good. However, there are many cases where I witness girls doing just that, which makes me angry.

Some women talked about how they not only stood up for themselves, but also actively fought back. In discussing an experience of police abuse, one respondent said,

I filed a complaint against the officer. So many people don't file any action. They just let it go. I can't because I knew they have done this type of behavior before to someone else or will do it again. The buck stops here.

## DISCUSSION

African American women appear to use a varied array of coping strategies to resist the stress of racism and sexism. Similar to Feagin and Sikes's finding (1994) that African Americans have strategies for dealing with specific instances of racism as well as "broader personal philosophies, coping styles, and protective defenses" (p. 293), our findings point to three specific or immediate coping strategies as well as three internal resources and one external coping resource that provide a platform from which Black women respond to specific instances of discrimination.

The internal and external resources—resting on faith, standing on shoulders, valuing oneself, and leaning on shoulders—appear to be particularly important as tools for managing discrimination. Each of the internal and external resources might help the woman to draw on a specific coping strategy. She might, for example, decide to stand up and fight back after reflecting on the struggles of her ancestors. However, at other times, these resources seem to provide a cushion against what might feel like an unassailable foe. When, as is often the case, women do not have the power to change the racism or sexism they experience, being able to rely on their faith, to draw courage from their forebears, to remember their inherent value, or to garner support

from family and friends can help mitigate the damaging effects of an oppressive experience. Greene's (1994) and Bell's and Nkomo's (1998) notion of armoring is echoed in these findings. The internal and external resources seem to armor African American women—to bolster them on the inside and the outside so that they are better able to withstand the external threats.

The finding of the centrality of resting on faith and leaning on shoulders parallels previous findings that Black women often cope by drawing on their spirituality (Broman, 1996; Christian et al., 2000) and surrounding themselves with social support (Christian et al., 2000; Neighbors, 1997; Taylor et al., 1996). In contrast, standing on shoulders and valuing oneself have seldom been discussed as coping resources. Feagin and Sikes (1994) talk briefly about the importance of buttressing one's self-image (similar to valuing oneself) and being exposed to Black literature (perhaps one element of standing on shoulders). Nevertheless, neither drawing strength from one's culture and ancestors nor sustaining a positive self-image have been carefully examined as coping assets.

The specific coping strategies that emerged in this study correspond relatively well with the framework that Lykes (1983) developed to describe how Black women cope with racial and gender discrimination. Standing up and fighting back is direct instrumentality—in other words, direct action to confront the source of the problem. Role flexing is indirect instrumentality—an indirect action that helps to solve the problem without confronting the source of the problem. Avoiding is a form of purposeful indirect coping, or choosing to be inactive. The one category in Lykes's schema that does not have an equivalent in this study is passive coping. In this study, respondents did not talk about doing nothing at all in response to the stress of bias.

In this study, although the specific coping strategies used to counter racial and gender bias are similar, there are important distinctions. Avoidance was more prominent in racial than in gender bias, which makes sense, given that the society is much more segregated with respect to race than it is with respect to gender. In other words, it is likely easier for African American women to avoid Whites than to avoid men. Assimilation, though rarely evidenced, was found in a couple of instances as a response to racial oppression but not as a reaction to gender oppression. This might speak to the more powerful impact and greater salience of racism in contrast to sexism (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Role flexing, a very prominent coping strategy, often appeared to be quite different in response to racial versus gender prejudice. For racial bias, role flexing usually took the form of acting more White or appearing less Black, whereas, for gender bias, role flexing did not typically take the form of being more male but instead appeared to be the opposite—presenting oneself as

more traditionally female. However, in direct contrast, in some instances in responding to gender bias, women played up their talents, an action that, perhaps, is the equivalent of acting more male. It is interesting that how best or most effectively to role flex seems more complicated and confusing with respect to gender than with regard to race. "Should I appear more passive and deferent? Or should I appear smarter, tougher, and stronger?" The answers to these very different questions seem to dictate the direction of gender role flexing.

Role flexing might be an unpopular coping strategy, one that people tend to feel ashamed of and eager to denounce and decry. The notion of altering one's behavior to deal with the dominant group conjures up images of Uncle Tom, the fabled slave in the Harriet Beecher Stowe novel (1852) who was fawning and servile to his owners. Being an Uncle Tom suggests that one is not simply playing a role but, instead, that one has lost her way emotionally and spiritually, ceding all personal power to the oppressors. In contrast, the women in this study suggest that role flexing, in many cases, is a consciously used tool to manage one's external persona, that it is not giving up who one is or losing one's core sense of self. In only a couple of cases did role flexing seem to give way to assimilation or to internalized racism—where the woman seemed to lose herself in the process of changing her outer persona. Role flexing can, in fact, be a very adaptive survival mechanism when the option of fixing or undoing the discrimination is not available.

There are a number of limitations to this study. The sample, though geographically diverse and relatively large in number, was not a random or systematic sample, and the response rate was relatively low. The sample skews toward highly educated, professional women, and it is likely that women who felt less comfortable writing responses to the open-ended questionnaire were less likely to participate. Another limitation is that participants were not directly asked about how they cope with racism and sexism; their responses were gathered from questions that were indirect. It might be that using a direct question would have yielded different responses. In addition, the data collection strategy relies on women's self-report of their experiences and reactions to oppression. Thus, it is possible that social desirability—in other words, wanting to appear in a favorable light—had some impact on the participants' responses. For example, the respondents did not discuss self-destructive or escapist behaviors, such as drinking or using recreational drugs, as a way of coping with stressors.

However, in spite of these limitations, this study points to a number of avenues for future research. The psychological processes that are part of role flexing need to be better understood. Role flexing appears to be primarily a behavioral strategy, but there are indications that, at times, it is cognitive as

well. For example, for some women, hypervigilance and cautiousness were associated with role flexing. As discussed earlier, it appears that role flexing did not usually compromise or change the woman's identity or feelings about herself; yet not enough is known about this. Thus, important future research questions are as follows: When is role flexing accompanied by cognitive as well as behavioral changes? When does role flexing impact the woman's inner sense of self? Is there a slippery slope from role flexing to the internalization of oppressive beliefs or assimilation? When is role flexing adaptive and when is it maladaptive? Must role flexing be conscious to be adaptive?

Additional research is needed on the coping strategies of standing on shoulders and valuing oneself, as they represent approaches that have not been a focus in the coping literature. How effective are these strategies in ameliorating the negative impact of racial and gender stress? How can African American girls and women be socialized and taught to enhance and use these internal coping resources?

Future research is also needed on the degree to which each of the seven coping strategies that were identified in this study mitigates the negative effects of the stress of racism and sexism. Are some strategies more effective than others? Does it depend on the particular type and form of racial or gender bias? The question of what works in what situations is, of course, important in finding ways to help African American girls and women more successfully counter racial and gender oppression and thus diminish its negative psychological and physical health consequences.

In summary, this study explored the coping strategies that African American women use to manage racial and gender stress. Three internal resources, one external resource, and three specific coping strategies appear to account for Black women's responses. Although there were similarities in how racial and gender bias were coped with, there were also important and notable differences, indicating that it is important to continue to explore how African American women cope with both racism and sexism. Future research can illuminate the relative value of these seven coping strategies for different types of oppressive situations as well as provide a richer and more textured portrait of the multiple resistance strategies that Black women use.

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