

# THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN STEREOTYPE

When Black women say they are strong, I validate them. Then, I ask them to tell me more about their experience of being strong.

BY NICHOLA WATSON WILLOUGHBY, RCC

I cannot recall the first time I heard the phrase, strong Black woman. It is common language I have listened to in and outside of the Black community. When people told me I was strong in the earlier stages of my life, I received the term to compliment my physical and emotional capacities. For example, many white teachers or coaches who were not interested in my personal life, approached me to participate in athletics in middle school and high school. Most did not take the time to find out my thoughts and feelings about sports. I was a student with Black skin, and therefore, a valuable athlete to these teachers or coaches. Looking back, I don't know if I enjoyed sports. However, I liked the attention I was given when I participated.

In middle school and high school, there were personal benefits to participating in athletics. I met other Black students, and I enjoyed team

sports, which were great for my sense of belonging. With the training in athletics, as my physical health improved, so did my mental well-being. Athletics taught me about structure, time management, problem-solving, and the art of healthy competition. I understood the importance and effects of making decisions in my best interest at post-secondary levels. While I continued to exercise, I did not participate in sports. My focus was on academics.

Before graduate school, I saw a therapist because of gang violence directed towards me by white staff in the workplace at a non-profit organization. However, the critical aspect of going to counselling was that while I knew I could access therapy, I waited until the presenting issues affected my mental health severely. That delay was because I unconsciously performed the strong Black woman stereotype. I was convinced that I could manage my life, address the

contributing social contexts, and implement responses without help.

Recently, I isolated myself from people I otherwise gravitated towards because I was exhausted physically and emotionally. But I did not connect my exhaustion to the performance of being strong. Instead, I became angry and frustrated at myself for underachieving. Also, it became more apparent that I had neglected my needs. I wanted to be available to others, but I had to set limitations. To correct the latter, I stopped performing the strong Black woman stereotype. I learned about boundaries, why they are essential, and how to implement them constructively. I started to say yes to myself; I began spending more time in silence and solitude. I love being around people, just not all the time.

I cannot speak to a precise moment before commencing my graduate studies in 2013 when I began to think critically about what it meant to be called a strong Black woman. In 2018,



### **THE REASONS WHITE ENSLAVERS CONSTRUCTED THE STEREOTYPE**

Within the context of enslavement, Black women became the subjects and objects of white supremacists.<sup>1</sup> It is not accidental that whites labelled enslaved Black women as not being fully human<sup>2</sup> because it permitted enslavers' mistreatments.<sup>3</sup> For their benefit, white elites constructed the stereotype that Black women are strong and can endure pain as a strategy<sup>4</sup> that justified the abuses of sexualized violence, reproductive violence, disfigurement of Black women's bodies, and separation of Black families.<sup>5</sup> And white elites used the phrase to manipulate enslaved Black women into believing they had the capacity to persevere through "hardship without breaking down, physically and mentally."<sup>6</sup>

my thesis research provided the platform to examine the history of the stereotype, its meaning, and its impact.

## WORKING WITH CLIENTS

As a clinician, I have met Black girls and women who have communicated that it was challenging to access counselling services, because they wanted to be strong and work through issues independently. At some point in the conversation, I revisited the latter statement and asked if accessing counselling services was a sign of their weakness. I asked questions concerning being strong, including how they learned that they are strong. How did they see being strong acted out? Who was the first person that told them they were strong? Can they recall the activities or events that occurred when people said they were strong? Explain the emotions and physical sensations they experienced when people said they were strong? After my plethora of questions, I validate their stories of socialization to the strong Black woman stereotype.

Often, I highlight their strengths within the context of the therapeutic relationship. For example, I share that strength can include recognizing the need for support and accessing resources. Strength is acknowledging their vulnerabilities – the issues that brought us together. Because of their strength, we can explore, learn, and grow together. And strength is about self-kindness, self-care, and self-compassion. I like to highlight their strength processes for coping

## KNOWING MY STRENGTH

*My strength is my Black herstory and history.*

*My strength is my Black ancestors.*

*My strength is re-discovering who I am.*

*My strength is getting into trouble.*

*My strength is walking away from abuse, danger, and violence.*

*My strength is asking for help.*

*My strength is confronting issues.*

*My strength is vulnerability, as evident in my tears, my screams, and my walk.*

*My strength is my beautiful Black skin.*

*My strength is my smile.*

*My strength is my song.*

*My strength is my joy.*

*My strength is silence and solitude.*

*My strength is, at times, unapologetic.*

*My strength is self-compassion.*

*My strength is my courage.*

*My strength is my essence.*

*My strength is mine.*

— NICHOLA WATSON, 2021

and healing, such as reading, praying, exercising, sleeping, writing, talking with others, practising safety, and more. I acknowledge their work because it speaks to their strength that is grounded in what Allan Wade calls “their inherent ability to respond effectively to the difficulties they face.”<sup>7</sup>

Like many clients’ stories, my experience of the stereotype addresses people who said I was strong because they wanted me to perform for their benefit. When I was acting out this stereotype for others, I felt empowered. In my role as a strong Black girl, student, and woman, I felt good because I was helping, serving, and comforting. Specifically, I had euphoric brain and body experiences from being told I was strong. My performances of the strong Black woman stereotype were about my social world.<sup>8</sup> Namely, in the religion of Judeo-Christianity grounded in the white supremacist patriarchy doctrine, I was socialized to serve others to the detriment of my health. I was taught that girls and women served boys and men. Despite my history of acting out this stereotype, I cannot diminish my strengths. Today, I am stronger because I am

better at being more confident with my yeses and nos. ■

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*Nichola Watson Willoughby RCC locates herself as an African Caribbean daughter, who immigrated to Canada from Jamaica and became a citizen and settler on Indigenous land. Her work as a clinical counsellor is her passion.*

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