

ARTICLE

## The Weight of It All

### *An Analysis of Help-Seeking Behavior Among Black and White College Women*

Makeiva Jenkins and Justine Tinkler

Department of Sociology University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

**Corresponding author:** Makeiva Jenkins; Email: [Makeiva.jenkins@uga.edu](mailto:Makeiva.jenkins@uga.edu)

#### Abstract

Sociologists often interpret racial differences in help-seeking behavior in the United States as stemming from differences in cultural capital, an implication being that those who hesitate to seek help lack understanding of how important it is for success. In this paper, we draw on the work of W. E. B Du Bois and research on gender and racial stereotypes to show that it is not a lack of understanding about the importance of help-seeking, but rather, Black women's double consciousness that underlies their reluctance to seek help relative to White women. Through twenty-nine in-depth interviews with Black and White college-aged women, we investigate how they make meaning of two competing ideals: the need to be seen as a strong woman and the need for help and social support. We identify a discourse around gender stereotypes for White participants and intersectional stereotypes for Black participants. Where Black and White women experience a consciousness born out of their marginalization relative to men, comparing how they differently navigate stereotypes about strong women reveals the analytic power of Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. First, the "veil" reveals the racialized gender stereotypes Black women worry they might confirm by seeking help. Second, Black women's sense of "twoness" means they more often than White women saw their help-seeking behaviors as reflecting negatively on their broader community. Finally, consistent with Du Bois's point that "second sight" brings awareness but not liberation, we find that even though Black women were hyperaware of the disadvantages of not seeking help, they tended more often than White women to reach a breaking point before seeking it.

**Keywords:** Strong Black Woman; Double Consciousness; Help-Seeking; Intersectionality; Black Women; Racialized Stereotypes

#### Introduction

Sociologists have long documented social support as a key determinant of life chances and an important resource for mitigating structural disadvantages (House et al., 1988). Research has also documented racial and ethnic differences in help-seeking tendencies (Ayalon and Young, 2005; Kim and Zane, 2016; Lacey et al., 2020; Woodward et al., 2010). Much of this research has highlighted differences in cultural norms (Mojaverian and Kim, 2013) and/or social class-based differences in cultural capital that lead people from more privileged backgrounds to feel more entitled to ask for and receive help from others (Jack 2016; Lareau 2011; Calarco 2011). In this article, we use Du Bois's concept of double consciousness to better understand differences in White and Black college-age women's

help-seeking tendencies. Specifically, we draw on data from in-depth interviews with fifteen White and fourteen Black women at a predominantly White institution (PWI) to explore the self-presentation dilemmas women face in trying to be seen as strong women. Our findings generate novel theoretical insights about how differences in the stereotype content associated with White and Black women lead to differences in help-seeking behavior.

### Du Boisian Theory of Double Consciousness

W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness was originally published in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois examined what it meant to be Black at the dawn of the twentieth century, a time when Black Americans suffered extreme violence and limits to their freedom under Jim Crow laws and practices. He argued that Black Americans experienced double consciousness as citizens of a world that did not willingly accept their presence, where they were treated with hostility. Black Americans experience double consciousness as they encounter "this experience of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 1903, p. 2). At the moment when the "veil is lifted," Black people come to a profound understanding about their lives (Du Bois 1903). It is here where Black people realize that their life experiences and structural positions are and will be significantly different from their White counterparts (Du Bois 1903). Upon this realization, Black people must develop strategies that allow them to successfully navigate a world where they resist oppression and also fight against negative stereotypes that attempt to pigeonhole them.

We draw on Du Bois's conceptions of "the veil," "twoness," and "second sight," as synthesized by Itzigsohn and Brown (2015), to organize our insights about the differences in how White and Black college-aged women understand help-seeking. Du Bois (1903) suggests that the veil "must lead to a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment" (Du Bois 1903, p. 122). To understand this sense of bewilderment, we conceptualize the veil as what separates the races but also as what "structures the way in which subjects situated on different sides of the veil see and experience their social world" (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2015, p. 235). More specifically, we suggest that the projection of Whites' understanding of Black Americans onto the veil leads to the inclusion of those projections into the self-formation of and realities of Black people (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2015). A major consequence of the veil is that Black people are hyperaware of negative racial stereotypes and must routinely contend with their impact.

We define twoness as having to exist and position oneself in both the Black world, which is "constructed behind the veil, and the White world, which dehumanizes them through lack of recognition" (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2015, p. 235). In other words, twoness forces one to exist in two worlds, which informs self-formation (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2015). One consequence of this twoness is that Black Americans experience a sense of linked fate in which they see their own lives as intimately intertwined with the fate of the broader Black American community (Monk 2020).

Second sight, as described by Du Bois, is a gift of consciousness that "escapes the majority" and comes from Black people's experience of racial alienation. This gift allows Black people a unique lens for seeing how to transform America. Du Bois documented the social reforms led by Black Americans in many of his writings (e.g., Du Bois 1996 [1899]; 1998 [1935]; 1924). We explore how second sight allows Black women to deal with their dehumanization and neutralize the veil's impact (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2015). While enlightening about the nature of the racial hierarchy, our data suggest that second sight cannot fully liberate Black women from the constraints the color line imposes on their ability to seek and receive help. Although "second sight" gives Black women a vision of how

to uplift the Black community through individual actions aimed at displaying strength, this comes at a cost to their mental health.

Though Du Bois did not apply the concept of double consciousness to gender relations, in recent years, feminist scholars have expanded the concept to examine racialized gender identities (Falcón 2008; Gonzales 2019). Where Black and White women experience a consciousness born out of their marginalization relative to men, comparing how they differently navigate stereotypes about strong women reveals the analytic power of Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. In the next section, we discuss how race and gender stereotypes intersect to differentially shape White and Black women's self-presentation options.

### Gender and Race Stereotypes and Their Intersections

Widely held cultural beliefs about social groups are hegemonic in that they are reflected in social institutions and tend to be shaped by dominant groups (Du Bois 1903; Sewell 1992). Du Bois describes the veil as working like a one-way mirror. Black people see themselves in their own eyes and in the eyes of White people, whereas White people, by virtue of their structural and cultural dominance, have little occasion to become aware of how they are seen by Black people. White people's "racial innocence," hegemonically entrenched in social relations, obscures the *racialized* nature of stereotypes about White women (Clair 2021, p. 292). In contrast, Black women, by virtue of the "twoness" that the veil creates, navigate racialized and racialized gender stereotypes (Collins 2000). This asymmetry is reflected in the number and valence of stereotypes about White women as compared to Black women and creates distinct constraints on the latter's help-seeking behavior.

### Stereotypes about White American Women

Since White people represent the dominant racial standard by which others are contrasted in the United States (cf., Fiske et al., 2002; Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz, 2013), the prototypical *woman*—that is, who most Americans imagine when they think about women—is White. Thus, traditional gender stereotypes and the cultural expectations for what it means to embody womanhood are rooted in a history of White women's experiences.

During slavery, White women were the property of their fathers and husbands. White women were nonetheless able to maintain power and authority over the enslaved, taking part in and profiting from the brutal system of slavery (Jones-Rogers 2019). However, White women's lower status compared to White men was ideologically upheld by stereotypes that described women as less competent than men. White women were charged with upholding the cult of true womanhood, which "emphasized innocence, modesty, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Perkins 1983, p. 18). Today, White women are still stereotyped in terms of domestic ideals such as being more emotional, nurturing, and submissive (Baker 2005; Settles et al., 2008) and less competent in positions of leadership (Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz, 2013). To the extent that asking for help could be perceived as a sign of weakness or incompetence, it is also seen as consistent with traditional stereotypes of White women.

With White women's move into the labor force, they now have more opportunities to display agentic characteristics, such as intelligence and independence (Donovan 2011). White women who enact power and dominance at work or in politics have also been forced to contend with stereotypes that suggest they are "ice queens," "ball breakers," and "castrating bitches" for challenging gender norms (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). This characterization of strong women as angry and mean is a form of backlash, functioning

in response to real and symbolic threats to the gender status hierarchy (Rudman and Phelan, 2010).

Ironically, the commercializing of feminism has created a space for White women to identify as “strong women” and avoid backlash. The cultural associations (i.e. stereotypes) of what it means to be a “strong woman” today can be traced back to a White feminist discourse that aimed to appeal to women’s strength and power and less to their collective victimization (Hains 2009). The idea of “power feminism” was popularized in the media and created an opportunity for the individual voice, not the collective (Ivins-Hulley 2015), as it encourages women to take an “every woman for herself” approach. Today, the strong (White) woman is celebrated, encouraged, and highly commercialized through media (Hains 2009; Ivins-Hulley 2015). The young White women in our study have grown up with this watered-down version of “power feminism” that emphasizes individualized and internal solutions to structural gender inequality. Thus, young White women can identify as “strong women” and embrace “girl power” as long as they do not threaten patriarchal sources of power. Since the college-aged White women in our study are young and haven’t had opportunities to threaten men’s power at work or in their families, they are probably less worried about backlash and more worried about what help-seeking looks like for them as individuals.

## **Stereotypes about Black American Women**

### *Racialized Stereotypes*

As doubly marginalized in America by their race and gender, Black women are treated according to racial stereotypes and racialized gender stereotypes (Settles et al., 2008). Racial stereotypes, modified to fit various historical moments, can be traced back to slavery (Melson-Silimon et al., 2024). Generated as a justification for slavery, African Americans were viewed as primitive, violent, and childlike (Collins 2002; Davis and Tucker-Brown, 2013). Through the periods of Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Era, and ongoing cuts to affirmative action and social welfare programs, stereotypes of Black people have continued to be used to maintain racial inequality. Modern research shows that Black Americans are stereotyped as having brute strength and superhuman capabilities (Ferrucci and Tandoc, 2017; Harrison and Lawrence, 2004), as well as being seen as ghetto, unrefined, criminals, dangerous, lazy, loud, unintelligent, uneducated, and poor (Ghavami and Peplau, 2013). The racial stereotypes most relevant to displays of strength characterize Black people as hypermasculine, angry, and aggressive, and those most relevant to help-seeking associate Black people with laziness, dependence on welfare/handouts, and lesser competence.

### *Racialized Gender Stereotypes and the Strong Black Woman Schema*

Black women face gender stereotypes rooted in these more general racial stereotypes. These controlling images held by the dominant society are “socially constructed... each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination” (Collins 2002, p. 72). For example, Black women in America were and are charged with negative controlling images that stereotype them as sexually aggressive Jezebels, emasculating Sapphires, welfare queens, and angry Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007; Collins 2002; Wallace 2015; Walley-Jean 2009).

Where the veil forces Black women to always be aware of these negative stereotypes, the experience of twoness, that is, existing under the gaze of White America *and* within the Black community, allows Black women access to a more positive self-presentation option in the Strong Black Woman schema (Abrams et al., 2014; Harris-Lacewell 2010; Nelson et al.,

2016; Thomas et al., 2008). Black women's experiences in America have called them to be extraordinarily strong in the face of hardships and circumstances that other groups have not experienced. The Strong Black Woman is understood to be many things: an affirming symbol, unnaturally strong, a role model for her community, a symbol for Black women to aspire to, resilient, religious, selfless, and self-sacrificing (Abrams et al., 2014; Harris-Lacewell 2010; Nelson et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2022).

Black women's experience of twoness positions them as not only concerned about how they are viewed as individuals but also instills a sense of responsibility for how their behavior reflects on Black Americans as a group. As Patricia Hill Collins (2004) suggests, "as one of the few positive images used to describe Black femininity, the valorization of women's strength in African American communities makes it difficult for Black women to reject... and simply walk away from responsibility, especially from their families" (p. 205). This schema is passed from one generation to another as mothers, grandmothers, and other family members train their daughters to harness their strength in service to their communities as caretakers and providers (Harris-Lacewell 2010; Thomas et al., 2022). As caretakers of the community, Black women often internalize a sense of responsibility for how their behavior reflects on Black Americans as a group.

Black Americans' gift of *second sight*, as described by Du Bois, sees the Strong Black Woman as a challenge to the racial and gender hierarchy. The Strong Black Woman schema is a constellation of characteristics that celebrate but also prescribe Black women to act as transformative representatives of their community. The schema is a response to a collective sense of injustice that is both an affirmation of Black women's strength in the face of adversity but also a call to embody strength for the benefit of other Black people. Second sight, in giving Black people a heightened awareness of the roots of their marginalization, also lays bare the downsides of having to live up to the expectations embedded in the Strong Black Woman schema.

Stronger identification with the Strong Black Woman schema has been shown to be associated with depressive symptoms (Abrams et al., 2018; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2008; Donovan and West, 2015; Woods-Giscombé 2010), psychological distress (Watson-Singleton 2017), anxiety (Watson and Hunter, 2015), overeating (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007; Volpe et al., 2023), loneliness and isolation (Liao et al., 2020), relationship strain (Woods-Giscombé 2010) and lower self-esteem (Stanton et al., 2017). Black women who embody the schema may also feel pressured to avoid seeking help for depression even when they view seeking help in a positive light (Nelson et al., 2020; Watson and Hunter, 2015).

While asking for help should be a straightforward decision, research has found that asking for help, particularly among Black women, can be difficult, especially if they embrace the Strong Black Woman schema (Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2008; Thomas et al., 2022). For both Black and White women, seeking help may trigger stereotypical negative images in the mind of the helper, which many women want to avoid. For Black women, this may be particularly problematic as they attempt to avoid historical images such as the welfare queen and angry Black woman (Abrams et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2020). For this article, we consider how navigating in White spaces and fighting against these stereotypical images of Black women create a double consciousness for our Black participants. Double consciousness here is understood as Black women's recognition of how they are viewed, particularly in a White space such as a PWI, and how controlling images held by dominant society may be used against them, particularly when they choose to seek help. Drawing on twenty-nine in-depth interviews with fourteen Black and fifteen White college-aged women, we examine how race and gender stereotypes intersect to differentially shape Black and White women's help-seeking behavior.

## Methods

Our analysis is based on interviews with fifteen White and fourteen Black undergraduate women recruited via flyers, social media groups, and word of mouth to participate in a study about “how women balance the pressure to seem strong with their need to seek and receive help from others.” Approximately two-thirds of the students were recruited from their universities, and one-third learned about the study via Facebook. All participants were paid ten dollars via an Amazon gift card. The study was approved by our university’s Institutional Review Board.

The participants ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-five, with a mean age of twenty-two. All but two were born in the United States (one was from Canada, and the other was from Albania). Two of the women who identified as Black reported that they were also biracial. The rest of the participants self-identified as monoracial.

Since all participants in an interview participate in the production of meaning (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), the racial composition of interviewer-interviewee dyads should be acknowledged, and findings should be understood in context. The first author, a Black woman, conducted all the interviews. Being just a few years older than her participants was an advantage in establishing rapport. Participants behaved in a relational manner, which the interviewer encouraged. The first author’s position as a Black woman may have allowed Black participants to feel more comfortable answering questions that invariably invoked discussions about race. We sensed that White participants were also comfortable discussing interview topics. We suspect, however, that the White participants’ frequent mentioning of famous Black women, such as Beyonce and Michelle Obama, may have been partly related to the fact that they were talking to a Black woman. Still, the primary topic of the interview was about embodying strength and help-seeking, and we found that White participants exhibited openness in answering questions about sensitive topics (e.g., seeking professional psychological help). The interviewer’s race seemed to be salient when talking about race but less relevant when discussing other topics.

Interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to ninety minutes, with an average of about thirty minutes, and took place over Zoom. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and we assigned interviewees a pseudonym. Interviews varied in length due to how much or little the participants talked, how much they responded to probing questions, and how open they were to sharing information. Interviews were semi-structured so that participants could answer questions that best reflected their personal experiences and allowed them to share as little or as much detail as they wanted.

The first author opened interviews by engaging in small talk to make participants more comfortable. She then outlined the general topics to be discussed and began by asking participants what it means to be a strong woman (for White interviewees)/Strong Black Woman (for Black interviewees). We did not ask White participants what it meant to be a strong White woman. While stereotypes about what it means to be a strong woman are rooted in racial understandings, the labels assigned to strong White women tend to exclude “White” as an adjective. Addressing participants immediately with a question of what it meant to be a strong *White* woman may have been confusing and could have activated stereotypes about racist White women. Second, White women’s strength is not discussed or viewed in the same light as Black women’s strength. While Black participants immediately related to the Strong Black Woman schema, the same did not happen when White participants were asked about being strong women.

To ensure that the racial differences we uncovered were not simply because we asked Black and White women a slightly different question to start, the interview guide was adjusted for later interviews to begin by asking both groups what it meant to be a strong woman. Five Black participants were given the original question before the adjustment was

made. Their answers mirrored the previous interviewees. This adjustment did not change Black women's responses: Black participants' discussion of strength, regardless of the question order, reflected their understanding of what it meant to be a Strong *Black Woman*. All other questions asked remained the same between both groups.

Other questions included: (1) How and where did you learn to be strong? Is your strength an important character trait for you? (2) When you need help, who do you call on? Do people call on you when they need help? (3) If help is offered, do or would you accept it or reject it? Why or why not? What would be the reason? (4) Can you think of a time when you felt the need to ask for help but did not?

The analysis began with a review of all transcripts. All transcripts were then uploaded to ATLAS.ti to help with the identification of themes. Code landscaping helped shape the first author's direction as she reviewed the transcripts (Creswell 2013; Saldaña 2016). She then engaged in open and concept coding. Finally, she utilized a constant comparative approach to identify similarities and differences within and between both groups. This approach also ensures that themes were not skipped and that new themes could emerge and be split or joined as needed (Creswell 2013). The following section discusses how participants discussed and made meaning of being strong and its intersection with help-seeking behaviors.

## Findings

Both Black and White participants identified strength as a characteristic important to their lives, and many participants felt that it was a fundamental part of who they were. Their definitions of strength were quite similar, and all interviewees indicated that they worried asking for help could make them look less strong. Despite these similarities, we documented important differences in how Black and White women navigated this self-presentation dilemma.

### ***The Veil: Obscuring and Revealing Race and Gender Stereotypes***

The veil gives those who are racialized as Black Americans a highly developed awareness of how White people see them. The veil also ensures that White people are more likely to believe negative stereotypes about racialized others because their interactions are limited. Black people's awareness of the veil puts them on guard in how they choose to interact with others. When asked about how they believed society influenced their help-seeking, awareness of how they would be viewed in light of negative racial stereotypes was at the forefront of our Black interviewees' minds. As many of the participants embodied the Strong Black Woman schema, they understood they had a certain responsibility to their communities to not further entrench negative stereotypes of Black people. For example, when the first author asked Amina what role she believed society played in her decision to seek help, Amina responded:

I'm... a part of me is always struggling with the concept of being stereotypical, I guess. I hate it because I know that everyone asks for help. I know that it's normal, too. And I know that no one is really judging me for asking for help. But at the same time, another part of my brain is like, no, you need to figure this out for yourself because it doesn't look good that you're asking for help. You're supposed to be, you know, the self-reliant person. And I guess, I don't know, maybe it's the same thing as how we view White people on food stamps versus Black people on food stamps. Like the fact that we

view White people on food stamps as poor and unfortunate, you know, that sucks versus Black people on food stamps.

Similarly, Lisa worried about the stereotype that associates Black people with “handouts”:

The first thing that comes to mind is the thought that people of color, specifically Black people, are asking for handouts, taking advantage of that, which is racist, frankly. But I think that affects how much I want to ask for help.

Amina and Lisa suggest that stereotypes of Black people as lazy welfare recipients who receive unearned benefits help drive their avoidance of seeking help. The broader culture paints the welfare queen as lazy, poor, and having bad values, providing a way for poor Black women to be demonized in public opinion (Collins 2002; Foster 2008). The stereotype of the welfare queen impacts Black mothers from all class backgrounds, who consistently fight against assumptions that they are poor, unmarried, and on welfare (Dow 2015). We find that these experiences extend beyond Black mothers to Black college women as well.

In the college context, Black students often face the stereotype of being admitted to college based on affirmative action, another version of the stereotype that associates Black Americans with “handouts” or unearned benefits. Implicit in the assumption that Black college students’ admission to college is due to affirmative action is that they are less competent than their White peers. Our interviewees worried about how asking for help would make people question their abilities. Adrienne suggests reaching out for academic help was where she struggled:

It kind of has to do with academia. But I never... in my freshman and sophomore year, I was kind of reluctant to reach out to academic resources and stuff. Because I felt, I really felt as a Black student at a PWI that people look down on me pushing my intelligence. So, I didn’t want to have to be in tutoring and stuff. There might be someone who’s thinking, “Oh wow, she really isn’t smart enough.”

Adrienne believed that as a Black woman attending a predominately White institution (PWI), she had to be concerned about how her intelligence would be questioned if she sought help. This highlights a common problem for Black students who attend ‘White institutions. Black women who embody the Strong Black Woman schema may also feel pressure to be role models for other Black students (Abrams et al., 2014), as appearing educated is an important theme of the schema (West et al., 2016). Amina explained how she and her Black friends navigate these social pressures:

Oh, I mean, I see it in myself, and I see it in my friends as well. And we were scared to ask for help sometimes when we know we need help. We’re scared to mess up because then now we have stereotypes on us, which is great. Now we fall into the stereotype category of not knowing how to do something properly, of being too loud, of being, you know, so many things.

For Amina and her friends, asking for help increases the chances of being perceived according to negative racialized gender stereotypes. Amina’s comment at the end that she and her Black friends risk falling into the stereotype category of “so many things” highlights the predicament of embodying a marginalized race and gender identity. Jasmine



suggested that the angry Black woman stereotype kept her from seeking the help she needed:

I think a lot of times, you can be viewed as an angry Black woman. If you're just speaking your opinion or just what you want to say, there are a lot of women in the media who can say the exact same thing as a man said. But just because it's coming from a woman, it seems bitter, it seems angry, and it seems negative. So, I guess just seeing that backlash made me be like, oh, I don't want to receive that backlash. You know, not that I couldn't take it, but it's just the fact of why throw yourself into unnecessary conflict like that.

It is striking that Jasmine even sees a request for help—a deference behavior associated with admitting vulnerability and weakness—as having the potential to activate the angry Black woman stereotype. The implication of Jasmine's statement is that no matter what she says, she risks facing backlash for being seen as an angry Black woman. Ironically, Black women typically report fewer feelings of anger, particularly in situations that might produce such feelings (Walley-Jean 2009). Jasmine's hesitation to ask for help is consistent with research showing that Black women engage in self-silencing and suppression of angry emotions to prevent the perpetuation of the angry Black woman stereotype (Jones 2023; Walley-Jean 2009).

According to Du Bois, just as the veil allows Black Americans to be hyperaware of how they are seen by the dominant society, it obscures White Americans' ability to see Black people's humanity and the racial hierarchy for what it is. One related consequence of the veil is that White people don't recognize their own racial background as a relevant factor for understanding how others view them. The analytic purchase provided by Du Bois's concept of the veil is revealed in contrasting how White women recognize gender but fail to see the role of race in the dilemmas they navigate when asking for help.

White women made decisions about whether to ask for help under the shadow of negative stereotypes. This consciousness is born out of their position in the gender *and* race hierarchy, but their discussion of gender stereotypes revolved around race-neutral talking points. Moreover, they tended to talk in more abstract rather than personal terms about the effects of society. Savannah, a White woman, suggested that women who ask for help more easily face questions about their competence:

There's always just an inherent bias of if a woman does anything that makes her look stupid or incompetent. It's blown more out of proportion than if a male were to do it. So, I think, and I hate being compared like that, or I hate being seen as incompetent or incapable of doing something.

Holly, a White woman, also intimates that the stereotype of the weak woman causes stress for women who might need to ask for help:

I think I would say that the stress part may come from trying to convince people you're strong. Not necessarily put up a facade because maybe you are, but just trying to show people, to prove to people, because people often don't think women are strong. I mean, there's the stereotype of the weak woman. So, trying to prove that you're strong could be the stressful part, and knowing yourself that you are strong is where the pride comes from.

When asked what role society plays in her decision to ask for help or not, Greyson replied:

I feel like [some women] not wanting to ask [for help] because they want to prove that they're better than that and that we're obviously not biologically inferior... So, I feel that maybe because of that, women, in general, don't want to ask for help because they want to seem stronger. But then there's also maybe women who give in to that and you know, the ditzy kind of stereotype of a girl like, "oh, I don't know what's going on, please help me." So, there could also be, I guess, people doing that because of society, because people find it cute or whatever it is.

Greyson exhibits awareness of age-old, widely held stereotypes associating White women with lesser competence, purity, and submissiveness (Perkins 1983; Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz, 2013). Greyson points out that not only do women face being viewed as biologically inferior if they seek help, but they may also be able to use the "ditzy stereotype" to get help. In this sense, Greyson recognizes that asking for help can be rewarded by those who see women's helplessness as "cute" but also highlights the "patriarchal bargain" White women sometimes make when they act ditzy to get help (Hamilton et al., 2019). White women recognize that they can choose to present themselves as weak and fragile to achieve their goals and be rewarded by society for it. While Black women might also be seen as "ditzy" and "cute" when asking for help in certain situations, this was not a stereotype any of the Black women brought up during the interviews. We suspect this is because even if Black women are occasionally perceived as "cute" in their helplessness, their double consciousness made negative racial stereotypes more salient and important to avoid.

Both Black and White participants expressed the fact that stereotypes come into play when deciding if they should ask for help. The veil means Black women were attentive to generalized racial stereotypes and those at the intersection of their race and gender, (e.g., avoiding the "welfare queen" and "angry Black woman" labels and displaying the "Strong Black Woman" schema). In contrast, White women never once recognized that the gender stereotypes they felt most constrained by were unique to stereotypes about White women. They also never mentioned being seen as "bitchy" or "angry" despite the ubiquity of stereotypes that associate White women with "domineering" when they display strength (Rudman 2008). In addition, where Black women used "I" statements and described how societal stereotypes affected their personal decision-making, White women tended to talk in abstract terms about the dilemmas of help-seeking and appearing strong. While we hesitate to over-interpret this difference in linguistic styles, it is plausible that White college women simply face less of an emotional conflict between wanting to appear strong and asking for help. Black participants' expression of strength was a necessity brought forth by their double consciousness and a deep understanding of controlling images and stereotypes. White participants, in contrast, were not called to exhibit the same level of strength nor did their responses suggest that their race was important in the matter.

### ***Twoness: Community vs. Individual-Level Decisions***

Du Bois's concept of twoness emphasizes that Black Americans' self-formation involves being attentive to both the White world's views and that of the Black community. As Du Bois (2007) states, the "Negro American has for his environment not only the white surrounding world, but also, and touching him usually more nearly and compellingly, is the environment furnished by his own-colored group" (p. 125). The talk of Black participants suggested that in their everyday practices, their actions reflected a belief that they were representatives for their communities. Black women saw themselves carrying the responsibility of how Black people are viewed by their own and other communities. When asked why she sometimes hesitated to ask for help, Amina replied:

Well, it could be the vulnerability thing as in scared of appearing weak, or making a fool of myself, or showing to others that I don't know how to do something that maybe I should have learned from a family member. Or I should have learned from my parents or should have learned from just someone close to me that I didn't because I'm the oldest.

Amina expressed her worry about how her family would be seen if others found out she did not know things she felt she was supposed to know, especially being the oldest. How she represented her family, particularly as a first-generation college student, was important to her. While it is admirable to want to represent one's family well, we interpret Amina's concern to be partly related to the greater scrutiny Black families face because of negative stereotypes in the broader culture (Dow 2015). Media has consistently presented Black families as inferior, lazy, poverty-stricken, and dysfunctional (Berry 1998; Cummings 1988). These negative stereotypes reflect the veil, which in turn leads Amina to her twoness. She learns that to exist successfully beyond the veil is to exist in a manner that does not allow for weakness or vulnerability. Amina articulated her own cultural awareness of what happens when Black women fail and need to seek help:

...sometimes I'll see a news clipping where it'll be like, she's raised five boys, while working on a nurse's salary or something like that. And everyone's like, wow, she's amazing. Then I'm just like, you realize that even if even one of those children slip up, she'll be categorized as like this horrible mother. And at least I've been seeing it more recently that people are so quick to call them a hero when everything works out perfectly. But if there's even a little bit of a slip up, like they'll come for the neighborhood, they'll come for the city. They'll come for, you know, the school system, [...] they'll try to find any possible thing to say that the mother is a bad mother. And it's like, I don't want to say the media, *but I do want to say that it's the way that we don't take care of black women as a society that makes it harder for them to not be strong. You have no choice.*

To Amina, any Black woman's slip up is a blow to not only her, but her entire community. Hayden also expressed similar sentiments about the way a Black woman asking for help might be perceived:

...When you go out, ask for a lot of help, especially from family and friends, we see that as a cue that something is wrong. You know, it's not being normal. It's not seen as that [normal] because you're supposed to be a Strong Black Woman. So, I think every Black woman we're going to pick up on that. And we're going to try to live up to being a strong, healthy Black woman. So, asking for help isn't bad, but I believe that there has to be some type of self-awareness. There has to be some type of cultural awareness of how this makes me look. If I'm asking for help, you just have to consider a lot, especially publicly and, you know, asking for help.

Again, we see an understanding of how the personal decision to ask for help can have ramifications for the Black community. Hayden implies that she risks making other Black people look bad when she admits she needs help. The Strong Black Woman schema makes all help-seeking "not being normal" and calls upon Black women to carry this cultural awareness into very personal, individual-level decision-making. It is important here to point out that though Black people saw White oppressive systems as the primary source of

this burden, their experience of twoness meant that White and Black communities expected Black women to fulfill their role as Strong Black Women.

White participants expressed a more individualistic understanding of how strength and asking for help worked in their lives. Reese, a White woman, suggested that her role in her relationships decided if she chose to ask people for help. Her decision, however, was an individual one unrelated to her position in her broader community.

I have been talking a lot lately, especially with my mentor, of the self-concept I have of myself of being the listener. And the listener shouldn't need someone else to listen to them. So, I'm finding in a lot of my relationships and friendships they're the talker and I'm the listener. And there's other relationships where I'm the talker, and the other person's the listener... Sometimes, I guess in the relationships where I'm the talker, or I'm like the one being mentored, if that's the history of the relationship, then I don't have difficulty asking for help. But if the history of the relationship is that I'm the one giving the help, then I would have difficulty asking for their help.

Reese identifies as being “the listener/giver” among her friends and struggles to make sense of that identity when she is the “talker/taker.” She is taking the perspective of the other as she tries to make sense of her help-seeking, but the dilemma is an individual one with no sense that how she is perceived will reflect on her broader community, family, racial, or gender identity groups. Kate expressed a different set of concerns about how she could be viewed for asking for help, but like Reese, they were highly individualistic:

Ooh it's like, I, I have it in my head that if I ask for help, I'm a burden on the other person. And so I never want to, like, I always feel bad when I ask for help if it's offered that I'm definitely more open because I'm like, Oh, okay. Like they offered it. So I'm going to take it if they're offering.

Both Kate and Reese were not concerned about how their need for help would reflect on their community. Their reasoning for deciding to seek help has more to do with their personal lives and experiences. Consistent with the “every woman for herself” individualism that characterizes much of power feminism (Ivins-Hulley 2015), White women consider the individual-level consequences of their help-seeking with little awareness of how their behavior reflects on their families or other women.

As Black Americans ever feel their Americanness and Blackness, so to do the Black participants here (Dubois 1903). Because the Black women saw themselves as representatives of their race, their decision to ask for help felt high-stakes. If they were not careful, they could reproduce the very stereotypes they were trying to work against. They understood their actions to be community-level actions that could have far-reaching impacts on other African Americans. In contrasting Black women's community-level concerns to White women's more individualized concerns, we highlight the unequal burden Black women face as doubly marginalized on race and gender. Their double consciousness gifts them with a second sight, but it also creates largely invisible burdens that make help-seeking risky for themselves, their families, and Black Americans more generally.

### ***Second Sight: Differences in Breaking Points***

Du Bois's concept of second sight highlights the way in which the “gift” of seeing beyond the veil gives Black Americans a heightened understanding of the roots of their subordinate position in society as well as routes for societal transformation. In embodying the Strong

Black Woman, Black women subvert their oppression into a strength and work to protect their families and broader communities. This second sight, however, does not allow people to escape the constraints the color line imposes. Our data show that Black women often found themselves more vulnerable as they tried to navigate the pressure to embody the Strong Black Woman schema.

All interviewees acknowledged a tension between seeking and avoiding help, particularly for their mental health struggles. The Strong Black Woman schema requires that one possess supernatural emotional strength by suppressing emotions while also remaining emotionally stable (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007; Watson and Hunter, 2016). Many times, this tension manifests itself in participants ignoring self-care practices such as counseling while trying not to break down (Watson and Hunter, 2016). Many of the Black participants discussed reaching their breaking points. For example, Kendyll suggested that she was weighed down by everything she carried:

For me, it took a long time for me to accept help from others personally because I'm just really independent. And you know, I've done things on my own for so long, dealing with, you know, my emotions and stuff by myself. So, I was just like 'what's the point of asking other people for help' or 'I'm good by myself.' But you know, as I got older, I was like, yeah, I can't. I was holding so much weight on my own shoulders. I was like I can't do this by myself anymore. And I still have some reservations of opening my feelings to others.

As Kendyll's response above suggests, even when seeking help, she is uncomfortable discussing her feelings with others. Like so many Black women, Kendyll expresses the call on Black women to be emotionally stoic, silent, and to shed no tears:

Yeah, because now growing up we're all taught to like be strong and there was a period in my life for like all other emotions were just shut off and like I was just focused on like being good at school and being good at sports and stuff like that... Like just how a lot of Black boys are taught to not cry and stuff like that. Black women are taught the same thing. So, it's just, it's just been like a very weird, difficult journey of like emotionally figuring these things out.

When asked about an instance when she did not seek the help that she felt she needed, Lisa shared how she also carried her emotional burden alone at the beginning of her freshman year. She discussed reaching a tipping point before asking for help:

Lisa : Freshman year of college, which is a really big transition, and I felt very outside of my comfort zone. And then I was struggling with anxiety and depression and just didn't really talk about it until very recently or seek help out in any way.

Interviewer : What led you to seek help?

Lisa : Just some like family events that made it almost necessary to go see someone. A tipping point. I was like, okay, maybe.

Interviewer : But that was a long time to kind of wait because you say you kind of felt that way in your freshman year, right? That was fall 2018? So how did you deal with it kind of in the, in the time-lapse?

Lisa : I think, just be busy. So, like when I have to acknowledge as much and just like fill my schedule up with like school and work and other things that had to be done so I wouldn't have to think about it.

Even though Lisa knew she was anxious and depressed, she did not seek help for over two years. Adrienne described how her identity as a Black woman impacted her decision to not engage in help-seeking:

I feel I didn't know, well look, I didn't fit in. But I felt my identity as a Black woman put me in a space where it was hard for me to talk to people. Or for me to express how I felt, but I didn't really understand it exactly.

As a Black woman at a predominantly White institution, Adrienne connects her struggle to seek help to not feeling like she "fit in." She continues this train of thought by suggesting that not seeking help or finding a place where she could express her emotions led to a breakdown:

Not talking about it [her feelings]. I just wouldn't do anything, and kind of just break down in my room or something. I feel like I didn't really know how to express my feelings outwardly.

Adrienne's difficulty expressing her emotions may reflect her sense that Black women are not meant to display emotions but to be mask wearers on both sides of the veil. Historically, Black women, as mammies, could show no real emotion other than jovialness, loyalty, and love for their White families (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Robinson 2011). In many ways, the mammy lives on in the Strong Black Woman schema as a caretaker and altruistic giver (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Collins 2004; West et al., 2016).

While all of the Black interviewees acknowledged a tension between being strong and help-seeking, we documented variations in how they navigated this tension. For example, three Black participants hesitated to identify as Strong Black Women and instead used the term "resilient" to characterize their strength. They argued that this was not a denial of their identity as Strong Black Women but, rather, a mentally healthier option. Kris explained her position on resilience versus strength:

I wouldn't use the word strength. I would say resilience... You can be strong, and you can, on the surface or outwardly, look like you are able to deal with challenges. But on the inside or behind closed doors, you're not actually dealing with them very well. Resilience is being able to face those challenges, bounce back from them, and use whatever obstacles come from those challenges as learning tools to help you be a better person.

Kris seems to suggest here that her outward presentation of self might be strong, but her inner self is resilient. This framing allows Kris to see her mental health challenges in a more positive light and gave her more space to seek counseling. Of the three participants who eventually sought help after reaching their breaking point, only two sought therapy, and those were the two who disassociated from the identity by calling themselves "resilient" rather than "Strong" Black Women. The fact that the Black women in our study recognized both the need to embody the Strong Black Woman schema and its limits on their mental health is in Du Bois's terms, a "gift" of second sight. This second sight did not fully

protect the Black students, as they usually sought help long after reaching their breaking points.

White participants also told stories of reaching a breaking point. However, this was *after* seeking mental health resources and realizing a pathway to success could be accomplished by seeking help. For example, Maggie pointed out this very scenario:

I remember when this past year my depression got super bad. I was at a point where I literally knew nothing else to do. *I had done therapy, I was on medication*, and it was just so bad, and I didn't know what else to do. So, at those times I would call my mom, just to talk, or to calm me down.

Maggie's breaking point came after she had sought mental health resources. This is different from the Black women we spoke to, who waited until they reached their breaking point to seek help. Our data suggests that this is partly because the White women in this study learned earlier in life that asking for help was a pathway to success. Erin discussed her experience as a dancer:

I feel that sometimes I did neglect asking questions, and I can kind of translate that into dancing too, because I'm a dancer. When I started, I was really shy, and everyone was female where I dance. So, I didn't ask for help when I really needed it really badly. I didn't want to slow others down...[Now] I feel like I am strong, confident, and safe in that environment. So, I do ask questions I ask them all the time, and I think that's a characteristic of strength.

Erin suggests that as a young child she did not want to look less smart than her peers, but she learned at an early age through her experience as a dancer that asking questions is a sign of strength. By the time Elizabeth was in college, she had internalized the notion that asking for help had no downsides:

Oh, when it came to choosing a college or just a major, I was...I'm the only person that can determine what will be right for me. But I later determined that there's no harm in asking what other people could see me thriving in. Like where my mentors could see me because it could be something that I've never even thought about doing.

Here, Elizabeth is not worried that her mentors will judge her as incompetent, so she sees no harm in asking. Where White women see learning to ask for help as a part of their maturation, Black women see it as a double-edged sword. Even when Black women realized they needed to get help from others, tension always manifested in our Black participant's explanations.

For Black women, reaching a breaking point reflected their understanding that people expected them to be strong and saw them as strong, especially when Adrienne confirmed that her identity "as a Black woman put me in a space where it was hard for me to talk to people." Part of embodying strength meant knowing at a young age how to handle their emotions on their own. Their double consciousness allowed them to take on a mantle of independence and emotional distress, making them more vulnerable. On the other hand, White participants shared fewer concerns about being viewed as weak for asking for help and felt little pressure to consider how their help-seeking would affect perceptions of their families and/or broader racialized community. Erin and Maggie made help-seeking choices that did not appear to be based on their gender or race but, rather, on their personal lives and experiences.

## Conclusions

Drawing on Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, this study investigates how college-aged Black and White women conceptualize strength and help-seeking. Members of both groups express the desire to be seen by others as strong and worry that asking for help will make them look weak. Nonetheless, we find important differences rooted in racialized gender stereotypes. Our findings align with research showing similarities among Black and White women in perceptions of womanhood, but important differences in the actual content of their experiences (Settles et al., 2008).

We documented how the veil makes Black women acutely aware of negative racial stereotypes. The experience of twoness leads Black women to see through the veil and choose to embody the Strong Black Woman schema to avoid negative stereotypes that associate Black people with lesser intelligence, crime, family dysfunction, and welfare dependence. While this choice is seen as one that protects their family and community from negative judgments, it comes at a cost to their ability to seek help before they reach emotional breaking points. Second sight is part of what guides the widespread adoption of the Strong Black Woman schema as well as Black women's awareness of the downsides of embodying the schema. Black women in our study differed in the extent to which they sought help. Nonetheless, we argue that second sight cannot liberate Black people from the constraints of the color line because Black women's rational concern for how their behavior reflects on the community creates a mental health vulnerability that White women can avoid. Double consciousness performs the double duty of being both protective *and* reproducing Black women's vulnerability.

In contrast, continuous guarding of one's behavior to ensure it aligns with community expectations is not something White women reported. White women were more worried about judgments of them as individuals, not as representatives of their race, gender, or family. These factors led White women to seek help before they reached their breaking points. They perceived fewer sanctions for appearing vulnerable and did not worry about being seen through a racialized paradigm when making a choice to seek help.

These findings are driven by the cultural and historical social position of both groups: Black women were historically called on to care for White families while protecting their families and communities. Today, Black women still experience a twoness that makes it difficult to prioritize their own mental health if doing so could hurt how the broader Black community is perceived. White women were historically called on to be subservient to White men, but as they have entered college and the workforce in greater numbers, they have been encouraged to embrace power feminism, a highly individualistic call of "every woman for herself" (Hains 2009; Ivins-Hulley 2015; Nelson et al., 2016).

Our research design had advantages and limitations. Engaging in interviews allowed us to assess specific nuances and meanings that we may not have been able to find by using observational or survey data. There are limitations with respect to the generalizability of this study. Only interviewing college students meant we were not able to capture class or age differences. For example, older women who have worked and/or raised families have more experience facing gender-based backlash when they embody leadership or act with dominance. While the White women in our study expressed little concern about being seen as angry for exhibiting strength, we suspect interviews with older white women would have revealed more concern about the "bitch" stereotype. Likewise, older Black woman may be more likely to explicitly discuss their experiences with other racialized and gendered stereotypes in multiple spaces. We also can't rule out the possibility that we would have generated different data had White participants been interviewed by White interviewers. In addition, since one-third of the Black interviewees were primed to talk about being "Strong Black Women" rather than "Strong Women," the comparisons across racial lines



might not capture similarity/variation to the extent that we would have had all interviewees been asked the same questions.

These findings should inform future diversity and inclusion programs and practices and college counseling and psychiatric services. Counseling programs should aim to include spaces for Black women, particularly college-aged women, to express their feelings and emotions before reaching their breaking points. They should also serve as places where Black women can release the added stress of being representatives for their communities. White college-aged women should be offered access to similar services. Though White women are more likely to seek therapy services, they may also benefit from being given a space where they are free to address their concerns of stereotypes, seek help, and display strength.

The findings of this study offer direction for future research. One direction for future research should further explore how negative stereotypes drive the decisions of Black women. For example, both the welfare queen and the angry Black woman were discussed by participants, but we do not know to what extent they impact important life decisions for Black women or how they may interact with the Strong Black Woman schema. Similarly, future research should assess how gendered stereotypes may also be constraining for White women when seeking help. Though not discussed here, participants also discussed the role of social media in shaping the social pressures to be strong women and to prioritize self-care. Future research should examine how social media contributes to and challenges White and Black women's self-presentation dilemmas.

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**Makeiva Jenkins** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Georgia. Her interests include race, gender, class, stereotypes, and culture. Her dissertation explores the lived experiences of Black, single, stay-at-home mothers. She holds a master's degree in African American Studies from Georgia State University.

**Justine Tinkler** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Georgia. Her research employs experimental, survey-based, and qualitative research methods to examine the micro-level processes that create and reinforce gender and race inequality. Her current projects include studies of people's reactions to the formal and informal enforcement of sexual misconduct policies and the role of race and gender bias in the workplace.

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