

Strength in Numbers: Black Women’s Engagement in Social Support and Feelings of Loneliness

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Introduction

The Strong Black Woman Narrative (SBWN) is a stereotype based on black womens’ emotional and physical strength, the ability to balance femininity and strength, and providing for and supporting her family and community (Verinique, 2018). Environmental and social factors have the ability to impact black womens’ mental health. These factors can contribute to how they’re perceived and how they express themselves to others (Abrams et al., 2014; Schreiber, et al., 2000). Depression, stress, loneliness, and difficulty expressing emotions are prominent in many communities of black women. In addition to these factors, the SBWN can create a cultural disconnect or an inability to rely on their peers. This narrative pressures black women to isolate themselves from their community resulting in feelings of loneliness. Social support, the perception that an individual is cared for and can rely on a trusted group, has the potential to greatly alleviate the effects that the SBWN has on black women. Previous literature suggests that social support affects depressive symptoms (Sherman et al., 2023), decreases disordered eating symptoms (Affuso et al., 2022), and promotes healthy habits such as exercise maintenance (Jones et al., 2023). The purpose of this study was to investigate the role that social support has in mediating the relationship between a black woman’s belief in their stereotypical roles and their feelings of loneliness. We hypothesized that black women who receive higher levels of social support would feel less restrained by the SBWN and report lower levels of loneliness.

Methods

- Participants:** The sample included 400 Black/African American women.
- Age: 18 - 83 years old (M = 42.64, SD = 15.92)
 - Ethnicity: American (n = 42; 60.5%), African (n = 129; 32.3%), Caribbean (n = 14; 3.5%), Latin American (n = 4; 1.0%), and Other (n = 11; 2.8%)
 - Sexual orientation: Heterosexual (n = 365; 91.3%), Other (n = 34; 8.6%)
 - Marital Status: Single (n = 193; 48.3%), Married/committed partnership (n = 143; 35.8%), divorced (n = 38; 9.5%), widowed (n = 26; 6.5%)
 - Religion: Christian (n = 280; 70.0%), Agnostic (n = 10; 2.5%), Atheist (n = 7; 1.8%), Hindu (n = 1; .3%), Humanist (n = 4; 1.0%), Jewish (n = 1; .3%), Spiritual, but not religious (n = 67; 16.8%), Other (n = 26; 6.5%)

UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978): 20-item scale designed to measure one’s subjective feelings of loneliness as well as feelings of social isolation

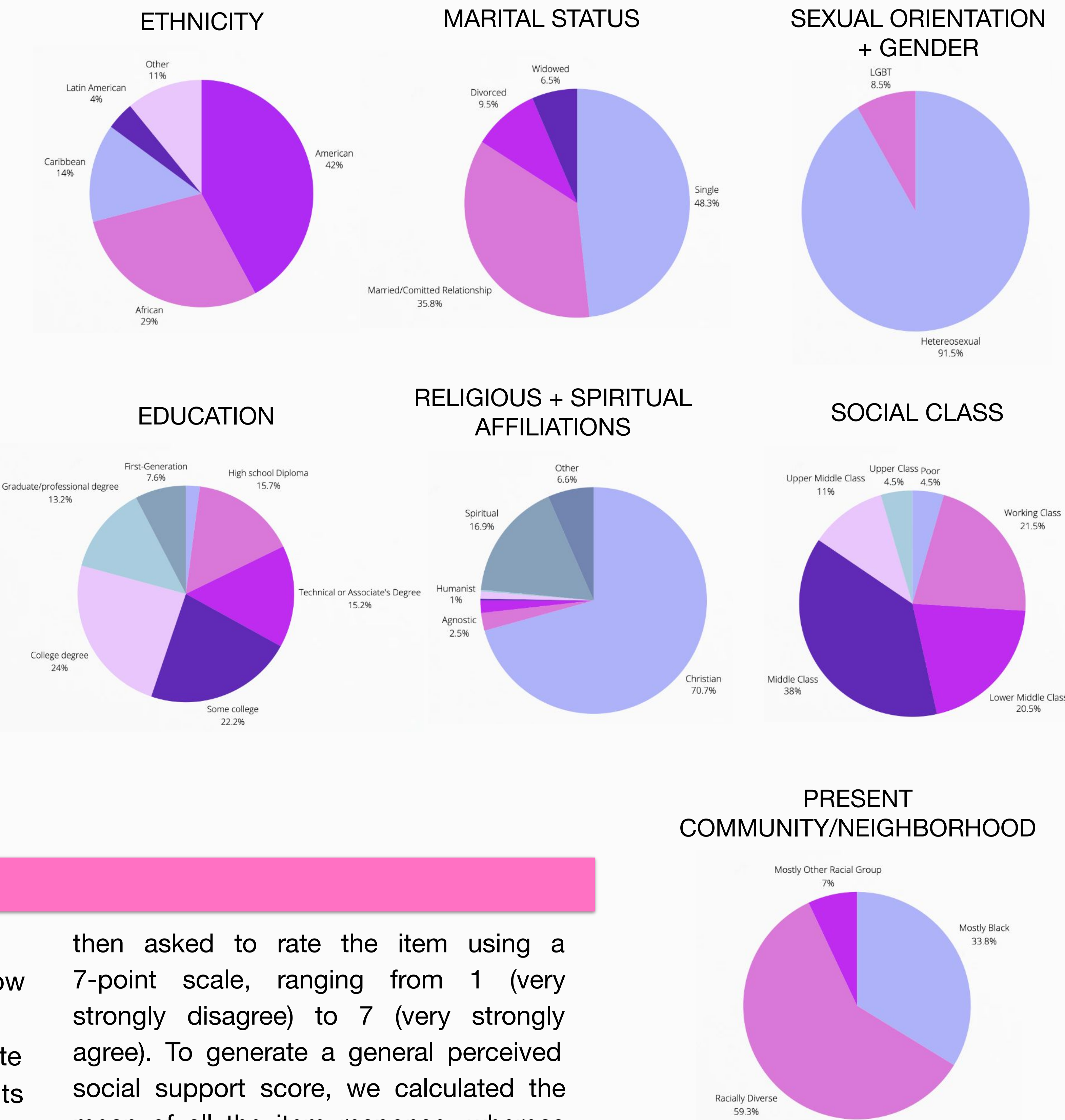
The Stereotypical Roles of Black Women Scale: 34-item scale asses how self-esteem, racial identity, and endorsement of these stereotypes relate to each other (Dawis, 2000). Participants are given statements (eg. “Black women are loud and obnoxious”, “Black women need to be strong to survive”, “Black women use sex to get what they want” and “If I fall apart, I will be a failure”) and are asked to respond using a Likert point-based scale from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1998). This 12-item scale, which is divided into three 4-item subscales, assesses how much help and support participants believe they are receiving from three primary sources: family, friends, and significant others. Participants are presented with a series of statements (e.g., “My friends really try to help me.” and “My family is willing to help me make decisions.”),

then asked to rate the item using a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). To generate a general perceived social support score, we calculated the mean of all the item response, whereas we calculated the mean of item responses within each subscale to generate a perceived social support score for family, friends, and significant others. Across all scores, higher scores represented greater levels of perceived social support, generally, or from a specific source (e.g., friends). Validity of the scale has been demonstrated through its negative correlation with negative mental health outcomes (e.g., anxiety and depression; Zimet et al., 1988; Zimet, et al., 1990).



Samples

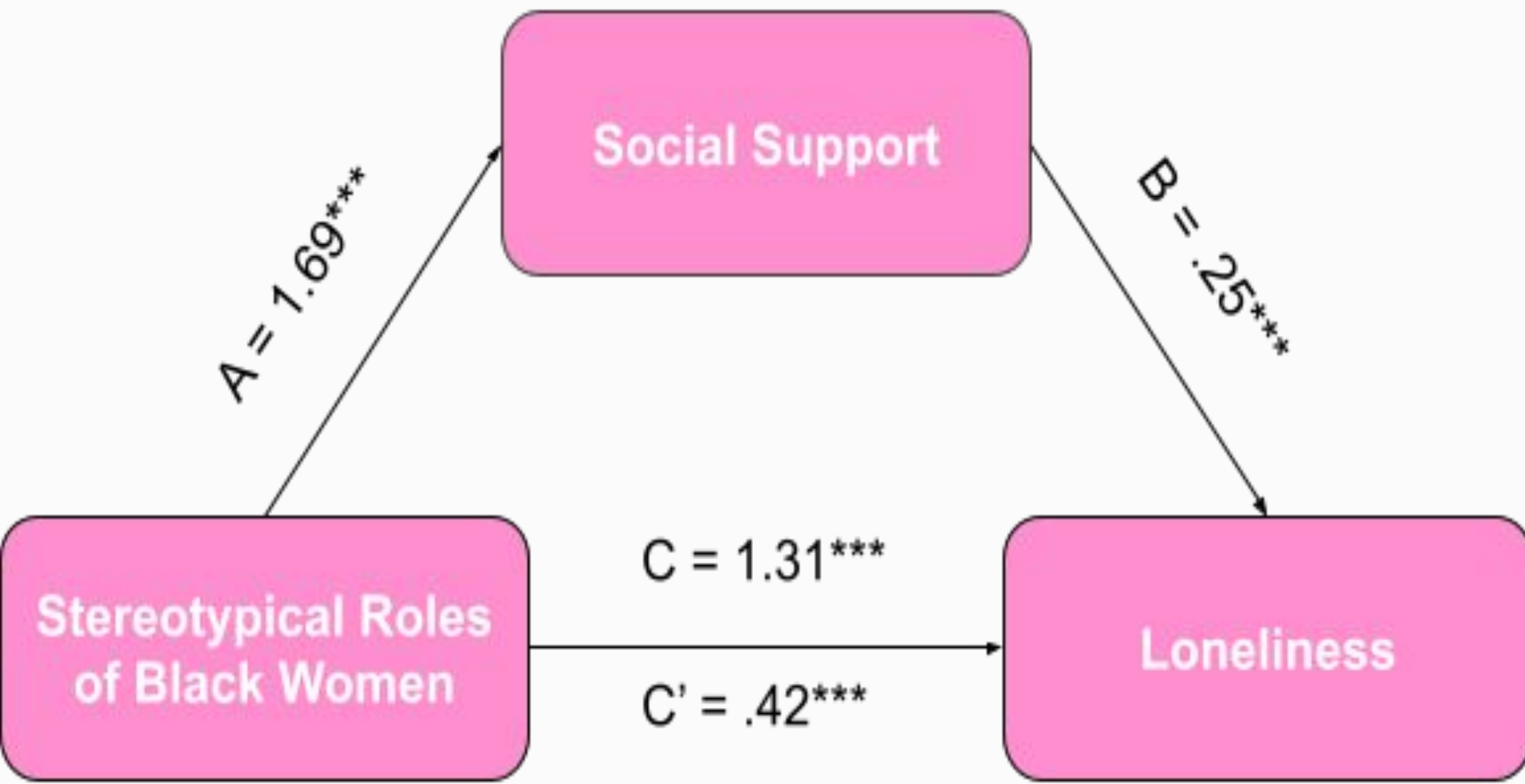


Demographics

Demographics. Demographic information included women’s age, ethnicity, marital status, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, educational background, including first-generation status if applicable, field of work/study, socioeconomic status, racial demographics of the community in which they were raised and currently live. Because the current study focused on social support, participants were also asked to describe their perceived levels of support. More specifically, participants were asked to describe help and support levels of their family, friends, and significant other.

Results

A mediation analysis was conducted to determine if social support mediates the relationship between the strong black women narrative and loneliness. The effect of social support on the strong black women narrative (Path A) was significant, $\beta = 1.69$, 95% *CI* [.92, 2.46], $t = 4.32$, $p < .001$. The hypothesized mediator of social support significantly predicted loneliness (Path B), $\beta = .25$, 95% *CI* [.17, .33], $t = 6.15$, $p < .001$. The direct relationship between the strong black woman narrative and loneliness was significant (Path C), $\beta = 1.31$, 95% *CI* [.7, 1.92], $t = 6.4.2$, $p < .001$. The indirect effects of strong black women narrative on loneliness was also significant which also suggests that social support was a mediator, $\beta = .42$, 95% *CI* [.20, .67].



Notes: *(p<.10), **(p<.05), ***(p<.001)

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how feelings of loneliness are related to the strong black woman narrative when mediated by social support. Results show a stronger belief of stereotypical roles among black women were indirectly related to loneliness through social support. Our results suggest that the more that black women believed in stereotypical roles, the more prevalent their feelings of loneliness were. However, the more social support they received, the less they were attached to such roles. When black women have a social support network, they feel less restrained by the stereotypical roles and experience lessened feelings of loneliness. This has implications for how we support black women, providing evidence that social support can help mitigate the prominence that stereotypical roles of black women hold in their lives. Some limitations included:

- The lack of information on whether those who were single or married had children and how that would affect social support.
- The Multidimensional Scale may not capture all complexities of social support.
- A larger sample could provide more generalizable results.

