

Stress and Coping in Higher Education: A Case Study of a Haitian American Woman

Administrator

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**Abstract**

The authors applied Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) to conduct a case study of an Afro-Caribbean woman administrator to explore her perceptions of stress and coping in higher education. While much has been written about the challenges facing Black faculty and students, this study focused on the experiences of a Black woman administrator in a predominantly White higher education institution. Findings suggest that resilience and coping for this Black woman administrator are reflected in her acts of resistance to combat the effects of systemic oppression.

*Keywords:* Afro-Caribbean, Relational-Cultural, Higher Education, Black Woman Administrator

## **Stress and Coping in Higher Education: A Case Study of a Haitian American Woman Administrator**

While prior research has demonstrated that Black faculty and administrators are underrepresented at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), relatively little is known about retaining the few that do exist in higher education (Bridges, 1996; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Jackson, 2001; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008). Currently, Black women account for 55% of all Black full-time faculty in U. S. institutions of higher education (Wilder, Jones, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). However, Black women account for less than 3% of the total full-time faculty in the U.S. (Daniel, 2009; Gregory, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2015; Ryu, 2010; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wong, 2011; Wilder et al., 2013) and only 1% of Black women in higher education, including full-time faculty, are employed by predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in the U. S. (American Council of Education, 2010; Dowdy, 2008; Wilder et al., 2013). Black women administrators make up 6% of the total administrative and managerial staff, and of the total number of Black administrative and managerial staff, Black women make up 62% of that in higher education institutions in the U.S. (NCES, 2012).

For Black women administrators at PWIs, issues of marginalization, lack of support and mentorship, transition, growth, and identity development are evident and may contribute to stress and burnout for this population (Harley, 2008; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; West-Olatunji, 2013; Wilder et al., 2013). Yet, researchers have also shown that Black women have demonstrated an ability to cope in hostile work environments (Abrums, 2004; Lutz, Hassouneh, Akeroyd, & Beckett, 2013). A critical aspect of this area of research is the emphasis on the role of identity in understanding stress and coping for Black women administrators in higher education (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Collins, 2000; Heath, 2006; Williams, 2005). This point is particularly salient

when investigating the experiences of Black women administrators of Caribbean descent who may also experience acculturative stress.

Using a Relational-Cultural framework, the researchers explored the attitudes of a Haitian-American woman administrator regarding her experiences with stress and coping in higher education at a PWI. Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) was used because of its focus on the quality of interpersonal dynamics. Recommendations for future research focus on the need to continue investigations that include a larger sample of Afro-Caribbean women, beginning with a collective case study and eventually developing an instrument that is sensitive to the multilayered experiences of this population.

### **Review of the Literature**

While it has been documented that women of various cultural backgrounds experience marginalization and the resultant challenges to vocational advancement in higher education, women of color face unique obstacles in the workplace (Monzó & SooHoo, 2014). For Black women faculty and administrators, in particular, three salient issues provide a foundation for understanding their experiences in higher education. They are: (a) stress and burnout in the workplace (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Jackson & Sears, 1992; Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005), (b) the unique coping style of Black women administrators in PWIs (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001), and (c) the role of identity in conceptualizing the interrelatedness of both stress and coping for many Black women (Brice-Baker 1994; Mattis, 2002; Sanchez, 2013).

#### **Stress and Burnout in the Workplace**

Stress, although essential to human functioning, can lead to chronic stress and, ultimately, burnout (Jackson & Sears, 1992; Tytherleigh et al., 2005) and has been linked to the erosion of mental health and wellbeing (Watts-Jones, 1990). For the purposes of this paper, burnout is

defined in multidimensional terms, consisting of emotional, interpersonal, and cognitive aspects (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). In the workplace, stress has been shown as correlative to physical illness, impaired personal and working relationships, a decrease in the overall quality of job performance, and depression (Jackson & Sears, 1992).

Job-related stress has also been associated with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lowered self-esteem. Emotional exhaustion results when there is a depletion of affective resources (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Tytherleigh et al., 2005). Oftentimes, this leads to a breakdown in interpersonal relationships wherein disconnection and depersonalization occurs (Portman & Garrett, 2005). Monzó and SooHoo (2014) suggested that, for women of color, their disconnection results from living in a society that devalues their engendered cultural identities (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Finally, the cognitive aspect of burnout involves developing a negative evaluation of one's self (Abel & Sewell, 1999).

**Additional challenges.** For women of Afro-Caribbean descent, there are additional challenges while navigating the higher education landscape. In particular, immigrants often experience acculturative stress as they transition from majority to minority status; a process that is lengthy and ongoing (Brice-Baker, 1994, 2005; Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Sanchez, 2013). Acculturative stress occurs when adaptive resources are inadequate to sustain adjustment to a new cultural setting (Roysircar-Sodowsky & Maestas, 2000). As with other immigrants of color, Afro-Caribbean women often experience psychological distress that hinders their ability to establish and maintain support networks. Additionally, there is frequently a sense of displacement when Afro-Caribbean individuals are separated from spouses, children, parents, siblings, and other family members (Brice-Baker, 1994). The yearning for relationship can create multiple challenges for members of the Afro-Caribbean community as they struggle to maintain

familiar relationships while being confronted with the racialized interactions with White and Black Americans (Sanchez, 2013).

Haitian culture, for example, places value on relationships with ancestors, history, and the community. Haitians often utilize spiritual, social, and personal elements to deal with all aspects of their lives (Menos, 2005). Also, Haitian children are often not directly involved in adult family decisions; rather, it is often older family members whose wisdom and guidance are frequently sought. Research on this group suggests that Haitians view their entire extended family as a source of support (Brice-Baker, 1994; Menos, 2005).

**Afro-Caribbean work ethic & stress.** In particular, many Haitian Americans financially support relatives back in their home country who may not have resources of their own because of unemployment. Haitian parents, similar to other Caribbean caregivers, may work long hours at multiple jobs to pay for their children's schooling. They also view academic advancement with pride, seeing it as a source of social mobility (Menos, 2005). Those who provide economic support are given respect and increased social status. However, scholars have suggested that this can limit their family and leisure time. The pressure to survive is often intensely felt and attribution for failure to obtain material wealth is frequently internalized, leading to guilt and self-blame (Brice-Baker, 1994).

### **Coping and Black Woman Administrators**

Ways in which many Black woman administrators cope with the stress in PWIs are to engage in expressive acts of resistance through testifying and storytelling, which helps them gain awareness and manage these negative outcomes (Lutz et al., 2013). Testifying, as a coping mechanism, connotes asserting, affirming, and reclaiming one's own humanity and oneself as a whole, while resisting oppression (Abrums, 2004). Such a form of resistance can be a powerful

form of coping because it allows individuals to: (a) name the oppressive processes, making them explicit, and (b) bear witness to pervasive acts and situations of inequality. Storytelling also serves as a strategy for resisting negative imagery and mythology at both the personal and structural levels (Abrums, 2004; Burke, Cropper & Harrison, 2000; Clay, Olatunji, & Cooley, 2001). Black women's resistance strategies can serve to aid in maintaining relationships within unsupportive and unwelcoming institutional climates (Monzó & SooHoo, 2014; Lutz et al., 2013).

Other forms of coping for this population include prayer, non-disclosure, and a hyperwork ethic (Chatters, Taylor, Jackson & Lincoln, 2008). Prayer and religious practices have been shown as a common source of coping among Blacks, and more so among Black women, with no significant differences between Black Americans (people of African descent who are at least two generations U. S. born) and Black Caribbean individuals. Hunn and Craig (2009) suggested that Blacks often choose not to disclose their stress symptoms as a sign of independence and control, particularly in the workplace. Consequently, they can suffer from what has been labeled as, *John Henryism*, reflecting on the Black folk hero who worked himself to death. Another form of coping for Black women is the strong Black woman or Superwoman role that is seen to preserve self and family or community (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). However, there may be deficits to this form of coping, such as relationship strain, stress-related health behaviors, and stress embodiment.

### **The Role of Identity: Womanism & Intersectionality**

First coined by Alice Walker (1983), womanism offers a model of identity for women of African descent that integrates their cultural, engendered, and other identities with a focus on wholeness of self. More importantly, at the core of womanist ideals is a commitment to survival.

Thus, womanist scholars assert that any discussion of Black women must include ways in which they resist oppression. Williams (2005) discussed three key strategies used by African American women in their struggle for social justice: (a) contextualizing the problem, (b) drawing upon the historical legacy of social justice, and (c) creating networks of support.

Womanist theory takes into account Black women's ability to construct knowledge within their own historical, cultural, and spiritual context (Collins, 2000). This is illustrative in the use of testifying and storytelling by Black women to articulate personal insights, what Heath (2006) has labeled as participatory witnessing. Womanism differs from feminist ideology to include issues of racial oppression, classism, heterosexism, and the challenges women of color face in formulating intersected identities, such as culture, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Samuels, & Ross-Sheriff, 2008). Conversely, the feminist movement, led primarily by middle-class White women has been labeled as largely focusing on sexism. Of significance, African American womanist scholars reject the essentialism of both White feminist and Afrocentric ideals. Several scholars have called for a framework that takes into account the simultaneity of oppressions, positionalities and illustrates the intersectionality of individuals' social location (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

### **Relational-Cultural Theory**

The authors of this paper used Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) to provide an opportunity to explore the participant's interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental, and cognitive experiences. RCT suggests that: (a) people grow in and through connection and (b) develop these relational competencies over the life span, and (c) that one's sense of self develops within growth-fostering relationships (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, Parsons, & Salazar, 2008). By interpreting obstacles to mutuality and resisting disconnecting strategies, a type of coping is



developed known as relational resilience, allowing one to stay present during complexity and difficulty (Duffy & Somody, 2011). RCT proposes that relationships are a primary source of an individual's ability to be resilient in the face of personal and social hardships or trauma (Hartling, 2008). From this perspective, isolation is viewed as one of the fundamental sources of suffering in people's lives. Movement toward mutuality, defined as a two-way relational process of authentic impact and change, lies at the heart of relational development (Frey, 2013). Through the lens of RCT, disconnection and disempowerment give rise to internalized oppression and depersonalization, exemplified in three dispositions: spotlight anxiety, hyper-visibility, and striving superstar (Walker, 2005).

*Spotlight anxiety* refers to an individual's: (a) heightened concern with appearance to dominant group members and (b) the use of enormous amounts of energy attempting to manage impressions (Walker, 2005). *Hyper-visibility* is a strategy used to hide from relationships by exaggerating certain aspects of self. Individuals exhibiting hyper-visibility tend to be more comfortable publicly expressing rage than grappling with complexities of self-doubt and private sorrow (Walker, 2005). They often lack empathy with their own vulnerability and may not be able to engage in growth-fostering conflict. A *striving superstar* seeks to prove worth, gain recognition, and be accepted by the dominant group (Walker, 2005). They tend to become judgmental towards self and members of their devalued group, can be drawn into unhealthy competitiveness, mistakenly perceive empathy as weakness, and have feelings of emptiness and isolation (Comstock et al., 2008).

As offered by Yin (2014), theory guided this study in order to begin a critical exploration of the contextual issues related to the phenomenon of underrepresentation of Black women administrators in PWIs. This allowed for a dynamic interplay between existing knowledge and

confirmation or rejection of prior findings without allowing existing theory to predetermine the outcomes of our investigation. The researchers investigated how an Afro-Caribbean woman administrator experienced stress and coping in higher education. This investigation asked the question, “*How does an Afro-Caribbean woman in higher education articulate stress and coping as an administrator at a PWI?*”

### **Methods**

As part of a larger investigation of the experiences of Black women administrators at PWIs, we provide the preliminary findings of this particular case study of an Afro-Caribbean women administrator. We employ an instrumental case study design to illuminate our understanding of the phenomena incorporating context in the inquiry. As a case study, context is extremely relevant because the dynamic interplay between phenomenon (underrepresentation in higher education) and context (social positioning, job satisfaction, and identity, for example) are not fully understood (Creswell, 2015; Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery, & Sheikh, 2011; Pyne & Means, 2013; Yin, 2014). While case study research has been criticized for its lack of rigor and limited basis for generalization (Crowe et al., 2011), we strengthened the credibility of our findings through theoretical sampling, respondent validation, and transparency throughout the research process.

We used an interpretist approach, utilizing critical ethnography as a framework, wherein this study represents the dialectic conversations between researchers and participant. Following a critical research perspective these conversations are intended to be transformative and best understood within the context of the conditions influencing action and experience (Georgiou & Carspecken, 2002) as well as the empowerment of the individual (Kincheloe & McClaren, 2000). We followed the intentions of a case study in order to move beyond descriptive questions, such

as who, what, when, how much, and how many, to answer the questions of how and why (Yin, 2014). The case study's heuristic approach, designed to create discovery (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002), supported our desire to deepen the reader's understanding of the participant's subjective experiences or phenomenology. We did this with the hope that this manuscript will extend the reader's own experiences and understanding around this topic.

The research team was comprised of a multi-ethnic and mixed gendered group consisting of an African American woman counselor educator, a Latina practicing counselor, and a White male counselor educator at a research intensive university. As such, the researchers carried their ethno-cultural beliefs and engendered experiences into the investigation. Their assumptions framed the manner in which they viewed, understood, and analyzed the data.

### **Data Sources and Protocols**

The participant for this study was a 38-year old, single, first generation Afro-Caribbean American woman. She is one of three daughters. Both of her parents immigrated to the U.S. from Haiti. The participant had attended predominately White k-12 and post-secondary schools and was, at the time of the interviews, enrolled in a master's level program. *Gina* (pseudonym used) was coordinator of a compensatory education program for low-income youth housed at a large university in the southeastern region of the U.S. Members of the research team had developed an ongoing relationship with the participant over a two year period through various interactions between her office and the academic program where the researchers were housed. Based upon informal conversations with her, we believed that Gina's experiences and background would illuminate the phenomenon under investigation. A member of the research team solicited Gina for the case study.

Following completion of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent form, the researchers conducted four 50-minute interviews over a four-month period. Each of these interviews took place in an interview room on a university campus, where the sessions were audio taped and subsequently transcribed and analyzed resulting 230 minutes of interview data that was compiled into 69 pages (15,229 words) in the final completed transcription.

The first and second interviews were guided by questions the researchers developed based upon a review of the literature (see Table 1). As transcriptions were completed, they were shared with the participant via email to check for accuracy. In the third interview, the researchers shared the preliminary themes with the participant to allow for respondent validation (member checking), the dialogue led to expanded questioning in order to get thicker descriptions enabling the participant to dig deeper into her experiences (Creswell, 2015). In the final session, we debriefed the participant, allowing her the opportunity to clarify and elaborate on the interview summation and interpretation. These interviews were facilitated in such a manner that the researchers were able to co-construct the conceptualizations with the participant.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis involved reviewing the transcript for accuracy and then highlighting phrases that were descriptive of the participant's experiences. Subsequently, key phrases were highlighted and organized into summary statements in the margin of the transcript. Finally, domains of meaning were created from the summary statements and then paired with related quotes. To ensure credibility of the investigation, peer examination, member checking, and theoretical sampling were used (Creswell, 2015; Crowe et al., 2011). For peer examination, each researcher separately reviewed the data set to extract themes. The team then met to reach consensus about common themes and outliers. Verification of results was also attained through

on-going respondent validation regarding the themes found and by sharing the findings with the participant. Although there is variance in the way in which theory is used in case study research, we relied on Yin's (2014) approach. Thus, theoretical sampling was used to juxtapose our understanding of Relational-Cultural Theory to the findings in the study.

**Table 1.****Initial Interview guide**

1	In what ways has your ethnic or cultural identity impacted your experiences as an administrator in higher education, if at all?
2	What were the most prominent stressors for you?
3	How and when are you aware that you are stressed?
4	While in your position as director did you feel supported? At work? At home?
5	Were you mentored while in your position?
6	If you could go back in time, what would you change, if anything about your work experience in higher education?
7	How do you know when you are experiencing burnout?
8	What steps do you take, if any, to prevent burn out?
9	How do you manage your life when you are experiencing burnout?
10	What lessons have you learned about how you handle yourself, your life, and the people around you when you are experiencing burnout?
11	What skills do you utilize to empower yourself in the workplace?
12	How does your support network in your personal life influence your work-life?
13	How do you see yourself mentoring other African-American young women in similar settings?
14	What skills would you most like to pass on to help them cope with working in predominately White institutions (PWIs) of higher education?

## Findings

Our review of the literature, served as a guide to explore issues of stress and burnout as well as coping skills. However, by carefully addressing threats to credibility of our study (peer examination, theoretical analysis, respondent validation, and transparency throughout), we were able to maintain a critical stance in relation to the data and in the process of our analysis.

Analysis of the data resulted in two themes: *working as coping* and *contextualizing and testifying (resistance and testifying)*. The theme, *working as coping*, was defined as the valuing of a hard work as a work ethic in order to cope with oppressive conditions; this theme reflected both positive and negative outcomes. The second theme, *contextualizing and testifying* was defined as conceptualizing by using external factors and being empowered through support systems. This theme is illustrated by two concepts; resistance and testifying. Resistance is defined as withstanding and persevering against obstacles. Testifying is defined as naming the oppressive processes, telling one's story and experiences, and bearing witness to pervasive acts and situations of inequality. Gina shared her story by referencing her life as an administrator at a PWI and as a woman in society. Both roles are seamlessly presented without demarcation. As such, her home and her personal lives appear to be seamless.

### **Working as Coping: Stress and Burnout**

In attempting to answer our research question, we begin by describing some of Gina's expressions of stress. The first three expressions are described within the RCT framework, they are spotlight anxiety, hyper-visibility, and striving super star. As stated previously, *spotlight anxiety* refers to an over concern with appearance and the use of enormous amounts of energy attempting to manage impressions. Gina displayed *spotlight anxiety* when she stated,

*“I keep putting more and more and more on my plate...am I helping others because I feel.... I don't know because I don't like that being questioned...part of my satisfaction is knowing that what I do is valued.”*

This reflected Gina's intent when exercising considerable energy to achieve tasks; rather than being driven by her own passions, she appears to be motivated by others' impressions of her. Watts-Jones (1990) suggested that such behaviors can contribute to stress as it could lead to a sense of exhaustion and depersonalization. Thus, while a strong work ethic may be perceived by Gina to help succeed in U.S. society, it may also cause her additional stress.

Looking through the lens of hyper-visibility, Gina may be hiding from relationships by exaggerating certain aspects to manage impressions of self. Gina stated,

*“...we don't talk about our own stuff... I'm not going to let them know I'm different from them... before it was part of the job and not me... I don't do these things very often...just how people judge you... you produce ...”*

This suggested that Gina's reticence to talk about her stressors and challenges reflects the ways in which she hides her vulnerabilities. While it may serve to protect her from perceived threats to her self-esteem and self-worth, it also makes it difficult to engage in growth-fostering relationships. Without supportive relationships, Gina could feel enduringly disconnected leading to impaired relationships wherein depersonalization occurs (Portman & Garrett, 2005; Walker, 2005). Such disconnection, for women of color, can be a result of feeling devalued (Monzó & SooHoo, 2014; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Turner et al., 2011).

Finally, the concept of a *striving superstar* is another aspect of internalized oppression and acculturative stress within the RCT framework. The Striving Superstar needs to gain recognition from dominant group members whom an individual perceives as having more power

and authority, without regard for socio-political dynamics (such as racism and sexism) that systemically impact success. Gina stated,

*“...I set very high standards for myself... everyone knows I’m a hard worker... you work as hard as you can, and you do whatever you have to do, to get ahead. You don’t let anything stop you. You don’t whine about things, you go ahead and put forth the effort to get past it...when I was younger I always felt that umm, if you do your best that you can get through anything...Umm nothing can stop you.”*

When asked how she might gain the help she needs from a mentor, Gina replied,

*“...Mentor is still a person of authority...I want them to see me in a positive light.”*

These statements suggest that Gina strives to prove worth, gain recognition, and be accepted within the context of others’ power and authority, while possibly being drawn into unhealthy competitiveness and developing feelings of emptiness and isolation (Comstock et al., 2008). As she talked about how she copes as a striving superstar, another aspect of her hyper work ethic became apparent, the superwoman role. When asked what other ways coping has been modeled, Gina replied,

*“I work a lot... I don’t like thinking about why I am doing this... I don’t question myself... And so as a family, um it’s real important that you provide so... if you put in the long hours and...reap the benefits.”*

This form of coping reflects what Hunn and Craig (2009) described as, *John Henryism*. It is possible Gina’s drive for working a lot and providing is emphasized from within her culture, as many Haitian Americans in the United States, often feel an obligation to financially support relatives living in their home country or to make life better for their families (Brice-Baker, 1994; Menos, 2005). However, these forms of coping can have both beneficial and negative results. A



potential benefit is it allows Gina to preserve self and family or community. Negative outcomes can be seen as relationship strains, stress-related health behaviors, and stress embodiment (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Gina expressed this and her hyper-visibility as she described her parents, Gina stated,

*“...their strong work ethic got them through,... I think a lot of the stuff we keep to ourselves...you don’t want people in your business... there are certain things that you don’t want people to know...”*

Gina expressed pressure to be successful and to give back to successive generations, which could be a part of her Haitian Afro-Caribbean culture. In terms of stress and burnout, failure to obtain material wealth is often internalized for people of West Indies origin, which may lead to guilt and self-blame (Brice-Baker, 1994). These were suggested in Gina’s statement,

*“I don’t want to feel obligated all the damn time... I don’t want to disappoint people...If I have the capability to do it then I should do it... meaning that...I should give back.” In talking about how her family coped with stress, Gina stated, “... We live by denial...if you say that it’s rosy enough...and you just don’t whine about stuff...whatever happens you don’t quit... So, from my cultural standpoint, umm, I know my Mom and my Dad, my aunts and uncles, they did stuff they hated. They...swallowed their pride and did it because, in the end, it was all about advancing the family.”*

Gina may cope with stress using the strategies employed by her family members. This hyper work ethic may be related to acculturative stress. Gina shared her thoughts on education,

*“...for my parents, our education was the most important thing for them and we were their investments and ...so as a result education was nonnegotiable and... you did your best... my dad was the kind of person that [said]....’why you bringing home a 85 you*

*aren't studying enough?'.... so my older sister used to get in trouble for her grades... my dad never took into consideration that she came when she was older and this was almost a third language for her.... I knew, for me, I didn't want to get in trouble like my sister... you know...keep the family peace..."*

It seemed that Gina's father valued working hard and obtaining an education. Without interpersonal resources, the stressors accumulate and lead to burnout.

Of interest, we also discovered a positive outcome of stress when linked with supportive interpersonal resources. Gina articulated her awareness of options to eliminate her isolation and internalized oppression. Gina was also aware that, if she questions or even rejects concepts and values within her ethnic community, she might lose support. Ultimately, Gina has learned to make decisions that combine her family-based identity, self-worth, and sense of community,

*"I definitely need to release this...running away from what I'm feeling... I'm thinking that this is my coping mechanism..."*

Gina continued,

*"I just said it because it's part of my script 'never complain'... so I want to help others so maybe I'm not open to them helping me... work tends to be such a big compartment of my world...I may need to do things a different way... and, that I may need to look at it... that I don't have to be perfect at everything that I do... and hold back... umm, probably a little more open to it now than before."*

### **Contextualizing and Testifying**

We theorized that the theme of *contextualizing and testifying* meant that Gina was able to conceptualize the obstacles she faced in life to include external factors, such as how she is positioned by White administrators and co-workers. This theme was evident when Gina talked

about becoming empowered through the use of discourse with other women and supportive mentors. Gina shared her use of narratives, storytelling, and testifying to gain insight and cope with her experiences in higher education. Additionally, the two sub-themes, *resistance* and *testifying*, provide more clarity in how Gina copes with her positioning as an Afro-Caribbean woman in higher education.

**Resistance.** In response to a question about what causes stress, Gina replied,

*“...it causes stress when the whole thing is completely incongruent...”*

Here, she seemed to articulate a conflict between her personal and familial values and those that are thrust upon her from the dominant culture,

*“...umm, my perspective is we’re all in it together, the academy’s perspective is...each person is on their own survival.”*

These statements reflect her acculturative stress where the clash between Afro-Caribbean values (emphasizing collectivism and relational interdependency) and those in a more Westernized culture (emphasizing individualism) causes psychological distress.

*“Umm, there is always ah hidden agenda and there is a hierarchy...umm, so from that standpoint, it’s, it’s frustrating because they say they really believe in whatever you’re doing and they want you to put a 100 plus in, and they really appreciate what you’re doing. However, the actions, umm, do not uhh, compliment the work. So from that aspect that’s very stress provoking.”*

Again, Gina referred to the incongruence she is experiencing in her work environment. However, despite the stress she experiences she continues to work and persevere, exemplifying resilience through resistance.

Gina expressed resistance and self-awareness while verbalizing her experience,

*“...and so na, na, na I am going to show you I can make it through all, if that means I have to put more in there. That’s what happens. But I think as you do that, I don’t even think you know, that, I don’t think you know how much of that is going on as you’re doing it. Probably, when you are so far into it, you know you start giving them the five minutes, then the extra hour... ‘ahh, what the heck?’ Your week just went out the window forgetting personal stuff, you just, you start out with a little bit at a time. Giving more, more of yourself and before you know it... you kind of lose yourself in it. And that’s where the boundaries can get skewed, so, I guess it is a reaction to the hegemony.”*

Elements of chronic stress, depersonalization, physical, mental and emotional exhaustion are embedded in Gina’s response; she uses resistance to cope in her position as an Afro-Caribbean woman administrator in a PWI. Her testimony reflected in her internal dialogue, essential to the formation of knowledge (Self and Other) and identity (personal and engendered). Her stories offered insights into the meaning of those experiences. Her intersected values became meaningful rather than maladaptive, creating a need to do things in a different way so that she doesn’t have to be perfect at everything.

**Testifying.** In response to the question about how her cultural identity aids in coping, Gina stated,

*“...Umm, umm, from the stance of how does my culture help me with umm, distress...my peers that are of similar backgrounds, umm well we’ll not always all be that same culture, we share similarities, umm, come to a similar understanding...finding out that we all have the same types of stressors...it seems like all day long you’re walking around keeping a smile on your face trying to pretend everything is ok. So, when you are able to be with people that understand those stressors and you can just be real about it.”*

Testifying allows Gina to tell her story, feel validated, establish a relational connection, and normalize her feelings and experiences with her peers from similar backgrounds. As illustrated in Relational Cultural theory, Gina expressed how testifying and connecting with others has allowed her to feel human against oppressive forces. Finally, testifying was an integral factor in coping for Gina, as a Black woman administrator because it provided a “corrective experience” by allowing her to tell her story within a supportive network.

*“Even if you can’t change it, just to, just to be able to express it, umm there is a sense of freedom that comes with that; umm, there is a sense of peace of mind that comes with it. A lot of times, as I said earlier, I think umm, people will try to paint it as if you are being sensitive or you’re not properly prepared, they try to make it seem like it is all on you. And so, when you find people that are having the same type of situation, it starts validating that it is not just you. It kind of normalizes some of those things you’re feeling. And that is why I think it is important to talk about things.”*

Gina’s stories articulated her desires to engage in culturally connecting relationships. Gina stated,

*“...in that matter I felt supported and I wasn’t in the trenches by myself... if we are real and really start discussing things, we start finding there are similarities that what is happening is kind of happening to all of us. So, when we come together, and we can... feel that we trust each other, we can really go there...”*

As Gina talked about her support networks, she expressed how she copes,

*“...Umm, if you were able to make it where you’re at and be in the academy, you did enough. Stop downing yourself...don’t give up...it’s not just about you.”*

In summarizing her experiences, Gina stated,

*“...That it is very important to remember umm that it is a business and not personal. Like it is kind of umm difficult because you’re dealing with people ... since I care a lot about people, especially with what I was doing I was working with kids. Then I felt a certain sense of responsibility and umm that sense of responsibility carried into it...it became personal...I think there is an additional pressure to fit the bill that makes you exceed the expectations...umm part of that is from the institution and part of that is from within...”*

Gina stated the importance of viewing the hegemony experienced in higher education as systemic, not personal. She articulated the need to balance one’s sense of responsibility toward work with a commitment to one’s self. Particular cultural values such as collectivist ideals and relational importance were evident when Gina talked about her “sense of responsibility from within.”

*“...Part of my satisfaction is knowing that what I do is valued. I am real. And so I say what it is, I say what it is... I say it because I want to see it fixed. Umm, I just don’t see the reason to keep the system running you know at half speed when simple changes could be made. If everybody kinda was on the same page and came together... you look at it and go, ‘I am not going to be beaten,’ and then you kind of go, ‘ok, shake it off, I can do this.’ In many ways, that is what the academy ...wants... is for us to just kind of you know, just disappear, you know, just kind of give up... And I... and that I was good enough to get into the academy. Then, I am great enough to be successful in the academy, and that nobody is going to push me out.”*

Based upon prior research in this area, issues of acculturative stress (Roysircar-Sodowsky & Maestas, 2000), spotlight anxiety and hypervisibility (Hartling, 2008), and the superwoman role (Woods-Giscombe, 2010) guided our initial analysis of the data. All three of these concepts were

found in this case study. Forms of resilience and coping, such as contextualizing her problems (Williams, 2005), relational coping (network support) and storytelling/testifying (Abrums, 2004) were evident in our participant's testimony. However other forms of coping, such as the use of prayer and religious values (Chatters et al., 2008), and the legacy of social justice in her community/family were not supported in this study.

### **Discussion**

Based upon our analysis of the data, issues of marginalization were present and confirm prior research reporting the experiences of Black women administrators in higher education (Monzó & SooHoo, 2014; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). We also found three areas worthy of further investigation that could extend our understanding of stress and coping for Afro-Caribbean women administrators in the U.S. First, we found that Gina talked about issues of stress and burnout in the workplace as a multilayered experience, where job-related stress was on top of the acculturative stress, with hyperwork ethic stress serving as a top layer to her stressors. This finding extends prior research on stress and burnout for Black women in higher education. Second, in analyzing Gina's statements about the effects of hyperwork ethic on her overall wellbeing, this response may be both a form of coping and also serve as a stressor for her. Little has been written about hyperwork ethic for Afro-Caribbeans in the U.S. (Brice-Baker, 2005; Menos, 2005). Third, as Gina discussed her developmental awareness of systemic racism, she articulated more evidence of resistance and coping. Although the relationship between identity and coping has been explored for African American women (McCall, 2005; Shorter-Gooden, 2004), more research is needed to explore these concepts with Afro-Caribbean women in the U.S.

### Stress as a Multilayered Experience

Based on what Gina expressed, her stress may be a multilayered experience, resulting in an accumulation of intersecting areas that can be difficult to separate out. Additionally, these intersectional areas (job-related stress, acculturative stress, and hyperwork stress) can be contributing to a heightened sense of tiredness and burnout (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**  
**Stress as a Multilayered Experience**



**Job-related stress for Black women.** For our participant, Gina may be expending enormous amounts of energy managing how others perceive her. As proven in prior studies, these actions can be tiring and lead to burnout (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Monzó & SooHoo, 2014; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Tytherleigh et al., 2005). As a Black woman, this spotlight anxiety seems to be correlative to hyper-visibility in which the coping response is to hide her true feelings about being marginalized within the workplace (Comstock et al., 2008). From a Womanist perspective,



Gina's identity as a woman, at least initially, did not significantly incorporate her racial identity as a Black person in the U.S. and the social positioning that is inherent in this society. This lack of awareness may contribute to her job-related stress. These findings are consistent with prior research about job-related stress (Tytherleigh et al., 2005). However, we believe that the other two findings related to issues of acculturative stress and hyper work ethic extend our understanding of the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women administrators at PWIs in the U.S.

**Acculturative stress.** As a Black woman who immigrated to the U.S. as a child and grew up in an immigrant household, Gina exhibits signs of acculturative stress. This is evident in her efforts to prove her worth, gain recognition, and be accepted by her supervisor and peers, most of whom are White and whom she believes represent dominant group beliefs and attitudes about women, people of color, and immigrants (Roysircar-Sodowsky & Maestas, 2000). These attitudes represent the striving superstar role and may be correlative to her symptoms acculturative stress as many first generation immigrants often embrace dominant culture ideals of equality, opportunity, and enterprise that are typically not applied to individuals from culturally marginalized groups (Sanchez, 2013). From the lens of intersectionality, this aggregated stress related to the workplace and acculturation may serve as additional stressors for Gina as an immigrant Black women in higher education. While scholars have investigated job-related stress for Black women and acculturative stress for immigrant Black women, very little is known about the interaction between the two and their impact on immigrant Black women administrators. Further investigation is warranted.

**Hyperwork stress.** Very little research in the area of hyper work stress has been offered, particularly in relation to Afro-Caribbean women administrators who may have multiple factors influencing the stress caused by this ethic. Moreover, Afro-Caribbean women administrators

may be experiencing stress in a multi-layered fashion whereby hyperwork stress is situated on top of acculturative stress that sits on top of job-related stress. Much more research is needed to fully explicate how the different types of stress impact Afro-Caribbean women administrators and how they cope in PWIs.

### **Hyperwork Ethic**

Gina's disclosures in this case study, as a Black woman in higher education, show she may be presenting a dynamic interaction of behaviors that alternately reflects characteristics of the Superwoman role (Woods-Giscombe, 2010) and burnout (Tytherleigh et al., 2005). Such a cycle of extremely high and low performance behaviors might put her at risk for traumatic stress wherein there is a work-stress cycle of: work → stress → more work → more stress → burnout. The demands of the workplace along with non-work related environmental stressors due to social marginalization, often leads to more stress. If Gina responds to these stressors by working harder and longer, she is likely to increase her stress levels that may lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout. Thus, this hyperwork ethic that may be connected to ethnic values and can serve as coping also has some negative outcomes. Again, little is known about this concept of hyperwork ethic, particularly for Afro-Caribbeans living and working in the U.S. (Bryce-Baker, 2005; Menos, 2005). Additional investigation in this area is needed.

### **Racial Awareness and Coping**

Our participant was able to demonstrate resilience and coping through acts of resistance by contextualizing and testifying about hegemony in her work environment. Gina's colleagues may be misinterpreting her coping behaviors as combative. Given that, for Gina, her identity incorporates intersected identities, such as culture, gender, and class (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Her persistence and commitment to survival in the workplace may require alternative strategies.

Such divergent approaches to success in higher education may draw upon resistance and other social justice ideals (Lutz et al., 2013; Williams, 2005). Administrators who are unaware of ways in which Gina copes with work related stress may be losing out on opportunities to support her.

Gina seamlessly articulated her stress and anxiety associated with experiences in both her personal and work environments. Emergent work in the area of traumatic stress, oppression, and Black Americans discusses the high cost of discrimination (Carter, 2007; Paradies, 2006; Utsey, 1998). Researchers aver that racism, classism, and other forms of institutionalized prejudice can incur psychological distress and other injurious health consequences. Some identified outcomes of oppression have included depression, anxiety, interpersonal conflicts, high blood pressure, and hypertension (Din-Dzietham, Nembhard, Collins & Davis, 2004; Fang & Myers, 2001). Thus, it is in the best interests of higher education administrators to create less culturally hostile environments to increase employee satisfaction, wellbeing, and productivity. Given that burnout results when there is a depletion of emotional resources (Tytherleigh et al., 2005), Gina may be suffering from job-related chronic stress that erodes her mental, physical, and emotional health.

### **Future Research**

It would be beneficial to implement a follow up ethnographic study of Afro-Caribbean women administrators in higher education. Such a study would include focus group and semi-structured individual interviews of this population. Additionally, holistic data from focus group and semi-structured individual interviews, observations, and archival information from websites, blogs, and newsletters would help to illuminate the experiences of these women. Ultimately, it would be important to isolate the key constructs that are related to issues of marginalization, stress, and coping for Afro-Caribbean women administrators in order to develop an instrument that could be sent out to a nationally representative sample. Soliciting self-reports on stress,

coping, and identity would be beneficial in learning more about how Afro-Caribbean women administrators navigate the challenges in higher education.

In sum, this study provided an overview of the literature on stress and coping for Black woman administrators in higher education. From the lens of Relational Cultural Theory, we explored the perspectives of an Afro-Caribbean woman administrator employed at a PWI. Salient findings from this study suggest that stress and coping are complex issues for our participant. Future research that focuses Afro-Caribbean women administrators in higher education is recommended. One such a study could be in the form of a collective case study to further explore the experiences of this population.

Gina's experiences at a PWI reflect her resilience and challenges as an Afro-Caribbean woman. Her tenacity and commitment to the youth she serves and her ability to cope are reflected in a Haitian proverb that states:

...*'Nan tan grangou patat pa gen po'* ('During times of hunger, sweet potatoes have no skin') meaning that, [sic] when one is starving, one will eat anything, including the skin of a potato. This proverb conveys Haitians' strong will to survive even in the face of insurmountable troubles. For if poorly armed slaves could triumph over the once powerful French army, then no problem is so great that it cannot be resolved (Menos, 2005, pg. 129).

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