DYING TO SUCCEED

Realizing the Price of Academic Success for Black Scholars (in STEM)

Ebony O. McGee, PhD
“Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”

Ruth Gilmore, PhD
Overview

Cognitive Dissonance: Recovering Engineer
My Childhood: Pizza Box Narratives...
History Reveals the Mystery

Misguided Turns in Mental Health
1. Underestimating the Cost of Making It
2. The Harms and Limits of Resilience and Grit

Mental Health Vs. Structural Racism
3. Critique of Self Care
Black STEM Futurist
Mythical BLACK EXCEPTIONALISM & COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Where Others Created my Narrative
Pizza Boxes as Bookbags?
RECOVERING ENGINEER

BLACK

MENTOR

MOTHER

WOMAN

Still Recovering...
BLACK GIRL MAGIC
We are real & we are suffering!

BEING BLACK is not MAGICAL!
BLACK GIRL MAGIC
We are real & we are suffering!

We are more likely to be killed at almost 3x the rate of white women, yet when we are missing or murdered, headlines do not call for our safety!
BLACK GIRL MAGIC
We are real & we are suffering!

We are more likely to be killed at almost three times the rate of white women, yet when we are missing or murdered, headlines do not call for our safety.

We are 3x more likely to die giving birth. And so do our BABIES!
We are real & we are suffering!

We are more likely to be killed at almost three times the rate of white women, yet when we are missing or murdered, headlines do not call for our safety.

We are more likely to die giving birth.

Black girls are the most suspended of any student group in our nation.
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Black girls are the most suspended of any student group in our nation.

At work, we must navigate antiblackness and sexism: misogynoir. “Smile More”
Racially Underrepresented STEM Students, Faculty, and Staff of Color
Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous

STEM Success Not Failure

Mental & Physical Health
Cost of Coping with Racism, Sexism, Classism, Capitalism, Etc.

Career Trajectories; Perceptions of STEM CAREERS

Coping Mechanisms
Responses to Racism, Antiblackness

Race & Racism
Racialized Structures, Stereotypes, and other forms of bias

Success ≠ Problem Free
REVEALS THE

Mystery.
THE IMMUNITY HYPOTHESIS

“Slaves are immune from stress and from the subsequent risk of mental illness because they do not own property.”

John Galt, M.D.(1840)
THE END OF SLAVERY & THE RISE OF “INSANITY”

1840 US Census:
“Insanity” 11 times more likely among African Americans living in Northern free-states than in South

Slavery Proponents:
“Burdens of freedom” drive African Americans “insane”...slavery saves them from “mental death”

Whitaker (2002)
1

Understanding the Costs of Being Black and Academically High-Achieving
BLACK BRILLIANCE LOST

Michelle Evon Scott
Age 29
Vanderbilt University
Navy veteran pursuing degree in Biomolecular Science seeking to find a cure for cancer.
Suicide
BLACK BRILLIANCE LOST

Dandry “DJ” Henry

Age 20

Pace University
Defensive back on football team studying business management

Killed by Police
BLACK BRILLIANCE LOST

Tatissa Zunguze
Age 20
Scripps College
Student leader, mentor, and advocate conducting lab research to combat HIV
Suicide
Giovonn Joseph-McDade
Age 20
Green River College
Former High School football player
pursuing Associates of Arts degree
Killed by Police
BLACK BRILLIANCE LOST

Cariann Hithon
Age 22
Temple University
Studying to become a defense attorney to assist the underrepresented
Killed by Police
Study Warns of Looming Mental Health Crisis for Black College Students

Researchers have noted anxiety, depression, thoughts of suicide and "John Henryism."

By Lauren Camera | Dec. 31, 2015

STUDY WENT VIRAL!

Racially Toxic STEM Places & Spaces

- Alienation
- Prove Them Wrong Syndrome
- Invisibility/Hypervisibility
- Family and Friend Hardships
- Pioneerism
- Devaluing/Compromising Authentic Racial Identities
- “Pedigree” Snobs
- Creation of Fragile Identities
- Negative Future Stress
- Pressure to Represent One’s Racial Group
- “Pet-to Threat” Syndrome
- Relationship Break Up
- Isolation: too few STEM students & faculty of color
- Minority Status Stress
- Racial & Gender Microaggressions
- Lack of role models or mentors
- Weathering
- the “Revolving Door” syndrome of faculty of Color leaving
- Tokenism
- Racial/Ethnic Stereotypes
- Financial Difficulties
- Powerlessness
- Impostor Syndrome
- John/Johnetta Henryism
- Racial Battle Fatigue
- Illness or Death of Friend/Family
IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

- recognizing your expertise
- building your self-confidence in STEM
- talking to mentors
- realizing that perfection is an unachievable goal
- mediation, breathing exercises
- yoga

Yes, I’m Crazy!

change your thinking!
YOU CANNOT YOGA POSE YOUR WAY OUT OF A STRUCTURALLY TOXIC ENVIRONMENT

- recognizing your expertise
- building your self-confidence in STEM
- talking to mentors
- mediating, breathing exercises
- realizing that perfection is an unachievable goal

No, You’re Not Crazy!

what if your thinking is right?
WHAT IF IT IS NOT IN YOUR HEAD?

If the space is IMPOSTOR-ish, why is it the STUDENTS’ job to fix themselves?

Who is fixing the environment that breeds IMPOSTOR-ism?

Maybe it’s RACISM camouflaged as Impostorism
STEREOTYPE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Channeling Ancestral Legacy of Struggle

Caring/Empathetic Ideology

Sense of Racial Pride

Strong Sense of Self (I know who I am)

Black Joy!

Religiosity

Spirituality

Culturally Affirming Friends (Peers), Mentors, Organizations

Discipline Affirming Friends (Peers), Mentors, Organizations

Family and Extended Family

Group Athletic Activities

Music (Racial Justice Music)

Poetry

Historical and Structural Understanding of Racism

Racially Salient Activism

Volunteerism

Seeking Mentorship

Temporarily disengaging w/ school/STEM course

Dancing Hip-Hop

Being a Mentor

AND STILL, THEY RISE?
STOP the PEDDLING of RESILIENCE as THE CURE!
...it’s not a DIY endeavor!
CELEBRATING OPPRESSION!!

STEREOTYPE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- Being a Mentor
- Seeking Mentorship
- Temporarily disengaging w/ school/STEM course
- Dancing Hip-Hop
- Discipline Affirming Friends (Peers), Mentors, Organizations
- Family and Extended Family
- Group Athletic Activities
- Culturally Affirming Friends (Peers), Mentors, Organizations
- Historical and Structural Understanding of Racism
- Poetry
- Musical (Racial Justice Music)
- Racially Salient Activism
- Volunteerism

RESILIENCE

Grit
RESILIENCE/GRIT

WITHOUT UNIQUE EXTERNAL SUPPORTS & RESOURCES IS OPPRESSION!
Chronic Stress

- Increases Heart Rate
- Increases Blood Pressure
- Increases Blood Glucose

- Alters the Immune System
- Slows Digestion and Hair Growth
- Affects Aspects of the Brain That Controls Mood

Epigenetics: Generational Trauma that Lives Within
NOT JUST MENTAL HEALTH, BUT PHYSICAL HEALTH TRAUMA
(All interviewees were 27 years & younger)

Hospitalizations
Many Cases Bells Palsy
Anxiety Attacks
Miscarriages
Difficult Pregnancies

Strokes
Suicidal Thoughts
Exhaustion
Self-medication


HIGH ACHIEVERS OF COLOR ARE HIGH FUNCTIONING

- Must spend mental energy considering whether they are genuinely accepted or just being tolerated.
- Their intellect and frequent coping masks the depression mental health and at times the physical health outcomes that they have.
- More interactions with racism, sexism, and classism the more educated Black and Brown folks are. Placed at Greater Risk...
African-American Folk Hero

Worked so hard that he beat a steam-powered machine

Died from his efforts
African-Americans have to work much harder than their white counterparts to combat the day-to-day psychosocial stressors which are ubiquitous in their educational contexts. Results in detrimental physiological and psychological effects.
(Mental) Health Outcomes are a Byproduct of Policy/Structural Violence
Policy
Violence
Led to
Racist
Violence
CARING FOR MYSELF IS NOT SELF-INDULGENCE, IT ISSELF-PRESERVATION AND THAT IS AN ACT OF POLITICAL WARFARE.

Audre Lorde

1934 – 1992
Died age 58 of cancer

PROBLEMATIZING SELF CARE... NOT AUDRE LORDE!
Self Care  
*Capitalistic*

VS

Community Care  
*Non-Capitalistic*
KROGER WINE BAGS: “Wine is Basically Fruit Salad!”

Self Care Café

$10 Latté’s

Personal Training

High Fashion

$200 Massages

Promotion of Unhealthy Behaviors

Cosmetic Surgery as SELF-CARE?? WTF!!
Self Care

Capitalistic

Meritocracy: STEM is not racist, our motto is “STEM as Survival of the Fittest”

Community Care

Non-Capitalistic

Inditing STEM Companies and the Military as Responsible for Planetary Destruction
Self Care

*Capitalistic*

*Meritocracy: STEM is not racist, our motto is “STEM as Survival of the Fittest”*

*Measuring Black Death With Preexisting Conditions and Statistics*

Community Care

*Non-Capitalistic*

*Inditing STEM Companies and the Military as Responsible for Planetary Destruction*

*Examining the Role of Racism, Sexism, and Classism as Determinants in BLACK DEATH*
Self Care

Capitalistic

*Meritocracy: STEM is not racist, our motto is “STEM as Survival of the Fittest”*

*Measuring Black Death With Preexisting Conditions*

*Normalizing racism by spending money to cope (not heal) with the discrimination*

Community Care

Non-Capitalistic

*Inditing STEM Companies and the Military as Responsible for Planetary Destruction*

*Examining the Role of Racism, Sexism, and Classism as Determinants in BLACK DEATH*

*Supporting Black/POC Owned Coffee Shops, Community Centers, and UNIONS*
Self Care

Capitalistic

Meritocracy: STEM is not racist, our motto is “STEM as Survival of the Fittest”

Measuring Black Death With Preexisting Conditions

Normalizing racism by spending money to cope (not heal) with the discrimination

Violence as Individual Acts... and Guns as THE SOLUTION

Community Care

Non-Capitalistic

Inditing STEM Companies and the Military as Responsible for Planetary Destruction

Examining the Role of Racism, Sexism, and Classism as Determinants in BLACK DEATH

Supporting Black Owned Coffee Shops, Community Centers, and UNIONS

How Policies/Companies Manufactures and Normalizes Violence
<table>
<thead>
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R+RIGHTS

Racial Revolutionary and Inclusive Guidance for Health Throughout STEM

Focus: Mental Health
THANK YOU