



Project SOAR: The Strong Black Woman Schema in the Breast Cancer Context

Tammie Denyse¹, Kimberly J Martin², Yrvane K Pageot², K Denise De Luz¹, Jacqueline HJ Kim², Praise Owoyemi² & Annette L Stanton²

¹Carrie's TOUCH, Sacramento, CA; ²University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Los Angeles, CA

INTRODUCTION

Breast cancer is a crucial problem for African American women (AAW), with marked disparities in five-year survival relative to non-Latina white women (WW).¹ Additionally:

- AAW breast cancer survivors are lower in specific quality of life (QOL) domains (relative to WW), persisting through 2+ years, including depressive symptoms, perceived stress, fear of dying, unmet supportive care needs, and financial distress.²
 - Younger AAW (< 50 years) are particularly at risk.
- Spiritual QOL is more robust for AAW relative to WW.²
- Factors such as socioeconomic and medical factors only partially explain the QOL disparities.²
- AAW breast cancer survivors report not receiving sufficient information from their physicians during diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up care.²

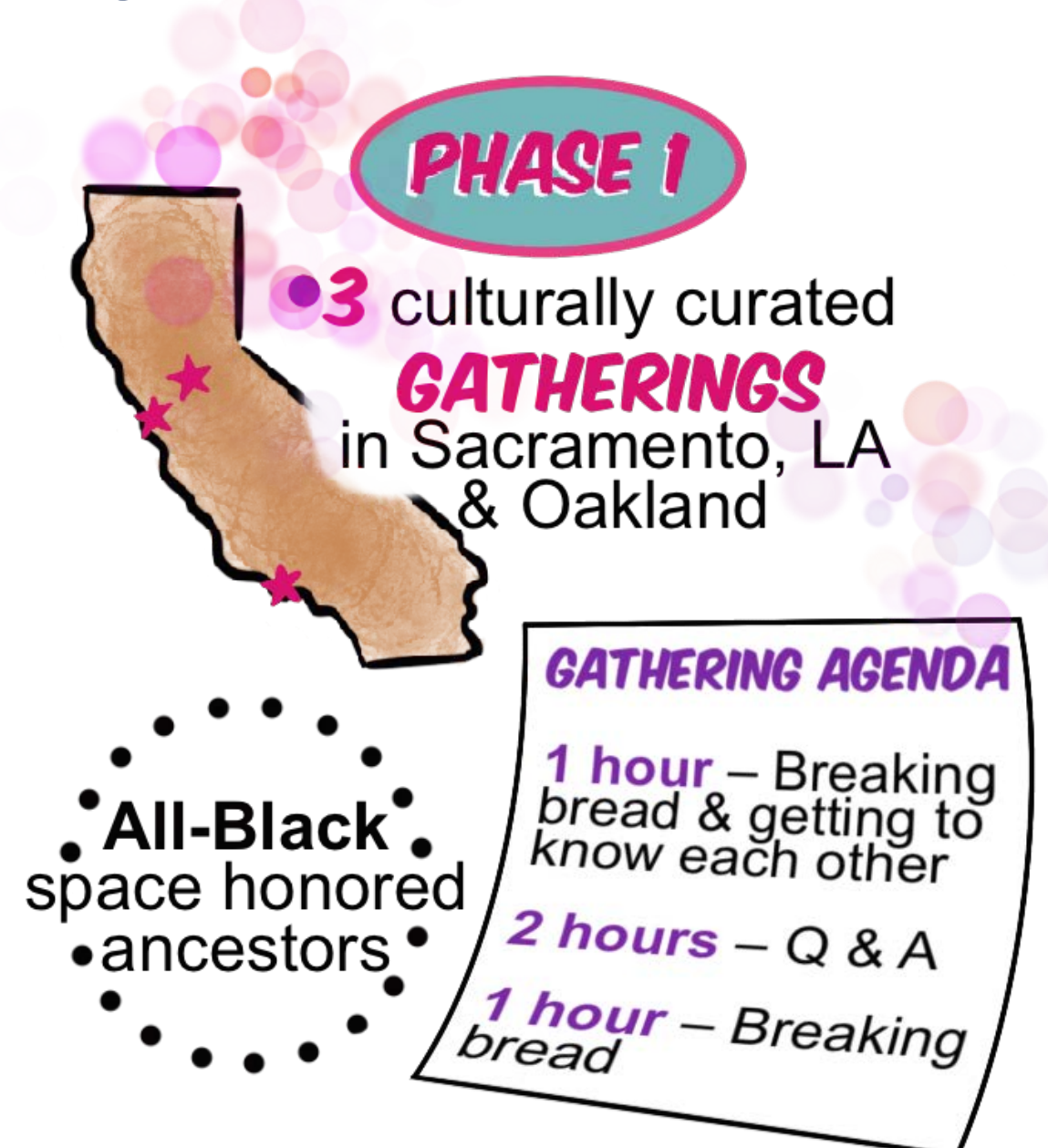
The goal of **Project SOAR (Speaking Our African American Realities)**, a community-academic partnership, is to explore in the breast cancer context the potential relevance and influence of the Strong Black Woman schema, which involves historically grounded expectations to:

- prioritize caregiving over self-care
- suppress emotions
- present an image of strength
- decline support
- strive to achieve success without adequate resources

METHOD

In Project SOAR, led by Co-Principal Investigators Tammie Denyse and Annette Stanton, Gatherings were conducted with AAW breast cancer survivors.

- Gatherings = culturally curated focus groups
- Gatherings were intended both to explore the Strong Black Woman schema in the breast cancer context and to offer participants some immediate benefit (in addition to monetary compensation).



RESULTS

Participants

- Black women (N = 37) diagnosed with breast cancer
- Age range: 30 to 94 years
- Diagnosis range: one month to 20+ years



Photographed with permission.

Question: How do you define the Strong Black Woman concept?

- “You do and you do and you continue to do no matter what.”
- “No complaining, no crying.”
- “Black women having to bear the brunt of emotionally damaging experiences and still keep pushing through life. Experiences such as Black men being lynched, castrated, giving birth and having babies ripped from your arms, and kids being shot by the police. We have to bear it all and still keep going.”

Question: Do you think others, such as your family, friends, or medical team expect you to be a SBW during your breast cancer journey? If yes, who and how?

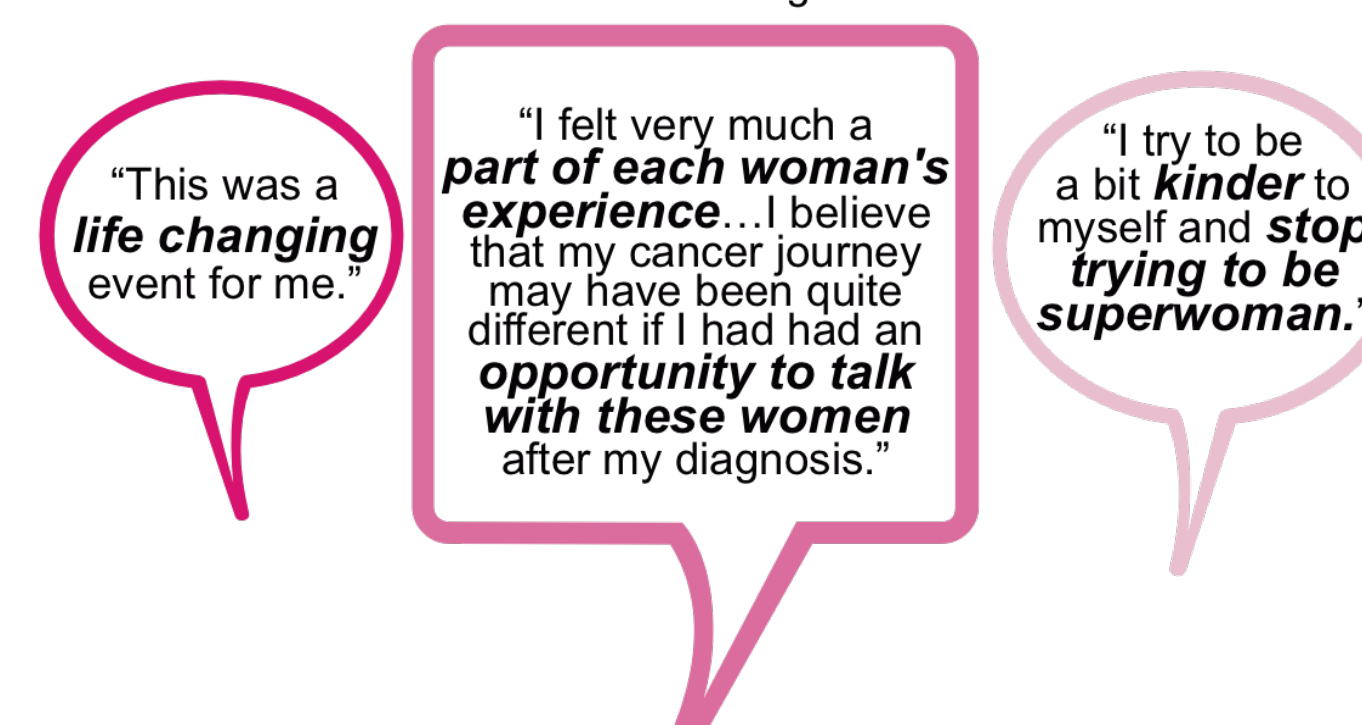
- Participants reported medical staff perceiving them as SBW, particularly with regard to presenting an image of strength:
- Having physicians call them (when they were at work, driving, etc.) to convey their biopsy results.
 - Physicians having no regard for their mental health.
 - Having to advocate for the treatment they needed/wanted; not being heard and/or understood by their physician.
 - “[I was told,] ‘We can’t save them (her breasts) they’re no good’ but not even in a sympathetic way...Maybe I showed too much strength...What I got from the medical, ‘You come in here like you can take it so this is how I’m going to dish it to you.’”

RESULTS

Follow-up surveys at 2-12 weeks (n = 27) and 3-9 months (n = 20)

QUOTES

from participants after the Gatherings:



On average, women found the Gatherings highly meaningful. The Gatherings’ particularly meaningful aspects (M > 4.5 on a 5-point scale of meaningfulness [1 = not meaningful; 5 = extremely meaningful]) were:

- discussing the Strong Black Woman concept and its applicability to participants’ experiences;
- sharing one’s own unique experience with breast cancer;
- connecting with other African American survivors;
- having an all-Black space.

Participants reported doing more of the following since the Gatherings:

- practicing self-care;
- feeling empowered to have a conversation with their doctor;
- saying “no” to things they would prefer not to do;

Formal qualitative analysis of Gathering transcripts is in progress.

CONCLUSIONS

- The Project SOAR community-academic partnership successfully completed culturally curated Gatherings to explore the Strong Black Woman schema with 37 Black women diagnosed with breast cancer.
- Nearly all participants identified as a Strong Black Woman.
- Participants saw their oncologic teams as expecting them to be Strong Black Women, and particularly not to need support.
- Participants found the Gatherings to be highly meaningful.
- Development of ethnocentric clinical care pathways is needed to provide optimal and holistic oncologic care to Black women.

REFERENCES

- ¹American Cancer Society. (2020). *Breast Cancer Facts & Figures 2019-2020*.
²Powe et al. (2007) Quality of life of African American cancer survivors—a review of the literature. *Cancer 109(2 Suppl):435-445*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Supported by the California Breast Cancer Research Program (Co-PI Denyse & Stanton) and the Breast Cancer Research Foundation (Stanton). We are grateful to the women who took part in the Gatherings as well as Teri McClanahan, an early member of the Project SOAR team.