

# Calling on Hope: Examining the Protective Nature of Hope on Mental Health Risk Factors in Black Women

Journal of Black Studies  
2024, Vol. 55(8) 623–637

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DOI: 10.1177/00219347241265783

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## Abstract

Feelings of defeat and entrapment are significant risk factors for various mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidality. However, limited studies have intentionally examined these constructs exclusively within a sample of Black women. The current study aims to investigate whether the endorsement of hope can serve as a protective factor against feelings of defeat and entrapment among Black women. About 266 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34$ ) cisgender African American/Black women were surveyed, and results indicated that hope negatively moderated the relationship between defeat and entrapment, suggesting that hope served as a protective factor by weakening the relationship between defeat and entrapment. Future research and clinical implications are discussed.

## Plain language summary

### Primary agenda

This study aims to critically investigate the ways in which hope can protect against feelings of defeat and entrapment among Black women.

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**Keywords**

Black women, hope, defeat, entrapment

**Introduction**

This study aims to critically investigate the ways in which hope can protect against feelings of defeat and entrapment among Black women. Prior to this investigation, it is imperative to contextualize this study within a Black Feminist theoretical framework (BFT; Collins, 2022). Using a BFT lens, the current authors are able to (1) intentionally center Black women's lived experiences in the analysis, (2) openly acknowledge and consider Black women's intersectional identities when examining their potential experiences with mental health risk factors, and (3) meaningfully contribute to the field of Black Studies by adding to research that refuses to pathologize Black women's psychological experiences (Angelou, 1997; hooks, 2014; Shange, 1997; Spates & Slatton, 2017), and instead deliberately redefine and reclaim messages concerning Black women's mental health.

This timely research is grounded in BFT as evidenced by centralizing Black college aged women and their mental health. As Black women are pursuing higher education, they often encounter significant challenges including the need to navigate racial and gendered microaggressions, as well as explicit marginalization (Lewis & Neville, 2015; Walkington, 2017). While enrolled in higher education, these challenges may either lead or contribute to Black women's potential feelings of defeat and entrapment. Inherent in the conceptual framework of BFT, it is important to not only center Black women, but also highlight and honor the distinct ways Black women engage in healing and enact strategies to maintain their well-being. Due to the unique positionality of Black women, particularly in the context of academia, it is necessary to continuously highlight protective strategies, as well as potential risk factors that can impact Black women's mental health.

***Defeat and Entrapment***

The current study focuses on feelings of defeat and entrapment due to prior scholarship suggesting they are significant risk factors for the occurrence of various mental health conditions (O'Connor, 2011; Siddaway et al., 2015). Feelings of defeat can be described as a negative emotional experience due to difficulties attaining goals. Feelings of entrapment can be described as a state of being in which one perceives no escape (O'Connor, 2011). Initially, psychological constructs such as defeat, and entrapment were explored to gain a

deeper understanding of depression (Gilbert & Allan, 1998). Gilbert and Allan (1998) found a significant correlation between defeat, entrapment, and depression. Thereafter, other scholars began researching whether defeat and entrapment were risk factors for suicidality as prior studies indicated a strong correlation between depression and suicide (Jacobs et al., 2001). The Cry of Pain model was then developed to examine the relationship between defeat, entrapment, and suicidal behavior (Williams, 2001); however, O'Connor (2011) expanded the Cry of Pain model by developing the Integrated Motivational-Volitional model (IMV). The Integrated Motivational-Volitional model (IMV; O'Connor, 2011) specifically identifies feelings of defeat and entrapment as primary risk factors for the emergence of suicide ideation and intent (O'Connor, 2011). The model also suggests that experiences of defeat may lead to feelings of being trapped or unable to escape (i.e., entrapment) and potentially trigger suicide ideation and suicide related behavior (O'Connor, 2011).

Numerous studies have confirmed that feelings of defeat and entrapment are significant risk factors for the occurrence of various psychological disorders (O'Connor, 2011; Siddaway et al., 2015). For instance, in a meta-analysis, researchers found that defeat and entrapment were significant risk factors for mental health conditions including depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidality (Siddaway et al., 2015). Owen et al. (2018) found that defeat and entrapment were risk factors for suicide ideation in a sample of 80 participants diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Littlewood et al. (2016) collected data from 91 participants who experienced trauma and PTSD. They found that feelings of defeat, entrapment, and hopelessness mediated the relationship between nightmares and suicidal behaviors (Littlewood et al., 2016). A meta-analysis conducted by Taylor et al. (2011) examined 51 peer reviewed articles. Collectively, they found a link between social anxiety and perceptions of entrapment; an association between defeat and PTSD; and a potential relationship between defeat, entrapment, and suicidality, but this association may be due to comorbid experiences of depression (Taylor et al., 2011).

Although several studies have examined the psychological consequences resulting from feeling defeated and/or entrapped; few studies have explored these variables exclusively within Black women or Black individuals more broadly. One study applied the IMV model (O'Connor, 2011) to a community sample of 270 African American/Black women (average age of 34 years old) and found that entrapment mediated the relationship between defeat and suicide ideation, suggesting that the relationship between defeat and suicide ideation can be potentially explained by feelings of being trapped by life stressors for African American/Black women (Clement, 2020). Hollingsworth and

Polanco-Roman (2022) utilized the IMV model (O'Connor, 2011) as a framework to examine whether ethnic identity can moderate the relationship between defeat, entrapment, and suicide ideation in a sample of 106 African American young adults (ages 18–35). They found that ethnic identity weakened the relationship between the identified variables and was able to serve as a protective factor against suicide ideation (Hollingsworth & Polanco-Roman, 2022). An additional unpublished study conducted by Hollingsworth (2017) used the IMV model (O'Connor, 2011) in a sample of 75 African American college students from a large Midwestern University (average age 20 years old), but did not find a significant relationship between defeat, entrapment, and suicide ideation. Overall, there is limited research assessing the negative psychological impact of defeat and entrapment among Black female samples. There is a need for additional research that intentionally identifies relevant protective factors against defeat and entrapment for Black women specifically.

## *Hope*

Hope has been conceptualized as a relevant protective factor for Black individuals (Davidson et al., 2010; Hollingsworth et al., 2016). Historically, research suggests that Black individuals have embodied the concept of hope in their survival for centuries and this is evidenced by their ability to survive during the period of enslavement (Hartman, 2008), resist against systematic forms of oppression (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020), and develop culturally relevant coping mechanisms to find ways to thrive despite constant dehumanization (Outley et al., 2021; Utsey et al., 2007). Hope is a psychological construct primarily studied in the field of positive psychology, and scholars have defined it as “the ability to successfully plan and achieve a set of goals with determination” (Hollingsworth et al., 2016, p. 177; Snyder et al., 1991). Hope is composed of two elements, which include pathways and agency (Snyder et al., 1991). Pathways describes one’s ability to create a successful plan to accomplish a goal, and agency refers to the necessary determination and desire to reach such goal. Essentially, the combination of having a plan (i.e., pathways) and determination (i.e., agency) can enable an individual to successfully obtain a goal (Snyder et al., 1991).

The literature suggests that individuals with higher levels of hope are less likely to endorse suicide related behavior or other negative psychological outcomes. For instance, one study found that African Americans with higher levels of hope are at a lower risk for engaging in suicidal thinking even when other risk factors are present such as thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness (Hollingsworth et al., 2016). Tucker et al. (2016) found that

hope moderated the relationship between feelings of entrapment and suicide ideation among a sample of 174 college students. Specifically, Tucker et al. (2016) research revealed that individuals who can set goals and have the determination to achieve these goals (i.e., hope) are less likely to experience suicide ideation even when feeling trapped by difficult life circumstances. Another study explored hope and its relation to suicide risk among African Americans, and found that hope was able to serve as a buffer against suicide ideation (Davidson et al., 2010). Tucker et al. (2013) found that hope and optimism weakened the relationship between rumination and suicide ideation among a sample of 298 college students from a Midwestern university. Ultimately, prior literature suggests that higher levels of hope can serve as a buffer against negative mental health outcomes and suicide related behavior for Black women and African Americans more broadly. However, there is a dearth of literature that explicitly identifies how hope is related to risk factors such as defeat and entrapment among Black women.

### **Current Study**

Prior research suggests that feelings of defeat and entrapment are common risk factors for negative mental health outcomes (O'Connor, 2011). We can infer that if we reduce the impact of defeat and entrapment, we may reduce the occurrence of internalizing mental health disorders such as depression, suicidality, PTSD, and anxiety (Siddaway et al., 2015). Studies have also found the endorsement of hope as a relevant protective factor for African Americans (Hollingsworth et al., 2016). As a result, the current study aims to examine how the endorsement of hope can protect against Black women's potential experiences with risk factors such as defeat and entrapment. First, it was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between defeat and entrapment such that Black women who report higher levels of defeat will also report higher levels of entrapment. Second, it was hypothesized that hope would negatively moderate the relationship between defeat and entrapment such that higher levels of hope would weaken the relationship between defeat and entrapment.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 266 cisgender women who self-identified as African American/Black with a mean age of 34 years ( $SD=9.80$ ). A demographics questionnaire was administered which included a screening item that assessed

participants race/ethnicity to ensure the sample consisted solely of Black women. Approximately 94% of participants identified as Black, while 5.2% of the sample identified as biracial with one parent being Black. Participants were recruited online using snowball sampling through various social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). Participants were also recruited from a predominantly white institution in the midwestern U.S. using the SONA platform, which is an online recruiting system through the university. Participants recruited from SONA were compensated by receiving academic credit to partially fulfill a requirement for an introductory psychology course. Participants received a consent form that indicated that participation was voluntary, and consent was assumed upon completion of the anonymous survey. Participants completed measures on an online survey platform (i.e., Qualtrics). After completion of measures, participants were debriefed about the aims of the study and received a referral list of psychological services. The university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all study procedures, and all participants provided informed consent prior to completing any of the questionnaires.

## **Measures**

### *Demographics Questionnaire*

A demographics questionnaire was administered to participants to obtain information about their race/ethnicity, age, sex, and gender.

### *The Defeat Scale*

The Defeat scale is a 16-item self-report measure that assesses feelings of a failed struggle as well as a decline/loss in social rank. The scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always). Items from the scale include statements such as, "I feel that I have not made it in life," "I feel that I have lost important battles in life," and "I feel powerless." Higher scores indicate greater feelings of defeat. In a previous study examining defeat in a general sample of Black college aged adults, internal consistency was excellent, with an alpha level of .93 (Hollingsworth, 2017). In the current study, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

### *The Entrapment Scale*

The Entrapment scale is a 16-item self-report measure that assesses feelings of inescapable situations. The scale measures for both feelings of internal

entrapment and external entrapment. The scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 0 (not at all like me) to 4 (extremely like me). Items from the scale include questions such as “I am in a situation I feel trapped in,” “I am in a relationship I can’t get out of,” and “I feel trapped by other people.” Higher scores indicate greater feelings of entrapment. In a previous study that examined entrapment in a sample of Black individuals, the internal consistency was excellent ( $\alpha = .97$ ; Hollingsworth, 2017). In the current study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

### *Revised Trait Hope Scale (HS-R2)*

HS-R2 is an 18-item self-report measure. Six items assess one of three hope components of goals, pathways, and agency. Responses are rated on an 8-point Likert Scale with responses ranging from 1 (definitely false) to 8 (definitely true). Items from the scale include questions such as “I have trouble getting what I want in life,” “I go after goals that are difficult and challenging,” and “I have difficulty finding ways to solve problems.” Previous studies that have used the Revised Trait Hope Scale in a sample of African American college students reported good reliability ( $\alpha = .84$ ; Davidson et al., 2010). The alpha reliability for the current sample was also good ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

### *Analytic Strategy*

Prior to beginning the statistical analysis, the data file was scanned for any potential missing data. Missing data were found due to some participants not completing the entire study survey. To account for missing data in the sample, Little’s Missing Completely at Random analysis was conducted to ensure the data were missing at random. The assumption of missing completely at random (MCAR) was satisfied as the analysis revealed a non-significant chi-square statistic,  $\chi^2(4) = 0.604, p = .963$ . Once MCAR was satisfied, the expectation maximization (EM) algorithm was used to identify optimal values for missing data (Bennett, 2001; Keum et al., 2023; Schafer & Graham, 2002).

After accounting for missing data, bivariate correlation analyses were conducted to identify the relationships between the study variables. A moderation analysis was conducted to understand the impact of hope on the relationship between defeat and entrapment. Moderation analyses used the PROCESS macro, model 1, v4.1 (Hayes, 2013) in SPSS version 28.01. When completing moderation analyses, bootstrapping procedures were used with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples at 95% confidence intervals, as recommended

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Hope total	115.07	15.92	—	-0.56**	-0.60**
2. Entrapment total	15.01	14.4	-0.56**	—	0.77**
3. Defeat total	20.83	12.27	-0.60**	0.77**	—

Note. *N* = 266.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Bootstrapped Moderation Analysis of Hope on Defeat and Entrapment.

Predictors entered in set	Entrapment					<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>p</i>	LCI	UCI	
Defeat	1.34	0.247	.000	862	1.83	
Hope	-0.028	0.067	.673	-0.160	0.103	
Defeat $\times$ Hope	-0.0052	0.002	.021	-0.009	-0.008	.6224

Note. LCI = lower bound estimate of 95% bias-corrected confidence interval; UCI = upper bound estimate of 95% bias corrected confidence interval; 5,000 bootstrapped resamples.

by Hayes (2013). In the model, defeat total score was the predictor variable (*X*), hope total score was the moderator (*W*), and entrapment total score was the outcome variable (*Y*).

## Results

Descriptive statistics for the scales of all measures and bivariate correlations between study variables are displayed in Table 1. As expected, there was a significant positive correlation between entrapment and defeat ( $r = .77$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There was a significant negative correlation between defeat and hope ( $r = -.60$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There was also a significant negative correlation between entrapment and hope ( $r = -.56$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

A moderation model using bootstrapping (PROCESS; Hayes, 2013) was conducted to examine whether hope would significantly moderate the relationship between defeat and entrapment. Results indicated that there was a significant main effect for defeat ( $B = 1.34$ ,  $t = 5.45$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95% CI [0.86, 1.83]), but not for hope ( $B = -0.028$ ,  $t = -0.422$ ,  $p = .67$ , 95% CI [-0.16, 0.10]), associated with entrapment. These effects were qualified by a significant interaction ( $B = -0.005$ ,  $t = -2.30$ ,  $p = .02$ , 95% CI [-0.009, -0.008]). The interaction term accounted for 62.24% of the variance of entrapment within the model. See Table 2.

Additionally, the Johnson-Neyman technique was used to determine at which level of the moderator is the association for the predictor and outcome variable no longer significant. The results showed that there are no statistical significance transition points within the observed range of the moderator found using the Johnson-Neyman method. Conditional effect analyses indicated that at high levels of hope, there was a significant relationship between defeat and entrapment ( $B=0.673$ ,  $t=8.84$ ,  $p=.00$ , 95% CI [0.52, 0.82]). At moderate levels of hope, there was a significant relationship between defeat and entrapment ( $B=0.743$ ,  $t=12.43$ ,  $p=.00$ , 95% CI [0.62, 0.86]). At low levels of hope, there was a significant relationship between defeat and entrapment ( $B=0.84$ ,  $t=14.16$ ,  $p=.00$ , 95% CI [0.72, 0.95]). Collectively, these findings indicate that hope weakens the relationship between defeat and entrapment.

## Discussion

The current study sought to understand the moderating effects of hope on the relationship between defeat and entrapment among Black women. The first hypothesis stated there would be a positive relationship between defeat and entrapment. Results confirmed this hypothesis, suggesting that Black women who reported higher levels of defeat also reported higher levels of entrapment. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting the link between defeat and entrapment (O'Connor, 2011). A potential rationale for feelings of defeat and entrapment within Black women may be due to their constant fight against simultaneous systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Black women's interlocking identities (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religious affiliation) have historically engendered mistreatment and discrimination (Collins, 2020), which could play a role in Black women's potential feelings of defeat and entrapment.

The second hypothesis stated hope would negatively moderate the relationship between defeat and entrapment. Results confirmed this hypothesis, suggesting that higher levels of hope weakened the relationship between defeat and entrapment among Black women. This is important because a weakened relationship between feelings of defeat and entrapment theoretically implies a reduction of internalizing mental health disorders among Black women. This finding is consistent with prior research implying hope as a protective factor against negative mental health outcomes for Black populations (Davidson et al., 2010; Hollingsworth et al., 2016). A potential rationale for hope weakening the relationship between defeat and entrapment may be found within the components of hope. For instance, hope comprises the combination of creating a plan and having the determination to accomplish a goal

(Snyder et al., 1991); it may be that Black women's plans include the use of culturally specific coping strategies (Utsey et al., 2007) and their determination stems from the support they receive from community and kinship networks (Chatters et al., 1994), which enables them to accomplish goals such as refusing to feel perpetually defeated and trapped.

To the authors knowledge, this is the first study to empirically test the relationship between hope, defeat, and entrapment among Black women. Although this study provides important contributions, there are several limitations that can be addressed with future research. First, the use of a cross-sectional study design is a limitation because causal inferences cannot be made. Readers should interpret the results of the study as associations rather than causal relationships. Second, although hope significantly moderated the relationship between defeat and entrapment, the correlation between defeat and entrapment is consistently strong at all levels of hope, which may suggest that additional research may be needed to confirm the protective nature of hope on feelings of defeat and entrapment. Additionally, future research should incorporate other important variables such as symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, or stressful life events to aid in reducing the occurrence of highly correlated study variables. Third, future research should intentionally incorporate culturally specific measures to better assess Black women's psychological experiences. The measures used to assess for hope, defeat, and entrapment are well validated (Gilbert & Allan, 1998; Shorey & Snyder, 2004); however, incorporating measures that are more culturally specific to Black women may have yielded different results. For example, future researchers could use Abler et al. (2017) Hope Scale, which is a validated measure of hope primarily developed among young women living in rural South Africa. Despite the study's limitations, this research makes a timely contribution to literature by centering Black women in the analysis and identifying an accessible protective factor that can aid in reducing experiences of defeat and entrapment for Black women, as defeat and entrapment are primary risk factors for various psychological conditions (Siddaway et al., 2015). The outcomes of this study provided empirical evidence for hope weakening the relationship between defeat and entrapment. Implications can be drawn and extended to both clinical work and future research.

For instance, in clinical work clinicians can use this research to inform potential treatment options for Black women endorsing feelings of defeat or entrapment by assessing for levels of hope, as well as identifying specific barriers that can increase Black women's experiences with defeat and entrapment. Clinicians can also collaboratively discuss ways to increase hope by

using everyday activities, such as listening to music. Prior research has shown that listening to music may significantly lead to higher levels of resilience, self-efficacy, optimism, and psychological flourishing among both females and males (Gupta & Singh, 2020). Music's potential of generating positive emotions may create opportunities for engaging in hope and serve as a buffer against negative life circumstances (Gupta & Singh, 2020). Scholars have also found that integrating hip-hop and rap music in the counseling process can aid in increased levels of emotional awareness, empowerment, and assistance in processing difficult emotions among marginalized communities (Jefferson et al., 2024). Therefore, opportunities may exist for clinicians to emphasize the use of culturally relevant and affirming music as a practical and accessible strategy for increasing hope. More specifically, a potential intervention may be clinicians and Black female clients collaboratively creating a playlist to provide Black women with a practical resource to utilize when experiencing feelings of defeat and entrapment.

Additionally, clinicians can consider using hope therapy (Cheavens et al., 2006) with clients who express feelings of defeat or entrapment. Hope therapy is designed to increase hopeful thinking and encourage goal-pursuit activities among clients. Clients are provided psychoeducation about hope theory and then supported in finding ways to practically apply these principles in their lives (Cheavens et al., 2006). In terms of future research, it is critical to continue developing defeat and entrapment related work intentionally centering Black women. To examine Black women's risk for defeat and entrapment carefully and critically, future psychological research can find ways to continue grounding their analysis in Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2020), Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems, 2019), and African/Black Psychology (Kambon, 2012). In doing this, researchers can appropriately situate Black women's experiences and contextualize empirical results in culturally relevant and humanizing ways.

Overall, by utilizing a BFT framework (Collins, 2020), the current study is able to (1) purposefully center Black women in the analysis, (2) rationalize the study results by taking into consideration Black women's unique intersectional identities (Collins, 2020) and the ways in which they navigate simultaneous systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), and (3) emphasize the need to create additional protective research for Black women, particularly Black women enrolled in higher education. The results of the study revealed that hope can be an accessible and practical way to reduce feelings of defeat and entrapment among Black women. These findings have relevant clinical and research implications as it supports the importance of hope as a protective factor for Black women potentially feeling defeated and/or

trapped. The current study's results may also suggest that hope is a necessary psychological construct for Black women's survival as the endorsement of hope may be protecting Black women from experiencing significant mental health risk factors such as defeat and entrapment.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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