

WORKING CLASS BLACK AMERICANS:
EXPERIENCING AND COPING WITH RACISM

By

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This thesis attempts to formulate a better understanding of the lived experiences working class black Americans have with regard to their class and racial positioning. The unique position of the working class within the class structure of America and black Americans' place within the American racial hierarchy result in the overlapping of class and racial oppression for working class black Americans. Understanding how this particular segment of the American population experiences class and racial oppression is of great importance, as this group comprises the majority of the black American population.

A pilot study was conducted in which nine black Americans were interviewed about their life experiences with racism and the mechanisms they employ to internally and externally combat racist stereotypes, speech, and actions. The working class black Americans interviewed described in detail personal experiences with racism and how

they dealt with incidents of racism. Interviewees also revealed how they cope with racism and what influences have led them to develop these coping strategies.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 1619 when the first Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, black Americans have held an important place in American labor history. Essentially, without black American labor the economic development of the United States would not have been as successful as it has been. Recognition of the contributions of black American workers has been long in coming, and many still wait for appreciation. The unique position of black Americans and their contributions to the dramatic changes in the American economy over the past three hundred years warrants attention. More often than not, these contributions have been overlooked as racist interests prevailed in creating a land of opportunity for whites at the expense of opportunities for black Americans. The status of black Americans is lower than white Americans as evidenced on a number of scales, for example the earnings gap between black and white Americans and differences in education attainment between these same racial groups.¹ Black Americans have suffered the indignities and harms of slavery and Jim Crow, and continue to be impacted in all areas of life by systematic patterns of racism.

This thesis will share the experiences working class black Americans have had with racism. It will then discuss the coping strategies these same individuals use to combat the internal and external results of discrimination. To the researcher's knowledge there has

¹ Such differences will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

never been a study of this kind. Since the working class is the largest portion of the black American population, such a study is of exceptional importance.

Oppression for What End?

Black Americans have, historically, served as the backbreaking workers who have allowed white America to develop its wealth. Domestic, manufacturing and production work no other group wanted have been relegated to black Americans. For over a century, black American workers have been the backbone of American success during periods of economic boom, yet during times of economic depression, have received less assistance than whites. Due to the tradition of racism that has persisted in the United States, much of black America is working class,² with many within this class hovering around the poverty line. Black American labor has provided for the enrichment of white America.

Technological advances that are creating high paying jobs for those with a college degree and beyond are not available to many working class black Americans. It is the job expansion within the service sector that is available to black American workers. These jobs often offer little to workers other than the opportunity to become a part of the working poor. The lack of well paying employment is an important issue for the black American community. Race and class together create a position for a majority of black America that is threatening to individual's emotional and physical well being.

The position of class creates a space for working black Americans that is shaped by the personal necessity to take any work that is available. The juxtaposition of class with race, and for women, gender, lead black Americans to a place that is dominated by

² The working class is a group of workers that fill mainly blue- and pink-collar jobs. Recently, more working class jobs have emerged in white-collar industries. A lengthier definition will be discussed later in this chapter.

multiple “-isms,” on and off the job (Feagin 2001; Hill Collins 2000; Roediger 1999). These “-isms” serve as “systems of domination that affect access to power and privileges, influence social relationships, construct meanings, and shape people’s everyday experiences” (Chow 1996:xix). These are the new ways to keep whites on top of the success ladder with blacks far below holding the ladder up.

Feagin terms the use of race and class, and by inference, gender, as part and parcel of the “social reproduction” of the status quo. Social reproduction utilizes the many forms of oppression to create a systemic environment where white males hold power over all other racial and gender groups.³ “For systemic racism to persist across many generations, it must reproduce the necessary socioeconomic conditions. These conditions include substantial control by whites of major economic resources and possession of the political, police, and ideological power to dominate subordinated racial groups” (Feagin 2001:25-26). That the black American working class has been greatly harmed by systemic racism, which limits access to economic, educational, and other social resources, is hardly disputable. The substantial value of the black American working class throughout American history, as well as currently, have led to this group being feared, mistreated, and used for the economic power that they have and continue to generate. Racism has been an instrumental mechanism for maintaining white hegemony. Understanding how racism impacts black American workers is the purpose of this study.

The Goal of This Project

The unique history of working black Americans makes their views on racism, classism, and sexism, and their methods for coping with these discriminations of interest.

³ The concepts of social reproduction and systemic institutionalism of power and privilege can be extended to any oppressed group.

There has been much attention lavished on the emerging middle class of black America as well as those on the other end of the spectrum, the impoverished. Yet, there has been a dearth of research on working class black Americans, particularly, attention to their racial and class positioning.

This thesis will explore how working class black Americans experience and cope with racism. An examination of how working black Americans fare vis-à-vis other racial and class groupings will be included. An analysis of data collected during a pilot study will comprise the bulk of this paper. A better understanding of the how racism is experienced by working class black Americans and the mechanisms used to cope with it are of primary importance, for this is the black American majority and it deserves to be heard.

Three questions have dominated throughout the preparation and writing of this thesis:

- What are the demographics of working class black America?
- How do working black Americans develop awareness about racial discrimination?
- What coping strategies do members of this group employ to combat the threat and effect of racism?

These questions were considered as part of this project. Chapters three, four, and five, respectively, will address each of the questions proposed here. Chapter two will detail the methods used in conducting this research and the final chapter, six, will conclude this thesis.

The significance of experience for middle class and poor black Americans is important, but the experiences of the working class also warrant exploration. This thesis seeks to shed some light on what working class black Americans think and feel about their experiences with racism.

The Working Class Defined

The shift in the labor market from manufacturing to that of service and information/knowledge has created new positions for many of the working class. The blue-collar jobs that used to distinguish the working class from their white-collar counterparts can no longer be used as the only standard by which to determine working class status. Traditionally, blue-collar jobs, both skilled and unskilled, have been designated as working class with some white and pink-collar jobs fitting the general description of working class labor. Today, working class jobs are mainly low-wage work across white-, blue-, and pink-collar industries. The working class includes jobs such as manual labor, service work, and other such employment where higher education is not a requirement. Trends in industry development have shifted traditional notions of working class to account for the expansion of low-wage, low-skill white collar and pink-collar work.

A modern definition of working class is difficult to formulate given the shifts in what has been conceived of as the working class. Marxian conceptions of class can be used to determine who the working class is and, in fact, a revitalized concept of the proletariat has been applied recently to distinguish the working class from other class groups. *The Working Class Majority*, by Michael Zweig, succinctly describes the modern working class, “Working class people share a common place in production where they have relatively little control over the pace or content of their work, and they aren’t anybody’s boss.... When we add them all up, they account for over 60 percent of the labor force” (2000:3). This definition fits the Marxist conception of the proletariat, who are without power over the means of production. Once this concept is applied to all jobs

it is possible to envisage the lower, middle and upper grouping that is closely aligned with the working, middle, and upper classes.

Jobs that are working class are those such as retail employee for large stores, low-level government workers such as postal clerks, and factory employees. These jobs are ones in which employees take instructions from middle management, who in turn takes their directives from corporate and government elites. Working class jobs offer little in the way of autonomy and creativity. In short, the working class is the group of labor who are employed across various industries, but do not have power over their work and product.

By applying traditional notions of the working class to modern trends in industry and occupational shifts, a definition of the working class can be fashioned. Today's working class is comprised of men and women who are employed in occupations that can be found primarily in industries such as service, retail, and manufacturing. These jobs are often low-wage and/or low-skill. A lack of ultimate control and authority over the production or direction of one's work is a key element that distinguishes working class jobs from those of other class groups. For the purposes of this paper, another distinction that needs to be made between those designated as working class and other classes is the lack of the necessity of a college degree to complete job requirements. The combination of job status and higher education together determine who is working class. The vast majority of Americans, and black Americans in particular, fall into this spectrum.

The Working Class Predicament

The working class is comprised of a diverse group of people working within a variety of industries. The greatest shift in the composition of the working class has occurred in the post-industrial era. The industrial economy, mainly manufacturing and

agriculture, has shifted dramatically away from what has been thought of as traditional industries towards service and information/knowledge occupations in the now post-industrial era. The advent of the service economy is well documented (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Wilson 1987; Peterson and Vroman 1992) and the computer age has ushered in knowledge as the key to accessing labor market success (Autor, Katz and Krueger 1998). As the economy shifts from being based in manufacturing to an information/knowledge base, there has been a trend within the working class occupation structure to follow these industry changes. This development accounts for a number of dramatic changes in the workforce.

The Shift in Dominant Industries

The decline of manufacturing positions and the increase in service jobs has had a negative impact on the working class. There has been a steady decline in United States manufacturing, despite increases in demand for durable goods. Manufacturing employment in the United States is at 1958 levels, with significant job loss since 1998 (Bivens 2004). Steady, high paying, union jobs are being replaced by low-wage, non-union service jobs that do not offer much in the way of benefits and security against economic downturns. As information and knowledge become increasingly important, occupations in this sector have been expanding, as have the educational requirements to perform duties associated with these jobs (Autor, Katz and Krueger 1998). Without higher education, high-wage, stable jobs are increasingly unavailable to the working class population.

The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that the top jobs with employment growth between 2000 and 2010 will be in the areas of “computer and data processing services,” “residential care,” and “health services” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004a). These

predictions follow the trend of growth in the service and information/knowledge arenas. The Department of Labor also predicts that there will be a 15.2 percent increase in employment between 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004a). The occupational groups that will realize the greatest increase in employment numbers with the greatest positive change are in “professional and related occupations” followed by “service occupations” and “transportation and material moving occupations” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004b).

Employment in the categories that require a college degree or “other postsecondary award” is predicted to grow faster than any other area from 29 percent of all jobs in 2000 to 42 percent of all jobs in 2010 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001). The service sector is expected to add 20.5 million jobs by 2010, while the total share of jobs in manufacturing will decrease by two percentage points to its 1990 level of 19.1 million jobs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001). While good jobs (that presumably will require education at least through and more than likely beyond college) are expected to increase, service jobs are also increasing at a high rate. If the predictions are correct, high paying information/knowledge jobs will require more education than most working class individuals have. Simultaneously, low-wage, service jobs will be expanding. The service jobs are those most likely to absorb those working class people who will be shed from better paying manufacturing positions as companies move industrial and some service from the United States to overseas nations.

Members of the working class are doubly disadvantaged as the growth of jobs goes to college graduates, a requirement that many working class individuals cannot meet. The job climate for the working class is good for those seeking jobs in the service sector.

The problem with this is the low-wages many service sector jobs offer. Even though jobs are available to the workers are being displaced, these jobs pay a fraction of what their previous jobs have paid with high paying jobs going to those with higher education. The difficult position many within the working class face is one of dismal prospects.

Low-Wage Realities

A review of the wage shifts the working class has experienced is necessary to gain a complete understanding of economic position of this group. The Federal minimum wage increased in 1996 from \$4.75 to \$5.15 in 1997 (U.S. Department of Labor 2003). There has been no increase within the now almost ten-year period since the last minimum wage increase. In constant dollars the Federal minimum wage has increased by only \$.16 since 1960.⁴ These trends are having damaging effects for working class families. As low pay rates and declines in wages and salary become common amongst many jobs in which the working class is employed, it is understandable why many within the working class are in precarious economic positions with many falling into the category of “working poor.”

The working poor are defined officially as those who are at or below the official poverty line and have been in the labor force for more than twenty-seven weeks (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2003). During 2001, those who worked in the service sector comprised the largest portion of the working poor, 31.3 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2003). “Within the category of service workers, 20.4 percent of private household workers (that is, housekeepers, childcare workers, and cooks) were among the working poor. The portion of service workers other than those in private households or

⁴ In 1960 the minimum wage was \$1.00. This is equivalent to \$4.99 in 1997 dollars. The 1997 wage rate is \$5.15. (Economic Policy Institute 2001)

protective services (occupations such as bartenders, waiters and waitresses, dental assistants, janitors, hairdressers and others) classified as working poor was 11.6 percent” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2003:2). In 2002, approximately two-thirds of all low-wage jobs were in the service industry and three-fifths were in retail trade (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002). Recently, popular books such as *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (2001), have shed some light on the plight of the working poor. Ehrenreich (2001) details the difficulties in securing well-paying employment which forces many of the working class into the category of working poor.⁵

Increasingly, individuals and families are becoming part of the working poor. The “one paycheck from poverty’ category is also expanding as more jobs are dissolved than are created. Industrial shifts and the recent economic downturn have negatively impacted the families that are the most at-risk. As these economic forces continue to batter the working class it can be expected that increases in a range of problems that result from such harms will occur with more frequency (Mishel, Bernstein and Boushey 2003).

Conclusion

As the working class expands into the new industrial arenas that are becoming a main source of jobs in America, namely the service industry, a better understanding of the issues that are particular to this group warrant attention. These shifts are having a tremendous impact on black Americans. White hegemony in all areas of black American life is beginning to have a greater impact than in the recent past, as worker and civil rights are eroding, leaving black Americans no where to turn for support against the

⁵ While the working class includes a variety of occupations at a range of pay, the working poor are specifically those who are engaged in the labor market, yet whose earnings are at the poverty line. The working poor are part of the working class primarily because of their occupational designation. Salary and wages alone does not necessarily make one working class, however it can make one part of the working poor.

onslaught of institutional and individual racism. Understanding the economic climate in which many black Americans find themselves is of great importance in this time of labor sensitivity. For labor market difficulties limit black Americans' labor choices, and by extension, life choices. Working class individuals and families often occupy an unsteady position on the border of economic success and ruin.

For black Americans this situation is aggravated. In seeking to ameliorate this precarious position, black Americans are forced into occupying both black and white spaces, thereby splitting themselves between the two sides of the color line. Their experiences with racial issues and racism are unique in that they operate with a dual consciousness that must be ever vigilant against the constant threat of racism. Reviewing the contextual world that the working class is part of, and specifically black Americans, will deepen the understanding of this group. This thesis will review how some black Americans develop an awareness of racism and what mechanisms they use to cope with and mitigate such treatment.

CHAPTER 2 METHODS

The lack of literature about working class black Americans makes it difficult to assess whether the experiences of this group vary from those of other classes. The goal of this research was to do a preliminary examination of how working class black Americans experience and cope with racism. For this reason this pilot project has been conducted.

The methods used for this project are consistent with those used by qualitative researchers. The primary source of data for this project is interview data that was collected using purposive and snowball sampling. Since a specific population is being studied, it was necessary to direct my interview inquiries at black Americans who are working class. Individuals were designated as working class based on their occupation. For this sample, interviewees' occupations include government employees, retail workers, clerical workers, transportation drivers, and employees in black American owned small businesses.

Study participants were recruited from various areas within the community at-large, as well as the black American community. I shared the nature of the project with potential participants, and then asked if they would be willing to be interviewed. Several individuals declined to participate. Once interviews had been conducted, I asked interviewees if they knew of anyone else that would be interested in being interviewed. Some interviewees passed my contact information along to friends and family with the intent on setting up interviews.

This sample includes four women and five men all of whom are currently residing in the Southern United States. The age range for this sample is twenty-nine to fifty-eight years of age. Four of the nine interviewees are or had been married. Three of those interviewed have at least one child. All interviewees have graduated from high school and a majority has some additional technical or college training.

Interviews were held where interviewees worked and in public places such as malls and libraries. No interviews were conducted in private homes. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two hours. Interviews were audiotape-recorded. The audiotapes generated were then transcribed by myself.

The interview guide began with questions that sought to gain an appreciation for the type of values the interviewees were raised with. Questions about interviewee's childhood experiences were included for this reason. The middle section of the interview guide inquired about the interviewee's adult life. Questions in this section focused on employment and family experiences in adulthood. The last section of the interview guide contained questions about the interviewee's thoughts on inequality, including racial and gender inequalities.

Once several interviews had been conducted, I found it necessary to add several questions to the interview guide. The questions included on the original interview guide were not eliciting as much data about experiences with racism and how interviewees cope with racist incidents, as I believed existed. Therefore, midway through the interview process I introduced several vignettes to the interview guide. Once this new portion of the interview guide was incorporated into interviews, responses about racism and coping with racism increased.

When I conducted the interview I avoided leading the respondents. I had the interview guide at the ready for those whom I perceived as wanting a more structured experience, but there were interviewees who simply shared their experiences without me having to ask any questions.

Many questions remain unanswered and much of the interview data that was collected has not been used within this study mainly because it did not address the topics that have been directly raised within this thesis. The introduction of vignettes midway through the data collection phase corrected issues of concern. Further data collection should yield data that touches on multiple forms of oppression.

This study was able to gain obtain a rich understanding of black Americans' experiences with racial and class oppression. Further exploration of the nature of multiple oppressions, is necessary and future work is planned by the researcher.

CHAPTER 3 BLACK AMERICANS

Demographic characteristics of black America are quite important for understanding the context in which the majority of black Americans live. The issues with which black Americans contend differ from those any other racial/ethnic group faces. The structure of black America in terms of composition, family life and other important characteristics has an impact on this group's socioeconomic positioning, and, in turn, socioeconomic position has an affect on black American life. For example, family composition can result in gross differences in resources families have access to, as well as other non-demographic characteristics of families. Reciprocally, the resources a family has available to them can dictate family composition. When labor market positioning is taken into account, black Americans frequently end up on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. This in turn further affects the economic, social, and the political situation of the black American community.

General Demographics of Black America

Of the 280 million Americans, 30 million, or 12 percent are black Americans. The economic legacy of black Americans in the United States has been siphoned away through institutional and individual racism. Today, black America is, economically, stronger than ever before, but remain at a distinct disadvantage relative to whites. Opportunities abound as evidenced by rising graduation rates and entry into the job market at higher levels than ever before (Carnoy 1994). As much as the status of black

Americans has changed, there are many demographic features that have remained constant over the past century.

Residential Patterns

Today, despite the great Northern migration of black Americans at the turn of the last century, the majority of black Americans live in the South. Fifty-five percent of black Americans live in the South compared to only thirty-three percent of whites¹ (McKinnon 2003). The next two largest groups of black Americans are located in the Northeast and Midwest, with eighteen percent in each region (McKinnon 2003). When taking into consideration the lack of job opportunities in these sections of the United States, the residential pattern of black Americans is having a tremendous impact on the occupational opportunities available to this group.

Household Composition

The family is often times thought to be the bedrock of the black American community. Many families today are struggling as the percentage of single-parent households increase and family incomes decrease. Statistically, the black American family is quite different from its white American counterpart. These differences are significant when one considers the impact that the family has on life chances and opportunities. The purpose in reviewing household statistics is not to suggest that the family structure is to blame for many of the problems plaguing the black American community, but to draw attention to the increased harm economic difficulties have and the burden that black American families carry.

¹ References made to “whites” when used in conjunction with federal statistics means non-Hispanic whites.

Recent statistics on black American families suggest that black Americans are less likely to be married and tend to be larger than white families. Forty-three percent of black Americans are described as never married, ten percent are divorced, and six percent widowed (McKinnon 2003). Thirty-five percent of black Americans are married compared to fifty-seven percent of white Americans (McKinnon 2003). The significant likelihood that a single parent will head a black American family means that there is less total family income and other resources than if two parent were present. Since more women head single-parent households than men, the lower wages that women tend to earn disproportionately harms the families that they are raising.

In addition to the increased percentage of single-headed households, black Americans tend to have larger families than white Americans. Black American families with three or more family members within each family are 66.8 percent for married couples, 40.3 percent for female households with no spouse present, and 43 percent for male householders with no spouse present (McKinnon 2003). These percentages are all higher than those for whites. The significance here is that, statistically, black American families have more people to support than do white families. Not only are there more people within each household to support, but also there are fewer economic resources, in terms of multiple householders, to contribute to the income of the family.

The larger and more frequently, solely headed households of the black American community have from the start a greater disadvantage than white families. With disproportionately lower wages than white families, black American families are forced to do more with less. This fact may often times have the effect of decreasing the resources available to families that can aid them in advancing their economic position.

Educational Attainment

Education helps black Americans secure steady and financially meaningful employment. For black Americans, who are already at great disadvantages when they enter the labor market, education is critical. “The likelihood of a worker being paid the minimum wage or less is inversely related to the level of education attained” (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002:1). Given the current labor situation, with knowledge being among the primary ways to secure good employment, the graduation rate for black Americans is a significant statistics to consider. Graduation from high school and college can be the key to unlock success in the labor market.

Graduation rates are also a predictor of what the labor force composition across various industry sectors will be. For example, a low graduation rate suggests that as youth enter the labor market the jobs for which they will qualify are limited (and limiting) as opposed to those who enter with higher levels of education. Of course, in certain cases underemployment is possible due to any number of factors such as high unemployment rates in particular sectors, discrimination, et cetera. Knowing the education levels black Americans have reached is important for understanding why so many fall into lower levels of the occupational structure.

In terms of education attainment, white Americans are outpacing black Americans. As of 2002, seventy-nine percent of black Americans had earned at least a high school diploma; for white Americans, ten percentage points more had achieved the same level of education (McKinnon 2003). For those that go on to college, a similar pattern exists. Seventeen percent of black Americans have earned a bachelor’s degree, compared to almost thirty percent of whites (McKinnon 2003). Forty-three percent of black men and almost forty-six percent of black women had some college or higher (McKinnon 2003).

The black/white differential in education attainment, at all levels, impacts the school-to-work pipeline. Fewer high school and college and beyond graduates lead to decreased opportunities for obtaining high paying, secure employment. Fewer blacks entering at various occupational levels are competing with more whites seeking those same positions. Assuming hiring preferences for whites over blacks, the increased competition further frustrates job opportunities.² Therefore, the sting of racial bias is even more potent.

Although education is the key to securing a good job, higher education does not guarantee a job. Even for those black Americans with college degrees, unemployment rates are higher compared to those for whites. For college educated black Americans, the unemployment rate for graduates was four percent in 2003 compared to half that for white Americans (Rodgers 2004). For jobs that frequently require education beyond high school, managerial and professional specialties, positions were filled by only eighteen percent of black Americans, whereas whites fill thirty-three percent of these positions (McKinnon 2003). These statistics suggest that black Americans fare worse despite educational gains when compared to other racial groups.

The demographic character of black Americans detailed above indicates that blacks are not doing well relative to whites. With limited opportunities due to geographical location, family composition, and educational attainment, chances for success are relatively lower compared to whites. These lowered chances disproportionately place black Americans at greater risk to economic hardship than whites.

² Regarding racial hiring preferences see Feagin, Vera and Batur (2001), Roediger (1999).

The Black American Labor Force

Black American workers³ experience the labor market in ways that are distinct from other labor market participants. Black Americans before, during and upon exit from the labor market are faced with many obstacles that must be surmounted. Several theories have been developed to explain depressed labor market performance of black Americans. These theories attempt to explain the labor trends for working black America. Comparing black American labor statistics to those of whites is useful since whites fare far better in the labor market than any other racial group. Given this “elevated” position within the labor market, statistics for whites are the measuring stick by which all other racial groups are measured. Overall, black America is faced with more challenges than white America in the labor market, as well as other sectors that pipeline into the labor market. The determination of the black-white difference in labor force participation and other market areas, such as pay, is debated. A statistical portrait of black American labor and education is included here along with a comparison in some cases to white labor and education.

Theories of Labor Market Differentials

Several theories have been put forth to explain the black American predicament in the labor market. While these theories either do not explain or partially explain the labor market participation differences between black Americans and other racial/ethnic groups, it is worth acknowledging them since they drive much of the economic and social policies generated that affect working class black Americans. Many of these theories are based on racist notions of black American ability and culture. Those theories that take

³ There are no known (to this researcher) statistics that specifically relate to the black working class. For this reason a statistical examination of all black workers will be made.

into account the role of racial discrimination in the labor market are probably closer to advancing an understanding of labor market differentials than those that do not.

Blaming-the-victim theories

Among the oldest of the theories of statistically significant racial differences in the labor market is cultural deficiency theory. This theory is an outgrowth of the culture of poverty theory advanced by Oscar Lewis in the 1960s (Granovetter 2000). The theory suggests that cultural traits that view work in a negative way become deeply ingrained such that the culture itself impedes labor market entry and advancement. This theory continues to be popular today, particularly among conservative policy-makers (Murray 1984). A test of this theory suggests that it is not a valid explanation for differential labor patterns (Johnson and Herring 1989).

Economists have proposed and advanced human capital theory. As is the case with most economic theories rational behavior is assumed to guide decisions made within the labor market, “a rational model of humans in which people (workers and employers) try to maximize their earnings” (Herring 1995). Some advocates of this theory suggest that the differences in hiring and firing patterns are a result of differences in worker ability and productivity due to individual investments made in education and training (Mincer 1962, Becker 1964). If black Americans are unsuccessful in the labor market, then it is because they have not advanced the skills that would make them more desirable to employers. This theory acknowledges that some employers do discriminate based on race. However, it is assumed that their economic interests will outweigh their personal biases and any market imbalance with respect to race will correct itself. It is primarily, so the theory suggests, a lack of skill on the part of the individual worker that leads to the labor market differentials that exist, not other factors such as racism.

Systemic and structural theories

Some have proposed that the labor market is divided into two segments, the primary and the secondary (Bonacich 1976; Dalto 1987). The primary labor market is composed of jobs that offer high wages, secure and steady employment, and upward mobility. Low-wage, temporary and part-time jobs make up the secondary market. The theory suggests that black Americans are excluded from the primary sector due to factors such as discrimination and are therefore pushed into the secondary sector where increased competition forces many into unemployment. This theory explains underemployment as well as joblessness, but it does not account for the differences that exist within labor markets.

Shifts in the composition of the labor market from manufacturing to service and information/knowledge as well as shifts in the location of jobs, for example from inner cities to suburban areas, have led to an increase in the skill and spatial mismatch of jobs and workers. Spatial mismatch and skill mismatch theories have proven to be rather useful in explaining the difficulties black Americans face in the job market because it calls attention to the dual effect of labor and housing discrimination (Wilson 1996; Herring 1995). This view of joblessness and underemployment diverges from the blaming-the-victim theories proposed by earlier social scientists, thereby re-focusing attention on structural incompatibilities and deficiencies.

Structural discrimination “exists when African Americans and other unempowered groups are disproportionately denied access to good jobs and other social rewards by social forces and policies that systematically operate to their detriment and have negative effects on their life chances” (Herrick 1995:4). Structural discrimination differs from other forms of discrimination because it is widespread and systematic, not just

interpersonal. Education, housing, and labor policies each act to aggravate the difficulties black Americans experience with the labor market. The harmful effects of such policies have been discussed in many texts (Feagin 2001; Feagin, Vera and Batur 2001). Policies that may appear to be race neutral in fact have an opposite effect creating harmful results for working class black Americans.

These theories discussed above, in sum probably explain much of what is happening with black American participation within the labor market. The multiple phenomena that work to hinder black American labor advancement such as spatial and skill mismatch, labor market segmentation, and structural discrimination are undoubtedly to blame for much of the difficulties plaguing black America.

Workforce Expansion

Despite the many obstacles that black American workers face, this group is projected to expand workforce participation at strong rates, however the recent recession has caused stagnation and setbacks to labor predictions. As the workforce expands in the direction of service and information/knowledge, it is black Americans who are projected to increase workforce participation at almost double the rate of “white non-Hispanics,⁴” but only at half the rate of “Asian and other” and “Hispanics” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001). However, the growth that has been predicted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics seems to be going awry in the jobless economic recovery that is plaguing the United States presently.

⁴ Black American workforce participation is projected to increase from 9 percent in 2000 to 21 percent in 2010; workforce participation for Asians is expected to be 44 percent in 2010 and 36 percent for Hispanics (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001).

Joblessness and Underemployment

As the “dot com” sector began to fail, the job loss fallout of the early 2000s primarily impacted educated whites that were the primary participants within the information technology industry. As the recession expanded, impacting other industries, black Americans took their place in the downturn as the hardest hit group. As of early 2004, the unemployment rate for black Americans was just above ten percent (Rodgers 2004). Not only is unemployment for black Americans higher than the overall national average by about four percentage points, but also the “inflation-adjusted median income of African American households fell by 3.2% from 2000/2001 to 2001/2002, compared to only a 0.8% decline in median white household income” (Rodgers 2004:1). Even though the beginning of the most recent economic downturn disproportionately affected white Americans, black Americans were quickly included in the fallout of the economic breakdown.

With higher unemployment rates, and a greater loss in real household income, black Americans have been harder hit than white Americans. The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists published an article that detailed the state of the black worker (Kirk 2003). A key fact cited in the report is that the unemployment rate for black Americans “has increased four times faster than the rate for white workers” (2003:2). Kirk concludes that the jobless recovery is having a devastating effect on the black American community with little relief in sight and is exacerbating the divide between black and white joblessness (2003). It could be suggested that, as in the past, black American workers are the first being fired and the last being hired (Pinkney 1993). It will take black America longer to recover and progress once the economy stabilizes. Over the past

several years, black Americans have lost jobs and real income thereby having a dramatically negative impact on the financial well being of this group.

Geographical Effects on Employment

Where black Americans are located geographically can have an impact on how they are weathering the current economic storm. States with the highest percentages of black Americans are also those with job loss, including all states in the South, many states in the Northeast, rustbelt states such as Michigan and Ohio, and California (Economic Policy Institute 2004). Every other state, with the exception of Alaska, is experiencing “insufficient job growth” (Economic Policy Institute 2004). Frequently, when labor markets become competitive, black Americans are the first to be harmed. Given this state-level data, it can be inferred that many black Americans are having a difficult time securing employment since job growth is weak.

Industry-specific Considerations

Recent industry-specific employment statistics suggest that compared to white America, black America faces more difficulties in the labor market. “Black men were more than twice as likely as non-Hispanic White men to work in service occupations (19 percent and 8 percent, respectively). They were nearly twice as likely (29 percent compared with 16 percent) to be operators, fabricators, and laborers” (McKinnon 2003:5). A similar pattern exists for women. For these industries, which are overwhelmingly working class, black Americans are over-represented. In other sectors, those requiring higher education, black Americans tend to be underrepresented. Since there are more jobs being created that are low-wage and working class, black Americans are disproportionately found among those industries versus more lucrative sectors.

Working Women

It is difficult to detail the situation in which working class women find themselves. Virtually no research has been conducted on this particular segment of the black American population. Although much of the research on working women focuses on middle and professional classes, these analyses may point to overall labor patterns including those for working class women. Reviewing some key findings about all working women may hint at the experiences that working class women face since many women across economic levels experience similar patterns of inequalities (Cotter, Hermsen and Venneman 1999). Until more research is conducted on the working class it is almost impossible to do anything more than speculate about their situation.

As more black American women are heading households it is important to note the labor market situation these women are presented with. Women may fare better than black American men in terms of finding work, primarily service-oriented employment, but their pay and security are compromised as a result. The expansion of the service sector has benefited black women and white women alike, but black American women are more concentrated in public sector and “pink collar” jobs (Reskin and Roos 1990; Higginbotham 1992; Sokoloff 1992; Higginbotham 1994). This concentration results in higher gender segregation and lower wages for black American women relative to their male counterparts.

Historically, private service work was the main occupation for a large portion of black American women. “In 1970 employment in private households was the top industrial niche of all Black workers and was 92 percent female” (James 1999:3). The shift away from domestic work for many black American women reflect the changes, both racial and economic, that have opened access for more desirable jobs. Nakano-

Glenn finds that the new job market in which black American women find themselves participating shares many characteristics of the domestic jobs of the past, suggesting that the gains made have not been as dramatic as some have proclaimed (1992).

For black American women, higher levels of employment relative to black American men may appear positive, but the lower wages they receive depress the outlook for this group. Lower wages for women compromise families headed by women, a trend that is on the rise. Overall, the gains women make in the labor market are offset by concentrations in low-wage, service work.

Conclusion

Context matters. The context in which black Americans are situated matters tremendously when seeking to understand their experiences in labor and other settings. In order to gain an appreciation for the hardships many black Americans endure, and the significance of overcoming those difficulties, it is necessary to be aware of their demographic and economic characteristics.

Economically, black America faces a number of challenges. The region of the United States one lives in can have a serious impact on available resources and opportunities. In addition to geographical considerations, educational attainment also significantly affects socioeconomic well being. The lower levels of education obtained by black Americans mirror the lower levels of occupations.

Since disproportionately large percentages of black Americans are found within primarily working class industries, there is less total income and wealth development possible within the community as a whole. Comparisons with whites suggest that black Americans suffer great disadvantage within the labor market. Theories explaining racial differences suggest that the structural barriers, racial and otherwise, make it exceptionally

difficult for the black American community to find and keep employment. For women, this scenario is exacerbated by their concentration in low-wage, service jobs.

Furthermore, as more women head households, black American families are placed under greater socioeconomic stress.

The importance of understanding better the experiences of working class black America becomes clearer when one takes into consideration the demographic portrait that has been developed in this chapter. Racial differences in educational attainment and employment suggest that race is of prime importance. Recent theories that have been developed take into account the significant impact race has on securing employment and realizing opportunities.

Given the racialized situation in which black Americans find themselves, a position that aggravates and is aggravated by other issues, gaining more knowledge about how black Americans come to know what racism is and when and where it occurs is of great importance. If how, when and where racism happens can be better understood then perhaps more efficient policies can be developed to protect black Americans and allow them to experience the greatness of opportunity that has been under exclusive control of whites for so long. The next chapter will explore how black Americans learn how to recognize the racism that is found at work and in the community.

CHAPTER 4 AWARENESS OF RACISM

How do black Americans know that a situation is racist in nature? What are the ways that black Americans determine that they are the recipients of discriminatory treatment? How does one learn how to identify the difference between a white person that is treating you poorly and one that is treating you poorly because you are black? As it becomes increasingly inappropriate to behave in racist ways in public, determining what is and what is not racism becomes more challenging. For many working class black Americans, who live with one foot in their own black community and one foot in the white world, it is difficult to assess what is and is not racism. Moreover, ensuring discriminatory actions do not have adverse effects on opportunities within the labor, housing, and other markets and proving the existence of discrimination becomes virtually impossible as federal laws and regulations, as well as basic rights are eroding (Alexander 2003; Carnoy 1994).

This chapter examines the experiences working class black Americans have had with racism. First experiences are of great importance. The circumstances of the incident and how it is dealt with will remain with the recipient of the abuse forever. How black Americans subsequently formulate their reactions to racism can be gleaned from knowing how they experienced racism for the first time. More than forty years after the fall of Jim Crow, racism plays a significant role in the daily lives of black Americans. Negotiating the “new racism” which is frequently hidden behind white rhetoric and double speak has become a difficult matter for black Americans. As black Americans

venture from one side of the color line to the other deciphering discrimination becomes increasingly necessary for it will have an impact on their daily reality and life opportunities.

First Experiences and Early Lessons

Developing an awareness of racism usually happens at an early age for black Americans. For working class black Americans, who frequently are near whites for one reason or another during childhood, developing an awareness of racism is almost certain to occur at an early age. Of those interviewed in this pilot study, almost all had contact with whites at a young age. Whites were either neighbors, schoolmates, or in the community at-large. Unlike poorer black Americans who frequently live and work within all black communities and upper class black Americans who live and work in an almost exclusively all-white world, working class black Americans go in between both worlds with some frequency. This dual life, or double-consciousness as W.E.B Du Bois termed it, continues into adult life, when working class black Americans work in mostly white arenas, but live in mainly black communities. The experiences black Americans have with racism at a young age shape their future experiences and thoughts about the world.

First Experiences with Racism

A person's first experience with racism is oftentimes burned onto the memory. Long after the incident occurs, it can be recalled with vividness of experience and feeling. In the retelling, the words uttered are heard as if for the first time. The first experiences with racism are tinged with sadness and hurt. For many respondents, the first acknowledgement of racism came in the form of a traumatic personal experience with the

interviewee as an unwilling participant in a racist situation. These experiences left an emotional stain on the memories of interviewees.

The pattern of racist treatment that emerges in early childhood becomes deeply imbedded in the psyche of all who are involved, remaining there forever. During interviews as respondents shared their experiences the emotional tension was so strong that I felt it in the interviewees' voices and the tensing of their bodies. The lasting effects that first experiences have on individuals cannot be overstated. Strong emotions from early racism run deep.

Racism perpetrated by childhood peers

In the quote that follows a black American boy describes his first experience with racism:

In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, —refused peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and in life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.

The man telling the story of the rejected boy is W.E.B Du Bois, who for the remainder of his life, worked tirelessly to remove the stain racism left on him and fellow black Americans (Du Bois 1903 in Lewis 1995:28). One hundred years later there is remarkably little difference in the character of the story above and the stories shared by those who were interviewed.

That the social reproduction of systemic racism as described by Feagin (2001) in the form of racial awareness begins early is well-documented (Clark and Clark 1939; Clark and Clark 1950; Goodman 1964; Troyna and Hatcher 1992; Holmes 1995); that

children are not only aware of racial differences, but also use these differences to their advantage and others' disadvantage is also documented (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001).

Sam's first memory of racism involves being excluded from his peer group at school. During his recollection of the racist act, it was obvious that recalling the story made him feel some degree of the hurt that he had experienced as a young boy.

When I got a little older, so when I was in kindergarten, first grade, second grade they didn't really tell me anything about like this race, that race. Until I came to them and I was like, okay, a little boy, this is my earliest memory of being discriminated against. There was a party, my whole class, everybody was invited except me. Everybody in the class was white except me. And I was the only one that wasn't invited. And I kid you not, everybody in there had an invitation but me. And I was like, 'why didn't I get an invitation?' That was my first true experience, that was first grade, with that. Uh, I mean, and there was another time. My first crush was on a little white girl. And she literally told me that she didn't like because I was black.

Being accepted in one's peer group is extremely important for children. Sam's exclusion caused him to realize early in his life that he was not the same as everyone else. The second account of being told that his childhood crush did not like him with the exclusive reason being that he is black was another painful event account of rejection. These types of feelings in one so young leave a lasting impression. Sam explains how he coped with the feelings that resulted from these rejections, "learn to love yourself."

Racism perpetrated by adults

Many of the working class black Americans interviewed related similar accounts about their first experiences with racism. The similarities in age of development of consciousness of racism centered around early childhood, approximately four to seven years of age. Despite the young age of the interviewees when the racist incident occurred, the details and feelings associated with that memory are strong. The hatred that can develop as a result of the hatred heaped upon the black American child by whites

does not subside easily. Walt's first experience is an example of this. During the interview, for a moment, Walt was transported back to a little drugstore in a small Southern town:

It's amazing of all the racist things that you run into in your lifetime and when I was a small kid, uh, that drugstore up there on W. Road and that guy [the pharmacist]—I sat down, [he] tells me 'Nigger, get out that chair.' You know, that stayed in my head forever. And every time I pass by there, it's funny, but I think of that. I think of that, and that little store is now a real estate office up there...and recently somebody opened it up as a daycare there. But, every time I pass by I think of it; very seldom it doesn't cross my mind. You see, very seldom it doesn't cross my mind. And so, I grew up with racism and you never really understand it, you know, why it exists because it is something that I think, white people learn at a very early age.

Walt's recollection of what he experienced as a young boy also triggers the experience he has at the sight of what was the drugstore, now a completely different type of shop. His experience today at the sight of the building is linked to the past racist injuries. When I approached Walt for an interview he told this same story, but in more detail. The increased detail that he shared with me reveals the truly insidious nature of racism. The life-long toll it takes on those who suffer at the hands of whites is apparent:

When the line died down I was able to speak with him specifically and I told him exactly what the project is focusing on: how African-Americans learn about racism and how those experiences shape how they deal with racism the rest of their lives. He said: My first experience was when I was a little boy at a pharmacy here in ---. I went in and was sitting in one of the booths and the pharmacist walked over and said, 'Nigger, get out of here.' Walt said: the funny thing is that I played with the pharmacist's little boy. All the children played together. Over time all the kids started beating up the white little boy. There was so much hate that had built up. And this just doesn't go away even though whites want to act like nothing ever happened. They don't expect African-Americans to be angry, but once that seed was planted it doesn't go away.

The long-lasting effects of racism have an impact on those who were part of the original racist situation and forevermore the effects may be felt. The intense emotions caused by the verbal assault and physical rejection of Walt from the drugstore led to a severing of

friendships among the black and white children. Racism forced many to relinquish their friendships, and in the case of Walt the wall that was built upon hatred was so strong that friendships later in life cannot be forged.

Cathy shared a story about her childhood growing up in an all-white neighborhood that did not accept her family, the only black American family in the area. The theme of feeling “different” and severing relationships continues in this recollection. Cathy’s story involves a friendship that had to be kept secret from her white friend’s racist father:

I remember playing with the neighborhood children and one of the little girls, I used to always go over to her house, and I was allowed to go over as long as her dad wasn’t home, her mom would allow that. And it was just understood that he didn’t like black people. So whenever it was time for him to come home I would have to leave. And I can remember one day him coming home early and she and I were in my driveway riding our bikes and he told her, ‘Didn’t I tell you not to be playing with those niggers!’ For a child to hear that, that’s devastating. And to know what color is because there are children that don’t know and I want mine to be raised that way.

As an adult, Cathy can recall how devastating the experience of being caught playing with her friend and the father’s hateful words were to her, so much so that she adds that she does not want her own children to even know what color is. Cathy is implying that color is a negative thing, an idea that many black Americans harbor within. The lying that both children and the white mother had to do in order for a friendship to exist seems extreme, but in this case it was just “understood.” In the experiences quoted above, the way children came to know that they were different was through a traumatic racist event. The harsh reality of hatred taught a lesson that these individuals have never forgotten.

Entire families share the pain of racism, with their children being just one of the many who suffer. Prior to describing her friendship with the daughter of a racist, Cathy

shared two experiences she had in her neighborhood. In the early 1980s, Cathy learned that racism could be life threatening:

Growing up we lived in an all white neighborhood. In fact, in the neighborhood we lived in we were the only blacks. I can remember when Jesse Jackson was running for president, we woke up in the middle of the night and there was a cross burning on our front lawn. And also, somehow, accidentally, no one could ever prove it, our next-door neighbor's house was set on fire. We do believe that it was meant for us and so does everybody else. But, I remember that and being very afraid. I had to be about ten years old when that happened.

The terror and fear for her life that Cathy experienced as a child continues as she recalls the lessons racism taught her early in her life are devastatingly real.

The first experiences of racism for these respondents was so blatantly full of hatred that it is almost unbelievable that anyone could treat another with such lack of humanity. For Du Bois one hundred years ago, Walt forty years ago, and Cathy two decades ago, the experiences of racism have been burned into the memory. What these individuals shared with me surely becomes part of the collective memory and handed down from one generation to the next (Halbwachs 1950). Black Americans pass on the painful lessons they have learned, teaching their children all they will need to know to get by in the world, including how to deal with being "different."

Early Lessons

Interviewees' first experiences with racism seem to have come as a shock to many of them. Parents, family, and friends may have prepared them, but no amount of warning could prepare them for the experience when it faced them personally. These "lessons" become critical as children venture beyond the reach of parents. Black Americans must teach their children how to negotiate the racist world in which we all live. These teachings help black Americans to avoid racism and successfully cope when it does touch their lives.

One respondent, Ernest, shared what his mother taught him about race. At the time he did not know exactly what her words meant, but the reality of life as a black American and experiences with racism put her words into context. Today, as a young man, the lesson Ernest's mother taught him rings true as he lives his life as a black American male.

The way my mom put it to me was, 'You're different.' That's what she would say. When, uh, you know, when I would want to go out to the little kid parties and stuff that they had at their house, that I got invited to, she would let me go to some, but would say, 'You're different.' As I grew that went from, 'You're different,' to you know when I got up to eighth, ninth grade and she told me, 'When you was a kid I told you you were different. Now that you're becoming a man I'm telling you that you can't do the same things that you see white people do.' I, I listened to that. I took that to heart because as I say society, I realized that she was right. The things that this white guy can do and get away with, this black guy, he's gonna get nailed for it. We are different. The differences, the similarities, there's always controversy.

For Ernest, what being "different" meant as a boy is synonymous with what the reality of his adult life is like. As a black American, he is different from whites in many respects. Statistically, black Americans are different from whites on any number of points. In reality, the daily life of black Americans as an oppressed people is substantially different compared to whites. The threat of racism is everywhere for black Americans as they must be consistently on guard for racist attacks.

Parents are not the only source of knowledge about racism. As people experience racist events they will share these incidents with families and friends. When I asked who Sam shares his experiences with, he reported "friends, my friends. I explain it to them. You know, how I feel about that, that incident that happened. Some co-workers, you know, that I work with, I explained it to them." As experiences are shared among family and friends, black Americans learn about racism from one another as much as they do from personal experiences.

There are two ways that black Americans learn about racism. The first is through personal experience. For children racism is a traumatizing event that is never shed from the mind. Emotional scars are permanent. The second way black Americans learn what racism is is through parents and other influential people. Parents must prepare their children for our racist society long before the child encounters racism personally. Developing a system of protection against racism by being aware of it is a significant lesson that will carry into adulthood.

Experiencing Racism as an Adult

At no point in time is there an escape from the threats of racism. Beginning in early childhood racism dictates where you can and cannot go, with whom you can and cannot be friends, and threatens your very existence. As an adult the same continues to be true. For working black Americans, regardless of whether they reside primarily in black neighborhoods, contact with whites is constant. This high level of contact with whites forces black Americans to constantly be on alert. For those who also lived in or live in white neighborhoods, like Cathy and Walt, the threat of racism is always close to home.

As part of their descriptions of racism, many interviewees detailed how racism works. As adults, black Americans are able to formulate an understanding of racism based on the experience they and those they know have had. Walt suggests that, “We understand them [whites] I think very much, but they don’t understand us because white people live in this mythical world of assumptions.” This section will review the understanding the working class black Americans interviewed have of racism.

How Racism Works

Today, racism is not always as straightforward as described in the accounts above. There is no doubt that racism continues to persist. Walt believes, “America is full of racism no matter what... The American system is wrong to where they don’t want to believe that it’s like that. They don’t want to believe. It’s like white people actually believe that there’s nothing wrong.” When I asked Sam if he “think[s] racism and discrimination are a widespread problem” he responded, “Oh, yeah.” However, the form it takes has changed over the past several decades.

The concept of front-stage and back-stage racism, developed by Joe Feagin and Leslie Houts, suggests that as racist actions and words become intolerable in public (front-stage), these acts shift to the private sphere (back-stage) (Feagin 2003). Now that racist beliefs are no longer demonstrated in public with the same frequency as in the past, recognizing racist treatment is more difficult. Ernest explains the current situation:

I think it’s one of those things now that people try to hide more than they had done forty years ago. I think now discrimination and racism is always here. There’s not too many people’s that gonna come out and just blurt it out and be aggressive with it because of society will make them serve a punishment. I think if a person, black or white, tries to do it they come with it kind of suddenly, kind of unexpectedly. That’s the way I think society is teaching you to get away with it now.

For those living with racism today, the line between what is and what is not racism, and when and where racism takes place has been muddied as whites hide and develop sincere fictions that allow them to act in racist ways and use racist speech, yet believe that they are not racist (Feagin 2001).

Whites may deny that racism is widespread, but several black Americans interviewed have a different view. It is not that racism is gone, but where and how racism occurs that has changed. Interviewees report that it is not easy to detect racism

today for various reasons. Ernest describes the rules of back-stage racism: if a person is going to be racist in public then it must be done suddenly so as to throw the recipient off balance “to get away with it.” Getting away with front-stage racism may happen more times than is documented, but this form of racism is clear and decisive action can be taken against it. Whereas, with the more subtle forms of racism that are increasingly prevalent, determining what is and what is not racist action is much more difficult.

The black Americans interviewed describe blatantly racist situations, those where the white perpetrators knew they were guilty and those where they believed that black Americans were deserving of their hateful treatment. Other situations described were not as clear for the black Americans involved to decipher as racist or. The range of racism that now exists is exemplified in the following accounts.

Racism at Work

For working class black Americans many of the jobs that are available puts them in contact with whites. The high level of contact that occurs at the job site makes work a place of racial vulnerability for black Americans. Encountering racism at work is almost commonplace for those interviewed. Many of the interviewees describe incidents that have occurred throughout their working life. When asked about racism, in general, many interviewees did not know where to begin, “Schools, job, oh, where you want me to start? I know plenty of places.” Racism at work not only takes the form of discriminatory actions against an employee, but also it is a place where more subtle racist behaviors such as joking and teasing occur. Some interviewees also received accusations of reverse discrimination. The worksite is not only a place a where black Americans must endure racism, but also a space where they can be taunted and accused of acts of racism too.

Racist customers

Working with or around whites can lead to difficulties with racism. For Sam, being the manager of a small shop made him vulnerable to racist treatment from customers, employees, and the owner of the shop. He describes the commonplace incidents that would occur with customers:

I always had a lot of customers in the store. I had a group of customers and one wanted to compliment one of the employees. And she was looking for the manager and I was standing right there and I told her, 'I'm the manager.' 'You're the manager?' [repeating the customers surprised tone]. I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm the manager.' 'Oh, you're the manager?' 'Yeah, I'm the manager of the store is something wrong with that?' And I was like, 'did you think that because I was black?' [not said to customer, but internal dialogue]. I mean I dress just like everyone else in there. You know.

It seeming impossible or out of the ordinary for a black man to be the manager of a shop is a racist event that is subtle, but can have a significant impact. A position such as this is one that is cause for pride and to have that pride darkened by racism may be difficult to deal with. Many black Americans are consistently questioned about their position or authority, thereby having the effect of eroding that very authority.

Walt, who also works with the public, has had similar experiences. In order to help a customer solve a problem she was having he inquired about who had been helping her on the day the problem arose:

She said, 'It was him' [pointing to Walt]. I said, 'Me?' She said, 'Yeah, it was him,' and I said, 'Well, you was in here Tuesday, or Monday?' She said, 'No, I was here Wednesday.' The little piece of paper that she had had Wednesday's date on it. So it had to be Wednesday. I said, 'Well, I don't know how I sold it to you because I was off on Wednesday.' I'm off Wednesday. See today's Wednesday and I'm here with you [our interview was on Wednesday]. I'm off every Wednesday unless I decide to work and I was off. And she said, 'Well, all y'all look alike.'

This new form of racism may leave no physical scars, but emotionally it takes its toll as it becomes consistent and everyday. Customers' demeaning treatment of black Americans

that serve to reinforce the second-class status black Americans have endured for centuries.

Racist co-workers

The negative treatment and demeaning situations that black Americans experience at work does not end with customers. For many, racist co-workers make the workplace an unsafe space that is virtually intolerable. Sam endured direct racism from one of his co-workers.

It's a store that sells Louisiana souvenirs and different things so they had some Southern type merchandise and it was a Confederate sign and somebody, it said, let me see if I can get it right, 'Never Die' or something like that. It was just a Confederate flag on the sign. And a lot of us wanted to do away with it because you know, we don't want to work for a store that actually carries this sign. Well, it was like, one, two, three, there was three of us that were like that. And there was some argument going back and forth. I was an assistant manager at the time. Me and another assistant manager who was also the buyer, she was the buyer so she was the one that actually purchased it. And she was like 'Well, I'm gonna keep it.' And I was like, 'Well, I'm gone.' And that was the thing that made her go ahead and not take it. But, oh, that was a lot. I had another lady who I worked with who was telling me that I was ignorant, I didn't know what the war, the Civil War was all about. She told me, she literally told me that I was ignorant.... I'm like, what other, I don't understand, what history have you been taught? You know, that's what it taught me. And she was like. Yeah, that, I did experience a lot of race there. I've been called, I was called a 'Nazi.' She called me nigger.' And, uh, nothing was done about it which upset me.

When I asked Sam if this woman was fired he said, "Oh, she stayed there for a long time. And I was the general manager for two years and that lady stayed on." At the workplace, even in a position of relative authority, black Americans can be forced to endure name-calling and other maltreatment. Whites' refusal to acknowledge their participation in the racist situation is exemplified by calling Sam "ignorant" to the (fictional) facts that some whites continue to believe.

Enduring racist remarks at work from co-workers is an event that an interviewee shared. Walt has endured much racialized treatment from customer and from co-workers. This mistreatment has led him to “hate” the people with whom he works. Although he is cordial, he does not “associate” with them.

And I go home from work, from the [place of employment] and I never talk about the [place of employment]. I never talk about the people I work with. I hate ‘em. I hate working with them. They’re racist. They always telling black jokes and all this stuff. And you get to the point where you can deal with it, but you don’t really. And then they always got opinion, well I know black people do this. They know so much about black people, but they don’t know nothing. I ask them, ‘Well, who do you know other than the blacks who work at the post office?’ Very few no anybody. Either they met them through [work], or bowling somewhere, they know somebody, but they don’t know that person. See they’re not sitting down to dinner with these people and all that or going out on a regular basis to really get to know them. It’s just they form an opinion. I got a problem with that. I don’t like the association like that.

Living, daily, through such experiences can take its toll on black Americans. It is little wonder that Walt wants as little to do with whites as possible. The desire to keep to yourself is overwhelming when you have to endure racism at work.

Racist management

Receiving negative treatment at work because of your race can occur at the hands of management as well as co-workers. As always is the question of whether the subtly racist treatment is race based or not. Black Americans are forced to judge whether subtle maltreatment is race-based and are then sat in judgment of as they prove that negative treatment was racialized. Racist treatment at work by management is difficult to protest because there are not many people to whom one can complain. When the management is all white, there is the fear of negative repercussions if a black American takes action. For many black Americans, the necessity of a job, even a job that forces them to endure maltreatment, is too great to risk losing.

Sam's first job was one in which he experienced racialized treatment from his manager.

He rode me like I had a saddle on my back.... You know my main thing was I used to do the floors. And I mean, you know, I used to get there and I would do it. He would, he would try to find the smallest problem with what I was doing. I mean, if it was like, 'oh well, you missed a line' or something like this, or 'look at the floor, it doesn't shine as much' and stuff like that. Uh, I don't know, I was just like 'what is he talking about?' You know, I, oh, I'm not doing it fast enough, or things like that.

Sam was sure that the treatment he received was based on race. He was the only black male who worked the night shift and it was clear that this manager did not inflict degrading remarks on other employees. Yet, there was little he felt he could do but endure the treatment.

Working class black Americans may work with other black Americans since the jobs they occupy are frequently segregated by both race and gender. As a result, some of those interviewed were witnesses to the firings of fellow black American co-workers.

Sam notes the distinctly racist form these firings would take at the shop where he worked for a number of years:

They done away with a lot of folks of color quicker than what they done away with some folks that weren't. And they were doing a whole lot more wrong, I mean from not coming in on time, from not doing their job at all, you know just standing there and they were there years after. And, but sisters would come in late once and that was it. They'd do away with them.

This statement suggests that there is a systematic difference in the way black Americans are judged at work and the way whites' work is considered. Walt shares a similar story about being fired when a white boss and a fellow black co-worker conspired against him. That same white boss, soon after Walt's own dismissal, fired the black co-worker under similar pretenses. The black American man suffered a great deal after he lost his job, "His wife left him after he lost his job. She left him. And he became an alcoholic. He

couldn't find a decent job anywhere after that and he became an alcoholic. About eight or nine years later he died." Clearly, the white boss sought to eliminate black American workers from his department. The double standard that white management uses to evaluate many black Americans' work performance is the tip of the racist iceberg. Black Americans must endure racism at all levels at work: customer, co-workers, and management. Learning to maneuver within these environments is important for black Americans to be successful in white dominated workplaces.

The "new" racism that is emerging makes many black Americans vulnerable. Subtle and hidden tactics used to harm black Americans abound. Negotiating this minefield is extremely stressful. Black Americans must not only do their job, but must be aware of how this performance is being perceived. Today, black Americans workers are responsible for being conscious of how others are treating them and how they are treating others as the concept of "reverse racism" becomes a popular tool of whites in the fulfillment of their sincere fictions and racist agendas.

Charges of reverse racism

Today working black Americans must not only be aware of how they are being treated at work, but they must also worry how they are being perceived as treating others. With public attacks on affirmative action taking center stage in the news, whites are becoming aware of how they can manipulate the system by accusing black Americans of "reverse racism." Two interviewees who work with the public on a daily basis described being accused of reverse racism. The support one receives from co-workers and management when such accusations are made can help or harm the individual being accused. But the wound to one's pride in their work does not dissipate easily.

Walt shared with me accounts of two incidents that he experienced at work when whites accused him of being racist. He and his managers “laughed and we made jokes about it” because the accusations were ludicrous. Walt hypothesizes that white people do this because “someone is looking for attention.”

Ernest, who was formally accused of reverse racism through written notice to his employer said, “I was real hurt about that, but I do know that in this society now a lot of the things that was done basically to hurt blacks, is generally, is a lot of times now are actually used to flip the script basically. Make it like you’re the one who did this, that’s prejudice against them.” He went on to detail accusations of reverse racism are more commonplace now:

I am beginning to see things going the other way towards that and I do believe that that’s one of the things in the future that blacks do have to take and put a question mark by. Now you have to be real careful how you treat whites and other races. Because now they’re saying, ‘Hey, you’re the one that’s prejudice against us. We’re not the ones that are prejudiced against you.’ I think that’s the same thing as saying well we got away with it for years, but now we’re gonna pin it on you so you ain’t gonna get away with it.... If you don’t treat them with respect, even if they treat you with disrespect, you have to still show respect to them and their race, you know. I think that has become a big problem on jobs and that’s nationwide.

It seems that the accusations about reverse racism are extensions of the Jim Crow demands for deference. These demands can harm black Americans professionally since complaints are kept on file thereby affecting pay raises, firings, et cetera.

The “new” rules of racism allow many whites to get away with racist treatment of black Americans. As racism becomes subtler it is difficult to prove that racism is in fact racism. Also, with the rise of accusations of reverse discrimination black Americans are vulnerable to becoming the recipient of racism by being called racist. The system of racism is twisting around black America in such a way as to limit the ability of blacks to defend themselves and their families against racialized attacks. As the economy shifts

and black Americans are left with few employment options, especially those lacking a college degree, enduring racist treatment will become more commonplace.

Racism in Public

For black Americans, venturing into public space is always a risk. The risk is to one's emotional and physical well being. The unfair treatment of black Americans by the justice system is well documented (Russell-Brown 2004; Feagin and Sikes 1994). What is of interest with these interviewees is that public spaces, roadways, parks, et cetera, are locations where black Americans are not wanted. The use of public officials, such as police, to monitor the presence of black Americans in public is significant. Current actions and reactions by the public and public officials are reminiscent of "the enforcement of black codes by police and the harassment of blacks by white patrols and vigilante groups [that] convened to regulate African American behavior (Ruff and Fletcher 2004:448). Working black Americans are well aware of the fact that the monitoring of their presence in public is a form of racism taking place on a grand, institutional scale.

Police harassment

Walt began his interview with a discussion about racism, what it is and how it works. "Racism comes in different ways and I guess if you get old enough you know racism when you hear it." Walt described an incident with a police officer that pulled him over about a week before our interview as "subtle racism":

The police stops me and I don't say anything. He comes up and, a white cop, he comes up and he goes, 'Do you know why I stopped you?' 'I guess I was speeding.' He said, 'Yeah, you were going about 41 in a 30 mile an hour zone.' First he said, 'How fast do you think you were going?' I said, 'About 35, 40.' 'The speed limit is 30 and you were going 41.' He gives me this ticket and I don't say anything and he don't say anything. He goes back and writes my tag number down. Comes back to the window and gives me the ticket and tells me to sign the

paper and all that. But then, when he gives me the ticket, before he walks off he talks about, 'It's nothing personal.' And I'm wondering, why would it be something personal. You talkin' about something 'personal' if he's doing his job and if he's doing his job then all he has to do is give me the ticket and that's it. But he says, 'It's nothing personal.' And I realize that he had a problem because I'm black. And it made me realize that if I had been a white person he may not have even given me the ticket because then it became personal. His statement, 'It's nothing personal.' Why would he have to tell me it's nothing personal? First, I'm 58 years old. He don't know me from Adam's housecat, or nothing else, so why would it be? The fact that I'm a black man and he's a white police officer, why would it be personal. So I know right then that race played a part in his actions.

This excerpt is important because it unearths the path of thinking that takes place within the black American mind in order to identify the subtle racism of today. Walt concludes the story by saying that he "laughs it off because I've seen it before. Racism pops up all the time."

Sam had an experience with the police who targeted him simply because he is black:

S: I've been pulled over for, strictly because of my race, and that was funny, but it was partially my fault. The police were in the neighborhood searching, I saw just cop cars all in this neighborhood. So what I did, I said, 'Let's see what they're doing.' So I just drove through the neighborhood, I mean I just drove through, I didn't follow anybody or anything. I drove back out. I didn't get a quarter of a mile before I was pulled over by three cop cars at gunpoint.

I: Three? And it was only you in the car?

S: Well, it was me and a young lady. We were just riding around. And I said, 'Let's see what they're doing.' So, three cop cars pulled up, at gunpoint, 'Get out the car.' So I was laughing, I got out of the car and I said, 'Y'all are looking for a black guy, right?'

I: So you were laughing as they were pulling you out of the car.

S: Yeah, because I found it funny. I was like, 'Oh, my God, I got pulled over.' But uh, I was like, 'Y'all looking for a black guy?' And they were like, 'Yeah, how you know?' Uh, okay [chuckling]. And one guy was like, 'Ah, nah, that's not him, he's too big.' So I was, one day I was glad I was big. But what happened, was a guy broke into a, broke into a, no he robbed a doughnut shop. And they were looking for him. That's what happened.

Experiences with police are not unusual for black Americans, particularly males, but what is significant about this incident is the large amount of force used, three police cars and several police officers all with guns aimed and ready to be fired. What is also of significance is the fact that all black Americans who were in this particular neighborhood were found to be suspicious, even if they did not fit the description of the suspect being pursued.

The hyper-policing of black Americans is a tactic that has the effect of (and perhaps intention of) limiting the freedom of black Americans. When a people are at-risk for harassment simply because of the color of their skin, then the question arises, “Is it worth it?” Is it worth taking that car trip to visit family? Is it worth going out late at night to get some ice cream? The limitations that black Americans place on themselves, conscious and unconscious, based on race, are the quintessential example of how freedom does not belong to everybody in the United States.

Whites ONLY

Just going to the park on a Sunday afternoon can be a matter of concern for black Americans. Access to resources such as parks, play areas for children, and other public spaces are limited for many who live in black American neighborhoods. Differences in access to such resources have been found to be restricted to whites only.

Sam relates how areas of his city limit access to black Americans and how this has restructured his use of public space.

Parks, uhm, Lakefront, yes. I’ve experienced some stuff out there that’s going on on Sunday. You know, on Sunday how everyone will go out there and hang out with their cars and stuff like that and I truly believe that that is a racial issue because it is only on that particular day, on those days is when they block off a certain section knowing that that’s the only time that you’ll find black folks out there with their vehicles. Cause I know there’s other days when other races are out

there and it's not like that. They actually cut it off, there's a lot of patrol during that time and you know, but this was years ago because I don't go out there now.

Just being with family and friends in public has to be a matter of consideration for black Americans, "Is it worth being hassled?" For Sam the answer was "no," it is better to stay home then to venture into public space, despite the fact that his tax money, in part, makes that space possible.

Walt recounted an incident that occurred at a local mall. This mall has a play area for children. Walt's story is not uncommon as racism continues to permeate every shared (black and white) space.

And you know, let me tell you a story, I had my P--[granddaughter] with me one day at the mall and they got a little thing out there at the mall that they play in, a little dinosaur and stuff that the kids crawl up on. She was in there playing and she starts playing with a kid because she's so friendly, and she's about three years old, and this guy is sitting there and he let his little boy [a white boy] hit her and I went over and I told the little boy, 'Don't do that.' And so, the guy [the father of the white boy] is sitting there and he watches the little boy and later on he goes back and hits her again. And so, P-- just stands there and lets him. And so I told my grandson, M--, I said, 'M-- go over there and whop him a good one and tell him to stop.' And so M--, my other little grandson he's about maybe a year or two years older than this little white kid and so he goes in and he busts him one, then the daddy jumps up and wants to do something.

He came over and wanted to raise some sin and shakes his finger in M--'s face and when he did I went over and I said, 'Let me tell you something right now. You sit there and I told you to stop him [the white boy] from hitting my little granddaughter and you never said one thing and once he went over and started doing it again you sat there and you're gonna allow this. If you don't get your hands out of his face [M--'s] I will slam dunk you all over this place.' And I was just that mad though and I usually don't, but I was so mad with him. And I said, 'If you say one word I will slap you right in the mouth, right now.' And it really upset me because he sat there and he allowed this to happen. And he didn't say nothing and this is to show you how there are good people. This white lady was sitting there and she came over and she said, 'He told you and then you sat there and watched and did nothing. That's exactly what happened and then now, you're shaking your hand in this little boy's face.' She said, 'You should be ashamed of yourself.' She told him that and I told him, 'cause it made me so mad, 'You are the type of people that got the world messed up.'

In this account, children's play places become a site for racism. The white father is teaching his son that it is acceptable to abuse black Americans and women. The double standard he shows with regard to allowing his son to hit P--, yet disciplining M-- when he hits back is a racist standard. This is a clear instance of racism and struggling against racism, being transmitted from one generation to the next. Walt's reaction of fury is an example of the stress that black Americans experience when dealing with racism (Franklin 1998; Utsey 1998; Landrine 1996; May, Coleman and Jackson 1996). Walt became uncharacteristically angry when the need to defend his grandchildren arose. The stress involved with going to a mall is so great that it seems that it is not worth the trouble. Yet, giving up access to public space also comes with a cost. For black Americans, the two must be weighed.

Not having access to commonly shared resources within the community is just another form that racism takes. There may be no signs posted saying "Whites Only," but the sentiment is there nonetheless. As the police get involved in monitoring, the act becomes institutional. The same enforcement organization that should be protecting all citizens works for whites and against blacks, thereby serving as a constant reminder of the belief that black Americans are unworthy, and second-class citizens.

Conclusion

As racism takes on new and changing forms, black Americans must develop new "ways of knowing" what is and what is not discrimination. In addition, negotiating the line between intentional and unintentional discrimination becomes increasingly thorny as more white Americans deny their prejudice swathing it in the "color-blind" mantra.

For black Americans, coming to consciousness about racism, means giving up the innocence one has. When children are confronted with the racist reality of the world,

their loss of innocence because of the hateful actions of another leaves one feeling violated and vulnerable. Walt said of his granddaughter and grandson:

One day she'll get to the point where she'll have to learn the difference between black and white. She'll have to learn the difference between black and white. And it's going to be interesting because she loves everybody. My little grandson, C--, he loves everybody and I mean he just loves everybody. And the time will come where it'll end.

At some point in the lives of black American children, their love for everybody will dissipate into at least fear of and at most hatred for the whites that exhibited hatred toward them.

This chapter has elucidated some of the experiences working class black Americans have with racism. As children, black Americans learn the lessons necessary for living in a racist society. These lessons are learned through first hand experience and by teachings from parents and others who are significant in their lives. The emotional wounds that early experiences with racism leave are legacies that will continue to have an effect on individuals into adulthood.

As adults, black Americans must learn to decipher the complex language and action-system of racism. Only two locations of racism were highlighted here, work and public places, yet these areas account for a major portion of black American's lives. It is important to note that the various forms that "new" racism takes leave black Americans on the defensive and the offensive. Making accusations of racism must be carefully considered, as the racist power structure that exists within many organizations does not serve black Americans interests well. Furthermore, accusations of racism made by whites is increasing as black American actions become scrutinized based on an equality standard that was once used only to judge white actions.

The experiences described by the working class black Americans interviewed are similar to those detailed by middle class black Americans (Feagin and Sikes 1994). Perhaps the similarity can be accounted for by the overlap of space. Many working class and middle class black Americans work in organizations that have white management. Unlike middle class black Americans, working class black Americans do not have access to entry into upper management and professional spheres. The limited levels working class black Americans can ascend to continue to make their position unique. Although, at this preliminary stage of research both working class and middle class black Americans may have similar stories, the two should not be merged as synonymous in all areas of life.

Spaces in which black Americans can be themselves are extremely limited. Racism forces them to be ever vigilant and public monitoring curtails black Americans from living life as they choose. The limitations placed on black Americans by public monitoring are receiving some attention, yet more needs to be done to limit the rampant abuse by law and other officials who develop policies that negatively impact black Americans' freedom.

The tools that black Americans use for coping with the ever-present threat of racism and the actual experience of racist actions and words are of prime interest to this researcher. The coping strategies working black Americans use to mitigate the threat of and experiences with racism will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 COPING WITH RACISM

For black Americans, racism is a phenomenon that is becoming more elusive, yet one which is alive and well, constantly causing much harm for both those who experience it directly and the black American community at-large. How individuals view and cope with racism can have an impact on their overall life outlook and, by extension, their life chances.

The previous chapter cited many incidents of racism that black American workers experience. The effect that these experiences have, are detrimental to one's psyche and in some cases one's professional life. In order to better understand the circumstances that working class black Americans experience, it is useful to understand how this group deals with the consistent barrage of racism that which afflicts them.

This chapter will detail the myriad ways that the working class black Americans interviewed for this project described their responses and beliefs about racism. Individual's life philosophy seems to inform how they view and cope with racism. The responses to racism reported by interviewees fall into one of three categories. Individuals coped with racism by ignoring it, confronting it, or changing their own behaviors.

Life Philosophy

The life philosophies that can be gleaned from the interviewees as they told the story of their life are remarkable. In order to understand how individuals cope with racism, it is necessary to acknowledge from where coping skills originate. I argue that the values and experiences learned early in life have prepared black Americans to cope

with the adversities racism will present. Sharing some the trials the respondents have been through will aid in understanding the strength these working class individuals possess and the way they view the world helps them to cope with racism.

For many interviewees growing up in a single-parent home was not easy. There were many wants that did not materialize and many hours spent apart as mothers worked two jobs to support the family. Through these difficult times Marsha learned how to survive, “You know how it is when you don’t get, when you see other people with stuff and we didn’t get a lot of things, but we had food, the important things. And there were times we did have *just* enough. But through it all you learn a lot. You learn how to survive with a little bit. You know what I mean?” Getting by with “just enough” is a skill that black Americans have been forced to hone. Learning to do without is a coping strategy that is derived from accepting your circumstances and making the best of what is available, a skill developed during slavery.

The knowledge of collective, historical struggle may bolster black Americans when they face adversity today. Comparing the past with the present, today’s race problems seem insignificant. When asked how blacks are different from whites, Teresa responded,

Looking back on what we’ve gone through, our grandmothers and mothers, we’re just strong. We, as a people are strong. . . . They went through a lot. I don’t think I would have been able to go through it. You know between racism and whatnot, you know, not being able to go into a store, a water fountain. I wouldn’t be able to go through all that. The things they had to do to survive—no, no. We have it good.

Through the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next, knowing that what black Americans endure today is not as overwhelming as what our ancestors experienced helps to keep the spirit and the body moving forward. Enduring because of

necessity is an idea that is evident in the quotes by Marsha and Teresa. Other respondents share similar life outlooks.

Jack's life philosophy is another example of how strength and acceptance can help one to endure. Jack had a large financial debt due to a medical operation that was needed to save his legs. After leaving college and turning down an internship of a lifetime, Jack had the necessary medical operation and once recuperated (two years later) he began paying the over \$100,000. debt. That he did so with a willing sense of responsibility shows a source of strength that is remarkable. Jack said, "It took me five years to pay everything off. You know, I worked two or three jobs, ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours out of the day and everything else." When I asked how he had the strength to work as hard as he did, he responded:

It was because of the fact that it was told to me that I couldn't do it, that this would be a debt that I would have for the rest of my life. I had to basically, prove myself. You know I've been doing that basically all of my life. You know they look at me and say you can't do this, you can't do that. I have to prove that I can do this and I can do that. And that was the main reason.

When all one has is their dignity, maintaining it becomes important. This is true of Jack and the men that Duneier studied in Chicago (1994). Proving that one can do something that everyone believes to be impossible is a life outlook that can help black Americans to overcome the obstacles that they are required to surmount.

Proving oneself by making your own way and taking charge of your responsibilities are not exclusively black American values, but they are values that many working class black Americans exhibit. Examples of this abound from the interviews. Walt put four children through college, three completed graduate school and one is a major in the military. This was accomplished on a working class salary, all the while enduring racist bosses and co-workers. Sam's father left college to support his own

mother and father when it became necessary. He then raised four children, solely providing for the family's financial needs so that Sam's mother could stay home to care for the children. After Teresa's father died, her mother worked two jobs to support her five children. Marsha's mother also worked two jobs off and on to provide for her two children. For others surviving a trauma, such as Cathy's experience with the life-threatening racism, develops the strength to accept the reality at hand. Cathy's philosophy is to "just stay focused. Get you your dreams and as long as the little saying that, 'As long as you can dream it, you can achieve it.' That's true. I really believe that."

The will to survive and overcome, and building the necessary strength to accomplish this, seem to be the foundations for being able to cope with the stress generated by racism. The foundation that many of the black Americans interviewees had makes it possible to deal with racism in a way that is manageable for the recipient of race-related hatred.

Strategies for Coping with Racism

The ways the working class interviewees react to racist situations are varied. There does not seem to be a pattern among men or women, younger or older. What was common among the interviewees is their non-aggressive way of dealing with the racism they have experienced. Although anger would be justified, many black Americans prefer to deal with racism through positive means. The exception is Walt's fury over the mistreatment of his grandchildren. In his accounting of racism against him, he did not react with such anger. I believe that his anger flared because of his instinct to protect his grandchildren. It is easier to take abuse yourself than to watch someone you love being harmed. Most black Americans cope with racism in one of three primary ways. By ignoring racism, black Americans are able to distance themselves from the race-related

trauma. There are many ways this can happen. Black Americans may also confront racism. In confronting racism, black Americans are setting the record straight, seeking to disconfirm whites' beliefs in their superiority and lack of culpability. Changing behaviors is another way that black Americans deal with racism. For some, the strategy employed varies depending on the racist situation that they are confronted with. Overall, a set of coping strategies is used by black Americans in order to deal with the reality of racism.

Ignoring Racism

When black Americans ignore the racist speech and/or behavior that are cast at them, they are undermining the threat. By not acknowledging the threat as important, black Americans can avoid some portion of the harm that racism inflicts. Having moral values, a strong sense of self, and respect for oneself and others enable black Americans to reduce racism to rubbish.

We are all equal

“I just tune it out because that’s their ignorance. My mom and dad taught me that everybody is equal,” said Phyllis. This quote is an example of how black Americans deal with racism, by ignoring it. “I laugh it off,” states Walt. Sam advises, “Don’t look at it personally.” When asked how Sam reacts to discriminatory treatment he said, “I’m a slow person to respond to things that actually happen to me. I, cause I, don’t really let stuff get to me that often.” Ignoring racism means more than just not acknowledging it. Ignoring racism means to undo some of its harmful effects by casting it as “nonsense” or buffering one’s emotions against it.

Black Americans must know where they stand and having a strong sense of moral right and wrong can help to protect oneself against the harms of racism. For Cathy, “In

speaking about racism, her way of dealing with it has been to know that she is right and they are wrong.” Her mother taught her that it is almost impossible to change people, so you just have to go on knowing that we are all equal, even if others do not treat you as their equal.

She told me basically that you cannot change someone’s opinion of you, or for the most part change their stupidity from feeling that way, but we are all the same. We are all God’s children. We were raised in church so it’s in fact there’s no color, it’s color-blind we are all the same inside. We all bleed red. And you shouldn’t be offended by the fact that there are some people who were not raised the same way you were. Don’t be concerned with it.

The belief that all people are equal permeated many of the interviews. In addition to Cathy, Walt says, “We are all the same people. I don’t care what color your skin is, rip off the skin and you have the same person.”

Know thyself

The support individuals have from others, as well as the conclusions they formulate about their experiences, create a viewpoint about racism that is part and parcel of their overall life outlook. Sam stated, “It’s self-love. Learn a lot about yourself and your background. Somebody telling you something don’t really know much about me and I’m gonna let that person’s opinion affect my life or affect the way I feel? Or better yet, use it as a positive. That’s what I did.” Turning a negative situation into a positive learning experience and growing from adversity are common traits that the interviewees share. When I asked Jack how he would teach his children to be successful despite the many obstacles that life may present to them, he said he would teach them, “how to prepare for hard times by taking advantage of everything that is out there for you. And to use your mind first, before you resort to anything else.” Having a strong sense of what one is capable of can help give black Americans the support they need when racism

pushes them down. Black Americans may cope with racism in different ways, but they all have the underlying common characteristic of trying to advance a positive outlook on life.

Avoiding whites

Avoiding racism by avoiding whites whenever possible is another coping mechanism that many black Americans use. Ignoring whites is beneficial in that one does not have to deal with being in a potentially racist setting. This is detrimental to all Americans because contact with other humans, regardless of color, can lead to the formation of meaningful relationships. When avoiding whites the loss is great for blacks and whites alike.

I got white people living all around me out there where I live at, but I don't get involved with them.... So I don't go to parties when they have parties. My wife will go down and associate with them and they ask her where I'm at. And she says, 'Oh, don't worry about him. He ain't coming.' And I stay home and watch football games that are on, or basketball. Or I find a reason to leave the house. I just don't like the association.

Given Walt's experiences with racism it is easy to understand why he does not like to associate with whites when he does not have to. Sheltering himself from the potential racist threats that exists in the form of white people is a coping mechanism that limits him and others from participating fully as a human being. Such is the case with racism.

Interestingly, Walt makes a distinction among racists. He explains, "With racism, overall, most people are nice. They can be racist, but they're nice. They are genuine nice, most of them. But then there's the one's that you just really don't want to deal with them." He seems to be suggesting that of whites, there are benign racists, perhaps those who know no better, and then there are those who are malicious. Making such

distinctions may be a way of assessing racist situations and developing an appropriate strategy for dealing with racism incident by incident.

For Marsha and Teresa who work in an all-black environment, experiences with racism at the workplace are non-existent. Being able to work at a location where the workers and boss are black American can help to protect against the harms of racism. The importance of black American owned businesses is not simply to improve the economic well being of black Americans, it also serves to protect black Americans against the racist experiences they would otherwise have working in jobs that put them in contact with whites. Avoiding the white occupation structure allows many black Americans to avoid racism as well.

I would argue that there is one of two underlying reasons for reacting to racism by ignoring it. There exists a belief that there is no changing the racist situation so why bother getting upset about it. Also, for many black Americans racism has been a part of daily life since early childhood; there must come a point when one becomes desensitized to the injuries that are being hurled at you. The opposite of ignoring racism is to confront it. Confronting the racist person becomes an empowering way to take control of the situation by letting the perpetrator know that they are wrong.

Confronting Racism

For some black Americans interviewed confronting racism is a way to cope with its realities. Confronting the perpetrator of racist behaviors at the time of the experience, or even long after the incident has occurred can help to release the stress that the racialized incident caused. Confronting the situation can also have the effect of potentially bringing about a change in the individual. At least it lets them know that the way they are behaving is unacceptable and unfounded to at least one other person. Setting an example

for others to follow is another way black Americans confront racism. Treating others the way you would want to be treated is one method that the working black Americans interviewed use to respond to discrimination.

Standing up for our rights

Demanding equal treatment and letting whites know that you refuse anything less is one way to confront racism. The incident Walt experienced protecting his grandchildren is an example of demanding equal treatment. Cathy's experience with unequal pay and the subsequent demands she made for equal treatment through equal pay is another example, "I get my point across. I let them know how I feel, if I find out the salary [of other employees is different from hers] I'm going to let them know so they're going to have to match it, or they're going to have to deal with a suit or something. But, I make sure I'm heard." Confronting the wrong that is being done to you is of prime importance. It is often necessary to "get it out" and let those who are discriminating against you know that you know what they are doing and you believe this to be morally wrong.

Years after a discriminatory act occurred, Walt told the perpetrator, his former boss, exactly how he felt about him. Walt had the opportunity to confront his former boss who fired him unjustly:

They were treating him at for cancer. He was a veteran. I walked by there one morning and Mr. B—was in a room down there. I walked in there and he was very cheerful and he was sick. He remembered me and I said, 'I remember you. You deserve every damn thing that you get too.' I said, 'I'm glad to see you dying.' My wife told me he wasn't going to make it. I said, 'You took my life from me and you deserve what you're getting.' And that's the way I felt. I may have been wrong to tell him that. But he looked at me with the strangest look and he knew I hated him because see I lost my job at the time. But thank God things got better and I went on and I got a job at [current place of employment] and I never looked back. But I just thought things happen some time for the better too. And so, at that time I hated him, but today, I'm over it. Kids graduated and I've moved on.

The hatred that had been simmering for years was released on the day that Walt confronted his former employer who caused Walt much pain by insulting his pride. Walt shared another story that happened just about a week before our interview was conducted. In this account another way of dealing with racism is exemplified as Walt confronts a racist situation by making light of it:

I remember I was on the elevator the other day. It was just me. My niece had just had a baby, uh, this was Saturday, and I went out to the hospital to see her. So I'm at S. Hospital out there, and I get on the elevator, and what is so funny, this white lady is on the elevator. When the door opens up, and the expression on her face was like 'Ooh.' And we were going up and so I step on and I always ask, 'Well, how are you doing?' And, uh, it shocked her I guess and so she dropped her pocketbook and I reached down and picked it up and handed it to her. And she said, 'I'm just as nervous.' She must be in her fifties, late fifties, early sixties. She said, 'I'm just as nervous.' She said, 'I've never been on an elevator with a big, ol' black man.' I laughed and I said, 'We're just like any other men that get on the elevators. We're going up or going down.' And she just laughed.

Maintaining one's sense of dignity is a critical motivation for confronting racism. Confronting racism may leave the recipient of maltreatment with a sense of justice. The demand for fair and equal treatment is both practical, such as Cathy's demands for equal pay, and emotive, exemplified by Ernest's quote about dealing with racism against his daughter (below). *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* by Mitchell Duneier describes how dignity and pride among the working class black American men he studied are of great significance to their overall well being (1994). When one has little else, pride, is something that is fiercely fought for.

The golden rule

The golden rule states that one should treat others in the way that they themselves wish to be treated. Treating others better than they treat you is another way to confront racism. Several interviewees said that when they encounter racism the way to handle the situation is to treat people better than they have treated you.

Do what we can do but always treat people good. Treat people good. We might disagree with the politics, but love ‘em. We’ll win if we love ‘em. You know hate can’t stand up to love. You know. You might hate me, but if I just keep treating you good, no matter what you do to me, the walls will fall. And that’s what we have to do. We have to really learn how to love and get the divisiveness from out there. And bring it all together and then spread the love. Just love ‘em no matter what the criticisms, just go ahead on.

Walt believes that love has the power to change hateful hearts. Turning the other cheek is the way to elevate yourself above the racist and the racialized situation, while simultaneously showing the racist that there are ways to behave that do not involve hatred. Another interviewee had a similar response to a question about how to deal with racism when it arises.

When asked what he would do if his daughter was the only person in her class to not be invited to a classmates party Ernest’s response was, “The key to dealing with that is to kill a person with kindness.” Ernest explains what he would do in this hypothetical situation:

If he didn’t invite you to the party, well, that’s fine. But we’re going to have our own party—I think that’ll make her feel good and invite her friends and invite him. I think inviting him gives you a greater satisfaction. When you hand him an invitation, you’re calling him on his wrong. The first expression you get is worth a thousand words. That’s worth a bar of gold because you just showed him that you’re different than him. And that means, to you, that you are a great person inside. I just say sometimes killing a person with kindness is the best way. And at the same time, when you hand him that invitation you show him what that kid and that kid’s parents didn’t have the values to do. That’s the way I would handle that situation.

Acting as an example of how people should behave by exhibiting the values everyone should have is a way that black Americans cope with negotiating a racialized event. For Ernest, building his daughter’s self-esteem by showing her that she is kind and above immoral actions is of primary importance. In addition, showing the racist family that

love is more powerful than hate and that their immorality is not ubiquitous is another lesson to be taught.

Extending yourself to the racist, either by confronting their racist beliefs, or treating them with kindness are but two ways to let them know that their beliefs are unjust. By doing so the recipient of the racist treatment is establishing himself or herself as the fairer and just, while showing the racist the error of their ways.

Changing Behavior

For some black Americans to deal with racism is to ignore it. For others, the best way to handle racism is to avoid it altogether. Some interviewees described how changing their behaviors in order to avoid being the recipient of racist treatment was a method that they practiced. Behavioral changes include crafting a particular image that contrasts the stereotypical image of black Americans.

Knowing the stereotypes

In order to change one's behavior to fit the "ideal," one must know the stereotypes that exist about your racial group. Black Americans interviewed know the stereotypes that exist about them all too well. The facts are the facts; black Americans are well aware of the disproportionate incarceration rates and other racial statistics. The stories they have heard from family and friends, and the history of their own race all add to the knowledge black Americans have about what whites think of them. Through racist experiences it is possible to glean what others think about you and your racial group. The media also serves to remind black Americans that they are not thought of in an overall positive way. The culmination of all these factors and the ways black Americans receive the knowledge that they are second-class citizens can be seen in the way black Americans describe in detail the stereotypes that exist about them.

An interviewee, Jack, described the stereotype that he feels he must combat every time he leaves his black American community:

As a black male, you always have to prove to somebody that you're not the thug, you're not on the corner trying to do this, you do have some sense, you have common sense. You always have to prove that to everybody.... You always have to prove it as an African-American male you always have to prove that you have some type of sense. You're not out there trying to kill everybody, bother anybody, you're not out there on drugs and things like that.... They will look at you as black first, not what you have to offer.

When I asked where this stereotyping originates Jack suggests that “part of it is media and part of it is through hearsay and part of it is through personal experience.” When I asked Walt where he thought the negative images of black Americans came from he explained:

I think myth. Myth. The myths from the old days have been out there and then hate. Hate has conjured up a lot of it because black men have a hard time dealing with white men because white men have been so dominant in society and they've been very unfair and they don't see any way of winning because white men will steal from you. They steal your dreams. And if you steal somebody's dreams then there's no hope.

Earlier in the interview, Walt was sharing a story about how he has been accused of racism by whites (as did many other interviewees). He believes that the concept of reverse racism comes out of the continuation of whites stigmatizing and unjustly accusing blacks, but in this new, more acceptable format.

You know and really what happened if a black person do that then they get this idea in their head that black people are acting up, you know. Because it gets to be an accusatory thing. It's easy for—we live in a world where white people have always gotten away with accusing blacks. Stigmatizing them, you see, and once that happened. And blacks accept it, it's acceptable.... We understand them, I think, very much, but they don't understand us because white people live in this mythical world of assumptions and they hear all types of things. Once they hear these things it becomes beliefs. If you hear them long enough, these myths about blacks do this, blacks want to rape white women, this and that, and it's crap.

Walt's comments are synonymous with the concept of sincere fictions of the white self (Feagin, Vera, Batur 2001). The authors write, "A wide range of misconceptions and myths about African Americans and about whites themselves—what we call "sincere fictions. Usually unfeigned, whites' negative beliefs about and images of African Americans and other Americans of color still provide the make-believe, but no less effective, foundation for white dominance and supremacy" (Feagin, Vera, Batur 2001:4). The use of behavioral alterations to mitigate the severity of a racist encounter, if not avoid it altogether is undeniably an extreme measure. Yet, if changing one's appearance and behavior mitigates the racist threat then many black Americans are willing to go through the aggravation.

A double consciousness

To change who you are from one situation to the next is to live the double consciousness that Du Bois described long ago. Interviewees describe their way of avoiding discrimination by changing their appearance. In relation to a discussion about racist events she has experienced, Cathy stated that when her appearance is casual she is the recipient of more discriminatory behavior than usual.

I've seen it from my childhood all the way up 'til now. I think about when we go certain places, you know if we're dressed down, because the place I used to work I used to have to wear heels and pantyhose everyday, so if I'm off I'm in t-shirts, sweatpants, however I get up that's how I'm going to the store, people looking at you a certain way or assuming that because you're black that you are trying to steal or something.

Cathy recognizes that a difference in appearance can make all the difference in whether or not one is going to be treated well or poorly. That black Americans have to think about such when they are dressing to go to the grocery store or walking up the street to a neighbor's house is an undeserved burden.

Ernest explains, “The key to success is adaptability.” He uses an example from one’s own experience to explain how one’s appearance can alter the way others perceive you.

I think how well you adapt here determines the way you succeed in life. Just from the way people take you, perception. You know I can go to the store, or I can be in my pickup truck dressed just how I am now in a pair of jeans and t-shirt or something and I’ll get looks like, ‘What is he doing here?’ Well, if I put on a nice pair of slacks and a nice dress shirt and hop in the car and drive down and people look at me totally different. And I notice that and I always, you know it’s like a game.

Going out in public should not be a game, but it is if you are black American. This is particularly so for those black Americans who have frequent and close interactions with whites. Appearance can limit the amount of discriminatory treatment one is subject to. Fitting into the white model of what a non-threatening black American looks like is a way to protect oneself against undo harm. Altering one’s personal style and personality seems like an extreme length to go to in order to protect oneself, but for black Americans it is easier than dealing with the repercussions.

Coping with racism in part means understanding the racist way of thinking and combating the stereotypes with positive images. Changing one’s behavior and living the double conscious life as one cross the black and white color line has become an essential way of being for black Americans. The lack of liberty that is part of these changes to one’s self is a difficult reality, but making such alterations is an effective way to cope with racism as the quotes above suggest.

Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the many ways that black Americans cope with racism and the racist threat. Life philosophy provides the foundation for formulating an effective mechanism to soothe the emotional stress evoked by racism. The three ways

that black Americans cope with racism, 1) ignoring it, 2) confronting it, and 3) changing personal behaviors, are used to varying degrees and as the situation calls for. As a result of the ever-present threat of racism, black Americans must constantly be prepared to cope with it when it arises.

For working class black Americans, being both black and, many times, poor, is a double burden. While this chapter does not specifically address how class relates to race, it is clear in the final section that by dressing and acting as if one is part of the upper class, some degree of protection ensues.

Despite experiencing racism, black Americans believe that they are as good as and equal to all other racial groups. It is the perpetrators of racism that are wrong. The equality imbalance that takes place on a daily basis through actions and words has not dampened black American's beliefs that they can achieve their dreams. Knowing that they come from people who were stronger than imaginable and that they too possess this strength helps black Americans to overcome the obstacles racism sets in their way. The mechanisms that have been employed by black Americans who traverse the precarious positions on both sides of the color line have long been in use. Black Americans are well aware of the potential difficulties and indignities that they may have to face. The coping strategies above protect them emotionally and physically from the full force that racism can wield.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to explore how working class black Americans are experiencing racism. Key questions were “How do working class black Americans develop awareness about racial discrimination,” “What coping strategies are employed to protect oneself psychologically and physically from racism,” and “How do working class black Americans negotiate living in a racist society?” The answers to these questions have been discussed within this thesis. While there is still much to learn, this pilot study has shed some light on key issues that working class black Americans face.

Working Class Black America and the Economy

Due to recent economic policies that have aggravated the economic situation of many Americans, black Americans, in particular, have become vulnerable in the recent economic downturn. The positive statistics that the U.S. Bureau of Labor had been touting at the beginning of this decade have, in reality, been less positive than expected. The jobless economic recovery has affected black Americans particularly, for they disproportionately occupy positions within industries that have been the most weakened by economic policies and the latest recession.

The shift in industrial sectors has resulted in a simultaneous shift from high-paying jobs to an increase in low-wage occupational choices. This has had a dramatic effect on black America. Recently, industry shifts and the poor economy have led many black Americans to low-wage, low-skill employment. The effect that this economic situation has on many black Americans is to push them further into the ranks of the working poor.

Even those with a college degree are finding themselves underemployed as jobs that would normally absorb their numbers shrink. I predict that over the next decade there will be an expansion of the working poor as the service sector continues to grow and manufacturing jobs decline.

Experiences with Racism

Racism is a significant part of the working black American's life. The threat of racism is everywhere, at work, in public places, even at home when relaxing by watching television. The fear of physical threat and loss of livelihood are constant considerations for working class black Americans. The multiple effects of racism become manifest itself in the form of psychological or physical stress. Developing a way of coping with this stress is important in order to maintain everyday life activities. The black Americans interviewed detailed the many ways that racism touches their daily lives and how they have become proficient in recognizing the racist threat.

Among those interviewed, an introduction to racism occurred early in life, usually by the early school age years. The first experiences described by interviewees were traumatic events that were burned onto the respondent's memory. The early encounters with racism forced interviewees to recognize that being black in America means being different from all other racial groups, especially whites. The intimate accounts confirm recent research on the development of racial knowledge and use of racism among young children (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001). Parents prepare their children for the reality of living in a racist society with the hope of mitigating the injury that racism will cause. The lasting effects early experiences with racism have on the interviewees are difficult to assess, but there is no doubt that the stain of those early traumas remain forever in the memory.

Racism is a common experience in black Americans everyday lives. The “new” racism demands that racist whites act in such a way that will not draw attention to themselves. The consequences for racist behaviors at work and in public are now seriousness enough that it is generally considered unacceptable to behave in such a manner. Self-monitoring is one of the forms that social control of racism takes. As it has become socially unacceptable to voice racist beliefs, at least in public, racist whites have shifted their speech and actions to the back-stage, or private arena. Interviewees aptly described the new way that racism is demonstrated.

For many black Americans, judging and categorizing the many forms racism takes has become an automatic process. Those interviewed were able to detail the difference between direct and subtle racism. The many experiences that adults have had with racism provide material with which to develop a system of categorization. Furthermore, being able to assess what form and degree of racism is being used against you will better allow one to determine the strategy that is best for assuaging the harm done by the racist incident. Oral traditions, personal experiences, and experiences shared by family and friends all allow black Americans to become knowledgeable about racism and how it works.

The experiences shared by working class black Americans are similar to those described by middle class black Americans. Feagin and Sikes’ 1994 book *Living with Racism* describes the experiences middle class black Americans have with racism. Many of the same types and sites of racism detailed in this thesis are described by those interviewed. For example, similarity to working class black Americans, middle class black Americans experience varied forms of discrimination, “discrimination can vary

from outright exclusion, to discrimination in salary and promotions, to unpleasant and restrictive working conditions (Feagin and Sikes 1994:184). That most black Americans, regardless of class are experiencing similar difficulties in the workplace underscores the widespread nature of racism at all class levels. Being upper class does not protect one from racism any more than being part of a lower class does.

Feagin and Sikes include in their book a chapter about housing discrimination. Interestingly, none of the respondents in this study spoke of being discriminated against in the housing market. In fact, the only mention of housing was Walt's description of how his white neighbors frequently want to chat with him and invite him and his wife to parties. Perhaps the difference is accounted for by the fact that many black working class individuals live in primarily black neighborhoods. This is a hypothesis that further research should explore.

Racism touches black Americans in almost every space they exist in. Class does not protect black Americans from racism. In fact, it may exacerbate the everydayness of racism. I hypothesize that for poor black Americans, who have little contact with whites, racism is experienced structurally more than individually. Whereas, those black Americans who work with whites, or live in majority white neighborhoods, racism is both structural and individual. The many ways, places, and times that black Americans experience racism has led them to develop specific mechanisms to cope with racism and the constant racist threat.

Coping with Racism

The working class black Americans interviewed shared the many ways in which they cope with racism. The foundation black Americans have for dealing with racism is rooted in their overall life philosophy. The black Americans interviewed have a positive

life outlook despite many personal obstacles that have kept them from reaching their goals, or disappointed in some way. This positive outlook may allow for the development of positive strategies to cope with racism. Having an overall happy outlook on life may serve as an important protecting factor against racism. The positive orientation may lead black Americans to reject negative coping strategies, such as depression or other psychological ailments.

Three general forms of coping strategies emerged from interviews. The key to coping is to not let the racist behavior get to you. Those interviewed described coping with racism by 1) ignoring it, 2) confronting it, or 3) modifying their behavior. There are several behaviors that fall under each of these three types that work to protect black Americans from various types of racism.

Ignoring racism for black Americans allows them to relegate it to an event that is not worth their time in considering. There are several ways that interviewees described ignoring racism. Some stated that they believe that all people are equal, therefore they do not accept what racist whites say or do. In rejecting the racist behavior, black Americans are able to relegate racism to the realm of the ridiculous. Others reported that they are protected because they love themselves and turn the negative situation into a positive one. Avoiding the source of racism, whites, altogether is another strategy that black Americans interviewed spoke of.

Many of the black Americans I interviewed dealt with racism by confronting it. Since there are many types of racism, there are many ways that a confrontation can occur. Depending on the type and location of the discrimination confrontations can range from making light of the situation to becoming infuriating. Standing up for oneself is

something, historically, that many black Americans could not do without guaranteeing that they would lose their life. Only recently, have black Americans been able to defend themselves against racist actions. For this reason, standing up for one's rights is an important new way to cope with racism and the racist threat. Letting those who are racist know that their actions and belief system is immoral is an important step towards undoing racism. Confrontations can range from subtle demands for equal treatment and justice to angry spectacles. What coping style is employed depends on the situation at hand.

In order to protect oneself against racism, some black Americans described altering their behavior. Knowing what whites think about black Americans, by being aware of the stereotypes is necessary in order to change one's behavior to fit the dominant white ideal. One interviewee considered adapting to be absolutely necessary in order to get by in this racist society. Adapting usually means adopting patterns of behavior such as dress, speech, and mannerisms that whites will not find "suspicious." Black Americans are forced to operate a double consciousness. They are themselves at home, and when in public they become what they perceive whites expect of them. All this is done simply to go to the grocery store, the park, or ride in your car on a public street. Avoiding harassment by public officials and other member of the white community is a way to protect one's psyche and body.

While many of the coping mechanisms for working class black Americans are akin to those that middle class blacks reported in *Living with Racism*, some variations exist (Feagin and Sikes 1994). Whereas Feagin and Sikes (1994) detail the repressed rage many middle class black Americans feel, none of those who I interviewed described feeling this. Another difference is that none of the working class black Americans

interviewed discussed turning to the courts for remedy against racism. The working class interviewed dealt with racism internally or directly with the perpetrator of the racist act.

Racism in the Future

The lessons that black Americans have learned as a result of coming to consciousness about racism are stressful and terrifying. That they are forced to experience racism at all is depressing, for racism does not have to occur. Many of those interviewed are hopeful that perhaps with time, racism will disappear. Yet, many who were positive were also realistic about the future of race relations in the United States. When asked if discrimination would ever disappear, Jack said, "I don't think so because of the past of this country. I don't think it could ever happen. It probably can, but who knows when it will." Sam suggests that what needs to be done, as a society, for discrimination to end is to "try not to look at a person's color and judge them on that.... People just need to look at the person. The inside of the person, not so much what's on the outside. I truly believe that, believe me, from my childhood I experienced people just looking at the exterior and not so much dealing with the interior." Being non-judgmental and operating without the use of stereotypes may be difficult, but in order for racism to be eradicated, it is necessary to shift the ways in which one thinks. Walt said, "The real great changes, and I hate to say it, won't come until man moved out into space and goes to colonizing space from the point where we know it and they can leave all this riff-raff behind." The idea that this planet will have to be left behind in order for racism to no longer exist is extreme, but it illuminates how serious a problem it is for black Americans.

Future Research

Just giving voice here to the fears and frustrations of working class black Americans is more than most researchers in the area of race have done. Yet, continuing to learn from and understand the struggles that the working class of the black American community face is of extreme importance. There is an immediate need for more research on working class black Americans in all social scientific disciplines, not just sociology. This group has been virtually ignored by researchers in favor of the middle class and inner city poor. It is important to understand how black American working class lives are similar to and differ from other racial and class groups. Without significant research that describes the experiences of the working class in all aspects of life, it is difficult to analyze the impact racism and other forms of oppression have on this group's life chances.

Final Thoughts

Formulating ways to endure racism is a more realistic approach to coping with racism than to wait for its demise. Black Americans, despite what may be written about racism, know that its decline is not as great as many report. For black Americans the reality of life is now, as it has always been, to develop ways to negotiate living in this racist society. Black American parents must continue to educate their children about the wicked ways of the world and adults must to devise strategies that will help them to mitigate racism's impact on their spirit and their opportunities. For those working class black Americans who were interviewed for this project "getting by" means something similar to what it meant for their grandparents. As much social change as there has been, there is still much that needs to be done.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How would you describe your childhood?
 - What were your parents like?
 - Do you have siblings?
 - Who were your friends?
 - What was your school like?
 - What is your best memory? Worst memory?

2. What was your high school experience like?
 - What was your favorite subject(s)?
 - Who were your friends?
 - Who was the best teacher you had? Why?
 - Can you recall what your goals were when you were in high school?
 - What do you wish you had known then that you know now?

3. What was your first job?
 - Did you like the job?
 - What was your boss like?
 - Who were your co-workers?
 - *If at a young age:* What did your family and friends think of you working?

4. Who was your first boyfriend/girlfriend?
 - Where did you meet?
 - What was he/she like?
 - What did your family/friends think of them?
 - What did their family/friends think of you?
 - Why did you break up?

5. What was your college experience like?
 - What was your major?
 - What was your social life like?
 - What was your academic life like?
 - Did you date? If so, what were they like?
 - Who were your friends?
 - What was your favorite thing to do when you weren't studying?
 - What is your best memory? Worst memory?

6. What was your first job out of college?

7. What has your family life been like as an adult?
 - Have you married?
 - Do you have children?
 - Describe those experiences.
8. What have your main goals been throughout your life?
 - What goals have you been able to achieve?
 - Was there anyone or anything that helped you to achieve your goals?
 - What goals have you been unable to achieve?
 - What has prevented you from achieving your goals?
9. What hopes/goals do you have for your children and other family members?
10. What similarities exist among all black Americans?
11. What differences exist? If I was an outsider, how would I categorize black America?
12. What is the biggest problem facing the black community today?
13. If you had to place yourself in a class, which would you select? Working, middle, upper? Or would you identify yourself as belonging to some other class?
14. What impact has your social class had on you and your family? (By social class I mean poor, working, middle-class, upper-class).
15. What are you activities are you involved in (i.e., church, fraternity/sorority)?
16. What do you think the greatest problem facing America is?
17. Have you had any experiences with mistreatment because of your race?
 - In schools? In jobs/workplaces? In stores and other public areas like hotels/motels? With police or other government agencies/officials?
 - What has been the most recent discriminatory event that you have experienced?
 - How did you react?
 - How did you feel?
 - Who did you tell about your experience?
 - Did you find that sharing your experience helped to ease the pain?
18. What is your opinion on affirmative action?
 - What is your opinion about recent media and legal attention on affirmative action?
 - Do you think racism is a widespread problem?
 - How would you like to see equality achieved (by what means/programs)?

19. What values have helped you to be successful in a racist society?
20. What are the values that all black children should be taught so that they can grow up to be strong and successful?
21. Have you had any experiences with discrimination because of your gender?
 - How did you react?
 - How do you define feminism?
 - Do you think sexism is a widespread problem?
22. How would you describe your adult life?
 - What has been great about your adult life?
 - What have the challenges been?
 - If you could do things over again, what would you change?
23. What are your hopes for your future?
 - How do you envision spending your retirement years?
 - Do you have a retirement fund that can be used for your retirement years?

Vignettes & Questions

1. Recently, I had an experience in a restaurant where the waiters did not wait on my boyfriend and I until we asked for service. The restaurant has an outdoor patio where most people sit. We selected a corner table. There were two waiters, both white, serving outdoor diners. There was a table two spots behind us that was full and another table a few spots to our right that was filled. The three tables formed an “L” shape, with our table at the corner of the “L.” These were the only customers in the entire restaurant, indoors and outdoors. The two waiters consistently walked past us and neither of them offered to get menus or water for us.
 - Do you think the situation could have been racial discrimination?
 - How can you tell a discriminatory situation from a non-discriminatory situation?
 - What would you have done in this situation?
 - What would you explain the situation to your children? How would you advise them to handle the situation?

2. A few years ago, I worked at the local Pizza Hut. One night after closing the restaurant I waived good-bye to my friends and got into my car to go home. As I pulled out of the brightly lit parking lot I realized my headlights were not on. I switched them on and in doing so noticed a police car sitting across the street. The police officer must have been watching everyone get into their cars after work. I pulled out of the parking lot making my way onto the highway. As soon as I got onto the entrance ramp I noticed the police car that had been across the street behind me. As soon as I got onto the highway, the police car lights came on and I pulled over. The officer told me that I was going 15 miles over the speed limit. I had not been speeding because I knew he was behind me.

- Do you think my being pulled over was racially motivated?
- How can you tell what is racially motivated and what isn't?
- What would you have done in my situation?
- Have you had a similar experience?

This is how I reacted: I told him that that was not true because I knew he was behind me and I was careful to drive at the speed limit for I was not stupid enough to speed when there was a cop behind me. He let me go with a warning.

- Was I correct in defending myself?

3. Imagine that you have a child that is six year old and in kindergarten. He/she is the only black child in the class. All the other children are white. One of the children in the class is having a birthday party and your child is the only one who isn't invited. Your child is upset about not being invited to the party.

- What would you do in this situation?
- How do you explain the situation to your child?

You are having a birthday party for your child who wants to invite everyone in their class.

- What do you do? Do you invite the child who did not invite your child to their party? Why did you make this choice?

APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS GUIDE

1. Gender 1 () Female
2 () Male
2. Place of Birth

3. Age _____
4. Current Marital Status 1 () Never Married
2 () Married
3 () Widowed
4 () Divorced
5 () Separated
6 () Partnered
5. Children? 1 () Yes
2 () No
6. How many? _____
7. What is your current residence? 1 () House
2 () Apartment
3 () Condominium
4 () Mobile Home
5 () Room
6 () Other

8. How long have you lived at your current
place of residence? _____ Years _____
Months
9. Do you rent or own? 1 () Rent
2 () Own
10. What is your current occupation?

11. How long have you worked there? _____ Years _____
Months

12. What kind of work have you done most of your life?

13. What is the highest grade level or year of college completed?

00 01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12	13 14 15 16 17 +
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14. Did you pass a high school equivalency exam
or get a diploma?

- 1 () GED
2 () High School Diploma

15. Do you have a bachelor's degree?

- 1 () Yes
2 () No

16. What was your major?

17. What college/university did you attend?

18. Do you have a graduate degree?

- 1 () Yes
2 () No

19. What graduate program were you in?

20. What university did you attend?

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Liv Newman was born and raised in Miami, Florida. She graduated from Emory University in 1997 with a bachelor's degree in history. In 2000, she received a master's degree in education policy analysis from Stanford University's School of Education. Between degrees she has worked as an assistant director of admissions at Loyola University and as a seventh grade language arts teacher, both in New Orleans. Miss Newman currently resides in New Orleans, Louisiana.