The Impact of Workplace Isolation, Occupational Stress, and Stereotypes on the Experience and Expression of Anger among Black Workers

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1930s, researchers have speculated about what role suppressing anger has on the quality and quantity of life of individuals from various social backgrounds. From ulcers and hypertension to depression and schizophrenia, the experience and expression of anger has been found to be influenced by status characteristics such as age, race, and gender. Recently, researchers have suggested that experiencing anger in social interactions is indicative of feeling dissatisfaction concerning perceptively unfair social conditions, social events, and/or social behaviors. Therefore, this study will build on the use of anger as an indirect indicator of inequality in social relationships to assess the disproportionate amounts of anger and the unhealthy anger expression styles Black Americans reportedly exhibit in the workplace. Specifically, this study seeks to answer this question: what influences the manner in which Black Americans experience and express their anger in the workplace? Qualitative in nature, the study employs semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzes interview data via a combination of grounded theory and qualitative comparison methods.

INTRODUCTION

The experience and expression of anger can be indicative of patterns of social inequalities not typically observable by asking people their direct perceptions of what is and is not fair. In past research on the effects of anger on parenthood, anger (characterized as an emotion for the disadvantaged) has been used to measure gender inequality (Ross and Willigen 1996). The use of anger as an indicator of social inequality can be traced to Averill’s claim that the instigation to anger is caused by an “unjustified or avoidable” violation of general social norms or specific social and/or personal expectations (1982:175). Consequently, because anger is a social emotion and occurs as a reaction to a person perceiving a particular social interaction as unfair, unjust, and/or undeserved, the anger experience can be seen as an indirect indicator of social inequality. Likewise, because the manner in which a person chooses to express his/her anger is defined by social rules, anger expression can also be employed as an indirect indicator of social inequality.

Lovaglia and Houser’s application of status-compatible emotions theory among female workers illustrated that within groups 1) higher status members experience more positive emotions and 2) positive emotions elicit higher expectations of a group member’s competence and her allotment of influence (1996). Consequently,
high status members were given more opportunities to perform, performed more, received higher evaluations for their performance, and influenced group decisions more than low-status members. On the other hand, low-status members only gained influence by both feeling negative emotions and inducing positive reactions and were seen negatively and resisted if they did not mask their negative emotions. In this study, competence and assertiveness did not eliminate the disadvantage of female status. Instead, female workers were overlooked for promotion if they only displayed positive emotions; discredited and stigmatized if they expressed negative emotions; profited professionally only if they both experienced and suppressed their negative emotions.

As seen in Lovaglia and Houser’s study, workplace interactions “asymmetrically limit the expression of negative socioemotional behaviors arising from disagreements, but not the positive expressions arising from agreements” (Ridgeway and Johnson 1990:1189). This top-down pattern of negative emotional expression maintained the status quo by suppressing the negative socioemotional behavior of low-status members (who have negative socioemotional reactions) while allowing expression among high-status members (who report positive socioemotional reactions). Specifically, Ridgeway and Johnson found that low status group members 1) elicited more negative emotions from other group members, 2) internalized lower performance expectations of their work, and 3) engaged in task-related work with previously-lowered performance expectations from their co-workers (1990). Anger resulted when low status group members exhibited equal or greater levels of performance expectations and externalized their disagreements and negative emotions.

**Perspective of Anger among Black Workers**

Anger is often experienced as a countering strategy to perceived and/or anticipated discrimination (Feagin and McKinney 2003). As a racial minority, Black workers have less social space to express their anger but may experience more frequent discrimination. Thus, the accumulative and synergistic effects of status-specific inequalities may expose them to poor health conditions over time (Williams and Collins 1995). Studies that have examined the physical, mental, and social health impacts of anger among Black Americans have consistently found anger experience and/or anger suppression to have negative mental health (Grier and Cobbs 1968), physical health (Vandervoort, Ragland, and Syme 1996), and psychosocial (Johnson and Greene 1991) impacts upon Black Americans. Additionally, public health researchers and social scientists have written extensively on the physical, psychological, and economic consequences of dealing with racism, discrimination, and race-based stereotypes on a daily basis (Anderson 1989; Krieger 1999; Williams and Williams-Morris 2000).

**Theoretical Explanations of Why Blacks Might Suppress**

In this paper, I will present qualitative data in my attempt to understand what variables render Black Americans more susceptible to anger experience and suppression in the workplace than their White American co-workers. Consequently, I propose that the expression and experience of anger and dissatisfaction in the workplace is not universal but rather closely reflects an individual’s status characteristics (e.g. race, gender,
sexual orientation, age, and social class). Additionally, several variables, such as workplace isolation, occupational stress, and stereotypes, are key factors in uncovering how Black Americans choose to deal with anger-provoking situations. As a social emotion, anger not only uncovers inequalities in workplace relationships, but also reveals a dynamic process by which Black Americans continually negate negative racial stereotypes and the economic and health consequences of being born brown in America. Specifically, this paper will address the research question: What influences the manner in which Black Americans experience and express their anger in the workplace?

METHODOLOGY

I interviewed 24 Black workers in the states of Florida, Georgia, and Alabama. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews inquired about Black workers’ experience of discrimination and occupational stress, experience of anger and anger suppression, and experience of physical and mental health problems. Participants’ professions ranged from occupations in medicine and academia to business and engineering. Occupations encompassed both blue-collar and white-collar occupations and both low-autonomy and high-autonomy occupations. Occupations included, but were not limited to: professor, registered nurse, janitor, entry-level manager, waitress, computer technician, and university administrator. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60, with the majority being in or near the age bracket of 30-39. Their incomes varied widely with the majority of participants reporting incomes between $20,000 and $40,000. Eligible participants included those who identified themselves as being of African descent, were employed full-time, and were over the age of 18.

I used a combination of snowball sampling and quota sampling. Initially, as I focused on high-status occupations, I employed snowball sampling techniques to locate key informants in a university town who could identify other Black professionals whom they knew might be willing to participate. Eventually though, I sampled both Black professionals and Black non-professionals in adjacent and non-adjacent cities. To locate eligible Black non-professionals, I employed purposive sampling techniques to locate potential participants in low-status occupations. Specifically to gain access to eligible Black non-professionals, I combined the random selection of bus riders on routes servicing low-income neighborhoods with the social networks and endorsement of respected community lay persons.

My analysis focused on two specific questions: “How assimilated into mainstream America are you?” and “Have you experienced any type of racism on your job or on the way to obtaining your job?” Employing qualitative comparison analysis techniques, three variables emerged as being key factors in determining the quantity and quality of anger experienced and the anger expression styles of the study’s participants. The three variables include workplace isolation, occupational stress, and negative stereotypes of Black Americans.

ISOLATION: ASSIMILATION AND RACE
The intricacies of race were salient in producing feelings of isolation among Black workers. Workplace isolation is defined here as the degree to which workers feel physically and socially alienated from their co-workers during the time spent on and off the job. The question, "How assimilated into mainstream America are you" elicited various amounts of confusion from participants, as they struggled to determine what exactly defined "mainstream." Their struggle to define the word was somewhat indicative of their state of isolation.

Generally, younger Black workers tended to report perceiving themselves as more mainstream than older Black workers; when possible, Black workers leaned on their educational achievements to prove their capacity to be mainstream; and class and gender interacted with race to produce feelings of isolation.

Though one young, low-level assistant manager characterized herself as "normal" and "very mainstream," her experiences of anger revealed her as anything but that. Her brother was shot by police a few months prior to the interview; she was 19 and an assistant manager at a globally-recognizable franchise; and to keep her job, she consistently completed tasks above and beyond her job description. Still, she never attributed what she called the "shit work" to her race or sex; instead, she chalked up her experiences to everyday life. Likewise, the graduate students I interviewed also indicated feelings of normalcy even while acknowledging sentiments of "biasness" in their respective departments. Ironically, the bias seemed to benefit those students who were "already ... familiar with the way things go."

Possibly, the young Black Americans I interviewed were not as affected by racism as their older Black counterparts because today racism is not so transparent and blatant in their lives. Black men no longer hang from nooses in trees behind busy shopping districts. Though those students who seemed to be familiar "with the way things go" tend to have White classmates, these young Black Americans may not readily see the systematic and institutional racism that have historically given persons of higher social status better access to the intricacies of higher education. Additionally, though young Black Americans may recognize themselves as "just like" their White co-workers, as in the case with one young Black janitor, they also are less likely to recognize that having the same physical and mental attributes of their White co-workers does not mean that they have the same economic, social, or health opportunities their White peers or co-workers may have. Consequently, young Black Americans, without the complete recognition that they are isolated, are placed in social spaces of isolation based on their lack of opportunity to access elite social groups and exclusive knowledge.

On the other hand, older Black Americans both recognized their isolation in the workplace and acknowledged that their Blackness set them apart from their co-workers. When explaining their perspectives on assimilation, older participants constantly referred to their advanced education for many had received bachelors, masters, and doctorate degrees. In the absence of these, as reflected in a woman who held a low-level management position, the essence of the white-collar job they held served to characterize them as "mainstream." Consequently, being mainstream served in various ways as an indicator of personal and financial success.

Still, as indicated in the following statement, their feelings of isolation were undeniable:
I don’t have things to do with White people outside of work. After I left work, I didn’t even see White people you know because I lived in a neighborhood that was predominantly Chicano.

In this statement, the uniqueness this Black woman feels at work is aggravated by the fact that even personally, she has few connections with the White Americans with whom she works. Accordingly, workplace isolation reflected her lack of social and emotional connections with her White co-workers. Surely, the housing segregation which characterizes urban and rural neighborhoods prevents interactions between racial and ethnic group members outside of what is socially necessary.

Feelings of workplace isolation also stemmed from the realization of being a numerical minority within the workplace. This was particularly true for those Black Americans in high-status occupations:

...the isolation that you feel knowing that there are only 77 Black faculty on campus... you don’t see yourself reflected in any real numbers...people look surprised that I’m actually here and I’m actually a professor.

Consequently, workplace isolation stems not only from one’s social circles but also from one’s professional circles. Notice she identifies herself as one of “77 Black faculty” [emphasis added], not one of a number of women faculty nor one of a number of university faculty. This statement captures the importance of racial identification to people who feel workplace isolation.

Yet the statement reflects more than the isolation Black workers experience from racial, ethnic, or cultural identification or even from being a numerical minority in the workplace. Social class and race interact to produce a systematic separation of Black workers from mainstream culture and opportunities. The same woman later states,

Though I have the markings of American success, I have a clear understanding on a day to day basis when I worry about paying my mortgage, and you know, my mom is asking me to borrow 20 dollars, that I’m not assimilated at all...

Her last line captures it all. Nearly half the number of individuals I interviewed indicated growing up in poverty or working-class households, even those with high-status occupations. The same separation that has produced hip-hop, drive-bys, and high rates of unemployment in the Black community has socially isolated Black workers from their White co-workers, even when they work side by side.

Along with race and social class, gender also played a significant part in characterizing the isolation Black women faced. One young Black female professor states “I’m not [assimilated] in that I have a history of being
a Black woman in this country, who was a Black girl in this country. And the bodies of Black girls are not respected; the minds of Black girls are not respected.” For this woman, the devaluation of Black Americans and women in American society places her at a unique point of isolation such that neither her physical nor intellectual labor is valued in the workplace. Considering the pervasive and systematic racism which presents limited opportunities for young Black workers, the social separation Black workers have from their co-workers, and the devaluation of racialized and gendered bodies, it is not illogical to postulate how feelings of workplace isolation among Black Americans can lay the foundation for unhealthy and chronic anger experience and anger suppression. Workplace isolation inspires anger among Black workers by clearly delineating the differences between Black workers and their co-workers. Specifically, it accentuates Black workers' limited opportunities for economic advancement, for interaction with co-workers in non-professional environments, and for expression of anger through reliable and productive social relationships.

**OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: OVERWORKED AND UNDERVALEUED**

The isolation Black Americans face in the workplace was exacerbated by the disproportionate amount of job stress Black Americans handled on a daily basis in both low-status and high-status occupations. The effects of being overworked and undervalued was evident in the experiences of racism Black workers encountered in the workplace and in their co-workers’ conceptualizations of them as “workhorses.” The term “workplace” alludes to the slavery-produced sentiments that claim Blacks are useful primarily for labor. Such sentiments are echoed in the answers to the question, “Have you experienced any type of racism on your job or on the way to obtaining your job?”

One blue-collar worker recalled a job in a distribution center, “where they have more Black people working than White people, working harder. So, [that’s] kind of bad…and the situation hasn’t gotten solved yet.” He illustrates the phenomenon of Black workers not only working harder qualitatively, but also working hard in greater numbers in more difficult lower-status jobs than proportionately their White co-workers.

Along with incurring a disproportionate amount of occupational stress by overworking themselves, Black workers also do so by being undervalued by their employers. The young janitor mentioned above quit his job at the distribution center because he acquired a back injury from lifting heavy packages improperly. According to him, the workers (primarily Black workers) were never given training on how to lift properly or corrected in their lifting techniques. As the Black workhorse, he worked harder at a job that simultaneously exposed him to more physical dangers and stress than the “mainstream” White American, white-collar job does. As such, institutional racism primarily limited this Black man’s job opportunities, availing him disproportionately to dangerous, low-paying jobs where managers (typically White, older, and male) neglected to provide their employees with quality training. Consequently, co-workers and managers proved to undervalue the Black body.

Being overworked and undervalued occurs in high-status occupations as well as low-status occupations. While Black Americans have touted education as the key to gaining equality, today many educated Blacks find
themselves in jobs where they must meet expectations far above those of their co-workers to prove their competence. One overworked Black female professor maintained that covert racism produced both workplace isolation and a hostile work environment, for in her department there are people who seem to tolerate you and often kind of enjoy the fact that you are here, but don't really take you seriously until you jump 20 more hurdles than they themselves have to jump...

While jumping “20 more hurdles” may seem like hyperbole, another professor actually reported sitting on thirteen different professional committees within one academic year.

In addition to being undervalued and overworked, the commitment of Blacks to service places them at a vulnerability to being undervalued in high-status positions where they hold themselves personally accountable to mentoring younger generations. By the politics of sheer numbers, White professors can easily disperse the responsibility of mentoring students. However, since there are so few Blacks in high-level occupations, from professionals to white-collar positions, these Blacks end up serving as mentors to the upcoming generation of Blacks. In the academic setting, this produces an unequal proportion of guiding, accepting responsibility for, and mentoring students—particularly, but of course not exclusively, Black students. One professor states candidly, There is a limited number of Black faculty, so the students come to me....The expectation is that I will be there for each and every one of my students, and I will. But that's a responsibility that a lot of the White male professors do not carry, and they don't have those expectations [placed on them].

Here, she speaks of the additional expectations of her students, which causes her to split her time between mentoring and publishing. Like committee work, mentoring students does not count towards obtaining tenure. Yet these duties are part of the unwritten rules for Blacks in academia—one, to influence (and in many cases, ensure) equal hiring practices and the curriculum and another, to serve those historically disadvantaged students who have the opportunity to sit in their classrooms. That responsibility is made more difficult by the hurdles Black administrators, professionals, and professors face in securing adequate financial resources to improve the already inequitable conditions. Yet it is not simply a question of "if" for Black professionals in the academia, but rather a question of "how" they will successfully manage both service and academic duties.

The occupational stress which results from being overworked is, in many cases, expected as an individual advances to higher status occupations. However, the devaluation of the Black worker makes the normal stress of working especially difficult to handle. When one young female professor attempted to secure more time to conduct research by relieving some of her professional commitments, she revealed that the department’s reaction to preserve research time for her White male co-worker (whom she had a hand in hiring) revealed clearly that
they did not choose to protect her time. She states, “day after day, over and over, every single interaction with them basically betrayed that they didn’t value me beyond what they could take in terms of labor, and not the intellectual labor, the actual labor.”

America’s growing dependence on the service economy is detrimental for Black workers, as work-related tasks increasingly rely on intellectual capabilities. Unfortunately for Black workers, in even the most intellectual of fields, Black bodies are used for the most mundane, time-consuming, and unrewarding tasks. Black workers, unlike their White counterparts, chronically have their intellectual capacities questioned. Coupled with the added stress of oftentimes being one of few Black workers and having at best a limited amount of social support, the treatment and devaluation of Black workers as “workhorses” reveal partly why many of my participants reported experiencing and suppressing their anger daily.

RUNNING FROM STEREOTYPES (AND UNEMPLOYMENT)

Within my sample, workplace isolation and occupational stress interacted to create an atmosphere which was conducive to the experience of anger reported by Black workers. Additionally, economic anxiety, which stemmed from the threat of unemployment, silenced the expression of anger among Black workers in my sample. Social mobility for Black Americans is precarious and dependent on the social graces of higher-status, well-connected employers. Entrenched stereotypes of Black Americans as incompetent, lazy, and unnecessarily angry serve to discredit the voices of Black workers when they attempt to express their frustrations and anger. Those who do not fight the stereotypes are overlooked for promotions, dismissed on ambiguous grounds, and pigeonholed as individuals who resist professionalism and integration. An older professor laughed ironically as he explains the Black worker’s dilemma:

the terminology nowadays is, “oh, he’s playing the race card”…. that’s all a lot of people have [though], they’ve been dealt with from the race deck! … they play the race card and somebody screams about that.

The stereotypes of the “angry Black man” and “angry Black woman” played a central role in anger suppression among the Black workers I interviewed. These stereotypes served to reinforce the economic risk that Black Americans face when deciding how to deal with their anger. Regardless of whether one gets labeled as the “angry Black male” or the “angry Black female,” the racial stereotypes function to provide White co-workers with other misguided reasons (besides the real reasons) of why their Black co-workers may be expressing anger. Therefore, the inequalities that Black workers react to are never addressed but rather are swept away in the guise of a stereotype. By individualizing inequalities, stereotypes burden only the Black worker, not the co-workers who participate in creating and maintaining the inequalities, and produce sentiments of anger that have no place to be expressed.
In conclusion, workplace isolation, occupational stress, and stereotypes interact to create an atmosphere which promotes anger experience and discourages anger expression in the workplace among Black workers. These social variables are closely linked to the low social status of Black workers and their poorer socioeconomic status as compared to their White co-workers. Isolation evidenced as a key factor in Black workers’ feelings of alienation from their White co-workers both professionally and personally. Consequently, isolation may produce more feelings of anger among Black workers.

Job stress captured two separate aspects of Black workers’ interactions in the workplace—that of being overworked and of being undervalued. Regardless of whether Black workers are in high- or low-status positions, they subscribed to an ethic of working hard which is both exploited by their White co-workers and needed by younger generations of Black Americans who seek their guidance. Disproportionate workloads and the devaluation of the Black body and the Black mind may produce chronic and debilitating levels of stress and anger among Black workers.

Though workplace isolation and workplace stress can produce higher levels of anger experience among Black workers, it is the very real and economic risks that accompany anger expression which produce anger suppression among Black workers. Stereotypes of the angry black person threaten promotions and frustrate Black workers by causing them to be taken less seriously by their co-workers. The high rates of unemployment among Black Americans, especially among Black men, are chronic threats Black workers must consider when choosing how to deal with their anger.

While this study outlines several variables which may be used to focus future discussions of anger experience and anger suppression among Black workers, one limit of this study is the small sample size. In the future, researchers should seek larger, more representative samples so future findings can be more inclusive of the various experiences of Black Americans. Focus groups may be effective in procuring larger samples of qualitative data.

Future research should concentrate on the dynamic relationship between racial identity and the perception of racism, as one must perceive that an event is racist, discriminatory, or unfair before one can react to it with anger or other emotions. We should also seek to establish an epidemiology of anger suppression in the Black community with careful consideration of the various ethnic, class, and sexual orientation identifications of Black Americans.

REFERENCES


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