

# The Quality of Work Life, Self-Evaluation and Life Satisfaction Among African Americans

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African Americans like most Americans, spend a substantial amount of time and energy working. Historically, the quality of work life among African Americans has been structured by inequality (Farley and Allen, 1987). Thus, for most African Americans, work life consists of poor work conditions, inadequate earnings, less autonomy and job instability. In addition, African Americans are more likely than whites to be concentrated in low-skilled, blue collar occupations (Jayne and Williams, 1989; Farley, 1984; Terry, 1981; Kluegel, 1978). Research indicates that these conditions lead to low levels of job satisfaction (Mortimer, 1979; Kalleberg, 1977; Coverman, 1989; Tuch and Martin, 1991), and contribute to persistent poverty among many African Americans (Wilson, 1987; 1996).

Research on the social psychology of work also suggests that the quality of work life can have pervasive consequences on one's sense of worth and one's personal sense of control (Mortimer, 1979; Mortimer and Lorence, 1989; Gecas and Schwalbe, 1983). Moreover, the spillover hypothesis indicates that one's level of job satisfaction can spillover and influence behaviors in other spheres of life, which in return, can impact general life satisfaction (Rice et al., 1980; Rain et al., 1991). In other words, the quality of work life affects job-related social psychological outcomes, as well as, global social psychological outcomes.

The association between the quality of work life, self-evaluation and general life satisfaction is not surprising when one considers the fact that the research on African American families indicates that job loss, low-skilled occupations and low earnings have negative implications for African American families including poverty, psychological distress, and health problems. Despite the fact that it is well documented that work is a salient aspect of personal identity, very little is known about the quality of work life among African Americans and its importance to their self-evaluation or satisfaction with life in general.

The central aim of this review is to provide an overview of research that demonstrates the importance of the quality of African Americans' work life in relation to their self-evaluation and satisfaction with life in general. The research on the quality of work life of African Americans and the impact it has on other spheres of their lives has been limited. This review synthesizes the existing research into four discussion sections. The first section reviews the literature that examines the relationship between African American work conditions and job satisfaction. The second section considers the impact of work on African Americans' self-evaluation. The third section summarizes the research on the relationship between job satisfaction and life satisfaction. The final section presents gaps

in our knowledge about the impact of African Americans' work life on their self-evaluation and overall satisfaction with life. In addition, directions for future research are discussed.

### **African Americans' Work Conditions and Job Satisfaction**

Previous research on job satisfaction consistently reveals that African Americans report lower levels of job satisfaction than whites (Staines and Quinn 1979; Weaver, 1978; Tuch and Martin, 1991; Austin and Dodge, 1992). However, the sociological research on the sources of African Americans' job dissatisfaction is limited. The basic explanation given for African Americans' lower level of job satisfaction is that their structural position in the labor force impacts their level of job satisfaction. That is, African Americans are over represented in those occupations located in the secondary sector of the labor force that produce disadvantages in terms of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards (Mortimer, 1979; Tuch and Martin, 1991). Tuch and Martin's (1991) analyses of the General Social Survey indicate that African Americans report lower levels of job satisfaction because they are over represented in blue collar occupations that produce low levels of extrinsic rewards such as low pay and high instability. Moreover, African Americans are disproportionately located in urban areas that exacerbate their restricted employment opportunities. A recent study of the General Social Survey for 1972 through 1991 suggests that the race difference in job satisfaction is largely due to the lower satisfaction of African American women relative to white women (Firebaugh and Harley, 1995).

Findings from the National Survey of Black Americans imply that the job dissatisfaction among African Americans is not necessarily related to structural variation in the kinds of jobs held. Bowman (1991) found that about equal portions of secondary and upper primary workers reported to be very satisfied with their jobs, while lower primary workers were less likely to be very satisfied. Results suggest that one possible explanation for this difference is that lower primary workers most valued concern about their job was promotion opportunities. The implication is that job characteristics impact job satisfaction based on distinctive work needs. In other words, it is important to understand what workers most value in a job and whether the job provides what is most valued (Hanson et al., 1987).

### **Work, Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy Among African Americans**

It is well documented in the sociological social psychology literature that work experience impacts self-evaluation (Kohn and Schooler, 1973; Mortimer and Lorence, 1979; Staples, et al., 1984; Schwalbe, 1985). The two dimensions of self-evaluation discussed in the literature are self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem refers to an individual's sense of self-worth, whereas self-efficacy indicates a sense of control or competence (Rosenberg, 1979; Gecas, 1982; Schwalbe, 1985).

Research investigating the relationship between work and self-esteem shows that work conditions or job characteristics are positively related to self-esteem. The work condition that most studies in this area find to be most consequential for self-esteem is work

autonomy. Findings from several studies reveal that the degree of freedom or control the worker has over his or her work has an impact on self-esteem (Mortimer and Lorence, 1979; Staples et al., 1984). Schwalbe (1985) identifies three contributions of autonomy in work to positive self-esteem: 1) autonomy via self-perceptions-allows individuals to take responsibility for their own actions and success; 2) autonomy via reflected appraisals-autonomy is experienced as a reward for demonstrated competence and reliability; and 3) autonomy via social comparison-autonomy as a status indicator in the workplace culture is used for social comparison with other workers. Results also indicate that, in order for autonomy to have a positive effect on self-esteem, it must be valued by the worker.

Despite the fact that African Americans are more likely to be concentrated in occupations with low work autonomy, research investigating this relationship among African Americans is rare. However, findings from the 1980 National Survey of Black Americans, examining how social processes influence black self-perceptions, indicate that job characteristics have a weak relationship to the self-esteem of African Americans (Hughes and Demo, 1989). Rather, self-esteem is found to be related more to family, friendship and religious involvement. Similarly, Johnson (1990) found that underemployment and underpayment did not lower the self-esteem of African American males. However, diversification among African American workers was not addressed in these studies. According to Bowman (1991), African American primary and secondary workers identify differently with various subjective indicators of work life quality. Therefore, it is quite possible that job conditions may impact the self-esteem of African American primary and secondary workers differently, depending on the specific measures used and their diverse work values.

The research on work and self-efficacy suggests that work is important to the development of self-efficacy. Work gives rise to action that allows individuals to experience themselves as a causal agent in their environment (Gecas, 1982; Gecas and Schwalbe, 1983). Since work creates possibilities for engaging in efficacious activities, certain job conditions can either enhance or constrain the formation of self-efficacy.

Although institutional inequality and discrimination are identified as important causes of low self-efficacy among African Americans, with few exceptions very little research has examined how the quality of African Americans' work life or job conditions impact self-efficacy. An investigation by Hughes and Demo (1989) is one notable exception. These investigators found that the job characteristics (e.g., job security, expected mobility, self-perception of work quality, and job satisfaction) used in their study were unrelated to self-efficacy. However, self-rated job performance and occupational prestige were significantly related to African Americans' sense of personal efficacy. Because much of the inequality and discrimination African Americans experience occurs in the workplace, investigations that identify job-related conditions that impact the development of self-efficacy among African Americans are clearly needed.

### **The Job Satisfaction and Life Satisfaction Relationship**

While the relationship between job satisfaction and life satisfaction may possibly be reciprocal, most research conceptualizes job satisfaction as affecting life satisfaction (Rain et al., 1991). The relationship between job satisfaction and life satisfaction has best been supported by the spillover hypothesis. The spillover hypothesis argues that the activity, involvement and attitudes of one sphere of life (e.g., work) are positively related to the activity, involvement and attitudes in other life spheres (Rice et al., 1980; Champoux, 1981; Rain et al., 1991). The implication is that the quality of work life and job satisfaction is important to the overall quality of life.

Research on the relationship between job satisfaction and life satisfaction for African Americans has been neglected in the literature. However, the quality of work life among African Americans has been associated with persistent poverty (Wilson, 1987; 1996), family structure (Wilson and Neckerman, 1986; Farley and Allen, 1987), psychological distress (Brown and Gary, 1988; Beale, 1997), and problems in other areas of life.

### **Conclusion and Directions for Future Research**

With the growing diversity among African American workers and the history of African American work life being structured by inequality, it is important that future research examine the impact of the quality of African Americans work life on their self-evaluation and satisfaction with life in general. Although in recent years, a significant body of research on the black underclass has discussed the impact of work on

African Americans' family structure and socioeconomic status (Wilson, 1987; 1996), very little research has linked African Americans' quality of work life to their self-evaluation or life satisfaction. This review has identified some potential research investigations. First, research efforts should focus on work values and whether the job provides those values. This research will provide important insights into understanding the relationship between job satisfaction, self-evaluation and life satisfaction among African American workers occupying different job levels. Research has shown that work satisfaction is associated with more general satisfaction with life. Thus, if African American workers at different job levels have work values that are not provided by their job, this can have substantial effects on self-esteem, self-efficacy and other psychological dimensions that may have negative implications for family interaction.

Second, research efforts should explore the impact of a variety of different job conditions on African Americans' self-esteem, self-efficacy and life satisfaction. Although research indicates that African Americans level of job satisfaction is influenced by structural conditions of work, research has used a limited amount of variables. In addition, research on the social psychology of work suggests that autonomy has the strongest effect on job satisfaction and other emotional repercussions, including self-esteem and self-efficacy (Mortimer and Lorence, 1995). Further, evidence suggests that work role marginality (e.g., job instability, skill underutilization, downward mobility and promotion opportunities) and racial inequity are serious problems among African American workers, regardless of job level (Bowman, 1991). Such studies are useful in identifying how autonomy in the work place enhances or constrains the development of self-esteem

and self-efficacy among African Americans. Moreover, these studies can effectively address which job conditions impact self-evaluation and life satisfaction the most among different levels of African American workers.

Finally, since work experiences and career patterns are different among African American workers, an age-related influence investigation will provide important information about age-related differences in work values, work involvement and job satisfaction, as well as the relationship between work conditions, job satisfaction, self-evaluation and life satisfaction. Younger African American workers have had better opportunities to pursue occupations in the primary sector of the labor force than older workers due to better educational opportunities and Affirmative Action programs. Thus, they may have more autonomy on the job. Increased autonomy is positively associated with higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, which may have positive effects on satisfaction with life in general. On the other hand, high educational attainment could stimulate high job expectations. All African American workers face considerable disadvantages in the job market. As a result, younger African American workers may experience higher levels of job dissatisfaction due to perceived work role marginality, which can spillover and affect self-evaluation and life satisfaction.

The research on African Americans' work life in recent years has provided us with valuable knowledge about the impact of work life on the social structural conditions (e.g., family structure, poverty) of African Americans. Research needs to be extended to include social psychological factors (e.g., job satisfaction, work values,) to examine the psychological consequences of work life on African Americans' self-evaluation and overall quality of life.

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