

The combined impact of racism at work, non-racial work stress, and financial stress on Black women's psychological well-being

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Introduction

One general finding in the research literature is that women report lower levels of psychological well-being than men. For example, average rates of clinical depression are higher for women than for men (Blumenthal, 1994). Yet, Black women have even lower levels of well-being than have White women (Allen & Britt, 1983). Given this discrepancy, it is critical to examine the factors that account for Black women's decreased psychological well-being.

Demographic characteristics such as income, age and marital status have been shown to impact well-being among Black women (Williams & Rucker, 1996; Crohan, Antonucci, Adelman & Coleman, 1989; Tran, Wright & Chatters, 1991). Many researchers have also found that racism is a source of stress for Blacks (Franklin, 1998; Hacker, 1992; Locke, 1992; Outlaw, 1993; Utsey, 1998) that negatively impacts physical and psychological well-being (Billingsley, 1992; Burke, 1984; Fernando, 1984; Foard, 1991; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). However, the role of racism as a predictor of Black women's well-being has not been examined in detail. Further, researchers have paid virtually no attention to the contextual factors that may affect the racism-well-being link. Thus, in an effort to better understand the factors that predict Black women's well-being, this paper examines the impact of racism in the workplace.

Experiences of racism at work might explain Black women's well-being for two reasons. First, the experience of racism itself is stressful. Though it has been found that work conditions such as skill discretion, job demands, and trouble with subordinates lead to psychological distress and lower levels of job satisfaction and well-being (Barnett & Brennan, 1995; Snapp, 1992; Wright, King, Berg & Creecy, 1987), it is proposed that racism at work impacts well-being due to the added stress of racism. Previous research supports this explanation, as it was found that perceptions of race-based discrimination affect patterns of job stress in the work environment of Black women (Mays, Coleman & Jackson, 1996). Further, two types of racial bias, 1) institutional discrimination and 2) interpersonal prejudice, were more important predictors of job quality than were other occupational stressors (e.g. low task variety and decision authority, heavy workloads, and poor supervision) for Black women (Hughes & Dodge, 1997). With respect to well-being, the experience of race-related stress significantly impacts psychological distress for Hispanic American college students and employees above and beyond the effects of non-racial college and work role stressors (Saldana, 1994; Sanchez & Brock, 1996).

Based upon these findings, we predicted that the stress of racism at work would explain variance in well-being above and beyond that which was explained by demographic variables and non-racial work stress.

Second, when experienced in the work context, racism poses a threat to financial viability and thus, impacts well-being. Racism at work may be more detrimental in the work context than in everyday interactions outside of the job. For many Black women, work experiences directly impact financial viability (Burgess, 1995). Black women who are in greater financial need may be more impacted by racism in the work context than women who have less financial need because it poses a threat to job security and advancement, which directly affect economic stability. Such a relationship between economic need and stress has been found in the past. Research indicates that blacks in lower income groups experience more symptoms of distress in general (Anderson, 1991; Kessler & Neighbors, 1986). It is also suggested that being poor and being discriminated against makes life even more stressful, and increases the risks for disease and instability (Myers, 1982). Therefore, one's economic dependence on employment may account for the deleterious effects of racism in the work context on well-being. In the present study we examined such issues. Specifically, we predicted that the impact of racism at work on psychological well-being would be moderated by perceived financial stress, such that women with higher levels of financial stress would be more impacted by racism at work than women with lower levels of financial stress.

Methods

Participants & Procedure

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of 188 Black women who attended either a town meeting for women or a conference for women of color at a large, Midwestern university. The mean age of the respondents was 38 years, the mean annual household income was between \$25,000 and \$49,999 and approximately half of the participants in this sample had a partner (married, remarried, or lived with significant other). The other half were never married, separated, divorced or widowed.

The survey consisted of measures of demographic variables, stress and well-being. Twelve stress items were taken from the 116-item Women's Stress Inventory (WSI) (Beale, Mattis, White & Stovall, 1995). The measure of racism at work stress used in this study was a three-item index drawn from the WSI ($\alpha=.78$). A sample item was "working at a job where people of color are treated differently than whites." Non-racial work stress was measured by five items drawn from the WSI ($\alpha=.81$). A sample item was "nonracial conflict with a coworker." Financial stress ($\alpha=.80$) was measured by four items on the WSI, such as "unsure you can pay rent, utilities and buy food." Responses were coded on a Likert scale (0 = did not happen; 1 = not at all stressful to 5 = very stressful).

Psychological well-being was measured by depression, life satisfaction and job satisfaction. Depression was measured using the Center for Epidemiological Study - Depression (CES-D) scale (Radloff, 1977). The CES-D is a 20-item scale that measures

symptoms of depressive mood in the general population. Respondents were also asked to respond to single-item measures of life and job satisfaction, which stated: “how satisfied are you with your life in general?” and “how satisfied are you with your job?” respectively. A Likert scale ranging from 1 = “very dissatisfied” to 4 = “very satisfied” was used for the response categories.

Hierarchical regression analyses were used to determine the explanatory power of the demographic variables (age, income, partner status) and stress variables for each measure of well-being (depression, life satisfaction, job satisfaction). Given the exploratory nature of this study, the interaction term was tested using relatively few degrees of freedom ($df = 36$). As such, relationships were considered to be statistically significant if $p < .10$.

Results

Using hierarchical regression, demographic variables were entered first, followed by non-racial work stress second and racism at work stress third. As predicted, the model including racism at work explained significantly more of the variance in well-being than the model with only general work stress for Black women. The incremental effects of racism at work stress were statistically significant for depression ($F(1, 70) = 2.92, p < .10$) and life satisfaction ($F(1, 41) = 3.11, p < .10$).

Consistent with the second hypothesis, the impact of racism at work on well-being was moderated by financial stress. Demographic variables were entered in the hierarchical regression as a block in step one, racism at work and financial stress were entered as a block in step two, and the interaction term between racism at work and financial stress was entered in the third step. The incremental effect of the interaction term was significant for life satisfaction ($F = 3.20, p < .10$).

Discussion

The results of this study indicated that racism at work is a significant predictor of Black women’s psychological well-being, and that both racism and the work context explain this link. Consistent with previous findings that racism negatively impacts the health of Black people (e.g. Burke, 1984; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996), racism experienced within the work context continues to have deleterious effects. Furthermore, racism at work is not simply another work stressor; the experience of racism adds an additional strain to Black women’s lives.

It is interesting to note that while non-racial work stress negatively impacted job satisfaction, racism at work did not have such a relationship. On the other hand, racism at work negatively impacted life satisfaction, while non-racial work stress did not. This discrepancy suggests that Black women may have cognitive and affective strategies for understanding racism at work that preserves their evaluation of the work life context. However, those strategies may not effectively buffer against the spill-over effect. Research on the spill-over effect offers that, in general, work issues are carried into

family life (Crohan et. al., 1989; Kahn, 1981; Rook, Dooley & Catalano, 1991; Williams & Alliger, 1994). As such, Black women who experience racism at work may continue to feel satisfied at work, but may experience diminished satisfaction with life in general.

The results of this study also indicated that the impact of racism at work on well-being was moderated by financial stress, as women who perceived greater financial need experienced greater decreases in life satisfaction than women who experienced less need. This relationship supports the hypothesis that the impact of racism at work is exacerbated by the threat of economic loss that accompanies the work context.

Further contextualization and more detail about appraisals of racism in the workplace is important for determining why racism at work is stressful for some Blacks and not for others. Financial stress and income are discussed in this article to examine the economic threat of racism at work. However, racism at work can also threaten one's personal identity. Past research has found that women who define themselves according to their occupational role are more likely to report physical symptoms when exposed to work stress (Luchetta, 1995). Experiencing limitations in one's career due to racism could be more detrimental to people who identify strongly with their career.

Racism at work might be also more stressful for people who base their self-concept on racial group membership. People who define race as an important component of who they are might be more sensitive to racist attitudes and/or more affected by racial discrimination. It has been proposed that racial identity might be a mediating factor of stress sources such as racism on psychological and physical distress (Anderson, 1991; Gary, 1995). Watts and Carter (1991) found that stages of racial identity development were the best predictor of perceptions of racial climate and personal discrimination at work. LaVeist, Sellers, Knickerson & Elliott-Brown (1998) found that perceived closeness to other Blacks moderated the impact of racism at work on physical health and longevity. The roles of professional and racial identity should be examined in greater detail, as they relate to experiences of racism at work among Black women.

The results of this study have a number of practical implications. First, in order to maintain psychological well-being, Black women must develop effective coping mechanisms to manage experiences of racism at work, and prevent these experiences from spilling over into their moods and attitudes about life as a whole. Employers would do well to take an active role in preventing racist events from occurring. Research supports that depressed women are less able to perform effectively or maintain enthusiasm about their jobs. Finally, the findings of this study imply that it is critical to examine contextualized experiences of racism in explaining Black women's lowered levels of psychological well-being. Researchers have much to gain by understanding the particular threat racism poses in various contexts.

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