

## **Powerlessness and Anger in African American Women: The Intersection of Race and Gender**

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### **Abstract**

*African American women often face the reality of powerlessness due to the experience of gender and racial oppression that limits, or denies outright, the access to empowering resources such as fair income, education, employment and positions of prestige and power. The article suggests that the clash of powerlessness with internalized historical representations of the “strong black woman” increases the risk of internal distress, frustration, and anger in African American women. The authors review current literature and socio-economic indicators, to discuss historical, social and cognitive aspects of powerlessness and anger in African American women. Practice implications are discussed.*

**Key words:** powerlessness, anger, stress, women, African American women

### **1. Background and Purpose**

An accurate evaluation of the emotional experience of anger in African American women must include an understanding of issues related to gender and race (D. King, 1988; K. King, 2005). It is this intersection of gender and race in African American women that is likely to increase their exposure to societal conditions that create barriers which limit their ability to implement solutions to problems. The aforementioned process may increase susceptibility to the internal experience of helplessness for this population. We suggest that as the result of such dynamic interaction African American women find themselves in a position of high risk to experience powerlessness; and it is this experience of powerlessness that has been identified as a persistent theme in the construction of anger in women (Fields et al. 1998; S. P. Thomas, 2005).

Within the framework of gender and race, the discussion of anger in African American women must take into account two factors that play a major role in their experience of anger: gender-role socialization and cultural expectations of strength. It has been suggested that gender-role socialization messages influence not only how women view anger, but also the mode of anger expression in women (Cox, VanVelsor, & Hulgus, 2004). On the other hand, some authors have suggested that cultural expectation of strength in African American women fuel the myth of the “strong black woman” that compels the woman to push for unrealistic levels of self-sacrifice, self-denial and ensuing emotional distress (Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 2007; Harris, 1995; Harris-Lacewell, 2001; Martin, 2002.) It is this combination of “powerlessness” and “strength” that presents a problematic paradox for African American women. This essay explores the question, what are the possible emotional ramifications when such expectations of strength clash with the disempowering reality of societal attitudes and policies that pose obstacles to empowerment and self-fulfillment for African American women?

It is the thesis of this paper that the emotional outcome of such paradox is the experience of frustration and anger, often left in silence and expressed maladaptively in the form of either self-defeating behaviors or physical health problems (S. A. Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009). We propose that when discussing African American women, the relationship between powerlessness and anger must be understood as a function of both their race and gender. The exclusion of either one of these factors would not give an accurate explanation of the topic. Women in general, but African American women in particular, find themselves at the highest risk of internalizing a sense of powerlessness as the result of experiencing gender and racial oppression that has either limited, or denied outright, the access to empowering resources such as income, education, employment and positions of prestige and power. At the same time, these social conditions have contributed to the disproportionate representation of African American women at the bottom of the income, education, and employment categories, and at the top of the poverty levels (Hartmann, Lovell, & Werschkul, 2004).

## **2. Methodology**

For the purpose of this study the authors conducted a review of the literature based on databases of the social/psychological literature. These databases included PsycInfo, WilsonSelectPlus, Sociological Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts and Social Work Abstracts. Keywords used during the review were: powerlessness, anger, stress, women, African American women, and “strong black women”. In addition the authors also reviewed data from the United States Census Bureau Community Population Survey as well as from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics in order to gather socio-economic data pertinent to African American women, and to be able to make comparisons to other population groups. The literature review for this paper focused on three areas. First, the authors reviewed available literature that has addressed the concept of powerlessness and its emotional and physiological impact on African American women. Second, we reviewed literature that discussed cultural and historical perspectives of expectations of “strength” in African American women. Lastly, we looked at how African American women rated along socio-economic indicators such as income, employment, positions of power, and poverty.

### **2.1 Limitations of current literature on anger**

The review of the literature on anger reveals significant limitations particularly when the focus is on women in general, and the gaps become more glaring when that focus is on African American women in particular. González-Prendes (2008) indicates that an examination of meta-analytic reviews of anger studies (R. Beck & Fernandez, 1998; DelVecchio & O’Leary, 2004; DiGiuseppe & Tafrate, 2003; Edmondson & Conger, 1996) reveals that out of 148 studies included in the reviews, only 2 – both unpublished dissertations – focused exclusively on women, and neither of those focused exclusively on African American women. Furthermore, a close evaluation of these studies underscores another significant limitation: 74% of the studies focused on college students thus creating an over reliance on undergraduate college populations (González-Prendes, 2007). These limitations in the research raise questions regarding the generalizability of such findings to community-base groups. Therefore, a need exists for more conceptual studies and empirical research that illuminate and add to the understanding of theoretical perspectives and client variables that contribute to the experience and expression of anger in African American women (S. P. Thomas, 2005.) Similarly, the Surgeon General’s report on mental health, culture, race, and ethnicity has called for more research that focuses on mental health issues affecting the mental health of racial and ethnic minorities (USDHSS, 2001).

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Powerlessness**

The construct of powerlessness includes two factors: an internal-subjective experience as well as an external reality (S. A. Thomas & González-Prendes, 2009). The internal experience is manifested in an individual’s belief that he or she has little or no control over either the causes of or solutions to one’s problems (Brickman et al. 1982). A person in that situation is likely to believe that he or she is powerless to control circumstances affecting him or her. Controllability, especially over the “solutions” to problems implies power. For example if individuals believe they have appropriate access to resources that will help them implement solutions to their problems, even if they do not see themselves as responsible for the causes of it, then they may feel more empowered to take socially appropriate corrective measures to resolve that problem, and consequently may be less likely to feel exceedingly frustrated and angry. Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, and Brown (2007) suggest that even for disadvantaged women suffering from multiple acute and chronic stressors, perceived control along with optimism have been associated with less emotional distress, including less depression and anger.

In such case one would want to consider a solution-focused approach that enhances the women’s sense of autonomy, increases awareness of their strengths and resources, and engenders a sense of control and optimism to produce the desired changes (de Shazer et al., 2007; Berg & DeJong, 1996). Conversely, as previously indicated, feelings of powerlessness or helplessness appear to be significant factors in the experience of anger (Farrow, 1989; S. P. Thomas, 1995; Fava, Anderson, & Rosenbaum, 1990.). How prevalent is the feeling of powerlessness in the experience of anger in women? S. P. Thomas (2005) conducted a study of everyday anger in a diverse sample of 535 women aged 25 to 66, with 7 to 24 years of education and mostly employed in traditional female fields such as nursing, teaching and clerical work. The researcher suggested that the most prevalent theme of women’s anger, associated with almost two thirds of anger-inducing situations, was powerlessness. At the same time, Mabry and Kiecolt (2005) suggested that minorities, women, and people of lower socioeconomic status experience a lower sense of control than whites, men, and those who are more highly educated, more affluent and hold positions of prestige. The authors hypothesize that a sense of control, or a lack thereof, (the idea that one is in control of one’s outcomes) mediates the experience of anger more for African Americans than for whites.

Fields and her colleagues (1998) conducted an existential-phenomenological study of 9 middle-class, African American women in the Southern United States, ranging in age from 27 to 58 with the purpose of studying their experience of anger. The authors concluded that three key elements of African American women's anger emerged: power, control, and respect. Furthermore, the authors suggested that the anger of the middle-class African American women in the study must be understood within the context of racism and oppression.

Therefore, individuals or groups in society who have been marginalized and experienced oppression and have limited or no access to empowering resources (e.g. gender, racial and ethnic minorities), may experience a strong sense of powerlessness and the negative emotions associated with that experience (i.e. unhealthy anger) (A. Beck, 1999; Meier & Robinson, 2004; Ohbuchi et al., 2004; Weber; 2004). Moreover, perceptions of control conform to objective reality. That is, a sense of personal control increases with education, income, employment and occupational status, and decreases with economic hardship, heavy-burdened jobs such as domestic work, unemployment and poor health and physical impairment; relative to these indicators minority groups often feel less in control than whites (Ross & Mirowsky, 2002.)

### **3.2 Gender-role socialization**

Any discussion of anger in women must include societal expectations for certain gender-role attitudes and behaviors that influence how women may express angry feelings. These expectations, in the form of implicit or explicit messages that women receive throughout their lives, often discourage women from expressing anger directly, and instead promote the view that direct expression of anger poses a threat to the stability of relationships. Consequently, women learn to divert or reroute their anger and in the process of doing so interfering with their ability to implement healthy pro-social solutions to their problems (Cox, Stabb, & Bruckner, 1999; Cox et al., 2004; Hatch & Forgays, 2001; Munhall, 1993; Sharkin, 1993.) According to Cox et al. (2004) anger diversion in women may take either one of four separate pathways: anger containment (e.g. a conscious attempt to avoid expressing anger); anger internalization (e.g. suppression and internalization of anger); anger segmentation (e.g. dissociation from angry feelings with little or no awareness of such feelings); and externalization (e.g. use of aggression or projection of blame for one's uncomfortable feelings).

## **4. Women, Powerlessness and Anger**

Ross and Mirowsky (2002) used data from the 1995 survey of Aging, Status, and the Sense of Control (n = 2,592) to test the hypothesis that men have a higher sense of personal control than women. Their investigation suggested support for the hypothesis, and also indicated that the gap between men and women relative to personal control was larger in older groups (i.e. age  $\geq$  55 years old) than in younger age groups. The authors suggested that conditions such as education, personal history of full-time employment, household income, and physical functioning account for much of the effect of gender on personal control. The authors also point out that high levels of educational attainment are associated with high levels of personal control.

### **4.1 Education, Earnings, Occupation and Poverty: Indicators of Powerlessness**

According to the United States Census Bureau Current Population Survey (2009) relative to indicators of educational attainment women have made significant strides and in many aspects have surpassed men. However, despite the advances of women in the educational field DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith (2009) indicate that in 2008 women lagged behind men in income power: women with equivalent education earn about 77% of what men earn; female-led household ranked at the bottom of the income scale and at the top of the poverty scale; and overall women had a poverty rate of 22.6% compared to 18.9 for men. Data from Bureau of Labor Statistics (as cited by Swift in *The San Jose Mercury News*, 2007) also show that some of the lowest paying occupations (e.g. receptionists, maids, secretaries, paralegals and legal assistants) were female-dominated fields. Moreover, BLS figures also indicate that, although in 2005 women made up 43.6%, of the labor force, they remained underrepresented among the top fourth of earners at 31% and overrepresented among the bottom fourth at 53.2%. When it comes to positions of power, women held 24.8% of chief executive positions compared to 75.2 % for men. Such disparities create real and objective disempowering conditions that often may leave the woman without the needed resources, and therefore feeling powerless to enact viable solutions to address problems in life.

In the same manner that indicators of powerlessness can be found in gender disparities in income, education and poverty rates when comparing men and women in general, similar indicators of powerlessness can be found in racial disparities when comparing white women to African American women across income, education and poverty rates. Relative to educational attainment African American women are less likely than white women to have a college or advanced graduate or professional level degree (U. S. Census Bureau, 2006).

When compared to white women, African American women receive lower hourly wages (Covington, 2005), lower weekly earnings (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008) and lower median annual earnings (U. S. Census Bureau, 2006). Additionally, according to Padavic (2004) the modal occupation for African American women in 2002 was nurses' aide/orderly with weekly wages for full-time year-round workers of \$346 per week or \$17,992 per year. African American women are far more likely to live in poverty than White women. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, (IWPR), (2005) among employed and unemployed African American women 26.5% lived under the poverty line compared to 9.1% for white women. African American women also experienced disproportionate gaps in unemployment when compared to white women, 9.2% to 4.0% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). As the above data suggest, African American women, by the fact of their race and gender, face unfavorable socioeconomic conditions that significantly impede their access to empowering resources in our society. Consequently, one would argue that African American women are disproportionately vulnerable to the experience of powerlessness, and as S. P. Thomas (2005) asserts, powerlessness is a pervasive theme that underscores the experience of anger and stress in women.

#### **4.2 African American Women, Powerlessness and Anger**

Fields and her colleagues (1998), in their study of anger of African American women in the South, suggested that issues of powerlessness and power permeated all descriptions of African American women's anger experiences. Powerlessness in African American women should be viewed as a function of their social status within this society, a status that, as we argue above, is determined by the intersection of gender and race. Gender stratification, which refers to the inequality between men and women in terms of wealth, income and status, helps to determine one's social location. Although gender is a social construct, it influences the experiences of all people: "Gender structures interactions, opportunities, consciousness, ideology and the forms of resistance that characterize American life" (Andersen, 1996, p. ix). Significant components of gender are the socially constructed characteristics of masculinity and femininity, rather than the physical attributes that distinguish men from women (Segal, 1995). As children, we are socialized by various institutions as to what are the roles for men and women. A society can exaggerate or minimize the importance of these sex-role differences (Segal). For example, it is socially acceptable for men to display anger or aggressive behaviors. However, women that are aggressive or assertive are penalized: abandoned by their men, impoverished, and stigmatized for being "unfeminine" (Collins, 1991, p. 75).

Like gender, race is a social construct that is ever-changing. However race is not based on objective biological determinants but rather on classification by society. Race is defined as a group of people united or classified together on the basis of common history, nationality or geographic distribution (Smelser, Williams, & Mitchell, 2001). At the same time, race, as a stratifying practice, is attached to social privileges and resources (Smelser et al.). Within this society individuals are evaluated, ranked and their behaviors ascribed on the basis of their presumed race. For example, historically, African American women have been portrayed as strong, burden-bearers of the race, super African American women, in some cases with detrimental effects. As Harris (1995) states:

The superficial attractions of strength have dominated portraits of black women to the detriment of other possibilities and potentially stymied future directions for the representation of black women. This tradition of portrayal, therefore, has created as well as become its own form of illness (p. 110).

However, the experiences of African American women cannot be explained without an understanding of how the intersection of race and gender impedes their access to available resources; limits their access to available solutions for problems; and thus contributes to an undercurrent of powerlessness. African American women experience both, sexism and racism; and both have a single and distinct impact on their social status and on their feelings of powerlessness. As Cotter, Hermsen, and Venneman (1999) indicate, past analyses of the experiences of African American women have attempted to look at either gender or race individually, but these women do not experience gender or race separately. The "analyses of any one of these dimensions taken out of this context distorts people's lived experiences" (Cotter et al., 1999, p. 434). Furthermore, as D. King (1988) has suggested existing gaps in the literature regarding discussions of the experiences of African American women render African American women invisible and contribute to their sense of powerlessness. This invisibility is especially obvious regarding the research literature in the area of mental health.

#### **4.3 The "strong black woman"**

To gain further insight into the experience of anger in African American women one needs to consider the paradox of powerlessness and strength. From an early age, African American women receive not only gender-role messages, but also culture-bound messages of "being strong".

Black feminist writers (Beubeouf-Lafontant, 2005, 2007; Harris-Lacewell, 2001) have argued that this image of the “strong black woman” is limiting rather than empowering and creates unrealistic demands and problematic expectations of stoicism that impact upon their emotional expression, often leaving feelings of frustration, anger and depression unstated because it does not fit with the image of strength. From a gender-socialization perspective women are cautioned, explicitly or implicitly, against the open and healthy expression of angry feelings because of the possible adverse impact that such expression may have on their relationships. From a cultural perspective, African American women are told that they must be strong and should endure and prevail against all pain and difficulties. As Harris (1995) suggests, the notion of “strength” in African American women may often cut both ways: in one way it can be seen as a virtue needed to overcome adversity; on the other hand, it may create the false image of a “superwoman,” who sees it as her duty to help others while ignoring her own distress. Harris (1995, p. 1) goes on to state that “this thing called strength, this thing we applaud so much in African American women, could also be a disease”.

So we then ask if the African American woman has bought into the notion that she must be the pillar of strength and help others at all costs, and yet she lacks access to the means and resources for doing so, what is the emotional, behavioral and health price she pays. This presents a unique and interesting paradox between strength and powerlessness. When the image of strength comes face-to-face with the reality of powerlessness, what happens? We propose that this dynamic interaction results in heightened levels of emotional distress that include frustration, anger, and resentment. Prolonged anger has been associated with increased risk of negative behavioral or health outcomes such as: hypertension (Webb & Beckstead, 2005), coronary heart disease (Kamarack et al., 2009; Warren-Findlow, 2006), obesity (Ricca et al. 2009; Robert & Reither, 2004), and substance abuse (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Schultz, 1998; Larimer, Palmer, & Marlatt, 1999) among others. In her study of exploring experiences of strength among twelve African American women, Beubeouf-Lafontant (2005) reports on the case of a woman who used eating as a coping mechanism and a means to deflect and voice her feelings of entrapment and frustration that had otherwise been left in silence under her expectations of strength, while experiencing hypertension and diabetes.

The barriers to empowering resources do not afflict just African American women of low socioeconomic status. As Fields et al. (1998) have suggested this seems to be true even for African American women with middle class backgrounds and relative professional success. Along the same subject, Richie, et al., (1997) conducted a qualitative study of 18 high-achieving and prominent women with the focus on generating a theory of career development of the participants grounded on their personal experiences. The sample consisted of 9 African American and 9 White women. The authors stated that for the African American women, despite their persistence and efforts to overcome obstacles, they also had to face barriers, personal challenges and lack of opportunities caused by racism and sexism (Richie et al., 1997). Upon a review of the available objective evidence discussed in the preceding paragraphs, one may conclude that the available data underscores the fact that African American women experience disproportionately a lack of access to empowering resources, and as such are at a higher risk of experiencing an internal sense of powerlessness and the behavioral and health consequences of such powerlessness.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this essay we have reviewed current literature to set the framework around the relationship between powerlessness and anger in African American women. We highlighted key socioeconomic indicators that suggest that African American women experience limited access or outright denial to empowering resources such as income, education and employment status. When such resources are limited the individual’s ability to resolve problems and improve their own life situations are reduced and so she becomes more vulnerable to feeling powerless. The experience of powerlessness has been identified as a recurrent theme underscoring the experience of anger in women (Fields et al., 1998; S. P. Thomas, 2005). We discussed how gender socialization shapes the means of anger expression in women, prompting women to see the expression of anger as “unfeminine”, a sign of weakness or threat to relationships, and thus the anger is often left unstated and/or diverted into unhealthy expressions increasing the risk of adverse behavioral and/or health consequences. In this paper we also addressed culture-bound messages and images of “the strong black woman”, the paradox of powerlessness and “strength”, and the impact of such on the woman’s emotional expression. The fact remains that many African American women continue to lag behind when it comes to having full access to empowering resources in our society. So what might be the implications of this thesis? First, we suggest that to get a true understanding of powerlessness in African American women, this subject must be viewed from a broader perspective that includes not only the subjective cognitive elements of the construct, but also incorporates social, economic and historical realities of racism and sexism that create disempowering conditions for women in general and for African American women in particular.

Second, we highlight the importance of recognizing how gender-and-racial-socialization messages have influenced the experience and expression of anger in African American women. These messages, often deeply entrenched in the woman's consciousness, become part of the woman's self and world view, and could be, in themselves, disempowering. Third, knowing that African American women may not readily acknowledge, or even be aware of their powerlessness, it is imperative for practitioners working with African American women who are experiencing anger, frustration, depression or other emotional distress to help the women frame and understand such feelings in the context of the paradox of powerlessness and expectations of strength.

Social work practitioners should help their African American female clients to evaluate the validity and functionality of the traditional gender socialization and culture-bound messages that have interfered with the healthy expression of their anger and frustration. The aim here is not to ignore or deny those messages with a strong and rich cultural and historical tradition (i.e. strength), but rather it is to help the client re-write the personal script of such messages in a way that promotes a more balanced and realistic view of herself as an African American woman, and helps her build a healthier and more functional sense of personal responsibility for her anger. Once the messages are changed, the woman can begin to develop a more assertive, open, direct and socially appropriate style of communicating her anger.

Often, clients' anger is outwardly directed at specific objects or circumstances. Culturally competent and aware practitioners will want to help the African American female client to frame their anger within the larger oppressive, socio-cultural-economic environment in order to normalize their experience, and acknowledge and give a voice to their sense of powerlessness. Once that such powerlessness is acknowledged, the woman can begin to develop empowering strategies to help create healthy solutions to her problems that rest within realistic and rational boundaries of control.

A final implication of this essay is driven by the direction of research on anger in African American women in particular, but also as it relates to other minorities and vulnerable populations. The current literature simply reveals a dearth of studies that focus their investigation of anger exclusively on African American women. Therefore, if social workers are going to develop effective and culturally-sensitive treatment approaches to help African American women and other minorities with anger problems, then social workers practicing in the clinical arena must actively and specifically target minority groups and generate quantitative, empirical studies to find out what works and develop evidence-based strategies. Simultaneously, there is a strong need for additional studies that continue to illuminate individual client variables and theoretical constructs that may contribute to the experience and expression of unhealthy anger. These actions will contribute to the knowledge base and further the understanding of the experience, expression and treatment of anger among African American women.

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