Anger Matters: Black Female Student Alienation at Predominantly White Institutions

Introduction

Colleges around the United States are enrolling a growing number of Black female students who earn about two-thirds of the bachelor's degrees among African Americans (exceeding the 56% of degrees earned by white women) (NCES, 2012). In the wake of these changing demographics, many faculty and staff at predominantly white institutions (PWI) lack awareness of the special emotional challenges that Black women commonly face (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016; Henry, Butler, & West, 2011-2012; González-Prendes & Thomas, 2011; Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman, 2015; McCorkle, 2012). Both Black male and female students at PWI endure microaggressions e.g., being singled out by security personnel, belittled intellectually, or treated as indistinguishable from other Black people (Hope, Keels & Durkee, 2016; Jackson & Wingfield, 2013; Sue, 2010). Yet for Black females, the intersectionality of their race and gender can compound their discomfort at PWI (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016; Henry, Butler, & West, 2011-2012; McCorkle, 2012). To better understand the Black female experience at PWI, we analyze data that assess student responses to a pressing social issue that is particularly relevant for African Americans: police shootings of unarmed Black individuals. By comparing Black women's reactions to other demographic groups, we hope to add to our understanding of Black women's experiences at PWI, including how they relate to classroom dynamics during discussions of issues surrounding race.

The Black Lives Matter movement elicits a variety of reactions that reflect how students see racial issues, given that the movement taps into anger about the indignities that Black people face at the hands of the state in general (Rickford, 2016; White, 2016). Riots such as those in Ferguson, Illinois (2014), Baltimore, Maryland (2015) and Charlotte, North Carolina (2016) helped to make the movement common knowledge among college students, even though its impact is most detrimental to Black men. Between 2010 and 2012, young Black males were 21 times more likely to be killed by police than young white males (Gabrielson, Jones, & Sagara, 2014). Despite the notable impact on the Black community, the movement also has galvanized many non-Black allies to protest as well. Nevertheless, the movement has proven to be generally divisive, as evidenced by the All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter counter-movements. Yet beyond the often-rancorous racial divergence of perspectives about the treatment of people of color lies the question of whether a gender divide exists among African American college students at PWI. This difference could potentially elucidate how Black males and females manage emotionally traumatic societal events within the PWI college setting, with implications for critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

This study examines student reactions to police shootings of unarmed Black individuals. It also explores whether Black women's perspective not only distances them from other demographic groups including Black males, but also sets them apart in ways likely to affect their wellbeing during and after college. Of the responses analyzed, anger is the variable most emblematic of how emotional reactions are contextualized by race and gender.

The Angry Black Woman Stereotype

Although it may not be openly discussed, Black women are acutely aware of the angry Black woman stereotype (Banks, 2014; González-Prendes & Thomas, 2011; Mabry & Kiecolt, 2005; Magee & Louie, 2016). They are also mindful that because of the intersectionality of their race and gender, expressing anger is "quick to turn off engagement and cause others to shut down" (Barmore, 2015, para. 4). Black women must operate under the pressure of knowing that their words and actions may be viewed through the lens of this stereotype that devalues them (Lewis & Neville, 2015) which contributes to their marginalization.

In their comprehensive review of Black college women's psychosocial struggles, Henry, Butler, & West (2011-2012) identify anger as the most common cause of psychological distress. They discuss the relevance of Black women feeling ignored on campus when Black males are recognized for Blackness while white females are viewed as representing femininity. If Black women feel and internalize rejection, they might come across as intimidating to disguise their feelings and place a barrier between themselves and others. This reaction could contribute to the "angry Black woman" stereotype that in turn fuels a sense of alienation among Black female college students (Henry, Butler, & West, 2011-2012).

Walley-Jean (2009) assessed the validity of this stereotype using the results of a state-trait anger expression inventory (Spielberger, 1999). She compared a sample of 76 undergraduate Black women aged 18-29 in Introductory Psychology courses from a large co-ed urban university in the southeast to a normative sample of 977 mostly undergraduate females (10% of whom identified as African American). She found that

Black women aged 18-19 (n=39) were *not* more likely to express anger but did suppress the anger that they felt, a trait called Anger Expression-In (significant at p<.01). This trait was operationalized as: *I boil inside, but don't show it; I am angrier than I am willing to admit*.

Older Black women in her sample, aged 20-29 (n=37), were also *not* more likely to express anger; instead of having anger that they contained (like those aged 18-19), they were less likely to cool off after becoming angry. This trait, known as Anger Control-In, encompassed the following: *I reduce anger as soon as possible; I take a deep breath and relax* and was the only other variable that showed a statistically significant difference compared to the normative sample (p<.001). Walley-Jean notes that in contrast to Black women, individuals who expend more energy calming down and cooling off (that is, with high levels Anger Control-In), "may fail to take assertive action" (Walley-Jean, p. 82), a factor with implications for civic engagement.

Walley-Jean, then, demonstrates that Black women are more likely to expend energy either hiding their anger (aged 18-19) or staying angry (aged 20-29). In visible expression of Anger Control-Out (*I keep cool; I control the urge to express angry feelings*) and Anger Expression-Out (*I argue with others; I express anger*), however, Black women report levels comparable to a normative sample. According to these data, we would expect Black women to stay angry for longer and not just feel upset in the immediate aftermath of an incident such as a police shooting of an unarmed civilian.

Black Masculinity through Contrast with Angry Black Females

Although Walley-Jean does not provide data for Black men, interview data collected by Wilkins (2012) provide insight into why the stereotype is more associated with women than men. Rather than Black men commiserating with the emotion underlying the stereotype (i.e., anger stemming from social inequality), there is evidence that at least some Black men at PWI publicly distance themselves from this sentiment. Instead, some unwittingly may perpetuate the stereotype of the "angry black woman" by openly contrasting this archetype with their own laid back, apolitical demeanor (Wilkins, 2012). This image is part of the public presentation of self in contrast to racial activism out of the public eye, such as online participation on Facebook, Twitter, etc. (as operationalized by Hope, Keels & Durkee, 2016).

Wilkins (2012) conducted 43 in-depth exploratory, life history interviews with Black undergraduates or recent graduates (25 women and 18 men) from one of two large, mainly white public universities. She found that Black males strived to communicate comfortably and get along with white students as a means to overcome racial boundaries in order to attain upward mobility. Part of Black males' strategy involved bolstering masculinity by portraying themselves as moderate when compared to stereotypical, emotional and angry Black women. If Black women are political, angry, and have "an attitude," then Black men are by comparison apolitical and easygoing, masculinizing moderate blackness (especially true of non-athletes who need an alternative means to secure their masculinity). As a result, Black men abdicate to Black women the emotional stewardship of their community, including political causes:

"By dismissing both black women and, often, black organizations, as immoderate spaces, black men abandon their collective responsibility to fight racial inequality,

focusing instead on individual strategies of mobility and leaving the work of

fighting racism up to women" (Wilkins, 2012, p. 57).

Methods

After receiving IRB approval, students in a Sociology Methods course distributed

questionnaires door-to-door to students living on campus in spring 2016 at a small,

private, suburban co-ed liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

The data analyzed in this paper were part of this larger Sociology Methods class survey

that included a variety of questions, based on the enrolled students' interests. From a

sampling frame of 1,263 campus residents, 414 dormitory rooms were chosen through

systematic random sampling.

From mid-March to mid-April 2016, students knocked on designated residents'

doors to solicit the participation in the anonymous class survey. Students waited nearby

while each respondent first completed the survey, and then placed it in a sealed white

envelope that was deposited in a larger envelope with other completed surveys. No

incentives were offered. Students made up to three attempts per room to solicit

participation at each assigned room, yielding a response rate of 71%.

One hundred and eight (108) males (20 Black and 88 white) and 130 females (29

Black and 101 white), completed the survey (n=238). The 21% of the sample that was

African American is comparable to the 14% representation at the college (which is about

70% white). Students who did not identify as either Black or white were excluded from

the analysis because there were too few to be representative of their demographic group.

Survey respondents were asked to think about recent police shootings of unarmed
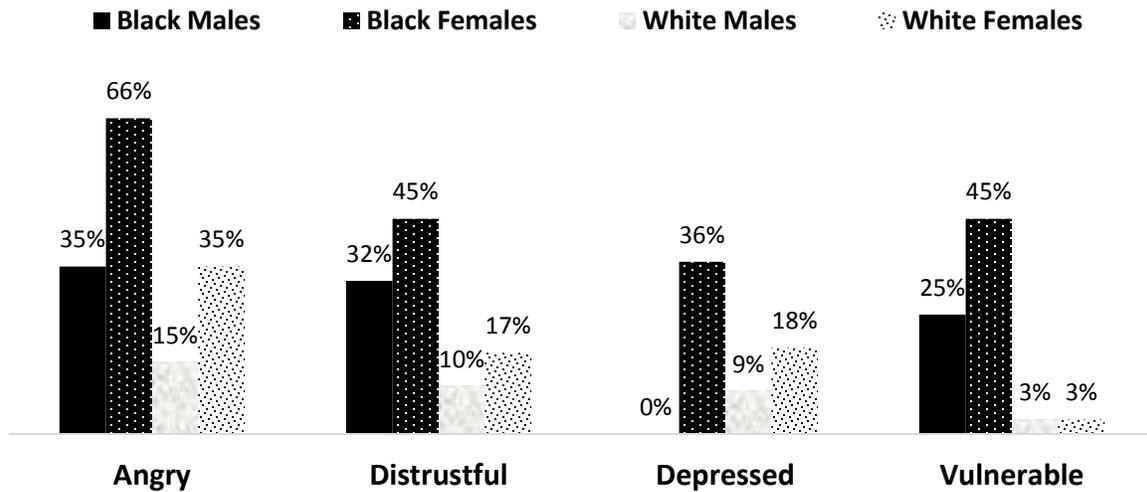
African Americans and indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that they felt angry, depressed, vulnerable, and distrustful of police. Data analysis that consisted of cross-tabulations and measures of statistical significance was conducted using the software package SPSS Statistics.

Results

We examined how race and sex of respondents predicted who "strongly agreed" that they felt angry, depressed, vulnerable, and distrustful of police when thinking about police shootings of unarmed Black people (see Chart). Because of the potential impact of social desirability in responses, albeit anonymous, we wanted to assess demographic patterns among those mostly deeply upset (i.e., those who strongly agreed) rather than those with less intense reactions (i.e., those who agreed).

In all four demographic groups, more respondents strongly agreed that they felt angry than the other reactions assessed. Black females were by far the most likely to be angry (see Chart), despite that more Black men are killed by police. The data demonstrate that the proportion of Black females who were angry (66%) was close to twice that of Black males (35%). The proportion of Black males who were angry was identical to white females, while white males were clearly the least likely to feel angry (18%). Although the across-the-board gulf between Black females and white males was expected, the disparity between Black females and Black males was even larger for depression (36% to 0%) than even the difference between Black females and white males (see Chart).

Strong Reactions to Police Shootings

■ Black Males   ▨ Black Females   ░ White Males   ⣿ White Females

	Angry	Distrustful	Depressed	Vulnerable
Black Males	35%	32%	0%	25%
Black Females	66%	45%	36%	45%
White Males	15%	10%	9%	3%
White Females	35%	17%	18%	3%

Angry: p=0.002; Distrustful: p<0.001; Depressed: p=0.001 Vulnerable: p<0.001

Discussion

This study broadens the discussion of Black students' experience at PWI by assessing how reactions to police shootings of unarmed Black individuals relate to feelings of isolation that have been documented among Black female students (Weitz & Gordon, 1993; Henry, Butler, & West, 2011-2012; McCorkle, 2012). We found that compared to white students as well as Black men, Black women were significantly more upset. In particular, it is significant that there is a lack of solidarity between Black men and women on this issue; fewer Black men than Black women felt very angry (35% versus 66%), depressed (0% versus 36%) and vulnerable (25% versus 45%). Black women at PWI who may already expect that many white students are indifferent to struggles in the Black community may feel more demoralized if they are part of a college community that seems apathetic about even police shootings of unarmed Black persons.

In addition, Black women socialized to be "superwomen" (Nelson, Cardemil & Adeoye, 2016) who feel responsible for the uplift of Black communities could feel particularly alone in their level of indignation.

In contrast, Black men may emphasize race over racism in their presentation of self (Wilkins, 2012). In order to get along with white people, many Black college men bolster their masculinity by avoiding what could be deemed making excuses or "playing the race card," (Wingfield, 2007). Taking pride in cultural heritage is socially acceptable, but complaining about structural social inequality is avoided as a sign of weakness (Jackson & Wingfield, 2013) (similar to the divide between African Americans and Afrolatino immigrants who treat denunciation of discrimination as psychological weakness [Ramos-Zayas, 2011]).

In addition to expectations that males project strength as part of masculinity, there are also pressures to avoid resentment about racial subordination that can alienate white people (Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney, & Luque, 2015). The importance of masculinity jibes with our finding that more Black women than men felt vulnerable, a reaction perceived as undermining traditional masculinity. Consistent with the need for Black males to solidify a sense of strength, none strongly agreed that they were depressed. Interestingly, more white males and females (9% and 18% respectively) than Black males indicated that they were depressed. Even distrust of police is not gender-neutral for Black respondents, reflected in our finding that Black women are 40% more likely to be distrustful compared to Black men. This disparity could reflect the link between social trust and inequality (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005), given the interactive effects of Black women's race and gender at PWI.

The image of nonchalance that Black males project can be understood within the context of what Erving Goffman called a "front stage" public performance that if sufficiently internalized, could moderate "back stage" anger (Goffman, 1959; Jackson & Wingfield, 2013). In any case, this outward sangfroid about racism inevitably affects white students' views of Black women who unlike Black men, may be less concerned with impression management. In other words, if Black men at PWI cope with their environment by projecting a more cavalier attitude about racism in order to get along with white people, Black women who decry racism could seem more strident by comparison.

Although white students benefit from learning about the realities of racism from their peers of color (Smith & Dundes, 2016), it can be an exhausting burden if Black women feel that they bear the onus of educating or galvanizing their peers. At the same time, by speaking out, these female students could prompt the label of angry Black woman, with the concomitant risk of being dismissed as biased because they seem to take racism too personally or are blinded by resentment. Unchallenged, this stereotype is not only stressful (Lewis & Neville, 2015), but also likely to widen the social distance between Black women and white people (and possibly Black males), deepening Black women's feelings of alienation at PWI.

Black women's candor about racism could also affect their opportunities for romantic relationships. The notable gulf between Black females and white males in how they view social inequality raises questions about their compatibility (in addition to other issues raised in discussions of their infrequent pairing [Bany, Robnett, & Feliciano, 2014; Schoepflin, 2009; Stackman, Reviere, & Medley, 2016)]. Not only did we find that Black

women were far more likely than white males to be angry about police shootings (66% versus15%), but we also determined that Black men and white women are equally likely to be angry (both 35%). Although prior literature analyzing different configurations of interracial relationships tends to explore how family and societal forces discourage romantic Black-white relationships (e.g., Childs, 2005), we encourage further research on how these racial and gender dynamics affect the likelihood of inter-racial college pairings.

Moving Forward

In the absence of action in this arena, we fear the continuing social cost to Black women at PWI. As default spokespersons that are seemingly responsible for denouncing social inequity, they bear a disproportionate share of consciousness raising and action, even when an issue affects men more than women (as with the greater number of men shot by police). Black women must not only navigate whether objecting is their duty but also if others view aggressive political advocacy as apropos (Hooker, 2016).

Of equal concern are the stresses that await them in the professional and corporate arenas after graduation where they continue to face interpretations of their demeanor as unapproachable rather than nurturing (Harlow, 2003), qualities that may be encouraged among Black women, but that also may be inconsistent with certain powerful professional roles. In addition, they must grapple with emotional exchanges that become an integral part of their job (Hochschild 1983) including the expectation that as Black women they should conceal any anger they might feel and instead should exude congeniality (Wingfield, 2007 and 2010) in accordance with white, middle class norms (Anderson, 1999; Chase, 1995; Feagin & Sikes 1994). These stresses carry mental health

costs that indicate the urgency of addressing the alienation of Black women at PWI (Phillips, Henry, Hosie, & Milne, 2006; Thomas, 1989; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; West, 1995).

Limitations

We extrapolate from very limited data from a single institution, and base our analysis only on the implications of racial and gender disparities of those who feel strongly about their reactions to police shootings. Our data are not applicable to African Americans outside of PWI where dissimilar inter-personal dynamics related to the race of students in the majority have a differential impact on students' self-perceptions and behavior. Also, as upwardly mobile college students, our sample's reactions are likely distinct from those who do not attend college (since only 31% of Black men and 43% Black women attend college versus 43% white males and 51% white females [NCES, 2012]). However, it is also worth noting that the topic studied (i.e., police shootings), is not a women's issue per se, but rather a problem that disproportionately affects Black men. Nevertheless, women's reactions were still stronger than men's, suggesting that we observed a generalizable pattern.

Conclusion

Black female college students' isolation and factors underlying their marginalization merit greater attention. Among these considerations is Black males' moderate blackness coping mechanism that minimizes how racism affects them and their life chances. When Black males downplay racist actions, they safeguard their masculinity and can more easily see the campus community as hospitable. In the case of white

people's "anger privilege," or the ability to express anger free from fears about fulfilling a stereotype, the potential consequences could be significant. If white people can display anger and demand attention without repercussions, then their greater freedom from judgment could give them disproportionate credibility and thus influence in setting the agenda for social issues.

On college campuses, these phenomena could have the effect of further disempowering those who already feel disenfranchised, discouraging them from challenging the status quo. Awareness of these psychosocial repercussions can guide instructors in college classrooms as they strive to make classroom dialogues more inclusive and productive. Instead of simply encouraging and appreciating Black female students' willingness to share their views, instructors should endeavor to support them, knowing that they often carry a disproportionate burden in speaking out on racism. In addition, teaching students about the link between masculinity and complaints about social conditions could encourage male students to acknowledge and discuss inequality. How these gendered race issues impinge on classroom dynamics, as well as the college experience and agency of Black women, deserves further attention and exploration.

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