Standing on a Stalled Escalator: The Impact of Race on the Mobility of Black Americans

and African Americans Within the Workplace

INTRODUCTION:

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Minority communities, particularly Black Americans and African Americans, have faced numerous challenges in navigating employment, navigating the workplace, and ascending to higher positions due to their race. The barriers that hinder these populations from progressing are fueled by the history of systematic racism and discrimination that has continually attempted to disenfranchise and deter mobility of minorities within the United States, especially in the workplace setting. This literature review, in turn, attempts to answer the following: what are the most significant impacts of race on career success and treatment within the workplace for minorities, particularly Black and African American employees, within the United States? To elucidate relevant information concerning this question, an analysis of existing research was conducted through multidisciplinary perspectives, such as sociological; medical; and intersectional in order to further understand the extent to which discrimination is prevalent within the workplace and why diversity and related workplace interventions are necessary to restart the stalled escalator of minority mobility in the United States.

WHAT IS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION?

To understand the impact of race within the workplace, it is imperative to employ an operational definition of racial discrimination. Since racial discrimination and its effects are visible in many realms, including societal, political, and scientific domains, this research review will employ a two-part social science definition outlined by the National Research Council. According to this, racial discrimination, in any case, is the "(1) differential treatment on the basis

of race that disadvantages a racial group and (2) treatment on the basis of inadequately justified factors other than race that disadvantages a racial group…" (Blank et al. 2004). To more thoroughly understand the influence of racial discrimination on practice(s) within the workplace, I must preface this review's content with background on the history of inequality that has plagued Black/African American communities for centuries.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST BLACK AND AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATIONS WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

To understand the weight of racial discrimination, it is necessary for individuals first to become familiar with the long-standing history of systematic racism and inequality in the United States. Though it has existed for numerous centuries around the world, the practice of African slavery in the United States reached its peak with the organization of the transatlantic slave trade in which 12.5 million individuals were kidnapped from Africa and sent to the Americas. Along the way, these people were subject to brutal conditions, leading to the survival of only 10.7 million over the two-month journey on slave ships (Crawford 2020). These instances have had detrimental repercussions on the health of Black Americans/African Americans, with the message that Black Americans/African Americans "needed only the bare necessities, not enough to keep them optimally safe or healthy" (Strings 2020). The assumption that Black/African American slaves did not need basic materials, including pay, to sustain themselves has continued to affect their offspring, with incorrect assumptions leading to discriminatory practices degrading Black/African Americans and their fundamental rights.

Even in the years after Emancipation and the formal abolishment of slavery within the United States, Black Americans/African Americans have continued to struggle for equality and representation. For decades, these individuals and their families were not given equal access to

adequate resources through the Plessy versus Ferguson case of 1896, in which segregation was upheld and deemed constitutional (Our Documents 2020). For sixty-eight years, Black/African American individuals continued to grapple with the reality of institutionalized racism until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. With its passage, this act "prohibited discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities, and made employment discrimination illegal" (Our Documents 2020), to slash segregation and discrimination in the United States.

Despite this sweeping legislation of the civil rights movement, the effects of hundreds of years of racism have maintained their hold on Black/African American communities, surfacing in the form of racial microaggressions and institutional racism that continue to exist at the local and national level. Such discrimination undermines this population's contributions and negates the years of protests and movements toward equality of which Black/African American individuals have partaken. In this review, I will analyze the continuation of this racially-charged discrimination toward Black Americans/African Americans, specifically within the workplace, and analyze possible solutions that aim to restart the stalled escalator that still prevents Black Americans/African Americans from moving up in their careers.

CHANGE OVER TIME WITHIN THE UNITED STATES:

To accurately discuss the mutation(s) of racial discrimination against Black Americans/African Americans within the American workforce, ethnographic and qualitative analysis of real individuals adds more context to quantitative research. To foster a better understanding of how racial discrimination within the workplace has either changed or stayed stagnant within the United States, I will review the experiences of two Black/African American individuals who have lived and worked through the era of segregation to the modern-day. Nurse

Bernardine Lacey recounts her experience of returning to work in a hospital in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in the early 1960s. She notes how six of the nurses quit when they discovered her employment, stating that they "would not take orders" from Lacey, undermining her position as a more experienced, knowledgeable employee because of her race (Lewenson and Graham-Perel 2020).

While Lacey's experience before the signage of the Civil Rights Act reflects the explicit racial discrimination in the era of segregation, author Ijeoma Oluo's first-hand account of working while Black indicates how remnants of outward racism disguise themselves in modern times. For example, Oluo explains how she "worked 50 percent harder" than her White coworkers and "laughed off racist jokes" out of compliance (Oluo 2018, 234). The accounts of these two women indicate that the degree to which racial discrimination is made evident to its Black/African American victims has been altered but has not been eradicated. . Although Oluo is not subject to the use of separate bathrooms like Lacey, she is still subject to the burden of taking racism in the presence of White colleagues and superiors so she can continue to work and live comfortably in the United States. The plight of these women calls for change and widespread intervention that aims to remedy the scars of racism, whether explicit or in the form of microaggressions.

SECTION ONE: IMPACT OF RACE ON CAREER SUCCESS

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND RACE

Black and African American individuals continue to face limitations in gaining employment within the United States, primarily due to racial discrimination present in the hiring process. To further understand the degree to which race influences career success, a sociological lens is imperative in comprehending the social prejudice that encourages bigotry, such as that

taken by Tracy R. Whitaker of the Howard University School of Social Work. Pre-employment inequity is evident through the castigation of Black/African American names. (Whitaker 2019, 23). Research and experience within the sphere of employment indicate that applicants with names identified with Black/African American populations received "less favorable responses" to their resumes than applicants with White-sounding names, despite both applicant pools having identical credentials and residing at similar addresses (Whitaker 2019, 23).

In addition to the effects of name-based discrimination, employment of Black and African American individuals, in addition to other minorities, is further hindered by the biases of employers (Whitaker 2019, 24). In a series of calibrations, or discussions between pairs of interviewers about candidates, researcher Lauren Rivera noted that regardless of whether White or minority applicants possessed the same attribute, "nonwhites were rejected for being unassertive, but in whites, modesty was seen as a virtue," (Burrell 2016, 72). Such clear discrimination indicates the pervasiveness of implicit bias in employers within the United States.

The impact of race reaches far beyond the attainment of employment. For Black/African Americans, pre-employment and workplace-related discrimination has brought on a myriad of disorders, such as "hypertension, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, fatigue, and bodily pain" (Whitaker 2019, 25). As exhibited by existing literature, the stretch of racial discrimination is not simplified to one locus. Its reach is both internal and external, affecting the ability of Black/African Americans (as well as additional minorities) to not only obtain a job but also grapple with the adverse physical reactions that increase their allostatic load. In continuation with the discussion on the effects of race on Black/African American employees' career success, I must cover the perception and satisfaction of these populations on their opportunities for promotion.

PERCEPTIONS ON CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND CURRENT SATISFACTION

In conjunction with sociological perspectives on race and workplace mobility, the inclusion of quantitative and qualitative data is necessary to assist the comprehension of discrimination through evidence. More specifically, I will focus on responses from a questionnaire conducted through convenience sampling by Communications scholars Masoomeh Khosrovani and James W. Ward. This form elicited perspectives of Black/African American employees regarding their perceptions of access to workplace opportunities and job satisfaction within the United States. A key indicator, these questionnaire excerpts illustrate that nearly 40 out of 187 Black Americans/African Americans were dissatisfied with their pay (Khosrovani and Ward 2011, 137). Of those dissatisfied, most generally believed that they did not receive enough financial compensation for their work, with some interviewees stating that this disparity in pay existed due to the favorability of White employees (Khosrovani and Ward 2011). Even more stark is the 65% of Black/African American respondents who claimed they had never advanced in their firms and were dissatisfied with their current job placement. The significant degree to which Black/African American individuals express disappointment in their careers echoes the pervasiveness of race-based inequality, as evidenced by the difficulty of ascending in rank and perception of discrimination in the spheres of pay and mobility within the workplace.

The inclusion of quantitative data relating to the satisfaction and job turnover of registered nurses within the United States aids the discussion of career advancement and satisfaction. The findings of a secondary data analysis conducted using the National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses (2008) portray a discrepancy between Black/African American and White nurses' intention to quit. Survey results indicated that Black/African American nurses were more likely to intend to quit than white ones (as were Hispanics). In contrast, Asians were

less dissatisfied and less likely to intend to quit than White nurses (Doede 2017). Since minority nurses cited racial discrimination and related experiences as reasons for dissatisfaction, these data support the assertion that racial discrimination not only has an effect on the success of minorities within the workplace but an adverse effect on certain ones, namely Black and Hispanic nurses. These figures provide a summarized insight of the toll discrimination has on these marginalized populations, suggesting the immediate need for both support and structural change in and out of the medical workplace of the United States.

SECTION TWO: IMPACT OF RACE ON TREATMENT WITHIN THE WORKPLACE

EXPERIENCES OF BLACK AND AFRICAN AMERICAN INDIVIDUALS

While the previously cited data is necessary in building a frame around the issue of race and racial discrimination within the American workplace, the inclusion of evidence relating to the experiences of Black/African American employees is crucial in order to gauge a more in-depth understanding of Black/African Americans' daily experiences and struggles within the workplace. I begin by analyzing the statistical data presented in Allan Farrell's study examining the relationship between racial identity contestation (when one identifies with a race they are not seen as) and unfair treatment within the workplace (Vargas and Kingsbury 2016). The study draws on evidence from pooled data from the 2004-2010 Behavioural Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), a cross-sectional survey conducted annually by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Associations were able to be made via logistic regression, and Farrell claimed, after examining the logistic regression(s), that White adults seen as non-White were more likely to report unfair treatment than Whites that are perceived as white (uncontested). On the other hand, contested Black and Latinx individuals are less likely than uncontested ones to report unfair treatment (Farrell 2019).

In continuation with evidence of racially-charged [mis]treatment in the workplace, a cross-sectional, national survey conducted by a team of researchers led by Marcella Nunez-Smith (currently an Associate Professor of Internal Medicine, Public Health, and Management at Yale University) between 2006-2007 recorded results depicting a discrepancy in the treatment of majority and minority races/ethnicities. Numerous minority physicians reported enduring personal discrimination "sometimes, often, or very often" during their career and within their present work environment. As delineated by a multivariable-adjusted analysis, within these non-majority groups, higher instances of racial discrimination were consistently linked to Black/African American physicians (Nunez-Smith et al. 2009). The stark distinction in treatment solely based on perceptions of race indicates the severity of racial discrimination in the American workplace despite years of civil rights activism and movements toward change.

The widespread, systematic discrimination against Black/African populations is further rendered by excerpts of interviewees who have experienced racial discrimination first-hand within their chosen career(s). In a study of self-reported discrimination within the legal field, researchers found that in comparison to LGBTQ+, Asian American, Native American, and Latino employees, Black/African American men and women reported the highest percentage of legal workplace discrimination at 42.5%. Among those sampled, many shared personal experiences. One African American lawyer claimed that a "client made racist comments...regarding intellectual inferiority of Blacks" (Nelson et al. 2019). Besides explicit discrimination, another African American employee from a different American law firm asserted that "too few Black attorneys being hired and a lack of familiarity or comfort with such attorneys may contribute to the subconscious discrimination" (Nelson et al. 2019).

Instances such as these are not limited to a given area of work. Professor of medicine Cyndy Snyder and research scientist Malaika Schwartz analyzed several quantitative and qualitative studies examining experiences of racial discrimination for minority health-care employees, including Black/African Americans, within the United States. Findings displayed several common patterns of discrimination. These include but are not limited to: racist assumptions by patients, limitations of professional growth, and minorities being held to different standards than their White colleagues (Snyder and Schwartz 2019). This stark reality of continuous, similar occurrences plagues and has plagued the American medical workplace, demonstrating that modern interventions are scarce and/or inadequate in tackling the deeply embedded issue of racial discrimination in the United States labor force.

Though multiple other sectors experience racial discrimination and its effects, not much data has been collected on minority employees and their experiences in fields outside of STEM or legal oriented careers. This discrepancy indicates an opportunity to conduct further research within American workplaces that center around the arts, humanities, and social sciences, among other arenas.

INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS: IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EMPLOYMENT OF BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN AND WOMEN?

While this review has stressed the implications of race in understanding how Black/African American populations face situations within the workplace, an intersectional lens is necessary for comprehending how additional factors, namely gender, compound the experiences of minority men and women across the United States. Researchers Beth Mintz and Daniel H. Krymkowski undertook this question in their investigation of ethnic, race, and gender gaps in workplace authority over two periods: the early period and the late period. The presented

results indicate evidence that in the early period (1972-1989), the authority gap between Black/African American men and women was not statistically significant, but by the late period (1990-2006), a gender difference emerged due to more women entering the workplace. This is furthered by evidence which delineates that Black Americans/African Americans in occupations with more than 80 percent women experienced a decline in authority; in other words, the occupations they occupied lost authority over time. This adds nuance through the intersectional perspective of race and gender, allowing researchers to comment on and examine how Black Americans/African Americans (namely Black/African American women) experience a decline of authority within the workplace. Meanwhile, the effect is "negative," or virtually nonexistent, for White Americans, as supported by the data (Mintz and Krymkowski 2010).
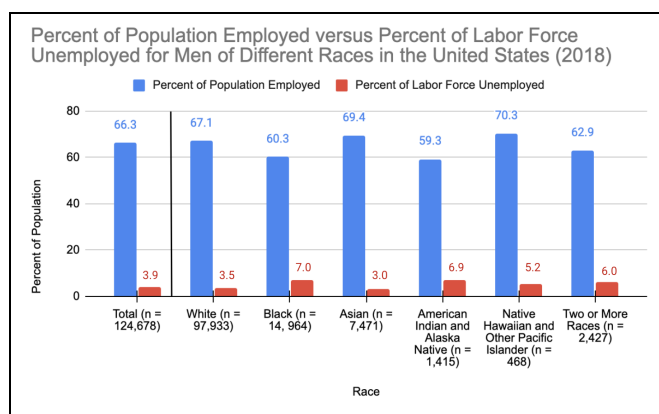
Fig. 1. 2018 Employment Status of the Civilian Noninstitutional Population 16 years and Older by Race for Men in the United States. Adapted from "Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years and older by gender and race, 2018 annual averages (Numbers in thousands)." *U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics,* Current Population Survey, Oct. 2019, https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/race-and-ethnicity/2018/home.htm. Total population percentages on the left of black line; percentages of different races on the right.
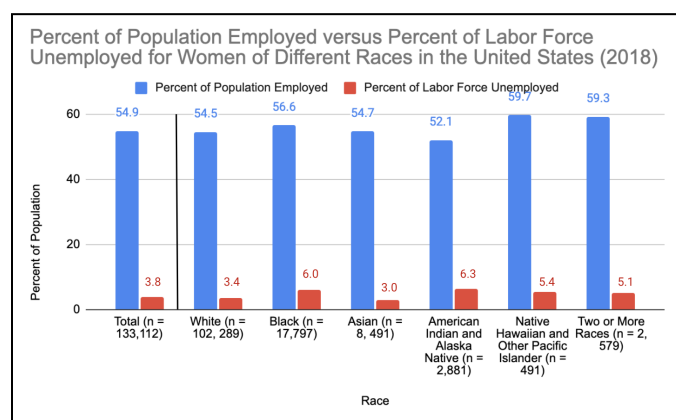

Fig. 2. 2018 Employment Status of the Civilian Noninstitutional Population 16 years and Older by Race for Women in the United States. Adapted from "Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years and older by gender and race, 2018 annual averages (Numbers in thousands)." *U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics,* Current Population Survey, Oct. 2019, https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/race-and-ethnicity/2018/home.htm. Total population percentages on the left of black line; percentages of different races on the right.

In congruence with previously presented statistics, further data indicate that contrast exists between the employment and unemployment of Black Americans/African Americans compared to Whites as well as other minorities within the United States. For reliable analysis of this discrepancy, I will look toward figures displaying the employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years and older by gender and race (2018 annual averages). This was taken from a Current Population Survey of 60,000 households, with n = total civilian noninstitutional population (employed and unemployed) of women in each race category from the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For instance, Figure 2 indicates that the percent of Black/African American women employed (56.6) is less than the percent of Black/African American men employed in the United States (60.3), as shown in Figure 1. These data depict an imbalance and possible double prejudice resulting in Black/African American women being underrepresented and undervalued for their contributions to the American workforce. However, the number of Black/African American women sampled was greater (n = 17, 797) than the number of men (n = 14, 964). These circumstances might have resulted in sampling bias toward a given population of Black/African American men and women. Nonetheless, the data still point toward discrimination in the form of unemployment statistics. Compared to White men, where 3.5 percent of the population is unemployed, Black/African American men's unemployment is double at 7.0 percent unemployed. Similarly, fewer White women were unemployed than Black/African American women, with 3.4 percent of White women facing unemployment versus 6.0 percent of Black/African American women facing unemployment.

These data emphasize the underrepresentation of Black Americans/African Americans within the workplace, especially Black/African American women, highlighting the necessity of

interventions and programs that work toward ameliorating racial discrimination and lack of diversity within the American workforce.

SECTION THREE: RUGGED AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM'S CONNECTION TO RACISM

HOW RUGGED AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM PERPETUATES RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

While the data presented thus far have employed evidence to indicate the presence and pervasiveness of inequality and racial discrimination against Black Americans/African Americans, many continue to subscribe to the ideology of rugged American individualism. Introduced by 31st US President Herbert Hoover, rugged individualism has continued to describe the idea that "The default explanation for most Americans is very individualistic and reductionist, not just for poverty but for virtually everything. The individualistic explanation locates the cause of poverty within the individual who is deficient in some way…" (Eppard et al. 2020, 138). Aside from socioeconomic factors such as poverty, American adherence to the allure of rugged individualism is used as an excuse for racial inequality/discrimination, which has continued to propagate itself in the workplace.

Many privileged, White Americans continue to believe the myth that minorities, especially Black/African Americans, remain stalled in the workplace because these populations lack the drive and initiative to succeed like their White counterparts. When faced with data and analyses that clearly provide corroboration of racial discrimination in the United States, including the United States workplace, I anticipate that many Americans disregard the data due to the ideology of rugged American individualism. As described by sociologist Lawrence M. Eppard and colleagues, "...if people think that African Americans are really not even fully

human—that they're bound to fail, that they're less intelligent, they don't work as hard, they're just inherently inferior—then they won't want to support social policies that are going to help Black people" (Eppard et al. 2020, 149).

This individualistic argument falls short, however, as it ignores the systematic and behavioral reinforcement of racism that prevents Black/African American individuals from advancing not only in the workplace but in a multitude of other sectors. "Unfair discriminatory practices and inequities in the health and criminal justice systems and in labor and housing markets bolster unfair discriminatory practices and inequities in the educational system, and vice versa," as explained by Zinzi D. Bailey and colleagues (Bailey et al. 2017, 1454). The ubiquity of this inequity indicates that rugged individualism is not a satisfactory lens to define all individuals' experiences in the workplace. For a majority of Black Americans/African Americans, rugged individualism alone cannot negate the discriminatory effects of structural inequalities, such as those mentioned above. For this reason, it is imperative to recognize the widespread nature of racial inequality through history, data, and multiple disciplines so the plight of Black/African American individuals, along with other minorities, is not only acknowledged but ameliorated through intervention.

CONCLUSION

Though it has been over half a century since the passage of landmark legislation such as Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, minorities, especially Black Americans/African Americans, have suffered at the hands of racial discrimination within the United States. These effects of race are particularly apparent in the workplace, where spending hours subject to microaggressions, lack of diversity, and immobility have hindered success for these populations despite their credentials or experience.

The existence of this long-standing racial discrimination clearly outlines the need for both large and small-scale intervention(s) that aim to educate and ameliorate the state of inequity and inequality within the American workplace. As stated by Nunez-Smith and colleagues, "Determining the prevalence of physician experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination is of critical importance as the US strives to foster physician workforce diversity and eliminate disparities of all kinds from the health-care setting" (Nunez-Smith et al. 2009, 1198). The ubiquity of discrimination within not only the medical workplace but countless fields, including legal, indicates the lack of effort directed towards addressing workplace discrimination. Simultaneously, this omnipresence of racial discrimination emphasizes the need to implement diversity initiatives and the need to work toward answering research questions related to racial discrimination in other fields and among more minority populations. As suggested by numerous researchers, these may include (but are not limited to): running special diversity recruiting programs, ensuring minorities are promoted and empowered at the same rate as others, creating an open channel to discuss inequality concerns and grievances, and educating the workforce on and emphasizing the importance of diversity within the workplace. In addition to these workplace-centered initiatives, children must be taught the explicit history of systematic and behavioral racial discrimination throughout their student careers, so this history of inequality and complacency via rugged American individualism is not lost and not tolerated. The relevance of these interventions is important to not only better the work experience of Black Americans/African Americans and other minorities but to reify the importance of inclusion so diverse employees are accepted, valued, and employed at equal rates as their colleagues.

I understand that these proposed interventions will not provide absolute solutions or rectify the long-standing history of institutionalized racism; however, I hope to encourage the

development of anti-racist programs and signal the necessity to conduct more research within this field so the severity of discrimination can further be brought to light and positive change can sweep the nation to finally restart the stalled escalator of minority mobility in the workplace.

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