

Angry Black Woman: Debunking the Stereotype Through Black Women's Lived Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe how black women cope with the angry black woman stereotype. Past research on black women's anger indicated there is much psychological stress following a micro aggressive comment or being emerged in environments rooted in the misinterpretation of black women's emotions. This study answered the following research questions: How do black women cope with the angry black woman narrative? What is the emerging story of the angry black women stereotype? Who are the players in this narrative? The research was conducted by way of the narrative approach to chronologically analyze the lived experiences of each participant through epiphanies and events. The sampling strategy to recruit participants was purposeful sampling through maximum variation. Participants were selected through flyers and emails. The data collection methods included interviews of each participant and observations. Validation strategies included member checking and rich thick descriptions. Biases were always bracketed and reflexive which established dependability. Preliminary results revealed the following themes: Perpetuation, healing, and changing the narrative. Participant narratives of the 9 participants--3 black male, 3 young adult black women, and 3 older black women, indicated that the 'perpetuation of the stereotype' was continued through the media and colorism; 'healing' starts with black women allowing other black women to exist without adding to the stereotype themselves; and leading to the 'changing the narrative' by not categorizing black women as angry. Implications of the results for future studies include creating a forum for only black women to participate in conversations that lead to the debunking of the stereotype. The results of this study can contribute to the field of social and experimental psychology and help initiate positive change for black women and the African American community.

Introduction

Black women have been at the forefront of many racial inequalities, but their own issues and wellbeing still has been downplayed when the discussion of oppression is being presented. The issue is overlooked but always prevailing when someone mentions the micro-aggressive label of the angry black woman. There is an awareness of this label being placed upon black women, and there has been past research conducted concluding the effects of the stereotype causing detrimental, psychological distress. There is not much research on the understanding of this stereotype from the target's point of view about the notions of black women's anger. This current research will provide an insight through the narratives of black women.

Literature Review

A microaggression is the "subtle and everyday nonverbal, verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender" (Lewis & Neville, 2015, p. 291). In 2015, Lewis and Neville conducted a study to "[apply] intersectionality framework to Essed's (1991) theory of gendered racism and

Sue, Capodilupo, et al.'s (2007) model of racial microaggressions" to validate the Gendered Racial Microaggression Scale. This multidimensional scale explores the psychological distress experienced by black women which was narrowed down to a 4-factor model analyzed by 210 black women that resulted in the following: "(a) Assumptions of Beauty and Sexual Objectification, (b) Silenced and Marginalized, (c) Strong Black Woman Stereotype, and (d) Angry Black Woman Stereotype" (Lewis & Neville, 2015, p.289). To adequately dissect the oppression black women experience— based on race, gender, and social class— there had to be an intersectional theoretical perspective developed. This approach concluded black women could "(a) experience racism and sexism similarly to Black men and White women (Crenshaw, 1989), (b) experience double oppression or double jeopardy (Crenshaw, 1989; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008), (c) experience the interaction of race and gender oppression (e.g., Moradi & Subich, 2003), or (d) experience specific oppression that is unique to black women on the basis of the intersection of their race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Thomas et al., 2008)" (Lewis & Neville, 2015, p.290). By the end of their study, they found "initial internal consistency estimates of the total and subscale scores were acceptable, and, moreover, the GRMS frequency and stress appraisal subscales were related to increased perceived racial microaggressions, sexist events, and psychological distress" validating the Gendered Racial Microaggression Scale (p. 299).

Being that African Americans are the minority it is inevitable that they must congregate in white spaces. In these white spaces, there are heightened preconceived notions being placed on African Americans. The media plays a role in perpetuating the angry black woman trope. On television, they are sure to include a black woman who is "loud-talking, irrational, overly assertive, aggressive, and argumentative" (Corbin et al., 2018, p. 628). In 2017, there was controversy surrounding Jemele Hill, a black sports broadcaster, because she tweeted the former president, Donald Trump, is a white supremacist. Harrison et al. investigated 1,534 of the comments under this post to dissect the role social media played from a theoretical point of view finding "black voices in the media are often marginalized and framed along racial stereotypes" (2020, p. 145).

In the past, black women have tried to disparage this stereotype which has resulted in the creation of the strong black woman image. Black middle-class church members instructed the working-class black women that "since she [the Black woman] is liable to these insults and encroachments ... she must become a tower of moral strength and by her reserve and dignified bearing defy and cower her aggressors" (Corbin et al., 2018, p. 629). The black women try to simultaneously control and resist these stereotypes being created against them; "this response as a defense mechanism to misogynoir is exhausting and stressful" (2018, p. 629). Corbin et al. studied the experiences of black women at predominately white universities. According to the authors, because the opportunity for white college students to form interpersonal relations with black women are low, the perpetual controlled image of the angry black woman and strong black woman is amplified, and the racial battle fatigue is exacerbated (2018). After interviewing 13 black women that attend predominately white institutions, findings revealed that, "the dominant and problematic mass media-perpetuated controlling image of the angry black woman continues to structure the lives of black college women" (Corbin et al., 2018, p.639).

Just as in universities the trope is largely eternalized, it is often displayed in the workplace. Motro et al. (2021, p.1) explore the potential causes for the lack of black women in corporate leadership positions by conducting a study with 302 undergraduate business students and 253 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers through parallel- constraint satisfaction theory. The parallel-constraint satisfaction theory, or PCST, asserts "that when forming an impression of an individual, people consider (a) any common stereotypes, and (b) any individuating information, such as observed behavior" (Motro et al., 2021, p.1). Stereotypes are said to influence interpretations of behaviors, so they "argue that observers' interpretations of expressions of anger by black women at work will activate the "angry black woman" stereotype" (Motro et al., 2021, p.1). Because of preconceived notions, it is hard for black women to escape what people expect their behavior to be. These biases will lead to the assumptions that the anger is due to factors internally that will lead to a negative stigma that it will influence her leadership performance and capabilities. (Motro et al., 2021). With this must come the exploration of how "emotion [is] evaluated differently depending on demographics" (Motro et al., 2021, p.1). After conducting their two studies, Motro et al. found there were "indirect effects of anger

[that] were not significant when she was white but were significant when she was black” meaning due to their race they are deemed unfit for leadership positions (2021, p.4).

Because overcoming stereotypes feels like an uphill battle, black women are tired. Holder et al. studied the effects of the stereotypes in the workplace with the use of 10 black corporate women to gain “an authentic and deeper understanding of experiences of racial microaggressions and coping strategies” (2015, p.166). It is important for black women to look out for their well-being given that the stereotypes will constantly be perpetuated. They found through spirituality/ religion, armoring, shifting, support networks, sponsorships/ mentorship, and self-care it is easier to navigate through what is to be expected of them. “Despite the use of these adaptive coping strategies, experiences of racial microaggressions created harmful consequences” (Holder et al., 2015, p.175). It is hard, even with coping mechanisms, to block out the hate placed upon the existence of black women. Kilgore et al. examine writing as another coping strategy as revealed by 25 black women writers in the Midwest, and they found that it allowed black women “to openly express themselves, use their voice, educate others, and feel empowered” (2020, p.372). Not only is it important for black women to find power within themselves but supporting one another “[provides] a sense of security and spiritual guidance and [enhances] their self-concept” (Davis, 2019, p.156). Sharde Davis takes a deeper look into the community that is gained when black women support each other by creating a supportive discussion that consisted of 52 different black women friend groups, each group having 3 friends, for a total of 156 black women. Much research thus concludes “stereotypes of black women are often perpetrated on the interpersonal level in the form of gendered racial microaggressions that objectify black women and reduce them to their race and gender” (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 772). Although studies have explored the stereotypes and their impact, none have explored the narrative and how it has unfolded for black women, specifically young, black college students. The purpose of this current study is to explore the narrative of the angry black woman stereotype. By understanding the narrative, we may be able to prevent the negative effects of such a stereotype. The following are research questions intended to be answered:

Research Questions

How do black women cope with the angry black woman narrative? What is the emerging story of the angry black women stereotype? Who are the players in this narrative?

Qualitative Research Design

The narrative approach is appropriate because of its ability to capture the stories of the lived experiences of the participants. The research question can only be answered by considering subjective knowledge of multiple realities. Words can only explain these experiences, and no numeric data is needed.

Role of Researcher

As a black woman, it is hard to not be passionate about stereotypes that are formed against me. Because I grew up in predominantly white areas, I have experienced many micro aggressions including this stereotypical angry black woman narrative. I often find people confusing my passion for anger, and the judgement of that “anger” only being reserved for black women. My passion for this topic could have swayed the answers of the participants which would no longer be their lived experience, but mine.

Participants

1. 21-year-old, African American Jamaican woman, high school education, New Jersey native
2. 21-year-old, African American woman, college senior, North Carolina/ New York native
3. 21-year-old, African American woman, college senior, New York/ Georgia native
4. 22-year-old, African American male, high school education/ minister, Mississippi/ Texas native
5. 23-year-old, African American male, second semester college freshman, Georgia native
6. 33-year-old, African American male, first semester college freshman, Georgia/ Tennessee native
7. 46-year-old, African American woman, Master's degree, Tennessee native
8. 53-year-old, African American woman, cosmetology school, Tennessee native
9. 48-year-old, African American woman, PhD, New York/ Tennessee native

Sampling Strategy

Maximum variation sampling was used to select each African American participant: 3 younger black women, 3 older black women, and 3 black males.

Data Collection and Procedures

Each participant was interviewed with the same questions. The interviews were recorded both by note taking and audio-recording. Participants were recruited based on interest.

Ethical Considerations

Before each interview the participant was read the consent form disclosing the nature of the research. The consent form included the number of participants, the outcome of the research, and the reason for them being selected. Participation being voluntary was disclosed as well as the number to Clark Atlanta's counseling center if any of them sensed discomfort following the interview.

Data validation

Through rich thick descriptions and member checking, credibility is built because it is solely through the eyes of the participants. Reflexivity and bracketing were used before and after interviews to ensure findings were not influenced by researcher biases, this builds dependability.

Results

After each interview, the central themes of the findings were sorted to capture the story. The quotations of the participants were split into categories: Positive influences and negative influences. These categories were broken down into codes: Coping strategies, contributions to the stereotype, misinterpretation of emotions, effects of stereotype, and origin of the stereotype. These were used to find the themes: Healing, perpetuation, and changing the narrative. To thoroughly code the results, Atlas Ti was used to organize each quote, category, code, and theme. Themes were selected based on the overall goal of the research. They were also selected based on participants' stories.

Perpetuation

Contributions to the stereotype. These are things that allow for the stereotype to be continual.

“Colorism and texturism, which I did not know were a thing until like last year, definitely contribute to the stereotype. People judge you based on you being darkskin or lightskin and how tight your curl is, like 4a vs 4c hair.” (Participant 1)

“Tyler Perry does not accurately tell the story of a black woman like in *Diary of a Mad Black woman*. He shows the black woman being angry and going through hardships but does not show exactly why she got there.” (Participant 6)

“Reality shows like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* show black women in a negative light, and them always arguing or fighting.” (Participant 4)

“Social media, mainly twitter, allows for a divide among black women and for black men to express their dislike for them. A black woman will express herself, and it will be blown out of proportion. It paints a false narrative for who black women really are.” (Participant 2)

“I have told black women it’s not that serious when it is for them.” (Participant 5)

“Black men are the biggest contributors.” (Participant 6)

Origin of the stereotype. Finding the source will eventually lead to ending the narrative.

“White supremacy. White men view themselves as superior, and white women view black women as being in need.” (Participant 2)

“It dates to slavery when white men would rape black women, and the white women were jealous. I think they created it with malice and envious intent.” (Participant 9)

“[Black women] have to overcompensate for being inadequate [to white people], or them being viewed as strong.” (Participant 3)

“Being enslaved, families were always being separated which causes trauma. Imagine a mother watching her child being taken away from her, of course she’s angry.” (Participant 6)

Changing the Narrative

Misinterpretation of emotion. With change, first must come understanding. Black women’s emotions are often misunderstood.

“Black women are some of the most caring people ever.” (Participant 7)

“They are loud because they are passionate about the things they care about.” (Participant 8)

“Really, we need to sit down and talk to black women to figure out the root of their so-called anger.” (Participant 6)

“They are not angry, just stressed and upset.” (Participant 5)

“[Black women] are expressing regular emotions; people just see them as angry, so they automatically group any expression of passion or care as anger.” (Participant 9)

Healing

Effects of stereotype. This stereotype can have a detrimental effect on black women.

“It is draining because we have to control ourselves everywhere we go just to not be labeled as another angry black woman.” (Participant 8)

“There is no advocacy for black women, and our emotions are looked at as exaggerated.” (Participant 7)

“It’s mentally taxing and makes me feel less feminine because my emotions are seen as aggressive.” (Participant 1)

“It effects our ability to form a genuine relationship with each other because it is deep rooted across different diasporas.” (Participant 9)

“In the workplace, people are looking for you to be the aggressor. Most of our emotions are reactionary, but they don’t see them as that.” (Participant 2)

“We are always visibly and vocally emoting, so it is easy for our emotions to be misconstrued.” (Participant 7)

“It creates unnecessary competition within our own community because black men are more accepting of lighter girls. Then this makes us not feel accepted anywhere.” (Participant 2)

“Career wise the boss could be racist and give the black woman a hard to time make her feed into the stereotype in order to give him a reason to fire her or for her to be reprimanded.” (Participant 4)

“It gives black women no voice because they are seen as emotional rather than seeing the situations for what they are.” (Participant 5)

“They are given a lesser than treatment because of the one-sided view that was created.” (Participant 6)

Coping strategies. To heal, there must be mechanisms created to get there.

“We cope by existing.” (Participant 2)

“[Black women can start by] accepting counseling, taking their mental health serious, prayer, a positive mentor, or even finding a happy place in their head to escape from their reality.” (Participant 6)

“We are not really allowed that space to cope because often people say, *‘let go and let God’*. This is harmful because it does not appease us, truthfully.” (Participant 1)

“[In the media] every aspect of us should be highlighted. Our dancing, true happiness, even us being vulnerable and crying.” (Participant 2)

“Us black men should promote more positivity surrounding our women.” (Participant 6)

“Black men can start caring and just being there for our women.” (Participant 4)

“As men we should stop being in the way. We can take their emotions more serious. Even allow for more women to be in positions of power.” (Participant 5)

“Black women are creating avenues to allow for other black women to freely express themselves.” (Participant 9)

Discussion

The emerging story of the angry black woman stereotype begins with a black girl who is young and free with innocence. She watches her mother become more tired and frustrated each day due to the heightened misinterpretations of her emotions. To the young black girl, her mother is passionate and caring about things that are important to her; to the world, her mother is angry with everyone and dissatisfied with everything. This young girl is often provoked by uneducated and immature little boys; she is learning to navigate through the pressures of being misunderstood while keeping her composure. Each day is harder than the last because she is still frustrated from past misinterpretations. Social media has made it hard for her to exist with many online discourses that emerge everyday such as: light skin versus dark skin, 4c hair versus 3c hair, and how intolerable black women can be. She manages to finish grade school with the pressures of remaining tranquil. She decides to take the academic route and goes to college. The pressures and stereotypes remain just the same, if not worse. She emerges herself in the workforce where they look to her to cause trouble; her passion is still misunderstood as anger. She is now deemed unfit for leadership positions. The lack of support from black men also contributes largely to her emotions being misinterpreted. She feels she has no support anywhere. She copes by praying, surrounding herself with other black women to have a community that will truly understand her, or by simply existing. Each day black women are faced with the decision of whether they will succumb

to the racial stereotype that was created to destroy them. Black women are doing the best they can with what they have, and they are prevailing despite the stigma that is surrounding them. For the future, I would focus more on creating a forum for black women to have an outlet for their emotions. Mixed methods could be used to quantify the coping scales and further see how many black women would participate in a conversation which would lead to the debunking of the stereotype.

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