

Invisibility Syndrome: A Clinical Model of the Effects of Racism on African-American Males

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Adaptive behavior and psychological well-being of African Americans can be affected by prejudice and discrimination. Encountering repeated racial slights can create "psychological invisibility." The invisibility syndrome is presented as a conceptual model for understanding the inner evaluative processes and adaptive behavior of African Americans in managing experiences of racism.

This paper proposes that adaptive behavior and psychological well-being of African Americans can be affected by personal experiences of perceived prejudice and discrimination. Encountering repeated racial slights can create within the individual a feeling of not being seen as a person of worth. This subjective sense of psychological invisibility takes the form of a struggle with inner feelings and beliefs that personal talents, abilities, and character are not acknowledged or valued by others, nor by the larger society, because of racial prejudice. The "invisibility syndrome" is offered here as a conceptual model for understanding the intrapsychic processes and outcomes in managing the personal stress arising from racial slights and the subjective experience of invisibility among African Americans.

Although this model can be applied to African Americans generally, it is particularly salient for males because of the perceived connection between their experiences of racism and their inordinately high social and health risk factors (Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994; Leary, 1996). African-American men have one of the lowest life expectancies in the general population due to homicide (Hammond & Yung, 1993), cardiovascular disorders, hypertension, diabetes, and substance abuse (Anderson, 1995; Braithwaite & Taylor, 1992).

Approximately 30% of young black males are involved with the judicial system (Butterfield, 1995; Gibbs, 1988; Taylor, 1995). Many lack marketable skills and functional literacy; the ability to gain employment, sustain upward mobility, and contribute to the family remains problematic for many African-American men (Billingsley, 1992; Staples & Johnson, 1993).

CREATION OF AN INVISIBILITY SYNDROME

The persistently marginal social status of African-American men in society is a major concern to the black community. It is a matter of widespread belief that racism is a primary contributor to this predicament and to the marginality of the African-American community in general. The easy ability of African Americans to catalog and obtain corroboration of prejudice and discrimination experiences from each other often serves as validating evidence. These shared experiences fit Jones's (1991) conceptualization of the personality of African Americans as being "in part an adaptation to the political contours of racism" (p. 305). In understanding the development of personality in African Americans, therefore, one must consider the extent to which racism provides a thematic unity in their lives, as well as the variety of reactions to it from person to person.

The inner vigilance for racial slights, maintained throughout life (Franklin, 1993), is considered among African Americans to be a "sixth sense." Its activation depends on the way in which individuals interpret a racial encounter and relate it to their personal view of how to respond to such incidents. Encounters considered to be racist affronts also develop the individual's intuitive skills in evaluating the intent of such acts. The recognition, interpretation, and internalization of perceived acts of prejudice is as idiosyncratic as it is universalistic. For example, African-American men uniformly report difficulty in securing a taxi on a city street corner, but can differ in their beliefs about the extent to which racism played a part in these incidents.

Racial identity has been proposed as a central facet in African Americans' development of their worldview (Carter, 1995; Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990), and the salience of racism to the African-American community has produced diverse modes of socialization, different degrees of vigilance, and varied approaches to its handling. Generally, though, accumulated experiences of racial slights reinforce the perception that perpetrators of these acts are truly blind to the "personhood" of the individual they have encountered. The recipient feels disregarded, and disrespected as—and because of being—a person of African descent. Repeated encounters of this sort can begin to alter assumptions about instances in which one does find acceptance in cross-racial interactions, raising the suspicion that these social contacts are disingenuous, acts of "tolerance" rather than genuine acceptance.

It becomes increasingly likely for individuals in this "racialized context" to believe that their true personality and unique abilities are hidden by a cloak of psychological invisibility woven by attitudes of prejudice and discrimination on the part of others. This barrier is perceived as supporting the belief structure and personal comfort of the perpetrator, while obscuring the unconscious racism that is its cause. Feelings of being victimized are nurtured in African Americans who connect their present experiences to the collective unconscious about the legacy of depersonalization and dehumanization poignantly associated with African-American history (Riggs, 1987; Riggs & Kleinman, 1991). For African-American men, this legacy is also tied to masculine gender expectations, their ability to fulfill such expectations, and gender conflicts with white men (Boyd & Allen, 1995; Jones, 1997; Lazur & Majors, 1995).

Relationship to Prejudice and Discrimination

The psychological struggle for acceptance by African Americans is as long as their history in the United States. Their original experience of being brought over as slaves has been compounded by centuries of acts on the part of the larger society to reinforce their status as inferior: The 1787 Constitution of the United States represented slaves as "three fifths of all other persons"; the Supreme Court, in the 1857 Dred Scott case, reaffirmed slaves as property; the 1896 Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld the policy of segregation. It was not until 1954, when *Brown v. Board of Education* dismantled segregated schools, and 1964, when the Civil Rights Act guaranteed broad citizen protections, that the legal underpinnings for treating African Americans as unequal and unacceptable were rescinded (Franklin & Moss, 1994; Fredrickson, 1988). The significance of this legal and social history is the "racialized" interpersonal environment bestowing invisibility upon African Americans through second-class citizenship (Jones, 1997).

The plight of black people led Kardiner and Ovesey (1951) to characterize the "Negro" as being psychologically damaged by oppressed status and treatment. Likewise, admonitions about inequities in two separate black and white communities have become routine documentation for each generation (Hacker, 1992; Jaynes & Williams, 1989; Myrdal, 1944). Grier and Cobbs's (1968) examination of black rage and Kovel's (1970) analysis of white racism attempted to interpret the depths of the psychodynamic consequences of historic prejudice. However, it is Ralph Ellison (1952), in his literary classic *Invisible Man*, who most poignantly portrayed the essence of psychological invisibility and the stress derived from conflicting messages about status and acceptance for African Americans:

I am an invisible man...I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 3)

This experience of invisibility also creates inner conflict for the individual because it requires choices about ways in which to make oneself visible, while striving for acceptance. Moreover, individual choice may be preempted, with visibility being determined by imposition of stereotypes. This is the "paradox of invisibility," as represented in the frequent observation of African-American

men that their recognition and treatment are based on stereotyped notions about black men (*Cose, 1993; Edwards & Polite, 1992; Feagin & Sikes, 1994*). In effect, stereotyped assumptions greatly determine the salience of African-American men's physical and psychological presence in many contexts.

For example, because violence has so often been associated with black men, they are mindful of how their gait can trigger particular intrinsic notions and responses, notably fear, when they pass white people in the street. Rohan Preston, in the preface to his book about young black men (*Wide-man & Preston, 1996*), provided a contemporary parallel to the dilemma of Ellison's invisible man, with regard to how to act in different situations:

Our eyes slant away so as not to cause fear—because we know that they think they know what they don't, namely us. (*p. viii*)

For many black men, this fear on the part of whites is so pervasive as to influence all cross-racial interactions, including trying to establish friendships. In these circumstances, African-American men are forced to maintain vigilance, and thus must devote intrapsychic energy to discerning, preventing, and ameliorating such negative presumptions.

Presumptions of Racism

The invisibility paradigm emanates from people's naïveté and biased attitudes about African Americans. It evolves from superficial rather than authentic and intimate social contact with the African-American community. In spite of gains in civil rights, prejudice continues toward African Americans because of separation and narrow experiences with them. Jones (*1997*) examined the multitude of definitions about racism and concluded that all of them subsume the notion of group privilege, having the power to maintain it, to define it as natural, and to reject others who deviate from their self-reflecting standards and way of life. Therefore, one's assumptive world can very much be influenced by attitudes promoted by one's racial group membership.

Whites, feeling dominant in many aspects of societal life, nurture notions of group privilege, while blacks, in less of an influential position, contend with the power of whites to maintain that privilege. As McIntosh (*1990*) noted, "whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege" (*p. 31*). For blacks to gain access to the privi-

leges of whites, they must often suppress those attributes deemed unacceptable to whites.

Racism gives whites permission to disregard or devalue those attributes that do not reflect their privileged status, and to be reactive to those that pose a threat to them. An intrapsychic dynamic of invisibility for African Americans requires that they contend with group notions of superiority embraced by many whites. Another feature of this phenomenon is the extent to which those attributes that define African-American identity are viewed as contradictory to what is widely upheld as "American." Thus, visibility for African Americans is frequently a day-to-day process of choice—between a societal assimilated identity based on an Anglo-European norm, and an identity incorporating the distinctiveness of being African American. Adult development for African Americans, therefore, can be a process of consolidating a self-definition in spite of, because of, and inclusive of notions of white superiority and black inferiority.

Franklin (*1992, 1993*) reported the dilemma of an African-American patient named Bill, who was overlooked by the seating host in a restaurant, then slighted by his waiter, and, after dinner, was unable to flag down a taxi. This sequence of events aroused in Bill feelings of rejection and insult. They combined to make him emotionally exceed his threshold for tolerance of racial indignities, and culminated in his throwing his body angrily across the hood of the final offending taxi. No matter how highly Bill thought of himself, these repeated racial slights, unyieldingly applied, branded him with stereotyped assumptions; then, his act of frustration appeared to reaffirm them.

The concept of "correspondence biases" is illustrative of what occurred in these circumstances. Group notions can be so powerful that their assumptions can create a tendency to infer that behavior reflects internal dispositions (*Gilbert & Jones, 1986*). By exploding in anger, Bill supported a generalized notion that black men have poor impulse control, are dangerous, and should be avoided. Thus, it becomes easier to believe, for example, that when another black man waves his arms demonstratively, or raises his voice, he is potentially volatile. Such error in attribution is a bias because of the inclination to overlook alternative explanations for the behavior (e.g., he is just emphasizing his point, or his behavior is justified because his threshold for painful indignities has been exceeded). This misattribution of behavior fre-

quently leads African-American men to exercise caution in being assertive, lest the assertiveness be misinterpreted as aggression in cross-racial dyads.

Black men are often intuitively mindful of how correspondence biases work. This awareness makes them self-conscious and, thus, inclined to learn adaptive behavior that lessens their influence, while protecting their own well-being. Countering these stereotypes and racial slights can be a strain on one's emotional equilibrium, however, and erode personal resilience to the adversities of racism.

According to Jones (1997), racism can be understood as people's tendency to perceive essential characteristics of race as the explanations for socioeconomic outcomes or behavior, and a corresponding tendency not to see the contextual and ecological influences on those same outcomes. This, in fact, is the interpretive jeopardy understood by Bill in retrospect, after his act of frustration.

Racism's complexity, and the internal conflicts it generates from the choices and decision-making it demands, is manifested in subtle forms of behavior. Word, Zanna, and Cooper (1974) illustrated this in a study of how interracial interactions are mediated by expectations. White undergraduates were asked to interview white and black high school students in order to select members of a team that would perform a decision-making task. The high school students were confederates of the experimenter. Each undergraduate subject conducted three interviews, beginning with a white high school student and followed in counterbalanced order by a black and white student. During the interviews, measures were taken of "immediacy" or physical proximity, interview length, and speech error rate. Results showed that, compared with the white high school students, blacks were interviewed at a significantly greater physical distance, for a shorter amount of time, and had generated more speech errors during the interview.

Using these results as a template for nonverbal factors in black and white interactions, a subsequent experiment was conducted in which white undergraduates were asked to serve as job applicants. The job interviewers, all white, were confederates of the experimenter. Subjects were interviewed by these confederates, who had been trained to behave toward subjects in the same way that interviewers in the previous study had been observed to behave toward black and white sub-

jects, respectively. Results from the independent rating of judges, as well as subjects' ratings of their own mood and interviewer friendliness, supported the prediction that subtle negative behavior toward a recipient can induce commensurate negative behavioral outcomes. Those white subjects treated as blacks had been were judged as less competent, exhibiting greater distance, and making more speech errors in the interviews.

Jones (1991) concluded that these results exemplify the kind of negative circumstances that reinforce notions of institutional racism and racial mistrust. The subtleties of biased attitudes, or at least interpersonal discomfort manifested in nonverbal social distancing, is illustrative of what African-American men experience as invisibility.

Microaggressions

The array of interracial interactions conveying disregard, ambivalence, or contempt often come in the form of slights. These acts, which Pierce (1988, 1992) termed "microaggressions" or "psycho-pollutants," have an additive effect over time, shaping one's view of self in the world. Microaggressions are subtle acts or attitudes that are experienced as hostile, and that fit a history and pattern of personal racial slights and disregard. They act as status reminders by their implicit suggestion of unworthiness, and have a leveling effect on the recipient (i.e., "Stay in your place!"). They promote "defensive thinking," a mode in which thoughts are reactive, mixed with inner deliberations about what one desires to do and what one shouldn't or can't do. Appearing intermittently and unpredictably, microaggressions reinforce defensive thinking by making it difficult to disregard their possible reoccurrence. They force the individual to remain vigilant in order to preserve personal dignity and self-respect.

Essed (1991), in her interview study of black women in California and the Netherlands, concluded that everyday racism is a process of problematization, marginalization, and containment. For example, racism puts mechanisms in place that declares black people (or any outgroup) to be a problem, marginalizes them through ethnocentrism and barriers to participation, and contains them through forms of suppression such as intimidation, pacification, and majority rule.

In their episodic occurrence and provocation, racial slights are disorienting; they breed confusion and disillusionment. This outcome of every-

day racism becomes a part of the individual's intrapsychic structure; it is a catalyst for feelings of invisibility, which grow in response to the erosion of self-esteem and which incline one toward alternative roles that appear able to resolve conflicted identity and provide acceptance. In this manner, racism makes membership in the target group undesirable.

This is how Steele's "stereotype threat" evolves. His research (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) suggests that the tendency for African Americans and women to underperform is a reaction to the environmental climate within domains. For example, a school can be associated with existing stereotyped expectations about a particular group having less ability. How an individual from that group reacts depends on the individual's past performance, and on how widely the particular belief about the group is held. Steele noted two types of reactions: *disruptive apprehension*, in which the person fears verifying the negative stereotype held about his or her group, and *protective disidentification*, in which the person rejects the setting where the verification might occur.

Racism and Gender Role

Steele's work (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) can be extended to explain the difficulties that African-American men face in achieving gender-role expectations. For example, meeting the challenge to fulfill such role expectations in the "home domain" can promote reactions to stereotyped expectations about black husbands and fathers; rather than risk verifying these stereotypes, some African-American men abandon the responsibility.

Implicit societal expectations about gender-role fulfillment also collude in the determination of racial gender stereotypes. Pleck (1995) rejected a prominent view that masculinity evolves from an intrinsic psychological need to have a gender-role identity fashioned to traditional cultural scripts. In contrast, Pleck proposed that masculinity can be better discussed from a role-strain paradigm in which there are contradictions and inconsistencies; considerable violation of gender roles; overconformity in response to perceived failure; and imposition through socialization of stereotypes and norms, with the threat of severe consequences for deviation.

Negative consequences of trying to meet standards of masculinity can come from gender-role discrepancy, trauma, or dysfunction. Discrepancy

arises from long-term failure to fulfill male roles; trauma is the negative impact of the male socialization process itself; and dysfunction occurs when successful fulfillment is inappropriate for the context or the needs of others (e.g., being a competitive man may be incompatible with being a cooperative partner in a relationship).

Formation of the African-American male's conception of masculinity can be viewed within this gender-role strain paradigm, but it is also influenced by the unifying theme of racism. Prejudice and discrimination form barriers to the achievement of gender-role expectations and help shape ethnic-group-centered standards as adaptive and self-affirming (Majors & Billson, 1992). Fulfillment of male roles becomes that much more complex for African Americans because, within the larger society, white and black conceptions of masculinity have both shared and independent attributes with intrinsic conflicts (e.g., what constitutes assertive in contrast to aggressive behavior in given circumstances for white and black men).

Bowman (1992) found that socially structured inequalities raised provider role strain for black husbands and fathers, reducing psychological well-being and quality of family life. Moreover, indigenous patterns within the African-American community may reaffirm adaptive cultural resources. Based on data from a national survey of black Americans (Jackson & Gurin, 1987), Bowman showed that husband, father, and primary provider discouragement, as well as employment difficulty, reduced global family satisfaction. On the other hand, husbands and fathers who were in very close families, and those who were religious, had higher levels of global satisfaction. Black husbands/fathers within very close families were as likely as those in the not-close families to be unemployed, but they were consistently less likely to experience subjective aspects of provider role strain. Close family ties, therefore, can be a buffer against provider role strain.

Bowman's research raises several issues. Although the results are not surprising, and are somewhat consistent with expectations irrespective of race, they tell only part of the story. Since respondents answered questions within their personal life context, the unifying theme of racism (Jones, 1991) is embedded in their answers. That is, their support of the general assumption about the relationship between role strain and family life satisfaction does not fully explain the qualitative as-

pects of that relationship, which, for African Americans, is so largely shaped by racism. An alternate interpretation may be that, for these black men, the reasons that close family acted as a buffer against role strain had to do with the extent to which it helped them gain acknowledgment, satisfaction, and validation as individuals. More specifically, the elements of psychological visibility achieved in a close family may compensate for, or at least offset, the indignities of racism.

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE INVISIBILITY SYNDROME

The ongoing effort to manage racial slights, as well as the confusion and disillusionment induced by persistent acts of racism, can undermine the resilience of some African Americans, leading to deterioration in their ability to cope, whether on a transient or a more enduring basis. This manifestation of the invisibility syndrome may include severe levels of dysfunction, often characterized by a jaded outlook or chronic indignation, in which injustices are perceived everywhere and become a primary source of personal interpretations about treatment and accomplishments. Likewise, there may be a preoccupying anger, internalized rage, or immobilizing frustration focused on racial injustices that greatly determines behavior (*Grier & Cobbs, 1968*). Depression and substance abuse, as well as violence, may be additional reactive symptoms that arise from the oppressive and disorienting elements of psychological invisibility.

In these circumstances, the struggle of African Americans for inner comfort with personal identity may be understood in terms of a conceptual model involving an interaction between interdependent elements of individual choice for visibility and the ways in which racism determines society's level of

comfort with that visibility. The ultimate resolution sought by the individual is adaptive behavior promoting a sense of personal efficacy and psychological well-being, but it is a process fraught with intrapsychic tension and conflict for black people. The model, presented in FIGURE 1, is intended as a means for understanding how racism influences the achievement of personal identity in African Americans, and for identifying potential points of intervention when confusion and disillusionment prevail.

In FIGURE 1, visibility is represented as a configuration wherein interaction of inner evaluative elements, from recognition to identity, denote a conscious or unconscious processing of the individual's view of personal treatment by others (or by circumstances). In evolving an identity, the individual *a*) deliberately and intuitively moves toward people and places that provide recognition and acknowledgment, and *b*) must be given validation and legitimacy to fulfill a sense of appropriateness. The presence of these positive elements consistently and repeatedly across places fosters a feeling of respect, which reinforces a sense of dignity. This is evident in all of us, for example, in the social and professional networks we select: the interplay and fulfillment of these elements over time lead to a greater sense of identity within that given context, and we feel acknowledged as friend or professional.

Societal circumstances certainly contribute to the experiences that shape personal identity. For example, persistent prejudice and discrimination are experienced by African Americans as an indication of society's discomfort with them. Distancing from black people now is maintained more as psychological distancing, since segregation and discrimination can result in legal penalties.

Figure 1
CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE STRUGGLE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS WITH SOCIETAL NORMS OF VISIBILITY



An enduring climate of prejudice and discrimination, however, allows stereotypes to thrive and racial slights to be carriers of a societal disposition toward African Americans. As represented in FIGURE 1, invisibility evolves out of society's racism as a mechanism for achieving its comfort with people considered unacceptable. People and places embracing racism generate a climate of disregard for African Americans by denying appropriate recognition and other elements essential to a positive identity. Use of stereotypes and racial slights promotes a unifying, subjective experience of invisibility and reactive efforts on the part of African Americans as they seek to deconstruct their impact.

Case Example

Bill's evening of restaurant indignities, referred to above, may serve to illustrate the clinical utility of the model in working with reactions to such circumstances:

This was not the first time Bill had told of such incidents during the course of treatment. He had a memory of racial indignities experienced in many different interracial contexts over his life. Moreover, he had devised a strategy for dealing with them that did not compromise his self-esteem in spite of the corrosive potential from repeated exposure to them. This was facilitated in part by a legacy of family lessons for overcoming barriers of racism, and in part by his own fulfillment of the legacy through his educational and career accomplishments.

Development of personal identity is a dynamic process that evolves over the course of the life cycle. Visibility (or invisibility) is the state of feeling acknowledged (or unacknowledged) that arises from inner assessment and evaluation of the day-to-day experiences central to achieving a stable personal and racial identity. It is this psychological process we can presume Bill was engaged in during his restaurant encounter, which was, for Bill, a context that verified his sense of self within his chosen path of visibility. That is, the restaurant, which represents a feature of his individual choice, plus the subsequent incidents that evening, are part of a constellation of people and places (e.g., home, work) that serve to validate and reinforce Bill's still-evolving identity.

When he was overlooked by the *maitre d'*, Bill reported that he had a twinge of not being recognized, but chose to dismiss it because of the host's preoccupation with a busy dinner hour. He also ignored his inner "red flag" that this might be a potential racial slight. As the evening progressed and the ensuing incidents built toward humiliation, it became more difficult to ignore the inference. In the end, he experienced a diminished sense of social competence, and felt he had lost some of his self-respect and dignity. Equally important, he felt he had failed his family legacy, the lessons about vigilance toward prejudice and strategies for managing racial indignities.

Managing the Stress of Invisibility

Achieving visibility within a racist society, while maintaining integrity and dignity, is a stressful

psychological process for many African Americans. Tennis star Arthur Ashe, in response to an inquiry suggesting that his medical condition must be his greatest burden, observed: "Race has always been my biggest burden. Having to live as a minority in America. Even now it continues to feel like an extra weight tied around me" (*Ashe & Rampersad, 1995, p. 306*). For African Americans, sustaining a dignified sense of self often requires managing the emotional pain and disillusionment elicited by subtle acts of prejudice and discrimination—particularly the self-blame that comes from being "blind-sided" by humiliating incidents or racist outcomes, such as finding oneself among the "last hired, first fired" or failing to achieve a promotion earned on the basis of objective criteria (e.g., being told, "You need a couple of more years experience," while someone with less seniority gets the promotion).

Being in places and circumstances that provide a greater sense of acceptance and legitimacy reduces feelings of invisibility. Frequently, seeking out other blacks is part of a self-healing process aimed at neutralizing psychic injury from the indignities experienced in interracial environments. It is a form of "microaggression repair," in which the individual evokes curative thoughts, engages in healing conversations, or carries out deeds designed to soothe emotional wounds. The intent is to lessen damage to self-esteem, moderate indignation, and calm vengeful inclinations. It is a restorative measure that also seeks to elevate and project attributes of chosen visibility. This may be exemplified by a defiant attitude ("I'll show you!") or a stabilizing thought ("This slight doesn't dignify a response; I'm better than that!").

When black students congregate at school cafeteria tables, or black co-workers choose to sit together during coffee breaks, they exchange a particular kind of acceptance and legitimacy. It activates and reinforces key elements in their process of achieving visibility. Society's discomfort with assemblages of black people is represented by pervasive conspiratorial notions frequently associated with such gatherings. Consequently, either through direct messages or by management of the environmental climate, white discomfort with this behavior—rooted in racism, whether conscious or unconscious—will lead to whites trying to initiate a renegotiation around this declaration of black visibility. Thus, their question, as Tatum (1997) aptly reflected in the title of her recent book: "*Why*

Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"

Defiance as adaptation. Defying invisibility through self-empowerment is an important facet of adaptive behavior for African Americans. This entails the individual rejecting and resisting implications of stereotypes. The black community's wisdom is encompassed in adages such as "work twice as hard *in spite of* knowing you may get only half as much." This reversal of common sense demonstrates resilience in the face of adverse circumstances, but also highlights the vicious circle and insidiousness inherent in psychological invisibility. Most important in the message is its inference with respect to emotional process. To sustain a sense of efficacy and well-being requires an equivalent emotional capacity to weather the personal encounters and introspective evaluations that come with having to work twice as hard for half as much. These lessons in dealing with prejudice and discrimination become internalized as a standard against which future management of racial encounters is measured. They constitute a road map to a dignified identity.

Sanity checks as psychic stabilizers. Of vital importance to emotional survival and well-being for African Americans are personal "sanity checks." These are steps taken to seek corroboration from other African Americans of experiences and treatment at the hands of a racist society. For example, sanity checks are another reason black students and co-workers "sit together in the cafeteria," and talk with each other at school and work. The family is similarly instrumental in providing these crucial sanity checks (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). After his evening of racial slights described in the case cited above, Bill called his family to verify that his indignation was justified.

Racial identity development as a protective factor. Racial identity development is another crucial facet in managing stress arising from psychological invisibility (Franklin, 1999a). While process and outcome are complex, racial identity development is representative of how racism can shape the declaration and acceptance of oneself (Carter, 1995; Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990). The painful encounters with racism move some African Americans to immerse themselves in the ethnic and cultural traditions of African people as a means of attaining a status that provides an intrapsychic structuring for visibility. Achieving racial identity solidifies one's perspective about self in relation to

others, and becomes a part of a protective mechanism shielding the individual from the effects of racism.

Therapeutic support groups. As a conceptual model, the invisibility syndrome can be instrumental in uncovering sources of immobilization and dysfunctional behavior by assessing life experiences and different contexts where, for example, recognition, validation, and respect were (or were not) central elements. Psychotherapy can help in managing symptoms of the syndrome. However, the shared experiences of slights among African Americans, while pervasive, often go unrecognized even in therapy. For African-American men seeking to gain perspective on their struggles with the personal tribulations of being a black man in America, therapeutic support groups can be an especially effective intervention (Franklin, 1999b). In a support group, validation of experiences paralleling the "sanity check" can occur. Moreover, the disclosure of individual coping strategies enables alternative adaptive behavior to be learned, tried, and evaluated within a "fraternal" context more consistent with natural peer networks (Franklin, 1997, 1999a). Achieving a fraternal atmosphere within the dynamics of the group (e.g., "brothers in the struggle") is important for black men because the therapeutic context is often thought of as an unnatural setting and not appropriate for self-disclosure (Ridley, 1984; Sutton, 1996).

Finally, one way to make therapeutic support groups for black men appealing and effective as an intervention is to focus on self-empowerment. Empowerment provides a context for self-disclosure that concentrates on personal efficacy, in contrast to a psychotherapeutic process that may be perceived as centered on personal failing or pathology. Achieving the proper supportive environment in the group can help to maintain or renew personal resilience, and fulfill an empowerment objective of visibility in the face of racism.

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