

# Diversity within Women of Color: Why Experiences Change Felt Stigma

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**Abstract** This commentary offers additional considerations for better understanding and studying how women of color detect and respond to prejudice in the United States. Building on the thoughts raised by Remedios and Snyder (2015), we highlight the importance of considering the socio-cultural and historic factors that differentially impact how sub-groups of women of color are perceived. Rather than generalizing work on stigma and discrimination across the diverse group of women of color, we discuss the importance and benefits of examining subgroups individually. In this commentary therefore, we pose research questions about three additional bodies of literature that add to Remedios and Snyder's (2015) ideas regarding experiencing stigma. First, we examine how stereotypes of subgroups of women of color differ. Next, we introduce other work in the field of intersectionality, e.g. gendered race, to argue that differences in the ways women of color are perceived may affect how they experience identity centrality, discrimination, and other identity-related processes. Finally, we provide empirical evidence highlighting the concept of intersectional invisibility as an additional form of felt discrimination.

**Keywords** Intersectionality · Gendered Race · Women of Color

On January 25, 1972, congresswoman Shirley Chisholm took the stage at Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn and made the historic announcement that she was running for president of

the United States (Harris 2012). Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress, made the announcement in a way that reflected her unique position as a Black female politician:

I am not the candidate of Black America, although I am Black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement in this country, although I am a woman, and I am equally proud of that. I am a candidate of the people, and my presence before you now symbolizes a new era in U.S. political history. (Chisholm 1972, p. 1)

Chisholm was the first woman and the first Black American to seek the nomination of the Democratic Party for president (Sheeler and Anderson 2013). She was also founder of both the Black Congressional Caucus (1971) (US Office of the Historian n.d.) and the National Women's Political Caucus (2010). Despite her many achievements, she contended with discrimination that was unparalleled in politics at that time, or since (Harris 2012). Of central interest to Remedios and Snyder's (2015) review, as well as to this commentary, lies the question: How did Chisholm perceive, attend, and respond to such discrimination? Speculating about Chisholm's experiences illuminates the need to understand how women of colors' experiences of discrimination may differ from that of other groups.

Some speculated that Chisholm experienced *double jeopardy*—in other words, she was doubly discriminated against based on both her race and gender (Harris 2012). The general argument is as follows: Because White Americans were steeped in an anti-Black mindset at the time, the prospect of a Black candidate, regardless of gender, was preposterous, bordering on offensive. At the same time, the notion that a woman, regardless of her race, could be considered for the Presidency was similarly untenable. Therefore,

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Chisholm's race and gender resulted in compound discrimination where her identities contributed equally to stigmatizing judgments.

Did Chisholm's experiences with discrimination match this *double jeopardy* argument? Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that it did not. Chisholm herself noted that she experienced far more prejudice from *Black male* political contemporaries at the time than any other group, "I had far more discrimination because I am a woman than because I am Black," (Chisholm 1969, p. 1). Black male politicians accused her of usurping the fortunes of Black men by deciding to run for president; many expressed that if a Black person should make a serious run for the presidency, that Black person should be male. Black male politicians were also concerned that raising issues of gender discrimination publically would divide the Black community at a time when racial solidarity was necessary to consolidate political power (Harris 2012). Thus, the experience of prejudice *may not* be evenly partitioned by race and gender because Chisholm perceived prejudice from her racial ingroup (i.e., Black male politicians) as more potent than that from either her gender ingroup (i.e., women) or outgroups (i.e., White men). Accordingly, the source, the reference group, and the context may be important factors demonstrated by Chisholm's experiences—or as psychologists have coined, the *target's perspective* (Swim and Stangor 1998).

Remedios and Snyder's (2015) insightful review posits that women of color may attend and respond to prejudice in ways that differ from the general models developed in social psychology. Specifically, because women of color contend with multiple, intersecting subordinate identities, they may seek different strategies to determine whether they are targets of discrimination and, if so, how to respond to discrimination.

In this commentary, we scaffold Remedios and Snyder's review with concepts that we argue are also crucial to consider when testing the proposition that women of colors' experiences of discrimination differ from that of other groups. First, we argue that societal stereotypes of Black, Hispanic, and Asian American women differ, and the contexts in which these stereotypes arise also differ. Consideration of the particular nature of these stereotypes will be important to advance future research on discrimination against women of color. Next, we consider what role gendered race (the finding that racial groups may be perceived as masculine or feminine; Galinsky et al. 2013) has in models of discrimination. Specifically, we argue that theories of gendered race may illuminate the social contexts in which women of color experience discrimination. Finally, we argue that women of color may experience discrimination by being ignored rather than by being actively targeted. We use theory and data from models of intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008; Mohr et al. 2015) to advance this claim. Important to note, all studies reviewed in this

commentary are conducted with samples of people living in the United States.

### Intersectionality—What is it?

Intersectionality refers to the general notion that social identities "serve as organizing features of social relations, [and] mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another" (Shields 2008, p. 302). A single identity, such as gender, can only be understood in relation to the other categories of identity one holds, such as race, sexual orientation, or social class. In this commentary we focus on the intersection of race and gender subordinate identities with the recognition that intersectionality can take the form of multiple subordinate identity permutations. Intersectionality as a theoretical framework has been traced to Black feminist responses to the limitations of examining gender at the exclusion of other social identities, or of acknowledging multiple social identities but restricting understanding of intersectional individuals' experience to models of accumulating disadvantage (e.g., Crenshaw 1991; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Mullings and Schulz 2006; Nakano Glenn 1999).

Past research on intersectionality has primarily focused on how people perceive those with intersectional identities (Goff et al. 2008; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008; Shields 2008). In contrast, little is known about how people with intersectional identities themselves perceive and respond to discrimination. Early work examining the experience of discrimination from the target's perspective has uncovered evidence of cumulative disadvantage for intersectional individuals. For instance, Black women report that employers expect to pay them less in comparison to Black males and White females (Settles 2006). In addition, Black lesbians who were interviewed about stressors associated with their triple subordinate identity status claim that racism, sexism, and heterosexism are significant sources of stress in their lives (Bowleg et al. 2003). In a study using a stereotype threat paradigm, Gonzales and colleagues (2002) provide support for the notion that the compound effect of stereotypes about Latinos' intelligence *and* stereotypes about women's intelligence lowered Latina females' test performance relative to White males and females and Latino males when both their gender and race identities were simultaneously activated.

Despite these early findings, as a field, we continue to know little about the process by which people with multiple subordinate identities perceive and respond to discrimination. As such, the remainder of this commentary aims to reflect on processes and mechanisms that should be considered when conducting research on women of color and how they perceive and respond to discrimination.

## Black, Latina, and Asian Women: Women of Color's Experiences of Stigma Differ

To assist women of color, we need to delineate their multiple identities, examine how those identities intersect to privilege or lead them to face discrimination, and then design multidimensional programs that would enhance their life situation. (Wing 2000, p. 8)

Remedios and Snyder (2015) advance the intriguing hypothesis that compared to White women, women of color may experience more attributional ambiguity, or difficulty determining whether negative feedback is a result of their behavior or a result of their membership in a stigmatized group (Crocker et al. 1991; Major and Crocker 1993; Major et al. 2002). This is because contending with multiple subordinate identities makes the task of discerning the source of discrimination more challenging. With respect to future research on women of color, it will also be important to consider *how distinct intersectional combinations of race and gender identities differentially influence how ambiguity is experienced and interpreted*. Both a senior Black female manager and a senior Asian female manager may ask herself whether she was asked to pour coffee because of her race and/or gender. But the Black female manager may wonder whether this request is a subtle indication that she is being stereotyped as not feminine enough and if the request was meant as a nudge into a more feminine role, while an Asian American female manager may wonder whether this request indicates that she is being stereotyped as the perfect docile woman to do office housework.

As a downstream consequence of experiencing more attributional ambiguity, Remedios and Snyder (2015) suggest that women of color may experience greater cognitive depletion than White women because disambiguating attributions of discrimination based on multiple subordinate identities may be more effortful than making attributions on a single subordinate identity. We suggest that the degree of cognitive depletion may further be differentiated by the subgroup of woman of color to which the target of study belongs. Because Asian Americans are stereotyped as competent in science (Shih et al. 1999; Steen 1987), an Asian American female engineer who is asked to pour coffee may be quicker to attribute prejudice to sexism than racism. In contrast, Blacks are stereotyped as unintelligent in academic domains including science (Howard and Hammond 1985; Steele 1997; Williams 2014), and therefore a Black female engineer may have more difficulty disambiguating whether the same prejudiced incident was racially or gender motivated. Because cognitive depletion has implications for memory (Schmeichel 2007), performance (Baumeister et al. 1998), and motivation (Muraven and Slessareva 2003), examining how the magnitude of cognitive

depletion differs as a consequence of intersectional attributions of discrimination is a fruitful avenue for future research.

In order to empirically examine how individuals with intersectional identities form attributions of discrimination, we need to understand how stereotypes about each subgroup of women of color shape concerns about discrimination. A recent qualitative study differentiating the concerns and anxieties of women of color in STEM workplaces has begun to shed light on this question (Williams 2014). Black, Hispanic, and Asian American women were interviewed about their identity-based concerns in STEM workplaces. Overall, these women of colors' concerns in the STEM workplace fell into distinct categories, of which we discuss three: 1) perceiving the need to prove their competence above and beyond what was required of their male co-workers; 2) perceiving the need to manage their masculine or feminine attributes so that their gendered behavior was tuned to gender expectations of them; and, 3) contending with expectations of motherhood and stereotypes about working mothers' priorities. Interviews of each subgroup reveal that Black, Hispanic, and Asian American women hold distinctive concerns, presumably as a function of the stereotypes about their specific subgroup (Williams 2014). Black and Hispanic women raised concerns about proving their competence at work, a concern Asian American women did not report. Asian and Hispanic American women reported struggling to downplay their perceived femininity within the workplace, while Black women did not cite this as a challenge. Hispanic and Black women cited expectations by others that they should maintain one's career in addition to also being a mother while Asian American women did not report facing the same expectations. Although Williams (2014) did not explicitly link stereotypes about the racial groups of Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans to the concerns that women of color in STEM reported, societal stereotypes attached to each constituent group appear to govern the workplace concerns each subgroup of women perceived and actively attempted to correct.

Another step towards testing intersectional identities and attributions of discrimination requires exploring other areas in psychology that may illuminate how subgroups of women of color are perceived. For example, Fiske and colleagues' (Fiske et al. 2002, 2007, 2012) model of Stereotype Content may be instructive for considering general process models that inform analyses of subgroups of women of color. Fiske argues that most groups can be categorized along dimensions of warmth (e.g., warm, friendly vs. cold, distant) and competence (e.g., capable, alert vs. dumb, inept) (Eckes 1994; Fiske et al. 2002). Research shows that rather than categorizing all women along the warmth/competence dimensions, people sort subgroups of women very differently (Fiske et al. 2002). For instance, woman can be subtyped as *society ladies*, who are high in warmth and competence, *feminists* and *career women*, who are low in warmth and high in competence, and *welfare*

*queens*, who are low in warmth and competence, to name a few. Research on subgroups of women of color might benefit from utilizing Fiske's Stereotype Content Model to understand which stereotype dimensions Black, Hispanic, Asian American, and White women share and on which dimensions they differ. One advantage of applying the stereotype content model to better conceptualize women of color is that it allows us to integrate the study of unique subgroups within a general model that allows for informed predictions.

Combined, this work from classic social psychology and law suggests that people who have different combinations of race and gender identities may have very different experiences of discrimination and felt stigma even within the same context. As we advance our understanding of intersectionality, it is useful to first focus on and thoroughly understand specific subgroups of women of color rather than creating a generalized model of these groups' experiences.

### Gendered Race Changes Felt Discrimination

Stephan Leshner of the *New York Times* described Chisholm's physical appearance in a masculine way:

Though her quickness and animation leave an impression of bright femininity, she is not beautiful... Her face is bony and angular, her nose flat and wide, her neck and limbs scrawny. Her protruding teeth probably accounts in part for her noticeable lisp (1972, p. 15).

Williams (2014) also found that in her study of women of color in STEM, Hispanic and Asian American women reported feeling that they need to tone down their femininity while at work, while Black women did not report this. When asked about moderating her femininity at work, one Black female respondent in Williams' study said "I've been rewarded and praised for dominance. It's something people admire about me," (Williams 2014, p. 201). These qualitative examples raise questions about how gender and race categories may mutually influence each other, differentially biasing a perceiver's impression of one subgroup of women of color relative to another. Williams (2014) study suggests that Blackness may be perceived as masculine, which could be beneficial to Black women in this male-dominated work environment. However, the link between masculinity and Blackness might have negatively impacted Chisholm's chances as a presidential contender.

The idea that race and gender judgments may influence each other has been explored in the social psychology literature. Rather than behaving as totally separate categories that are not influenced by other visually apparent identities, several studies suggest that different race and gender combinations may bias person perception judgments, such that certain races are *gendered*. That is, categorization of gender can be confounded

by racial stereotypes (Goff et al. 2008; Hall et al. 2015; Johnson et al. 2012). Specifically, people are more likely to make mistakes in categorizing the gender of Black female faces relative to Black male and White male and female faces (Goff et al. 2008) suggesting that masculine associations with the racial category of Black may be biasing participants' perceptions of Black female faces. Johnson et al. (2012) tested the hypothesis that overlap in stereotypes between racial and gender groups may affect the ease and accuracy of categorizing both Black (masculine stereotypes such as angry, athletic, dominant) and Asian (feminine stereotypes such as quiet, submissive, etc.) faces. Participants categorized Black, White, and Asian faces. Again, participants' judgments of Black faces facilitated masculine categorizations (Goff et al. 2008; Johnson et al. 2012) and participants' responses to Asian faces facilitated feminine judgments. Overlapping stereotypical content affected how participants made gender judgments.

Several studies demonstrate how gendered race plays out in real world situations, affecting hiring decisions and evaluations of performance within the workplace. Study participants rated Asian American applicants as more suitable for feminine-typed jobs such as a librarian position and less suitable for masculine-typed jobs, such as security officer (Hall et al. 2015). The effect was the opposite for Black applicants, despite the fact that the Asian American and Black applicants in this study had identical resumes. Thus, the gender of a person's race affected perceived fit in traditionally masculine and feminine jobs. Within a job, gendered race may also affect perceived job performance. When participants evaluated the behavior of female executives towards a lower level employee, White women were perceived more harshly when portrayed as acting in a dominant manner compared to Black women (Livingston et al. 2012).

The concept of gendered race has several implications for how women of color may experience stigma. Gendered race can interact with traditionally male or female situations to create different experiences of discrimination. The above studies suggest that perhaps Black women are allowed more leeway to act in dominant ways in more traditionally male workplaces because their racial identity is intertwined with perceptions of masculinity. Thus, if a Black woman (conceptually masculine) has a negative interaction at work (a masculine setting), it may be easier for her to attribute this negative interaction to her race, rather than her gender, as she may be seen as a good fit in the masculine environment.

Secondly, Remedios and Snyder (2015) suggest that the extent to which women of color have integrated (Black woman as a singular identity) rather than independent (Black and woman as separate) identities may be an important predictor of how stigma is felt by women of color. Someone who has integrated racial and gender identities may interpret discrimination as due to the unique combination of one's identities (rather than from many different separate identities), which may ultimately reduce attributional ambiguity and lead to

feeling less stigmatized. Taking into account theories of gendered race adds an additional component to this hypothesis. If a Black woman for example, has an integrated view of her gender and racial identity, but societally Blackness is viewed as masculine, she is not treated as fully female as a result. She may feel she is not living up to her integrated identity as a Black woman. To her, there is no contradiction between the identities Black and female, but society treats her otherwise. She now runs the risk of perceiving herself as deviant of the category Black women. Integrated identities become significantly more complex when considering gendered race.

### Active Versus Passive Discrimination?

“During editorial meetings in the ‘90s, I noticed that sometimes if I were to say, ‘Let’s do A,’ the room would continue in its discussion. I’d hear that idea of mine coming out of someone else’s mouth. And then the room would hear it, understand it, and get behind it.” Yvette Miley, senior vice president and executive editor of MSNBC, described a barrier she faced early in her career and a phenomenon that is commonly expressed by Black women, according to a recent report on Black women in the workplace (Hewlett and Green 2015, p. 26). In a world where one aptly timed game-changing idea can be the catalyst for promotion, being rendered invisible can severely truncate Black women’s career opportunities. In this final section, we suggest that women of color may contend with a passive form of discrimination, invisibility discrimination (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008), which differs from more active forms of discrimination.

Cultures are partly defined by their social ontologies, the possibilities for personhood that they create and recognize (Hacking 2002). In contemporary United States culture, three of the defining dimensions of personhood are an individual’s race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation: any person is supposed to have some kind of racial/ethnic identity, some kind of gender identity, and some kind of sexual orientation identity, with a limited set of culturally recognized options for each of these identity dimensions. These dimensions of personhood are theoretically independent of one another, such that a person’s ethnic or gender identity does not determine that person’s sexual orientation and vice versa. For example, knowing a person’s race and/or gender should not give us any insight into what their sexual orientation might be. In practice, however, people do not treat these dimensions as though they are orthogonal. Rather, for each of these identities, certain subcategories of identity groups receive privileged cultural recognition when it comes to defining the standard representation of that identity. For example, if a group is looking for someone to represent women’s issues, this group will most likely choose a straight White woman, as she is the most *typical* woman. This privileged *default* role of certain

subgroups in defining identity norms renders relatively invisible other subgroups who technically share that identity. We define intersectional exclusion as the privileging of some people’s experience over others when it comes to defining these identity groups. In the above example, selecting a straight White woman to be the face of women’s issues thus renders women of color, as well as non-heterosexual women, invisible in this group, even though they too are women.

The process of exclusion is not random, but rather is shaped by various ideologies, both explicit and implicit. Androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterocentrism are three such prevalent cultural ideologies that function to ontologically exclude certain individuals from fully recognized personhood (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008). Androcentrism (Bem 1993) defines the standard person as male (thereby excluding women from fully recognized personhood). Ethnocentrism (Bonilla-Silva 2000; Devos and Banaji 2005) defines the standard person as White (thereby excluding racial and ethnic minorities from fully recognized personhood). Finally, heterocentrism (Hegarty et al. 2004) defines the standard person as heterosexual (thereby excluding gay and lesbian individuals from fully recognized personhood). Sometimes these exclusionary definitions of personhood are explicit; Black slaves, for example, were intentionally defined as White men’s property in the antebellum United States, thus excluding them from legal personhood (Scott v. Sanford 1856). However, exclusionary definitions of personhood can also be more implicit, as when workplace policies that are allegedly designed to fit all workers actually match the experiences of White men much better than they match those of White women or people of color (Bem 1993).

Our research investigates how the intersecting influences of ideologies such as androcentrism, heterocentrism, and ethnocentrism can cause individuals with certain configurations of identities to be particularly vulnerable to experiencing exclusion, a phenomenon we call *intersectional invisibility*. A person with intersectional identities is defined as any person who is ontologically excluded across at least two of his or her identity groups. For example, the intersectional invisibility model predicts that Black women will be vulnerable to being perceived as both atypical women and atypical Black people due to ethnocentric definitions of femininity (i.e., that the *typical* woman is White) and androcentric definitions of Black identity (i.e., that the *typical* Black person is male; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008). It is this invisibility, derived from the perceived ethnocentric atypicality of being a non-White woman that Sojourner Truth appears to have been protesting when she defiantly asked, “Ain’t I a woman?” (Truth 1851, p.1).

Our theory of intersectional invisibility extends to people with more than two subordinate identities. Black lesbians, for example, experience not just these ethnocentric definitions of femininity but also androcentric definitions of Black identity

and androcentric definitions of gay identity. Because she is not included in the *default* of *any* group, she thus finds herself excluded from fully recognized personhood within *all three groups*: the Black community, the gay community, and the feminist community. These experiences of exclusion may be psychologically painful as Rich (1986) writes, “When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you... there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing” (p. 199).

If Black women are truly rendered invisible because of their perceived violation of andro- and ethnocentric definitions of Black and female identity respectively, we would expect these intersectional members to be absent in the representations of each identity group. We decided to test this hypothesis by looking at common depictions of race and gender identity: magazine covers (Mohr et al. 2015). Specifically, we examined photographic depictions of women and ethnic minorities on Time magazine covers over a span of 85 years to study the hypothesized intersectional invisibility faced by Black women due to the combined effects of ethnocentric definitions of femininity and androcentric definitions of Black identity. Our theory predicted that, due to ethnocentric definitions of femininity, women portrayed on magazine covers would be disproportionately White. Indeed, we found that the represented proportion of White to Black women exceeded the actual proportion of White to Black women reported in the U.S. Census. Similarly, we found that Black men were over-represented compared to Black women. This is consistent with our hypothesis that androcentric definitions of race would lead to underrepresentation of Black females among representations of Blacks. In popular representations of both women and Blacks, we found that intersectional individuals were less likely to be represented than their non-intersectional counterparts. In a lab setting, Sesko and Biernat (2010) tested the idea that Black women would be rendered invisible relative to more prototypical group members who were not qualified by ethnocentric definitions of femininity and androcentric definitions of race. In support of this idea, participants remembered fewer photos of and statements by Black women compared to photos and statements by Black men and White men and women.

These studies highlight an issue beyond conscious, explicit discrimination. Clearly, magazine editors did not purposely keep intersectional individuals off of the covers. Rather, these results suggest that the very way we process information leads us to focus on the prototypical at the cost of the intersectional, on both an individual and an institutional level. Additionally, intersectional invisibility discrimination adds to Remedios and Snyder’s (2015) insights on perceived stigma. In addition to perceiving racial, gender, and intersectional discrimination, perhaps women of color also experience this more passive form of discrimination. Women of color may feel stigmatized when they are looked over in favor of more prototypical group

members. Research has not yet determined if and how perceptions of invisibility discrimination differ from the more traditional forms of active discrimination.

### Concluding Remarks

Intersectionality and the experiences of women of color is no longer a fringe topic in psychology or an academic exercise left to researchers in Ivory towers. Intersectionality frameworks have important theoretical and practical implications. With respect to theory, understanding how women of color interpret and react to prejudice advances basic theories of stigma, discrimination, and intergroup relations that have been the foundational blocks of social psychology (Allport 1979; Swim and Stangor 1998). The next generation of intergroup relations work seeks to understand the neural, hormonal and epigenetic correlates of stigma and discrimination (Derks et al. 2008; Forbes et al. 2008). Our conclusions, combined with Remedios and Snyder (2015), illuminate the attentional and affective responses women of color may face when contending with stigma. These ideas can help us understand how identity and context modulate experiences of discrimination. Such insights have much potential for being integrated with neurobiological research on stigma.

Many corporations, federal agencies, and institutions of higher education prioritize and create initiatives around the idea that woman of color may face barriers that differ from their racial minority male and White female counterparts. For instance, Hewlett and Green’s most recent report, *Black Women Ready to Lead* (2015), revealed an intriguing finding: Black women on track for leadership positions are more likely than their White female peers to aspire to be leaders. However, relative to White women, Black women’s advancement opportunities remain constrained (Hewlett and Green 2015; Purdie-Vaughns, 2015). Although Hewlett and Green’s (2015) report does not explicitly use the term intersectionality, the report’s main points support ideas of intersectional invisibility. Specifically, most leaders that identify as women of color feel misunderstood and invisible. As institutions continue to aspire to maximize the value of *all* of their employees (regardless of their group identity), research on intersectionality is increasingly important. The future of intersectionality and work on the experiences of women of color is full of promise and potential for psychologists and practitioners alike.

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