"*I have to scream and yell*": A Black man's, a Black woman's and a White man's reflections on gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions in a workplace

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Abstract

Sustainability is essentially the pursuit of intra- and intergenerational justice. Following from this, we contend that any form of discrimination in any context, including those arising out of gender, race, and the intersection between them, constitutes a sustainability problem. Here, we relate a journey of 'discovery' and/or 'confirmation' which we undertook based on the daily lived experiences of gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions[1] of Black women working in the telecoms sector in South Africa. Our act of telling this story in the space of appearance opened up by this special issue is an inherently political act, making this article an example of Freirean conscientisation. Our hope is that we contribute towards rendering the forms of aggression related to us slightly more visible to anyone who reads this article, on the assumption that visible oppression is less easy to stomach.

1. Introduction

We did not begin this study knowing that we would 'discover' and/or 'confirm' what we did. Does anybody ever really? Actually, if we knew what we were about to 'discover', would it even be a 'discovery' at all? But perhaps we are jumping ahead of ourselves with all this talk about 'discovery' and 'confirmation'. Perhaps we should first establish who we are? All of us were, after all, born in Africa. And we all live in Africa. And in the corner of Africa where we live, when a person stands up to 'speak' in public, it is convention that they tell you who they are and 'where' they come from. This helps those listening

1 We use the convention of putting the 'micro' in 'micro'-aggression in inverted commas to emphasise the irony embedded in this idea. There is really nothing small about these persistent aggressions.

to 'place' the speaker, and perhaps even to ground inevitable assumptions about them on a firmer foundation than just the way they look.

So, sticking with the conventions of our home, there were three of us who embarked on this journey of 'discovery' and/or 'confirmation'. We were brought together around a dissertation-based master's research project. The first of us, KM, was 'The Student'. Because it is important to the story we are telling, KM identifies as a Black man. At the time of this study, he worked in the telecoms industry for a major cellular telephone company in South Africa. He first registered for his Master of Commerce in Business Management degree in January 2022, and he completed the qualification in early 2024 (Mhlakaza, 2024). The second of us, NN, was 'The Supervisor'. Again, because it is important to the story we are telling, NN identifies as a Black woman. She is a sociologist by training, and at the time this study was undertaken, she was a lecturer working to establish an academic career. KM was her first post-graduate student. The third of us, NE, was 'The Co-Supervisor'. He identifies as a White man. Although by training an ecologist, his research interests now lie broadly in the field of business ethics, which he generally approaches from something of a Marxist or neo-Marxist critical perspective. At the time of this study, he was a professor and was invited to participate because he had done this supervision thing many times before.

In KM's first tentative approach to NN and NE as prospective supervisors, he outlined what he wanted to study. He had noticed that in the company he worked for, and in the industry in which he worked generally, Black women seemed to be underrepresented and voiceless. This was especially in technical divisions and in management and leadership positions. Armed with this observation, as he put it in his original concept note:

> I want to explore this topic [the underrepresentation of Black women in the telecoms sector] to raise awareness of this matter and hopefully help pave a way for future women professionals to be interested in the sector. [KM]

The slightly naive optimism of grand praxis, which so often finds expression in master's level draft proposals, was quite strongly evident here, and again in the following, where KM reflected on what he viewed as the likely importance of the study:

> The importance of the study is to ensure that the future young Black women can enter the STEM2 sector in South Africa and become leaders without being discouraged by challenges faced by Black women leaders, and as such ensuring that a way is paved for these Black women to be top leaders in the future. [KM]

As supervisors, NN and NE were of course somewhat more 'realistic' (some might even say jaded) and moved to manage expectations a little. As NE put it in feedback:

> I think that you need to be a little more realistic in terms of your expectations of what your study will yield. Realistically, it is highly unlikely that it will 'ensure' anything because in all honesty, very few people will read a master's dissertation. Instead, you might say that: 'Any insights into the challenges experienced by women of colour

2 Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

> in the STEM sector can potentially assist us in …' This is much more modest in its expectation. [NE]

NN and NE were also concerned initially about a certain measure of paternalism embedded in KM's early articulations of his objectives. NN put it like this in feedback on one of his draft proposals:

> In terms of your framing of the benefits of your study, there are still traces of a hero complex – as though you are going to rescue Black women from their plight of oppression and discrimination – which must be removed. If this gets through to the wrong examiner, you are not going to pass because this will irritate them immensely. [NN]

NE was arguably even more concerned. Ever since reading Freire's discussion of "false generosity" (Freire, 1996:26), NE has been (and continues to be) plagued by the difficulties inherent in "speaking for others" (Alcoff, 1991:5) given his almost universal oppressor identity. As such, not only was he concerned about the "hero complex" which NN alluded to, but on a more fundamental level, he was concerned about the appropriateness of a man undertaking this study full stop, not to mention a White man co-supervising it. At one point, he wrote:

> In places you seem to suggest that you are going to solve Black women's problems for them. This is likely to get you into serious trouble with any examiner who comes from a feminist background. I tried to illustrate the problem with this in my detailed comments by using an example from outside the gender domain – by making reference to Biko and his disdain for white liberals who moved to 'own' the liberation of Black people. This kind of 'oppressor saviour' is never appreciated in my experience. I think that this was why I was originally worried about a male tackling this particular study back when we were first discussing it. [NE]

Eventually, after much grappling with these issues, KM settled on the following questions that would guide his study:

1. How do intersectional factors of gender and race influence the experiences and career trajectories of Black Women in leadership positions within the telecoms sector in South Africa?
2. What specific challenges have Black Women faced in their efforts to attain leadership positions in the telecoms sector in South Africa?
3. What ongoing challenges do Black Women encounter even after achieving leadership positions in the telecoms sector in South Africa?
4. How do gender and racial identities intersect to shape the professional experiences and career progression of women in leadership roles within the telecoms sector in South Africa?

At the time, we were all comfortable that these were appropriately humble, premised on listening rather than saving, and open to the possibility of authentic discovery in the particular context within which KM had elected to conduct his study.

However, what we present in this article is not the findings from KM's study. It is a story of conscientisation in the true Freirean sense. Freire (1996:17) defined *conscientização* as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality". There are two elements to this: consciousness of contradiction, and action. The story that we tell here is a very specific journey of 'discovery' and/or 'confirmation' of contradiction and oppression that emerged after KM had completed his data gathering and analysis. This was the consciousness element of conscientisation. In undertaking the inherently political act of telling our story in the space of appearance (Arendt, 1998) opened up in this special issue, we add action to the mix.

The story unfolds as follows. First, we present a basic description of the methods used in KM's original data gathering and analysis. We then describe the 'discovery' and/or 'confirmation' of the contradiction that seeded this story, the original moment of consciousness. Following this, we elaborate on the contradiction to tease out the nuances and, ultimately, present something of a conceptualisation. Finally, we adopt a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 1996) and go to the literature to situate our story in a broader realm. Then we conclude.

2. The original study methods

Having established the very open guiding questions and having secured all the necessary approvals from research committees and research ethics committees, KM embarked on the empirical part of the study. He conducted a series of seven conversations with a sample of Black women in leadership positions in the company in which he worked (Table 1). Because all the participants were from a single company, i.e. a "bounded system" (Creswell, 2013:97), it might be technically appropriate to label this study a 'case study'. Complex jargon is often used to describe the processes used to assemble a sample and, in this way, lend an air of mystic authority to them. But in this case, it was really not that complicated. KM had conversations with Black women in leadership positions whom he knew. From there, participants he had interviewed put him in touch with other potential participants in their networks.

Table 1: Participant information

Number	Job title	Division	Age	Duration in position	Academic background	Interview length
P1	Executive Head of Division (EHOD)	Network Operations*	43	21 months	• B Eng or equivalent • MBA	50 mins
P2	EHOD	Transmission	34	9 months	• B Eng or equivalent • MBA	60 mins
P3	Managing Executive (ME)	Network Operations	44	3 years	• B Eng or equivalent • MA ICT • MBA	67 mins

Number	Job title	Division	Age	Duration in position	Academic background	Interview length
P4	EHOD	Network Project Management	41	20 months	• B Eng or equivalent • Postgraduate Degree – Management	59 mins
P5	EHOD	Network Operations*	39	3 months	• B Eng or equivalent • Master of Business Leadership	61 mins
P6	EHOD	Network Operations*	40	4 months	• B Eng or equivalent • M Eng • MSc • MBA	62 mins
P7	EHOD	Network Optimisation	39	5 months	• B Eng or equivalent • MBA	62 mins
* Participants P1, P5, and P6 are all EHODs in the Network Operations division, but work in different regions.						

In terms of analyses, KM initially conducted them independently. He started his analyses during the interview process by noting preliminary 'thoughts' that struck him during each interview in a reflexive learning journal. He used these a) to adjust subsequent interview questions; b) to determine when he seemed to be nearing saturation; and c) as an input into his formal thematic analysis. Once he had completed the seven interviews and transcribed them, he then conducted a formal thematic analysis following the approach suggested by Nowell et al. (2017). This proceeded from the generation of initial particular codes, through an iterative process of aggregation and abstraction, to a set of themes. In August 2023, KM presented these together with supporting transcript excerpts to NN and NE so that a supervisor review process could get underway.

3. Contradiction

What would usually follow at this point in an article is a presentation of the full findings from KM's thematic analysis, sketching the rich landscape of 'challenges' that the participants in this study reported experiencing and the strategies they used to overcome them. However, as we have already noted, that is not the article that we have set out to write. This is a story of conscientisation that began to emerge during the course of the supervisor review process. Initially, this process proceeded fairly 'normally' for a master's dissertation through a series of iterations until October 2023. It was towards the end of October that the following pair of apparently contradictory excerpts from the interview with P6 intruded the consciousness of NE:

> I have to scream and yell, and I see a lot of unfortunately, Black female leaders adopt that persona because there's also a culture that supports that. There's a culture that celebrates that, there's a culture that says if you come across as that, then actually you belong. Unfortunately, I don't necessarily subscribe to that of which it has its disadvantages. Because people are so accustomed to that, when you do not show up like that, they undermine you. And they undermine your authority in that position and

> question. And they respond very quickly when you adopt that personality, which is very wrong for me. [P6]
>
> Unfortunately, when you as a Black female are firm and you are assertive, you get given a label. And that label is 'one of those'. It has come down from year to year. It's a label. Whether you fit it or not. But the minute you are not saying what the majority of your male counterparts are in agreement with, or, if it doesn't fit the way that it's supposed to … if you're not smiling and stroking the egos, then you are like … you are very angry; That one likes to shout. That one has issues. [P6]

Part of the reason why this contradiction intruded into NE's consciousness so forcefully was the fact that he had, for some time, been witnessing similar patterns of contradiction unfolding in a separate context, a university governance structure on which he was serving at the time. In an email to NN, he wrote:

> I am fascinated by the Catch 22 situation that can be drawn out [of KM's findings] where Black Women in leadership have to be extra assertive to overcome the stereotypes and discrimination, but that this assertiveness can backfire, resulting in these Black Women being accused of being tyrants. I have seen this happening elsewhere! [NE to NN, 26 October 2023]

He also mentioned this epiphany to a friend who laughed kindly at his ignorance and suggested that he read up on the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype. Which he did very quickly and therefore superficially. To be precise, he read the reflection of Motro et al. (2022) on the effects of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype on Black women in corporate leadership, which seemed particularly relevant to this study. The next morning, he again wrote to NN:

> On [KM's] Masters, I did some scratching around regarding the bit of his data that really struck me and stumbled onto the 'Angry Black Woman' stereotype/phenomenon in the literature. We might want to point him in the direction of that when he looks at his interpretation. It seems to me to be a very interesting literature… [NE to NN, 27 October 2023]

Not surprisingly, NN was not nearly as surprised by this 'discovery' as NE. To her, the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype was just another part of her daily lived experience as a Black woman. She responded:

> The stereotype around the Angry Black Woman makes an interesting read, which one experiences and gets to see every day. [NN to NE, 30 October 2023]

From NN's response and the literature that NE had superficially dipped into and shared, it was already quite clear that the contradiction inherent in the two excerpts that had triggered NE was not a new discovery for humankind! On the contrary, it seemed that KM's findings represented just another space in which the phenomenon of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype might manifest, and a personal 'discovery' of this phenomenon for NE and KM, and a 'confirmation' of it for NN. Nonetheless, we all agreed that it did warrant a focused return to KM's transcripts.

3.1 "I have to scream and yell"

We began a focused analytic process of 'pulling at this string' of anger in KM's transcripts. KM and NE, in particular, were initially very surprised that we found reasonably compelling evidence from all seven interviews, indicating that the phenomenon of having to "scream and yell" seemed to be universally at play among KM's sample. NN, of course, was somewhat less surprised. P1 stated that:

> The screaming and the tough talk, as much as it's needed in certain situations, but it's not that effective. Honestly, that's why I have to learn the hard way as well that I need to reduce it because it means I'm treating people as children. [P1]

As in the pair of excerpts from P6, the Catch-22 inherent in being 'angry' is apparent here, too. The "screaming" is "needed" but not "effective". P2 euphemistically referred to her giving expression to the contextually imposed need to be angry as having to "push harder" in the presence of "whiteness" (Green et al., 2007):

> But I did find that I had to push harder to be heard and understood when I was leading the team of White people, right? [P2]

P4 reflected the need to not be "soft" and a certain degree of personal dissonance that this has created:

> Sometimes if you become too soft they will like ohh OK, this one you know. So, you need to have that balance. I'm completely opposite of myself five years ago, completely OK. One of the team members said something in the last two months. He said: 'I'm a friend'. This is a Specialist, by the way. He says; '[P4] can be a friend. Actually [P4] is my friend, but I know … she's a friend that can fire you.' I acted as if I did not hear what he said. [P4]

The inference that the participant could swing from being a friend into a rage, which could result in people (friends) being fired, creates an impression of extreme mood swings and a degree of perceived unreasonableness.

P5 made perhaps the most ambiguous references to being angry out of the sample, references which might not have been picked up had we not specifically looked for them. There were two instances where she referred to women needing to "act like men" and doing so:

> What also I've realized is, the lack of appreciation of the characteristics of a female that tends to be missed, especially for a female that's not trying to act like a man. [P5]

> Because of this industry being the way it has been, I have seen how some women, when they become people's managers, they try to act like a man in a way. [P5]

These references were not explicitly relating her intersectional experience as a Black woman but rather emphasised her being a woman, although the question posed specifically asked about her experiences as a Black woman. Finally, P7 also spoke about

'angry' workplace stereotypes associated with Black women managers, which she was not naturally comfortable with:

> There is always this perception of a Black female manager who's now emotional and dramatic and always shouting at the team. And you know, 'There's certain times when you can't speak to them' [Black female managers]. [P7]

However, she also described how, over time, she had found her voice to confront male colleagues, in particular when inappropriate things were being said, even at the risk of being labelled as "emotional and dramatic" and causing "issues":

> And there's also that element of, I don't want to be now this drama queen and cause issues. So, you tend to just sweep under the rug. Where Umm later, I did, as I grew in my career and my confidence I was able to say, you know what, guys? That's not actually something you should be saying in the workplace, you know? [P7]

In summary, *all* of the participants made reference in their interviews to either being labelled as "Angry Black Women" or seeing people bearing the label of "Angry Black Women" in their work experiences. Several referred to the contextually imposed need for expressing anger either because a) it was expected in the workplace [P6], b) it was necessary to assert authority in the workplace [P1, P6], or c) it was provoked in the workplace [P7]. Several participants [P1, P4, and P6] reflected on feelings of personal unease (dissonance) that bowing to this necessity precipitated. They did not want to be an "Angry Black Woman". Finally, it was apparent that, while it was 'necessary' to "scream and yell", there was a strong sense that these 'necessary' expressions of anger were not particularly effective [P1 and P6] and, more specifically, that colleagues (generally white and/or male) did not appreciate them coming from Black women. Indeed, there was even an undercurrent that a Black woman might expect a hostile backlash arising from these necessary expressions of anger [P6 especially].

3.2 Aggression against Black women

This suggestion of aggressive backlashes against Black women from colleagues led us to the next string that screamed out for us to pull in KM's transcripts: aggression *against* Black women. And we did just that. We did not limit this search to instances of aggression which were described as backlash against the anger that Black women apparently needed to express. This return to KM's data, together with what we had already extracted in support of "*I have to scream and yell*" led us to identify three broad types of aggression against Black women: a) outright disrespect, b) sabotage, and c) blaming the victim.

In terms of outright disrespect, several of the participants reported being treated with disrespect. For example, P4 noted that:

> … the engineering sector has always been white dominated. White dominated, male dominated so it was a taboo thing for a female, especially Black female, you know to be seen as a leader, … So there's still a lot of sexism. There's still a lot of mistreatment.

> There's still a lot of *disrespect*, Uhm for Black females within the leadership roles. [P4] [emphasis added]

The most overtly offensive example of the type of disrespect that might be dished out to Black women managers was described by P2:

> And then you find the people who resist and I'm finding that the resistance is coming more from the people who've been in the business longer … and maybe you were not their choice of appointment … or who are these Black people [they ask], you know. I've had someone even say that 'They're planting all these "black girls" in these executive positions like crazy'. Yeah, it was like, uh, he said that to my face! And said: 'All of you are popping up everywhere.' [P2]

While, for the most part, the aggressions described by participants were more 'subtle', the sort of aggressions that one could easily imagine being swept under the rug, this particular one was, at least in our minds, different. Certainly, KM and NE instinctively struggled to see how anyone might mount a defence of such behaviour if the victim were to complain formally. That being said, NN reminded us that this sort of aggression happens daily and the worst that an aggressor can usually expect in the way of response is a polite reminder that this is inappropriate.

P4 related a similar sort of aggression arising out of affirmative action policies and the consequence of this:

> Because you know our company is pushing for female representation, they've got a target that they need to meet. People are of the perception that you are purely appointed … just from that statistics point of view and that you've got nothing else to offer than just being a Black female in a position. And therefore, people still want to make decisions for you, and they want to treat you like a puppet. [P4]

P2 described an aggression something akin to Ellison's "*Invisible* [wo]*man*" (Ellison, 2014):

> The older men … They first want to know who you are before you can have a conversation with them, and I'm like, look, I'm not going to keep explaining to you that I have been an EHOD for months and you are still not aware that I'm here. [P2]

While clearly an act of aggression, this aggression of not seeing people across gender and especially race lines can almost always be dismissed in an aggressor-dominated world with an "Oh, I just didn't see you. You have changed your hair?"

By far the most common form of disrespect that we unearthed was an aggression that we labelled 'skipping'. Here, participants described how colleagues (generally white and/or male) would simply circumvent them in the run of business. P1 reported how this took place from below, with people reporting to her directly accessing people whom she reported to:

> Your leader is white. So you find that now it's like, [someone white] reports to you. However, it's a mini kind of dotted line still for them to your leader because you know during lunch they walk together, they smoke together … When I was a manager, already

> I encountered that, whites, kind of, you know, feeling that because our executive is white, they feel privileged to have access to the top guy, you know. So obviously you'll hear them knowing more or they're busy working on certain things that you don't know of that they got from the top. [P3]

P1 reported how skipping took place from above, with managers directly accessing people reporting to her:

> So as a manager you will be like oh, it's done by the, you know, the staff. Then they [your managers] won't call you anymore for anything. They will call your team members. … You are a leader, but you are now in a competition with your staff at the bottom, just because they are white. [P1]

Other participants reported skipping more generally as emerging out of the "boys club". As P4 put it:

> There's this notion of a boys club right, and you still find that a lot within our environment and the boys club would be based on, you know, certain males you know, there's after hour meetings, there's side discussions and you as a woman are excluded.

Or as P5 put it:

> Sometimes where you find that there are 'boys clubs'. It's an industry that has been male dominated. You have a group, you know, guys that are friends or acquaintances that they meet outside even of the workplace where they go for drinks and what have you. And sometimes you know, roles that become available, are even discussed then so you can imagine if you're not part of the circle, that could potentially be a disadvantage, right? [P5]

Of course, one can just imagine the 'perfectly reasonable' and often incriminating (of the victim) explanations that would be advanced for skipping if the Black woman who was skipped raised it as an issue:

> From below: 'Oh, we couldn't get hold of you, and we needed a decision urgently.'
>
> From above: 'Oh, we couldn't get hold of you, and we needed information about your unit urgently.'
>
> From the boy's club: 'Oh, don't be silly. There's no boys club. Graham and I have been friends since university. Aren't you friends with Thandi? Does this mean there is a girls club?'

The second type of aggression that we identified was sabotage. Now, it is quite clear that there is a fine line between skipping, which we identified as a form of outright disrespect, and sabotage. Or at least it is clear that skipping might offer a mechanism through which sabotage could be executed. Nonetheless, several participants made specific references to sabotage and synonyms. For example, P4 noted that:

> In our environment there is this habit of people holding back information … you know, yeah so more like a *sabotage* type of strategy. We want to see her fail, let's see where she ends. [P4] [emphasis added]

"Backstabbing" was introduced as a synonym:

> They've never been led by a Black female, and so there was a lot of tension. And there was a lot of backstabbing, to be quite honest. [P4]

P1 added further nuance to the character of this aggression:

> Initially when I started, resistance … the support was just not there in the beginning … It's really *passive aggressive*. They will not do it directly that you will see it that it's happening. But you will see on the performance, but not to the extreme, that it will impact their performance, but your performance. I don't know if you understand what I'm trying to say. It's a bit of some *sabotage* that happens. But that you can't really directly link it to an individual … you *can't really pinpoint it nicely*. There's that *undertone* thing that is there. Yeah, you know… [P1] [emphasis added]

So, while some (in our case, KM and NE) might intuitively imagine that acts of "sabotage" and "backstabbing" would fall into an easily prosecuted category of aggression, P1 debunked this intuition. She described the subtle, "passive aggressive" character of this "sabotage" as difficult to "pinpoint".

The third and final type of aggression that we identified was blaming the victim. While the first two types do not necessarily link to the apparently necessary anger that Black women managers are required to express, in the case of this aggression, the intimate interaction is obvious. To be precise, it is obvious because it really requires no new excerpts beyond the ones already presented under "I have to scream and yell" to illustrate it. In many of those excerpts, it was clear that, in spite of the fact that it is systemically 'necessary' for Black women to "scream and yell", colleagues (generally white and/or male) seemed very quick to attribute the origin of the anger to the individual Black woman and not to systemic drivers. The default 'common sense' among colleagues seemed to have been that it was the Black woman who "has issues" [P6] or is "emotional" [P4, P7] or is a "drama queen" [P7] or "likes to shout" [P6]. But for completeness' sake, we do offer the following new excerpt from P4 for emphasis:

> As a Black Woman, you know, when you try to push back, you know, try to be assertive, you are seen as being *emotional*. Umm, so you are expected to, you know, take things in, not challenging the status quo, not challenging decisions that are being taken. And when you do, then yeah, the whole *emotional pettiness* that Black Women are associated with always comes up. [P4] [emphasis added]

This, then, was the aggression of blaming the victim, effectively an activation of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype.

4. Conceptualisation

The apparent intimate interaction between the necessary expression of anger by Black women and the reactionary aggression against them from the system[3] then prompted us to think a little more systematically about interactions. This took us to the whiteboard, where we started to draw blocks and arrows and eventually settled on something of a conceptualisation (Figure 1). It was in this process that NE's background in natural sciences yielded a somewhat unexpected explanatory dividend in the form of positive feedback loops (for example, see Meadows et al., 1972). These are used to describe situations where one phenomenon positively provokes another, which in turn positively provokes the former, leading to inevitable escalations of both phenomena. Because of these escalations, positive feedback loops are known for their destructive consequences in systems. Hence, they are sometimes called vicious loops (Meadows et al., 1972). We were able to identify four such positive feedback loops suggested either directly or with a little bit of imagination, labelled 1, 1a, 2, and 2a in Figure 1.

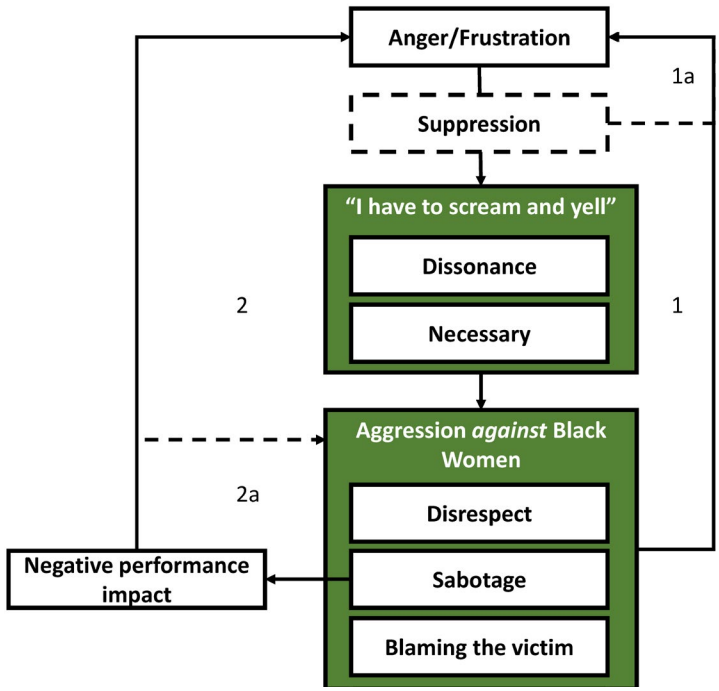

Figure 1: Conceptual model of four positive feedback loops between systemic aggression and anger experienced by and expressed by Black women in the workplace.

The first positive feedback loop (labelled 1 in Figure 1) is really the most obvious, and the one that triggered this entire exploration when NE suggested the existence of a Catch-22 situation. Here, the system requires that Black women "scream and yell". But the system does not like it and certainly does not recognise its own role in necessitating

3 We use the word 'system' here to highlight the apparent systemic character of this. However, our decision has the consequence of obscuring the fact that what we are actually talking about is colleagues (generally white and/or male). Perhaps this is a narrative trick to soothe the consciences of two of the authors of this paper?

such expressions of anger. It therefore reacts to necessary expressions of anger from Black women with disrespect, sabotage, and the blaming of Black women. These systemic aggressions inevitably provoke the experience of anger in the Black women victims. Short of superhuman self-discipline, it is inevitable that this anger experienced by Black women will eventually be expressed in some form or another within the system. And so, the loop will continue and is highly likely to escalate – aggression, anger, aggression, anger, ...

The second positive feedback loop is really a subloop of loop 1. Hence, we labelled it 1a in Figure 1. There is some evidence in our excerpts of efforts on the part of participants to suppress the anger that they feel in response to the systemic aggressions against them. Generally speaking, their aim in taking on this 'work' of suppression is presumably to regulate the positive feedback loop and mitigate against destructive escalation, perhaps to protect Black women who follow. As P6 put it:

> OK, so now over and above what you are doing, you are also trying to ensure that you are not the one that actually proves the stereotype that is there that will close doors for the next set of Black females that are behind you. [P6]

We speculated[4] about the likely stress that such suppression of emotions might cause for Black women managers, and a sense of rising anger and frustration that it might likely lead to. We considered the likelihood that, should this suppressive filter 'fail', as it inevitably must, the expression of anger that would follow might *appear* to be out of proportion with whatever specific incident triggered the 'failure' – a last straw sort of effect. This would, of course, feed back directly into loop 1 and serve as 'wonderful' ammunition to label the victim as having "issues", as being "emotional", as being unreasonable or irrational. In short, as being an "Angry Black Woman".

The third loop (loop 2 in Figure 1) is in many ways similar to loop 1, except that in this loop, the aggression arising from the system in the form of sabotage specifically leads to negative impacts on the performance of the Black women who are its targets. Anyone who is 'normally' competitive, ambitious, or committed to the delivery of whatever they do will certainly resent such constraints on their performance. As such, they will experience anger and frustration. It is inevitable. This experience of anger is likely to follow the same pathway as loop 1: through a suppressive filter and into expressions of anger and from there to further aggressive backlash, including acts of sabotage.

Finally, in terms of loop 2a, this is really an instance of us adding two and two and coming to six, rather than something that was explicitly described in the interviews. But it stands to reason that decreased performance by Black women managers as a result of sabotage will inevitably be met with aggression from the system, which already sees their appointments as a token, especially in the forms of disrespect and blaming. This will then feed into the major feedback loop 1.

4 At least KM and NE did. For NN, this was less speculative due to her first-hand experiences.

Will these loops ever end? We think that this is perhaps best answered with a final excerpt:

> If I can put it that way, yeah. So there is a difference, and I think it's just also historical because if you look at the history of South Africa, umm Black females were the lowest on hierarchy of anything: Pay. Uh, opportunity, you name it, right? So it's those legacy things … and again back to the mindset that I was talking about and the perceptions that people have. That you, might not, you're not gonna change necessarily a person who's got 32 teeth in their mouth. Like they're all grown. They've developed habits and all of that, you know. [P5]

In short, while the system has "32 teeth in [its] mouth", it seems unlikely.

5. But what does the literature say?

This was the pattern that emerged in our consciousness (that we 'discovered' or had 'confirmed' for us), largely inductively from our re-analysis of KM's data. As already noted, the only real engagement with the literature undertaken up to this point was a reading of Motro et al.'s (2022) paper. But this is academia, and our story would be naked without a half-proper effort on our part to relate our newfound consciousness to what has already been written. So, we ventured a little more earnestly into the literatures on the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype (Ahmed, 2009; Corbin et al., 2018; Doharty, 2019; Fears & Combs, 2013; Jones & Norwood, 2017; Motro et al., 2022; Williams, 2001) and gendered racial aggression (Lewis & Neville, 2015; Lewis et al., 2016; Miller, 2020).

It is perhaps appropriate to start with Motro et al. (2022) since this was the one paper which we had engaged with before the re-analysis of KM's data, which led to our conceptualisation in Figure 1. Their main emphasis was on the activation of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype (by locating the origin of any anger expressed by Black women as internal to the Black woman) and the impact of such activations on the performance evaluations of Black women in the workplace. To investigate these two issues, they conducted two formal experimental studies which demonstrated statistically a) the activation of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype and b) the negative impact of this activation on performance evaluations of Black women. Not surprisingly, given that we had read Motro et al. (2022) before we started our analysis, we too noted the system's tendency to locate the origin of anger expressed by Black women as internal to the Black woman. Jones and Norwood (2017) confirmed this pattern in their study, which is anchored in an autoethnographic reflection on more everyday encounters with the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype. They referred to it as the "phenomenon of displaced blame" (Jones & Norwood, 2017:2021). This was the blaming the victim form of aggression against Black women that we identified.

Lewis and Neville (2015) and Lewis et al. (2016) focused on systematically examining gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions against Black women specifically – "subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender" (Lewis et al., 2016:758). Their work led them to

develop a taxonomy comprising three main categories of aggressions that they claimed are likely to be experienced by Black women: a) "projected stereotypes"; b) "silenced and marginalized"; and c) "style and beauty assumptions". In terms of projected stereotypes, in Lewis and Neville (2015), they suggested three common types of stereotypes, namely the "Angry Black Woman", the "Strong Black Woman", and the "Jezebel" (the characterisation of Black women as seductive and sexually wanton).

In Lewis et al. (2016), they dropped the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype. Of course, our entire story in this article started with NE being kindly guided to the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype as a potential explanation for some of the patterns that emerged during the supervisor review of KM's draft analysis. As such, this was *the* central feature of our 'findings'. In terms of the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype, it rather liberally simplifying matters. In many ways the "Strong Black Woman" sits, or rather is expected to sit, in the "Suppression" box in our model where she is expected to take the aggressions thrown at her and bear them stoically (see Corbin et al., 2018). But more on this a little later. We did not find very much evidence for the "Jezebel" stereotype. One of the participants did relate a situation where she had planned to get a lift to an out-of-town conference with a male colleague, but that at the last minute the colleague had cancelled because his wife was not happy with the arrangement. But this was not attributed to her intersectional identity as a Black woman but seemed to be a pure gender issue.

In terms of Lewis and Neville's (2015) and Lewis et al.'s (2016) second category of gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions, their "silenced and marginalized" category, they again identified two sub-categories: a) Black women's struggle for respect and b) their sense of being invisible. Both of these were plainly evident in our results, although we lumped them into a category which we labelled 'disrespect'. What we didn't find in KM's data was any sort of reference to the third category of aggressions relating to "styles and beauty assumptions". There are, we suppose, a number of possible explanations for this. In their paper, Lewis et al. (2016) noted how context may well dictate the prevalence of particular 'micro'-aggressions. In this regard, our work was conducted in the workplace rather than in social settings. In contrast, from the literature that we engaged with at least, many of the cases describing "style and beauty assumption" aggressions seemed to have taken place in more social settings (often involving drunk White men). It is possible that this contextual hypothesis might also explain the near absence of the Jezebel stereotype in our findings? Beyond this, in the South African context specifically, since the technical end of apartheid in 1994 significant conscious 'effort' has been made, in advertising and media spaces in particular, to reframe beauty and style norms around demographic majorities.

It was a little surprising to us that Lewis and Neville (2015) and Lewis et al. (2016) did not mention direct sabotage in their taxonomy of 'micro'-aggressions. But we did find a more generic source of confirmation of our findings in the general literature on stereotyping. Fiske et al. (2007) proposed a general stereotype content model which comprised a two-dimensional space of competence and warmth perceptions. In KM's data, we found

easy references to instances where participants described being viewed as having low competence. For example, P1 said:

> I think for me, what I've picked up, it could be just my perception as well as black females. We, people tend to … what do you call this thing? No trust in our experiences, no trust in our skills, capability. Even if you've done the same degree, you've gone through the same training, they still question your capabilities in terms of technical skills. [P1]

And we also found many excerpts supporting that Black women were viewed as a threat (i.e. low warmth). For example, P3 noted how:

> … he felt threatened for the fact that I was a female, black, and on top of that, I knew more than he knew. [P3]

According to Fiske et al.'s (2007) model, the general affective response to people who are stereotyped as being low competence and low warmth is likely to be contempt, while the behavioural response is likely to be what they referred to as "harm" (both passive and active). Active harm and sabotage are cut from the same cloth.

The work by Miller (2020) focused on the sub-phenomena in the top part of our conceptualisation. She took the formal aggression scale that Lewis and Neville (2015) had defined and examined the relationships between the components of this and an anger scale, the State Trait Anger Expression Inventory-II developed by Spielberger (1999) among a sample of African American women. In doing this, she was able to quantitatively examine a) the *experience* of anger arising out of 'micro'-aggressions, b) the *suppression* of this anger, and c) the *expression* of this anger. Not surprisingly, her results revealed significant stress associated with constantly existing in this space (our loop 1a). Corbin et al. (2018) also considered the experiences of Black women "trapped between justified anger and being the strong Black woman" (Corbin et al., 2018:1) from a qualitative perspective. The narrative richness of their work really aided us in clarifying several aspects of our findings and confirming a more general character of these. Although they did not make it a central finding, they did note, with reference to something Vanessa Williams said, a similar effect to the contextually imposed need for expressing anger that several of our participants reported:

> As Vanessa Williams (2017) writes, 'When it's time to rumble, everybody looks to you to make the first swing. And if you don't show up, some folks are upset or suspicious, wondering whether you've lost your super powers or maybe cut a deal…' (Corbin et al., 2018:9)

Since they also noted how Black women's "justified angry responses are maligned and dismissed" (Corbin et al., 2018:3), there is an implicit confirmation of the contradiction, the apparent Catch-22 situation, which initially triggered our entire reflexive journey.

They also confirmed two additional features of our conceptualisation. Firstly, they confirmed the sense of dissonance expressed by several of our participants with reference to "I have to scream and yell". They noted how the images of Black women as

either angry or strong "'dehumanize and control' Black women (e.g. Collins, 1986) and deny them opportunities at true self-definition" (Corbin et al., 2018:4). Finally, besides reporting the stress of 'being' in "misogynoir" (Corbin et al., 2018:1), they emphasised the perpetual nature of this stress: "a sense of perpetual unfairness and consistent racial frustration" (Corbin et al., 2018:10). Or, as Jones and Norwood (2017:2030) put it: "Aggressive Encounters: Death by a Thousand Cuts".

6. Conclusion

What then does this article contribute? we asked ourselves. From the reflection on the literature, we can see that there is really no element in our conceptualisation that has not been reported somewhere else. Corbin et al. (2018), Jones and Norwood (2017), and Motro et al. (2022) all described manifestations of the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype, the 'blaming of the victim', and the perpetual character of this. Lewis and Neville (2015) and Lewis et al. (2016) characterised most of the aggressions that our participants reported experiencing. And the sabotage that they didn't report is, it seems, easily predicted based on Fiske et al.'s (2007) general work on stereotypes. Corbin et al. (2018) and Miller (2020) unpacked the experience of anger/suppression of anger/"I have to scream and yell" dynamic that we identified, as well as the dissonances that may emerge. And Corbin et al. (2018) noted the necessary nature of having to be angry, thereby implying the Catch-22 nature of all of this, which had triggered our reflection in the first place. However, the fact that our reflection on the reported experiences allowed us to pull all these aspects of the experiences of Black women into a conceptualisation does constitute a contribution.

Beyond this, we suppose that one might argue that our study makes a contribution in the sense that the empirical work was conducted in a country where Black women are not demographically a minority. In fact, quite the contrary, they are demographically the largest group. We have not seen the patterns we describe reported in such a context previously. Most of the work on this has emerged out of the United States with a few papers from other countries in the global north. But this geographical extension of findings in itself would hardly constitute a significant contribution, particularly in a global academic hegemony where case studies from Africa are so often dismissed as parochial and not globally relevant (Eccles, 2021). We might, we suppose, have made something more of this, by reflecting on how it might come to be that even in contexts where Black women are demographically the largest population group, they might still suffer under these states of systemic gendered racial 'micro'-aggressions. In this regard, we could perhaps have discussed the possibility that these patterns have metastasised from the global north via the miserable paths of colonisation in the past, and coloniality today. But we did not do this.

Instead, what we have done here, and what we think is a little different from anything else that we have seen in the literature, is to tell the story of *our* exploration of the experiences of Black women. Substantively, we have done this from the perspective of the surprised ignorance of KM and NE as traditional springs[5] of misogynoir, with NN, a

5 Perhaps a better metaphor here would be French drains?

Black woman, watching on somewhat bemused and somewhat comforted by a sense of confirmation. At the risk of foregrounding the male and/or white experience, we think it is worthwhile to draw some 'conclusions' on the question of where this reflexive journey has left KM and NE specifically.

Firstly, we (KM and NE) would be complete fools not to recall that we both still have "32 teeth in [our mouths]" [P5]. In other words, we would be very hesitant to conclude that we have been 'cured' of our misogynoir tendencies, in spite of having been graced with this opportunity to 'hear' the experiences of Black women through KM's interviews, and under NN's patient guidance. However, we have taken some comfort from Jones and Norwood's (2017:2069) optimistic conclusion that: "Listening to the voices of Black women not only renders the experiences of Black women visible, it also has the potential to transform understandings of racism and sexism". Certainly, we (KM and NE) are unlikely to witness the angry expressions of Black women and the experiences that cause them in the same way ever again. We have been afforded a very different framework for interpreting these to our default common senses before we began this journey.

Which brings us to conscientisation, the recognition of contradiction, and from this, acting against oppression. Quite early on, we recognised the contradiction and worked to elaborate on it. But conscientisation requires action. Corbin et al. (2018:9) note how "[w]hen one is consistently positioned as the sole purveyor of experiential knowledge for a racially marginalized group, particularly in a setting that requires and/or encourages engagement, the pressure to speak up, to dispute ignorant or malicious statements, or simply 'represent well,' becomes heightened and burdensome". By taking the opportunity presented in the space of appearance opened in this special issue to share the experiential knowledge that has been graciously curated by one of us (NN) and shared with two of us (KM and NE), we hope to lessen the burden of representation even if only in a minuscule way. This is our hopeful political act. NN and NE are somewhat sheepish in this hope, having harshly warned KM about the risks of being over-optimistic.

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