
Ann Petry's "Like a Winding Sheet": A study of Racial Discrimination and Mental Health.

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ABSTRACT

There has been a long history of racial prejudice and generalised hostility of white community towards the black community, who are thought to possess some undesirable characteristics. The result of which, black people have faced racial discrimination, denied equal socio-political and legal rights. Johnson and Mae are a black couple, who because of their undesirable position have faced subjugation at various levels in their everyday life. The story narrates the various incidents of racial discrimination that is faced by Johnson, how it affects his life and mental health. In this paper, we examine through social psychological theories, how race, racism and discrimination has an effect on the couple's identity, achievement processes, interpersonal relationships and their mental health. The paper will focus on the various kinds of discrimination suffered by Johnson and Mae, and how Mae is more at an disadvantageous position than her husband.

Keywords: Racism, Racial discrimination, racial attitudes, Psychological and Mental Health.

"Like A Winding Sheet" is a 1945 short story by Ann Petry. It tells about an episode in the life of a black couple Johnson and Mae, facing daily life racial discrimination and prejudice. The story narrates a day in the life of Johnson, who works for Mrs Scott, his white boss in a plant. On this particular day, he becomes a victim to racial discrimination, which leads to build up anger and frustration in him. However, this anger makes him lose self control and as a result, he displaces all his frustration to his wife. The present paper will investigate the various patterns of racial discrimination experienced by Johnson. Further, the paper will also illustrate the kind of effect racial subjugation has on Johnson's mental health, that lets him forget his devote pledge that, "he couldn't bring himself to talk to her [women/his wife] roughly or threaten to strike her like a lot of men

might have done. He wasn't made that way" (Petry 1499).

Scholars have often contested the meaning of the complex social psychological concepts of race, racism and discrimination. According to Bobo and Fox, "These concepts concern the meanings of social groupings and how those meanings come to guide patterns of reactions among individuals recognised as members of particular groups" (319). These concepts are components of hierarchical discernment that contour the arrangement of social relations as well as the ordering of life chances and life experiences. In simple terms, racial inequality means unequal treatment given to a group because of the colour of their skin. According to Angeline Ferdinand et al "Racism can be broadly defined as the types of behaviours, practices, beliefs and prejudices that underlie avoidable and unfair inequalities across groups in society based on race, ethnicity, culture or religion"(2). Racism can transpire at three levels namely, interpersonal, internalised and systemic and these levels often overlap in practice. Further, racism can be direct or indirect. While, Direct racism is, "based in differential treatment that results in an unequal distribution of power, resources or opportunities across different groups, such as a refusal to hire people from a particular

ethnic group" (Angeline Ferdinand et al 3). Indirect racism is "equal treatment that impacts groups differently and, therefore, results in an unequal distribution of power, resources or opportunities across different groups." (Angeline Ferdinand et al 3).

Various social-psychological theories revolve around the concept of race, racism and discrimination. First set of theories is called the Realistic Group Conflict theory named by Donald Campbell. It states that, "individuals identify with their own racial or ethnic group, that group conflict emerges from competing interests, and that dominant groups develop and propagate ideologies that maintain and even legitimate their higher social status" (Bobo and Fry 323). Therefore, the dominant group legitimizes inequalities through these group-interested ideologies and perpetuates them by displaying subjugating behavior. Another theory is Social Identity theory by Henri Tajfel and John Turner states that individuals favour their own group over other groups in order to achieve a positive social identity that is consistent with their ingroup identity. A third kind of theory is Optimal distinctiveness theory first proposed by Dr. Marilynn B. Brewer states that individual try and maintain a balance between social groups and situations by managing an optimal balance of inclusion and

distinctiveness both within and between them. Yet another is Social dominance theory devised by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, which states that groups maintain inequalities through three primary intergroup behaviours: aggregated individual discrimination, behavioural asymmetry and institutional discrimination.

Rebecca M. Blank et al in their book *Measuring Racial Discrimination* bring up two fold definition of racial discrimination that focuses not only on individual behaviour but institutional practices. According to them, racial discrimination can be defined as, “differential treatment on the basis of race that disadvantages a racial group and treatment on the basis of inadequately justified factors other than race that disadvantages a racial group (differential effect)” (55). They further suggest four kinds of discrimination: intentional discrimination, subtle discrimination, statistical profiling and organisational processes. The first three types of discriminations are based on individual behaviour and behaviour of the organization. The fourth type is steeped in practices that involve organizational culture.

The first type of discrimination is Intentional discrimination, which include

direct explicit behaviour expressed by whites towards the racial group. Intentional discrimination can be described in Gordon Allport’s 1954 analysis of prejudice. According to this analysis, there is a sequence of steps which lead an individual to show discriminating behaviour towards another racial group. Further, each step leads to another and it follows the fact that people learn by doing. These behaviours include verbal antagonism, avoidance, segregation, physical attack, and extermination.

“Verbal antagonism includes casual racial slurs and disparaging racial comments, either in or out of the target’s presence...Together with nonverbal expressions of antagonism, they can create a hostile environment in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods” (Rebecca et al 56).

Johnson arrives late for his shift because of pain in his legs that he suffers from due to continuous standing during his work hours. For this reason, he had been late almost three times previously in the week. His coming late is noticed by his boss and she questions him as to why he had come late. To which he replies, “My legs were bothering me” (Petry 1499). To this his boss replies in a angry manner, she says, “Half this shift comes in late...And you’re the worst one of all. You’re always late.

Whatsa matter with ya?” (Petry 1499). Johnson explains that his legs hurt because they don’t get proper rest as he can’t sleep properly. To which Mrs Scott replies in a very harsh manner. She says, “Excuses. You guys always got excuses..Every guy comes in here late always has an excuse...And the niggers are the worst. Don’t care what’s wrong with your legs. You get in here on time. I’m sick of you niggers--” (Petry 1499). These racial comments of Mrs Scott are full of verbal antagonism and it creates a hostile environment between the two, as we see that Johnson, although calmly tries to warn her about her comments.

Scholars also study the interpersonal relation between the dominant and subordinate group in day-to-day interaction. According to Bobo and Fry, in everyday interactions, “black middle-class professionals were not always completely candid with whites about their rage regarding racism and discrimination because they understood that voicing those feelings would anger or alienate whites”(322). Johnson is amused by the fact that his boss is a white lady, and that a lady should own a mill like that. However, after he suffers her racial slurs and comments, all he thinks about that, “he thought he should have hit her anyways, smacked her hard in the face, felt the soft

flesh of her face give under the hardness of his hands...If he had done that his hands would felt good now-- relaxed, rested” (1500). But, he is unable to do so because of the fact that his boss is a woman and second he is aware of the fact that it would have resulted in his loss. He would have lost his job and finding another would have been very difficult as, Mrs Scott would have made sure, that the news of his misbehaviour spreads like fire. He thinks that due to that, he could also have suffered some punishment like jail.

“Avoidance entails choosing the comfort of one’s own racial group (the “ingroup” in social psychological terms) over interaction with another racial group (the “outgroup”)...In work settings, discretionary contact may force out-group members into lower-status occupations or undermine the careers of those excluded from informal networks. (Rebecca et al 57). Both Johnson and his wife Mae work in lower-status occupations. Their pay is less and both of them can hardly afford to indulge in any kind of luxuries.

Avoidance then lead to segregation, which, “occurs when people actively exclude members of a disadvantaged racial group from the allocation of resources and from access to institutions. The most common examples include denial of equal education, housing, employment, and

health care on the basis of race.” (Rebecca et al 57). First, they are not employed in high paying jobs, and when they do manage to get jobs, they are denied basic facilities and equal rights. Johnson has a job, “that forced him to walk ten hours a night, pushing [the] little cart” (Petry 1499). For that reason, he experiences extreme pains in his legs. As, a result, in the story, Johnson thinks of the various changes he would have brought to the place, had that been his own plant. He thinks that he would turn the job to a sitting one. He states that, “There were too many standing up jobs for one thing. He’d figure out some way most of ‘em could be done sitting down and he’d put a lot more benches around. One of those littler trucks they used around railroads stations would be good for a job like this. Guys sat on a seat and the things moved easily, taking up little room and turning in hardly any space at all, like on a dime” (Petry 1499). Another this which people like Johnson have to suffer is standing in big lines to get their pay, which Johnson thought was inappropriate. So, he thought, ““That was another thing he’d change, he thought. He’d have the pay envelopes handed to the people right at their benches so there wouldn't be ten or fifteen minutes lost waiting for the pay” (Petry 1501).

The second type of discrimination is Subtle, Unconscious or Automatic discrimination. It can be described as, “a set of often unconscious beliefs and associations that affect the attitudes and behaviors of members of the ingroup (e.g., non-Hispanic whites) toward members of the out-group (e.g., blacks or other disadvantaged racial groups)” (Rebecca et al 59). Subtle discrimination includes behaviours such as non verbal hostility in both their posture and tone of voice and as can then manifest itself as indirect, automatic, ambiguous and ambivalent and as result can result in unfavourable effects.

Johnson becomes a victim of this type of hostility later the same day. While going back home, he his enticed by the lights and life in a coffee shop. Although, he couldn't afford all these luxuries on any common days, but today was special, as he had just received his pay check. So, when, “he looked through the window he thought that everything within range of his eyes gleamed...On a sudden impulse he shoved the door open and joined the line in front of the coffee urn. The line moved slowly. And as he stood there the smell of the coffee, the sound of the laughter and of the voices, helped dull the sharp ache in his legs” (1501). He waited for his turn like a child, peeping into other people’s cups and

as their lips first touched the froth and gives them a happy moustache. However, when his turn came, even before he could ask for a cup of coffee, the white lady behind the counter, announced, “No more coffee for awhile” (Petry 1502) straight to his face and lifted her hair from the back of her neck and tossed her head back. Unable to understand what just happened, he waited that someone from behind him would object or would come to his rescue. However, “There was silence behind him and then uneasy movement. He thought someone would say something, ask why or protest, but there was only silence and then faint shuffling sound as though the men standing behind him had simultaneously shifted their weight from one to the other” (Petry 1502). As a result, Johnson experiences subtle discrimination, where he is refused coffee only because of the colour of his skin.

The third type of racial discrimination is called statistical discrimination or profiling. In this type of prejudice, “an individual or firm uses overall beliefs about a group to make decisions about an individual from that group” (Rebecca et al 61). The discrimination happens when the based on the above assumption the group characteristics are automatically applied to the individual. Similarly, Mrs Scott assumes that Negroes are always late for

their shift and they are always making excuses for it.

The long history of racial bias has deeply affected the organisational processes. According to Rebecca et al, “these processes function in a way that leads to differential racial treatment or produces differential racial outcomes, the results can be discriminatory. Such an embedded institutional process—which can occur formally and informally within society—is sometimes referred to as structural discrimination” (63). This kind of discrimination occurs across various institutional domains. An example of of this kind of discrimination occurs in the housing sector. Research shows that racial bias has led to residential segregation. Johnson and Mae experience this kind of avoidance, as they don’t live in the city but have to catch a train (the last) to reach their ghetto, where the black population is allowed to live. The main cause of this that black people are assumed to be more involved in crimes such as thefts, rapes, murders and their influence over the people of the white community is seen as hazardous.

Further, Rebecca et al affirms that such discrimination often occurs during the process of hiring people for work or during promotion in institutions. According to Bobo and Fry, “Employers often express

stereotypical views of blacks, rate black workers as having weaker hard and soft skills than white workers, and openly acknowledge their own use of discriminatory recruiting and screening procedures during the hiring process” (320). Johnson and Mae are both black and therefore, they are not able to find a proper job in a big institution. They both are forced to take up job which both demean and exploit them. Both works in different plant, where the working hours are more and pay is less. Moreover, the work timings are not adequate. They are forced to work in the night shift and so, they both are not able to get proper sleep. When they are about to sleep, the sun is out and the brightness of the day hampers their sleep. Upon that, Johnson is forced to stand the entire time he is working.

Johnson mentions that, “It’s too light for good sleeping and all the standing beats the hell out of my legs” (Petty 1498). Thus, Johnson has significantly lower amount of both professional and personal satisfaction and one important cause of this is his job discrimination.

Johnson becomes a victim of racial discrimination twice that day and he almost losses faith in humanity, when he is refused a cup of coffee. However, on both the incidents he wants to react but he is forced by his pledge to never hit a woman

and also by his disadvantageous position. Racial discrimination has a negative effect on the life of the victim. Many studies state that discriminatory practices have often been linked to poor mental health. Tony N. Brown et al in their article, “Being Black and Feeling Blue: The Mental Health Consequences of Racial Discrimination” stress that, “Discriminatory experiences that occur because of race are demeaning, degrading, and highly personal. Thus, the experience of racial discrimination can be stressful and reduce a person’s sense of control and meaning while evoking feelings of loss, ambiguity, strain, frustration, and injustice” (118).

Similarly, both the experiences upset Johnson and he almost losses his control. The effect of the injustice can be clearly seen both externally and internally on Johnson. When Mrs Scott calls him a nigger and makes derogatory remarks, Johnson, “stepped closer to her. His fists are doubled. His lips were drawn back in a thin narrow line. A vein in his forehead stood out swollen thick” (Petty1500). However, at that time, he is reminded by the red lipstick of Mrs Scott that she is a woman and he doesn't hit women. However, he still, felt a curious tingling in his fingers and he looked down at his hands. They were clenched tight, hard,

ready to smash some of those small purple veins in her face” (Petry 1500).

Tony N. Brown proposes that, “the mental health consequences of racially based discrimination can never be fully mitigated or avoided, and that some Black Americans will succumb to race-related stress and psychiatric disorders” (120). Similarly, Johnson tries to avoid the situation, but that creates a peculiar kind of stress in his mind. He turned and left, tried not to look into Mrs Scott’s direction the entire day. He started walking up and down the length of the building, “and as he walked he forced himself to swallow his anger, get rid of it” (1500). However, the entire day he just had one thought that kept enveloping his mind. He thought that, “it would have deeply satisfying thing to have cracked her narrow lips wide open with just one blow, beautifully timed and with all his weight in back of it. That way he would have gotten rid of all energy and tension his anger had created in him. He kept remembering how his heart had started pumping blood so fast he had felt it tingle even in the tips of his fingers”(Petry 1500).

Johnson experienced a similar tingling in his fingers when the girl in the coffee house refused him coffee. “What he wanted to do was hit her so hard that the scarlet lipstick on her mouth would smear

and spread over her nose, her chin, out towards her cheeks; so hard that she would never toss her head again and refuse a man a cup of coffee because he would black” (Petry 1502). However, once again he avoided the situation by immediately leaving the cafe.

Devah Pager and Hana Shepher in their article “The Sociology of Discrimination: Racial Discrimination in Employment, Housing, Credit, and Consumer Markets” state that, “Patterns of perceived discrimination are important findings in their own right, as research shows that those who perceive high levels of discrimination are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and other negative health outcomes (183). Even Johnson experiences anxiety and depression and his negative health outcomes are seen in the following lines. “The roar of the train beat inside his head, making it ache and throb, and the pain in his legs clawed up into his groin so that he seemed to be bursting with pain and he told himself that it was due to all that anger-born energy that had piled up in him and not been used and so it had spread through him like a poison--from his feet and legs all the way up to his head” (Petry 1502).

However, the biggest negative effect of the anxiety and frustrations that had been building up in Johnson's mind and body is finally revealed the he goes home. Studies also found that personal experiences of racial subjugation and discrimination lead to poor marital quality and well-being. As on a regular day, his wife Mae is waiting for him when he arrives home. She asks him about his day, while she is looking at her own image in the mirror checking her red lipstick (similar to the one worn by Mrs Scott and the girl in the coffee shop). Johnson simply relies fine and goes on to sit in a chair where Mae has spread her work clothes. While he starts to sit on it, Mae asks to watch out as she has to wear the same dress tomorrow, while she holds her hair in the same fashion as the girl in the cafe did.

Johnson doesn't mind and sits on the chair. Mae then goes and pulls Johnson out of the chair. Johnson replies it will be better that he goes and stays on the subways. Mae, showing some sense of humour laughs at the comment and tells Johnson to come and eat food, and in a funny mocking manner says, ““You're nothing but an old hungry nigger trying to act tough and she paused to giggle” (Petry 1503).

The word nigger brings back the memories of what happened to him throughout the entire day and Mae with her red lipstick reminds him of the two women, who had been mean to him. Unable to hold the frustration in him, Johnson forgets his pledge to never hit a woman. He feels a similar tingling in her fingers which he is unable to control it this time and as a result, he slaps Mae right in the face, and “it wasn't until she screamed that he realised he had hit her in the mouth-so hard that the dark red lipstick had blurred and spread over her full lips, reaching up towards the tip of her nose, down towards her chin, out towards her cheeks” (Petry 1504). Thus, Johnson finally does what he wanted to do to Mrs Scott and the girl in the coffee shop for their racial behaviour and remarks against him. Only, this time he did that someone who was as innocent as he was in the earlier situations.

The action felt right and he felt that he was suddenly being unburdened of something that has clenched his heart and mind the entire time. As a result, “He kept striking her and he thought with horror that something inside him was holding him, binding him to this act, wrapping and twisting about him so that he had to continue it. H had lost all control over his hands. And he dropped for a phase, a

word, something to describe what this thing was like that was happening to him and he thought it was like being enmeshed in a winding sheet--that was it--like a winding sheet. And even as the thought formed in his mind his hands reached for her face again and yet again” (Petry 1504). Thus, this action is compared to a shroud, because it was an end to his relationship, an end to his patience, an end to his humanity.

“Broman (1997) investigated discriminatory incidents that Black Americans experienced in five domains: (1) getting a job, (2) at work, (3) at home, (4) shopping in a store, and (5) interactions with police” (Brown et al 119). Johnson in the story experiences discrimination in most of these domains. He is upset by the racial subjugation that he faces the entire day, which makes his psychologically distressed and finally evokes in him feeling of injustice, frustration and loss. Further, Bobo and Fry state that, “Discrimination based on gender compounds issues of racial discrimination for women of colour, who report experiencing “double jeopardy” (320). This is experienced by Mae, as she becomes a victim of discrimination by the white community and a victim of domestic

violence, therefore experiencing this double jeopardy.

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