# 2

# The Psychological and Energy Costs of Contemporary Racism

IN CHAPTER 1 we underscored the point that historically Europeans generated worldwide expansion involving the development of colonial systems exploiting the land of indigenous peoples and the labor of enslaved Africans. This *external* colonialism often became *internal* colonialism when the control and exploitation of the non-European groups overseas passed on from whites in the home country to white immigrant groups and their descendants within the colonized countries. This describes what actually happened in the North America. First Europeans and later their descendants in America stole the land of Native Americans and the labor of African Americans.

More recently, during the 1960s, the perceptive critic of racial colonialism, Frantz Fanon, argued forcefully that the early and continuing processes of colonialism in Africa and elsewhere have had serious consequences for those exploited and oppressed. This racialized colonialism has inflicted serious psychological and physical stress on those colonized,

both those initially colonized and their later descendants. One major reason for this is the constant barrage of racialized assaults by the colonial system on the personalities, lives, families, and communities of those it targets. Internal colonialism, with its many ideological interpretations and pressures, often makes those targeted for exploitation question their own abilities, understandings, and self-conceptions.[1] Writing in 1903 about the U.S. system of internal colonialism directed at African Americans, the pathbreaking African American scholar W. E. B. DuBois made a similar point: "But the facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate." DuBois also adds an important point about ongoing resistance by those targeted by white racism: "There are today no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes. . . . and the spiritual striving of the freedmen's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name . . . of human opportunity."[2] In the past and the present, African Americans have had to fight against the negative conceptions of themselves that are constantly generated in the private presentations and public assertions of their many white oppressors. Today, we see this ongoing struggle, against racial oppression and for social justice, in the accounts of our respondents.

In recent years, as we saw in the previous chapter, numerous conservative analysts have asserted that there is much black "paranoia" about issues of racism. For example, one conservative journalist argues that middle-class African Americans move too quickly to see racism in their daily lives and, oddly enough, he further argues that black rage is a "dysfunctional aspect of black culture, a feature mainly of middle-class African American life," and that this rage represents "the frustration of pursuing unearned privileges" of affirmative action.[3] In effect, this conservative perspective suggests that African Americans themselves are mainly to blame for the anger, stress, and mental health problems that are linked to their personal histories in a racist system. The "blaming the victim" perspective is a common way many whites try to (mis)interpret ongoing racial oppression in the United States.

In contrast, those researchers who have actually interviewed African Americans and conducted other field research on racial discrimination have generally come to a much different conclusion. Their research suggests that rage and the so-called paranoia are often more or less healthy responses to constantly recurring experiences with racial discrimination. As the distinguished analyst bell hooks reminds us, black rage is "a potentially healthy, potentially healing response to oppression and exploitation."[4] Indeed, the attempt to colonize the minds of African Americans and others of color has long been a critical aspect of racism. hooks further notes: "To perpetuate and maintain white supremacy, white folks have colonized black Americans, and part of that colonizing process has been teaching us to repress our rage, to never make them the targets of any anger we feel about racism."[5] As for new action, she then suggests: "Progressive black activists must show how we take that rage and move it beyond fruitless scapegoating of any group, linking it instead to a passion for freedom and justice that illuminates, heals, and makes redemptive struggle possible."[6]

Similarly, the cultural mistrust that many African Americans have for white Americans involves a reasonable suspicion of whites, which is adopted by African Americans for survival and because they see the racist world accurately from their many unpleasant, discriminatory experiences at the hands of white Americans.[7] It is not at all abnormal for a black person to believe that numerous people are discriminating against him or her when in fact many whites actually are. Some researchers have used the term "racism reaction" to describe the normal, protective orientation that individual African Americans often take in their interaction with whites.[8] Indeed, some insightful training materials designed for health-care providers suggest that the latter should be fully familiar with this racism reaction in order to avoid misdiagnoses of black reactions to everyday discrimination as pathological.[9] Such precautions are very important. Although African Americans are generally less likely than whites to seek mental health care, those who do are more likely to be diagnosed with serious mental illness. Such diagnoses are still sometimes erroneous for racial reasons, and such faulty diagnoses can mean a serious social stigma—and, possibly, yet other serious consequences in terms of involuntary medication or institutional commitment.[10]

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## DISCRIMINATION, ANGER, AND RAGE

The African American philosopher Laurence Thomas has suggested that African Americans have perhaps not articulated the psychological pain they face as well as some other groups have: "My own view is that we did brilliantly up until about the '60s and then we lost it. I think the pain of racism really hasn't been fully articulated yet. We talk about various changes and all of that, but we've underestimated the psychological damage American slavery and its legacy has wrought upon the lives of Blacks in general."[11]

### Variations in Stress: The Racial Factor

As we discussed previously, research on the contemporary workplace documents the harmful effects of work-related stress on the health of employees.[12] Although work is a primary source of stress for many workers, certain types of job stress are distinctive to the experiences of African Americans, and other Americans of color, and contribute to their physical and mental health challenges.[13] It is one thing to face the usual job stress and know that there are some measures one can take to decrease it. It is quite another matter to realize that the painful stress one faces is mainly because of the color of one's skin—and is thus largely beyond one's own control. Certain structural conditions and processes in workplaces and other societal settings—racial inequality, blocked opportunities, and other discrimination—are major generators of pain and distress, which can lead to or exacerbate physical and mental health problems. For example, one longitudinal research study has shown that African Americans who reported racial discrimination at one point in time were more likely to report high levels of psychological distress in another interview later on. Discrimination clearly has stressful consequences over time.[14]

Recent research accents several dimensions of the stress that affects the health of African Americans. Like many white Americans, some African Americans are susceptible to certain types of disease, propensities for illness that they inherited from their parents. Such a propensity, or the disease stemming from it, can cause much stress. In this regard, the relationship between stress and ill health for black Americans is much like that for white Americans. However, for black Americans, two other dimen-

sions of health-related stress are linked to both past and present racism. One such dimension is that of interpersonal relationships at work and one's health. The discrimination faced by African Americans from their coworkers and employers often leads to increased, unhealthy stress. Whites may have negative encounters with other employees as well, but there is a major difference. For most whites, the negative encounters they typically have with fellow employees do not have explicitly racial overtones or racial consequences. The other critical dimension, the long-term consequences of racism-generated poverty or other lack of resources, involves even broader societal factors. For many African Americans, the lack of certain types of material assets or social-network resources can mean additional detrimental effects on their health. This added stress affects a much smaller proportion of whites. As a group, African Americans live with fewer socioeconomic resources, largely because of the long-term effects of slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary discrimination. As we noted in chapter 1, the average black family has only about a tenth of the wealth of the average white family. A relative lack of family wealth can mean considerably more financial worries, even for middle-class African Americans. This lack of resources thus contributes to the everyday stress that can generate pain, frustration, anger, and physical illness. Whites do not, on a structural and institutional level, encounter antiwhite racism or the long-term consequences of such racism. Not only do African Americans encounter the usual sources of stress that any person encounters, but they also face the structurally generated stress that stems from nearly four hundred years of racial oppression. For centuries, African Americans have been caught in economic, social, and political conditions that are harmful to their health.[15]

## The Frequency of Anger and Rage

Commenting on the pervasive discrimination he faced in the workplace, the distinguished essayist and novelist James Baldwin once suggested that there is not a black person "alive who does not have rage in his blood—one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it. As for me, this fever has recurred in me, and does, and will until the day I die."[16] For most whites, it is likely hard to imagine living with this constant sense of justified rage. For many, if not most, African Americans,

this is a recurring reality, and the only choice one has is to find personal or group-based ways to deal with it. Systemic racism has dealt African Americans a very hard hand to play.

In a now-classic study, psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs examined the extent to which individual rage and depression among African Americans are shaped by discrimination. From clinical interviews with their own patients, they determined that black mistrust of whites is a very reasonable attitude, and one that is based on their many experiences with antiblack actions on the part of whites.[17] They concluded that the clinical treatment of enraged black Americans must take into account their experience with discrimination in many social settings, including workplaces, in order for psychological healing to take place. They note that black people "bear all they can and, if required, bear even more. But if they are black in present-day America they have been asked to shoulder too much. They have had all they can stand. They will be harried no more. Turning from their tormentors, they are filled with rage."[18] More recently, Cobbs has reiterated the point that rage against discrimination is reasonable and commonplace among African Americans, and for too many continues to be turned inward in a harmful fashion.[19] Thus, silent, all-consuming rage can lead to inner turmoil, emotional or social withdrawal, and numerous physical health problems.

African Americans working in, or traversing, historically white places commonly report pain, anguish, anger, and rage. These reactions may be immediately expressed in their words, the tone of their comments, or the character of their facial expressions. All of our focus group respondents indicated in one way or another that they suffer substantial and recurring stress and frustration in racially hostile workplaces or other societal settings. As one midwestern respondent put it, she knows her stress is linked to the workplace because her symptoms do *not* happen "on weekends or after five o'clock." The nine-to-five illnesses that stem from discrimination at work are commonplace and are often commented upon, or joked about, in African American families and communities.

As we have noted, there is a substantial literature that indicates that many workers suffer stress in dealing with employers, job requirements, pay levels, and other work-related issues.[20] However, in our interviews there is a general consensus that much life-damaging stress at work does not come from the performance of the job itself, but from racially hostile work envi-

ronments. In our focus groups, we asked the respondents to discuss important questions such as, "Thinking about workplace discrimination by whites, have any of you suffered serious personal costs or pain because of the discrimination? Please give me a concrete example." In the discussions and commentaries about workplace matters, the respondents generally had in mind this and related questions about their reactions to everyday discrimination. Moreover, as we will see, their comments often included assessments of life experiences both inside and outside their workplaces.

We asked this more specific question: "How often do you get angry about the actions of white people?" One male focus group participant made this comment: "Well, I'm angry right now!" he said with a laugh. "I get *concerned* several times a week, concerned on some level. I may get angry once every week and a half. It's hard to try and quantify. It's not a great level of angry, but there's some concern." He then added a blunt commentary on how he deals with this anger about discriminatory white actions:

> I try to control it, but I don't try to muffle it. And I certainly don't ignore it. I try to develop a healthy approach to it, because what I really do understand is that it can destroy you, it can pervert your thinking. And it can make you the "nigger" that a lot of people want you to be, it can make you the stereotype. And we all have to fight that. I just think that I do my best to acknowledge that it is generated, and that it's natural. But that doesn't mean you just let it take its course. And I'm always in the process of trying to develop a better and healthier way of working through the inevitable anger about this situation. There's a price you pay in being sensitive and conscious. The irony of all of this is if you really were a "nigger," none of this would bother you, because you'd be a beast. Have you ever seen a dog really being angry about his condition? If you really were a beast, it wouldn't bother you. The problem is that . . . this treatment bothers you most, because you definitively and clearly aren't what the world thinks you are.

Anger at constantly recurring racism is reasonable for sentient human beings. This man is very aware of the irony in the racist "beast" images of African Americans that are held by many whites. Nothing could be less true than these old white-racist images, for the frustration and pain felt

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because of white actions is often great. At the same time, this respondent realizes that to survive, one must find a way to control, yet not totally suppress, one's anger. It is likely that few whites must develop and frequently use the anger-management techniques that are more or less routinely developed by most African Americans over the course of their lives. Indeed, in a course recently taught by Karyn McKinney, a white college student realized and voiced this point—that blacks "probably know how to handle anger better than we do." Most whites probably cannot imagine dealing with such reasonable emotions of anger and rage at injustice over whole lifetimes.

## Mistreatment that Causes Anger

African Americans face discrimination in an array of settings, including many different kinds of workplaces. Commenting on racially hostile or unsupportive workplaces, some focus group participants described general feelings of frustration and anger, while others emphasized specific incidents that generated such feelings. A common source of anger is whites' use of racist epithets and other derogatory references, which can trigger painful individual or collective memories. For example, one professional described her reaction to an incident with a white administrator:

> I have felt extremely upset, anger, rage, I guess you would call it. One incident that comes to mind happened in a social setting. I was with some, with my former boss and some coworkers and a man who ran, like, a federal program. And we were having dinner, and he made a comment, and he had been drinking *heavily*. And he referred to black people as "niggers." . . . I'm sitting—he's there, and I'm here. . . . And as soon as he said it, he looked in my face. And then he turned beet red, you know? And I said, "Excuse me, what did you say?" And he just couldn't say anything. And then my boss, my former boss, intervened and said, "Now, you know, move his glass, because he's had too much to drink." And you know just making all these excuses. So, of course, I got up and left. I said, "good night," and left. And the next morning, the man called me and apologized. . . . his excuse was that he had been drinking, you know. And I said, "Well [gives name], we don't get drunk and just say things that we

wouldn't otherwise say. You know, I don't get drunk and start speaking Spanish [group laughter]. This was already in you, you know, in order for it to come out. [Voices: Exactly. Yeah, yeah. ] . . . I mean so, keep your apology, I'm not interested."

She then concluded with a comment on what she did with her anger:

I was so angered that I wanted to get him, you know? I was out to get him. I called his boss . . . who is black, and informed him of what happened. Because he was referring to his boss, actually. . . . And he [had] said, "Yeah, he's out with the other niggers."

This woman believed it was important that a fellow African American know that his white employee uses racist epithets to refer to blacks. While she describes her call to this other black man as her "out to get" the villain in her story, she also shows a concern for the larger black community.

Dealing with a similar problem, an administrative secretary relates an incident in which she had to explain the meaning of an old racial epithet to her white supervisor, who subsequently did nothing to reprimand the employee who used the term:

A white individual in my department was talking to me, and he referred to me as "Buckwheat." My supervisor, when I reported it to her, told me that she did not feel that I looked like "Buckwheat." Nor . . . did she understand what the term meant. Then she asked me to define it for her. She felt that [the term] was not derogatory. After I told her what it meant . . . she said "Well, you don't exemplify that, so I wouldn't worry about that." She also refused to talk to the individual.

Even today, some whites still use derogatory terms like "Buckwheat" and "Aunt Jemima" to put down and stigmatize black Americans. Recall, for example, the *Etter v. Veriflo Corporation* case discussed in chapter 1, in which three white judges on a California court decided that the recurring use of racist epithets like "Buckwheat" and "Jemima," directed at a black male employee, did not constitute serious discrimination. For nearly two centuries, the popular culture of ordinary white Americans—including the early minstrel shows of the mid-1800s and later radio and television

since the 1920s—has been an important source of painful racist imaging of this type. Indeed, the term "Aunt Jemima" originally comes from an 1870s minstrel show, in which a white man, in blackface and dressed in women's clothes, sang a popular song. This name for African American women became widely known because of its later use as the name of a pancake mix—and eventually as a name on forty different products earning millions of dollars in revenues for the producing companies.[21] One analysis of the term "Buckwheat" suggests that whites originally called black Americans this derogatory name because blacks were thought to eat a lot of the grain buckwheat. Yet, the use of the term by whites since the 1930s stems mostly from the black child's name in the old "Our Gang" movie series and, most recently, from the name of a black comic character on *Saturday Night Live* in the 1980s.[22]

Why are these and other common racist epithets often an irritating and painful experience for African Americans? As mentioned in the introduction, one experienced African American psychologist once explained to Joe Feagin that, when he hears the epithet "nigger," in the back of his mind he often sees a black man hanging from a tree. This is not surprising, because he grew up in the segregation era when lynchings of black men were much more common than they are today. In this way, past experience informs and contextualizes present events. Indeed, the impact of racist epithets is often underestimated by outside, especially white, observers. Some whites have the audacity to counsel African Americans as to how they can or should simply ignore such comments. The psychologist further commented that his liberal white friends will sometimes tell him to "let go" of such racist comments from white bigots and quickly "move on." Thus, it appears that many whites believe that as long as one has a strong sense of self, or as long as one does not exemplify whatever racist remarks signify, such insults are "only words" and thus should not hurt or cause psychological damage. Such a perspective suggests that its advocates have not been the recipients of regular put-downs and questioning of one's worth. Most whites also do not seem to realize that it is not just the racial attacks on one's own person that a black person must face and process, but also the harmful attacks by whites that are experienced by, and held in the collective memories of, one's family and community. Memories of extensive experience with white racism have a major impact on one's feelings and understandings, as well as on the countering strategies at one's disposal.

Think, too, of the continuing reality of hostile attacks on African Americans across the country. Many violent attacks motivated by racist imaging and hatred are reported each year. The images of the worst of the attacks on African Americans are communicated, often repeatedly, in the mass media. Brutal lynchings of black Americans are *not* just a matter of the past. They still take place, as we saw in Jasper, Texas, in June of 1998. Revealing links to white supremacist groups, three white men seized James Byrd, Jr., tied him to the back of a pickup, and dragged him along a road until his body was dismembered.[23] Such attacks on African Americans are certainly much less common than in the recent past, but they do still take place, and they are not detached from the larger context of systemic racism in the United States—although most whites probably see them that way.

In addition, most African Americans know that white supremacist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, have participated in periodic violence against African Americans for more than a century. They know from experience that these groups are still operating across the United States, with little government intrusion on their terrorist plotting. Indeed, not long after this Texas lynching, there were copycat attacks on black men in at least two cities in other states—in Belleville, Illinois, and Slidell, Louisiana.[24] Doubtless, the Jasper lynching continues to have a lasting impact on many African Americans.[25] Recently, a black filmmaker, Marco Williams, and a white filmmaker, Whitney Dow, made a prize-winning documentary about the diverse reactions blacks and whites in the Jasper community had to this racialized crime. They found dramatically different reactions to the lynching in the two communities. From his interviews with whites in the town, the white filmmaker Dow came to view the town as dealing with a horrible racist event, yet one that is rare and isolated. In contrast, from his interviews with black townspeople, the black filmmaker came to see the brutally racist act as part of a larger and continuing story of racial oppression that persists to the present day. The black community has the experience to know that such events are not isolated, but rather form a continuum of racist events—ranging from nonviolent to extremely violent—that characterize the everyday lives of most African Americans.[26]

Individual and family memories of past discrimination, including recent racist events, compound the damage of everyday discrimination. Connections between hostile epithets and acts in the distant or recent past

and those in the present are central aspects of individual and collective memories in black communities. Recall the focus groups in which we asked the respondents to discuss important questions such as: "Thinking about workplace discrimination by whites, have any of you suffered serious personal costs or pain because of the discrimination?" In one of the focus group discussions, a health care professional spoke about her anger over a traumatic workplace incident with a coworker. She partly attributed the hostility in their relationship to ongoing racial tensions in her white-dominated workplace:

> Most of the time you can do that [not get upset at racial hostility from whites], but it comes that point where you just can't. They have backed you into a corner. It's like a mouse, if you back him into a corner, he's going to come out. So, then you just explode. I had that happen on the job, and I hit this person. I physically, yes, I hit her. She's white, and she called me a "bitch." . . . That's why I hit her.
>
> She was abusive to the patients, and I had already had a conversation with her, with the supervisor. . . . She cursed me, and I'm looking at my supervisor who was her friend. . . . Both of them are white, and this was her friend. You know, they would go out to lunch together, whatever. She cursed me in the patient area, and I'm looking to my supervisor for some kind of response to her. Well, after she didn't say anything to her, then I cursed her back. And then I thought well, "Okay, this isn't cool, let me just get away from the situation." And I went [to] the medication room just to separate myself.

She then added this comment to complete the story:

> Well, that wasn't good enough for that person. She had to come where I was and ask me a question that she could have asked the patient. And I wouldn't respond to her. I said I'm not going to talk to her when she just cursed me. She just cursed me, what's the point? So, then she said, "Well, you bitch." When she said that, I just really lost it. . . . Well, when that happened of course your job flashes before your face. It's like, "God, I'm going to lose my job." Well, the supervisor had her back to us luckily. . . . I was angry with myself because I allowed this person to get me off my ground.

As can be seen here, many cases of antiblack hostility or harassment involve more than one brief encounter with a harassing white person. A sequence of events takes place over a period of time. In this case, the respondent is angry because of the pain the white attacks caused for her and also because she lost her temper over the situation. Such lashing out is rare for her, and most other African Americans, because it can mean the loss of one's job.

When this respondent finished her account in the focus group, one man added: "There's no one answer to a question [a racial situation] like that. Each situation warrants a different response. I think what helps us as being black now, we understand what these people think." One consequence of recurring racial harassment and other discrimination is the understanding that a black person typically, even necessarily, develops into the behavior of the white discriminators—an understanding leading to countering responses that usually have to be tailored for particular situations. This effort, and the consequent level of insight and understanding, is rarely required of whites.[27] Most whites are able to go to work without having to ponder deeply how to relate to others in their workplaces as one of just a few members of their own racial group because whites are ordinarily the substantial majority, if not the overwhelming majority, of employees. The informal and formal cultures of most U.S. workplaces are still white, and thus most whites are, without much personal adjustment, relatively comfortable there. Whites do not usually have to be bicultural in their workplaces. Not surprisingly, some recent research has linked the stress caused by the bicultural stance that African Americans and other racially oppressed people must take to their increased vulnerability to illnesses.[28]

## An Impact Beyond the Individual

In another context, a black female supervisor in the South discussed the link between black rage and unfair promotion practices in workplaces:

> I think a lot of anger and rage comes in when we . . . feel like—like I have a friend, he's been with the company twenty years, and he didn't get a promotion. And he was well over-qualified. They gave it to a [white] guy who had been there only seven [years], and knows nothing. So, of course, I was kind of angry with the process, but it was because

> he was the ex-boyfriend of the girl who was doing the promoting. So he was upset about it. But I told him, I felt like this: "They can only tell you 'no' so many times. Keep applying for that position."

Generally speaking, job satisfaction is rooted in how much employees' work contributes to their sense of control and self-esteem, in how much coworkers and supervisors are helpful in supporting one's work, and in whether rewards are truly meritocratic.[29] Employees, black and nonblack, have difficulty doing their best work when the conditions and rewards of employment are inequitable. Workers must be paid fairly and promoted equitably if employers expect them to do their best work. Recent research demonstrates that African Americans continue to receive lesser economic rewards than white Americans. This is true for middle-class individuals and African Americans as a group. Thus, the broad economic costs of being black include continuing disparities in income, wealth, and occupational position. In chapter 1, we noted the census data indicating that median black family income has hovered around 60 percent of white family income for decades. Black families also face poverty at a much greater rate than whites, while unemployment for black individuals is typically much higher than that of whites. Even middle-class African Americans generally have much less wealth, on the average, than their white counterparts.[30] One reason for this is continuing discrimination in the hiring and promotion processes of historically white workplaces.

In addition, as we see in numerous examples throughout this book, anger over racial mistreatment is more than a matter of what happens to an individual. Rage over racism is also fueled by what happens to friends and family members. Collective memories of the racism against black Americans as a group, as well as knowledge of specific discrimination against friends and relatives, can multiply racially related stress for individuals.[31] In recent years, several social scientists have researched collective and community memories. For example, Robert Bellah and his associates have noted that human communities "have a history" and "they are constituted by their past—for this reason we can speak of a real community as a 'community of memory,' one that does not forget its past."[32] These collective recollections are not always positive: "Remembering heritage involves accepting origins, including painful memories of prejudice and discrimination."[33]

For African Americans and other Americans of color, past and present discrimination perpetrated by white antagonists, as well as the responses to that oppression, are often inscribed in collective memory. The community passes along information from one generation to the next about how to deal with discrimination and the anger it causes. In one focus group, a nurse's assistant noted the importance of generational advice and collective memory: "Kindness will kill a person. My grandmother told me that so many times. 'Don't get upset. Don't fuss. Don't argue with them. Just smile at them.'" A male respondent in the group added, "That's true." Discrimination calls forth an expenditure of energy in developing countering responses, an issue we will return to in later chapters.

Accumulating experience with white racist practices often reaches into *thousands of minor and major incidents* by the time a black American reaches her or his sixties or seventies. This is not an exaggeration: Several of our African American informants and colleagues who spend much time in predominantly white settings have estimated that they face at least a hundred such incidents each year. Such long series of discriminatory events can have a major impact on the way one looks at the world. The accounts given throughout this book indicate how unexpected and severe the provocations of white-generated discrimination can be. The level and seriousness of black rage over racial animosity and discrimination were made clear by a retired professor interviewed in another study. Speaking to a question about the level of his anger toward whites because of everyday discrimination, on a scale from one to ten, this man replied:

> Ten! I think that there are many blacks whose anger is at that level. Mine has had time to grow over the years more and more and more until now I feel that my grasp on handling myself is tenuous. I think that now I would strike out to the point of killing, and not think anything about it. I really wouldn't care.[34]

After more than seven decades of living black in America, this otherwise mild-mannered professor, a prominent educator and researcher, is very angry over his own mistreatment at the hands of whites, as well as the mistreatment of his family, the young black people he knows, and African Americans generally. In his long interview, he is eloquent about

how continuing discrimination over many decades has generated his anger at racist whites and his concern for the country's future.

As we have seen in our respondents' and other African Americans' accounts, anger at racism stems from particular social situations as well as a lifetime of experience with such events. These discriminatory situations are not isolated, but accumulate over one's life, in workplaces and other settings. Routinely, black workers' lives are disrupted by direct discrimination by white coworkers, supervisors, and employers in workplaces, as well as by various whites in other public settings such as malls, hotels, restaurants, classrooms, and voting precincts. Such encounters can become major life crises with a serious health impact similar to that of other crises such as the death of a loved one.[35] This impact is both psychological and physical.

## DEPRESSION AND OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

### Stress in the Workplace: More Consequences

Researchers Mirowsky and Ross conclude that pain and distress can take two psychological forms: (1) depression, demoralization, and hopelessness, and (2) anxiety, fear, and worry.[36] In turn, these psychological reactions can have negative effects on physical health. Demoralization, depression, anxiety, and anger over everyday discrimination are to be expected under the circumstances faced by African Americans, but they are nonetheless unhealthy at the levels that many experience these feelings. In addition to older studies of black Americans such as that of Grier and Cobbs, more recent studies of Americans of color have found that experience with discrimination is linked to higher levels of stress and psychological suffering, including depression and lower levels of life satisfaction.[37] One analysis drawing on the National Study of Black Americans suggests that recent experiences with racial discrimination may be associated with "higher levels of chronic health problems, disability and psychological distress, and lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction."[38]

The African Americans in our focus groups and other interviews reported a variety of psychological problems that they view as linked, at least in part, to discrimination and related racial barriers in their workplaces. The psychological complaints range from moderate anxiety to depression severe

enough to require medication or hospitalization. For example, an administrative assistant reported great mental anguish after unfair treatment at work:

> I had been in . . . my department for [some] years when . . . we had a major change in staff. We had gone from a white male boss who had just left, [to] a white female who had taken over in the position. I had seniority in the office as far as time, and had just received a promotion in the job, and had nothing but excellent, excellent performance evaluations. But when it came time to do the budget cuts, my position was offered as being ten percent cut. I was told that there was no way to avoid this position being cut. Being that at this time I was the only minority that was, that was in the office, it was devastating to me at the time because we tried to work it out.

Some observers might expect a black woman to fare better with a white female supervisor than a white male supervisor. Unfortunately, white women do not always feel a sense of gender unity that would lead them to be sure to treat black women fairly in making hiring and firing decisions. This respondent then described the resolution, which involved a black commissioner interceding for her:

> Because I was looking at a layoff . . . [he] basically went in and told this supervisor that, "With all these vacant positions that we have in this county, you *will* find her a job." I was told on a Friday, by the department they wanted to transfer me to, that I had to make a decision over the weekend and let them know by that following Monday whether I was going to accept this job, which was a six thousand dollar cut in pay . . . or go in the unemployment line. I had to help take care of two children, so I chose to go for the transfer. But . . . through all this, and the mental anguish that I went through, I was hospitalized for nine days. It was just devastating, because I saw it as *blatant discrimination*. . . . There was nothing they could go to in the file and find in terms of not performing or anything like that. And then the amount of time, [to] get basically kicked out the door is what happened. . . . But then, but not only the financial burden, but just the toll that it took . . . . I think the toll was *so* hurtful, because I saw it strictly as racial.

It appears that perpetrators disguise some racially linked mistreatment in employment settings in bureaucratic terms, as here in a reported budget cut. This woman's judgment of discrimination is not arbitrary but comes from past experience as the only minority person in her department. It is likely that her ability to read the situation is also grounded in past experiences—likely, hundreds of harassing and other discriminatory incidents—in a variety of settings. In many such cases of racial mistreatment, significant achievements are ignored and serious mental anguish and physical pain can result, even to the point of hospitalization.

Often a worker of color finds that she or he is one of few people, or even the only person, of her or his racial or ethnic background in a particular employment setting. This isolated status typically does not provide the social networking support that might alleviate some of the workplace stress. Variations in control and socioemotional support at work predict variations in psychological depression among workers.[39] In addition, being the only minority person (as some say, just the "only") at work can draw an inordinate amount of attention to one's job performance, and this attention may involve a stigmatizing token status. Moreover, black employees in many predominantly white work settings may feel pressure to prove that they were not hired only or mainly because of affirmative action—an assumption among many white employees. Such pressure can further accentuate the racialized stress they feel.[40]

A teacher discussed a situation in which her boss moved her to a different grade level with no notice, just before school started. This woman discovered later that she was moved in order to make room for a new and less experienced white teacher. She described the stress she underwent as a result of having to change so quickly:

> I was so upset I didn't know what to do. Just totally wiped out. I'm thinking about all of this stuff I've got to move. She promised that the janitors would help me move. Nobody helped me. People were almost in tears watching me move all of this stuff in a shopping cart. . . . And, it took me—that means I had to organize my stuff, move it, and get ready for another grade level and be ready to teach. . . . So I did my pre-planning; it almost killed me. . . . Nobody came to help me, but everybody was giving me sympathy. I had to go to the doctor. . . . and I had become hypertensive. But I felt myself, I

> could hardly work, I was so upset. And I had gotten prayer, and was reading my scripture, and meditating.

There was no notice, and she did not get the assistance that was promised. We see here too some sources of the coping strategies, such as religion, that many African Americans use in dealing with the stress of everyday racism. When the moderator asked her if she had been hospitalized for hypertension, the woman answered:

> No, [the physician] put me on an antidepressant . . . in addition to the medication I needed to take—I'm glad you made me clarify that, helped me to clarify it, brother. I had to go on an antidepressant. I didn't take it very long. But that's how upset I was, had to see a physician. I was under his care for awhile. But, I mean, they brought these three white women on. . . . That's what irks me, when I hear about the white people attacking affirmative action, when it's worked in reverse, and it's still happening—to them. . . . Nobody hears about how they get hired and they're less qualified than we are. Nobody hears about how many times we're hired with *extra* qualifications, *more* than qualified, to do the same job that they're hired to do.

The impact of unfair treatment can be complex and extensive in its evolution and impact, involving pain, depression, and physical difficulties like increased hypertension, all at the same time. We also see the reality of many African American employees being *overqualified* for a job, an important issue we return to later.

## Issues of Workplace Networking

Thinking along similar lines, an engineer spoke of a black coworker's experience of depression. His view, shared by other respondents, is that many African Americans are reluctant to seek assistance with psychological pain:

> But it's kind of more against black culture to go for any type of psychological . . . testing. . . . I had one friend who actually went to a depressive state . . . because he was the type of person who just tried to do the best he could at everything. And sometimes you just can't

do that, or do everything. So in this particular case, he went to the point where his body just collapsed, mentally. Where some people's bodies can collapse physically, his collapsed mentally. I personally didn't experience that, but I saw the pain that he went through. And likewise he's having racial-type things at his job, where his counterparts would get promoted at a certain level, where he would stay on a level below, after years. And he was as qualified—sometimes they get you in a position to think that you're not as qualified as the next person, where in reality you may be more qualified than the person that got promoted over you. But a promotion doesn't necessarily mean that this person does higher quality work. It means, sometimes that person knows how to network with the boss better than you do.

Discrimination at work includes getting passed over for promotions as well as discrimination at the entry level. Here again the suffering of one black person is communicated to and felt by others in his friendship network. Research shows that most African Americans rely heavily on informal social networks of friends and relatives for support in dealing with problems like racial discrimination. Thereby, the concerns of one individual are often known in detail by a larger friendship or family network.[41]

Some sociological analysts call social networking a type of "social capital," that is, a resource that stems from close relations among people. This social capital is "created when the relations among persons change in ways that facilitate action."[42] In most white-dominated workplaces, as the engineer suggests, whites have the most social-networking capital—capital that often facilitates their advance in an organization. Yet, African Americans, where possible, often develop their own social networks to counter discrimination, even if these networks are small or extend outside the workplace. We discuss the social capital of African Americans in other accounts over the next several chapters, and we return to the issue of countering and coping strategies for racial discrimination in chapters 5 and 6.

After the comment about whites' networking in the workplace, a woman in the group added that black employees usually have less time to socialize with the boss because they are often working extra hard to prove themselves as capable. The engineer agreed with her statement, then continued:

> And if you're working, you can't network with the boss, and drink coffee with him, and tell him what kind of work and stuff that you're doing. Because you're actually out there in the trenches going to work. So it was not my personal case, but his particular case. He might have gone to a stage where he had such depression he had to actually take medication.

The idea about the qualifications of black and white employees is a theme that one finds in other accounts by black Americans of racial discrimination in the workplace, yet it receives little public and media attention. As reported by numerous African Americans in this and other studies, less qualified whites often get special consideration in competition with better-qualified people of color. Recall the woman above, who put this point accurately: "Nobody hears about how many times we're hired with *extra* qualifications, *more* than qualified, to do the same job that they're hired to do." The recurring white advantage—which is there whether or not whites meet a meritocratic standard—can create many psychological and physical health difficulties for African American employees.

Also critical here is the workplace networking theme suggested in previous comments and in later chapters. In the U.S. economy, many racial barriers are linked, directly or indirectly, to the white "good-ole-boy" networks, which are commonly at the core of workplaces and even of large business sectors.[43] In these critical social networks whites commonly restrict or exclude racial "outsiders" from the information flows and other resources that are critical for successful job or business performance.

## THE HIGH ENERGY COSTS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Another major psychological cost of being mistreated in a racially hostile workplace can be a serious loss of personal energy, including the loss of motivation to work hard or to participate in various family and community activities. Recall from chapter 1 the black psychologist who commented about the energy loss suffered by those who are the daily targets of racial oppression: "Now a black person also has one hundred ergs; he uses fifty percent the same way a white man does, dealing with what the white man

has [to deal with], so he has fifty percent left. But he uses twenty-five percent fighting being black, [with] all the problems being black and what it means."[44] The individual cost of dealing with discrimination is great, and one cannot accomplish as much as one might have when intellectual and physical energy is wasted in this way.

The loss of personal energy in dealing with persisting antiblack discrimination is more than an individual matter. An engineer made this clear in a focus group that was discussing the "eight whole hours of discrimination" they experience daily:

> One of the things, though, that really has had an effect on my family personally was me having [less] time to really spend with my son. As far as reading him stories, talking, working with him, with his writing, and, all of that. And those things really, really hurt us, and it hurt my child, I think, in the long run, because he never had that really. . . . I know when the program was really, really running, some days I would come home and I would have such excruciating headaches and chest pains that I would just lay on the bed and put a cold compress on my head and just relax. Thank God, I got him through that period. . . . And by the time I come home, I'm so stressed out. And he runs up to me, and you know I give him a hug. But when you're so stressed out, you need just a little period of time, maybe an hour or so, just to unwind, just to relax, you know? . . . to just watch the news or something, to kind of unwind and everything. So it definitely affects [you] . . . and you know you're almost energy-less. . . . And then by the time you get home, you have your family. So, by the time you kind of unwind a little bit to get ready to go upstairs, you haven't handled responsibilities.

The pain of workplace mistreatment can have a domino effect, with chest pains and headaches being linked to a serious loss of personal energy. That, in turn, can mean far less energy to deal with important family matters, including raising children. The drain on personal strength caused by whites' discriminating at work can take a significant toll on the activities of black Americans in their individual and family lives well outside their places of employment.

In an important review of the literature, researchers Brown, Keith, and Jackson note that the constant threat of discrimination "may lead many African Americans to maintain a heightened state of anxiety and vigilance that has implications for mental health."[45] Constantly having to watch and counter discrimination takes a toll on mind and body. Thus, in one discussion, a government employee examined the energy exertion issue in another of its troubling aspects:

> One thing, too, is especially if you spend time documenting situations, that takes time: What was said, what did he say, what did I say, and what did I do? . . . That's time, too. I mean you're doing that because you never know what's going to jump out. [Moderator: Why do you feel it necessary to do that?] History. I mean, there were just certain things that [history] teaches you that you need to have some information [on] because that's really the only thing they [whites] understand. . . . Documents. When you start pulling out "This is mine, this is what was said, here, here, here," they understand that. [But if] you start talking off the top of your head . . . you have no credibility, you know what I'm saying? With us it always comes down to being above them. This is just like when we were talking about qualifications, you know, they can come in with less qualifications, but we always have to be maxed out. . . . And sometimes go beyond that.

A psychologist in the group put this issue into a long-term perspective: "That would seem like that's always been a factor, always has been a history of us having to prove ourselves, over and over again, with documentation, this and that, and I would like to . . . get to the point where *my* kids don't have to do that." Thus, the energy drain from white racism extends well beyond the extra effort necessary to prove oneself to those with racially prejudiced minds, because it often entails keeping documentation in order to prove one's accomplishments and counter the commonplace racial discrimination in many employment settings. In such documentation, each African American is often repeating what his or her predecessors had to do to protect against white discrimination. We return to this matter again in a later chapter on strategies for dealing with discrimination.

Note too the recurring sense of justice and fairness that is evident in many of these commentaries. African Americans are major carriers of the long tradition of liberty, freedom, justice, and fairness in the United States. They seek it out and call for it. Many try to get redress for the discrimination they encounter in their workplaces, yet the government agencies in charge of enforcing the U.S. civil rights laws generally do a weak job of enforcing them. So the effort of black employees to get redress there, or in the courts, requires the expenditure of yet more energy, typically to no avail. As we suggested in discussing the *Etter* case in chapter 1, all too often the U.S. "justice" system is really an "injustice" system. This legal system is white-controlled, and most whites in the system seem to have little understanding of the racial discrimination that targets Americans of color. Thus, many whites have little interest in rooting out that discrimination in its individual and institutional forms.

Moreover, to be good at what she or he does, a black worker usually must learn many things about coping with numerous ill-intentioned or hostile whites. As a general rule, this is not a requisite task for similarly situated white Americans. In another context, a female planner explained, "We have to keep learning things, you know; they need to do the same, they need to jump through the same hoops we have to jump through." In addition, the regular education of whites seems to be an imposed responsibility for many African Americans. A sheriff's deputy responded to a previous speaker's statement with this summary:

> And that's the same thing . . . we were talking about on the energy. Burning so much energy trying to educate these people that we qualify, you know? And I always said if you see a black doctor and a white doctor standing side by side, equal in status, that black man is *twice* as [good], because he had to work harder. . . . In every profession.

This is a point one often hears in interviews with African Americans.[46] It is well worth noting that the great achievements of so many African Americans have come in spite of, and on top of, the energy-sapping barriers of discrimination. One can only speculate about what most African Americans could really achieve—for themselves, their families, their communities, and the larger society—if they did not to have to waste so much energy contending with everyday racism.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the costs of white racism are extensive and difficult to fully describe or enumerate. They intrude into many areas of the lives of African Americans, as well as of many other Americans of color. They include a range of psychological costs. Central to these costs is a sense of separation or alienation from the core institutions of U.S. society. In the early twentieth century, in his pathbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk*, the ever-perceptive W. E. B. DuBois provided an eloquent description of the way in which African Americans are segregated from, and "veiled" from, the white world around them. The impact of being "others" and "outsiders" creates a kind of divided consciousness. A black person

> is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[47]

Many African Americans still feel like outsiders in their own society. A recent research study of African American and Cuban American women asked them how they saw their identities. The majority of the black women felt that they were indeed "American," but that they were not seen that way by whites. Moreover, they felt that they as African Americans were economically and socially *excluded* from the mainstream. This was in contrast to the Cuban American women, almost all of whom had been in the United States for three generations or less. Most did not feel they were "American" and did not think whites saw them that way. Yet, these Cuban Americans felt strong feelings of *inclusion*, which increased with length of residence in the United States.[48]

Interestingly, in important ways African Americans as a group are among the most "American" of Americans. Most have nine to fifteen

generations of ancestors who have resided in North America. Most are *very* American in their ancestral mixtures as well. The majority has substantial ancestries going back not only to Africa but also to Europe and, in many cases, to Native American societies.

The sense of exclusion and alienation that most African Americans feel at some point, this sense of being unwelcome, is created by the recurring discriminatory practices of white (and sometimes other) Americans. This tragic and alienated sense comes from the negative reactions of whites in workplaces and in many other everyday settings such as stores, restaurants, schools, and various voluntary associations. When a black woman, man, or child enters a setting in which whites are the overwhelming majority and white norms are dominant, the "outsider" status is often felt in very perceptible and painful ways. Constantly being created and recreated as an outsider, and being excluded from full human recognition, usually has a profound impact. It often affects how African Americans see themselves, and affects their psychological and physical health.[49] At a minimum, they must develop an array of successful coping and contending strategies.

As we noted in chapter 1, modern social science has documented the serious impact that social dehumanization has on the physical and emotional health of human beings, whatever their racial or ethnic backgrounds. Racial oppression marginalizes and dehumanizes its targets. As we have demonstrated, for African Americans, this recurring degradation and discrimination have brought many heavy psychological burdens. It is their "dogged strength alone" that keeps African Americans "from being torn asunder" by these unjust racial burdens.