



Black Women, Work, Stress, and Perceived Discrimination: The Focused Support Group Model as an Intervention for Stress Reduction

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This exploratory study examined the use of two components (small and large groups) of a community-based intervention, the Focused Support Group (FSG) model, to alleviate employment-related stressors in Black women. Participants were assigned to small groups based on occupational status. Groups met for five weekly 3-hr sessions in didactic or small- and large-group formats. Two evaluations following the didactic session and the small and large group sessions elicited information on satisfaction with each of the formats, self-reported change in stress, awareness of interpersonal and sociopolitical issues affecting Black women in the labor force, assessing support networks, and usefulness of specific discussion topics to stress reduction. Results indicated the usefulness of the small- and large-group formats in reduction of self-reported stress and increases in personal and professional sources of support. Discussions on race and sex discrimination in the workplace were effective in overall stress reduction. The study highlights labor force participation as a potential source of stress for Black women, and supports the development of culture- and gender-appropriate community interventions as viable and cost-effective methods for stress reduction. © 1995 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

• Black women • work • stress • discrimination

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Historically, rates of labor force participation of Black women have been higher and more stable than those of White women (Bowman, 1991; Harris, 1989; Hatchett, Cochran, & Jackson, 1991; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983, 1989; Wallace, 1980). In spite of this high employment level, Black women have not reached economic equity with other ethnic/gender groups because they have borne the double burden of ethnic and gender discrimination in the workplace (Evans & Herr, 1991). Such discriminations represent a significant potential source of employment-related stresses for Black women (Mays, Coleman, & Jackson, in press). Perhaps because of these inequities, financial and personal advancement is of greater salience for Black women than White women (Hauenstein & Harburg, 1977). Controlling for class, Black women compared to White women had more arguments with spouses about finances, placed greater importance on personal and financial advancement, and felt less capable of paying next year's bills (Hauenstein & Harburg, 1977). Neighbors, Jackson, Bowman, and Gurin (1983) found that economic difficulties ranked second only to serious personal problems as a source of distress in a national probability sample of Blacks.

Although studies that specifically address the relationship between work and stress among Black women are rare (Mays, Coleman, & Jackson, in press), some investigations have examined these issues with White women (Haw, 1982). Work, in general, seems to benefit the psychological well-being of women (Kessler, 1982; Kessler & McRae, 1982; Warr & Parr, 1982), but differences as a function of marital status, quality of work, interpersonal environment, class, and ethnicity exist: Working women reported more daily stress than nonworking women (Haynes & Feinlieb, 1980); chances for coronary heart diseases rose as the number of children among working mothers increased (Haynes & Feinlieb, 1980); marital adjustment is worse for working wives than nonworking wives (Newberry, Weissman, & Myers, 1979); married female

executives with children suffered more stress than single or divorced women (Hall & Hall, 1980) and women, in comparison to men, less often developed coping patterns for work-related stresses (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Although many of these studies are methodologically flawed (Haw, 1982), the overall evidence suggests that work is a potential source of stress for specific groups of women (Cooper & Davidson, 1981; Haw, 1982).

Although Black women are more likely than White women to be in the labor market, they are more often likely to occupy jobs that are less secure, have fewer benefits, and pay less than those held by White women (Crohan, Antonucci, Adelman, & Coleman, 1989; Rodgers-Rose, 1980; Wallace, 1980). Even though Black women participate at higher rates in the labor market than White women, they have the lowest pay and occupational status jobs of any race/gender groups (Blau & Ferber, 1986; Bowman, 1991; Harris, 1989; Hatchett et al., 1991). As Black women are more likely to work out of financial need, researchers have suggested that concerns and pressures about job salaries and economic rewards may serve as a greater source of pressure for this group (Crohan et al., 1989).

In the case of Black women, perceptions of discrimination—specifically, race-related employment discriminations—were found to be significantly associated with reported job stress (Mays, Coleman, & Jackson, in press). Relative to White women, fewer Black women report job satisfaction (U.S. Department of Labor, 1977), with Black married mothers being the least satisfied with their work roles (Harrison & Minor, 1978).

It may be inferred from the results of these studies that a significant segment of Black women in the labor force are at risk for work-related stress that can affect their general health and psychological well-being. National Health Survey statistics indicate an unusually high level of emotional distress and depression among Black women as compared to White and other ethnic group women (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Urban Re-

view, 1981). Despite the increasing levels of emotional distress reported by Black women (Austin, 1992; Cochran & Mays, 1994; Urban Review, 1981), there are few reports of clinical interventions designed to address this distress and increase well-being among the at-risk segments of Black women in the labor force market. This study represents an exploratory attempt to examine the effectiveness of a community-based intervention model in decreasing self-reported stress and increasing supportive relationships among working Black women.

Focused Support Group (FSG) Model

The dual aims of this project were to (a) develop a cost-effective and viable intervention for the reduction of work-related stresses through an increase in support networks and awareness of personal and political issues affecting work; and (b) develop a large-scale community intervention that would be both culture- and gender-appropriate for those Black women who were most likely not to seek traditional mental health services.

The tool used for this intervention was the focused support group (FSG) model (Mays, 1985). The model was developed by the author over several years of work with women in a variety of therapeutic and educational groups. The goals of the FSG are: (a) to build and enhance group bonding and group cohesion in a short period of time, (b) to present participants with a model of facilitation that they can easily execute, and (c) to change patterns of coping through increased awareness of behaviors, of symptoms associated with those behaviors, and of maladaptive response strategies in the resulting situations (Mays, 1985). In addition, the FSG model endeavors to alleviate or buffer the effects of stress through the provision of positive support networks and by increasing knowledge of interpersonal and psychosocial variables (i.e., ethnic and gender discrimination) that may be significant sources of stress.

The FSG model is conceptualized as an intervention and prevention strategy. It is designed to de-emphasize the role of the professional staff over time and to increase the consumer's competency in facilitating groups. One of the indirect goals is continuation of the support groups in a self-help format. It is intended that through the self-help structure the groups will continue and new ones will develop and become a preventive tool, eventually alleviating a specific problem in a targeted segment of the population.

The techniques of this model can be used with one small group or several small groups, as long as the assembly of all the groups into a large group maintains a sense of intimacy. These small groups work best when the composition is no larger than 8 to 10 participants.

Method

Subjects and Design

Participants were recruited by a variety of methods. Because the project was sponsored by a local community mental health center, flyers were distributed in the catchment area by the community mental health center staff at consultation sites, laundromats, and grocery store bulletin boards of census tract areas with significant Black populations. A listing of Black community leaders, professionals, and social service agencies with predominantly Black populations were mailed flyers announcing the project. Announcements appeared in the local newspaper and in several neighborhood papers. These announcements instructed participants to call if they were interested in attending a 5-week series of support groups for Black women of similar occupations interested in exploring issues affecting Black women and work. It also stated that all sessions in the project, entitled "Black Women Working Together," would be facilitated by Black women and were free of charge.

A total of 102 participants over the 5-week period attended the sessions with an

average weekly attendance after Session 2 of 10 to 12 members for each of the five small groups. Participants, although encouraged to remain for all sessions, were able to terminate at any time, and new members were allowed to join small groups in progress throughout the 5-week period. Prior to small-group assignment, all new members were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire ascertaining standard demographic data, particularly questions about their jobs and levels of job responsibilities. This latter information was used to determine the composition of the small groups and the small-group assignment of each individual. Of the 102 participants, 76 (75%) completed the longer questionnaire on their work histories and demographic data. This questionnaire was completed at the time of their first attendance. Those who did not complete the longer questionnaire did provide information about their jobs in order to be assigned to a group.

The participants who attended the project and completed the longer demographic instrument ($n = 76$) ranged in age from 20 to over 50, with the two largest groups in the 31-35 and 36-40 age brackets (21% and 24%, respectively), followed by the 41-50 and 26-30 age brackets (17% and 16%, respectively). Occupations clustered in the white collar category, with 38% of the sample possessing midlevel graduate degrees (M.A./M.S.W.), 25% with bachelor's degrees, and 20% with 13-14 years of education. The marital status for over half the sample (58%) was divorced, separated, or single, and 32% listed themselves as married or in a long-term committed relationship. The volunteer staff for the project varied in group experience: One facilitator (the student group facilitator) had only one previous group experience, whereas the other 4 group leaders had several years of experience ($M = 6$) in small- and large-group work. All the group leaders were Black women in the social services who were selected because of their backgrounds in group dynamics and similarity to the participants' demographic, educational, and occupational

profiles. Ages of the small-group leaders ranged from late 20s to 40s. The staff met for 30 min before the start of each group for a discussion on the topic chosen for that session and again for 30 min after the last large group to debrief.

Groups met 5 consecutive Saturday mornings at a community mental health center for a total of 3 hrs. Session 1 was a didactic presentation on clinical and research findings on the problems encountered by Black women in the labor market. Starting with Session 2, for the first 30 min participants were assembled in a large group followed by 2 hrs in small groups, and the remaining 30 min in a large-group format. All large groups were facilitated by the author and assigned leaders who remained the same throughout all sessions to the small groups.

Assignment to small groups was based on similarity of occupational status and work responsibilities. It was intended that these assignments would increase the formation of professional and personal networks and enhance group cohesion by maximizing similarities and minimizing differences. The five small groups that resulted were white collar professionals, clericals, managers, students, and community/social service paraprofessionals.

Instruments

In addition to the demographic questionnaire, participants completed evaluations following Session 1 (Assessment 1) and at the end of the project's last session, Session 5 (Assessment 2). Ideally, participants would have completed a pretest prior to the start of the project, a posttest after Session 1, and a final postmeasure after Session 5. Despite several steps to ensure anonymity (e.g., use of mother's maiden name, mother's birthdate, initials of cross streets), many of the participants refused to complete questionnaires if they contained any information in which they could be specifically identified. Most participants, in line with the philosophy of the community mental health center sponsoring the event, were primarily inter-

ested in receiving services and skeptical of participating in research. Therefore, no one was refused participation in any aspect of the project for failure to complete any of the research instruments. When anonymity was guaranteed in that no identifying information would be used on the instruments, participants were more willing to complete the evaluations. Therefore, individual identification numbers were not assigned and only group aggregate data were compiled. Sixty-five participants of the total present at Session 1 (73%, $n = 89$) completed Questionnaire 1 designed to measure the didactic large-group aspect of the intervention. The effectiveness of the topic-focused small-group components was evaluated (Questionnaire 2) by 35 of the total participants present at Session 5 (76%, $n = 46$). Group results were analyzed and reported separately for each of the evaluations in this exploratory study.

ASSESSMENT 1. The purpose of Assessment 1 was to assess participants' satisfaction with a didactic presentation on problems faced by Black women in the labor force, and to measure the expectations of the intervention, reasons for attending, awareness about Black women's experience in the labor force, and effective recruitment strategies for encouraging this particular population to participate in the study. The major variables of interest in the first assessment were satisfaction, changes in self-reported stress, and level of awareness regarding problems faced by Black women in the labor force.

SATISFACTION. Participants rated their level of satisfaction with the didactic session on a 6-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *very dissatisfied* (1) to *very satisfied* (6).

STRESS. In an attempt to determine if participants felt that the didactic presentation mode of the first session was useful in changing their level of work-related stress, they were asked to rate the level of change they experienced as a result of this first session. Possible responses for those who were expe-

riencing work-related stress were *less stress*, *more stress*, or the *same amount of stress* following the first session.

AWARENESS. Using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *a great deal* (7), participants rated the degree to which the information presented increased their awareness of the types of problems faced by Black women in the work force.

ASSESSMENT 2. Assessment 2 measured overall satisfaction with the topic-focused small groups, changes in awareness about Black women's issues, the effectiveness of the large- and small-group designs in stress reduction and development of support networks, and ratings of the usefulness of each small-group topic on self-reported stress reduction. In addition to the questions used in the first questionnaire determining stress, satisfaction, and awareness, other questions were included to determine the effectiveness of each specific small-group topic on self-reported stress reduction, changes in support networks, and the determination of the small-group format as supportive. Also, because it was not possible to match respondents' answers on the first and second assessment, on Assessment 2, participants were asked to rate their level of stress from the beginning of their first session attended and at the end of Session 5 using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *no stress* (1) to *very high stress* (7). Ratings on the usefulness of discussing the specific topics for each session in decreasing stress were obtained by using a 1- to 5-point rating scale. Changes in personal and professional networks were measured with a dichotomous variable indicating *yes* or *no* for increases in each network. All items for each questionnaire were pre-tested for reading level and comprehension.

Procedures

There are two main procedures in the FSG intervention model. The first procedure involved the elicitation and clarification of the topics to be chosen and their importance to the group. This procedure is best accom-

plished using a modified back-translation procedure (Warwick & Osheron, 1973). Topic areas and their meanings are presented to the group. The topic is clarified and redefined until there is a consensus in the group about the topic and its importance for discussion within the limited time frame. In this study, Session 1 consisted of a didactic presentation in which findings from the clinical and research literature on the problems encountered by Black women in the labor market were presented. After this 90-min presentation, participants were instructed to discuss these problems with other participants and determine if these problems or others that had not been presented were of primary concern to the participants. They were asked to choose for examination the four problems that bothered them the most in the remaining four small-group sessions. Participants were given a 30-min coffee break to complete this task. The group then reconvened in a large-group format. Participants presented their list of work-related stresses. These problems were discussed and defined until both the topics and their order of presentation for the remaining four sessions had been decided by the participants. Details on the FSG model can be found in Mays (1985).

The second procedure involved the facilitation of the small group in three steps. First, behaviors associated with the chosen topic, were identified from previous studies. Participants were asked to cite specific examples of the chosen employment-related stress behavior. For instance, on the topic of sexism, occurrences of expectations to make coffee or being called "honey" were given as examples of the existence of the problem. This was termed *naming the problem*. Second, identification of the moods and feelings associated with the probited, that is, *recognizing the source of feelings*. In the example just cited women felt angry, disrespected, and abused. The third step was identification of the behavior used to cope with the feelings and moods, that is, *how do I cope?* Facilitation focused on pointing out maladaptive coping

strategies and engaging the group in a brainstorming strategy to identify adaptive coping strategies, that is, *discovering a different way*. All members were required to contribute during each step before the group proceeded.

Session 1, a 90-min didactic presentation, focused on issues thought to be facing Black women in the area of work. The topic for Session 2 was conflict/stress; Session 3 was racism/sexism; Session 4 was male-female/female-female relations; and Session 5 was planning for the future. Beginning with Session 2, participants met initially in the large-group format for 30 min. The purpose of the large group was to ensure that all members received the same orientation to the topic in order to observe how group processes varied as a function of occupational status. In the orientation to the topic, a definition of the topic, along with examples of its manifestation and impact on Black women, was presented. One of the critical elements was the use of examples that were universal to the experience of most Black women's daily activities in the labor market. Therefore, examples were chosen that could occur to any Black woman regardless of a specific occupation, job setting, or job status. After 30 min in this format, participants dispersed to meet in small groups using the three-step procedure previously outlined.

After each small group, participants met again in a large-group format in which each small group displayed its summary of important issues discussed by the group on newsprint. A different small-group member was selected each week to present the group summary to the assembled large group. Participants were encouraged to use this as a practice forum for those individuals who had difficulty speaking before large groups, but needed to do so in their jobs.

In Session 4, participants were offered the opportunity to compile a networking directory that contained names, addresses, and occupations of each person. Inclusion in the directory was voluntary. Participants were enthusiastic about the directory and suggested

that additional information about participants seeking or offering employment be included.

In the last session (Session 5), small-group meetings were reduced to 90 min, and the second large-group meeting was increased to 60 min. Participants received copies of the networking directory and volunteered additional employment-related data on their skills.

Results

Assessment 1

The goal of the first assessment was to examine participants' reasons for attending the session as well as their levels of satisfaction with the didactic format and expectations of the session. Finally, as a way of evaluating the relevance of the information presented in the didactic presentation, there was an interest in determining their level of awareness of issues faced by Black women in the workplace. Eighty-nine women attended the didactic session and 65 of them (73%) completed Assessment 1. Table 1 presents the results of Assessment 1. Examining the distribution of reasons for attending the session, 34% of the sample indicated that they came because of concerns about the plight of Black women, 31% came to meet other Black women who were experiencing similar problems, 14% came to learn about the issues of Black women, and 11% attended to seek help because they did not know where else to go. A substantial proportion of the

TABLE 1 Evaluation of Didactic Format (Assessment 1)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Degree of satisfaction	5.51	0.75
Level of stress	2.66	0.74
Level of awareness	2.72	1.51

Note. $n = 65$, except in the case of missing data.

TABLE 2 Evaluation of Topic-Focused Small Groups (Assessment 2)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Satisfaction	5.83	0.71
Stress	2.82	0.58
Awareness	3.82	1.29
Felt program was supportive	4.74	0.44
Stress Reduction		
Beginning stress	5.23	1.69
Ending stress	4.30	1.28*
Amount of stress reduction for each topic-focused small group		
Session 1 (didactic)	3.10	1.61
Session 2 (conflict/stress)	4.21	0.98
Session 3 (racism/sexism)	3.92	0.95
Session 4 (male-female/ female-female relationships)	4.00	1.16
Session 5 (future planning)	4.24	0.99

Note. $n = 35$, except in the case of missing data. Statistical differences evaluated by *t* tests.

* $p < .001$.

sample (61.5%) indicated that they were satisfied with the initial didactic session on Black women and work. Means and standard deviations for the variables of satisfaction, knowledge, and stress indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the didactic presentation, that it had an effect on their stress level but varied in how much it changed their awareness of the interpersonal and sociopolitical issues facing Black women in the labor market (see Table 2).

Many of the women who attended reported that they had very little knowledge of the psychosocial issues facing Black women in the world of work (64.5%). There was a low correlation between degree of satisfaction and reduction of stress (Kendall's $\tau = .23$, $p < .05$), indicating that changes in stress were associated with greater satisfaction with the didactic presentation. Greater knowledge was related to lower satisfaction ($\tau = -.22$, $p < .05$). The more knowledgeable participants were of issues facing Black women in the workplace, the less satisfied

they were with a didactic presentation about those problems. Greater awareness was also correlated with less change in stress ($r = -.24, p < .05$). At the end of the didactic session, 40% of the participants reported a reduction in feelings of stress, but 44.6% reported their stress level remained the same. Only 1 individual experienced more stress, and 14% reported no change as they had not felt stressed before the session began. There was an interest in determining the impact of the project on those individuals who indicated that they were experiencing a high level of stress, or who came to the groups because they were concerned about mental health and interpersonal issues. Several analyses were done comparing the stress and no-stress groups. No significant differences between the two groups were found on any of the variables. Finally, no differences were found on the variables of stress, knowledge, and satisfaction between those who came out of concern about mental health/interpersonal problems and those concerned with other issues. It appears that, regardless of their expectations or their level of stress, most women were satisfied with the didactic presentation mode of Session 1. Their level of satisfaction and change in their self-reported level of stress was most affected by how familiar they were the problems faced by Black women in the labor force. The more aware participants were of the interpersonal and sociopolitical issues faced by Black women in the labor force, the less likely they were to be satisfied or report any changes in their levels of stress.

Assessment 2

In the second assessment, the primary interest was in learning how effective each of the topic-focused small groups was and their overall effect on the major variables of interest: satisfaction, stress, and awareness. Table 2 indicates that participants were very satisfied with the small- and large-group formats, found the formats successful in reducing self-reported stress, but like Assessment 1, there was variability in the small- and large-

group formats' ability to effect awareness change. The participants rated the small- and large-group formats as providing a great deal of support, and reported a significant change in their level of self-reported stress between their first session and the final session, ($t = 4.23, p < .001$).

Results on the usefulness of each of the four small- and large-group sessions in reducing self-reported stress demonstrated that the discussions on conflict and stress, and planning for continuation of the support groups were slightly more useful than discussions of gender and race discrimination or interpersonal relationships (see Table 3). Though focusing on ending level of stress only, a stepwise regression analysis indicated that in the ratings of usefulness of specific topics for overall stress reduction, Session 3 (racism/sexism) accounted for 20% of the variance in stress reduction ($R^2 = .20$). No other variables were significant predictors in stress reduction. As in the first assessment, no significant differences between the stress and no-stress groups were found on any of the variables.

The significant correlations between satisfaction and stress reduction and awareness show that those reporting the most stress reduction also reported being the most satisfied and having the greatest degree of awareness. Satisfaction was highly correlated with planning, and plans to participate in the continuation of a support group. The pattern of relationships among satisfaction, stress, and awareness was the same as in Assessment 1.

The significant relationship between awareness and specific sessions seemed to indicate that the sessions on racism/sexism and future planning increased the participants' awareness of Black women's issues. Increase in awareness of issues correlated strongly with the degree to which the group was perceived as supportive. Awareness was also related to increases in professional networks, whereas discussions of same-sex and mixed-sex relationships were more effective in increasing personal supports. Personal support networks of 82% of the women were

TABLE 3 Evaluation of Topic-Focused Small Groups

	<i>Kendall's τ</i>
Satisfaction	
Stress reduction	.37*
Awareness	.37*
Black women and work didactic session	.45*
Conflict/stress session	.44*
Racism/sexism session	.33
Male-female/female-female relations session	.33
Planning for the future session	.46**
Professional support networks	.39*
Will participate in ongoing group	.70**
Stress Reduction	
Degree of small-group support	.37*
Awareness	
Black women and work didactic session	.38*
Conflict/stress session	.43*
Racism/sexism session	.51**
Male-female/female-female relations session	.41*
Planning for the future session	.49**
Degree of small-group support	.51**
Professional support networks	.34*
Male-Female/Female-Female relations session	
Personal support networks	.40*
Beginning Stress	
Small groups as supportive	.36*
Ending Stress	
Small groups as supportive	.38*
Future groups	
Personal support networks	.38*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

reported to increase as a result of the project, and 60% of the women also reported increases in their professional support networks. Nearly the entire sample (98%) stated an intention to continue in ongoing groups in the self-help format.

Discussion

This was an exploratory study of a community-based intervention model, the Focused Support Group (Mays, 1985), designed to allevi-

ate work-related stresses and increase the personal and professional support networks of working Black women. In this intervention model, discussions on the topic of racism and sexism in the workplace emerged as the most important in accounting for overall decreases in self-reported employment-related stress and increases in feelings of support. These discussions in supportive structures with individuals of similar employment circumstances raised awareness of the plight of Black women in the labor force, and offered participants successful examples of coping

with such stresses. The result was reduced employment-related stress and increases in personal and professional sources of support.

Whereas Black women represent the sex/ethnic group most likely to experience high levels of psychological distress (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Howard, 1986; Urban Review, 1981; Warheit, Holzer, & Avey, 1975), they are also more likely to utilize mental health services only when this distress is of a serious or crisis nature (Mays, Howard, & Jackson, 1995; Neighbors & Howard, 1987; Neighbors & Taylor, 1985). This tendency toward mental health service utilization within a crisis format accounts for some of the difficulty in recruiting and retaining Black women in prevention activities. Few mental health studies in the literature have been successful in recruiting significant numbers of Black women in order to study effective prevention strategies if they were not already captive participants in other programs. Most current knowledge of prevention strategies for Black women has either been based on very small sample sizes or has examined Black women's behavior within mixed ethnic groups that were not specifically designed for them. Although this study suffered from limitations based on its ability to employ systematic pre- and post-test measures, it did provide some observations on a cost-effective, gender- and ethnic-appropriate prevention strategy for Black women. Results should be considered in light of the fact that some participants did not complete the instruments, so the outcome may be biased toward positive results. On the other hand, because the groups were open and participants were free to drop out at any time, the fact that many of the respondents remained throughout the entire project may be an indicator of the usefulness of the model. Additional studies in which participants agree to complete matched pre- and postmeasures would further knowledge of the usefulness of the model. However, even the limited analyses possible with the current design and population do highlight a potential area of intervention that may re-

duce Black women's stresses in the workplace and increase their sense of psychological well-being. This focus seems particularly important in light of findings from a national sample of Black women that indicated a significant relationship between job satisfaction and life satisfaction, happiness (Crohan et al., 1989).

Discussions of racism and sexism in both the small groups and the didactic presentation heightened Black women's awareness of the psychosocial dynamics of ethnic and gender discrimination in the workplace. Working women, despite acknowledging the existence of general sex discrimination in the workplace, consistently deny that they themselves are the recipients of personal sex discrimination (Crosby, 1984). This tendency to cognitively distort the existence of personal discrimination has been viewed as a failure to recognize the collective experience or structural forces that impede the progress of specific categories of individuals (Crosby, 1982, 1984; Gurin, 1985; Twiss, Tabb, & Crosby, 1989). This lack of awareness of group-specific circumstances reflects an individualized position in which individuals are solely responsible for their progress in society (Lerner, 1981). In the last decade researchers have focused on the importance of group consciousness as a variable in accounting for behavior, particularly among such oppressed groups as Blacks and women (Gurin, 1985). The civil rights and women's movements were important vehicles for concretizing group consciousness for African-Americans and women, respectively. Yet neither of these movements has done a good job in addressing the unique experiences of Black women, which result from the interactive status of being simultaneously Black and female. Only in recent years have researchers recognized the necessity for developing models that view the behavior of Black women as the result of the interactive nature of their ethnic and gender status (Henley, 1985). It seems to follow that this same prescription is necessary when addressing the mental health needs of Black women.

Research on the curative role of consciousness-raising groups for women have identified increased awareness and social comparison of statuses as important components in increased psychological well-being. The appropriateness of such groups for Black women has been rejected as unhelpful, based on the primacy of gender only in such groups. Yet, this exploratory study suggests that interventions that address the gender and ethnic experiences of Black women may be of value. The curative role of the development of awareness of experiences specific to other Black women should be explored in future research targeting Black women. Whereas the civil rights and women's movements have helped to develop a women's group identity and a Black identity, neither of these may have sufficiently captured the interactive identity of the Black woman. The structure of the FSG model is one that provides the necessary components for the development of a Black women's group consciousness. The model included: a collective orientation of interest in the plight of Black women; a structure that allowed individuals to make social comparisons of the experiences of individuals in similar occupational circumstances, and with those in higher and lower status occupations; an opportunity to judge the role of the social structure in accounting for the differences in the comparisons; and last, the opportunity to develop a collective identification through the recognition of shared values and interests (Gurin, 1985).

In the FSG model each participant gave specific examples of personal ethnic and gender discrimination and the symptoms associated with that experience of discrimination. Stresses generated by perceptions of discrimination are difficult to confront and cope with, because they are often intangible, viewed as personal problems, and not verified by others in the work environment. In the supportive environment of the FSG small and large groups, participants were able to make social comparisons of work environments and differentiate the possible personal and structural contributions to job-related stressors.

Some of the Black women in our groups had found adaptive ways to cope with these discriminations, which provided an opportunity for others with maladaptive coping strategies to judge the effectiveness of individual actions. This exploratory study suggests that the FSG model (Mays, 1985, 1986), as an intervention, accomplished three things. First, it assisted Black women in verifying that some of their experiences in the workplace were a function of discrimination. Second, it increased their awareness of the sociopolitical contributions to those experiences. Finally, it identified the psychological symptoms and stressors associated with those experiences and adaptive coping mechanisms that may be effective strategies for decreasing employment-related distress of Black women in the labor force. This study calls attention to labor force participation as a potential source of stress for Black women and highlights the FSG as a cost-effective and culture- and gender-appropriate community intervention for reduction of employment-related stress.

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