

# The Phenomenon of Triple Jeopardy in the Narrative of Black Women

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## Abstract

Official government statistics show that the segment of the population that claims to be black is the segment that starts working at an earlier age, invest more in learning a trade and earn less than their white colleagues. We agree that studies on gender and inequalities could address the intersection of ethnicity, gender and class.

We have analyzed the narratives about the professional career of two black women living in Minas Gerais, Brazil, and we point out that the perceptions and expectations built on gender and ethnicity are present both in personal relationships and in the working relationships of the interviewees. Both respondents are from low-income families, worked in the service sector for most of their careers, and narrated situations of prejudice and discrimination. We point out that the manifestations of sexism and racism still permeate social relations and influence labor relations.

## Introduction

The liberal feminist movement was born seeking rights for women. However, this movement showed the lack of political action with regards to the needs of black women (Ribeiro, 2006; Holvino, 2008; McBride, Hebson & Holgate, 2014). This is not to belittle their importance in guaranteeing rights for women, but to understand that the liberal feminist movement, while claiming equality for all women, ignores the fact that their needs are not all the same type.

Especially in societies where discrimination is hidden and seen as taboo, the achievements of the feminist movement giving more importance to white middle-class women. Thus, the black feminist movement was more critical and exposed the contradictions of liberal feminist movements, since many claims left out the demands of women of other classes and ethnicities (Collins, 2000; Zanetti, 2011; Damasco, Maio, Monteiro, 2012; Rafferty, 2012; McBride, Hebson & Holgate, 2014).

The black population in Brazil, is the segment enters the labour market earlier (Damaske, 2011; Echeverria et al, 2015.). It is also the segment that invests more in training compared to

other segments of the population and yet earns less regarding their qualification, suffers the highest unemployment rates (Mattos, 2009) and the worst salary discrepancies. Still, black women are the majority in domestic service (Teixeira, Saraiva & Carrieri, 2015) and in many situations there is no formal contract outlining their duties and conditions (Domingues, 2007; Neves, 2013; Dieese, 2013). Such statements point to the concentration of black workers in precarious situations, without the guarantee of labor rights reserved to workers with formal contracts.

### **Research problem**

This paper aims to contribute to discussions about black women in the labor market, from a perspective that considers the various factors (class, gender, race), that go into the causes inequality. This is why we asked the question: How do you characterize the narratives about the life and work of black women? To address the issue, we interviewed two black women in Uberlândia (Minas Gerais/ Brazil) and analyzed their narratives. It is an exploratory and qualitative research.

### **Literature review: the intersection of the theories**

The experience of black women was not contemplated by the classic discourse about the oppression of women (Carneiro, 2001; Mariano, 2005; McBride, Hebson, & Holgate, 2014), since they were always affected by the intersection of gender and color oppression, recognized in the international feminist literature by the term double jeopardy (Beale, 1969). However, the assumptions of additive discrimination ignored the experiences of black women and are not comparable to the experiences of white women and those of black men, for example (Greenman & Xie, 2008; Lloyd-Jones, 2009).

In countries like the United States (Collins, 2000; Lloyd-Jones, 2009) and Brazil (Carneiro, 2001), due to past slavery, there is a concentration of black women in parts of the labor market that in a sense provide services previously seen in the time of serfs. Therefore, the segregation of work by gender and color is strongly reaffirmed and makes it difficult to transition to other occupations (Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Rafferty, 2012). When gender and ethnic inequalities are combined with perceptions about what is appropriate for men and women in social relations they reach their fullest potential and are reproduced in labor relations (Benedict, 1995; Acker, 2006).

We agree with the statement that research on inequality and domination should at least consider the intersection of color, gender and even class (Acker, 2006, 2009; Holvino, 2008; McBride, Hebson, & Holgate, 2014).

### **Class, race and gender: categories that are involved in the production of inequalities**

Bourdieu (2007, 2013) argues that there are cultural distinctions between people, created by the mechanisms of social articulation, resulting in class inequalities that can't be surmounted only by economic means.

Class differences are more clearly visible, recognized and legitimized, and influence the composition of unequal relations. However, they are not the only components of inequalities: the class is linked to inequalities built on the basis of color and gender differences (Acker, 2006).

Racist oppression in Brazilian society, is rooted in the social constitution, and that means appearance becomes crucial for discrimination: it is enough that a group pays attention to the features of others such as "visible skin color, hair and features" (Soares, 2000, p. 13) to form social constructions that go beyond just the physical differences and help establish negative assumptions about others.

In Brazil, the myth of racial democracy was driven by a speech by the abolitionist movement that affirmed the good relationship between a master and his slave (Domingues, 2005, 2007). The idea that the country is a racial democracy, in a way, inhibits the actions of the racism resistance movement with regards to discriminatory situations. However, overt prejudice has been replaced by discriminatory attitudes that are more subtle and indirect because social conventions condemn open expressions of discrimination based on skin color and physical characteristics.

The movement by blacks in Brazil to achieve equal status with regard to rights and to being included shows that racial democracy in Brazil is just a myth. Racial quotas in public universities as well as those found in private companies and more recently in government agencies (Law Projetc 6738/2013 – Silva & Silva, 2014), are examples that both show and also try to reduce the inequalities that exist based solely on skin color.

It is worth noting that in an attempt to disguise racism, people in an economically superior position are considered as being less black. This actually establishes a sort of scale for being black, something that had not been considered before where blacks were considered just black among their peers. This shows that the notion of race is tied to economic status and therefore should not be considered separately (Rosa, 2014).

The idea about class and color is also found within the notion of gender. When considering the characteristics attributed to men and women in the workplace that represents the sphere of public life, women find themselves in contradictory situations. Women are expected to behave according to the typical female stereotype and exhibit characteristics such as docility, beauty and submission. At the same time women have to exhibit aggression and competitiveness, characteristics that are associated with males. If they hope to achieve better work opportunities. They also have to put work as their number one priority ahead of family (Acker, 2006; Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2012) and this in turn hinders the breaking away from the sexist theories that have existed for years (Menegat & Silva, 2012).

On an individual level, the expectation faced by certain groups may directly affect their life choices. In this context asking women about their expectations in relation to work and intended career reinforces the accepted standards of heterosexuality and the establishment of both rigid and complementary categories with regards to females and males. This evaluates with regards to females and males. This evaluates the possibility of a women remaining on the job or abandoning it if family obligations become more central. Thus gender and class are two of the factors found in the construction of unequal relations by limiting access to certain resources such as education and training.

### **Triple Jeopardy being a black and poor woman**

Women “can’t be pressured to give up their job and career because this is what defines their autonomy as a human being” (Mattos, 2009, p. 36). However expectations vary due to one’s social class. In some societies with regards to white middle-class women it is expected that they will forsake work once they become mother, something that doesn’t extend to black women.

When we examine the expectations of working class families we see that the paid work of black women often occupy a less recognized position. Their work outside the home is considered secondary and therefore less important than the work done by men; Even though women are expected to take care of themselves from an early age (Collins, 2000; Holvino, 2008; Damaske, 2011; Echeverria et al., 2015). In addition women are never compensated for housework even though the hours of work and additional responsibilities have a direct effect on their social and professional assignments.

When we analyze the female labor market and expectations built on black working class women and also the prejudice based on appearance and skin color that still permeates social relations in Brazil, we can consider that gender categories, color and class are related and increase the unequal position of black women in the labor market.

### **Procedures for collecting data**

This article is a result of qualitative and exploratory research. As participants, we selected two people, living in a medium-sized city in the province of Minas Gerais (Brazil), which are identified as (1) women and (2) black, occupying positions of trust in the public service. The two women participants were asked to speak of their life trajectories, focusing on their work experiences, from the question: "Would you tell me about your professional journey. You could start with your first work experience. Cite, for example, from when you started working, where, as it was in day to day work, and, from there, to tell me how your professional life has been, in all the jobs and experiences you have had until now".

The duration of each interview was approximately two hours. The interviews were transcribed for further analysis. Bauer and Aarts (2008) explain that there are at least two restrictions for the search corpus size up. First, the versions of reality are not infinite, because even if the individual experiences seem unique in some ways these experiences are the result of social processes and for that reason, representations of a group of people in a specific social context "are, in part shared" (Bauer & Aarts, 2008, p. 71). Second, the resources available to analyze the corpus are limited and it is necessary to restrict the material to analyze it properly.

The two participants, Vera and Ana (fictitious names), 45 and 44, respectively, are married, with children, and work in the public service. Vera got her first job at age 12 as a nanny and has a degree in law. Ana got her first job at 09, as a maid, and at the time of this research, was a university student and taking Social Service courses.

We have adopted a discourse analysis with Foucault's influence (Flick, 2009), as a method for understanding the interviewees narratives. The discourse analysis reveals the origin and regularity of speeches, the contradictions, the facts that are comparable, as well as the changes and transformations revealed by discursive formations (Foucault, 2008).

The readings of the transcripts allowed us to divide the information from the interviews into three categories: work, family and prejudice. From these categories, we turned to the material and grouped some sub-themes around the categories. Foucault (2008, p. 110) considers that "an utterance is always accompanied in their margins by other utterances", which point out the association's utterance to a field that will show their meaning in a specific context. In this sense we talk about interdiscourse, evoked by what has been said at another time, by someone else.

### **Results and discussion**

### **Work: formal (with contract) and informal (without contract)**

The concentration of black women as domestic servants is still striking in Brazil (Teixeira, Saraiva & Carrieri, 2015). Both study participants have had experiences that exemplify this reality. Vera began working as a nanny in her early teens, and then as a maid in family homes. Ana worked as a maid from childhood through adolescence. Both worked these jobs always on an informal basis without a formal contract or guaranteed labor rights. The narratives on the experiences of working as a maid indicate memories of both satisfaction and distress:

God always puts great employers in my life [...] But after a while I told myself I did not want to work as a maid anymore [...] not in any way disregarding the work [...] but for me in my youth, with my first boyfriend [...] it is so embarrassing [...] (Vera).

The speech reveals the gratitude for the relationship established with the employers and at the same time shows how status is linked to domestic service work. By saying that "it was so embarrassing," Vera shows her perception – a reflection of society - that domestic work is inferior and carries less social prestige. This aspect relates to the symbolic capital as indicated by Bourdieu (2007, 2013) and the social position of the interviewee.

With regard to entry into the formal labor market, the stories are similar because both were working in the service sector. Ana started doing cleaning work, and later as a saleswoman; Vera started as a cashier in a supermarket, and went through several functions in the company she worked at for years.

Besides the experiences in the formal and informal labor market, the two women interviewed were also involved in volunteer work. Ana maintained a Foundation for four years for children and adolescents. The work there focused on the dissemination of popular culture of African origin. Vera, in turn, was in charge of a group of regular meetings focusing on the health and quality of life for women. The group promoted meetings while they were socializing and discussing women's health, self-esteem, domestic violence and legal counseling for women.

Both interviewees mention that at other times in their professions, they kept two paid functions: one in the formal market and one in the informal market. Ana's first job came in adulthood after the birth of her first child and it was in the service sector. Even though Ana had working and doing most of the household chores at the same times, Ana uses the expression "I joined the market". This expression indicates that the interviewee considers a formal job as being synonymous with what we call the labor market.

At other times of the narratives, Vera and Ana mentioned that they had to resort jobs to supplement the family income. While occupying jobs in the formal labor market, they sought alternatives to fill in what they called "free time".

### **Birth Family and Formed Family**

Vera and Ana's parents divorced when they were children and both mother were left with the responsibility of raising children and supporting the family. Having to start work while being quite young is in a sense the result of circumstances that are consistent with the information provided about the black population (Leite & Souza, 2010; Echeverria et al., 2015).

Vera starts her narrative confirming the social vulnerability she experienced, describing the beginning of her work offering services in the home, as a nanny, to contribute to the family income. Her narrative reinforces her family history, both for her and for her mother:

My mother works hard, day and night, my mother worked two jobs, she worked in a school cafeteria, she worked ironing clothes too. Still, she often could not provide basic needs for the family [...] (Vera).

Similarly, Ana, due to family difficulties, started working at the age of **nine**, as a maid in exchange for food, because her family didn't have enough money to support everyone.

[...] I climbed a small stool to wash dishes, to wash running shoes in the sink [...] because of food, I worked in exchange for food, to help my mother. But after my mother had to give their children to other families, because she was unable to sustain us (Ana).

By saying "in the past", Ana seems to put a distinction between the time of her childhood and the present, thus in her later life, despite the difficulties, she did not go through the same situations as her mother. Her work as a child was similar to that of a slave, "we worked in exchange for food", said Ana. That was not the only experience of exploitation that the interviewee experienced:

At eleven, I went to work in a house [...] was almost two o'clock and I had not eaten. I asked if I could eat and my boss said I could have whatever the dog doesn't eat (Ana).

It was not only the status associated with the image of a maid that made Ana look for other job opportunities. Although the interviewee returned to work as a maid later, by necessity, the memory of having been humiliated in this situation was remarkable. We realized that the interviewee, when speaking of all formal and informal jobs she that has mentioned the names of the employers, but avoided saying the names of the people who mistreated her the most.

Note that the career choices of the respondents were affected by their stories of live and reflect a wish to make changes.

When I was a kid, I remember seeing many injustices and I told my maternal grandmother 'Granny, I'm going to study, I'll be a lawyer and I'm going to provide justice (Vera).

I want to work in the Social Service field [...] totally different from anything I've ever done [...] I want to work with health, oncology. Women need as much support as possible (Ana).

The passage "when I as a kid" and the injustices that Vera claims to have seen indicate remarkable facts in the life of the interviewee. Although the interviewee did not comment about a specific situation that drove her desire to become a lawyer, her statement points to a perception society that promotes inequality. Similarly, Ana indicates a desire to provide assistance to women in treatment because she judges that they need additional support.

It was also observed that the tasks and responsibilities assumed by the interviewed families that were formed in adulthood are still related to the roles traditionally attributed to women. Even though they had assumed prominent positions in their professional life, they never left the care of their children and home in the hands of others. Any professional decision they made always took into account how it could affect their husband and children.

## **Maintenance of prejudice: racism and sexism**

When Vera comments on interactions with colleagues by the phrase "A black woman in a place dominated by men... is not an easy thing," she refers to the difficulty derived from the prejudice regarding black women. The difficulties, however, are seen by the interviewee as obstacles that once overcome are a source of satisfaction:

I, black, humble [...] working with lawyers whose fathers are judges [...]. So survive here  
is very good [...] being in the same league with the big boys and being respected as equal is a great feeling [...] we are not afraid of challenge, right! Addressing the challenges is something that we women, we seek to do (Vera).

Perceptions of gender and color prejudice are often subtle since they are immersed in social relations that reinforce these problems. However, the interviewees seem aware of their effects, including other features related to appearance: "[...] black, chubby girl, poor, added together, right?" (Ana).

Regarding experienced prejudice, the strategy "turning a blind eye" mentioned by Vera is a way to escape the hostile treatment and avoid interference in their life and activities. However, we realize that both the interviewees did not ignore the negative effect that such discrimination had on their lives.

Even famous black people suffer prejudice, people scream, talk about the subject [...] But most of the time, racism is hidden. Society does not accept us yet, you know? (Ana).

It "closed" prejudice [...] it is difficult to fight because it is hidden, but it is up to the "jokes" [...] racist people are used to thinking and acting in a racist way, and we remain silent (Vera).

The invisibility of inequality is one way to keep it and refers to the degree of awareness that you have of what is or is not unequal treatment. Acker (2006, 2009) said that awareness depends on the viewer's point of view, that is, those who have privileges often don't realize it.

## Conclusions

The narratives of the interviewees seem compatible with the criticism of the liberal feminist movement that not all women are protected. The stereotype of women being kept in the private sphere of home and family life did not apply to Ana and Vera, not even when they were quite young, or their mothers, as Collins (2000) and Holvino (2008) reported on what was expected from black women.

In addition, early entry into the labor market is consistent with studies of Damaske (2011), Holvino (2008), Menegat and Silva (2012) who pointed out the expectation that black women of the working class are responsible for their own support from an early age. Their speeches are not just considered by only what they say but also by the social and historical context.

Although the interviewees tried to ignore the prejudice they faced there are cases where the hostile treatment they received left a mark on their lives and also influenced some of their career choices. Ana and Vera were affected emotionally and felt that they had to work harder to prove they deserved to have their jobs.

Associated with the prejudice of gender and race, family social status and lack of access to basic resources made it difficult for the participants to make free choices about when and how to enter the labor market. Having economic resources available to someone is not always enough to change social relations. Knowledge, skills and origin are components of what Bourdieu (2007, 2013) called symbolic capital, and are linked to the economic capital in the class setting.

It was also found that while female participation in the labor market is growing, it does not exempt women who assume greater responsibility for the care of the home, children and family (Holvino, 2008; Mattos, 2009; Damaske, 2011).

The contributions of this study are intended as organizations highlighting the need to consider the diversity in the workforce, emphasizing respect in interpersonal treatment; the researchers in the field of human resources working with gender issues, since it shows a worrying social framework that needs to be debated and not ignored - this framework in turn interferes in the relations between people in the workplace and can generate open conflicts or covert violence, such as bullying; and too to society as it addresses issues such as racism, sexism, and civility in relations between people.

To fill the gaps in the subject we propose conducting research to consider: (a) an approach that also includes sexual and religious diversity and even aspects of prejudice aimed at immigrants; (B) analysis of multiple cultures; (C) impacts in the workplace from biographical trajectories or longitudinal studies that express the experienced prejudice, coping strategies and organizational policies on the subject.

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