Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race (2024), **21:2**, 273–292
doi:10.1017/S1742058X23000218

ARTICLE

Mitigating Unemployment Stigma

Racialized Differences in Impression Management among Urban and Suburban Jobseekers

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Abstract

The stigma faced by unemployed Americans places a toll on their wellbeing and decreases their life chances. While all unemployed Americans are subject to stigmatization, the stigma levied on Black Americans may be particularly potent due to racializing stereotypes that associate Blackness with the undeserving poor, including the inability to obtain employment. Given the social and economic challenges Black people face, research elucidating the racial complexities of unemployment stigma is needed. Through in-depth open format face-to-face interviews of unemployed individuals residing in urban and suburban areas, this study produces an alternative perspective on how impression management techniques are connected to both internalization and mitigation of unemployment stigma. This study contributes to employment, race, and stigma literature by providing a theoretical frame that synthesizes Du Boisian and dramaturgical concepts to conceptualize an "unemployed worker-self." Through this framing, I find variations across race and community type in impression management techniques executed by unemployed people. I conclude with suggestions for future research and potential applications for the theoretical frame developed in this study.

Keywords: unemployment; stigma; impression management; race; urban; suburban; Goffman; Du Bois; double consciousness

Introduction

Unemployment is an enduring aspect of American society. While the broader implications of job loss are well documented (Drydakis 2015; Shimer 2012), past research focuses primarily on the financial and material conditions related to joblessness. Because employment is perceived as a marker of social standing and moral character in society, unemployed people are often viewed as undesirable or suffering from an individual character flaw (Godofsky et al., 2010; Goffman 1967). Disposed of this crucial aspect of identity, unemployed people experience stigma that exacts a toll on their general wellbeing (Lin and Leung, 2010). Stigma, often defined as an attribute that is deeply discrediting, reduces the stigmatized from a whole person to a discounted one (Goffman 1963), which also negatively impacts life outcomes and is associated with longer unemployment duration (Godofsky et al., 2010).

While unemployment related stigma affects all unemployed Americans, it may be particularly potent for Black individuals who encounter stigma that is intertwined with racialization processes in a society that associate "failures" with Blackness. That is,

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X23000218 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unemployment stigma holds more significance for Black people who already contend with higher levels of pervasive stigmatization. Employed minorities, for instance, experience a 36% increase in stress linked to stigma compared to a 13.8% increase for unemployed Whites (Meyer et al., 2008) Furthermore, we need only consider the image of the "welfare queen" as indication of how Black people are typified as unemployed social service abusers solely based on their racial status (Jarrett 1996; Stuber and Schlesinger, 2006). These realities coupled with enduring racial inequities in unemployment (Wilson and Darity, 2022) underscores the need for research centered around the racialized complexities of unemployment stigmatization.

In Erving Goffman's (1959) path-breaking research, he describes stigma as the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance. In most areas of life people strive to present themselves in a favorable light. In the context of unemployment, unemployed people use impression management techniques aimed at shaping the perceptions of a diverse audience, including employers, professional networks, family members, and friends, all of whom assess their performances. While Goffman's framework of impression management provides a foundational understanding of unemployment stigmatization, in general, a more comprehensive understanding that includes its racial complexities is gleaned by the incorporation of Du Bois's insights.

When examining Black jobseekers' encounters with unemployment related stigma, Goffman's theory alone proves less robust. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), who coined the concept of double consciousness, explained how Black individuals perceive themselves not only through their own cultural perspective but also through the lens of White society. Within this framework, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how Black individuals may develop distinct approaches to impression management in contrast to their White counterparts. Consequently, in this study, I posit that the synthesis of dramaturgical theory with Du Boisian double consciousness offers a deeper understanding of the racial disparities evident in incidents of unemployment stigmatization.

Through twenty-two in-person in-depth-interviews with various unemployed Black and White respondents from workforce development agencies, half from a predominantly White suburb and the others from a predominantly Black major city, I discovered various methods of impression management utilized by job seekers to stymie the effects of unemployment stigma. The version of impression management practiced was dependent on a participant's race and whether they resided in an urban or suburban community, making community type a focal point of this study. Rather than serving simply as a proxy for class, community type also provides evidence of one's proximity to class derived cultural capital. Ergo a person did not have to be of a particular class to have been privy to the requisite cultural capital.

This study sought to understand the degree to which unemployed individuals intentionally manipulate the impressions of others through strategic displays of physical appearance, emotional presentation, tone, and style of speech (Rawls 2000). I refer to this presentation as the "unemployed worker-self." An examination of the participants in this study revealed distinct patterns based on racial and community factors.

Specifically, among the study's participants, it was observed that White respondents and Black suburban respondents exhibited a greater propensity to employ assertive impression management strategies. These strategies manifested as "skills inventory listing", the use of "mantras", or "making claims of exceptionalism." In contrast, Black urban respondents were more inclined to adopt defensive strategies, characterized by a tendency to "measure" themselves against societal norms. Additionally, suburban Black respondents were more likely to demonstrate and acknowledge a higher level of proficiency in racial "code-switching," the intentional or unconscious adaptation of language or behavior to align with a White cultural identity, whereas urban Black participants expressed discomfort with

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code-switching or perceived it as ineffectiveness. I term this absence or failed attempts at code-switching "masking" due to it being expressed as feeling unnatural.

Irrespective of the specific impression management strategy employed by the respondents, it was evident that they all actively crafted a distinct "worker-self" identity, seeking to convey their worthiness of gainful employment. Additionally, I determine that the experience of unemployment stigma for Black Americans is amplified by racialized understandings of Blackness and thereby requires a theoretical and analytical framework guided by concepts developed by Du Bois and Goffman to better understand racialized unemployment stigma.

Background

Stigmatization of the Unemployed

Stigma associated with unemployment reflects negative images and stereotypes depicting the unemployed as unskilled, unmotivated, or living off taxpayers, all of which can lead to feelings of inferiority (Crocker 1999). Unemployed people often express how the stigma of losing their job and being unemployed interferes with their ability to have positive social interactions, feelings of connectedness to society, and self-satisfaction (Cohn 1978). In one study of eighty unemployed men, feelings of depression, anxiety, or shame were expressed by 25% of interviewees (Eales 1989).

Stigmatization associated with initial job loss, unemployment duration, and accessing social services can result in dramatic impacts on life chances, effecting outcomes such as earning potential, self-esteem, housing, and social interactions (Link and Phelan, 2001). Stigmatization can even lengthen the duration of a person's unemployment. For instance, low self-esteem associated with stigmatization can make finding work harder for individuals, by increasing their anxiety and fear during their job search process (Karen and Sherman, 2012).

Regardless of the presence or absence of animus, Black people are more likely than are Whites to encounter and be adversely affected by unemployment and welfare stigmatization, suffering a sort of double stigmatization. This is not solely the product of the unique stigma attached to being Black and being unemployed individually alone (Meyer et al., 2008). In fact, the stigma attached to unemployment is often similar to that attached to Blackness. The unemployed, for instance, are often labeled as being helpless, lazy, less competent, or even aggressive and criminally inclined (Blau et al., 2013; Crocker and Major, 1989; Ho et al., 2011; Karen and Sherman, 2012; Reszke 1996)—labels often ascribed to Black people, regardless of their employment status (Moss and Tilly, 1996; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1998). Research has also demonstrated that White employers often expressed stereotypes centering on Black people's penchant for tardiness and absenteeism, laziness, aggressiveness, and lack of discipline (Kennelly 1999; Quillian et al., 2019).

The Urban-Suburban Color Divide

The contemporary urban-suburban racial disparity, marked by the creation of economically disadvantaged, predominantly Black urban centers juxtaposed with affluent, primarily White suburban communities, is a complex phenomenon shaped by historical factors such as redlining, federal transportation and highway policies, veterans' mortgages, mortgage-interest tax exemptions, and the rapid production of extensive tract housing (Wilson 1987). This divide, as outlined by William Julius Wilson (1987), endures to the present day, with

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middle-class White populations increasingly gravitating toward suburban areas, effectively confining Black residents to inner cities.

The period since 1970 has witnessed significant structural transformations in the economy, characterized by the relocation of low-skilled job opportunities away from urban centers and a general decline in manufacturing. These shifts have exacerbated urban unemployment rates, leading to a substantial outmigration of working-class and middle-class Black individuals from inner cities thereby intensifying Black urban poverty (Wilson 1987). This poverty is characterized by its concentrated geographical presence and social isolation from middle-class communities (Wilson 1987).

I contend that the concept of locality holds greater explanatory power than the subtext through which we traditionally analyze class. Just as place can become racialized and profoundly influence our comprehension of and experience with race, certain behaviors and practices conventionally associated with class membership may find more cogent explanations in their proximity to specific localities that have acquired such attributes (Bonam et al., 2017; Windsong 2021). To study the impact of race and location on impression management tactics, I utilize Goffmanian and Du Boisian theories.

Synthesizing Goffmanian and Du Boisian Theory

Within the context of workforce participation, the application of Goffmanian concepts pertaining to self-presentation and impression management emerges as fundamentally significant. Both concepts are primarily focused on the behaviors we direct towards each other to create and maintain desired perceptions of ourselves (Schneider 1981). Controlling perceptions is important to occupational success. Individuals attempt to manage others' perceptions of their worker-selves to access promotions, interview successfully, and obtain respect from colleagues, subordinates, and/or superiors. Moreover, these efforts extend to managing the stigma associated with job loss (Baron 1986; Ralston 1985).

In the sphere of employment this culminates in the creation of an ideal worker-self. However, any examination of a Black worker-self, or the conceptualization of how Black individuals navigate stigma and self-presentation, must consider the overarching influence of power dynamics, social hierarchies, and political contexts (Manning 2008; Rogers 1980). While Goffman (1963) argues that stigma is relational, the product of social setting and social intercourse, the central dilemma faced by Black people is the dual challenge of presenting two distinct selves—their authentic self-presentation and a presentation tailored to White expectations. This duality generates uncertainty regarding the reception and efficacy of either presentation.

Du Bois's (1903) framework of double consciousness offers valuable insights into Black individuals' self-presentation and their intricate interactions within society. With respect to stigma, Du Bois discerned that Black individuals not only bore the weight of stigmatization but were, to a greater extent, subjected to disenfranchisement (Holt 1990). He also recognized how institutions and societal practices ascribed stigmas to intrinsic attributes of Black individuals, subsequently employing these stigmas as justifications for mistreatment (Holt 1990; Meer 2019). Goffmanian approaches to stigma posit that the actor performs impression management to mitigate hostility through passing, concealing, or retreating; all of which are usually not options for Black people in society, nor are they healthy to Black self-conception (Orne 2013).

Du Bois (1903) astutely observed that Black individuals are compelled to negotiate two distinct cultural identities, each corresponding to different social roles, engaged in a perpetual conflict within a single body. Black people, forced to play two separate roles, become uncomfortably aware of their "two-ness" and become in conflict with two moral

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and cultural commitments (Rawls 2000). Dramaturgically speaking, Black people are hyper cognizant of their front-stage performances compared to White people. Anat Rafaeli and Alona Harness (2002) describes how self-presentation is enlisted into strategies by job seekers to convince employers of their employability. Their research underscores that Black individuals often perceive the need to invest additional efforts in validating their claims and deflecting insecurities when employing these strategies (Rafaeli and Harness, 2002).

Furthermore, it has been posited that self-presentation can be more anxiety-producing for Black people, particularly when communicating with individuals in positions of power who may endorse racial stereotypes or exhibit reduced concern for understanding a self-presentation originating from an individual of a different racial background (Rafaeli and Harness, 2002). These race-centric disparities necessitate the synthesis of Du Boisian concepts revolving around double consciousness with Goffman's dramaturgical approach.

Given the array of social and economic challenges that Black people face, the stigmatization of Black *and* unemployed can be particularly pernicious. This stigma is compounded because Black people are often perceived as perpetual outsiders within society. Consequently, the stigma associated with unemployment serves to reinforce preexisting anti-Black stereotypes, further entrenching the association of Blackness with the category of the "undeserving poor."

The primary objective of this study is to elucidate the strategies utilized by unemployed people to mitigate the stigma associated with their unemployment. Furthermore, I seek to explore the influence of race and contextual factors, specifically the distinction between residing in an urban or suburban community, on people's strategies for managing this stigma. This study explores the diverse impression management strategies (or "facework") used by unemployed people to counteract the effects of stigma, with a particular focus on the distinctive strategies adopted by Black unemployed people.

Methods

To gain deeper insights into the racialization of unemployment stigmatization, a total of twenty-two in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants (all provided pseudonyms) enrolled in workforce development programs. Conveniently chosen for their access to respondents, these agencies serve individuals aged eighteen or older, who are involuntarily unemployed or significantly underemployed, offering employment and training services (Bradley 2013). Specifically, there were twelve participants from a predominantly Black urban workforce development agency jobs center and ten participants from a predominantly White suburban center. Urban participants lived in a city (population 639,111; 77.7% Black, 14.7% White; median income $30,894; 35% below poverty) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) while suburban respondents were from a neighboring county (population 840,978; 83.4% White, 8.6% Black; median income $52,102; 5.6% below poverty) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

The study aimed for equal Black and White representation across urban and suburban agencies (see Table 1). In the urban area, defined as the main city and its surroundings, there were nine Black and three White respondents. All White respondents were male, while six out of nine Black respondents were male. White urban respondents were ex-offenders in transitional housing due to parole terms. Five of the nine Black respondents were also ex-offenders. Ten out of twelve reported incomes below the individual poverty line ($12,060 annually), while two reported earnings below $20,000 but above the poverty threshold. Eleven met the criteria for long-term unemployment (twenty-seven consecutive weeks), with five unemployed for at least a year.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X23000218 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Table 1. Description of Respondents

Name	Location	Race	Gender	Age	Long-Term Unemployed	Previous Occupational Level	Income (above or below poverty line)	Ex-offender
Ray	Urban	Black	Male	51	Yes	Production Worker	Above	No
Andrew	Urban	Black	Male	48	Yes	Production Worker	Below	No
Angel	Urban	Black	Female	29	Yes	Entry-Level Logistics	Below	Yes
Malik	Urban	Black	Male	31	Yes	Cook	Above	Yes
Rushaun	Urban	Black	Male	50	Yes	None	Below	Yes
Chantel	Urban	Black	Female	25	No	Retail	Below	No
Chistine	Urban	Black	Female	25	No	Home Health Aide	Below	No
Anthony	Urban	Black	Male	27	Yes	General Laborer	Below	Yes
Red	Urban	Black	Male	53	Yes	General Laborer	Below	Yes
Kevin*	Urban	White	Male	39	Yes	Painter	Below	Yes
Dennis*	Urban	White	Male	63	Yes	Production Worker	Below	Yes
Doug*	Urban	White	Male	40	Yes	Truck Driver	Below	Yes
Janice	Suburban	Black	Female	30	Yes	Mental Health Specialist	Above	No
Jordan	Suburban	Black	Male	26	No	Customer Service	Above	No
Wayne	Suburban	Black	Male	45	No	CNC Operator	Below	Yes
Betty	Suburban	White	Female	70	No	Book Keeper	Above	No
Paula	Suburban	White	Female	55	Yes	Media Consultant	Below	No
Nancy	Suburban	White	Female	66	No	Administrative	Above	No
Randy	Suburban	White	Male	62	No	Welder	Above	No
April	Suburban	White	Female	31	Yes	General Laborer	Below	No
Corey	Suburban	White	Male	27	No	Industrial	Above	No
Brent	Suburban	White	Male	45	No	Tech Sales	Above	No

* Recently released from prison

In the suburban sample, there were three Black and seven White participants, evenly split by gender. Four were under thirty-five years of age, four were over fifty, and three were over sixty. Only one, a Black male, had a criminal background. Seven reported incomes above the poverty line, with five reported earning $30,000 or more in the past year. Regarding unemployment, only two met the long-term unemployment criteria.

To facilitate the interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was developed, drawing from insights presented in several related studies (Godofsky et al., 2010; Meyer et al., 2008; Paetzold et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2018). The guide included questions covering various themes, such as participants' perceptions of the workforce development agencies, their experiences, emotions, and coping strategies related to unemployment, as well as barriers to obtaining employment. These interviews were conducted in participants' homes and occasionally within the workforce development agencies when other arrangements could not be made. The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours in duration, and all of them were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim within one to two days following the interview.

The data analysis employed a combination of open and closed coding techniques to identify recurring themes across the interviews. Upon completion of coding, several key themes emerged from the analysis, including "skills inventory listing" (SIL), "mantras" and "exceptionalism claims", "code-switching", "measuring up", and "masking." These themes are discussed below.

Findings

While previous research on unemployment stigma reports that Black people were three times more likely to be adversely affected by unemployment stigma than White people (Meyers et al., 2008), the current study underscores that this stigmatization is especially pervasive among Black respondents residing in urban areas. To be specific, my findings suggest that urban Black respondents exhibited a lower inclination than both White respondents and suburban Black respondents to internalize unemployment stigma. This trend was primarily influenced by disparities in the distribution of cultural capital based on race and locality (neighborhood type), which in turn influenced their ability to engage in effective facework.

Through the course of this study of respondents residing in divergent locales, it became evident that there was merit in distinguishing not only the variations in how respondents encountered and addressed their stigmatization based on race but also their community type. Analysis of interview data revealed that urban Black respondents were less inclined to employ the same impression management strategies observed in White or suburban Black respondents.

The unemployed suburban population employed various impression management techniques, comprised of the utilization of "skills inventory lists", "mantras", and "claims of exceptionalism" to effectively navigate the challenges posed by unemployment stigma. To further mitigate the racially infused facets of unemployment stigma, suburban Black respondents engaged in an additional layer of impression management, wherein they presented an idealized White middle-class identity through the practice of "code-switching." In contrast, urban Black respondents, motivated by factors linked to race and place, exhibited a diminished affinity for the aforementioned techniques. Instead, they resorted to distinct and specific impression management approaches in response to unemployment stigma, characterized by the practices of "measuring up" and "masking."

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Suburban Black and White Impression Management

Skills Inventory Listing

In situations where interview questions could be anticipated to trigger stigmatization, suburban respondents rarely exhibited a sense of self-doubt. While conducting interviews with suburban respondents, it became evident that their responses were imbued with a sense of pride regarding their past employment, often teetering on the verge of self-promotion, almost akin to engaging in job networking. These instances of "skills inventory lists" (SILs) were both frequent and sprinkled throughout the interviews with suburban participants. SILs originate from a respondent's work background, achievements, or skills, often unrelated to the question asked. Paula, a fifty-five year-old White suburban woman said she felt "shocked" when asked about her job loss after thirteen years with the company. She then detailed her accomplishments, emphasizing her value to the company:

> I was their lead consultant. Can you imagine that? … Basically, I am there for my clients to ensure that they get the best value for their production. So, when you see commercials on TV, um, … including the Super Bowl ones are produced properly… Um, so as a consultant I'm the one looking at the money and on paper and negotiating with the vendors to make sure that the price is fair and adequate. So, I was one of the biggest assets that they had at the company…

Similarly, when Randy, a sixty-two year-old White man residing in the suburban area, was prompted to delineate his response to being laid off, he initially conveyed his astonishment. However, without prompting, he proceeded to expound on the reasons why he considered himself a valuable employee:

> I was kind of surprised. I do all the welding for the company. I am the go-to man when they got to have something fixed quick and right out the door, and keep people informed of what's going on as far as progress on the job.

SILs were often used to refocus the conversation away from negative aspects of a participant's employment situation. For instance, when queried about the most substantial effects of unemployment, Paula acknowledged experiencing periods of depression but swiftly countered this with a SIL:

> Now granted I can be stressed during the work, you know, when you are working. But I would work sixty, seventy hours a week. So much so that my son says, 'mom, you work too much.' Maybe that's why this was a blessing in disguise because I was working way too much and I'd be on the phone with Russia at three in the morning to match their time because, I told you I worked around the world in my house, on the phone with clients and I loved it.

Another unpleasant area of discussion for respondents centered around the age of older participants. SILs frequently came into play when respondents believed that ageism might impede their prospects of securing suitable employment. For example, Randy admits that the younger welders where he worked had some advantages but made sure that his talents were not undersold:

> They're go getters and they pick stuff up a lot quicker, but they don't have one thing that I've got and that's years of experience and knowledge and knowing different shortcuts and what happens and what reaction you get when you do something to a product.

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Betty, a seventy-one year-old suburban White woman, comparing herself to her younger competition, explained:

> If you're one of three people being interviewing for the job, they usually take the younger one. I just think you're out of luck because I'll be here longer than she would be here. I'm trying to do things differently than these and no offense to you kids coming out of college. They don't have the experience that you're looking for. They have book experience. Great. But they don't have real life experience.

Repeatedly, suburban respondents regardless of race applied SILs as a means of defense when interview questions made them uncomfortable. Once SILs are employed the conversation was refocused to more positive attributes of the respondents or their situation, as they perceived them. On the one hand by listing skills and accomplishments the performance mitigates stigma by creating an image of competence. The respondent's unemployment could not be any fault of their own. On the other hand, the audience will be left unwilling to challenge the claims made, thereby validating the performance and allowing the performer to save face.

Mantras and Exceptionalism Claims

Mantras and claims of exceptionalism are powerful impression management tools because they allow the individual to verbalize a claim as a matter of fact, as if it should just be accepted as true. Typically presented in the form of a slogan, mantras are statements designed to influence both the audience and the performer's own belief that opportunities or reemployment are imminent. Claims of exceptionalism sometimes accompanied mantras, lending them additional strength by positioning respondents as exceptions to the rule. Other times a statement can operate as both. For instance, when Janice, a thirty year-old Black woman residing in a suburban area, was asked about the most significant effects of unemployment, she did not provide a direct answer to the question but insinuated that she was exempt from experiencing negative effects. The following quotation exemplifies Janice's use of claims of exceptionalism:

> I mean listen, seeing the kind of individual that I am, I mean I've always tried to just stay proactive. That's me …I try to just stay proactive… I'm just one of those type of individuals, the intellectual individuals that, you know, pretty much go crazy just sitting there and looking at TV.

Others claimed that they were not worried or didn't feel insecure about losing a job. Jordan, a thirty year-old suburban Black man utilized a mantra when claiming that, "What I lost was just a job, they come a dime a dozen." Paula claimed exceptionalism when suggesting that the truly specialized nature of her career field provided fewer employment opportunities:

> So that's why I feel a little stuck right now because I'm, I am in a specialized field. That's the most difficult part of the job search is knowing that I am in a specialized field.

However, April's claim to exceptionalism, "I have worked my whole life," was easily debunked by her previous admittance that she has lost "three to five jobs" that she can remember in the past five years. This highlights the effectiveness of mantras and claims of

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exceptionalism; they do not necessarily need to align with objective reality. Rather, they just need to be expressed confidently in a way that the speaker can be assured they will not be challenged. April, who currently resides rent-free with a family member, once again exemplifies this in a convoluted web of mantras and claims of exceptionalism:

> [Joblessness] makes me more driven and motivated. I'm very independent, like I moved out when I was eighteen and I had my son right before I turned twenty-one and uh, taking care of myself. I've always done for myself. Nothing being given to me. There's no like, sense of self entitlement or anything. Anything I have I earned. It wasn't given.

These claims were contradicted, however, when she was asked about the financial stresses she faced. Even in the face of a contradiction, she continued to assert additional claims of exceptionalism:

> I owe my dad $300. I don't usually owe. There was no handouts in my family. I don't have any [bills] I guess, except for car insurance…And then I get food stamps. I do have to buy my own food.

When asked if she pays her own rent she replied:

> No. Just the labor. I was doing dishes, and I had to shovel to go to my car, and I'm doing laundry…It's a win-win.

By presenting themselves in such a manner, suburban participants were able to redirect attention toward positive qualities they either genuinely believed they possessed or wished to project. Their self-presentation aimed to convey self-sufficiency, motivation, and alignment with middle-class values. Suburban respondents, viewing themselves as part of the middle class, allowed them to easily assume that typical demeanor. Their script is influenced by their surroundings and the societal expectations of their middle-class suburban environment, resulting from cultural capital. Through their performances, an expression of their prestige, suburban respondents—Black and White—can anticipate how they are perceived by their audience, thus helping to mitigate the stigma associated with unemployment.

Suburban Black Impression Management

Code-Switching

Impression management became more complex for Black individuals contending with unemployment stigma imbued with racial biases. However, suburban Black people were less likely to dwell on this racialized component due in large part to code-switching. It was interesting to note that, on the rare occasions when suburban Black respondents did discuss discrimination, they downplayed its significance. They seemed to proactively shield themselves from potential racial stigmatization by recognizing the need to counter the prevailing scrutiny associated with their Black identity, and they achieved this through this distinct form of impression management.

In this context, code-switching refers to a form of double consciousness, involving both linguistic and other presentational aspects, in which Black respondents intentionally or unconsciously tapped into a White cultural identity during interactions or conversations with others. On the surface, this was aimed at projecting a more professional image.

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However, it became apparent that suburban Black respondents made a conscious choice to make themselves more acceptable to White employers or interviewers, aiming to put White counterparts at ease with their presence. According to Jordan, code-switching both feels unnatural and at the same time is experienced as second nature:

> I'll put on a different tone of voice and a manner not to suit myself, but to…(laughs) it works, man. I ain't gonna lie to you. It works on the way you carry yourself around certain people and I guess that's what I had to do. I would have to adjust myself when I know I'm coming into a place or an area where there may be tension over some "God knows why" reason, you know? After while it's second nature. You just know when to put it on and when to turn it off.

Wayne, a forty-five year-old suburban Black man, provided insight into the widespread and instinctive nature of code-switching. When asked if being Black affected his ability to find work, he said that it didn't have an effect, ignoring the fact that the act of code-switching itself, minimizing his "Blackness" for the person he interacts with, in actuality demonstrates the power Blackness has over his employment prospects. However, it is also possible Wayne views his code-switching as a tool used to overcome his felony status separate from Blackness. In contrast to this perspective, there has always been a strong association between race and crime in employers' perceptions, with some believing that Black respondents have criminal tendencies, regardless of their criminal record (Pager 2003). When addressing the importance of code-switching Wayne depicts an interview as a rather high stakes affair:

> You have to present in a way to make people feel comfortable. Enough to make people think that I'm the one for this job. It's a time and place to do this, like on a job interview is the time to come in and you know, put on your best performance there because you got one shot at this.

When probed on whether this felt genuine, he responded:

> I don't think I'm being as someone else. It's already in me. You have to present in a way to make people feel comfortable enough to make people think that I'm the one for this job. Because the thing is, I have a strike against me, I'm a felon. They feel that you was dangerous. You are an animal. So we, we kind of, we can't trust you now. You might not have a felony, they gonna feel a little more comfortable in some ways. Even though, because you Black, you know what I'm saying, you still might. But knowing that you've made them feel comfortable, they're cool. Know what I'm saying? A White person wouldn't have to make them feel comfortable because they are.

Wayne had become so adept at code-switching that he was somewhat oblivious to the potential challenges his Black identity might pose to his employment prospects. In his efforts to enhance his chances of securing a job, he diligently minimized behaviors that might make potential employers apprehensive about hiring an ex-offender. Moreover, he discussed the need to curtail behaviors he associated with his Black identity. This aligns with Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, wherein Wayne viewed himself through the lens of the White gaze, critically assessing his own behaviors and actions that he deemed necessary to restrain.

When asked what goes into making a White employer comfortable, Wayne's responses revealed a paradoxical relationship between the impression management carried out by suburban Black respondents, the negative stereotypes they are aware of regarding Black

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culture, and the implicit acknowledgment of a second-class status that one must attribute to their own culture out of necessity for suppression. First, Wayne subscribes to the notion of White superiority, suggesting that all Whites are inherently exceptional, possessing the characteristics employers look for:

> I think I present myself good. I don't come in here with the, the mentality. I am not no different than a White person even though he's educated, speak profound words, and is at a higher level because he went to school and stuff like that.

Wayne proceeded to speak about what someone shouldn't do when job searching or interviewing. The examples given are similar in that they relay racist tropes of Black people as thugs.

> I can't go in there and be like, 'what's up Dawg, man, I do dis' man and I want to uh, you know, I can do dis'hydraulic.' You know, on the streets. I'd be doing this and you know what I'm saying? Even though I might talk with my fellas like that because we just kicking it in this way, the lingo is under the hood. I can't bring that into an interview. Some time you see some guys come in a suit or you have to dress proper. You know what I'm saying? Because that's what they want to see. I can't come there with a flag out of my damn back pocket in the name of crippin'… because that will make a person feel uncomfortable because now he's going to say, 'oh, he's a gang banger.'

In this account, Wayne has reduced the concept of being Black to stereotypes associated with street culture. In doing so, he inadvertently perpetuates the same stigma that serves as a tool for exerting social control over individuals like himself. His consistent negative categorization of Blackness highlights a paradoxical relationship where suburban Black respondents, while striving to present themselves as anything but Black through code-switching, must also inadvertently validate negative portrayals of Blackness, such as being seen as "hood," "gang members," or simply "abnormal."

Code-switching, while a necessary and instinctive process for suburban Black people, was also a taxing and anxiety-inducing endeavor. It proved to be taxing because suburban Black respondents constantly had to be prepared to assume a persona that wasn't always natural to them or to ensure that they never slipped and revealed their true Black identity. The anxiety stemmed from the immense stakes involved if their performance was not well-received, as Wayne elaborated:

> You got to make people comfortable because if we don't, people is not going to give you that opportunity in life, and so I just stuck with that thing. I have to make everyone comfortable because if I don't, okay, they see any signs of, of, of a threat or a type of, like 'he's going to be a hassle in my job,' then I'm not getting it.

It is apparent that portraying an "unemployed worker-self" is a more intricate undertaking for suburban Black respondents compared to their White counterparts. This complexity arises from the conscious nature of code-switching as a method of impression management. Previous research suggest that Black people are uncomfortably aware of their twoness and that double consciousness is linked to fragmentation (Berry 2001; Rawls 2000).

Both Wayne and Jordan allude to a "White worker-self" that is both "of them" and "foreign to them." It is noteworthy that both respondents reflect on the necessity and reflexivity of this practice in their daily lives. Neither man suggests that code-switching places an additional burden on them to address an extra layer of stigma.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X23000218 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Urban Black Impression Management

Masking Versus Code-Switching

The racialization of impression management becomes more apparent when examining the distinct use and purpose of code-switching among urban Black respondents compared to the suburban Black respondents discussed above. Many urban Black respondents, either due to lack of empowerment, compulsion, or cultural capital to effectively code-switch, refrained from, rejected efforts to, or performed poorly received attempts at code-switching. While code-switching was a proven hallmark of Black suburban impression management, for urban Black respondents it was uncomfortable and unnatural, more like wearing a "mask" than a second face.

Urban Black respondents seldom experienced interactions with White or suburban folks, nor had they ever been immersed into suburban (White) communities. Their encounters with middle-class White individuals were primarily confined to job interviews. Consequently, they lacked the experience with the scripts that suburban Black individuals had developed, resulting in unsuccessful interactions that left them bewildered. Andrew conveyed his sense of bewilderment in the following way:

> The interview I went on, I don't know if it was because I wasn't dressed a certain way, which I always had a problem with that. I mean why do I have to dress a certain way to get a job? I don't know if that's what it was, but it can be very discouraging.

On occasions where urban Black people attempted to engage in code-switching, their efforts were often met with a lack of support. This frequently resulted in further confusion or, in some cases, confrontational exchanges. These confrontations resembled less of a mutual consideration described by Goffman (1967), but rather more of a contest. Malik recalled his interaction with a workforce development staff member as, "not actually a shouting match but it's more of a, you know, a debate or a challenge." In these instances, the interactions ceased to be about preserving each participant's social role but instead became a battle for the upper hand on the part of the bureaucratic actor and a struggle for face-saving on the part of the urban Black individual.

Another example of the challenges urban Black respondents faced with code-switching occurred during Red's interview for employment. His attempt at code-switching failed when he wasn't aware that his assertiveness, when expressed as a Black individual, would be interpreted as hostility:

> I interviewed well. My references and everything was turned in properly. I had got the job. All I was waiting on was the start date. Tuesday I get a call from HR. She said, 'I need your references' I said 'oh I'm sorry, they should be attached.' She said, 'No I'm not using that. I need a couple more.' …I was like 'ma'am I have school but uh I can't understand why you can't use the references that's already there.' She said 'well I don't have to use those. I need two valid ones.' I said no problem and brought them down there the next day. The manager called me out and said, 'uh I don't think this is gonna work out. Uh, when you was talking to my employee you were kinda too abrasive.' I'm trying to picture how I was rough or abrasive.

Employers who interact with urban Black people appear unwilling to accept or cooperate with promoting the performance. This reluctance is primarily ascribed to the audience's racial biases or their prior awareness of the performer's situation. In some instances, the urban performer also struggles due to a lack of proficiency in crafting a desirable face. On some occasions the urban performer further suffers from being ill

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equipped to create a face that would be desirable. Often the act of maintaining the mask is both draining and unfamiliar, leading it to be perceived as inauthentic, as Red states:

> I'm trying to create the appropriate response to meet the objective of the person you are talking to, not so much being your belief, cause they're not [your objectives].

Further exhaustion comes from having to construct masks often blindly with little certainty if it will be effective. As Red indicated,

> It's a process. You do have to construct a mask. The mask has to be constructed according to norms of society… You have to deprogram yourself. If I felt this was getting uncomfortable, I would create an out.

Ultimately, for urban Black participants code-switching appears to cement notions of subordination in a White supremacist society. First, the act of having to code-switch or present a false self so dissimilar to who the individual is, reminds him or her that they do not fit in, as Red explains: "Frustrating. Frustrating. It creates a depression if you have to do this (sighs). Man!! I had to do… (pauses) Ooh, I hated doing that!" Second, the failure at code-switching informs them that they never will fit in, as Red elaborates,

> I get depressed at these particular times. In interviews I find that when I don't wear my kufi cap (Black Muslim head garment) I get a positive response. If I wear the kufi cap, I don't make it past the first interview. It makes me feel sometimes that I'm not of value…Also, anything you say and do in society can be used against you.

While Goffman suggests that, for certain purposes, people can dismiss encounters with individuals they will never see again, it is evident that these interactions continue to profoundly affect urban Black employment seekers.

Measuring Up

In contrast to their suburban Black and White counterparts, urban Black respondents in this study proved less likely to perform SILs, mantras, or exceptionalism claims. This may result from their distaste for presenting a different face for the sake of advancement. Besides seeming inauthentic, the urban Black respondents may lack access to the cultural capital that would be necessary to present the "proper" self to potential employers. For instance, a suburban White respondent can make the claim that:

> I was doing a million different things, working, you know, eighteen hours a day, every single day of the week. And I, it was just, it was just a lot. Uh, my stress immediately dropped. I felt a lot more healthy when I was actually unemployed.

An urban Black person might not consider such a statement appropriate for ordinary conversation. Moreover, due to the prevalence of unskilled and often low-status job opportunities in many urban areas, creating SILs would be more challenging. This is because it would be less desirable to associate one's worker identity with employment considered less meaningful, temporary, or stigmatized. Instead, urban Black people were more likely to verbalize not "measuring up" to societal expectations. In doing so they focused on where they believed they should be in life, the impediments barring them, their perceived failures, and what that self-assessed lack of success says about

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people more generally. "Measuring up" involved urban Black respondents assuring their audience of one, some, or all of the following attributes: 1) understanding the nature of hard work, 2) having aspirations, and 3) possessing awareness of their limitations. The aim was to establish and maintain a positive rapport with the audience despite their challenges. Through these performances respondents preserve face, expressing goal oriented-ness through aspiration, describing present and future obstacles without making excuses. Several statements regarding not measuring up to some undefined standard were made by Black urban respondents. Andrew, a forty-eight year-old urban Black man, stated:

> I always wanted to get into the (Automotive Industry). I knew some people that had. They were able to get homes and cars as a result. Naturally that felt discouraging.

Red, a fifty-three year-old urban Black man similarly stated:

> I'm not where I'm supposed to be or where I feel I should be. They got productive jobs… they're doing well. Then you have to look at yourself and say, 'why not I?'

Red goes on to frankly explain:

> You're going to weigh yourself against society. You're going to constantly do that. How can I manage understanding where I should be and where I'm not. I feel I am so far behind. You look at yourself versus other people.

Similarly, Rushaun, a fifty year-old, urban Black man recognized the value, dignity, and independence that would accompany gainful employment when explaining that "It would allow me a certain level of independence… I want to be able to tell social security thank you, but I no longer need your assistance." Rushaun continued to discuss the importance of being independent and his inability to measure up to a perceived societal standard. However, the immensity of the burden unemployment stigma has placed on him became more evident. The face he worked to create began to collapse as his impression-managed crafted response began to devolve into a confessional of his suppressed internalized stigma:

> I'm a grown man. I'm not supposed to ask for anything. I'm supposed to be self-sufficient and that's the discouraging and hurting part. Any able-bodied man should be able to take care of themselves or then you can't call yourself a man. It's frustrating because you can't do what you're supposed to do as a person. So its defacing. I'll put it like that. It's a bad feeling not to be self-sufficient. I feel like I'm not being productive so what's the purpose of even being? …You're wasting society's time. You might as well not be here… I'm not trying to promote suicide or nothing like that.

For urban Black respondents, "measuring up," similar to SILs, serves as a face-saving remedy, offering a sense of status and projecting a principled character by conveying the individual's understanding of and commitment to meritocratic ideals, self-criticism, and their ability to navigate challenges. However, it lacks the assertive dimension that SILs provide by showcasing one's competence to an audience. Without either the inclination or appropriateness to provide an account of their employment-related skills and achievements, "measuring up" may offer urban Black Americans the necessary solace to alleviate stigma.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X23000218 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Discussion and Conclusion

A persistent and defining characteristic of the American labor market is the significant 2-to-1 Black-White unemployment disparity, which continues to highlight an imbalanced power dynamic disproportionately affecting Black job seekers (Wilson and Darity, 2022). Extensive literature has established the links between poverty, income, and health, demonstrating the profound effect to well-being that is associated with unemployment (Lin and Lueng, 2010). However, despite the persistence of Black-White unemployment disparities, there remains an absence of research on the impact of unemployment on the mental health and well-being of Black people.

Given the inevitability of unemployment, it is imperative that scholarship continues to advance our understanding of how unemployed people cope with the accompanying stigma. In this regard, the current study contributes significantly to the fields of employment, race, and stigma literature by unveiling distinctions in impression management strategies employed to mitigate unemployment-related stigma. While previous research on unemployment has primarily focused on coping strategies such as personal, psychological, and social resources (Thoits 2011), this study adopts an alternative perspective by examining unemployment through the lens of impression management and double consciousness. Consequently, this research offers an alternative viewpoint on how people either internalize or mitigate the stigma associated with unemployment.

In Goffman's influential work, the "face" represents the positive social value that people effectively claim for themselves. The concept of preserving a proper face extends to the notion of the "worker-self," which persists even when employment ends. Avoiding unemployment stigmatization necessitates the display of appropriate impression management techniques by the unemployed. Impression management involves projecting an image of oneself that aligns with the desired presentation, thus maintaining the perception others hold of them (Rawls 2000; Schneider 1981). By conceptualizing the "unemployed worker-self" and exploring unemployed impression management, this study enriches the existing literature on unemployment and stigma. Most notably, it underscores the nuances arising from the intersection of urban versus suburban contexts with race, determining the distinct forms of impression management employed by respondents.

Anne Warfield Rawls (2000) has identified substantial disparities in self-presentation expectations and workplace interaction approaches between Black workers and their White counterparts. However, existing studies have not addressed Black-White distinctions in impression management strategies, let alone examined how these strategies may be shaped by distinct cultural capital associated with various cultural and community backgrounds. Consistent with previous literature emphasizing impression management's utilization to influence others' perceptions, suburban unemployed respondents were found to use impression management to control how they are perceived in an effort to manage the potential stigma of job loss (Baron 1986; Ralston 1985).

Impression management techniques among suburban respondents consistently leaned towards assertive forms emphasizing individual accomplishments and claims of excellence. This tendency is better explained by proximity rather than class strata. Even suburban people with low incomes or those who originated from low-income urban areas were more likely to employ impression management techniques characterized by listing of skills, claims of exceptionalism, or mantras. Proximity to cultural capital proved essential in shaping the manner of impression management and the face one creates. Whites and suburban Black people, both living in suburban areas, had access to similar cultural capital, enabling them to enact similar performances adhering to the middle-class ideal worker image. This "worker-self" epitomizes an individual who is deemed deserving of a job and free from blame for their unemployment status.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X23000218 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Suburban Black respondents, on the other hand, found it necessary to add another layer to their facework to overcome the racial component of unemployment stigma, employing a practice known as code-switching. By presenting a "Whiter worker-self," they attempted to counteract, overcome, or compartmentalize any racially motivated stigmatization. While suburban Black people employed skills inventory listing (SIL), mantras, and claims of exceptionalism, it was their code-switching that constituted the most complex form of impression management, as they expressed an acute awareness of their performance. In contrast, White respondents never seemed to exhibit awareness of performing any form of impression management. Black respondents, particularly those residing in the suburbs, recognized the conscious nature of code-switching, considering it necessary for securing employment or advancing within White society. This is consistent with Rawls' (2000) findings that Black people exhibit a heightened awareness of their frontstage performances. Paradoxically, the findings hint at past research suggesting a tendency towards fragmentation associated with double consciousness (Berry 2001; Moore 2005; Walker 2018).

However, Urban Black respondents did not demonstrate the same impression management responses as their suburban counterparts. While one might argue that this difference reflects less stable work histories or employment prospects, which would not necessarily lead members of the urban sample to develop the same attachment to a work identity, the impression management practices exhibited by urban Black people reveal more than just a lack of a work identity.

One particular impression management practice among urban Black respondents, I term "measuring up." Through "measuring up," urban Black respondents projected a positive face by assuring their audience that they 1) understood the value of hard work, 2) aspired to achieve specific goals, and 3) were aware of their own shortcomings. As an impression management practice "measuring up" provides prestige and moral character by communicating an appreciation for effort, being self-critical, and conveying struggle. While aimed at preserving one's image, "measuring up" more commonly leads to the internalization of stigma through self-evaluation against perceived "White" norms or expectations.

"Measuring up" serves as an alternative to SILs. While SILs may appear more suitable in an interview setting, it may not come naturally to employ these techniques in everyday conversations. Notably, some urban Black respondents have expressed discomfort in interview situations. This aversion to SILs and claims of exceptionalism aligns with prior research, which has shown that Bl"ack people often prefer introductory conversations that respect the boundaries between public and private domains, avoiding implications of hierarchical status or relationships (Rawls 2000). Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that urban Black people might shy away from impression management practices that emphasize sharing information potentially used to categorize or locate a person within a social hierarchy.

Deprived of the cultural capital associated with suburban proximity, urban Black respondents have either conveyed discomfort with an inability to, or reluctance to engage in effective code-switching. In some instances, their efforts were not well-received by their audience. For urban Black respondents, code-switching wasn't a mere face, but rather an obvious mask, one that elicited feelings of inauthenticity, not a second self. They harbored concerns about the possibility of their performances collapsing and being met with rudeness by employment professionals or workforce staff members. These anxieties can contribute to poor interview performances or hostile interactions with social service professionals.

This is in keeping with Goffman's (1963) assertion, that people require some assurance that interactional expectations are met to prove commitment to their performance and trust in the interaction. The potential for anxiety among urban Black respondents, in contrast to the relative ease demonstrated by suburban Blacks, can also be situated within the context of double consciousness literature. In the case of suburban Black respondents

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who engage in code-switching, double consciousness can enable them to resist stigmatization while remaining aware of the stigmatizing views of others. Conversely, when urban Black respondents engage in code-switching, this act of double consciousness may result in an emotional toll in the form of self-judgment concerning both their own cultural expectations and those of the White community.

Urban Black respondents often chose not to engage in code-switching or employ the same impression management techniques as their suburban counterparts. On the surface, this might appear insignificant, but it can have notable implications, particularly regarding the internalization of unemployment stigma. Even if urban Black impression management serves as a shield against potential stigmatization, these strategies may not always be well-received by their intended audiences, especially in contexts like employment interviews, job networking, or when accessing social services. The effectiveness and accessibility of impression management practices by the audience unfortunately can significantly impact the individual's employability.

Given that professionalism is often associated with White cultural norms, the failure to adopt "White" impression management strategies may lead to less favorable interactions. In light of this, organizations such as workforce development agencies and other employment services could greatly benefit from incorporating awareness of impression management into their career readiness training programs. Such training would empower urban Black jobseekers to confidently utilize assertive strategies while emphasizing the importance of these techniques.

Furthermore, employers should also undergo training to recognize cultural differences in how individuals manage impressions. They should be prepared to ask tailored questions to determine if a jobseeker is the best fit for a position. To achieve this, hiring managers and recruiters should be offered opportunities for cultural sensitivity training that include an understanding of various cultural impression management strategies.

While acknowledging the study's limitation in sample size, the described social processes are likely pervasive when individuals with similar backgrounds seek employment in comparable contexts. It is my hope that this study motivates others to adopt and elaborate on the synthesis of Goffmanian and Duboisian concepts when conducting comparative analyses aiming to delineate racial disparities in unemployment and associated stigmas. Such an approach would empower researchers to discern more insightful methods for observing stigma and to better consider the influence of race. Insights garnered through this research avenue could significantly heighten awareness among employers, service agencies, and other entities regarding the cultural nuances in self-presentation that may impact effective interactions with the unemployed. Beyond the benefits to scholarship, businesses, or agencies, the greatest gain would be the mutual understanding we could achieve.

Acknowledgements

I wish to convey my sincere appreciation to the reviewers for their valuable suggestions. A special note of thanks goes to Dr. Brewster, Dr. Jacobs, and Dr. Merolla from Wayne State University; their insights and encouragement have been immensely valuable.

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Cite this article: Heffner, Allen (2024). Mitigating Unemployment Stigma: Racialized Differences in Impression Management among Urban and Suburban Jobseekers. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 21: 273–292. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X23000218

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