


Lawyering While Black: Perceived Stress as a Mediator of Impostor Feelings, Race-Related Stress and Mental Health Among Black Attorneys

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Abstract

Attorneys suffer from high rates of stress and mental health problems, and Black attorneys, who make up only five percent of all attorneys in the United States, are especially vulnerable due to underrepresentation and experiences of bias. The present study examined perceived stress as a mediator of the impostor phenomenon, race-related stress, and mental health among a sample of 142 Black attorneys (114 women, 25 men). Gender, age, impostor phenomenon, race-related stress, and perceived stress accounted for 51% and 57% of the variance in depression and anxiety, respectively. Perceived stress fully mediated the links between the impostor phenomenon and depression, cultural racism and depression, and impostor feelings and anxiety and partially mediated the link between cultural racism and anxiety. Results suggest that perceived stress is an important mechanism for understanding why the impostor phenomenon and race-related stress negatively impact the mental health of Black attorneys.

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Introduction

A recent report identified the practice of law as one of the most stressful jobs in the United States (Koenig, 2019). Long hours, time pressure, competitiveness, emotional demands, and an emphasis on profits are some of the lawyer-specific demands that characterize many legal work settings (Bergin & Jimmieson, 2013). Research has found that attorneys are at greater risk of experiencing high levels of psychological distress than other professions (Skead et al., 2018). A random sample of 801 Washington state attorneys found that 37% suffered from depression or problem drinking (Benjamin et al., 1990). A survey of almost 12,000 employees found that attorneys were 3.6 times more likely to report the prevalence of a major depressive disorder compared to other employees (Eaton et al., 1990). In a recent study of 12,825 attorneys, 28% experienced symptoms of depression, 23% experienced symptoms of stress, and 19% experienced symptoms of anxiety (Krill et al., 2016). Moreover, research has indicated that attorneys are unable to seek treatment due to time constraints while others are unwilling to seek treatment considering the stigma related to seeking mental health services (Reed, 2020).

While research focusing on the mental health of lawyers has gradually increased, there is very little data and research about the perceived stress of Black attorneys. Most of the research is based on samples of predominantly White attorneys. For example, the majority of the participants in the Krill et al. study was White (91.3%) compared to only 2.5% being Black, while descriptions of race or ethnicity were not even mentioned in the Benjamin et al. study. The American Bar Association recently reported that 85 percent of attorneys in the United States are White, while only five percent of attorneys are Black (American Bar Association, 2019). This five percent continues a 10-year trend where the percentage of Black attorneys has not changed. Black attorneys remain less represented in law than in almost any other profession. In fact, the legal profession remains one of the whitest and least racially diverse professions in the nation, compared to engineers (81% White), accountants (78% White), and physicians (72% White) (Rhode, 2015).

Research on the mental health of Black attorneys is needed given the pressures they experience in predominantly White legal work environments. Historically, Black attorneys have faced considerable bias, including (a) being excluded from formal and informal networking opportunities (Rhode, 2015), (b) having a lower chance for partnership, (National Association for Law Placement, 2018), (c) experiencing less social support, more social isolation

and lack of social capital (Simmons, 2016), and (d) experiencing unconscious bias in the evaluation of work product (Reeves, 2014).

This bias has even contributed to the disproportionate number of Black attorneys who have been fired from law firms (Dias, 2021).

The aforementioned examples suggest that Black attorneys may be especially susceptible to the impostor phenomenon, a sense of fraudulence among high achievers (Clance & Imes, 1978). While there has been no empirical study of the impostor phenomenon among attorneys, an article in the American Bar Association journal challenged the legal profession to deal with the “impostor syndrome.” (Sampat, 2018). In addition to impostor feelings, systemic racism and race-related stress impact Black attorneys in many ways including being interrupted more by judges and being considered less intelligent or capable than their colleagues, who sometimes are less credentialed (Walters, 2020). Of course, all Black attorneys are not equally impacted by impostor feelings and race-related stress, with differences likely attributable to differences in the way they perceive stress. However, a review of the literature indicates that there have been no studies that focus solely on the mental health of Black attorneys. Thus, in the current study we were interested in better understanding the relation between impostor feelings, race-related stress and mental health among Black attorneys, as well as identifying perceived stress as a potential underlying mechanism.

Impostor Phenomenon and Mental Health

The impostor phenomenon (IP) refers to the tendency for high-achieving individuals to attribute their success to external factors (Clance & Imes, 1978). The impostor phenomenon occurs when highly successful individuals discount their achievements due to feelings of intellectual fraudulence (Clance & Imes, 1978). It should be noted that the review of the impostor phenomenon and mental health literature is based primarily on research that has focused on mostly college populations, and specifically Black college students. We review this literature with the assumption that these findings would also be applicable to Black lawyers. Despite tangible evidence of their competence (e.g., passing the bar exam) and accomplishments (e.g., obtaining favorable settlements), those experiencing IP attribute their success to luck, happenstance and/or chance. Impostor feelings have been linked to unfavorable mental health outcomes (i.e., anxiety and depression) in high-achieving individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Cokley et al., 2013). Impostor feelings have also been positively linked to minority status stress (Cokley et al., 2013; McClain et al., 2016).

There has been a growing body of research on the negative impact of the impostor phenomenon among Black college students (Bernard et al., 2020; Lige et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2018). Several studies have shed light on how

the unique racialized experiences of Black individuals in primarily White institutions (PWIs) may contribute to the onset and/or maintenance of impostor feelings. According to these studies, Black collegians and professionals at PWIs often report experiencing racial discrimination in the form of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2008), and minority status stress in the form of sociocultural invisibility and/or alienation (Cokley et al., 2013; McClain et al., 2016; Bernard et al., 2017). As a result, they also report experiencing heightened feelings of intellectual fraudulence and inferiority, despite evidence to the contrary (Bernard et al., 2017; Cokley et al., 2013, 2017). Similar to Black college students in PWIs, Black attorneys are often faced with being one of few people of color in their workplace, which can contribute to impostor feelings that negatively impact their overall well-being. While there is a growing body of research on impostor feelings and mental health, little is known about why impostor feelings negatively impact health. Several studies linking impostor feelings with mental health have not identified any specific mechanisms (e.g., Cokley et al., 2013; McClain et al., 2016; Peteet et al., 2015).

Race-Related Stress and Mental Health

It has been well established that racism is a major stressor for African Americans (Clark et al., 1999). As a result, there has been considerable research on race-related stress among the general African American adult population. Race-related stress is defined as “transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism, and that are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being” (Harrell, 2000, p. 44). Moreover, race-related stress is evoked by experiences of covert and overt racial encounters or racial discrimination.

Race-related stress is multidimensional in nature and best represented by Jones (1972) tripartite model. Jones proposed that racism occurs in three domains of life for Black people: individual, institutional, and cultural. Individual racism is the belief in the superiority of one’s own race over another and is closest to the idea of racial prejudice. Institutional racism involves institutional practices used to restrict rights and access of individuals to maintain a racist advantage over others. The use of poll taxes where a voting fee was imposed on individuals regardless of resources or income is an example of institutional racism. Cultural racism is the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one’s cultural heritage over another race. Ignoring the achievements of a race of people or attributing cultural or racial differences to inherent negative traits or characteristics is an example of cultural racism. Cultural racism is the most apparent to individuals who study race relations in the United States (Jones et al., 2020). These domains of

racism may be differentially related to different health and mental health outcomes. For example, Greer and Cavalhieri (2019) found that only institutional racism was associated with poorer mental health among African American men.

Individual race-related stress or racism (e.g., being treated poorly in a store or restaurant compared to White people) may be linked to depression or anxiety because of the personal shock and its unexpected nature. Institutional race-related stress or racism (e.g., being passed over for a promotion while White people with less credentials are promoted) may also be linked to depression or anxiety because of the feeling of disempowerment and loss of agency. Cultural race-related stress or racism (e.g., observing that Black people are depicted more negatively and stereotyped as more dangerous when committing similar crimes to White people) may also be linked to depression or anxiety because of the chronicity and pervasive nature of encountering messages of White cultural superiority and Black cultural inferiority. The aforementioned bias that Black attorneys experience in the practice of law suggests that institutional race-related stress or racism may be uniquely predictive of mental health outcomes. Observing how race in the criminal justice system can be a factor in discretionary decision making by taking into account a Black person's "dangerous" appearance (Alexander, 2010) suggests that cultural race-related stress or racism could also be uniquely predictive of mental health outcomes of Black attorneys.

Given research that documents the negative mental health impact of race-related stress and the well-documented stress of working in the law profession, Black attorneys are especially susceptible to the negative impact of race-related stress. It is important to acknowledge that experiences of race-related stress do not exist in isolation and may increase perceptions of stress in other domains of being a lawyer. Indeed, cultural racism and individual racism have been found to be positively correlated with perceived stress (Ustey & Ponterotto, 1996). The positive association between race-related stress and perceived stress allows for the consideration of perceived stress as a mechanism to explain the link between race-related stress and mental health.

Perceived Stress as a Mediator

The transactional model of stress proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provides the foundation for the analysis of the experiences of race related stress in Black lawyers. Lazarus and Folkman's theory of stress and coping posits that stress arises from an initial appraisal of a situation or transaction with our environment that is taxing and outside of our resources to cope with the stress. Appraisals categorize the environment as being a threat (i.e.,

potential danger to one's well-being based on past events or anticipated ones), challenge (i.e., focusing on the success and rewards that the situation could bring) or loss (i.e., harm that has already happened). Such responses (i.e., perceived stress) have been associated with increased feelings of depression (Heard et al., 2011) and anxiety (Ramos-Cejudo & Salguero, 2017). For some Black attorneys, the lack of representation and experiences of race-related stress could be perceived as a threat to their well-being, while for other Black attorneys the stressful environment could represent an opportunity to showcase their skills and positively represent Black attorneys. Lazarus and Folkman's theory of stress and coping can also help to explain why not all Black attorneys are similarly impacted by impostor feelings and race-related stress. Some Black attorneys perceive the demands of their job as exceeding their coping resources while other Black attorneys do not.

Interestingly, there have been very few studies examining perceived stress in the *Journal of Black Psychology* (e.g., Bediako & Neblett, 2011; Greer, 2008). However, several studies outside of the *Journal of Black Psychology* have documented the association between perceived stress and mental health outcomes among African Americans (Benca-Bachman et al., 2020; Heard et al., 2011; Schmeelk-Cone & Zimmerman, 2003). For African Americans, it seems likely that experiences of race-related stress would be linked to perceived stress. In a study of African American college students, racial and ethnic-related stressors were significant predictors of perceived stress (Greer, 2008). Stress has been associated with increased depression among Black men and women in the context of daily discrimination (Himmelstein et al., 2015). Specifically, the association of stress with depression symptoms was stronger among Black women than Black men.

Perceived stress is also an important mechanism that explains mental health. In a study of African American young adults, Sellers et al. (2003) found that perceived stress partially mediated the link between racial discrimination and psychological distress. Perceived stress has been found to fully mediate the relationship between academic stress and depressive symptoms (Lee & Oh, 2017). Perceived stress has been examined as a specific mechanism underlying the link between minority-salient constructs and health outcomes. In addition, Torres-Harding et al. (2020) found that perceived stress mediated the association between racial microaggressions and somatic symptoms in a sample of college students of color.

The mediating potential of perceived stress is because of its ability to explain whether individuals perceive that the demands of race-related stress exceed their ability to cope. If race-related stress is associated with depression and anxiety, one likely explanation is because individuals may feel overwhelmed or that their ability to cope with the stress is compromised. The individual differences in how people appraise race-related stress make perceived stress a particularly important mechanism of

mental health. Impostor feelings may also be associated with depression and anxiety because individuals perceive that the internal demands of dealing with their impostor feelings exceed their ability to effectively cope with their feelings (e.g., “No matter what I do I can’t get rid of my impostor feelings.”) Similar to why perceived stress would mediate the link between race-related stress and mental health, we believe that perceived stress would also mediate the link between the impostor phenomenon and mental health. We propose a similar mediating effect because of prior research which has found that culturally relevant factors related to racial discrimination should be part of the conceptualization of the impostor phenomenon for Black people.

Current Study

Black attorneys are especially susceptible to race-related stress in their work environment. Much of the stress among Black attorneys is related to their underrepresented, minority status and experiences of bias in the workplace. These experiences can increase the stress they feel in other domains of being a lawyer (e.g., performance in courtroom, writing of legal briefs). The current study is informed by an emic approach that considers the racial and cultural context of being a Black lawyer who experiences challenges due to their minority status and experiences of discrimination. Given this sociocultural context, we believe that impostor feelings and race-related stress are salient among Black attorneys and impact their mental health. Given Lazarus and Folkman’s theorizing of stress occurring when one’s perceived demands exceed one’s resources, the current study examined perceived stress as a mediator of the relationship between impostor feelings, race-related stress, and mental health among Black attorneys. We believe that impostor feelings and race-related stress are associated with negative mental health outcomes because of differences in the cognitive appraisals of the environment (i.e., threat instead of a challenge) that are linked to perceived stress. We made the following hypotheses: First, impostor feelings and race-related stress would be positively associated with perceived stress, depression and anxiety. We also hypothesized that impostor feelings and race-related stress would positively predict depression and anxiety. Next, we hypothesized that perceived stress would mediate the relationship between impostor feelings, race-related stress and depression. In other words, impostor feelings and race-related stress lead to perceived stress, which leads to increased depression. Finally, we hypothesized that perceived stress would mediate the relationship between impostor feelings, race-related stress, and anxiety. That is, impostor feelings and race-related stress lead to perceived stress, which leads to increased anxiety.

Method

Participants

Participants (142) were recruited from a list of attorneys registered to attend the Minority Outreach Conference that took place in the Southeast region of the United States. Of the participants, 114 (80.3%) were female and 25 (17.6%) were male, with 3 missing data. All participants identified as Black. When looking at the ethnic breakdown of the sample, 127 (90.7%) identified as African American, 8 (5.7%) as Afro-Caribbean/West-Indian, 4 (2.9%) as African, and 1 (.7%) as Latinx/Hispanic American. Individuals who did not identify being of African descent were excluded from analyses. The age of participants ranged from 27–72 ($M = 46.77$, $SD = 11.97$), and years practicing law ranged from 1–44 ($M = 17.81$, $SD = 11.19$).

Measures

Impostor feelings were assessed using the *Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale* (CIPS; Clance & Imes, 1978). The CIPS is a 20-item scale meant to capture feelings of fraudulence and phoniness. Items are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not true at all*) to 5 (*very true*) with a sample item being “I can give the impression that I’m more competent than I really am.” Evidence for construct validity has been found through a principal components analysis that yielded three factors (Fake, Discount, and Luck) and discriminant validity by comparing CIPS scores to measures of depression and self-esteem (Chrisman et al., 1995). A Cronbach’s alpha of .92 has been reported (Chrisman et al., 1995). Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was .93.

Experiences of institutional, individual, and cultural race-related stress endured by African Americans were measured using the *Index of Race-Related Stress-B* (IRRS-B; Utsey, 1999). The IRRS-B is a 22-item measure that asks participants to review a list of experiences and note whether they or someone close to them had encountered a similar event as well as asking their reaction. Items are rated on a 5 point scale ranging from 0 (*This never happened to me*) to 4 (*This event happened & I was extremely upset*). An example item for Cultural Racism is “You have observed the police treat White/non-Blacks with more respect and dignity than they do Blacks.” An example item from the Institutional Racism subscale is “You have been threatened with physical violence by an individual or group of White/non-Blacks.” An example from the Individual Racism subscale is “You were the victim of a crime and the police treated you as if you should just accept it as part of being Black.” Positive and significant correlations between the IRRS-B and other racism measures showed convergent validity in a sample of African American students (Utsey, 1999). Cronbach’s alpha for the three

subscales of .78, .69, and .78 for Cultural Racism, Institutional Racism, and Individual Racism respectively have been reported (Utsey, 1999). Cronbach's alphas in the current study were .85 for Cultural Racism, .64 for Institutional Racism, and .81 for Individual Racism.

Mental health was assessed using the *Mental Health Inventory-18* (MHI-18; Veit & Ware, 1983). The MHI-18 has been examined extensively in large populations and among Black samples. The MHI-18 consists of 18 items that asks individuals to assess "during the last 4 weeks, how much of the time." Responses are rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*all the time*) and 6 (*none of the time*). The MHI-18 includes a psychological distress index created from the Anxiety, Depression, and Loss of Behavioral Control subscales and a psychological well-being score consisting of the Positive Affect Subscale. Given that prior research has found an association between perceived stress and depression and anxiety, for the purposes of this study only the depression and anxiety subscales were examined. An example anxiety item is "have you been a nervous person" whereas a depression item is "did you feel depressed." For this study, only the Anxiety and Depression subscales were used. The MHI-18 has demonstrated construct validity when correlated with measures of race-related stress and perceived stress (Pieterse & Carter, 2007). Cronbach's alphas of .85 for the Anxiety subscale and .91 for the Depression subscale have been reported (Cokley et al., 2017). Cronbach's alphas for the current study were .85 for the Anxiety subscale and .91 for the Depression subscale.

Perceived stress was assessed using the *Perceived Stress Scale-10* (PSS-10; Cohen & Williamson, 1988). Appraisals of one's life stress was assessed using the PSS-10. The PSS-10 consists of 10 items that respondents answer using a 5-point scale from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Very Often*). An example item is "in the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly." Evidence of concurrent and predictive validity has been found through correlations with scores from a Life-Event scale and symptomatology measures (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). A Cronbach's alpha of .78 has been reported (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .92.

Procedure

Data collection procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin. Participants completed a survey online through the use of *Qualtrics* survey software. Participants first read through a brief introduction of the study as well as an informed consent form that assured them that their information would be kept confidential. Upon consenting, participants filled out basic demographic information and then

completed the *Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale*, the *Index of Race-Related Stress-Brief*, the *Perceived Stress Scale*, and the *Mental Health Inventory-18*. Lastly, participants were debriefed regarding the study hypotheses and were thanked for their participation.

Data analysis

Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations were calculated among the continuous study variables. One-way ANOVAs and hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted. Mediation analyses were also conducted using the bootstrapping technique proposed by [Preacher and Hayes \(2004\)](#). Bootstrapping creates confidence intervals (in this case 95%), tests the significance of the indirect effect, and does not assume a normal distribution. A total of 5000 bootstrapping samples were used. To conduct the mediation analysis, the computational tool and SPSS plugin PROCESS was used ([Hayes, 2012](#)).

Results

Data Management

Analysis of missing data patterns indicated that 88% of participants ($n = 125$) had no missing data, 8.5% of participants ($n = 12$) had one missing value, 2% of participants ($n = 3$) had two missing values, and .7% of participants ($n = 1$) had three or four missing values. No cases indicated excessive missing values, with the percentage of missing values ranging from .7% to 6.3%. Little's Missing Completely at Random analysis revealed a non-statistically significant chi-square statistic, $\chi^2(1350) = 1423.135, p > .05$, which suggests that the data are missing in a random way. No observations rose above or fell below the threshold for outliers (i.e., 3.0 times the interquartile range below the first or 3 times the interquartile range above the third quartile).

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among study variables are shown in [Table 1](#). A priori alpha levels were set at .05. Significant correlations of between gender, age, and the study variables resulted in these demographic covariates being included as control variables in subsequent correlations. Preliminary analyses also revealed significant correlations between the mental health outcome variables and cultural racism, but not individual racism or institutional racism. Cultural racism was therefore included in subsequent regression analyses while individual racism and institutional racism were excluded.

One-way ANOVAs were also conducted to examine gender differences in the variables. There was a significant difference in depression, $F(1,139) = 6.139, p < .014$, with a small to moderate effect size, $\eta^2 = .04$. Females

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables.

| Variable | Possible Range | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---------------|----------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|--------|--------|---|
| 1. Stress | 6-34 | 26.37 | 7.64 | — | | | | | | | | |
| 2. CR | 0-4 | 3.90 | 0.79 | .17* | — | | | | | | | |
| 3. InstR | 0-4 | 2.06 | 0.89 | .06 | .48** | — | | | | | | |
| 4. IndiR | 0-4 | 3.23 | 0.96 | .12 | .55** | .59** | — | | | | | |
| 5. IP | 1-5 | 2.78 | 0.73 | .43** | .09 | .14 | .25** | — | | | | |
| 6. Depression | 1-6 | 2.44 | 1.11 | .73** | .21* | .11 | .14 | .29** | — | | | |
| 7. Anxiety | 1-6 | 2.81 | 1.05 | .73** | .25** | .05 | .15 | .38** | .71** | — | | |
| 8. Gender | — | — | — | .30** | -.05 | -.06 | .02 | .14 | .21* | .24** | — | |
| 9. Age | 27-72 | 46.77 | 11.97 | -.26** | -.21* | -.06 | -.15 | -.23** | -.22* | -.38** | -.32** | — |

Note. InstR = Institutional Racism; IndiR = Individual Racism; IP = Impostor Phenomenon. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

reported significantly higher levels of depression ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.12$) than males ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 0.82$). There was also a significant difference in anxiety, $F(1, 139) = 8.65$, $p < .004$, with a small to moderate effect size, $\eta^2 = .06$. Females reported significantly higher anxiety ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.04$) than males ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.89$).

We conducted two three-stage hierarchical multiple regression analyses to determine whether, and to what extent, impostor feelings and cultural racism along with perceived stress significantly predicted depression and anxiety. Based on statistical significance at the bivariate level, gender and age were included at stage one of each model. We introduced impostor feelings and cultural racism in stage two, followed by perceived stress in the third and final stage. To test the hypotheses, two different mediation analyses involving perceived stress as the mediator were conducted.

Hierarchical Multiple Regression for Depression

Before running the regression analyses, tests were conducted to see if the data met the assumption of collinearity. The correlations among the predictor variables were all below .70 which indicated that multicollinearity was not a problem. The scatterplot of standardized predicted values contained approximately normally distributed errors, as did the normal P-P plot of standardized residuals, indicating that the data met the assumptions of homoscedasticity and linearity. Cook's distance values ranged from .000 to .143, with values greater than one indicating a potential outlier. The data met the assumption of independent errors (Durbin-Watson values of 2.28 and 1.89) with values falling below 4.0. Finally, gender was dummy-coded with men labeled 0 and women labeled 1.

In stage one of the first hierarchical regression analysis, the regression of gender and age contributed significantly to the model, $F(2, 124) = 5.00$, $p < .008$, with younger attorneys reporting higher levels of depression ($\beta = -.21$, $sr^2 = .041$, $p = .022$) and accounting for 7% of the variance. In the second stage, the regression of impostor feelings and cultural racism on depression while controlling for gender and age contributed significantly to the model such that depression increased with both impostor feelings ($\beta = .20$, $sr^2 = .038$, $p = .023$) and cultural racism ($\beta = .18$, $sr^2 = .029$, $p = .041$), $F(4, 127) = 5.55$, $p < .001$ and accounting for an additional 6% of the variance. In the third stage, the regression of perceived stress on depression while controlling for gender, age, and impostor feelings and cultural racism contributed significantly to the model with only perceived stress ($\beta = .72$, $sr^2 = .371$, $p < .001$) increasing with depression, $F(5, 127) = 27.17$, $p < .001$ and accounting for an additional 38% of the variance. Together, these variables accounted for approximately 51% of the variance in depression (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of multiple hierarchical regression analysis for gender, age, impostor phenomenon, cultural racism, and perceived stress predicting depression.

| Variables | B | SEB | B | sr ² | Adj R ² |
|-----------|-------|------|---------|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1 | | | | | |
| Gender | .353 | .242 | .133 | .016 | |
| Age | -.019 | .008 | -.217* | .042 | .07 |
| 2 | | | | | |
| Gender | .375 | .237 | .141 | .017 | |
| Age | -.012 | .008 | -.134 | .014 | |
| IP | .015 | .006 | .202* | .038 | |
| CR | .243 | .119 | .175* | .029 | .13 |
| 3 | | | | | |
| Gender | -.005 | .182 | -.002 | .000 | |
| Age | -.003 | .006 | -.034 | .001 | |
| IP | -.003 | .005 | -.041 | .001 | |
| CR | .148 | .090 | .107 | .011 | |
| PS | .992 | .101 | .707*** | .371 | .51 |

Note. IP = Impostor Phenomenon. CR = Cultural Racism. PS = Perceived Stress. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Summary of multiple hierarchical regression analysis for gender, age, impostor phenomenon, cultural racism, and perceived stress predicting anxiety.

| Variables | B | SEB | β | sr ² | Adj R ² |
|-----------|-------|------|---------|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1 | | | | | |
| Gender | .242 | .217 | .095 | .008 | |
| Age | -.033 | .007 | -.397** | .141 | .18 |
| 2 | | | | | |
| Gender | .254 | .207 | .100 | .009 | |
| Age | -.025 | .007 | -.300** | .073 | |
| IP | .018 | .005 | .261** | .064 | |
| CR | .244 | .104 | .184* | .032 | .27 |
| 3 | | | | | |
| Gender | -.068 | .163 | -.027 | .001 | |
| Age | -.018 | .005 | -.212** | .036 | |
| IP | .003 | .004 | .045 | .001 | |
| CR | .164 | .080 | .123* | .014 | |
| PS | .842 | .091 | .628*** | .293 | .57 |

Note. IP = Impostor Phenomenon. CR = Cultural Racism. PS = Perceived Stress. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Perceived Stress As Mediator of Impostor Feelings and Depression

A mediation analysis was conducted to examine the indirect effect of impostor feelings on depression via perceived stress. These analyses were run using Model 4 PROCESS (Hayes, 2012), a script built for SPSS based on the bootstrapping technique proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2004) with 5000 bootstrap samples. Significance of the indirect effect was indicated if the 95% confidence interval (CI) did not include zero. The indirect effect was significant, $b = .489$, $SE = .088$, 95% CI = .3175, .6594. The direction and significance of the path from impostor feelings to perceived stress ($b = .46$, $p < .001$) and from perceived stress to depression ($b = 1.05$, $p < .001$) indicated that higher impostor feelings were associated with increased perceived stress and that higher perceived stress was associated with increased depression. Perceived stress fully mediated the relationship between impostor feelings and depression ($b = .00$, $p = .963$; see Figure 1).

A mediation analysis was also conducted to examine the indirect effect of cultural racism on depression via perceived stress. The indirect effect was significant, $b = .1440$, $SE = .0767$, 95% CI = .0027, .3076. $b = .1661$, $SE = 0.779$, 95% CI = .0157, .3224. The direction and significance of the path from cultural racism to perceived stress ($b = .16$, $p = .049$) and from perceived stress to depression ($b = 1.03$, $p < .001$) indicated that higher cultural racism was associated with increased perceived stress and that higher perceived stress was associated with increased depression. Perceived stress fully mediated the relationship between cultural racism and depression ($b = .14$, $p = .106$; see Figure 2).

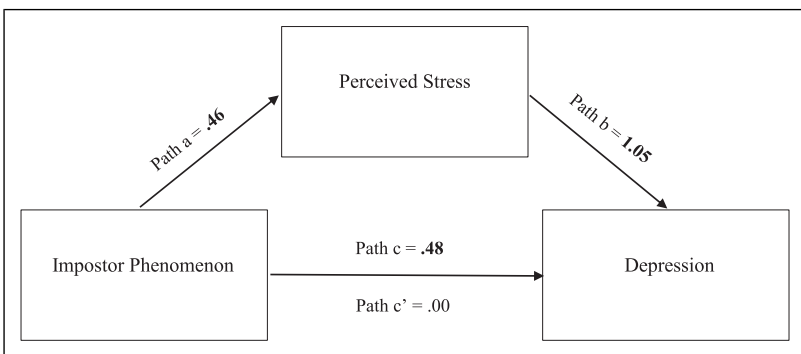


Figure 1. Mediation model of the indirect effect of the impostor phenomenon on depression through perceived stress. Regression coefficients standardized. For the impostor phenomenon-depression pathway, the top value represents the total effect and the bottom values represent the direct effect. Statistically significant coefficients in bold.

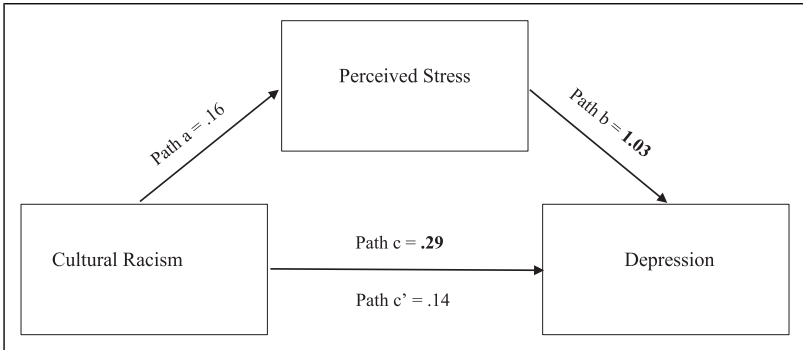


Figure 2. Mediation model of the indirect effect of cultural racism on depression through perceived stress. Regression coefficients standardized. For the cultural racism-depression pathway, the top value represents the total effect and the bottom values represent the direct effect. Statistically significant coefficients in bold.

Hierarchical Multiple Regression for Anxiety

In stage one of the second hierarchical regression analysis, the regression of gender and age contributed significantly to the model, $F(2, 124) = 15.61, p < .001$, with younger attorneys reporting higher levels of anxiety, ($\beta = -.42, sr^2 = .158, p < .001$) and accounting for 19% of the variance. In the second stage, the regression of impostor feelings and cultural racism on anxiety while controlling for gender and age contributed significantly to the model such that anxiety increased with both impostor feelings ($\beta = .26, sr^2 = .064, p = .003$) and cultural racism ($\beta = .18, sr^2 = .184, p = .015$), $F(4, 127) = 9.59, p < .001$ and accounting for an additional 9% of the variance. In the third stage, the regression of perceived stress on anxiety while controlling for gender, age, impostor feelings, and cultural racism contributed significantly to the model with both cultural racism ($\beta = .12, sr^2 = .123, p = .034$) and perceived stress ($\beta = .63, sr^2 = .293, p < .001$) increasing with anxiety, $F(5, 127) = 34.69, p < .001$ and accounting for an additional 30% of the variance. Together, these variables accounted for approximately 57% of the variance in anxiety (Table 3).

Perceived Stress as Mediator of Impostor Feelings and Anxiety

A mediation analysis was conducted to examine the indirect effect of impostor feelings on anxiety via perceived stress. The indirect effect was significant, $b = .4458, SE = .085, CI = .2854, .6164$. The direction and significance of the path from impostor feelings to perceived stress ($b = .46, p < .001$) and from perceived stress to anxiety ($b = .96, p < .001$) indicated that higher impostor feelings were associated with increased perceived stress and higher perceived stress was associated with increased anxiety.

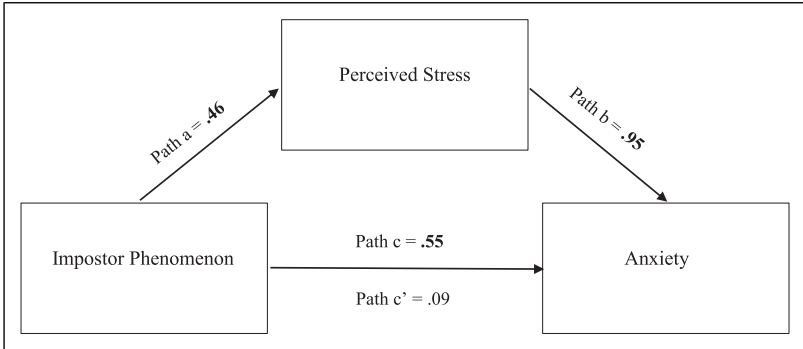


Figure 3. Mediation model of the indirect effect of the impostor phenomenon on anxiety through perceived stress. Regression coefficients standardized. For the impostor phenomenon-anxiety pathway, the top value represents the total effect and the bottom values represent the direct effect. Statistically significant coefficients in bold.

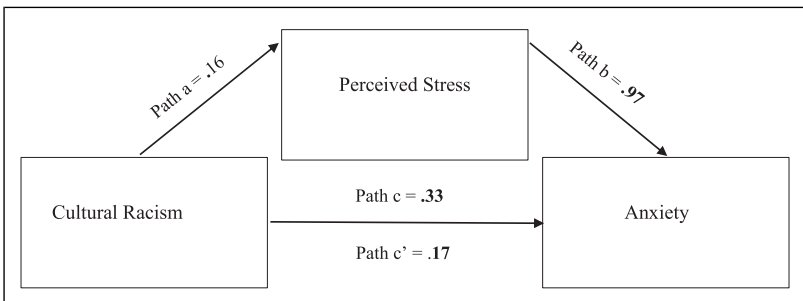


Figure 4. Mediation model of the indirect effect of cultural racism on anxiety through perceived stress. Regression coefficients standardized. For cultural racism-anxiety pathway, the top value represents the total effect and the bottom values represent the direct effect. Statistically significant coefficients in bold.

Perceived stress fully mediated the relationship between impostor feelings and anxiety ($b = .09$, $p = .282$; see [Figure 3](#)).

A mediation analysis was also conducted to examine the indirect effect of cultural racism on anxiety via perceived stress. The indirect effect was significant, $b = .1289$, $SE = .0630$, 95% $CI = .0074, .2565$. $b = .1563$, $SE = .0686$, 95% $CI = .0156, .2879$. The direction and significance of the path from the perceived stress mediator to anxiety ($b = .97$, $p < .001$) and from cultural racism to anxiety ($b = .16$, $p < .05$; $b = .17$, $p = .026$) indicated that higher perceived stress was associated with increased anxiety, and higher cultural racism was associated with increased anxiety. Perceived stress partially

mediated the relationship between cultural racism and anxiety (from $b = .33, p < .003$ to $b = .17, p = .026$; see [Figure 4](#)).

Discussion

The practice of law is overwhelmingly White, and replete with networking, socialization as well as mentorship opportunities that senior legal professionals extend, disproportionately, to White attorneys ([Payne-Pikus et al., 2010](#); [Rhode, 2015](#)). Lack of professional support and underrepresentation create and maintain difficult work environments for Black attorneys ([Dias, 2021](#)). Moreover, Black Americans are the most disproportionately over-represented racial group in the criminal legal system, which underscores the importance of Black attorneys in the continued fight for racial justice. We examined the association between impostor feelings, race-related stress, and mental health outcomes, and examined whether and to what extent stress associated with experiences of racism predicted mental health outcomes among Black attorneys. We also examined perceived stress as a potential mediator of the relationship between impostor feelings, race-related stress, and mental health among Black attorneys.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, impostor feelings were positively associated with perceived stress and mental health (i.e., depression and anxiety). Though previous work has not explicitly linked impostor feelings with perceived stress, research has shown a positive relationship between impostor feelings and minority status stress, suggesting impostor feelings among individuals from racial and ethnic minority groups may represent a specific, individualistic form of minority status stress ([Cokley et al., 2013](#)). Similar to previous findings among Black students ([McClain et al., 2016](#)), higher impostor feelings among Black attorneys are positively associated with poor mental health. While becoming an attorney is a high level of achievement, being in an overwhelmingly White profession nevertheless makes Black attorneys especially susceptible to impostor feelings and poorer mental health.

Regarding the association of race-related stress with perceived stress and mental health, our hypothesis was partially supported. Of the three domains of race-related stress, only cultural racism was associated with perceived stress and mental health. Black lawyers who reported greater stress associated with cultural racism also indicated higher levels of perceived stress and negative mental health outcomes. These findings are consistent with prior research showing that individuals who experience culturally disparaging racism also report negative mental health outcomes, in part as a result of the distress associated with being viewed through a narrow, negative, or stereotypical lens ([Fryberg et al., 2008](#); [Spencer et al., 2016](#); [Williams & Mohammed, 2009](#)). There are a couple of reasons that may explain why cultural racism was the

only race-related stress domain that was associated with perceived stress and mental health. First, when you consider the context of the legal environment and the types of challenges that Black lawyers face, cultural racism appears to be the most salient because it involves attributing cultural or racial differences to inherent negative traits of racial and ethnic minorities. Black lawyers who work with Black clients are likely to be confronted with many examples of cultural racism in the form of biases that exist in the criminal justice system that allow for discriminatory laws (e.g., stop and frisk) which create racial disparities. Another reason is related to the measurement of cultural racism, where half of the items reference differential treatment related to police or crimes. Given that Black lawyers may frequently represent, or are aware of, Black clients who are treated differently than White clients by police or the criminal justice system, it is not surprising that cultural racism would emerge as a distinct domain of race-related stress that is most salient in Black lawyer's mental health.

Regarding our second hypothesis, impostor feelings and race-related stress (i.e., cultural racism) were predictive of depression and anxiety. Black lawyers who endorsed higher levels of impostor feelings and who reported higher levels of stress associated with cultural racism indicated higher levels of depression and anxiety. The results are consistent with prior research indicating that poor mental health can be predicted by impostor feelings (Cokley et al., 2013) and specific domains of race-related stress (Greer et al., 2009). However, what is noteworthy about these findings is the fact that when perceived stress was entered into the model, impostor feelings were no longer predictive of depression and anxiety, and cultural racism was no longer predictive of depression. This suggests that how Black lawyers perceive stress is ultimately more important for their mental health than any struggles they may have with impostor feelings and cultural racism. These findings indicate that the racial bias and self-doubt Black lawyers experience in the legal environment do not have to be overly determinative of their mental health, especially when they appraise the legal environment as a challenge to showcase their skills instead of a threat to their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

We hypothesized that perceived stress would mediate the relationship between race-related stress and negative mental health outcomes (i.e., depression and anxiety). Results showed that perceived stress mediated both the cultural racism-depression and cultural racism-anxiety links. Specifically, perceived stress fully mediated the influence of cultural racism on depression, and partially mediated the influence of cultural racism on anxiety. To these authors' knowledge, no previous studies have shown perceived stress to be one of the key mechanisms by which race-related stress and mental health are linked. In line with Lazarus and Folkman (1984), these findings extend previous research demonstrating that appraisals of a situation as stressful

undergird the relationship between the stress-inducing phenomena itself (i.e., cultural racism) and mental health outcomes (Lee et al., 2013; Lee & Oh, 2017; Sellers et al., 2003).

We also hypothesized that perceived stress would mediate the relationship between impostor feelings and mental health. Consistent with this hypothesis, perceived stress fully mediated the relationships between impostor feelings and depression as well as anxiety. As with cultural racism, the current study is the first to demonstrate perceived stress as a mediator of the relationship between impostor feelings and mental health. Results of the current study showing perceived stress as a mediator of the relationship between impostor feelings and mental health are consistent with theoretical (Clance & Imes, 1978) and empirical (Cokley et al., 2013; 2017; 2018) literature on the impostor phenomenon. Clance and Imes (1978) have noted that characteristics associated with the impostor phenomenon include doubting one's ability to achieve success and subsequently being preoccupied with thoughts of perceived incompetence. Thus, it is the individual's perceptions about their incompetence along with their perceptions of the environment that combine to impact their mental health. This may be especially challenging for Black lawyers who may find themselves in racially biased environments where their competence is constantly challenged. However, the results of both mediation analyses suggest that regardless of impostor feelings and race-related stress, how Black lawyers perceive their work environment is ultimately the factor that impacts their mental health.

Taken together, these results indicate that perceived stress undergirds the link between feelings of professional fraudulence and adverse mental health outcomes. Additionally, these findings suggest that perceived stress is a central pathway by which stress associated with anti-Black cultural denigration contributes to symptoms of depression and anxiety. More specifically, perceiving life events, situations, or stimuli as stressful is one mechanism by which impostor feelings, cultural race-related stress, and psychological distress (i.e., anxiety and depression) are connected.

Two additional findings are noteworthy. A significant relationship was found between age, impostor feelings, anxiety, and depression. An increase in age was associated with lower impostor feelings and decreased levels of anxiety and depression. It stands to reason that, compared to younger lawyers, more seasoned lawyers are more confident and experience relatively fewer psychosocial stressors. A significant mean score difference was also found between gender and mental health, with females reporting higher depressive and anxiety related symptoms than males. This finding is unsurprising given that female-identified attorneys of color contend with dual,

race- and gender-based workplace discrimination (Burleigh & Goldberg, 1988; Smith, 1997).

Limitations

As with all research, it is important to note limitations inherent to this study. While notable for being the only empirical study we are aware of that focuses on the mental health of Black attorneys, the small sample size, specificity, and non-randomness of this sample does limit the generalizability of the findings. Focusing on Black attorneys prevents generalizability to other career domains. It is worth highlighting that the current sample was predominantly Black females, which mirrors data that show Black females are enrolling and graduating law school in larger numbers than their male colleagues (Wilder, 2008). The sample was also limited to those who attended a specific conference in southeast United States. Future attempts to explore factors that impact Black attorneys would benefit from a larger sample that is more diverse geographically and by gender.

Quantitative empirical research is only strong as its measures. While we were surprised that individual racism and institutional racism were not significantly associated with mental health, it should be noted that a recent study revealed some psychometric limitations of the *Index of Race-Related Stress* where the three-factor structure failed to meet recommended cutoff values (Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2020). Chapman-Hilliard et al. suggest that some of the items “need to be adapted to capture the experiences of a broader range of individuals, particularly as social media and other online platforms are increasingly when, how often, and where discrimination occurs” (p. 571). Conclusions drawn about race-related stress and mental health are therefore limited by a measure that, while widely used, needs modification and updating. Finally, another limitation is that this is a cross-sectional, self-report study. Given the correlational nature of the study, no claims of causality can be made. That said, the findings from this study are consistent with previous studies examining stress and mental health.

Implications and Future Research

Most psychological studies are conducted on student samples (Hanel & Vione, 2016), which raises questions of generalizability beyond students. This study is significant because it includes a non-student sample of attorneys and is the first empirical study that we are aware of to examine the mental health of Black attorneys. To address the stress that many Black attorneys experience, finding social support is important. Black attorneys should find and join their local Black bar association if one exists and seek culturally specific resources such as the African American Attorney Network. Joining a

Black bar association may provide access to social support and mentorship that are vital in combatting the challenges of occupational stress salient to Black attorneys, such as impostor feelings. Black attorneys should also seek therapy from therapists who can provide culturally competent services. To be culturally competent, psychologists are recommended to be aware of the challenges facing Black attorneys, to be knowledgeable about factors such as impostor feelings and race-related stress that may be particularly salient for Black attorneys, and to be skilled in working with Black professionals like Black attorneys. Given that perceived stress is such an important mediator of the links between (1) the impostor phenomenon and mental health and (2) race-related stress and mental health, psychologists should work with Black attorneys on adjusting to the stress that causes the emotions by using techniques such as reframing and positive thinking.

There are numerous avenues for future research on Black attorneys as there is limited empirical scholarship on them. Black attorneys' experience, as they participate in a system well-known to disadvantage Black people, justify specific research on the group. It is unlikely that mental health research on attorneys, in general, captures many of the salient psychological factors that will be integral to improving the mental health of Black attorneys. Therefore, future research should continue to focus on the unique experiences of Black attorneys. For example, research should continue to address how the impostor phenomenon may be experienced differently for Black attorneys as well as exploring how cultural racism may be taking a unique toll on Black attorneys, especially as they work in a justice system where cultural racism is prominent. We are also reminded that Black attorneys are not monolithic in their experiences. Black attorneys practice different types of law, including criminal, personal injury, civil, immigration, bankruptcy, disability, and bank regulation among others. The nature of the diverse types of law also reflects different emphases on race, with criminal and civil law for example likely involving race more overtly than other types of law. There are also individual differences in the way Black attorneys appraise stress. In other words, Black attorneys do not appraise or experience stress similarly. Given the power of perceived stress to account for much, or all, of the relationship linking impostor feelings and cultural racism to mental health outcomes, future research in the Black psychology literature should continue exploring the mediating potential of perceived stress for other important linkages involving race-related variables and mental health outcomes.

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