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Silent Struggle

Confronting anger in African-American women

by Amy Oprean

In the field of mental health, disorders such as anxiety and depression have been recognized for decades as debilitating ailments that often require professional treatment. In stark contrast to this, unhealthy anger has far fewer treatments in place, despite studies that suggest it may be an equally detrimental and widespread problem. Research-backed treatments are especially sparse for women and minorities, whose symptoms of unhealthy anger are often internalized rather than outwardly expressed.

Antonio González-Prendes, Ph.D., and Shirley Thomas, Ph.D., assistant professors in WSU's School of Social Work are working to change this with collaborative research that could lay a foundation for anger therapy in one of the most overlooked groups – African-American women. Their approach focuses on social messages on race and gender roles, which they suspect are major influencers on the experience and expression of anger.

"Women and men of different races receive very different messages about anger, both in terms of how they experience anger, and the socially acceptable ways to act on their emotions," González-Prendes said. "We believe it's essential for therapists to approach anger therapy in the context of these unique perspectives."

Anger's role in mental illness first came to González-Prendes' attention while he was a community mental health clinician. There, he noticed that unhealthy anger was an issue for many of his patients but discovered very little information available for treating the problem. "The vast majority of research on anger therapy

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— Dr. Antonio González-Prendes

focuses on college-age men," he said. "There is also no diagnosis related to unhealthy anger in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association. I welcomed the opportunity to come to Wayne State to begin addressing this gap in knowledge."

Since becoming a faculty member in 2005, González-Prendes has studied the unique forms that anger takes on in each gender and race. He joined Thomas, who studies the sociological aspects of mental health in African-American women, to begin to unravel the reasons behind this group's unique experience with the problem.

The 'superwomen'

González-Prendes and Thomas hypothesize that women receive messages that imply expressing anger could be harmful to their relationships. Because of this, women often internalize or divert their anger, which can then resurface in a number of unhealthy ways such as substance abuse, self-cutting, eating disorders, heart disease and hypertension. In addition to physical symptoms, women who divert their anger experience heightened levels of anxiety.

González-Prendes and Thomas explained that African-American women face additional barriers of culture-bound messages that characterize their role as the "pillars of strength" for their family and community. In striving to play this role, some African-American women may deny themselves the right to fulfill their own needs and express their emotions. "On one hand, this expectation of being a 'strong black woman' could serve as a virtue by which African-American women are collectively motivated and encouraged to overcome adversity," Thomas said. "On the other hand, it places an unrealistic goal of being a 'superwoman,' who serves others no matter how great the cost to her own well-being."

The problem is further compounded by the "powerlessness" that González-Prendes and Thomas say is experienced by African-American women as well as other minorities and oppressed members of society. In a study performed by González-Prendes and Thomas, they found that the disproportionate number of black women with low income, low positions of power, low education levels and





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high poverty levels significantly lowered their chances of attaining a sense of empowerment and control over their lives.

“The rigid expectations for black women to be unwaveringly strong is a paradox, in a sense, because black women have less access to the things that have been shown to influence a person’s sense of empowerment within society,” González-Prendes said. “We have theorized that this paradox causes stress and anger.”

Confronting anger

With their current study, González-Prendes and Thomas hope to further investigate what they suspect are the main influencers of anger in African-American women. Using focus groups and evaluations, they are assessing African-American women’s perception of cultural strength as well as the most prominent variables in their experience and expression of anger. Information obtained from the study will serve as the beginning of a database of anger profiles, and will provide the basis for cognitive behavioral therapy for anger geared specifically toward African-American women.

“Our goal is to make women aware of the messages that have shaped the role of anger in their lives and then help them rewrite the script of those messages in a more balanced, rational and realistic manner using cognitive behavioral therapy,” González-Prendes said.

Both González-Prendes and Thomas are hopeful their studies will be the start of a more comprehensive, effective approach to a widespread,

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yet under-researched problem. “The study of anger in African-American women and other minority groups, and its related consequences, is a topic that has more or less passed under the radar until now,” González-Prendes said. “Our research aims to provide a foundation of knowledge on the topic, and to develop and test out culturally sensitive therapy methods that will help women overcome their anger issues and live happier lives.”

About Dr. Shirley Thomas

Dr. Thomas received a B.A. in sociology from Adams State College, a Master’s in social work from the University of Denver, an M.A. in sociology and Ph.D. in social work and sociology from the University of Michigan. She joined Wayne State University in 2004.

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About Dr. Antonio González-Prendes:

Dr. González-Prendes received a B.S. in psychology from Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, a Master’s in social work and Ph.D. in counseling from Wayne State University. He joined Wayne State in 2004.

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