The Traumatic Impact of Structural Racism on African Americans

Gwendolyn Scott-Jones, PsyD, MSW, CAADC & Mozella Richardson Kamara, PE

Department of Psychology, College of Health and Behavioral Sciences, Delaware State University

Abstract

Many African Americans in the United States have been impacted by structural racism since slavery and continue to experience trauma because of health disparities, economic disadvantages, and segregation. This article will define race, racism, and structural racism, which has perpetuated trauma for African Americans. The authors present a theory called Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome (PTSS) by Dr. Joy DeGruy, a social work researcher, to explain why many African Americans continue to experience trauma. PTSS is a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of African and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery. Looking at history and the inherent long-standing trauma that has and continue to plague African Americans can assist in addressing systemic racism and provide an opportunity to look at holistic restoration.

Race

Race, racism, and race relations affect everyone in this country, especially African Americans.[1] The U.S. Census Bureau defines a person's race based on that person's self-identification of the race or races with which he or she most closely identifies.[2] In addition, the U.S. Census Bureau defines 'Black or African American' as a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. African American is the term currently preferred by most people of African ancestry in the United States.[1] It is important to note that many Africans, who migrate to the United States do not self-identify as African American but identify as African.

The definition of race has no consensual theoretical or scientific meaning in psychology, although it is frequently used in psychological theory, research, and practice as if it has obvious meaning.[3] Race is a cultural category that remains meaningful in the United States because of its continuing social and economic significance.[4] Race shapes how we experience the world and continues to be used as the basis for the mistreatment of African Americans. The impacts of racism continue to significantly affect those who identify as African-American.

Racism

Racism in this article is operationally defined as the beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation.[5] This is not a recent phenomenon. Racism has plagued the United States since the 17th century, around the time of European colonization. In the 17th century era, millions of Africans were shipped from Africa to the Americas as slaves. This dispersion of Africans across the Americas is what is known today as the African Diaspora.[6] Most of the Africans were separated from their families, stripped of their names and identities, beaten, raped, tortured, and in many cases lynched or hanged at the whims of their Caucasian masters. The psychological, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse Africans experienced during enslavement in the United States had long-lasting traumatic effects. More specifically, African Americans were traumatized

in the United States. The marginalization of African Americans based on race has been normalized across systems and institutions of the United States, and continues to impact African Americans today.

Structural Racism

Structural racism in the U.S. is the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics that stem from historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal aspects that routinely advantage Caucasians while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color.[7] Lawrence and Keleher reported that structural racism lies underneath, all around and across society. Furthermore, Lawrence and Kelecher found that structural racism encompasses: (1) history, which lies underneath the surface, providing the foundation for white supremacy in this country; (2) culture, which exists all around our everyday lives, providing the normalization and replication of racism and, (3) interconnected institutions and policies, the key relationships and rules across society providing the legitimacy and reinforcements to maintain and perpetuate racism. Structural racism creates trauma. The impacts of structural racism, can take a mental toll on African Americans. Mental health disparities based on minority racial status are well identified, including inequities in access, symptom severity, diagnosis, and treatment.[8] However, African Americans have a history of experiencing structural racism through economic disadvantages and segregation, which have been existent since slavery. Therefore, the factors of economic disadvantages and segregation are identified stressors that may have an effect on the mental health of African Americans. Mental health inequities began during the time of colonialism and slavery, when myths of racism were being integrated into the developing field of psychiatry and psychology.[8] By the end of the 19th century, many psychologists accepted an idea that African Americans were biologically inferior, with smaller brains and a natural instinct for labor. Studies have found that African Americans who participated in the Abolitionist and Civil Rights movements were met with prejudice by mental health practitioners, who labeled them schizophrenic due to their supposed pathologic desire for equality. To date, the research shows that African Americans are over diagnosed with schizophrenia and they are more likely to be treated with antipsychotic medications that can have lasting, negative side effects. Additionally, African Americans have higher rates of severe depression yet lower rates of treatment compared to Caucasians. African Americans are less likely to receive office-based counseling for psychological stressors and are more likely to be seen in emergency rooms.[9]

Dr. Joy DeGruy, a social work researcher, developed a theory called Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). This theory explains the etiology of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African American communities throughout the United States and the Diaspora. PTSS is a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery.[10] This form of slavery is predicated on the belief that African Americans are inherently/genetically inferior to their Caucasian counterparts. Dr. DeGruy identified three key patterns of PTSS behaviors that are exhibited by African Americans.[10]

1. Vacant Esteem

This is insufficient development of one's primary esteem, along with feelings of hopelessness, depression and a general self-destructive outlook. Vacant esteem, the belief that one has little or no worth, manifests a feeling that an individual and their partner are unworthy of healthy

monogamous relationships. Under strained economic conditions, and in an effort to increase self-esteem, masculinity may move from the acquisition of socioeconomic goods to the belief that the more women one sleeps with, the more masculine he becomes.[11]

2. Marked Propensity for Anger and Violence

Individuals can feel extreme feelings of suspicion, and perceived negative motivations of others. Violence against self, property and others, including the members of one's own familial or social group, i.e. friends, relatives, or acquaintances can be seen. Instead of acknowledging the barriers created by systematic racism and oppression, some African American men may hold African American women responsible for their inability to obtain traditional masculinity.[11]

3. Racist Socialization and (Internalized) Racism

This pattern includes behaviors like learned helplessness, literacy deprivation, distorted self-concept, antipathy or aversion for the following:

- The members of one's own identified cultural/ethnic group,

- The mores and customs associated one's own identified cultural/ethnic heritage, and/or

- The physical characteristics of one's own identified cultural/ethnic group.

Racist socialization manifests in the idealization of white norms and values by African Americans. The emphasis on the promotion of the nuclear family and traditional gender roles has resulted in many African Americans idealizing this model despite their inability to obtain it.[11]

Structural Racism Today

Structural racism continues to perpetuate trauma for African Americans today. Taking a look at history and the inherent long-standing trauma that has and continues to plague African Americans can assist in addressing systemic racism that is present today. Many medical providers, behavioral health practitioners, educators, and law enforcement officers seek to understand the African American culture and how they can provide equitable service delivery. To heal African Americans, service providers must first understand the overt systemic trauma, then examine the covert systemic and institutional aspects that continue to perpetuate racism in the United States. Trauma-informed care and services could offer an important opportunity to African Americans who have been harmed and emotionally injured. In addition to being trauma-informed, service providers should provide healing centered engagement in their approach to working with African Americans. Healing centered engagement is akin to the South African term "Ubuntu" meaning that humanness is found through our interdependence, collective engagement and service to others.[12] Additionally, healing centered engagement offers an asset driven approach aimed at the holistic restoration of African Americans and their well-being. Ginwright found that healing centered engagement advances the move to "strengths-based" care and away from the deficit based mental health models that drive therapeutic interventions.[12]

In order to dismantle structural racism, we must take a close look at the historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal aspects that lack equity for African Americans. Combatting structural racism is the responsibility of everyone, because we all must become conscious of our own responsibility as individuals. This is how we can be a part of something bigger than

ourselves. Former President Barack Obama once stated, "I see what's possible when we recognize that we are one American family, all deserving of equal treatment." Therefore, it is a call to action for all Americans, regardless of your race, ethnicity, social economical status, gender, or status to put a stop to structural racism.

References

1. Belgrave, F., & Allison, K. (2019). *African American Psychology: From Africa to America*, (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

2. Census, U. S. (2016). People in families by family structure, age, and sex, iterated by income-to poverty ratio and race. Retrieved from https://www.census/gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pov/pov-02.html

3. Helms, J. E., Jernigan, M., & Mascher, J. (2005, January). The meaning of race in psychology and how to change it: A methodological perspective. *The American Psychologist*, *60*(1), 27–36. PubMed https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.1.27

4. Mukhopadhyay, C. C., Henze, R., & Moses, Y. T. (2013). How real is race?: A sourcebook on race, culture, and biology. ProQuest Ebook central https://ebookcentral.proquest.com

5. Clark, R., Anderson, N. B., Clark, V. R., & Williams, D. R. (1999, October). Racism as a stressor for African Americans. A biopsychosocial model. *The American Psychologist*, *54*(10), 805–816. PubMed https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.10.805

6. Rotimi, C. N., Tekola-Ayele, F., Baker, J. L., & Shriner, D. (2016, December). The African diaspora: History, adaptation and health. *Current Opinion in Genetics & Development*, *41*, 77–84. PubMed https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gde.2016.08.005

7. Lawrence, K., & Kelecher, T. (2004). Chronic disparity: strong and pervasive evidence of racial inequalities poverty outcomes: Structural racism. Paper presented at the Race and Public Conference.

8. Medlock, M., Weissman, A., Wong, S., Carlo, A., Zeng, M., Borba, C., Curry,M., & Shtasel, D. (2017). Racism as a unique social determinant of mental health: development of a Didactic curriculum for psychiatry residents. MedEdPortal: Association of American Medical Colleges. (13), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.15766/mep_2374-8265.10618

9. Miller, J. (2020). A statement of the American mental health counselor association on racism as a social determinant of mental health. [AMHCA]. *American Mental Health Counselors Association*, *17*(04), 1–6.

10. DeGruy, J. (2017). *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, Revised Edition: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing.* Milwaukie, Oregon: Uptone Press.

11. St Vil, N. M., St Vil, C., & Fairfax, C. N. (2019, April 1). Posttraumatic slave syndrome, the patriarchal nuclear family structure, and African American male-female relationships. *Social Work*, *64*(2), 139–146. PubMed https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swz002

12. Ginwright, S. (2018). *The future of healing: Shifting from trauma care to healing centered engagement*. Medium Psychology. Retrieved from https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c