

# A Social Justice Approach To Black Mental Health

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Allyson N. Drayton, NCC, LPC

*allydconsults@gmail.com*



Being an anti-racist therapist is unlike being a culturally competent therapist or a therapist who practices cultural humility. The former is accountable to act against a system of oppression, instead of capitalizing on it.

B A B E K A W A I I - B O G U E



## OVERVIEW

Cliff Notes: [HTTPS://YOUTU.BE/A5QZV9RGX6K](https://youtu.be/A5QZV9RGX6K)

On Anti-Racism & Health Equity: [Ethics Talk: Antiracism, Health Equity, and a Post-COVID Future | Journal of Ethics | American Medical Association \(ama-assn.org\)](#)

### Racist Roots:

#### *Scientific Racism*

- Scientific racism emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century just after the onset of chattel slavery, in order to legitimize the dehumanization and murder of Black people through racial capitalism.

#### *The Medical Model & "Behavioral Health"*

- Flawed (fraudulent) intelligence research conducted by past APA President & recipient of the APA Career Achievement Award strengthened legislation to prevent the immigration of individuals belonging to groups categorized as being "intellectually inferior". Robert Thorndike used behavioral science to justify the dehumanizing treatment of BIPOC persons, women, Eastern and Southern Europeans, and people from lower socioeconomic statuses. His research, rooted in white supremacist ideology, became the foundation for behavioral research in psychology to this day.

#### *Protest Psychosis*

- Helped justify the need for police brutality in the civil rights movement, Jim Crow laws, and mass incarceration in prisons and psychiatric hospitals. Today, schizophrenia is among the most over diagnosed mental illness among Black Americans.



## DECOLONIZATION:

### Moving Beyond Cultural Competence

Disparities have been resistant to interventions such as cultural competency training and standardized diagnostic tools. Basic diversity approaches that focus primarily on the race of the provider and the client, while valid, is an approach that does not consider the system itself, the functions of the diagnosis, and its structurally developed links to protest, resistance, racism and other associations that work against the therapeutic connection.

Social Justice practice focuses on the effects of power differentials on individual and family wellbeing and on the relationship between clients and therapists. It calls for discussing issues of empowerment, cultural resistance or social action.

*(Falicov, 2004)*

## RACIAL TRAUMA



### MICROAGGRESSIONS

Traumatic discrimination can also result from excessive and intense microaggressions (i.e., repeated exposure to subtle discrimination that persists throughout an individual's life), as well as from blatant and subtle forms of systemic microaggressions (e.g., enforced policies or practices in government or institution that continually marginalize certain groups of people).



### VICARIOUS/COLLECTIVE

Vicarious racism traditionally refers to experiencing racial discrimination indirectly through close contacts, such as family members and peers.

Vicarious racism can be experienced by those who are not directly involved with the event, but who identify with the victims of racism generally on the basis of race.



### REACTION FORMATION

A psychological term which speaks to how people respond the opposite way of how they feel due to fear, rejection, or perceived threat to their survival.

Examples- "Acting White", Self Injurious Behavior, avoiding outward expression of culture/ethnicity, turning the other cheek

## Defining Racial Trauma

### Race-Related Life Events

- Daily racism
- Significant life events
- Time limited event with a beginning and end
- May lead to other events or the effects may be long lasting

- Brief/commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, (intentional or unintentional), that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group;
- Tone policing, color blindness, denial of individual racism, meritocracy myth, pathologizing communication styles/cultural values, invisibility

### Microaggressions

*(Microassaults, Microinvalidations, Microinsults)*

### Vicarious Racism

- Witnessing acts of racism via video, radio or social media;
- Experiences from the media such as perceived racial injustices (e.g. cases of police violence or racially-charged comments from elected officials);
- Being exposed to the racial trauma of a friend, family member or peer

(Harrell, 2000; Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2009)

## Defining Racial Trauma

### Collective Racism

- Cultural-symbolic and sociopolitical manifestations of racism;
- Similar to vicarious trauma but not associated with an identifiable individual

### Systemic Racism

- Racism embedded in social structure, political dynamics, institutions, organizations, etc.

### Historical Trauma

- Multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group. Related to major events that oppressed a particular group of people because of their status as oppressed
  - *(i.e. slavery, the Holocaust, forced migration, the violent colonization of Native Americans)*
- History shapes stories passed down through generations

(Harrell, 2000; Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2009)

## Examples of Race-Related Traumas That May Not Meet DSM-5 Criteria for PTSD

- **Overt racial slurs and threats made by anyone** (i.e., a perpetrator threatens the victim with assault or death using a racial/ethnic epithet);
- **Police harassment, body searches, and assaults** (i.e., issuing threats, searching the victim's body for evidence of a crime);
- **Workplace discrimination** (i.e., co-workers express racially motivated threats or carry out physical assaults against a targeted individual);
- **Community violence** (i.e., witnessing gang violence or being afraid for one's life/personal safety or that of family members);
- **Distressing medical experiences** (i.e., having persistent fear for life of self/loved ones due to medical mistreatment)
- **Incarceration** (i.e., having been physically or sexually assaulted while in jail/prison);
- **Immigration difficulties** (i.e., having feared for the life of oneself/loved ones during the immigration process, or having been exposed to extreme temperatures);
- **Deportation** (i.e., children of undocumented immigrants witness violent confrontation, abduction of, and separation from parents by law enforcement)

## Impact of Racial Trauma

### Psychological Impact

- Flashbacks/nightmares
- Intrusive thoughts
- Inability to concentrate
- Hyperactivity
- Restrictive emotional expression
- Depression
- Anxiety

### Biological Impact

- Decreased metabolism
- Hypertension
- Chronic fatigue
- Sleep deprivation
- Migraines
- Acid reflux disease
- Hostility
- Hunger
- Arthritis
- Decreased immune system

### Childhood Impact

- **Age 0-5:** Minimal understanding
  - Confusion
- **Age 6-11:** Basic understanding;
  - Confusion, Hurt, Sadness, Anger
  - Self-esteem issues
- **Age 12+:** More abstract understanding
  - Impacts identity development and outlook for the future

(Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006; Carter, 2007; Carlson, 1997; Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2010; Kniffey, 2021)



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