The Psychological Impact of Racism

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“I am human, therefore nothing human can be alien to me” – Dr. Maya Angelou
Conflict of Interest Disclosure

Disclosure

I do not have any relationship(s) to disclose.

By the end of this lecture, you should be able to:

- The history of racism as a powerful social construct
- Understand the basic neurobiology of fear and its intersection with trauma
- Better recognize the relationship between trauma informed practices and improved cultural responsivity
- Understand Schein’s model on organizational cultural change
- Appreciate the impact of underlying assumptions
- Trauma Informed approaches as one possible method to combat, confront, deconstruct racism and racist structures and schemas

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What we really want from these tough discussions regarding racism?

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**QUICK RELEVANT HISTORY—STRATEGIC EXCLUSION**

- **American Revolutionary War of 1776 (gave birth to America)** – “we hold these truths to be self-evidence that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” – for whom though?

- **Civil War** (shaped American culture and values), 1865: abolishment of slavery, ratification of the 13th amendment with a clause – “slaves are free unless they be criminals.”

- **Reconstruction era** from 1865-1876 – rebuilding of America post civil war, but there was a legislative, systemic exclusion and marginalization of specific groups. The rise of Jim Crowism began and lasted up until the period of the Civil Rights Movement.

- **Before the Black Lives Matter Movement**, there was the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, *I too, am America* (1920-30’s). Half a century after the ratification of the 13th amendment, people of color were still imploring to be included.

- **Civil Rights Movement of 1965** (not that long ago) – helped to swing the door wide open for women and other marginalized groups.

- Almost 200 years post the abolishment of slavery and there are still disproportionate groups of individuals in this country begging to be included....
The Oregon Legacy of Racism and Exclusion

- In 1844, provisional government of the territory passed a law banning slavery. AND... at the same time required any African-American in Oregon leave the territory.

- In 1857, Oregon adopted a state constitution that banned black people from coming to the state, residing in the state, or holding property in the state.

- During this same time period (1857), any white male settler could receive 650 acres of land and another 650 acres if he was married – this was of course land taken from native people who'd possessed the land for centuries prior.

- Oregon Statehood granted, February 14, 1859 – explicitly forbade black people from living in its borders (and was the only state to do so)

- 1922 – Governor Walter M. Pierce (a Democrat) was an open a vocal Klan supporter (and was photographed with Klansmen)

- 1926 – Black exclusion laws were repealed in Oregon

- Early 1940’s – War World II – African Americans came to Oregon to work in Shipyards

- 1948 – Vanport flood, the Columbia River flooded wiping out a predominantly African-American community (approximately 6,300), unnecessarily. Modern day would be likened to Hurricane Katrina (lack of infrastructure, lack of political will)

- The 13th, 14th and 15th amendments passed – which meant that Oregon’s state laws were superseded by national law, however...

- Oregon did not ratify the 14th amendment, equal protection under the law until 1973

- Oregon didn’t ratify the 15th amendment to give black people the right to vote until 1959 (which made it one of six states that refused to ratify the amendment when it initially passed at the federal level)

- 1960’s – undertook “urban renewal” projects that strategically displaced black communities (most prominent is Legacy Emanuel Hospital)
And it persists...

- Gentrification
- Unemployment disproportionately high
- Criminal justice involvement
- Homeownership is low
- Education disparities
- Blacks own six cents of wealth compared to every dollar of white wealth
- Discriminatory language wasn’t removed from the Oregon Constitution until the early 2000’s

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Racism

A system of dominance, power and privilege based on racial group designations....where members of the dominant group create or accept their societal privilege by maintaining structures, ideology, values, and behavior that have the intent or effect of leaving non-dominant group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status and or equal access to societal resources. (Harrell, 2000)

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Structural Racism

Race, Power and Policy
Dismantling Structural Racism

- Criminal Justice
- Education
- Social and Economic System
- Housing
- Community
- Employment
- Health

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Underlying assumptions

- Influence behavior and actions
- If underlying assumptions aren’t checked, systems/organizations don’t change

Toni Morrison on white supremacy
Napping while black

This allegedly wasn’t the first time this white Yale student called the cops on a person of color

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Barbecuing while Black

Residents hold cookout at park where white woman called cops on black family barbecue

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Being Black at Starbucks

Right here in Oregon – Canvassing while Black
THE POWER OF IMAGES

Context and subtext: Conscious expression, subconscious application
AND race as the powerful social construct

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Sandra Annette Bland
- Grew up in a Suburb of Chicago
- Family was middle class
- She was college educated
- Graduated with a degree in Agriculture
- She was a musician
The pain leaps out...everyone can relate to this feeling.
What can underlying assumptions lead to?
Conscious denial, subconscious application

Timothy McVeigh - Oklahoma
James Holmes - Colorado
Dzhokhar Tsarnaev – Boston
Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold – Colorado
Treyvon Martin - Florida
Michael Brown – Missouri
Freddie Gray – Baltimore
Sandra Bland – Texas
Eric Garner – New York

Racism & Invisibility

“To be a person of color in this country is really... never to be looked at. What white people see when they look at you is not visible. What they do see when they do look at you is what they have invested you with. What they have invested you with is all the agony, and pain, and the danger, and the passion, and the torment — you know, sin, death, and hell — of which everyone in this country is terrified.”
- James Baldwin
One approach to changing/managing assumptions

Trauma-Informed approach

Fear: a natural response

THALAMUS
Giant switchboard, directs information to other parts of the brain

HIPPOCAMPUS
Sensory cortex and AMYGDALA—gives context to the situational and emotional aspects of fear

HYPOTHALAMUS
Fight-or-Flight response is activated.

FRONTAL & TEMPORAL LOBES
Higher cortical areas where the experience of dread happens

Dopamine is released & can cause panicked, irrational behavior

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Natural fear response unchecked = traumatization

“Traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat.”
-Van der Kolk, 1989

What does it mean to be trauma-informed?

- Understanding the neurobiological, social, and psychological aspects of trauma (as outlined in prior slides)

- Changing the way you pose questions: instead of “what is wrong with you?” ASK “what happened to you?”

- Check underlying assumptions
Being trauma-informed

- Builds greater capacity for empathy
- Restores a sense of basic humanity
- Inherently renders you culturally-responsive

Profound Lesson in developing greater capacity for Empathy: “A Time to Kill”
The Invisibility Syndrome & Antiracist movement

Invisibility Syndrome

- Cumulative experiences of confronting race-related stress, emotional abuse and the psychological trauma of racism can lead to the development of the invisibility syndrome.

- Symptoms of the syndrome are an outcome of psychological conditions produced when a person perceives that his or her talents and identity are not seen because of the dominance of the preconceived attitudes and stereotypes.

Developing an Anti-racist ideology

Dominant culture is strongly encouraged to:

- Educate themselves through reading and discussions with persons of color about the nature of racism in its individual, institutional and cultural forms
- Acknowledge White privilege
- Take responsibility for learning about racism from people of color (should be done both inside and outside of the workplace)
- Secure mutual goals in working towards antiracist social change
- Be willing to assess and learn from their own stereotypes, prejudices, biases and fears
- Be willing to speak out against injustices, institutionally (this first requires believing that injustice exists)

Anderson et al. Racism and Invisibility: Race-Related Stress, Emotional Abuse and Psychological Trauma for People of Color. Journal of Emotional Abuse. Pages 9-30 | Published online: 22 Sep 2008

Dr. Maya Angelou

‘I am a human being, nothing human can be alien to me.’

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