

Should America Pay: Slavery and The Raging Debate on Reparations
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Reparations and Healthcare for African Americans: Repairing the Damage from
the Legacy of Slavery

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POST TRAUMATIC SLAVE SYNDROME
(PTSS): AN EXPLANATORY THEORY

Key Concepts

PTSS theory states that African Americans sustained traumatic psychological and emotional injury as a direct result of slavery and continue to be injured by traumas caused by the larger society's policies of inequality, racism and oppression. Another dimension of this type of injury occurred as a result of the destruction of the African culture (i.e., belief systems,, customs and values). Even prior to arriving in the Americas, African families were often torn apart and people were separated from their various groups or tribes. *Relationships with each other*, which was the foundation of their historical survival as well as their primary axiological construct or "value system", were threatened and destroyed. Due to their resilience, Africans survived the sudden violent disruption of family and home, as demonstrated in the reconstruction (albeit fragmented) of their cultural values and customs. However, as a result of exceptionally harsh treatment at the hands of their captors, they sustained severe, immeasurable psychological and emotional, as well as physical damage. For example, recent unearthing of a slave cemetery in Washington D.C. revealed startling evidence that slaves suffered physical injuries that have been rarely seen in recent history. These injuries were the result of extreme exertion and physical deprivation.

Additionally, the institution of chattel slavery forced Africans to integrate the ethnic ideology of their captors into their own psyche, which led to what can be described as a "cultural dissonance," a feeling of disharmony and psychological conflict resulting in a loss of identity and self esteem. Thus, multitudes of African Americans were forced to function within a system which was in conflict with their own traditional customs, values, and needs.

In light of the cumulative and continued stressors experienced by African American communities, viewing such stress in light of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as well as socially learned maladaptive behavior is appropriate. The direct traumas associated with slavery occurred long ago. If one considers differential dose exposure (differences in the amount of stress individuals were exposed to) and differences in individual psychology, it is difficult to determine the degree of severity of PTSD in those who were affected. Although it is likely that PTSD was prevalent, there is currently no evidence that would suggest that those Africans who may have suffered from PTSD in the past received any formal treatment. The lack

of any therapeutic intervention for millions of captive, displaced Africans who likely suffered from PTSD during or after the advent of slavery suggest that PTSD remained a perennial problem among African Americans. It is also overwhelmingly clear that new traumas continued to plague African Americans long after slavery was officially ended.

PTSS Theory

PTSS theory proposes that while the remarkable resilience of the African allowed for the perpetuation of a modified and improvised version of African culture, varying levels of both clinically induced and socially acquired residual stress related illness was passed along through the generations. Transmission occurred on several levels:

- the family level;
- the community level; and
- the societal level

Multigenerational Transmission of Trauma

The Family

The first mode of transmission was through the family. According to Comer, 1980:

"Each society has a vital interest in the indoctrination of the infants who form its new recruits. It lives only through its members, and its culture is its heart which it must keep pulsating. Without it, its members are rootless and lost. . . they must be so raised that the culture exists in them and they can transmit it to the next generation. It is a task that every society largely delegates, even though unwittingly, to an agent - the family."

The African American Community

The second mode of transmission is through the African American community. During slavery the community was a suppressed and marginalized group. Today, the African American community is made up of individuals and families who collectively share different levels of anxiety and adaptive survival behaviors resulting from prior generations of African Americans who suffered from PTSD and received no treatment.

The community serves to reinforce both positive and negative behaviors through the socialization process. For example in the 1940's according to Comer (1980) families frequently destroyed any signs of aggression in their children, particularly the male children. It was an acceptable and expected practice in African American communities to severely beat unruly boys so that they would never make the mistake of standing their ground with a white person in authority. While this practice was clearly the result of the hostile and oppressive environment in which African American families lived, it resulted in an assault on the collective psyche of the group as a whole.

The Larger Society

The third method of transmission is through the larger society. The interaction with the larger society has occurred at all the levels of transmission, adding consistent and enduring trauma. This occurs through policies of continuing inequality, discrimination and scarcity of resources, coupled with crass materialism and a mass communication system which allows everyone to see the stark disparity between the "haves" and the "have nots." New policies such as reversals in affirmative action act as set backs re-opening old wounds, and making it increasingly difficult for young black people to fulfill the societal expectation or individual and group aspiration

A CLINICAL VIEW

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has generated profound interest. Many psychological journals, articles and books have been written with elaborate details of the symptoms, causes and treatment of this disorder. Individuals and groups said to suffer from this disorder include: victims of rape, war veterans, holocaust survivors and their children, victims of incest, heart attack victims, natural disaster survivors, victims of severe accidents, etc., Absent from this list however are enslaved Africans and their descendants.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition- Revised,(DSM IV), PTSD is described as being a reaction to a distressing event which may have occurred months or years before.

The most common trauma involved a serious threat or harm to one's life or physical integrity; a serious threat or harm to one's children, spouse, or other close relatives and friends; sudden destruction of one's home or community; or seeing another person who has recently been, or is being seriously injured or killed as the result of an accident or physical violence. In some cases the trauma may be learning about a serious threat to a close friend or relative, e.g., that one's child has been kidnapped, tortured, or killed. The stressor is usually experienced with intense fear, terror, and helplessness. The disorder is considered to be more severe and will last longer when the stressor is of human design.

All of the above mentioned traumas were the common and perpetual experience of African slaves and their African-American descendants. A less severe form of the violence and abuse continued after slavery officially ended with peonage, Black Codes, Convict Leasing, lynchings, beatings, threats to life and property, the rise of the Klan, Jim Crow segregation, the death of Emmett Till, the race riots of the 60's, the 1989 beating death of Mullageta Sera (an Ethiopian man) by white supremacists Skin Heads, the proliferation of white supremacist groups, the near election of an ex-Klansman to Governor for the state of Louisiana, the 1992 police beating of Rodney King, the 1999 dragging death of James Byrd in Jasper Texas by four white youth, the police shooting death of Amadou Diallo in 1999, and the 2002 police beating of 16 year old Donovan Jackson-Chavis, a special education, hearing impaired youth. All these events remind African Americans that the trauma has never really ceased and that it is likely to continue if there is no intervention.

It is not plausible that after more than two centuries of relentless oppression and brutal violence, slavery simply ended, leaving no traces of its psychological impact upon the generations that followed. The evidence of the transmission of the psychological effects is represented in racial economic disparities, consumerism, higher rates of morbidity and mortality for many diseases and decreasing overall life expectancy. Unfortunately the consequences of human degradation, oppression and injury cannot be neatly swept away. These effects manifest like a recurring nightmare in the heart of America's prodigy and in her institutions.

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