

## **Breaking the Psychological Shackles of Racism: Implications for Empowering African American Clients**

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### **Aspects of Slavery**

The concept of slavery has existed since the beginning of humankind. Accordingly, Africans have been enslaved by various groups of people throughout the annals of history. For example, the Arabs enslaved Africans during the 7th century. The African Bantu tribe participated in domestic slavery as the result of war with other African tribes. They used the war captives to perform various duties as part of their war debt and the captives were given their freedom upon completion of the debt. Some researchers have suggested that of all the slavery that existed among Africans, none was more horrific than the transatlantic slave trade that existed from the early 15<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, Africans were not only removed from their physical environment but they were also stripped of their psychological environment. This means that their languages were removed, along with their traditional religious beliefs, values, and customs. In essence they were systematically transformed from an African-centered person to an European-centered person. This transformation was accomplished via beating, rape, torture, and death. This period lasted for approximately 400 years. Although the emancipation of the slaves occurred in 1863, the effects and impact of the horrific ordeal can still be seen with current African Americans. This implies that the psychological shackles have replaced the physical shackles.

### **Racism Ideology**

Racism as an ideology has played a significant role in the past and current psychological enslavement of African Americans. During the early 1500s, the European settlers and conquerors systematically began distorting and destroying African history (*Synopsis of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, n.d.). They used these methods to rationalize and justify the enslavement of Africans. In 1518, the transatlantic slave trade became known as the first race-based slavery in history. This concept strongly suggested that certain people (i.e., Africans) were more suited for slavery compared to

other races. The United States Constitution's section on slavery described Africans and other non-European groups as three fifths of "all other people" or three fifths of a person (*Synopsis of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, n.d.). Based on this description, the founding fathers of the United States held the belief that Africans were subhumans. This concept is in contrast to the Declaration of Independence notion that America was formulated to create an egalitarian multiracial society.

In addition to the United States Constitution, two prominent U. S. Presidents also subscribed to the belief that Africans were intellectually inferior to Europeans and European Americans. President Thomas Jefferson throughout his presidency advocated for the deportation of Africans, for fear that race mixing would ultimately destroy the European American race. President Jefferson subscribed to the belief that Africans were suited for labor rather than intellect. He held this belief without empirical evidence. President Abraham Lincoln was another president who subscribed to the concept of Africans being intellectually inferior. According to Bennett (1999), President Lincoln referred to African Americans as savages. He supported the ideology of the deportation of African slaves as a means to solve the U. S. racial problems. His decision to end slavery was not based on morality but instead on his belief that it would help to unite European Americans. Furthermore, President Lincoln held the belief that due to the physical differences between African Americans and European Americans, it would be nearly impossible for them to experience social and physical equality. He implied that if they had to live together, European Americans had to be recognized as the superior race (Bennett, 1999).

The overall notion that African Americans are subhuman and intellectually inferior has proven to be a detriment to their mental health. Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) examined the impact of racism on the mental health of African Americans. They postulated that African Americans have been the victims of both institutional and internalized racism. The former refers to living in a segregated environment that impedes socioeconomic mobility, such as residing in

neighborhoods that are economically impoverished. The latter refers to one's acceptance of the negative societal beliefs and stereotypes. This type of acceptance often leads to feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness.

The negative impact of institutional racism on mental health is evidenced in both the Epidemiologic Catchment Area Study (ECAS) and the National Comorbidity Study (NCS). Robin and Regier's (1991) analysis of the ECAS suggested that adults in the lowest quartile of socioeconomic status based on income, education, and occupation are approximately three times more likely to have a psychiatric disorder than those in the highest quartile. This suggestion applies to both European Americans and African Americans. The NCS findings also posit that there is a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and psychiatric illness. For example, individuals in the lowest categories of both education and income are twice as likely to meet the criteria for a major psychiatric diagnosis. Often African Americans are overdiagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic and underdiagnosed as affective disordered.

The impact of internalized racism has also had an effect on African Americans' mental health. For some African Americans that contributes to their perceived inferiority, and they tend to experience anxieties and reactions that affect their social and psychological functioning (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Some studies have found a positive correlation between internalized racism and alcohol consumption.

Other studies have revealed that the stigma of inferiority can negatively affect one's self-efficacy and confidence in performing various tasks. This concept applies to both race and gender. McCorkle's (1991) research disclosed that the victims of internalized racism typically experience lower self-esteem and lower ego identity. Furthermore, this study disclosed that the children of mothers who score high on internal racism experience low sociological-emotional development. Further, Delgado (1998) posited that internalized racism can affect very young children. In a recent study of 4-year-old African American preschoolers, approximately 75% of them preferred to play with their European American peers over their African American peers. Additionally, over 50% of them articulated their feeling of inferiority to their European American counterparts. In essence, one can infer that internalized racism is potentially more harmful than institutional racism due to the profound psychological and mental effects.

### **Eurocentrism Versus Afrocentrism**

In order to assist African Americans in overcoming the psychological shackles of racism, one

must first examine the prevailing philosophy of Eurocentrism versus Afrocentrism. One of the phenomena about the transatlantic slave trade was the indoctrination of African and African American slaves with Eurocentrism. This philosophy is centered on the idea that civilization began in Europe and that Europeans are superior to other races, especially Africans and African Americans. Pinderhughes (1986) suggested that this philosophy was first introduced to Africans during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He noted that during this time, the British established a system that projected Africans as being bad and guilty of licentious behaviors and that projected themselves as being good and having tremendous discipline over their behaviors.

Prior to and after their colonization of Africa, the British Empire had three social classes for their White inhabitants: upper, middle, and lower. The Africans were placed in a sublower class. This meant that they had less power, privilege, respect, and reward compared to Europeans. Elkins (1959) posited that the implementation of a sublower class created a very destructive and coercive slave system. This particular system promoted and advocated powerlessness, ignorance, inferiority, and the devaluing of self-esteem, language, and behaviors among African Americans. In other words, generations of Africans and African Americans were systematically disconnected from their prior culture.

Plous and Williams (1995) reported that during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, several prominent Europeans and European Americans viewed people of African descent as cognitively inferior and physically and culturally underdeveloped. They also suggested that Africans were apelike in appearance. This particular concept was widely accepted in the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which described Africans as occupying the lowest position on the evolutionary scale. Furthermore, it implied that the average African's brain was significantly smaller than the average European's brain, 35 ounces and 45 ounces, respectively, a comparison that supposedly gave further proof that Europeans were cognitively superior to Africans. However, this particular comparison was made without empirical support.

Afrocentrism is a philosophy that came into existence in the 1970s and 1980s (El-Amin, 1993). The word *Afrocentricity* means Africa at the center. Asante is credited with the development of Afrocentrism. This particular philosophy was developed as a counter measure to the dominant European-centered philosophy. Afrocentrism was designed to reconnect African Americans with Africa. In other words, this concept was implemented for the purpose of projecting the African culture in a positive manner. Afrocentrism

challenges Europeans' claim that people of African descent are inferior by nature. Afrocentrism is a motivator for African Americans to study Africa in order to identify their true origins (El-Amin, 1993).

Although Afrocentrism is a relatively new concept, there have been many prominent Africans and African Americans who have viewed Africa as the root of civilization. These individuals sought to instill cultural pride among those people who have been enslaved by Eurocentrism. These individuals included Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Kwame Nkrumah, and Patrice Lumumba, and they advocated for people of African descent to look toward Africa for strength and self-knowledge. More importantly, they advocated for Africans and African Americans to seek autonomy from the racist system of Eurocentrism. They all believed that oppressed groups of people need to seek their own solution to their oppressive conditions. They believed that Africans and African Americans needed to dismantle the negative propagandas perpetrated by Europeans during their enslavement and the colonization of Africa. Further, these individuals were opposed to seeking solution of their problems from Europeans.

### Conclusion

According to Corey, Corey, and Callanan (2003), people who enter into the counseling profession do so to nurture others. They are motivated by seeing their clients go from being victims to assuming control over their lives. If Corey and others are correct, then counselors have an important role in helping African Americans break the psychological shackles of racism. In order for this process to be accomplished, counselors are going to be challenged to rethink and reevaluate their views about Africa, Africans, and African Americans. In other words, they are going to have to be properly educated on African history, customs, and culture. Furthermore, they are going to have to come out of their comfort level and face the realization of racism. They are going to have to examine their own internal and external racism. They are also going to have to examine their own fears of African Americans. Practicing counseling from a Euro-centered approach is insufficient for most African American clients. The reason is that this approach does not allow these clients to become conscious of their African beginnings. In other words, they do not experience the overall value of being of African descent. According to Latif and Latif (1994), slavery produced a psychic trauma for African Americans. Counselors are going to have to assist African Americans in recognizing some of the

symptoms. The primary symptoms include their conscious and unconscious desire to be accepted by European Americans.

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