Racism is a Public Health Epidemic: First, Second and Third Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this pilot study discussed in this article is to determine whether racist behaviors exist on a continuum, in other words highlighting the degrees of racist behaviors. It appears that racist behaviors range from indirect to direct acts. White people often state that they are not a racist as evident by never using the “N” word. But this theory suggest that racist behaviors is not always associated with direct behaviors such as using the “N” word but can be evident by indirect behaviors. To support this theory Black males and females were interviewed to ask they experiences interactions and encounters with White individuals or groups. In addition, the responses from the interviewees confirmed that races-based encounters did highlight those racist behaviors exist on a continuum that ranges from indirect to direct behaviors that have been labeled as degrees of racism.

Keywords: Racist behaviors, African Americans, Stress, Racism

Introduction

Racism is defined by Oxford Dictionary (2020) as prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people based on their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized. Moreover, a racist is defined as someone who acts, supports or fails to act in the face of racism.

The connection between racism and wellness must be understood using the lens of stress which has been well researched in the field of psychology. In addition, the connection between stress and wellness has also been well defined. Research has supported that African Americans experience the highest levels of stress in society due to racism. In fact, early makings of the 2013 updated version of the DSM-5 race-related traumas was vigorously discussed to support a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder related to racial trauma.

African Americans experience weekly if not daily race-related insults which become a form of aggregated stress. These daily race related insults described by participants in this study are described as daily, toxic, insidious, and lethal forms most often initiated by White Americans. More importantly, Black Americans stated that race-based encounters did not involve neo-Nazi or similar groups but from loyal, well-intended, fair-minded, and church going White Americans.

However, what has not been well defined in the literature and examined are indirect and direct forms of racist behaviors, which will be discussed as degrees of racism that African Americans experience. The aim of this pilot study was to explore this continuum.
and defined the degrees. John Rice, an economist and journalist, asserts in an article published by the Atlantic Magazine in June 2020, that there are three degrees of racism that African Americans experience by White Americans. Moreover, Dr. Geronimo’s a researcher from UCLA discussed the weathering effects of racism that aggregates stress, that then become instrumental in explaining the increase rate of mental and physical disorders in African Americans.

Nature and Scope

The nature and scope of this pilot is to examine the theory proposed by John Rice. He asserts that there are three degrees of racism that are experienced by African Americans. This project surveyed 26 African American male (42%) and female (58%) between the ages of 21-60 years of age. The participants obtained a high school diploma (8%), some college but no college degree (15%), undergraduate college degree (7%) or graduate degree (69%). 68% of participants were employed, 23% retired and 8% unemployed. Participants lived in both inner city (23%) and suburban areas (62%) and high rent areas (19%).

The surveyed consisted of questions related to the three degrees of racism as defined by this researcher. First degree racism was measured by direct questions such as being called the “N” word by someone White, or someone White calling the police on the participant despite the participant obeying the law. Second degree racism was measured by less direct questions that asked about demonization of a person because they identify as African American. John Rice describes this as race-based encounters where White Americans aid and abet in maintaining White Social Order by silence. For example, individuals were asked if they were ever victimized by someone White in the workplace and no one White stood up for them. Another great example is Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the National Anthem. Many knew he was using his platform to address police brutality towards African American men. However, very few White Americans stood up for him or supported his actions. Alternatively, White Americans remained quiet as he was victimized by the press and leaders of the National Football League.

The third-degree racism is best defined system and institutionalized racism and can be seen in the legal, social, economic, and educational system. This level of racism is indirect and subliminal or covert. One example of this race-based encounter is when employers maintain institutional and organizational practices that keep African Americans at a disadvantage. Moreover, these institutions position and maintain White Americans in positions of power in organizations that espouse meritocracy while really practicing favoritism and nepotisms in the face of touting in-house diversity programs.

Results

The overall goal was to explore, examine and collect data on the categories of racism as measured in degrees. In addition, identify any health-related symptoms associated with racism. The survey developed captured data which will be discussed in this section.

1st Degree Racism: 54% of respondents reported that they have been called the "N" word by someone White and 60% of these respondents reported that it happened more than once and 20% stated it happened too many times to count. 42% of respondents reported that they were verbally attacked by someone White while other White individuals stood by and did nothing on their behalf to intervene with the truth.

2nd Degree Racism: 61% of respondents reported that while at work or place of business they spoke out against a racist practice or unfair decision. However, 39% of the 61% of respondents stated that when they did speak out at work against racism that no one else supported them even though they were witness to the event. Here are a few statements reported: An individual I will refer to as “A” made false accusations against people of color and negative statements about people that supported people of color. “A” often bypassing me when we had to work together. (This participant also stated that they were the only Black person in the section of 14 individuals). When events of “As” behavior was taken to leadership. Peers and individuals in leadership roles appeared to alienate me and seem to think of me as a troublemaker.”

Another statement shared by a participant: "As a black police officer, I spoke out against systemic racism and police brutality against black and brown citizens. I was isolated, retaliated against, fired without cause, blackballed from law enforcement, and arrested by the same department. National civil rights leaders and the National Black Police Officers ASSN came to my defense. I believe this saved my life."92 % of respondents reported that they experienced a situation while in line waiting to be served and that someone White walked up after them and was served first. 50% of the 24 respondents stated that this has happened to them more than once and 48% stated that it happened more than 3 times.

3rd Degree Racism: 50% of respondents reported that they have served in a position of leadership during a meeting and someone White minimized or refuted their contributions while another White person in the same room did not support them even though what they were saying was correct. A statement reported by one respondent: “once in an advisory meeting for a thesis. There was one section related to Mothers of color with children diagnosed with disability from lower social economic areas; not being able to have the same medical access as White mothers”. Consequently, I was told that
the information I was presenting was invalid even though there was documentation that supported my statements and therefore the information could not be included in the paper.”

50% of respondents reported that someone White was promoted over them and were less qualified for the job. Here are several statements provided by different respondents:

1. It happened often in the aerospace industry. You could be more qualified and have more education and you train the person who becomes your boss.

2. I had more years of experience and the company relied heavily on my input and expertise but not enough to give me my due and instead promoted someone that was a friend and was less qualified.

3. I was denied the opportunity on multiple occasions to take some classes that would have allowed me to apply for a promotion. I was told that there was not enough money in the training budget. I was denied taking the classes a third time even after I found a way to pay for the training by an outside source. Then the reason became they couldn’t afford for me to be off work that much to take the classes.

35% of respondents reported that they were stopped by the police for no apparent reason and felt threatened or feared for their life because they are Black. 50-75% of these respondents reported that they were stopped more than once by police and feared for their life.

Lastly, respondents were asked to select thoughts and feelings that impacted their wellness associated with the race-based encounter and that data is below in Table 1.

### Table 1: Selected thoughts and feelings of respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Prevalence Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irritability</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restlessness</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty making decisions</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with concentration and memory</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase worry related to the event</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble sleeping</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racing thoughts</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfocused</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Blood Pressure</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in appetite</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overeating</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight loss</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take days off from work</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take a day off from school</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary**

There are clear physical and psychological responses associated with daily race related encounters (DRREs) for African Americans who participated in this study. These DRREs ranged from being called a “N” to being displaced from a position or stopped by law enforcement. One theory supported by this sample is that racism occurs on a continuum which ranged from a verbal insult to institutional unfair treatment. A first-degree race based encounter is very clear; however the second and third degree levels are not as transparent but equally emotionally and physically damaging and racist. In other words, just because someone does not use the “N” word does not mean they are cleared from racist behaviors, as such identified as a racist. A White American who practices bystander behavior and does nothing on behalf of an African American who is the target of a knee in the throat by a White American can be viewed as a racist. More importantly, these DDREs result in changes in blood pressure, increase in stress reactions, restlessness, changes in memory and concentration as well as missed days of work and school.5-7

In conclusion, this pilot study supports the need for further studies to exam racism on a continuum and to design appropriate training programs that address the negative impact on these events perpetrated by White Americans towards African Americans.

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### Conflicts of Interest

Authors declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

### References

