Impacts of Historical Trauma on African-Americans and Its Effects on Help-seeking Behaviors

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Historical Trauma

What is it?

- Historical trauma is most easily described as multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural group.
- Historical trauma can be experienced by “anyone living in families at one time marked by severe levels of trauma, poverty, dislocation, war, etc., and who are still suffering as a result” (Cutler, n.d.)
Historical Trauma (cont’d)

- Historical trauma is cumulative and collective. The impact of this type of trauma manifests itself, emotionally and psychologically, in members of different cultural groups (Brave Heart, 2011).
Why is Historical Trauma Relevant?

- As a collective phenomenon, those who never even experienced the traumatic stressor, such as children and descendants, can still exhibit signs and symptoms of trauma.
Manifestations of Historical Trauma

- Internalized Oppression
  - As the result of historical trauma, traumatized people may begin to internalize the views of the oppressor and perpetuate a cycle of self-hatred that manifests itself in negative behaviors.
  - Emotions such as anger, hatred, and aggression are self-inflicted, as well as inflicted on members of one’s own group.
Who Is impacted by Historical Trauma?

- American Indians/First Nations Peoples
- Immigrants
- People of Color (African-Americans/Blacks)
- Families Living in Poverty
Communities Impacted by Historical Trauma (cont’d)

American Indians/First Nations Peoples

- This population has been exposed to generations of violent colonization, assimilation policies, and general loss.
  - Example of Stressor: The Americanization of Indian Boarding Schools and the forced assimilation among their students.
  - Current Manifestations: “High rates of suicide, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism and other social problems.” (Johnson, n.d.)
Communities Impacted by Historical Trauma (cont’d)

Immigrants

- Forced migration may be the result of conflict, natural disaster, famine, development projects and policies, or nuclear and chemical disasters (Forced Migration Online, 2012).
- These various populations may have been exposed to discrimination, racism, forced assimilation/acculturation, colonization, and genocide.
Communities Impacted by Historical Trauma (cont’d)

African-Americans/Blacks

- This population has been exposed to generations of discrimination, racism, race-based segregation and resulting poverty.
- Members of this population may have been exposed to microaggressions, which are defined as “events involving discrimination, racism, and daily hassles that are targeted at individuals from diverse racial and ethnic groups.” (Michaels, 2010)
Communities Impacted by Historical Trauma (cont’d)

African-Americans/Blacks

- Example of Stressors: slavery; colonialism/imperialism
- Current Manifestations: Mistrust of police; self-worth (Rich & Grey 2005)
- Self-hatred among Blacks/African Americans who act out their aggression on people who look like them.
Communities Impacted by Historical Trauma (cont’d)

Impoverished Communities

- Poverty can lead to:
  - family stress
  - child abuse and neglect
  - substance abuse
  - mental health challenges
  - Domestic violence

(Wilson, 2005)
Families Experiencing Intergenerational Poverty

- Poor individuals and families are not evenly distributed across communities or throughout the country. Instead, they tend to live near one another, clustering in certain neighborhoods and regions.

- This concentration of poverty results in higher crime rates, underperforming public schools, poor housing and health conditions, as well as limited access to private services and job opportunities. (Kneebone, Nadeau & Berube, 2011).
Families Experiencing Intergenerational Poverty

- Poverty in these communities is frequently intergenerational.
  - The lack of access to services, increased exposure to violence, and higher risk of victimization that exist in these communities often results in a much greater potential for experiencing trauma and re-traumatization among residents than in communities that are not areas of concentrated poverty.

- Example of Stressors: Hunger; poor or inadequate housing; lack of access to health care; community crime

- Current Manifestations: Domestic violence; child abuse; substance abuse (Wilson, 2005)
Fear of Utilizing Medical and Psychological Services

- There is a significant history of atrocities against African-Americans that contribute to suspicion and paranoia regarding seeking physical and mental health services.
Reasons for Fear

- Slave labor
- Forced migrations
- Stolen property
- Dehumanization
- Mass incarceration
- Torture
- Medical experimentation
- Discrimination
- Race riots
- Police Brutality
- Racial Profiling
- Lynchings
- Mass murder
- Long-lasting psychological effects (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) on survivors and descendants.
Symptoms of Historical Trauma

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Isolation
- Loss of Sleep
- Anger
- Discomfort around white people
- Shame
- Fear and Distrust
- Loss of Concentration
- Substance Abuse
- Violence and Suicide
Historical Trauma and Help-Seeking Behaviors

- African-Americans with high levels of mistrust are more likely to terminate therapy prematurely. (Terrell & Terrell, 1984)
- African-Americans have been found to average fewer sessions and terminate from outpatient mental health services earlier than European Americans (Sue & Sue, 1990).
Asbury, et al., (1994) conducted an empirical study of African American participation in rehabilitation services that may have relevance for attrition rates noted among African-Americans in therapy.

The results of discriminant analysis indicated that:

- perception of provider competence, self-esteem, emotional support, and attitude toward seeking services were significant predictors of seeking service.
- Racial similarity, perception of provider competence, and perceptions of the service process determined continued participation.
Results from American's Perceptions of Psychotherapy and Psychotherapists

• **Lack of Trust**
  • Participants reported that while psychotherapy might be beneficial, most psychologists and psychotherapists lacked an adequate knowledge of African American life and struggles to accept or understand them.
  • Participants discussed the stereotypes of African-Americans in the larger society and challenged the ability of psychologists and psychotherapists to be free of the attitudes and the beliefs of the larger society. (Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar 2004)
Results from American's Perceptions of Psychotherapy and Psychotherapists

**Cultural Sensitivity**

- Participants reported a preference that race not matter in the provision of mental health services, but a vague fear that it did. Most participants reporting this attitude noted that it was based on sensitivity to the issues and experiences that the African-American community has historically confronted.

- Participants believed that therapists were often influenced by frequently encountered stereotypes of African Americans. (Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar 2004)
Results from American's Perceptions of Psychotherapy and Psychotherapists

- Cultural beliefs, such as a belief in the need to resolve family concerns within the family and the expectation that African-Americans demonstrate strength.
  - Despite the sense that therapy was required to address certain issues, participants reported that they lacked sufficient knowledge of the signs and symptoms of mental illness, or information on the services available. (Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar 2004)
Results from American's Perceptions of Psychotherapy and Psychotherapists

- The *stigma* of mental illness, with its associated embarrassment and shame, were noted by individuals who received services, as well as those with no prior experience with mental health services, as a significant barrier to mental health services. (Thompson, Bazile & Akbar 2004)
Does Historical Trauma Have Only Negative Effects?

- Not necessarily. There are positive aspects that arise from historical trauma.
- Resilience
  - The ability to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens
- Adaptive survival behaviors
  - Increased Religious/Spiritual Coping
- Evolutionary Enhancements
  - The strong survive
Ways to enhance quality of life despite historical trauma

- Acknowledge and confront the historical trauma
- Work on understanding the historical trauma
- Focus on healing of oneself as well as healing within and among the community
- Releasing the pain in healthy ways
  - Spiritual/Religious and/or Cultural healing services
  - Psychological Treatment Services
  - Social Justice
Adaptive African-American Cultural Factors

- Spirituality, religious involvement
- Strong kinship bonds
- Role flexibility
- Communalism
- Rich affectivity, verve
- “Keeping it real”
We’re Done!

For additional questions, or references, contact Keisha Ross, Ph.D.
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References


