



## Psychiatry & Behavioral Science — 2018

### I28 Racial Trauma: Its Mental Health Manifestations in Racial Minorities Involved in the Legal System and Incorporating Findings in Forensic Psychiatric Assessments

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to: (1) understand the concept of “racial trauma”; (2) realize how it could apply specifically to racial minorities involved in the legal system; (3) better understand its psychiatric manifestations; and, (4) value its importance in the forensic psychiatric assessment.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by exposing how racial harassment and discrimination, in its numerous forms, against minorities in American society could lead to emotional and psychiatric manifestations due to traumatic stress. Awareness of this topic will enhance the efficacy of the forensic psychiatrist’s evaluation and treatment plan. In some cases, it may also strengthen the therapeutic alliance between the treating psychiatrist and the client.

The information presented is obtained from previously conducted studies and literature that examined the link between cultural competency regarding racial discrimination and the criminal justice system. Additional sources include current events reported by the media that relate to perceived racial injustice. The fact that many members of racial minorities believe there is racial injustice makes it imperative that forensic psychiatric evaluators address and include these issues in their examinations.

Researchers have noted that, in recent decades, one area of inquiry that needs increased attention is racial discrimination, specifically as perceived by non-dominant group members (African, Latino, Asian, and Native Americans). Carter and Forsyth define racial discrimination as a “form of avoidant racism, reflected in behaviors, thoughts, and policies that have the effect of maintaining distance or limiting contact between dominant and non-dominant racial group members” and racial harassment as a “form of racism that involves feelings, thoughts, and actions intended to communicate a target’s subordinate status due to membership in a non-dominant racial group.”<sup>1</sup> Multiple studies have found that “between 40%-98% of racial minority participants reported that they had experienced racial discrimination.”<sup>1</sup>

Currently, there are limited resources to assist psychiatrists in appropriately assessing racial trauma. Psychological reactions to racial discrimination often do not fit the specific criteria in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V)* for post-traumatic stress disorder; however, researchers have documented statistically significant relationships between “perceived experiences with racism” and mental disorders, such as adjustment, stress reaction, mood, and anxiety.<sup>1</sup>

According to the United States Census Bureau, the 2010 population of Whites (72.4%) far outnumber Black (12.6%) and Latino (16.3%) populations. Yet, in the same year, the national prison population consisted of 38% Black and 22% Latino men and women.<sup>2</sup> Race has been used as a political and media tool and, consequently, has engendered fear within the dominant group toward the minority group and vice versa. This has been a contributing factor to the minority groups’ overall distrust of the legal system. The following are some examples: the murder of unarmed Black males by law enforcement in which the perception in the Black community is that justice hasn’t been served, the outcry for the construction of a “wall” between the United States and Mexico with mass deportation of illegal immigrants, or the imposition of a Muslim ban on entry to the United States from Islam-dominant countries. These events have led to severe emotional and psychiatric stress (racial trauma) in these target communities that should be identified.

This presentation seeks to: further analyze racial trauma; explore how these reactions to perceived racial injustice could be expressed emotionally, psychologically, cognitively, or behaviorally; and provide a guideline in performing a thorough forensic psychiatric evaluation. In addition, consideration of perceived racial trauma will ultimately lead to enhancing the therapeutic alliance between client and psychiatrist.

#### Reference(s):

1. Robert T. Carter, PhD, and Jessica M. Forsyth, MA, EdM. A Guide to the Forensic Assessment of Race Based Traumatic Stress Reactions. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*. 37 (2009): 28-40. <http://jaapl.org/content/37/1/28.long>.
2. Kapoor, Dike, Burns, Carvalho, and Griffith. Cultural Competency in Correctional Mental Health. *The International Journal of Law of Psychiatry*. 36 (2013): 273-280. doi: 10.1016/j.ijlp.2013.04.016.

#### Racial Trauma, Guideline, Forensic Evaluation