American culture: Its Roots in Racism

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Abstract

Dominant theoretical explanations of racial disparities in criminal offending overlook a key risk factor associated with race: interpersonal racial discrimination. Building on recent studies that analyze race and crime at the micro-level, we specify a social psychological model linking personal experiences with racial discrimination to an increased risk of offending. We add to this model a consideration of an adaptive facet of African American culture: ethnic-racial socialization and explore whether two forms—cultural socialization and preparation for bias—provide resilience to the criminogenic effects of interpersonal racial discrimination.

Key words: American culture, cultural psycology, racism, slavery

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of recent incidents of police violence towards African Americans, the launching of the national civil rights movement known as, "Black Lives Matter", and the ever-present issue of race in the ramping up presidential campaigns, it's an important time to hear the voices and perspectives of Americans across the country to better understand how the general public and those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds feel about the issue. The Kaiser Family Foundation/CNN survey provides insights into the public's views of complicated issues surrounding race, including the experience of racism and discrimination in the daily lives of Black and Hispanic Americans, institutional discrimination and individual bias, and the role of both government and individuals in creating a path forward.

More than half of Black Americans and a third of Hispanic Americans say they have been treated unfairly because of their race or ethnicity, and some report being victims of racial discrimination that denied them opportunities in housing or in the workplace. At a time when more than half of Black Americans report some personal connection with the prison system, the vast majority say the criminal justice system as a whole favors Whites over Blacks. Meanwhile, White Americans are less likely than Black Americans to see racism as a big problem in this country, and more likely to say that individual behavior and bias is a bigger problem than institutional discrimination. Although there is some evidence that Whites are increasingly aware of the problem, still, fewer Whites than Blacks say that past and present discrimination and a lack of jobs and educational opportunities are reasons for the problems facing Black and Hispanic Americans today. The "Black Lives Matter" movement has emerged in part because of this disconnect; increasing awareness of the issue and advocating for equal treatment and protection under the law. Looking forward, society as a whole continues to face many challenges addressing institutional and individual racism, and trends over time indicate mixed progress in the past 20 years, particularly when considering that two-thirds of younger Blacks report recent unfair treatment because of their race.

This paper traces the history of slavery in America and attempts to evaluate it on the basis of cultural-psychological approach.

A Cultural-Psychological Approach to Racism

Between 1525 and 1866, 12.5 million people were kidnapped from Africa and sent to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade. Only 10.7 million survived the harrowing two-month journey. Comprehending the sheer scale of this forced migration—and slavery's subsequent spread across the country *via* interregional trade—can be a daunting task, but as historian Leslie Harris told Smithsonian's Amy Crawford earlier this year, framing "these big

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concepts in terms of individual lives … can better understand what these things mean."

Take, for instance, the story of John Casor. Originally an indentured servant of African descent, Casor lost a 1654 or 1655 court case convened to determine whether his contract had lapsed. He became the first individual declared a slave for life in the United States. Manuel Vidau, a Yoruba man who was captured and sold to traders some 200 years after Casor's enslavement, later shared an account of his life with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which documented his remarkable story—after a decade of enslavement in Cuba, he purchased a share in a lottery ticket and won enough money to buy his freedom—in records now available on the digital database "Freedom Narratives." (A separate, similarly document-based online resource emphasizes individuals described in fugitive slave ads, which historian Joshua Rothman describes as "sort of a little biography" providing insights on their subjects' appearance and attire).

To better understand the immense brutality ingrained in enslaved individuals' everyday lives, read up on Louisiana's Whitney Plantation Museum, which acts as "part reminder of the scars of institutional bondage, part mausoleum for dozens of enslaved people who worked (and died) in [its] sugar fields, … [and] monument to the terror of slavery," as Jared Keller observed in 2016. Visitors begin their tour in a historic church populated by clay sculptures of children who died on the plantation's grounds, then move on to a series of granite slabs engraved with hundreds of enslaved African Americans' names. Scattered throughout the experience are stories of the violence inflicted by overseers.

The onset of that mass movement in 1916, 90 percent of African Americans still lived in the South, where they were "held captive by the virtual slavery of sharecropping and debt peonage and isolated from the rest of the country," as Isabel Wilkerson wrote in 2016. (Sharecropping, a system in which formerly enslaved people became tenant farmers and lived in "converted" slave cabins, was the impetus for the 1919 Elaine Massacre, which found white soldiers collaborating with local vigilantes to kill at least 200 sharecroppers who dared to criticize their low wages.) By the time the Great Migration—famously chronicled by artist Jacob Lawrence—ended in the 1970s, 47 percent of African Americans called the northern and western United States home.

Today, scientific racism—"grounded in such faulty practices as eugenics and the treatment of race "as a crude proxy for myriad of social and environmental factors," writes RaminSkibba—persists despite overwhelming evidence that race has only social, not biological, meaning. Black scholars including Mamie Phipps Clark, a psychologist whose research on racial identity in children helped to end segregation in schools, and Rebecca J. Cole, a 19th-century physician and advocate who challenged the idea that black communities were destined for death and disease, have helped overturn some of these biases. But a 2015 survey found that 48 percent of black and Latina women scientists, respectively, still report being mistaken for custodial or administrative staff. Even artificial intelligence exhibits racial biases, many of which are introduced by lab staff and crowdsourced workers who program their own conscious and unconscious opinions into algorithms.

In contrast to the individualist conception of racism that prevails in mainstream U.S. society, is the conception that it is a "quintessentially cultural-psychological and socioeconomic phenomenon consisting of patterns of historically derived and selected ideas and their material instantiation in institutions, practices, artifacts, and other manifestations of 'mind-in-context'" (Salter and Adams, 2013). Racism as mind in context draws on foundational cultural-psychological writings that define cultural psychology as the study of mutual constitution: the idea that psyche and culture are inseparable outgrowths of one another (Shweder, 1990). This perspective suggests that there is a dynamic relationship between psychological manifestations of racism in the mind and psychological manifestations of racism in the world. In one direction (i.e., culture shapes psyche), people live in cultural worlds that promote and facilitate context-specific ways of seeing and being in the world. This direction emphasizes that tendencies of racism are not simply the natural outgrowth of some innate disposition but instead emerge as people interact with cultural worlds that promote and facilitate racialized experiences and racist habits of mind. In the other direction (i.e., psyche shapes culture), people shape and maintain the context *via* selected preferences, practices, and actions. The racist realities that people inhabit (and inherit from previous generations) arise and persist through everyday action as people selectively reproduce some features of the social context and fail to reproduce others.

When racism is theorized through this framework, racism is simultaneously the budding product of psychological subjectivity and the structural foundation for dynamic reproduction of racist action. Three key insights on the psychology of racism are derived from utilizing a cultural-psychology framework: (a) dynamic reproduction of racist action can be found embedded in the structure of everyday worlds, (b) people inhabit cultural worlds that afford

or promote particular racialized ways of processing and seeing the world, and (c) people shape, produce, and maintain racialized contexts through their selected preferences, practices, and actions. While cultural psychologists have applied these cultural-psychological concepts to understand diversity and social inequality broadly, few have utilized this framework to understand racism specifically. Not only is culture crucial to understanding racism according to this framework, but race and racism are fundamental phenomena in understanding American culture.

By analysing panel data from several hundred African American male youth from the Family and Community Health Study, we find that racial discrimination is positively associated with increased crime in large part by augmenting depression, hostile views of relationships, and disengagement from conventional norms. Such an analysis also indicated that preparation for bias significantly reduces the effects of discrimination on crime, primarily by reducing the effects of these social psychological mediators on offending and cultural socialization has a less influential but beneficial effect.

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