Black Males' Plight to Breathe in America—Black Racial Injustice

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Abstract: In this reflective narrative, I discuss the Black Male's plight to breathe in America; that is to live in the world, be creative, and exercise agency of self in the face of structural racism and White supremacy. Furthermore, I discuss the Psychology of Cruelty and how this mindset and its actions impact the overall well-being of Black Males. Finally, this reflection provides practical corrective social action in the form of societal engagement to address structural racism and White supremacy through an Afrocentric Perspective in social work practice to bring about policy advocacy and change so Black Males might breathe freely in America.

***Keywords*:** structural racism, Psychology of Cruelty, historical trauma, Black Males, Afrocentric perspective, equity, inclusion

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The Black Male's plight to breathe in America, that is, to live in the world, be creative, and exercise agency of self, has manifested into ongoing adverse interactions with structural racism and White supremacy ever since being brought forcibly to America. Since then, each generation of Black Males, including myself, have struggled with the impact of historical and ongoing trauma associated with the Psychology of Cruelty manifested under White supremacy and structural racism. The Psychology of Cruelty occurs when the dominant group persuades oppressed groups through fear and other forms of propaganda to preserve the way of life of the former by espousing that the latter is less than human and worthy of being oppressed (Magwaza, 2020).

My Personal Experience with the Behaviors of the Psychology of Cruelty

We all have a unique life story, and mine is no different. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, to an Afro-Trinidadian mother and African American father. I relocated to Trinidad with my mother at an early age, where I grew up within a Trinidadian culture, which is a pluralistic, multi-racial, and ethnic society where race was not the dominant factor in one's day-to-day interactions. When I returned to the United States as a young adult, I immediately experienced a sense of racial paranoia I had never experienced while living in Trinidad. I went from being a young man whom my immediate family and broader society in Trinidad reinforced as "the future" to a natural-born suspect in America. While I overlooked some of the behaviors and attitudes displayed to me in non-black communities, I was bothered and annoyed by the behaviors of suspicion or over scrutiny displayed towards me.

The psychological breaking point for me occurred when I watched, on the local news in 1986, the coverage of an African American of Trinidadian background, Michael Griffith, who was attacked by a group of White teens in Howard Beach, Queens, New York. Michael tried to flee

across the Belt Parkway and was fatally struck by a car while attempting to escape his attackers. I recall being angry and saddened by this event. As a result, I decided to join the protest marches calling for justice for Michael. My trip to Howard Beach was terrifying as mobs of angry White residents tried to physically assault us as they hurled insults such as "go back to Africa, you Black monkeys," and other racial abuses which I will not repeat.

As a result of this experience with the Psychology of Cruelty, I became conscious of my "blackness" and perceived otherness, that "Double Consciousness" Du Bois (1903/1968) so eloquently described in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. From that encounter, it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was perceived as less than human and a dangerous outsider to be controlled or neutralized through violence, if necessary, by this angry White mob. After that, I became ambivalent and developed a sense of self-doubt about my self-worth as a Black Male and an American citizen in my country that did not fully value my presence or humanity. That experience developed within me a sense of anxiety and racial paranoia around my safety and well-being in spaces where I was a noticeable minority by race and gender.

Eventually, my paranoia increased when I became a father to a Black Male child. When my son began elementary school, I was concerned about him being labeled or pathologized for engaging in normal childhood and adolescent behavior which could be perceived differently by his teachers, who were mostly White. I found myself being overly preoccupied, concerned, and protective of him and his well-being. Over the years, I have tried to gain a fuller understanding through self-reflection and research on the impact structural and interpersonal forms of racism have had on the gene expressions resulting from historical and ongoing trauma unique to most people of African descent in America.

The Unaddressed Impact of Racialized Trauma on Black Males

A recent study by Carter et al. (2017) has shown that prolonged incidents of racism in some individuals can lead to symptoms like those experienced with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD can look like depression, anger, recurring thoughts, physical reactions (e.g., headaches, chest pains, insomnia), hypervigilance, low self-esteem, and mentally distancing from the traumatic events. I reflect on my experiences over the years with structural racism, interpersonal racism, and other forms of implicit biases. I have had to suppress my anger and feelings of always having to prove my self-worth or downplay my worthiness as a Black Male by being hypervigilant under the faulty notion that I should not express my feelings because "Black people are resilient." This notion tends to downplay the oppressive behaviors inherent in structural racism by normalizing racial pathology in others as an unfortunate individual act and not calling it out as a problem among people who classify themselves as being more worthy than others within our society.

Practical Steps Towards Corrective Social Action

Du Bois' (1903/1968) poignant statement, "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line," (p. 8) still rings accurately in our society. In my opinion, the primary issue of the 21st century amid the COVID-19 pandemic remains that of race in this country. The dominant group uses its perceived and absolute power to control and universalize its experiences, history,

and interpretations as the only reality. One way to address this issue of universalization is through the continued implementation of corrective social action. Black Males and the broader African American community should take social/political actions to promote inclusion and diversity for African Americans and other marginalized groups. These actions would consist of strategic protests that incorporate our social-political organizations, such as fraternities, sororities, churches, community, and professional African American organizations engaged in collective action.

Secondly, there is a need for African Americans to *heal* from historical and ongoing racial trauma and racial paranoia through candid, open dialogue. First, African Americans must fully address our suppression of internalized oppression and its manifestation as Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (Leary, 2005) and the impact it continues to have on us as a race if we are to regain agency of self. We can no longer afford to engage in cognitive dissonance on this serious matter.

Just acting like racism, racial trauma, and White supremacy are in the past and have no bearing on our present or possible future is not working. Then, White Americans must gain the moral courage and fortitude to address the pathology of White supremacy and structural racism in America. We cannot move forward as a nation and as a human family until this elephant in the room is addressed candidly and forthrightly with action steps to redress these wrongs, such as the residual impact of the legacy of enslavement on African Americans, racialized segregation, mass incarceration, police violence, and unequal medical care, etc.

An Example of a Macro Corrective Social Action

A macro corrective social action would look like the following two concepts that I am proposing from an Afrocentric mode of thought: The first concept being Humanistic Values and the other Universalistic versus a Targeted approach to policy formation and advocacy from an Afrocentric Perspective in social work practice (Wright et al., 2018). As discussed by Asante (1980), Afrocentricity is a theory of thought and action that advocates for the centrality of people of African ancestry within the context of their own personal and historical experiences as a subject and not as an object, not as a victim but as a subject who can create an environment that will allow themselves to develop positively in the world. The theory's fundamental concepts are human agency, location, centeredness, and subject. As a mode of thought, Afrocentricity seeks to redirect the discourse on phenomena associated with people of African ancestry away from Eurocentric attitudes and conceptual frameworks, which are most often rooted in racism towards inaccurately understanding the contributions made by people of African ancestry throughout the course of human history up to the present. Afrocentrist practitioners use a strength-based approach to advance human agency in every given place where the examination, critique, or analysis of people of African ancestry occurs (Asante, 1980; Saleebey, 1992).

As such, Humanistic values as a concept in Afrocentric social work practice are values that place a priority on eliminating human oppression and enhancing human potential by valuing humanistic principles that advance equity, fairness, and social and economic justice concerns, whereas the Universalistic versus a Targeted concept is an approach to policy formation which examines the degree to which focus is placed on problems and situations that occur both within and without the African American community (Schiele, 1997). From a macro level standpoint,

the Universalistic versus a Targeted approach to policy advocacy provides an excellent framework for policy formation, analysis, and implementation because social policies in society should aspire towards the same universal goal, but each group in society may require a different policy strategy to help them reach that desired social policy goal (Schiele, 2000).

Public policy is generally understood as the broad area of government laws, regulations, court decisions, and local ordinances. Since all politics are local, African Americans as stakeholders in the governance of our affairs as citizens along with all Americans who stand against White supremacy and structural racism must become more informed about public policies and evaluate all policies within these two concepts as a lens to ensure that public policies are humanistic, fair, and seek to empower Black Males within the context of their families specifically and the broader African American community generally rather than delimiting people from living to their fullest potential by being overly punitive in their directives and implementation strategies to hinder or discourage Black Males specifically and African Americans in general from their full rights as members of the human family.

An Example of a Micro and Mezzo Corrective Social Action

A micro and mezzo corrective social action would look like community stakeholders engaged in the policy formation process to ensure social policies are created to empower Black Males within the context of their families and communities through government and private sector organizations in human services, banking, business, housing, education, and the criminal justice system, to address equity, inclusion, and the delivery of services at the micro and mezzo level. These services must be culturally appropriate and rooted in the communities' strengths rather than their perceived deficits for positive outcomes as part of our collective responsibility as a human family.

In sum, the Black Male's plight to breathe in America, that is, to live in the world, be creative, and exercise agency of self, requires collective leadership from us all to address this moral impasse of White supremacy and structural racism.

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