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Shaquan Womack
swomack@uvm.edu

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I Know I Can't: The Negative Effects of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome's on the well-being of African American college students

Shaquan Womack

Traumatic experiences can negatively impact the mental health of an individual. The effects of these experiences can distort how individuals perceive the world and their existence in it. This impact can span across generations of people, as seen in Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. According to DeGruy (2005), Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is the effect of multigenerational oppression suffered by enslaved Africans and their descendants. This theory has uncovered the internalized racism that has damaged the self-esteem of African Americans. The damage inflicted has created a struggle for African American college students to exist within America's social institutions. This article is a historical literature analysis of the negative effects of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome on African American college students. Additionally, this article will discuss the need for healing in higher education and the practices that student affairs professionals can implement to encourage the success of Black students.

The dehumanization of African Americans throughout slavery serves as the traumatic experience described in PTSD (DeGruy, 2005). During American slavery, Black slaves were constantly tormented by their owners through physical punishment. It can be assumed that the children of slaves were forced to witness the flagellation of parents, relatives, and other slaves. Both male and female slaves were beaten with whips that tore the skin off their backs. Historical photographs depict slaves with keloid scars that formed from the untreated wounds. In Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body* (1997), it is noted that Black women were frequently raped by White men. Roberts acknowledged that "the rape of slave women by their owners was primarily a weapon of terror that reinforced Whites' domination over their human property. Rape was an act of physical violence designed to stifle Black women's will to resist and to remind them of their servile status" (pp. 29-30).

Shaquan Womack is a first year HESA student at the University of Vermont. He received his B.A. in Psychology from the University at Albany, SUNY in 2015. He is also an Assistant Residence Director for the Department of Residential Life. He is passionate about African studies, critical race theory and college access for low-income and first-generation students.

DeGruy (2005) also suggested that slavery dehumanized African Americans through socially unjust laws and scientific theories. The worth of Black slaves was debated at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 because the Southern perception of a slave's worth was ambiguous. Although Southerners viewed slaves as property, they wanted slaves to be considered part of the population. This gave the South more representatives in Congress. Both the North and South decided to compromise and count Black slaves as three-fifths of the population, which meant that when the population was being counted by the census, each slave was counted as three-fifths of a human being (DeGruy, 2005). DeGruy credits Carl Von Linnaeus as one of the pioneers of racism within the science profession. Linnaeus' *Systema Nature* was a classification system that used color as a way to identify the different races. In this classification, each race was assigned moral and intellectual capacities. According to Linnaeus, African Americans were classified as *Homo Afer* and identified as being lazy and careless. Through these ideals, Whites were able to relieve the guilt that haunted their minds. They were able to justify the dehumanization of slaves by finding ways to prove that Blacks were not human (as cited in Degruy, 2005). DeGruy reminds us that slaves were not treated for trauma after they were freed. This is unlike the American soldiers we currently treat for post-war trauma. History also tells us that trauma did not end for Blacks after slavery. According to DeGruy (2005):

One-hundred and eighty years of the Middle passage, 246 years of slavery, rape and abuse; one hundred years of illusionary freedom. Black codes, convict leasing, Jim Crow, all codified by our national institutions. Lynching, medical experimentation, redlining, disenfranchisement, grossly unequal treatment in almost every aspect of our society, brutality at the hands of those charged with protecting and serving. Being undesirable strangers in the only land we know. During the three- hundred and eighty five years since the first of our ancestors were brought here against their will, we have barely had time to catch our collective breath. (pp. 107-108)

The Long Term Effects of Racial Trauma

The long term effects of racial trauma are present in the beliefs and behaviors of Black college students. DeGruy (2005) believed that “the legacy of trauma is reflected in many of our behaviors and our beliefs; behaviors and beliefs that at one time were necessary to adopt in order to survive, yet today serve to undermine our ability to be successful (p. 117). Black slaves were parenting children under psychological and physical stress. Through social learning, Black children learned from their parents to cope with oppression by lowering the respect and expectations they had for themselves. These values were passed through generations of parenting. After the Civil War, this internalized racism was evident in the ideology of Booker T. Washington, who believed that African Americans were better off

as tradesmen because of the restrictions put in place by the South (DeGruy, 2005). Today, African American parents are forced to tell their children that “they must work twice as hard” because they are viewed as being inadequate by society. According to *Umbrellas Don't Make It Rain: Why Studying and Working Hard Isn't Enough for Black Americans* (Hamilton, Darity, Price, Sridharan, & Tippett, 2015), Black students with college degrees only have two-thirds of the wealth of White high school dropouts. Adaptive behaviors have also been reinforced by the Black community. Black slaves learned to control others through violence from their White owners. Blacks inflicted that same physical punishment to control their children (DeGruy, 2005). DeGruy recalls that “in the 1940s, families frequently suppressed any signs of aggression in their children, particularly their male children. It was an acceptable and accepted practice in African American communities to severely beat unruly boys so they would never make the mistake of standing their ground with a White person in authority” (p. 119). Physical punishment as a way of protection is still widely accepted by the Black community today. It is also reported that “Black children are also more likely to have emotionally traumatic experiences impacting their childhood, such as abuse or neglect, the death of a parent or witnessing domestic violence” (Cook, 2015). Traumatic experiences have an adverse effect on a child’s educational experience because they distract the student from learning. Their safety takes precedent over their education. When Black children enter college, they do not seek help from counseling centers on campus. The traumatic experiences continue to hinder the education of the Black students. According to Kayla Stewart (2015), “Black people go untreated for depression more than any other group in this country” (Stewart, 2015, para. 4). The Black community’s distrust of the science field has driven Black students away.

“African Americans were fearful their doctors might use them as guinea pigs in research that might hurt them. They often cited the Tuskegee experiments as evidence of why they continued to be skeptical and suspicious” (DeGruy, 2005, p. 122).

Absence of Opportunity for the Black Student

The lack of educational opportunity faced by Black people negatively affects their college experiences. Slave owners prevented Blacks from learning how to read because of their fear of Black consciousness. Jim Crow and its emphasis on “separate but equal” prevented African Americans from attaining the education needed to survive in America. Today, African American students still feel inequities within America’s education system. According to Lindsey Cook’s article *U.S. Education Still Separate and Unequal* (2015), “Black parents may have less access to materials, have less time because of job and family obligations or be less comfortable reading” (Cook, 2015). When education is not reinforced in the home, Black children are put in a cycle where they are unprepared for the years to come.

Black children find themselves behind other students who live in homes with book filled shelves. As a result, Black college students often seek outside tutoring and support services provided through TRIO to keep up with their peers.

Racial Socialization of the Black Community

The distrust of other Blacks within the Black community is present within the Black college experience. DeGruy (2005) highlighted it was common for slaves to take on the views of their owners. White superiority was easily accepted by Black slaves because of the benefits that White people had in America. Whites never worried about starvation or the day-to-day fear of dying. They were held with high regard in American society. Slave owners incorporated White superiority in the slave system by dividing the slaves into different groups. Lighter skinned slaves were put to work in the house while darker skinned slaves remained in the field. Slave owners also assigned some slaves to be overseers. The job of the overseer was to look over the other slaves and discipline them when they were out of line (DeGruy, 2005). Slave owners gave some slaves these “false privileges” to disrupt the Black community. From the perspective of slave narratives, “slave owners perpetuated feelings of separateness and distrust by sometimes ordering some Blacks to beat or otherwise punish their friends, peers and relatives” (p.137). This distrust is present in today’s Black community. Many Black people do not trust other Black people who are in positions of power. They use terms such as “sellout” or “Uncle Tom” to invalidate their Blackness. The term “Uncle Tom” derives from the character in the novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” Uncle Tom is a slave who is subservient to the White oppressors within the novel. An example of the “Uncle Tom” theory is when Black college students, who are often first generation students, are shamed by their family and friends. These students feel guilty because they are receiving educational and economic opportunities that their family and friends cannot access. (Covarrubias, Romero, and Trivelli, 2014)

Vacant Esteem

The vacant esteem of Black college students is detrimental to their success and persistence. “Vacant esteem is the state of believing oneself to have little or no worth, exacerbated by the group and societal pronouncement of inferiority” (DeGruy, 2005, p. 125). According to DeGruy, this symptom can be compared to one of the symptoms of PTSD: the “sense of foreshortened future. This means that a person does not expect to have a career, marriage or normal life span” (p.115). The three influences that cause vacant esteem are society, community, and family. Society implements laws and policies that create negative disparities among Blacks and Whites (DeGruy, 2005). Blacks make up most of the prison and poverty population (Cook, 2015). The Black community passes vacant esteem to their children through parenting and community norms (DeGruy, 2005). Vacant

esteem can play a role in the retention of African American college students. Cook (2015) notes that only nineteen percent of Black students graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2013. Black college students who have vacant esteem find it difficult to finish their collegiate education because they are not confident in their future success. It is difficult for Black college students to have an optimistic outlook when “White men have higher median earnings across all fields except three. Asians pull down the top median salaries in law and public policy (\$55,000), psychology and social work (\$48,000), and biology and life science (\$53,000)” (NewsOne, 2011, para.10). According to William E. Sedlacek (1983), positive self-concept and a realistic self-appraisal can increase the persistence of Black students.

Conclusion

Black students come to predominately White institutions with more than just their physical baggage. Many come with the legacy of trauma that is associated with their marginalized identity as an African American. Healing is essential to the Black student experience. The physical abuse witnessed and learned by Black slaves has been passed from generation to generation. This has inflicted long lasting damage on the self-worth of the Black community because they learn physical abuse as “deserved” punishment. Negative perceptions have been further reinforced by experimentation and scientific theories that have stereotyped Black people. This also created a distrust of the science field where Black students refused to utilize health and wellness services provided by college campuses. Black students carry a feeling of inadequacy into predominately White institutions. Without self-worth, Black students find it difficult to envision a fulfilling future. Black students also have added pressure from their parents to work harder than their White counterparts. As student affairs professionals, we should not invalidate the continuing oppression that Black students face. Laura I. Rendón (2009) suggested that, “when working with low-income students who have been marginalized, stereotyped, and invalidated, a key concern is to transform them into powerful learners able to recognize their strengths and able to view themselves as capable of consuming and creating knowledge” (p. 91).

Based on the history of the Black experience, the following are some ways to accomplish such transformation:

1. *Creation*: Provide opportunities for Black students to create. According to DeGruy's theory (2005), the core of African American cultures is “treating relationships as preeminent; attuning ourselves to temporal rhythms; emphasizing learning through subjective barometer and symbolic imagery” (p. 43). This creation is a way for Black students to tell their story through music, poetry and other forms of art.
2. *Civic Engagement*: Provide opportunities for Black students to do

service in a community where the people they serve identify as Black. This makes the student feel invested in the Black community.

3. *Affirmation:* Give genuine affirmation. Denzel Washington (personal communication, June 13, 2010) once stated “man gives the award, God gives the reward.” DeGruy argues that incentive awards are not effective. She believes that Black students want to be “well-regarded by their teachers” (p. 33) This can be said about student affairs professionals.
4. *Tell The Truth:* Black students should be aware of the challenges they will face on your campus. This prepares them for the challenges they will face.
5. *Black Role Model:* It’s not enough for Black students to know that Black student affairs professionals are present on campus. These professionals must have a presence. Assure them that the challenges they will face on campus can be conquered.
6. *Encourage Affinity:* Help to rebuild the Black community by creating spaces where Black students can connect and learn to support each other.

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