



Global Inequality: The Traumatic Effects of Racism

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Abstract

Racism is an ongoing societal concern that is not unique to any specific country.

Racism is reportedly increasing internationally causing exclusion, conflict, and disadvantage on a global scale. Systemic racism disadvantages people of color and operates to the advantage of the majority group (Ponds, 2013). The purpose of this paper is to discuss global inequalities and racism, and to expose the extent of the traumatic effects of racism. Recommendations will be made to address threats to global peace and advocate for policy changes that will increase social justice and minimize racism that impinges on the human rights of all people, particularly marginalized populations.

Global Inequality: The Traumatic Effects of Racism

Racism is an ongoing societal concern that is not unique to any specific country.

Racism is defined as power and prejudice, embracing superiority of one group over another (Ponds, 2013). Discrimination and racism affects economics, politics, religious practices, and the social well-being of populations across the globe. Globalization contributes to the increased international attention of the effects of racism worldwide.

According to the World Health Organization, there is a plethora of research internationally confirming a relationship between racism and poorer mental and physical health (Beares, Nazroo, & Kelly, 2015; Paradies et al., 2015). Multiple studies have shown a correlation between racism and depression, anxiety, difficulty concentrating,



behavioral problems, mood swings, difficulty sleeping and school drop-out rates (Kwate & Goodman, 2015; Paradies et al, 2015). Literature has also shown racism affects physical health such as blood pressure and hypertension, and life expectancies (Kaholokula, Grandinetti, Keller, Nacapoy, Kingi, and Mau, 2012; Mannual, 2004; Paradies et al, 2015)

Racism is reportedly increasing internationally causing exclusion, conflict, and disadvantage on a global scale. Systemic racism disadvantages people of color and operates to the advantage of the majority group (Ponds, 2013). The ongoing systematic racism in the United States has resulted in the tragic deaths of many unarmed African American males shot by police officers. Anti- Semitism is on the rise in Europe and has recently been compared to the Holocaust. Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners are stereotyped as potential terrorists resulting in racial profiling and unprovoked reactions of fear (Hagopiam, 2015). These are just a few examples of marginal groups suffering traumatic and often lethal consequences of racism.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss global inequalities and racism, and to expose the extent of the traumatic effects of racism. Recommendations will be made to address threats to global peace and advocate for policy changes that will increase social justice and minimize racism that impinges on the human rights of all people, particularly marginalized populations.

Historical Overview of global inequality



Global inequality is the state that the world's circumstances are unequal; it includes food, health, and education, among other things. The overall presence of globalization has heightened the awareness of global inequality (Milanovic, 2012). As defined, Globalization is “a historical process, the result of human innovation and technological progress. It refers to the increasing integration of economies around the world” (IMF, 2008). In other words, the movement of people (labor) and knowledge (technology) across international borders.

Milanovic (2012) summarizes that “as the world becomes more integrated the global dimensions of inequality is likely to become increasingly relevant for two reasons: much greater movement of factors of production across borders and because of greater influence of other people’s (foreigners’) standard of living and way of life on one’s perceived income position and aspirations. According to Payne (2013), some causes of global inequality are: 1) geography, in which the location of countries impact their infrastructures and policy procedures; 2) colonialism whereby the powerful countries oppressed the less powerful by destabilizing structures and institutions while manipulating politics and economics; and 3) the nature of the global economic system, which is a primary factor for many researchers in that the international capitalist system is one that allows economically rich states to dominate economically poor states (Dependency theory) (Payne, 2013).

Population growth has also had its influence on global inequality; along with government policies. Corruption in governments, for example, can greatly affect inequalities in states, in that their focus has little concerns with inequality. In a similar fashion, political unrest impacts development and can contribute to global inequality. If



there is domestic unrest it can harm economic development and can have an impact on citizens' health, education, etc. Lastly, natural disasters wreak havoc on some countries, particularly those that experience earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, etc. and have a difficult task of providing the necessary materials for citizens (Milanovic, 2012).

Concerns about economic inequality are a primary factor in the policy debate about global inequality. What globalization does to the inequality among participating countries is quite different from what it does to inequality among all nations. Economic differences contribute to the ideologies of power and oppression, rich and poor, inclusive and exclusive. While there have been improvements in some states, an apparent factor stems across the world –cultural and ethnic differences. Hence, ethnocentrism (belief of superiority of one social or cultural group over another) or racism (an oppressive discrimination of people in power because of their skin color) tends to become the great divider.

Racism

Racism can be defined as “organized systems within societies that cause avoidable and unfair inequalities in power, resources, capacities, and opportunities across racial or ethnic groups” (Paradies et al., 2015). Stereotypes that are deeply embedded in social systems and structures often fuel racism. For example, Hernstein and Murray (1994) theorized intelligence is inheritable and that both genes and genetics contribute to racial differences in intelligence. They used their theory to explain why White people are more intelligent than Black people. These types of theories and beliefs perpetuate stereotypes that Blacks are intellectually inferior, lazy, drug addicts, and criminals (Oliver, 2003). These stereotypes often affect the way educators teach their



students, employers hire their employees, and society perceives the non-dominant group. As a result, the non-dominant group has less access to education, employment, and resources, resulting in increased likelihood of poverty and negative life outcomes. This is evident across the globe when looking at education and poverty. Non- white populations are less likely to receive an education and more likely to live in poverty.

Ethnic groups do not have control over their negative representation in the media or stereotypical views held by society because few professionals working in areas such as journalism, politics, and education are ethnic minorities (Van der Valk, 2003). Therefore, structural inequalities persist. Power is a central component of racism because the dominant group has the power; the capacity to exert force on or over something or someone. The dominant group has the social, economic, political, and cultural power to oppress marginalized populations (van der Valk, 2003). For instance, the concept of race has been used to justify political inequalities and to implement racist doctrines, such as the legalization of slavery in many countries and Nationalist Socialists under the leadership of Hitler, in which six million Jews and 200,000 gypsies were killed (va der Valk, 2003). Police brutality against African Americans in the United States is another example of how law enforcement uses their power to oppress African Americans. Although recently there has been much media coverage on police brutality and the killings of unarmed African American men in the US, racism occurs in every country. There is a common theme across the globe; the darker the skin, the more discrimination one will experience (Kaholohula et al., 2012). People with darker skin are less likely to receive education, have high paying jobs, be accepted into dominant



society and are more likely to live in poverty and have poorer physical and mental health (Paradies et al., 2015).

Effects of Perceived Racism

Biological affects of racism. Racism is a social stressor that adversely affects the health of many ethnic minority groups (Kaholokula et al., 2012). According to Paradies et al. (2015), racism impacts health due to reduced access to housing and increased exposure to concomitant patho-physiological processes, diminished participation in healthy behaviors such as sleep and exercise, increased engagement in unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol consumption, increased exposure to risk factors (such as avoidable contact with police), and physical injuries as a result of racially motivated violence. Several studies have shown perceived racism in African Americans and Latinos to be associated with hypertension and heart disease (Salomon & Agusztyn as cited by Kaholokula et al., 2012). Similarly, Sweet et al. (2007) found a correlation between skin tone and blood pressure in African Americans. Research has also shown correlations between racism and cortisol levels and blood pressure (Kaholokula et al., 2012). Manuel (2004) found that obesity and racism in African Americans are correlated with elevated systolic blood pressure. In a study conducted by Kaholokula et al. (2012), 146 Native Hawaiians were surveyed and the Native Hawaiians who reported more racism had significantly higher systolic blood pressure and significantly lower average cortisol levels than those reporting less racism. Not only does racism affect one's physical health, but there are also many psychological issues people face as a result of perceived racism.



Psychological affects of racism. Some psychological effects of perceived racism include increased stress, depression, fear, decreased motivation, impaired concentration, low self-esteem, anger and irritability. Studies have shown that by age 2 ½ children are becoming aware of their ethnic identity (Tatum, 2003). For the dominant group, children are learning positive things about themselves (they are smart, good, pretty, capable, etc.). However, children who are ethnic minorities have a very different experience. These children learn, become aware of, and often believe the negative stereotypes about their ethnic group. As a result, they can suffer from identity threat as they believe the identity contingencies assigned to them by the dominant culture. Clark and Clark conducted a doll study in 1939 which children were shown a Black and a White doll and asked a series of questions about the doll. The results of the study showed both Black and White children had more favorable responses toward the White doll and more negative reactions to the Black doll. The Black doll was considered to be the ugly doll, the bad doll, the dumb doll and the mean doll. These doll studies have been reenacted several times over 60 years in various countries with similar results (CNN, 2010). These studies show at an early age, many minority children are exposed to negative stereotypes about their culture, often resulting in negative racial identities. This is an example of how racism can affect a child's self-esteem.

Due to stereotypes about one's ethnic group's academic capabilities, many children become anxious and do not perform well on tests. According to Steele's stereotype threat theory (1997), when a person is part of a stereotyped group, they are concerned about being judged according to those stereotypes and it affects their performance. For instance, minority students worry that they will do poorly on the test,



which distracts them from being able to focus all their attention on the test, resulting in lower test scores. Therefore, children that are discriminated against have more negative academic outcomes due to racism and structural inequalities in the school systems (Diamond, 2006). Students representing the non- majority group tend to have lower grades, education levels, suspensions, and expulsions from school. This affects their future careers and employment during adulthood. According to Ogbu (1988), people who are discriminated against and devalued in a society begin to believe and accept the negative perceptions about themselves. Thus, they act according to the perceptions and it becomes reality (self-fulfilling prophecy). Therefore, marginalized populations often become frustrated that their situation is irreversible and lose hope and motivation to improve their situation.

Continual racism and oppression from childhood to adulthood has many long lasting consequences. A review of the literature of 62 studies on racism in 2006 found negative associations with racism and mental health and in 2009, a meta-analysis reviewed 110 studies on discrimination and mental health finding a correlation between discrimination and depression, anxiety, PTSD, and psychological distress (Kwate & Goodman, 2015). Studies have also shown that experiences with discrimination predicted generalized anxiety, worry, and muscle tension (Kwate & Goodman, 2015). As indicated above, there is a plethora of literature supporting the correlation between perceived racism and poorer physical and mental health. For many individuals these experiences with racism can be traumatic. However, trauma is rarely included in the research when exploring the effects of racism.



Trauma

Trauma is defined as an emotional experience or discomfort and stress resulting from memories of an event that completely overwhelms an individual's ability to cope (Brandell, 2011). Traumatic events are typically unexpected, the person is unprepared for it, there is nothing the person can do to prevent it from happening, and it may be a single or re-occurring event. There are various types of trauma which include individual trauma (rapes, abuse, witnessing a death or murder, etc.), natural events (hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes), war related traumas (killing/witnessing injuries, deaths, etc. during war). These individual, natural and war related traumas are often identified in the literature as traumatic events and are frequently associated with PTSD.

Racism is another commonly experienced trauma, but it is rarely discussed in the literature as a traumatic event. There is a plethora of research focused on racism and the physical and psychological affects of perceived racism (Paradies et al., 2015). However, when researching trauma, there are limited studies on trauma that included racism or perceived racism as a traumatic experience. Trauma leaves a person feeling helpless, hopeless, and often fearing for safety and survival (Ponds, 2013). These feelings are often expressed by minority clients when discussing their personal experiences with discrimination and racism. Throughout history minorities have been harassed, denied equal services and resources, threatened, devalued, assaulted, and sometimes brutally killed. These traumatic events can result in PTSD. However, PTSD is often associated with abuse, rape victims, natural disasters and war related trauma, not racism. Although it is established in the literature that racism related experiences can impact a person's physical and mental well- being, the literature suggesting racism



is traumatic is scarce. With the continued problems of racism globally, culturally based trauma should be considered (Ponds, 2013).

Social Policy to Address Racism

Many in the global societies continue to ponder how best to address inequities/racism that violates our most fundamental professional and national principles (Griffin, Mason, Yonas, Eng, Jeffries, Plihcik, and Park, 2007). Some people wrestle with the question of why global inequalities and the traumatic effects of racism continue to have a strong presence in today's society, and how that presence continues to perplex administration, educators, practioners and policy makers. It has been well documented that global inequalities play an important role in the impact of racism and stereotypes as a direct result of individuals' lack of cultural competence (Horner et al, 2004; Walls, 2011). The Literature suggest that one of the most common approaches to addressing racism and stereotypes has been through reeducation at the individual level (ie., inservices; cultural competence training to increase awareness, knowledge and skills; and educational sessions to increase sensitivity) (Cross, Bazon, Dennis, and Isaacs, 1989).

There is a growing consensus of the need to bridge the divide between the have and the have nots. Social workers and policy makers who are immersed in the real world are aware that there is a need for the global community to provide equitable standards of wellbeing for the global population. Social work practitioners are change agents in the development of policy and need to be engaged from the beginning of the policy process and the solution must be locally driven. The policy of mandatory cultural competence must be implemented in all state, federal and international agencies to



make an impact globally on inequalities that continue to have a traumatic effect on racism. Such training must include people who have developed shared visions that empower the people to take charge of their own environment and future. These models will have greater impact than imposing strategies upon them. Finally, social workers must engage in people centered focus that is in line with a human rights approach committed to the Global Agenda. It is imperative for social workers to become proactive in facilitating people's involvement and participation at various levels: service, planning, delivery, and research and evaluation (Bell & Hafford- Letchfield, 2015).

Recommendations for Social Workers

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (The Agenda) (2012) aligns with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in three dimensions – economic, social, and environmental – to contribute to a more fair and just society (UN, 2015). The vision for 2030 agenda includes: a world free of poverty, hunger, disease, and want; free of fear and violence, universal literacy equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels, access to health care and social protection where physical, mental and social well-being are assured (UN, 2015:3). Social workers are agents of change with ethical obligations for social justice. Social workers are also uniquely positioned to work towards a peaceful society “free from violence and exploitation, a world that invests in its children, gender equality, and removing social and economic barriers to empowerment of all people” (UN, 2015).

Social justice and peace are interdependent and social justice is one of six core values that form the foundation of social work. In order to achieve world peace, it is essential for social workers to advocate for human rights and social and economic



justice at all levels –micro, mezzo, and macro. Social justice is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Social workers aim to open the doors of access and opportunity for everyone, particularly those in greatest need (NASW.org).

A major threat to Global Peace is the many forms of social injustices carried out against the vulnerable populations such as systemic racism, effects of trauma, inequalities and disparities (gender, racial, ethnic, religion, geographic, sexual orientation, disabilities, class, etc. According to Van Soest (1992), “peace and social justice are interdependent,” and “peace is not only the absence of war but also the absence of all violence in a society, both internal and external, direct and indirect.”

According to UNESCO in Yesufu (2009) “peace implies principally a process of progress, justice and mutual respect among peoples designed to secure the building of an international society which everyone can find his share of the world’s intellectual and material resources,” where basic needs are met and resources are shared to benefit all people (Readon in Yesufu, 2009). Kafula (2016) suggests that peace-building is a complex and multidimensional issue which needs the involvement of various professions including social work. Others argue that due to the link between peace and development, it is essential to build peaceful societies if development is to be achieved (Metha, 1997; Mullaly, 1997; and Yesufu, 2009). When peaceful societies are realized, human rights can be sustained, be respected and protected. Achieving global peace involves a caring profession such as social work whose aims are of helping those who are vulnerable and cannot help themselves. Social work professionals can contribute to



peace-building and development by empowering clients at all levels and fighting for human rights and social justice.

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