

Intergenerational Trauma and the mental health of Black Americans

Definitions

Intergenerational trauma: The physical and mental effects of trauma passing down from a source to the descendants of that source.

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: When a population experiences intergenerational trauma from centuries of slavery, oppression, and racism.

Racial battle fatigue: The physical and mental toll from living under oppression and racism.

Epigenetics: The physiological effect of trauma on DNA.

Cultural competency: Applying the cultural and social context of a group of people to how it can affect their lived experience.

Origins of intergenerational trauma

The source, or *initial stressor*, of intergenerational trauma for Black people comes from a variety of sources. Over the course of Black people's oppression the following has contributed to the passing down of trauma:

- Transatlantic slave trade
- Slavery
- Jim Crow

These initial stressors can be marked as the beginning of the snowball that is Black people's intergenerational trauma. This trauma snowball grows with the following stressors:

- The carceral state (over incarceration, over policing, etc.)
- Police violence
- Gun violence
- "Legalized" racism
 - Stop and Frisk
 - Redlining
 - Flint water crisis
 - Daily microaggressions and discrimination (racial battle fatigue)

These ideas are re-emphasized through media, film, and TV, thus contributing to the ongoing traumatizing of Black people.

How is it transmitted?

Intergenerational trauma is transmitted *physiologically*. This transmission shows up in Black people's DNA, found using something called *epigenetics*. Epigenetics accounts for the physical transmission of trauma, and explains how *an environment can mutate DNA in response to stressors*.

This mutation comes as a result of a baby's stress hormone profiles being altered. For example, if a slave woman was pregnant, the environmental stressors (fieldwork, abuse, assault, etc.) experienced by the mother would be experienced by the baby as well, and impact their stress profile at a genetic level before it's even born. *The baby would be born with the effects of events they did not experience first hand*. This is called *fetal PTSD* (post traumatic stress disorder).

What are the effects?

Intergenerational trauma shows up as deteriorated mental health. Mental illnesses like depression, anxiety, PTSD, schizophrenia, and learning disabilities such as ADHD or dyslexia are common.

These illnesses go untreated due to the taboo nature of mental health in the Black community and racism in the medical field. Black people are suffering the effects of centuries of trauma, but it is not addressed due to stigma. Additionally, mental health and medical professionals do not appropriately diagnose these issues in Black patients due to institutionalized racism in the medical field.

What are stigmas around mental illness in the Black community?

Common responses to mental health issues are:

- “Mental illness is for white people”
- “You’re not depressed you’re just sad”
- “Why are you depressed, you have a roof over your head and food on the table”

Mental illness is also seen as a sign of weakness. Admitting to experiencing negative mental health or mental illness is seen as a failure or unacceptable. In fact, 63% of Black Americans see depression as a personal weakness.

Those who seek treatment tend to also face discouraging messages from their community. This, in turn:

- Promotes ineffective forms of treatment and unhealthy coping mechanisms
- Emphasizes self- sufficiency
- Can turn to religion as a *replacement* for therapy or counseling

Medical racism’s role in deterring Black people from seeking treatment

Racist ideology is ingrained in practices of medical professionals and institutions. This started ever since Black people were taken to be slaves, and still exists today. The most known example is the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. In the study, 600 Black men with syphilis were studied over the course of their lives. They were not given a diagnosis, nor were they ever given treatment. Some men passed the disease onto their children and lives were lost.

In current day, medical racism is seen in Black women’s birth mortality rate. Black women are twice as likely to have a premature birth than white women, and a Black baby is twice as likely to die in the first year of their life than a white baby. Additionally, because of intergenerational trauma and its effects, Black children are more susceptible to mental health issues (depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, etc.) but are the least to be diagnosed. Often, these children are incorrectly diagnosed with behavioral disorders.

What can help?

Because intergenerational trauma is inescapable, seeking mental health therapy can not only improve the mental wellbeing of Black people, but identify symptoms of trauma. Many of these symptoms go undiagnosed due to medical racism and *culturally incompetent* mental health treatment.

Mental health professionals and medical professionals in general should increase their cultural competence when dealing with Black patients. This will lead to accurate diagnosing/treatment as well as an increased breadth of medical data available on Black people to aid future research.

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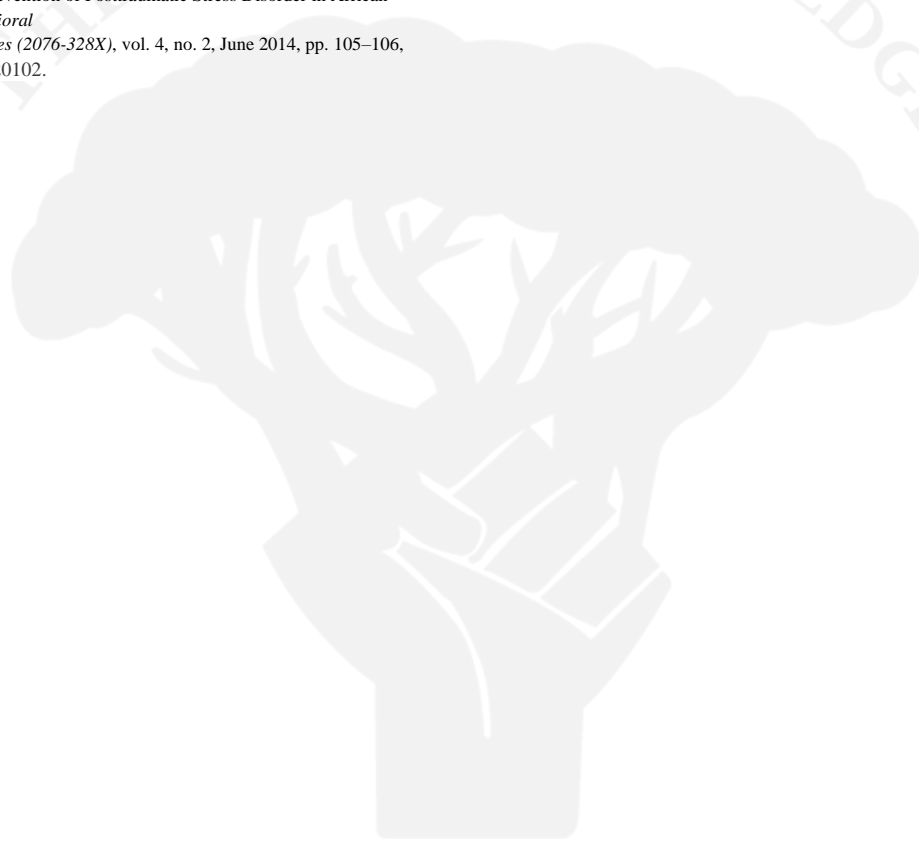
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