

Short Communication

Looking Back, Moving Forward: Reflection on Race and Racism

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the history of racism, its manifestation and its impact. It recognises that racism is both interpersonal and structural. It is embedded in the way society and organisations are structured, through policies and practices that disadvantage black people. It is important now to work towards racial justice for the sake of a better and shared future.

Keywords

Racism; Race; Black lives matter; Psychotherapy; Belonging; Identity and black identity; Internalised racism; White racism.

INTRODUCTION

Given the current economic climate, it seems we need to be thinking about how to make reparations and restore equilibrium regarding the politics of race and racism. Sustaining of a system of inequality has its benefits to those who uphold it. The oppressed can no longer remain oppressed and an acknowledgement of the empty category of colour that has benefited the west has to be acknowledged in order to begin the process of healing for those affected. Decision-makers maintain systemic racism, and systemic inequalities affect the economic, social, health and educational sectors, and maintain a system which effects disadvantages to Blacks, Asians, and other minority ethnicities. (BAME). This is a system that keeps some on the poverty line. As a result they are unable to get what they need and incapable of enjoying privileges, such as access to healthy food choices, education, healthcare, housing and employment. There is a body of evidence that shows that racism can lead to mental illness such as depression, experience of hallucinations and delusions. Evidence also confirms that BAMEs die at disproportionately higher rate when compared to white people as a result of inequalities. They however, continue to be pathologized and medical 'experts' continue to propose various biological (and even genetic) 'explanations' for this pattern.¹

The problem of racism is that it is at times hidden and at times overt. The reality is that the impact of day-to-day racism,

discrimination, micro-aggression — designed to control space, energy and mobility, means black people are more prone to stress and anxieties, and as a result and the effect contribute to feeling of degradation, to ill-health and their early mortality.

Baldwin, explains “*that for as long as we can deal with the 'Negro' as a kind of statistic, or something to be manipulated, to be fled from, or something to be given something to, there is something we can avoid and what is avoided is what he really means to us.*”²

HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

Black Britain

We need to return to our history in order not to repeat the atrocities of the past and understand how we got it wrong. The history of the transatlantic slave trade is a history of exploitation and oppression, often difficult to read and absorb. It was a bitter struggle of good and evil. The British people have been kept ignorant of the history of this oppression. The Atlantic slave trade was the largest single enforced movement of people in the pre-modern world. Britain came to dominate the trade followed by the Danes, French and Germans. The Abolition of Slavery Act was introduced in the British Empire in 1807. The trade in human lives itself spanned approximately 400-years in Europe and America.³ Even though it has been abolished for over 200-years, the transmission of the trauma

caused is still being experienced today.

Of importance is the ambivalence and lack of transparency of what African Slave trade meant to Britain as a whole. It meant imperial wealth and power as well as contribution to merchant fortunes in London, Bristol and Liverpool. For most of the British nation, and members of parliament, the African slave trade was almost entirely invisible.⁴ There were religious criticisms of the trade, however these were drowned or ignored. 'Profit ensured that morality was silenced'. In Britain, there is a lack of public and official interest in the Africa trade in the 18th century.³

This ambivalence and lack of guilt as to what was going on could only happen because of what is referred to as "Cognitive Dissonance." 'Cognitive dissonance' occurs when a person holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values; or participates in an action that goes against one of these three, and experiences psychological stress because of the phenomenon. According to this theory, when two actions or ideas are not psychologically consistent with each other, people do all in their power to change them until they become consistent.⁵ The discomfort is triggered by the person's belief clashing with new information perceived, wherein they try to find a way to resolve the contradiction to reduce their discomfort.⁵

European systematically turned the capturing, shipping and selling of other human beings into a business, a business for the development of an entire economy, providing the foundation for the world's wealthiest nation. The "business" of selling of the slave people, could only happen because they were thought of as less than human. They were no different to other forms of property like horses or cattle. If they are not human, then anything could be done with them. This way of thinking is what led to the subsequent atrocities that resulted. The atrocities were so bad, that some slave people took their own lives.

Worth noting is that the Africans fought against enslavement from the moment of initial capture through the horrors of the slave ships and throughout the daily life on the plantations.³ African slaves were mostly ferried across the seas to work on plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas, others were ferried into the ports of London, Liverpool and Bristol. This was a 'free trade' and it was not uncommon that the slave traders made 100% profit from it. The British coin, the guinea, originated in the African trade of the eighteenth century.

Britain flourished through slavery and capital investment from sugar, tobacco and cotton and by 1750, there was hardly a manufacturing town in England which was not connected with the colonial trade. The profits provided the main streams of capital which financed the industrial revolution. The trade made an enormous contribution to Britain's industrial development.

Although enslaved people moved through the shores of Britain regularly, most worked on plantations in the British colonies, the majority in the Caribbean. Some slave people were brought back to Britain and sold into domestic service working as butlers

and household attendants in aristocratic families. Thousands of people were born into slavery and died enslaved, not knowing what it is to be free. Some of the slaves escaped, they were poor and had to eke out an existence whichever way they could. They attracted attention and sometimes abuse. The impact is that generations of black lives, were stolen, families were torn apart and communities fractured. They encountered brutality and violence and lived in fear forever.

The second wave of black people coming to the UK were post war, as the British government began to encourage mass immigration from the countries of the British Empire and Commonwealth to fill shortages in the labour market. In services such as British Rail, the National Health Service, and London Transport. This was encouraged by the British Nationality Act of 1948, which gave all Commonwealth citizens free entry into Britain. An important landmark in the history of Britain was the ship HMT Empire Windrush from the Kingston Jamaica to Tilbury Essex, in 1948 which brought a group of migrants.⁶ Some were servicemen who took this opportunity to return to Britain, others came for the first time. Most of those who came were young women and men in their early twenties. The men worked in the metal goods, engineering and car manufacturing industries, and in transport and communications, while the women worked in occupations such as nursing and catering.

The British Nationality Act 1948 gave Citizenship of the UK and Colonies to all people living in the United Kingdom and its colonies providing the right of entry and settlement in the United Kingdom. By 1962, all Commonwealth citizens could freely enter the UK to work. By 1984 the black British population in the UK no longer consisted predominantly of immigrants but was mainly UK-born. According to the UK government, there is essentially 3.3% of the population of England and Wales who described themselves as black Caribbean or black African.⁷

Current issues: There remains a fear of "the Other" which takes on many disguises. The worry amongst some white people, is in a perceived disappearance of the essence of what it is to be British which is being eroded by immigrants. 'The fear that anything that doesn't resemble white homogeneity exists only to erase it'.⁸ Could it be that, we are more likely to treat those that are akin to us as similar to us? The word multiculturalism has become "a front word" for fears about black and brown and foreign people posing a danger to British Whites.⁸

Black Brits are represented in all walks of life in the UK and have made major contributions to the arts and sports and entertainment. Day-to-day racism, as well as the intergenerational transmission of slavery and colonisation still exists today. Black people remain trapped in a cycle of poverty because of stigmatisation and discrimination, based on colour difference. This affects their psyche. The stress of coping and continuous exclusion affects their health outcomes: and as a result mortality rates for African/Caribbean are higher in England and Wales, when compared with white people.⁹

Legacy of Slavery and Colonisation

This impact of the intergenerational and transgenerational trauma are not limited to those individuals directly exposed to traumatic events, and often it is the ripple effect which remains and gets passed down to the second and third generations.

One of the most malignant consequences of white projection of denigrated qualities onto a black person is, black people, introject the image of the self they see in the minds of the white person, believing their identity is defined by that image. The black person becomes the racialized object. In other words, s/he is experienced not so much for her or himself, but in terms of what has been projected onto them. This has created dislike of what it is to be black. This results in frustration and anger among black people which cannot be vocalised for fear of being branded as aggressive or violent. The reason for their anger should be clear, yet, it is made out that it is unjustified except for their 'maladaptive nature'. Because the anger cannot be directed towards the perpetrator, gets directed horizontally, against other black people as in the black on black killing in London. Whether black and ethnic people admit it or not, no one is free of racism. As a result, Black people feel acutely disrespected in their everyday lives, and every black person may have felt the sting of disrespect purely based on their skin colour.

Maintenance of Race System

People of colour are now living all over the world. Their skin colour means they stand out, significantly and even though they come from different parts of the world, they are treated as one homogenised group. In Britain, being black and British expresses an impossible duality. This reinforces who belongs and who doesn't and maintains a system of 'them' and 'us.' Black people do not feel they belong nor are they fully accepted, even though most are now second and third generations, born in Britain. Belonging or not belonging raises questions of identity, such as, if I do not belong, then, where do I belong and who am I. One thing the Coronavirus has highlighted is that the immigrants are looked on to do the menial tasks in the UK, but they are on the margins, yet central to the work force, but excluded from the culture.

Whiteness

White people inherited whiteness, and only think about colour when they come in contact with someone of colour. White people by virtue of being white, sees themselves as invincible. Baldwin expressed that 'an unchallenged identity makes a man feel he can do no wrong'.² To consider the impact of racism on the "black other" would mean to consider the impact that white as a race, has had a role in it. This means having an understanding that whiteness is multidimensional. The process and practice include a recognition of the fact that basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences pretended to be commonly shared is, in fact, consistently awarded to white people. A recognition of white centeredness and removal of white projection. Shame and guilt need to be removed, for the sake of progress towards racial justice. Many white people

believe their success is the result of their own efforts, ignoring the reality of white privilege and the wealth and riches resulting from slavery. To unpack all of these, and consider it, requires a psychic change. It would mean a power struggle, as there is a need to sustain ignorance and maintain supremacy this is not likely to change anytime soon. The need to maintain the status quo is so great.

In a society that is politically and socially controlled by white people, people with dark skin colour have the hardest time getting ahead.

Survival and Growth—Fighting Despair

There is a call for individuals and nations not to turn away from historical truth and its legacy of pain. The denial of the pain of slavery or the holocaust, turns the generations of those affected to despair and rage, due to its manifestations in our current society. Denial of any genocide cannot remain compartmentalised, as denial bleeds into the fabric of the nation. A reality for black people is that they are so expendable. An attack against a black person feels like an attack against the whole. Take the Stephen Lawrence and more recently George Floyd cases.^{10,11} The lack of response, and long drawn out delays for an injustice, results in the aggrieved being re-traumatised.

The visibility of being black makes black people more vulnerable, however, it is also their greatest strength. It is very important that black people learn to define themselves for and by themselves and strive for self-actualisation, knowing that courage comes from oppression. There is an argument that black people talk a lot about racism, and try to convince and inform the white population of its' importance. This takes them away from attending to themselves. Black people should talk less about racism, if possible, and white people should engage more. Those that have come before have paved the way and made it possible for us, and to them, we owe gratitude.

CONCLUSION

Difference as a Creative Force Necessary for Change

In order to move forward, we need to commit ourselves to a future that can include our differences and similarities and work towards that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. This is for black and white to co-create. Both black and white people have a shared similarity which surpasses our differences, moving forward, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as recognise our sameness. In order not to repeat horrific events of the past and reduce suffering, we need to be able to revisit and understand the past in order to rectify how we got it wrong and how to rectify the wrong. What prevents us from doing so is crouched in society's differentiation of one group from another. A superior and an inferior race.

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