Spring 2020

Racism in America: A Psychological Approach

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Abstract

America is a country that has racism interwoven into its history and ingrained within its society. Blacks have been subjected to this racism and oppression for generations, and at a higher level than other minority groups. More recently in American society, we can see a transition from overt discrimination to covert discrimination through policies and legislation that affect racial groups differently. Foucault and Bentham's Panopticon can be used to discuss the true systematic violence imposed on blacks and we can further that discussion by investigating the War on Drugs and Mass Incarceration and how they represent reincarnations of previous Babylonian systems. In addition to that, we will discuss psychological reasons for racism and discrimination, as well as the psychological and physiological effects of racism.

Keywords

racism, psychological, mass incarceration, war on drugs, power

Disciplines

African American Studies | Criminology and Criminal Justice | Psychology

Comments

Written for AFS 130: Introduction to African-American Studies

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America is a country that has racism interwoven into its history and ingrained within its society. Blacks have been subjected to this racism and oppression for generations, and at a higher level than other minority groups. More recently in American society, we can see a transition from overt discrimination to covert discrimination through policies and legistlation that affect racial groups differently. Foucault and Bentham's Panopticon can be used to discuss the true systematic violence imposed on blacks and we can further that discussion by investigating the War on Drugs and Mass Incarceration and how they represent reincarnations of previous Babylonian systems. In addition to that, we will discuss psychological reasons for racism and discrimination, as well as the psychological and physiological effects of racism.

FOUCAULT AND BENTHAM

The modern world exists through stratified social hierarchies that exist in every aspect of society and are policed through discipline and power. English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham designed a prison that could elicit high levels of obedience with a low number of guards. There would be one singular guard tower in the center and a circular row of cells around the tower. The guard had a spotlight and could see into any of the inmates' cells at any time. "Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so." (Farnam Street, 2014). The interesting thing about the Panopticon is that it required almost no guards to be effective, and some even argued that after some time no guards are needed at all. "Eventually guards discovered that, after a period of

consistent monitoring and prompt punishment against perpetrators, inmates began to regulate

their own behaviour. They couldn't see a guard and yet they were regulated by conscience itself.

An external reality had thus become internalized and became habitual." (Farnam Street, 2014).

Later, French philosopher Michel Foucault built upon Bentham's ideas. Foucault

expanded the Panopticon into a symbol of social control that extends into the everyday life for all

citizens, not just those in prison. He argues that social citizens always internalize authority which

is a source of power for prevailing norms and institutions and gives the example of a driver

stopping at a red light even though no other cars or police are present, making the police an

internalized authority due to rules becoming self-imposed (Joukowsky Institute for Archeology,

2009). Foucault compared the Panopticon to a laboratory, "It could be used as a machine to carry

out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals. To try out different

punishments on prisoners, according to their crimes and character, and to seek the most effective

ones." (Foucault, 1975). Most importantly, however, Foucault realized how the Panopticon had

real-world applications. Foucault stated, "The panoptic schema, without disappearing as such or

losing any of its properties, was destined to spread throughout the social body; its vocation was

to become a generalized function." (Foucault, 1975). Babylonian systems, even in the modern

world, rely on this kind of power and surveillance.

REAL-WORLD APPLICATIONS

I would like to take the ideas discussed by Foucault and Bentham and apply them to

modern structures of power in society. The panoptic schema, as Foucault stated, has spread

throughout the social body and has become a covert aspect of daily life for millions of people.

First, I would like to compare the model of the Panopticon to the life of minorities in America.

Society would be considered the guard and the individual people the prisoners. As a society, we have certain ideals regarding race that have been ingrained in our collective subconscious. Some of these common beliefs are that of black women on welfare being "welfare queens" or "Jezebels" or undeserving of assistance, or how people prefer lighter over darker skin, or how black people are thought to be less qualified for certain jobs, etc. There are many cases of overt racism, but I would like to focus on these covert and subconscious views. These negative views of blacks of being not as smart, aggressive, etc, has shaped the way we think about blacks as a society. We are the guard, shining the lights in cells in this example.

Next, the development of internalized surveillance. Since society has been "policing" blacks on how to act, speak, dress, and how to live, black people begin to internalize this authority and now police themselves. We can see black people getting upset at other blacks for sagging pants, as an example, due to the state of mind that "It makes us all look bad.". This is a perfect example of internalized authority. Now, society doesn't even need to tell black people how to act, they tell themself on society's behalf. Black people will police themselves even in the absence of society as an authority figure. This phenomenon is not unique to blacks and panopticism is perpetuated for many minority groups.

OPPRESSION REINVENTING ITSELF

Throughout history we can see Babylonian and oppressive systems change and morph and reinvent themselves into new systems. Oppression and discrimination never die, contrary to many peoples' beliefs. When discussing the oppression of blacks in America, I think it is best to begin at slavery. Slavery was one of America's most overt oppressions towards blacks, and is best described as a tortorous and horrendous practice that destroyed families, cultures, and broke

peoples' spirits. Even blacks who were not enslaved were treated extremely poorly and did not

have nearly the same amount of rights as whites. Eventually slavery is abolished, and not entirely

for humanitarian reasons either. However, next come the Black Codes, a set of laws that restrict

blacks' freedom and compels blacks to work for very low wages. Blacks were now in a state

similar to that of slavery, but just changed slightly. Then the Reconstruction period began and

the Black Codes were done away with. However in response to this, new laws oppressing blacks

were enacted called Jim Crow Laws. These laws mandated segregation of public facilities and

were basically a reincarnation of the Black Codes. The Jim Crow Laws lasted up until 1964,

shockingly.

We can then see a turn at this point in history from overt oppression, that oppresses

through direct laws and policies, to covert oppression, which uses laws and policies

systematically to oppress. This basically means that at this point in time you cannot take rights

away from blacks directly, so one must use laws that "indirectly" hurt certain groups. One of the

first of these policies would be Nixon's War on Drugs. The War on Drugs unequally affected

different racial groups and we can see many large racial discrepancies in drug charges and rates

of offenders. More recently, we have seen a growing trend of prison privatization along with

Mass Incarceration. We can find unequal rates of incarceration and sentencing lengths dependent

on race. It is no surprise that we find blacks to be the most affected by the War on Drugs and

Mass Incarceration. These are just a few examples of many different reincarnations of oppression

that have plagued the black community for hundreds of years. It is important to be aware of these

ever-changing Babylonian systems and notice when they begin to morph into a new system. For

the purpose of this paper I will focus on the covert systems of oppression in the modern era such as the War on Drugs and Mass Incarceration.

THE WAR ON DRUGS

The War on Drugs has disproportionately affected blacks in America compared to other races. Black males have a 29% chance of serving time in prison at some point in their life compared to whites who have a 4% chance (Gunja, 2003). Gunja (2003) also reports that while blacks and whites use and sell drugs at similar rates, blacks comprise 35% of those arrested for drug possession, 55% of those convicted for drug possession, and 74% of those imprisoned for drug possession. Pearl (2018) found that blacks are almost six times more likely to be incarcerated for drug-related offences compared to whites, despite equal substance usage rates. We can also see an example to go with these statistics that in 2000, 15% of the young black males in a town called Hearne were arrested in a drug sweep based solely on the word of an informant and later it was found that all the men were innocent (Gunja, 2003).

We can see that blacks are more likely to be arrested, especially for drug charges, but now we must discuss discrepancies experienced in courts. The Drug Policy Alliance (2016) reported that prosecutors are twice as likely to pursue a mandatory minimum for blacks as for whites charged with the same offence. In fact, people of color account for 70% of people charged with mandatory minimum sentences (Pearl, 2018). Pearl also discusses how blacks make up about 30% of drug related arrests while only representing about 12.5% of all substance users. Interestingly enough, Pearl (2018) also found that the average black person convicted of a drug offence will serve the same time (58.7 months) in prison as a white person convicted of a violent crime (61.7 months). This is supported by Gunja (2003) when they discuss the 1973 Rockefeller

Drug Laws in New York. These harsh drug penalties led to blacks and latinos comprising 94% of

the drug offenders in New York state prisons. However, there are further nuances to discuss in

this War on Drugs such as sentencing differences for crack and cocaine. There are no

pharmacological differences between these drugs, and in fact, the only true difference is who

uses them. Whites tend to use the more expensive cocaine, while blacks tend to use crack due to

other systematic housing and education differences that leads to income differences in black and

white communities. Crack has been associated with blacks and Gunja (2003) reports that in

2001, 80% of federal crack defendants were black. On top of this, the penalties for possession of

500 grams of cocaine was the same as 5 grams of crack. The effects of the War on Drugs on

black communities was devastating. According to Gunja (2003), 1.6 million children have a

father in prison and 200,000 children have a mother in prison. To add to this, black children are

almost 9 times more likely to have a parent in prison than white children. Imprisonment not only

tears apart families, but in certain cases, deprives individuals of their right to vote. The Drug

Policy Alliance (2016) found that, "One in 13 black people of voting age are denied the right to

vote because of laws that disenfranchise people with felony convictions." When applying this to

the high rates of incarceration in America, and the misrepresentation of blacks in drug

convictions and arrests, the War on Drugs can be seen as a nefarious Babylonian system that

oppresses blacks covertly through indirect policies and practices.

MASS INCARCERATION

The War on Drugs leads directly into Mass Incarceration. We can see this trend

beginning as private prisons become more popular in the 1970s. Similar to the War on Drugs, we

can see racial discrepancies in Mass Incarceration. The NAACP (2020) reported that between

1980 and 2015, the number of incarcerated people in the U.S. rose from 500,000 to over 2.2

million, making the U.S. the world's largest imprisoner with the U.S. comprising around 21% of

the world's prisoners despite only holding about 5% of the global population. This large number

of prisoners is troubling when we focus on the racial disparities found in the prison population.

Blacks are incarcerated at over 5 times the rate of whites (NAACP, 2020) and if blacks and

hispanics were incarcerated at the same rate as whites, prison and jail populations would decline

by almost 40%. This trend is only getting worse. Overall incarceration rates are over 500 percent

higher than 40 years ago according to Maxwell and Solomon (2018). They also report that 1/4

black millenials had an incarcerated loved one before turning 18 and for those born in the early

1990s, the rate is almost 1/3.

 We can see that there is a disproportionate representation of blacks in the U.S. prison

system, but we must also investigate further nuances. The NAACP (2020) reports that the

imprisonment rate for black women is twice that of white women. When looking through the

lense of intersectionality, we can see that many women, especially black women, are exposed to

unique stressors when incarcerated. Maxwell and Solomon (2018) found that 86% of

incarcerated women are survivors of past sexual violence. This is important when thinking of

prison procedures that could trigger past traumas such as cavity searches, pat downs, etc. On top

of this most prisons lack adequate mental health services for women as well as menstrual

hygiene products, or gynecological and obstetric care. On top of this, a majority of incarcerated

women are also mothers and the primary caretakers of their families. Half are imprisoned more

than 100 miles from their families and 38% will never see their children while incarcerated

(Maxwell and Solomon, 2018). While we can see that black mothers are being incarcerated at an

increasing rate and being subjected to new stressors, we must also discuss the effect of that on

the children. Maxwell and Solomon (2018) report that it is estimated that infant mortality rates

would be 7.8 percent lower today and that disparities between black and white women would be

15% smaller if incarceration rates remained at 1970s levels due to the effects of toxic stress from

contact with the criminal justice system.

Many people would consider the criminal justice system to be fair, despite these clear

racial disparities. This is discussed by The Sentencing Project (2018) when they claim that, "The

rhetoric of the criminal justice system sends the message that our society carefully protects

everyone's constitutional rights, but in practice the rules assure that law enforcement

prerogatives will generally prevail over the rights of minorities and the poor. By affording

criminal suspects substantial constitutional rights in theory, the Supreme Court validates the

results of the criminal justice system as fair." They state that the criminal justice system is

believed to be inherently fair due to laws and rights applying to all people regardless of race,

despite the fact that those laws affect racial groups differently.

REASONS FOR RACISM

We are all aware that there are individuals and practices that perpetuate racist beliefs and

ideas, but now we will investigate further into reasons for why individuals feel these racist

views. Cognitive behavioral therapist, Marion Rodriguez, discusses how hate can be rational,

such as hating unjust acts, however, hate of ethnic groups, races, religion, or sexual orientations

are based on irrational beliefs that the other groups are inherently flawed, inferior, or a threat and

often times these groups are dehumanized (Abrams, 2017). Specifically, attitudes of extreme

hatred are usually based on fear, coming from primitive survival mechanisms and instincts to

avoid danger and fear anything that appears different (Abrams, 2017). Dr. Reneé Carr, a

psychologist, states that defensive thoughts and behaviors also develop from unconscious fears

that peoples' own level of security, importance, or control is being threatened (Abrams, 2017). In

addition to this, the use of projection as a natural defense mechanism is discussed by Dr. Dana

Harron. She states that people avoid their own shortcomings by projecting them onto others and

that the things people hate about others is often what they fear within themselves and on a deep

level, the hateful individual believes that these things may be true about themselves. Lastly,

Abrams (2017) describes how some members of extremist hate groups are motivated by their

need for love and belonging, which is a basic survival need. For people who have difficulty

forming interpersonal relationships, identifying themselves with extremist hate groups is one

way to do so. Psychologist Dr. John Paul Garrison discussed how the "us-versus-them" mentality

makes individuals feel closer to the group they identify with, providing them with social support

(Abrams, 2017). We can see that most racist beliefs come from places of fear or severe insecurity

but Dr. Garrison also describes how certain personality disorders, such as antisocial personality

disorder, are defined by a lack of empathy, which could predispose individuals to possess

extreme racist attitudes.

  Interestingly enough, researchers have found decreases in overt expressions of racism,

which could suggest that racism has become less extreme in America. In fact, many

psychologists believe that racism has "gone underground" and now hides in more subtle forms

(Salter, Adams, and Perez, 2017). Salter, Adams, and Perez (2017) go further with this claim

when they introduce the idea of mutual constitution which states that the psyche and culture both

influence one another and are inseparable. Through this perspective we can think about how

racism in society is perpetuated by individuals' beliefs and vice versa, creating a self-fueling

cycle. We can apply this to the fact that most priviliged individuals are not aware of their own

privilege and racism and are also unaware of the discrimination many colored people face

(Shouhayib, 2015). A great example of this are the multitude of "colorblind" ideologies found in

individuals and in legislation. Salter, Adams, and Perez (2017) define the colorblind ideology as

"a tool for the production of ignorance" and state how claims that race doesn't matter are

strategically able to deny current realities of racial inequalities. We have clear evidence that

certain policies affect individuals very differently depending on race, so to be "colorblind" is to

not see the true nature of these inequalities and nuances that cannot be solved or even seen

through the "race-neutral" lense.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF RACISM

The effects of racism and discrimination on the mind and the body of the individual have

been well-documented in the medical field. The APA (2020) reports that the common and

pervasive exposure to racism and discrimination creates a unique additional daily stressor for

blacks in America. Researchers have been able to prove that racist material, as well as other

forms of stress, elicits physiological arousal, which increases the likelihood of someone

developing a stress-related disease (Harrell et al., 2003). This is built on by Zhang (2016) who

describes how experiencing racism increases stress and that added stress is called an allostatic

load which disrupts the normal function of the body. Increases in stress cause an elevated level

of cortisol in the body which leads to higher levels of cardiovascular disease. Zhang also reports

how blacks experience disproportionately high rates of diabetes, blood pressure, and

cardiovascular disease. We can relate the issue of high stress to the research done by Klass

(2019) who found that mothers who report experiencing discrimination are more likely to have infants with low birth weights. Not only are birth weights affected by racism, but so are levels of aggression in teenage boys. Black teenage boys from ages 10 to 15 who had experiences with racism are more likely to have behavior problems such as aggression (Klass, 2019). This development of behavior problems is due to stress experienced during childhood which creates hypervigilance in children who believe they are living in a threatening world.

Not only does racism and stress create physical harm to victims, but they also experience dangers to their mental health. Research shows that reporting more incidents of racism can be linked to showing more signs of anxiety and depression (Zhang, 2016). Klass (2019) discusses how children become aware of what place their cultural group holds in society around age 9. Klass describes the further implications of this by stating how children can internalize racism and since they see so much negativity about people like them, they develop negativity about themselves. Interestingly, a study was conducted comparing the performance of students attempting a simple task after experiencing blatant or subtle racism from the person at the desk next to them. They found that subtle racism, such as slowly inching away in one's seat lowered performance more than blatant racism (Zhang, 2016). The effects of stress and racism on the mind and body are very detrimental and are experienced on a daily level by millions of Americans.

Oppression never dies, but reinvents itself into a new and improved, stronger form that in modern times tends to be more covert. We discussed the very clear and negative effects of racism on physiological and psychological health among blacks in America and how racism tends to come from feelings of fear or insecurity from biased individuals. Foucault and

Bentham's ideas on panopticism can be related strongly to modern societal issues that plague many black Americans. Racism is a highly-polarized hot topic for debates among people and many people have their own personal beliefs and biases. We must be a color-conscious society and be aware of situations, policies, and legislation that affects people of different racial groups differently. We must celebrate peoples' differences and experiences, but most importantly we must not be ignorant or "color-blind" citizens in this modern and diverse nation.

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