

Racial Trauma: Play Therapists' Awareness and Interventions

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Objectives



- o Describe racial trauma (generational, current experiences)
 - o Describe effect of racial trauma on children's mental health
 - o Describe at least 3 play therapy interventions for children who have experienced racial trauma
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Our Hope

- Embrace the tension: difference between safety and comfort
- Discuss our awareness of the experience of others (those who are like us and those who are different from us)
- Be aware of your reactions and attempt to use them as a means to take the content deeper
- Discuss the system we/our clients live in more thoroughly
- Increase awareness/knowledge about racial trauma will lead to emotional shift which leads to behavior change
- Transfer knowledge into practice: How can your learning from today transfer into what you do with children and families?

The Milner's Story

Case study (Milner, 2015, p. 114):

“Jamal, use your inside voice.”

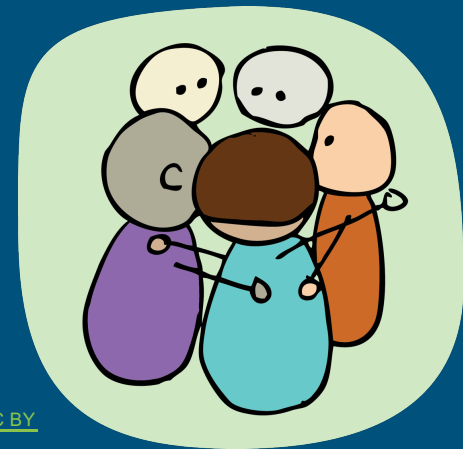
I visited almost two dozen preschool facilities searching for the best fit for my four-year-old twin daughters. During one visit, I witnessed a group of five students (one black male, three white males, and one white female) playing together in a classroom. As I watched, the preschool teacher, a white, middle-class woman with 14 years' experience, told “Jamal,” the black student: “You are too loud. Let's use our indoor voice, please.” The teacher turned back to me and went on answering my questions. Soon, she turned again to the five youngsters, but once more focused her words on one: “Jamal, you are too loud. I'm going to have to ask you to take a seat if you keep it up.”

I was stunned. What I observed was a group of five students yelling and not using their “indoor” voices. Yet this teacher heard one student, Jamal. I wondered what this singling out did to Jamal’s self-concept, voice, and identity....what can this teacher do to recognize her behavior as an action she was likely not consciously aware of- and ensure it does not happen in the future. I doubt seriously this teacher had any idea she as singling out Jamal and overlooking the voices/behaviors of the other students.

Discussion 1

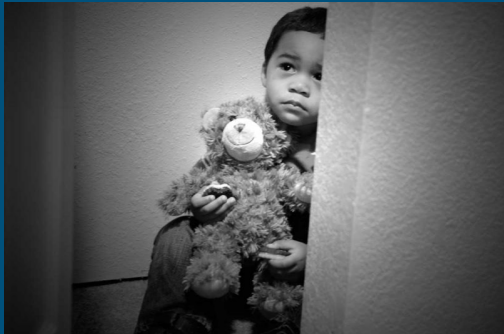
In your group, please introduce yourself and discuss the questions below. Identify 1 person in your group who can write in the chat the answer to the following discussion questions:

- 1- What did you experience/feel as you heard the story?
- 2- What are the effects of this experience on Jamal?
- 3- What are the effects of this experience on his parents?



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DEFINITION OF TRAUMA



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The three “E’s” of trauma

Trauma refers to an **event**, series of events, or set of circumstances that is **experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse **effects**.

(National traumatic Stress Network, 2023)

RACIAL TRAUMA and HISTORICAL TRAUMA

Racial Trauma: Potentially traumatic experiences resulting from direct experiences of racial harassment, witnessing racial violence toward others, and experiencing discrimination and institutional racism (Comas-Díaz et al. 2019).

Historical Trauma: “The cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma” – Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (2003)

Examples of historical trauma:

- Communities of color
- American Indian and Alaska Native communities
- Holocaust survivors
- Japanese-American survivors of internment camps
- LGBTQ communities



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(Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

RACIAL TRAUMA VS. INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

- Historical and/or racial trauma operates through a layering of narrative turns, including trauma as a concept represented in stories, history as socially endorsed memory, and an internal logic linking history to present suffering or resilience (Crawford, 2013)
- It is different from intergenerational trauma in that intergenerational trauma refers to the specific experience of trauma across familial generations, but does not necessarily imply a shared group trauma

Complex Trauma

The term **complex trauma** refers to exposure to multiple traumatic events from an early age, **and** the immediate and long-term effects of these experiences over development.



(National Traumatic Stress Network, 2023)

Ways in which Society Reinforces Racial Trauma

Oppression can occur in two ways:

- Imposition occurs as privileged groups, or those in power, impose conditions on oppressed groups.
 - Constant exposure to stereotypes and discriminatory messages about their group
 - Personally mediated
- **Systemic Oppression** (e.g. Educational System, Criminal Justice System, Immigration laws)
- Deprivation occurs when the system robs oppressed group of equal access to living conditions such as shelter, high quality education, or social support, among others (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000).



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(David & Derthick, 2017)

Microaggressions



- Demeaning messages sent to members of oppressed groups
- Often times unconscious
- Can be verbal or nonverbal
- Intentional or unintentional
 - Intent does not equal impact
 - “But I didn’t mean it that way...”
 - Subtle manifestations of internalized bias
- Microaggressions
- Microinvalidation
- Macroaggression
- Cumulative impact of microaggressions = trauma

(Sue & Sue, 2013)

Stories of Racial Trauma Activity

Effects of Racial Trauma on Children and Caregivers

Internalized Oppression

- **Internalized oppression** is a concept in which an **oppressed** group uses the methods of the oppressing group against itself. It occurs when one group perceives an inequality of value relative to another group, and desires to be like the more highly-valued group.
- **Examples:**
 - Overemphasis on achievement to prove your child belongs
 - Hiding parts of oneself or “code-switching” to be more accepted into the dominant culture
 - Associating oneself with the negative stereotypes about one’s cultural/racial/ethnic group

How Children of Marginalized Groups Come to these Conclusions

David & Derthick, 2017

- The dominant group is seen as the norm for humanity” (Tatum, 1997, p. 24)
 - “White”, “human”, and “normal” become synonyms
- Learning about White history in school; Whites as protagonists
- Heroes are White
- Definition of beauty based on Eurocentric features
- Light equated with goodness; dark equated with evil
- Children learn about who they are by reactions from others (clutching purse, not being called on in class)



David & Derthick, 2017

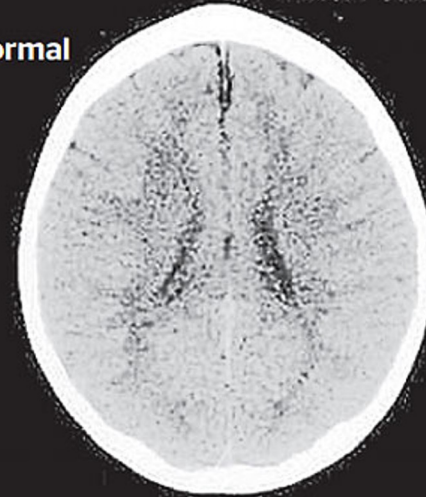
Ways in which Trauma Affect Children Development

- When stress hormones are activated for extended period of time in early childhood the neural connections in the thinking area of the brain that enhance learning and reasoning are weakened, which affects the cognitive skills.
- Continuous exposure to trauma/complex trauma can weaken remaining neural pathways to the thinking part of your brain and strengthen neural pathways to the survival part, thus bypassing the thinking part, which makes some children less capable of coping with adversity as they grow up.

HOW STRESS CHANGES A CHILD'S BRAIN

3-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN

Normal



Extreme neglect



■ Prolonged exposure to trauma triggers physiological changes in the brain.

■ Neural circuits are disrupted, causing changes in the hippocampus, the brain's memory and emotional centre.

■ This can cause brain shrinkage, problems with memory, learning and behaviour.

■ A child does not learn to regulate emotions when living in state of constant stress.

■ Associated with greater risk of chronic disease and mental health problems in adulthood.

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Epigenetics: Effects on Children and Caregivers

Black and Latinx women's experiences of discrimination throughout pregnancy were positively correlated to greater separation problems and greater negative emotions among infants at 6 months and 1 year of age, even after controlling for some medical and sociodemographic factor (Rosenthal et al., 2018)

Caregivers' exposure to discrimination were associated with a range of detrimental physical and mental health outcomes in children 5-11 years old. These detrimental effects included greater adolescent disruptive behavior (Savell et al, 2019), negative impact on mental health, sleep difficulties, obesity (Shepherd, 2017), and higher risk for trying cigarettes (Cavell et al, 2019).

COMMON RESPONSES TO RACIAL TRAUMA

- Fear, anxiety, worry, angry outbursts, concern for safety
- Difficulty separating from caregivers
- Reenacting aspects of the traumatic event in play (e.g. reenactments about microaggressions or social events)
- Physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomach aches, poor appetite, and decline in self-care
- Difficulty identifying feelings and controlling emotional reactions

(National Traumatic Stress Network, 2023)

IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON STUDENTS

- Desire to withdraw from peers and adults
- Difficulty paying attention and learning
- More time out of the classroom
- Increased isolation
- School absences
- More suspensions or expulsions
- Higher referral rates to special education
- Poor test scores and an increased risk of failing grades



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(National Traumatic Stress Network, 2023)

IMPACT OF RACIAL TRAUMA

- Depression
- Anxiety
- PTSD
- Elevated blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Muscle tension
- Other related mental health concerns
- Overall poor life satisfaction/quality of life



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(National Traumatic Stress Network, 2023)

Clinical Implications



Bruce Perry's Clip



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“What makes children get better following a trauma is connection to other human beings: human beings who are present, who are patient, who are kind, and who are sensitive. They don't need to be necessarily psychologically insightful. They need not to know anything about trauma. All they need to know is that they're right there with this child, they're trying to be comforting, they're trying to be supportive, they're trying to encourage. Those kinds of interactions end up being much more therapeutic and healing than many of the other things that we try to do with kids.”

(Perry, 2003)

Key factor for Resilience



It Starts with Us...

- Personhood of the play therapist is the most important cultural consideration.
- Ability to engage in self-reflection and to understand our clients' inner experiences.
- Cultural humility: Hook et al. (2017) defines cultural humility as, "an interpersonal stance that is other oriented rather than self-focused in regard to the cultural background and experience of the client" (p. 9).
- Creating a space that embraces our clients' experiences as they interact with the world
 - Waiting room
 - Toys
 - How we present ourselves

The Power of Play for Young Black Males

Steven's view of child-centered play therapy

8:40-10:33



The Role of Core Conditions in the Healing of Racial Trauma

- Empathy
 - Validation of the hurt, anger, despair that results from experiences of racial trauma such as microaggressions
- Unconditional Positive Regard
 - Not having to be “white” to be accepted and the impact this can have on the child’s racial identity development
- Genuineness
 - Cultural humility, self-awareness is key in order to hold the space for the client’s experience
 - Cultural comfort or internal emotional state (Hook et al., 2017)
 - How comfortable you are in the moment that the child is processing racial experiences in the playroom?

Implications: Jamal

Jamal comes to the playroom and always selects a black doll. He then proceeds to play-out a theme where that black doll is always “bad” and “misbehaving” Jamal’s facial expression indicates he is playing intensely and very focused on the play.

Allowing the Child to Lead Heals Racial Trauma

- It is not important to name racial trauma, what is important is to allow children to play their lived experiences without analyzing them
- Importance of empowerment of children of color
- Children can play different roles of power and confront authority without fear of retaliation
- Children control their narrative in the therapeutic process

Implications: Jamal

How do Steven's comments relate to allowing Jamal's to lead?

How can allowing Jamal to lead his play help him process his experiences of racial discrimination in his daily life?

Working with Parents who Have Experienced Racial Trauma

- Parenting involves implementing decisions about socialization to children that include passing on values to the next generation
- Lansford (2021) provides a summary of determinants of health that affect parental practices such as discipline, warmth, cognitive stimulation, and other types of parental behaviors that directly affect children and adolescent development (access to basic needs such as food, water, educational resources, and living in safe versus unsafe environments)

We must listen beyond the words:

“What I’ve tried to do is develop relationships with the teachers and the administration because what’s funny is I say, “Well, if they like me they’ll treat my kid better.” Also, tried to make sure that my education level and all of that is known in some way, shape, or form so that they know that I’m not ... [Pauses] Because I know that they’re looking at me as a single mother, uneducated, poor, and so to try to dispel that stereotype. [Takes a deep breath] I’m upset. It makes me angry that I have to do that.” (Powell & Coles, 2021, pg. 86)

“Every time I met with the White teacher I could feel how uncomfortable she felt around us (me and my husband). I could see how she would try to avoid conversations with us, but not with other parents...I guess our accent and who we represent made her feel uncomfortable. All I could think, if this is how she feel with us, how does she feel being around my Sofia? but what really kept me awake at night was: If that is how I feel around her, How does my Sofia feel being in her classroom every day?”

- Parents need safe spaces, validation
- Cultural healing

A Teacher's Experience

Video of Tamara 1:06-3:18



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Working with Teachers

- Teachers have not had training on how to foster relationship with children
- Interventions like child teacher relationship training are key to help children and to make changes in the system
 - Provide education to enhance understanding of trauma
 - Provide opportunities for teachers and other stakeholders to enhance their multicultural development
- Changing the system is advocacy in action

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