Chapter 5
Racial Battle Fatigue and Mental Health in Black Men

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of Black men in the United States are significantly different from men of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Black men have to deal with racism on a daily basis. Understanding of the effects of daily racism and its implications is limited. Racial battle fatigue is a relatively new concept in the field of mental health. The current chapter discusses the concept of racial battle fatigue and its effects on Black men. The authors discuss both the physical and psychological effects of daily racism on the health of Black men.

The lived experiences of Black men in America are significantly different from men of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Research has documented the role of discrimination as a predictor of major depressive disorder among Black men (Banks, Kohn-Wood & Spencer, 2006). The 1995 Detroit area study used a sample

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of 570 adult participants of which 390 were Black men. Black men reported more perceived everyday discrimination than Black women.

It is essential for therapists to understand the longitudinal effects of the period of enslavement and daily racial microaggressions on their lives (Marbley, 2011; Sue, 2015). Black history is unique in that Blacks are one of the few involuntary people of color brought to the United States. Cultural mistrust, and how the above factors into Black men’s worldview is critical to understand. Historical discrimination (Bell, 1992; Sue & Sue, 2016) and daily stressors of life (Bonhomme, 2004; Erguner-Tekinalp, 2009; Marbley, 2011; Pieterse & Carter, 2007) will affect their worldview. Robinson (1999) noted that sustained prejudices and discriminatory practices against Black men are, in part, responsible for the myths and misconceptions about them. These generalized misconceptions contribute to society’s aggressive behavior toward them. It is critical that we have culturally competent therapists who can effectively understand and work with Black men. This means that counselors are accurately conceptualizing their cases, providing proper diagnose and accurate treatment plans. It is also important to note that the vast majority of Black children reside in households led by Black women. (Prince, 1977; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). Thus, therapists must consider the cultural implications of female caregivers who are discussing matters of race with their male children.

Culturally responsive mental health services include the therapist’s ability to recognize the historical monocultural enthnocentric bias, microaggressions, systemic oppression, and racism in the lives of Black men and respond effectively (Sue & Sue, 2016; Sue, 2015). Therapists must have an awareness of the fundamental multicultural counseling dimensions (Roysircar, Hubbell, & Gard, 2013; Sue & Sue, 2015; Sue, 2015). These dimensions include the therapist’s awareness of their own biases and beliefs toward specific cultural groups, knowledge of diverse populations and the appropriate skills to service underserved populations (Sue & Sue, 2015; Sue, 2015). It is imperative that therapists understand historical cultural mistrust between African-Americans and social services agencies. Cultural mistrust for African-Americans developed as a result of years of oppression and racism (Marbley, 2011; Sue & Sue, 2015; Terrell, Terrell & Taylor 1981). Thus, many Black men may be unwilling to voluntarily seek mental health services.

Racial battle fatigue is a term coined by Dr. William A. Smith, professor at the University of Utah, who describes the condition as physiological and psychological strain (i.e., fatigue) suffered by oppressed groups in response to continuous exposure and experiences with racial microaggressions and discrimination (Smith, Allen & Danley 2007). Smith has equated the mental and physical strain on people of color attempting to survive in “mundane extreme environmental stress” (MEES) to that of a soldier entrenched in war on a battlefield (Smith, 2004). A theoretical framework by design, racial battle fatigue was developed to highlight negative symptoms such
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