Racial Appraisal: an integrated Cultural and Structural Response to African American Experiences with Violent Trauma

C. Shawn McGuffey, Ph.D.[1] & Tanya L. Sharpe, Ph.D., MSW[2]

Abstract

Racial Appraisal is discussed as an integrative approach in response to experiencing violent victimization for African Americans. The research asserts that the process of coping with trauma for direct and indirect victims of violence is both structural and cultural. The paper references sociology and social work research that illustrates the use of racial appraisal to understand the ways in which race-based structural inequality limits and facilitates the interactions and cognitions of victims of violence,thereby impacting the allocation of social, psychological, and cultural resources from which African American survivors can draw upon to manage trauma related symptoms. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: African Americans, violence, trauma, coping

Introduction

Research suggests that people's interpretations of a traumatic event influences how they respond to the stressful situation (Hess & Handel 1959; McNally 2003). Trauma is not simply a bodily assault, but also a social and psychological harm that causes the victim to assess her and his assumptions about how the world functions and how they thrive within it (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Richard Lazarus (1966; 1983)refers to this two-part process as an appraisal. First, a person establishes whether a situation or experience is threatening. If a situation is defined as threatening, the secondary appraisal governs the choices for handling the trauma and then acting on those interpretations. Like most scholarship on stress and coping, Whites have dominated the research literature and the experiences of people of color have been under theorized and under examined (Quiros& Berger, 2014). As research continues to expand and include more diverse demographics, scholars are identifying differences between the responses of people of color and their White counterparts that have typically been used to establish the trauma literature and the parameters in which the standard of practice or care is based. Scholars who identify differences in trauma responses often suggest that interpretive variations between Whites and racial minorities are cultural (Boss, 1988; Fisher &Moradi, 2001; Jackson & Sears, 1992; Utsey, 1998).

From this perspective, differences between racial groups are the result of different cultural expectations. Increasing numbers of scholars, however, are questioning the explanatory power of culture and are suggesting structural frameworks for understanding trauma responses. In this paper we propose an integrative approach to trauma responses and suggest the concept of a racial appraisal as a helpful approach to holistically articulate the traumatic responses of people of color in general, and survivors of African descent in particular. As such, this article first underscores the central limitations of cultural theories used to explain differences in trauma responses. We subsequently address the ways in which more recent scholarship has moved towards structural explanations.

[1]Boston College, McGuinn Hall 431, 140 Commonwealth Avenue, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467. clifton.mcguffey@bc.edu, (617) 552-4130
[2]University of Maryland, School of Social Work, 525 W. Redwood Street, Baltimore, MD 21201. tsharpe@ssw.umaryland.edu, (410) 706-3829

We then unpack the racial appraisal concept and show how it has been used to frame the experiences of both direct and indirect survivors.

Structural and Cultural Trauma Response Models

Trauma theorists that use culture as the primary explanatory tool to explain racial differences in trauma responses suggest that races of people in the United States typically – but certainly not always – adhere to cultural practices that distinguish themselves from one another. Responses to trauma, it is often argued, are rooted in these cultural practices. Culture, however, is generally defined monolithically and assumed to be a set of behaviors, attitudes, and values that are internalized by individuals within that defined culture (Lopez-Class, Castro, & Ramirez, 2011). Albeit some scholars suggests that culture is a process, most research treats culture as a concept that can be measured as a set of discreet behaviors that are then thought to be representative of particular cultural traits. Even among scholars that utilize a more expansive conceptualization of culture that includes social networks, neighborhoods, and *individual* experiences of discrimination, cultural frameworks still imply that traumatic responses are a set of individual level outcomes rooted in particular attitudes and behaviors associated with particular racialized cultural practices.

Cultural frameworks are increasingly challenged because they often do not locate trauma responses within structural power arrangements; especially the ways in which racism is structured in the U.S. Structural racism in the U.S. is the historical and contemporary legitimization of ideologies, material practices, and institutions that routinely advantage Whites while systematically disadvantaging people of color (Banton, 1987; Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Structural racism is a hierarchical system that maintains the privileged group position of Whites and continually reproduces racial inequality at the macro level, which in turn shapes the ways people interact and process information at the micro level (Hill Collins 1998). Cultural models frequently lack any discussion of how trauma itself is often structured and produces cultures of trauma. Understanding structural racism in this way makes clear the undeniable influential relationship of racism to the operationalization of responses to trauma that ultimately influence behaviors, attitudes, and values. Structuralist contend that the continued use of culturist models to explain racial differences in trauma responses ignores racialization processes, persistent discrimination, and the ways in which race structures things like housing, access to resources, and the images produced in society that provides the cultural material to make sense of traumatic situations (Acevedo-Garcia & Bates, 2008; Zambrana& Carter-Pokras, 2010).

Racism and Trauma Responses

As such, an increasing amount of research in the United States is recognizing the impact of race and racism on trauma responses. Racism has proven to be a chronic stressor for most people of color that often elicits negative physiological and social psychological responses (Bryant-Davis &Ocampo, 2005a; Jones, 1997). Physiologically, the body often responds to both covert and overt racism via hampered immune systems, neuroendocrine integration, and cardiovascular troubles (Harrell, 1999; 2000). Social psychological racism can cause people of color to experience shame, self-isolation, and lowered feelings of self-worth (Fontes, 2005; Sanchez-Hucles& Jones, 2005; Spanierman&Poteat, 2005; Wade, 2005). Many scholars are now even conceptualizing racism itself as a form of chronic trauma for people of color, with many similarities to other traumatic and stressful life events (Bryant-Davis &Ocampo, 2005b; Casas 2005; Helms, Nicolas & Green, 2012). Thus, the everyday experience of racism compounds acute experiences of trauma (Ponds, 2013; Quiros& Berger, 2014). This growing body of literature emphasizes three key aspects of the relationship between race and traumatic experiences. First, racism increases physical and psychological distress for trauma survivors, even if the individual does not define an event as racist. Second, although there is ample research demonstrating the negative physiological impact of racial marginalization on experiences of trauma, the literature clearly suggests that racisms greatest impact on trauma survivors is on the ways in which survivors perceive the traumatic event and how that perception shapes their responses to it. Lastly, the connections between race and trauma are the products of social and historical contexts that impact the salience of race for individual survivors.

Racial Appraisal

The racial appraisal approach, we contend, helps researchers and clinicians connect social structure to the lived experiences of trauma survivors of color and helps properly frame culture as a useful concept for understanding trauma responses.

In addition to explaining how cultural expectations based on one's ethnoracial identity and understanding of race-based structural inequalities contour interpretations of trauma, a racial appraisal also rationalizes a survivor's ensuing responses to trauma. A racial appraisal, however, does not conceptualize race or culture as static, concrete variables residing *within* individuals.   The racial appraisal perspective emphasizes that race and culture are *outside* victims and are used by individuals to form subjective understandings of a traumatic event.   In alignment with structural symbolic interactionism (Hollander & Howard, 2000; Hunt, Jackson, Powell &Steelman, 2000), a racial appraisal recognizes the ways in which race-based structural inequality limits and facilitates the interactions and cognitions of victims; as well as how race allocates the social, psychological, and culturally symbolic resources from which survivors can draw in cognitive processes. Thus, racial oppression edifies the perceptions of survivors who often assess their structurally subordinated racial status as an additional element that obstructs their capacity to act (McGuffey, 2005; 2010).

In other words, perceptions of race propose a particular "tool kit" of images, representations, and worldviews (Swidler, 1986). This racialized tool kit is used in social psychological processes and suggests particular responses to a trauma that have been racially encoded. Thus, interpersonal trauma operates as a situational cue for the use of cultural frames (DiMaggio, 1997). Survivors use these antecedent symbols and worldviews to make sense of their stressful situations and to provide cognitive order to their disrupted lives. This facet of culture underlines how other identity characteristics, such as gender and social class, often determine which cultural tools are used in a racial appraisal.

This article proceeds by showing how the racial appraisal approach can be applied to both direct and indirect victims.   Indirect victims are those who have personally experienced the trauma that has led to physical injury. Indirect victims, sometimes referred to as secondary victims, are those who are family or friends of the direct victim. Although many of the trauma responses between direct and indirect victims are the same, there are some distinct differences. For example, direct victims report not wanting to burden others with their feelings of pain and shame; while indirect victims are more likely to express survivors' guilt. The racial appraisal approach, however, demonstrates that culture and structure are both at play in contouring the perceptions and responses of survivors.

Racial Appraisal and Direct Victims

Using the accounts of Black women sexual assault survivors, McGuffey (2010; 2013)demonstrates how scholars can use this traumatic event to further extrapolate the mechanics of racial appraisal and how racial appraisal intersect with gender, class, and sexuality. By concentrating on how rape survivors use racial appraisal to organize their accounts, McGuffey argues that African Americans in his studies use racially inscribed cultural signifiers to root their understandings of rape within a racist social structure—which they also perceive as sexist and, for some, classist—that encourages their silence about same-race sexual assault. African and Caribbean immigrants, however, often avoid the language of social structure in their rape accounts and use cultural references to distance themselves from African Americans.

With its focus on how race intersects with gender, sexuality, and class, the racial appraisal approach clearly draws from intersectionality theory. McGuffey (2013)demonstratesthat racial appraisal differs, however, in one key respect: Whereas intersectionality has normally been focused on the *experience* of marginalized individuals, racial appraisal emphasizes the *cognitive frames* and *meaning-making apparatuses* social actors use that are ultimately *outside* of the survivor. A racial appraisal, then, is a social cognitive process that illustrates the ways in which social inequalities emerge in the mental schemas of racial minorities. Yet, the racial appraisal approach empirically demonstrates that the mental schemas are not only internalized; rather they are also products of social interaction.   The survivors consistently recounted that others—their rapists, social service providers, and friends—suggested to them how they should respond to their attack based on their status as Black women. In fact, several women changed their original strategies once they disclosed their rape with peers and professionals. Thus, the survivors reveal the intricate ways in which "controlling images" are used to control their actions(Collins, 2004).

Unlike studies of White rape survivors where victims chiefly discussed access to resources and feelings of shame and isolation, the Black[3] rape survivors in McGuffey's studies consistently discussed how race fashioned their assault in combination with these other challenges. For the African descent women in his 2013 study, the culturally approved racialized controlling images undoubtedly shaped their accounts. The vast majority of African-Americans also used racial ideologies to structure an account to understand their rape within gender and, for some, class hierarchies. The participants' responses highlight the significance of language, culture and cognition in intersectional processes as survivors account for their trauma in relation to their racial status in conjunction with other identity markers. The cultural languages that govern accounts are shaped by race, gender and class inequalities, which, in turn, constrain the ways in which to make meaning of an event. Survivor accounts, then, frequently follow a predictable cognitive and social script (McGuffey, 2010; 2013).

Nonetheless, McGuffey's research suggests that the perceptions of Black immigrants are not sufficiently reflected. The absence of a direct historical and collective memory of U.S. racism, as well as divergent levels of racial consciousness, suggest that the idea of a racialized social structure is not a cognitive resource that is easily available for some recent Black immigrant survivors (2013).

Still, the survivors' accounts suggest that the concept of racial appraisal is a useful model for understanding how Black survivors use larger, macro social forces to understand their micro, inter-personal experiences of trauma. On a cultural level, the rape survivors were forced to struggle with the controlling images of Black promiscuity, the Black superwoman, and the cultural protector ideal to figure out adequate coping strategies. On a social structural level, the African-American survivors recognized that their subordinate position in racial, gender and, for some, class hierarchies, underprivileged them in terms of personal social worth, the possibility of being believed, and the possibilities for justice. The despotic cultural images and the marginalized structural positions of Black women ultimately lie *outside* of the victim and produced the cognitive resources in which the participants utilized to appraise their sexual assault.

Racial Appraisal and In-direct Victims

Another way racial appraisal can be used is to better understand the process used by African Americans to respond to traumatic violence. Research on the post-homicide experiences of African American family members of homicide victims suggests that racial appraisal is a fundamental component for understanding how survivors identify and utilize coping resources to deal with the traumatic death of a loved one (Doka, 2002; Miller, 2009; Sharpe, 2015). The resources used by surviving family members for successfully coping with the death of a loved one are crucial elements to maintaining their mental, spiritual, and physical well-being.

Homicides are violent and unexpected, which puts surviving family members of victims at a greater risk of experiencing long term posttraumatic stress, which can magnify the process of grieving (Armour, 2003; Baliko& Tuck, 2008; Rheingold, Zinzow, Hawkins, Saunders, & Kilpatrick, 2012). Research on the experience of survivors of homicide victims indicates that family members and friends are confronted with managing not only their own grief, but also the grief of other family members. Holland, Neimeyer, Boelen, &Prigerson (2009) refer to this prolonged grieving process as complicated grief. In a study examining grief among African Americans who experienced the sudden or unanticipated death of a loved one, Goldsmith, Morrison, Vanderwerker, &Prigerson (2008) found that the risk of experiencing symptoms of complicated grief is 2.5 times greater for African Americans than their White counterparts. These theorists also suggest that homicide impacts an individual's worldview and belief system, which ultimately shapes how survivors make meaning of the homicide (Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick &Resnick 1991; Armour, 2003; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Parkes, 1993; Rando, 1996; Rynearson&McCreery, 1993). Meaning making, or attempting to make sense of the homicide, plays a central role in the bereavement process. Meaning making helps individuals reduce the discord between experiencing the devastation of homicide and the individual's personal belief system about how the world operates and how safety and order are actualized (Armour, 2002, 2003; Currier, Holland, &Neimeyer, 2006, 2008; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Neimeyer, 2000; Pakenham, 2008; Park &Folkman, 1997; Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008).

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[3]We use the terms 'Black' and 'African American' purposefully. Black refers to a racial category that includes all people of (Black) African descent, regardless of their national origin. African American, on the other hand, refers specifically to U.S. born people of African descent (Rogers, 2004).

Racial appraisal helps us conceptualize how African American survivors of homicide victims manage traumatic grief from this place of *meaningmaking*. Racial appraisal allows for the understanding of coping as a sociocultural constructed process of assessment wherein race-based structural inequality influences the perception, allocation, and utilization of culturally appropriate and equitably resourced services that can best be of assistance in helping survivors of homicide victims manage their grief (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002; Sharpe, 2015).

In a study of African American family members of homicide victims, Sharpe and Boyas (2011) found that to cope with their grief, African American surviving family members utilized: spiritual coping and meaning making, maintaining a connection to the deceased, collective coping and caring for others, and concealment of emotions. In other words, in the absence of social and racial equality, marginalized populations of color are forced to create and rely upon resources that are autonomous. This paradigm is not only unsustainable but it places additional stress on systems of support compensating for other inequitable systems that populations of color must navigate (e.g., education, employment).

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings of this review offer additional support to those who both argue against universal perspectives of trauma, and to those suspicious of the cultural variation model for not taking structural disparities seriously. Future research should employ the racial appraisal concept to other forms of trauma and with other racial, gender, and sexually marginalized groups. Only by comparing *if* and *how* other groups and traumatic situations produce racial appraisal can we expand our understanding of the sociocultural complexity of racial identity and trauma.Longitudinal studies that assess the application of racial appraisal to racial and ethnically diverse populations would be useful in helping to determine cognitive development of coping with traumatic violence. In addition, the development of racial appraisal as a tool of measurement that considers the interplay of both structure and culture to the management of trauma symptoms could be extremely useful in the development, assessment and utilization of survivor related services.

When practitioners are working with African American survivors of violent trauma, it is important to be aware of how their racial appraisal of the trauma impacts their perception and utilization of trauma survivor supports and services as well as adaptation to trauma experiences. In short,"practitioners, policy makers, and clinicians must devise programs and therapies that respond to both cultural differences and the sociostructural position ofethnic and racial minorities" (McGuffey, 2010, p. 296). Doing so may inform practitioners as to how to best support African American family members as they progress through the survivor process, given that we are still at an infancy stage in the understanding of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

Although the literature has traditionally favored culture as a means to understanding trauma responses, a growing number of scholars are advancing structure as the primary explanatory tool. Neither, however, holistically assesses the responses of survivors of violent victimization. The responses of the African American women and men in the studies reviewed here are the product of both cultural and structural factors. Thus, the racial appraisal framework is a helpful way to understand trauma responses for African Americans and, to a lesser extent, African and Caribbean immigrants. By focusing on both direct and indirect victims, their application of racial appraisal demonstrates that African American coping strategies are rooted in both culture and social structure. Thus, macrolevel social processes contour interpersonal experiences of trauma.

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