QUESTIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF GEORGE FLOYD'S MURDER: CAN ANTIRACIST TRAINING REDUCE THE PSYCHOPATHIC NATURE OF RACISM?

By Juanita Cleaver Simmons   JUNE 2021

The current racial climate in America brings attention to many long-standing issues of social injustices to People of Color, especially Black Americans. Although current to some, the dehumanizing, terroristic treatment of Black Americans has always been a norm to Black Americans. To most Black Americans, racism is as culturally entrenched in American society as baseball and apple pie. The only thing current about the racial conversations is documentation via social media that bears immediate witness to previously ignored acts. The nationally-televised murder of George Floyd, a Black male who was held (8+ minutes) in a ruthless chokehold by a Minneapolis, Minnesota policeman, only uncovers a glimpse of the truthful reality of systemic racism in America. After hundreds of years of such terroristic acts against Black Americans, I pause at the fact that many White Americans appear shocked and outraged. I am neither shocked nor surprised. Angry, reminded of my own reality as a Black American who witnessed pre-and-post Brown v. Board of Education living in southern Bible-belt America; but not surprised.

No, I have no real shock about racism, nor do I have hopes that racist people will ever change. Admittedly, I, as many others who experienced blatant Jim Crowism, suffer from what I call Jim Crow Traumatic Stress Syndrome. I can never get over being treated as a second-class citizen in the country that my ancestors were forced to build. Nor can I ever forget having to sit in the balcony at movies; drinking from 'Colored' water fountains; sitting at the back of the bus; grudgingly showing proof of purchase, while leaving the stores where I'd already been followed; being barred from trying on clothes or shoes in the stores, but rejected for refunds if the items didn't fit; and attending segregated schools named for slaveholders where they issued you damaged and outdated textbooks (even though your parents were dedicated taxpayers).

When studying the effects of continuous racism, I found that my idea of Jim Crow Traumatic Stress Syndrome and Smith's description of Racial Battle Fatigue were not new. There were other descriptions of psychosocial effects of racism and terroristic, subhuman treatment. Charles V. Willie and others described the after-effects of slavery as Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome. Additional studies aimed at minority PK-12 children describe their response to repeated racism in the classroom and misdiagnosed behavioral disorders as Socio-Cultural Deprivation or, put simply, assumed mental illness.

The point is - I've come to think of racism as a psychopathic disorder with diabolic and terroristic tendencies. How else would one be empowered to believe that his/her race gives carte blanche superiority over *other* human beings, the descendants of *others*, and the institutions that impact the livelihood of the *others*? To that point, I ask "Why don't we study the psychopathic nature of racists?" Besides, racists have intentionally diseased, lynched, raped, stolen, wrongfully murdered, exterminated, incarcerated, and enslaved almost every group of humans (the *others*) on this earth. Worse yet, racists have the audacity to assassinate, discredit and incriminate anyone who dares to openly challenge their racially-terroristic behavior. One might only recall Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, the discrediting of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the defaming of Colin Kaepernick, the criticisms and threats hurled at Black Lives Matter activists, and hundreds more who dare to expose and challenge racism.

The aftermath of Floyd's murder sparked and illuminated many conversations about various issues of racism and injustice, including racism in the workplace. For examples of racist treatment of professional Black women, look at the promotion and tenure rates of Black women professors at the university level. That alone sends a message about White privilege and racism.

While the U.S. has one of the most racially-diverse populations in the world, many Americans simply refuse to face the fact that America has continuously delegitimized the others, while endorsing, institutionalizing, funding, defending, and legalizing racial discrimination. Worse, the average American avoids conversations about racism, and many who do engage in race discussions are oblivious to ongoing racial complaints. This exercise in oblivion is especially prevalent in many of America's major institutions where invited conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion are only for the purpose of documenting an effort – an effort that is quickly discarded.

Indeed, many White Americans appear shocked (or intentionally embarrassed) about the world's confirmed knowledge of America's system of institutionalized and terroristic racism. The Floyd murder exposed the naked, undisputable truth to the world. The multiracial, multigenerational crowds of America's brave youths, who joined Black Lives Matter in protest, voiced disdain for the longstanding injustices in America. But in a demographically diverse society, how could so many Americans remain ignorant about the truthful history of its own country? Why have America's educational institutions been so negligent in teaching antiracism? In essence, why are Americans so culturally incompetent, and why were Americans shocked at the murder of George Floyd or any of the other hundreds of unarmed men, women, and children of color who have been profiled and/or murdered by police or privileged vigilantes? How, in the midst of America's fast-growing racial demographics, have Americans remained culturally incompetent and blatantly naïve about the inhumane treatment that minorities have suffered for hundreds of years?

Antiracist education appears to be the answer to bring America to a level of truth and reconciliation. Antiracist instruction is needed for all races, including some Blacks who, by way of subliminal suggestions and omissions delivered in their Eurocentric miseducation, have learned to hate themselves and those who look like them. But from my experience, teaching antiracist tenets or any form of social justice becomes a risk to instructors and to the institutions that retain them. Yes, teaching any form of antiracism is typically met with resistance, denials, defensiveness, fragility, and anger. One might believe that the ideal platform for ridding the nation of racism would be its educational institutions. Rightfully so, because such curricula would be an honest system of preparation for all Americans to become indoctrinated in real democracy for all. Sadly, so many antiracist and/or social justice instructors experience resistance. Others who might desire to teach such curricula feel ill-equipped because they, themselves, were never provided an opportunity to be taught (PK-12 through college). Many of those who are qualified to teach this curriculum are often unsupported by their institutions in numerous ways, including risks to their retention, tenure, and promotion possibilities (which are disproportionately

based on students' derogatory course evaluations). Professional isolation, mentoring opportunities, and professional socialization are also jeopardized for instructors who dare to teach and research antiracism.

Finally, I am convinced that the struggle is much too heavy for a small group of self- and career-sacrificing individuals to bear. I am hopeful, however, that a peace-loving leadership will emerge and create a national agenda for equity. A brave leadership platform is needed more than ever to help lead a critical mass of truth seekers to a more hopeful destination of equity. A platform is needed that demands and models respect and protection of all cultures, while fostering antiracist curricula as a core requirement in educational systems, constructive activism, and the creation and enforcement of human rights policies. Equally important, a platform is needed to drive the goal of democratic unity to a divided country that is grieving for peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Juanita Cleaver Simmons is the former Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Northwest Missouri State University. She is Emerita Associate Professor of the University of Missouri-Columbia, where she served in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis for several years. She is a former educator of Dallas ISD and Austin ISD and currently serves as the Senior Diversity Consultant and Coach of Atlanta based Talent Management Consultants, LLC.

Are you interested in submitting an essay or op-ed for the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice? Read the submission guidelines here and reach out to Director for Programs and Communications, Brandy Jones at brandy.jones@gse.rutgers.edu.

RUTGERS
Graduate School of Education

SAMUEL DEWITT
PROCTOR INSTITUTE
for Leadership, Equity, & Justice