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Racial micro aggressions and stress: Narratives of African American adults

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Abstract

Despite persistent nationwide research prioritization, mental and physical health disparities still occur, especially affecting African Americans (AA) with comparatively earlier onset, later diagnosis and under treatment of illness. Claims that the US is "post-racial" are belied by these facts. Overt racism has decreased, but subtle, interpersonal racism is increasingly common. Structural racism is persistent; and interpersonal subtle racism supports it. Racial microaggression, a way of conceptualizing subtle racism, is defined as daily slights, stereotypical remarks, exclusions and microinsults that are directed, intentionally or unintentionally, toward AAs by Euroamericans. Accumulated distress of such interactions increases allostatic load, and eventually crosses a threshold, resulting in illnesses. We did a narrative study, framed by critical race theory, via semi-structured interviews. Ten (M=4, F=6) participants presented 13 microaggression examples (denial of racism, being followed in a store, being overly praised for intelligence, being ignored, etc.) eliciting stories of the incidents, followed by questioning about physical/mental response to the incidents, how they interpreted and coped with them. Using narrative thematic analysis we saw stress-like problems, such as musculoskeletal pain, sensing "blood pressure going up," depression, insomnia, etc. attributed to the incidents. This is a beginning toward unraveling the link between interactional negativity and physiologic changes. Interpretations of the events were diverse, and overtly racist incidents were also described. Most of the incidents occur at work. Coping ranged from giving them a pass, to direct confrontation. Mixed methods might illuminate the socio-biological link from interpersonal microaggressions to disease. Truly, health consequences of subtle racism are underestimated.

Biography

Joanne M. Hall, Professor and critical narrative researcher (Ph.D., UCSF, 1992) studies marginalized populations (e.g., women, people of color, LGBTQ persons, and interpersonal trauma survivors. She led an interdisciplinary study of thriving in women survivors of egregious childhood maltreatment (R01NR07789). She has over 90 refereed journal articles and is co-director of the U of TN site for the International Institute for Qualitative Methods. .

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