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Internalized Racism: The Consequences and Impact of Racism on People of Color

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Although heightened by the current hate-filled platform of the 45th U.S. President, scholars of Critical Race Theory (CRT) have exposed racism as a permanent fixture in the policies and practices that govern U.S. and other settler colonial and colonial societies. As people of Color¹ are subjected to racialized structures in their daily lives, racism can have material, physiological, and psychological consequences that negatively affect the manner by which they see themselves, their culture, and the world around them. Framed through CRT, internalized racism is operationalized as 1) a phenomenon that, like racism, impacts all communities of Color, 2) occurs through cumulative and on-going exposure to racism, and 3) results in the conscious or unconscious normalization of a racialized power structure, where the history, values, and/or epistemologies of White and dominant culture are centered (Kohli, 2014). When people of Color experience internalized racism, they adopt a dominant lens that, in turn, serves to affirm and maintain a racial hierarchy that is often in opposition to the interests of communities of Color. This can be personally detrimental, and also harmful to struggles of racial justice.

Like racism, internalized racism is real and pervasive, but because peoples' self and worldviews are fluid and ever changing, it can be problematic to pathologize someone as embodying or "having" internalized racism. Instead, internalized racism must be understood as a learned or indoctrinated perspective, something complex and shifting in its manifestation. In addition, internalized racism is not a permanent state, as it can be mitigated by an access to critical history, a cultivation of self and community love, and a heightened understanding or analysis of racism.

INTERNALIZED RACISM AS AN ACADEMIC CONCEPT

While not always named as such, internalized racism has a long history of conceptualization, with significant focus on Black communities. In 1933, while many Black activists were fighting for access to education, Woodson (1990) argued that because schools as institutions were controlled by Whites, the curriculum was socializing Black youth to believe in White superiority and their own inferiority. In 1939, Clark and Clark echoed Woodson when they empirically tested the racial preferences of African American youth through the noted "doll study" and found that many young children had internalized a racial inferiority complex to whiteness. In 1963, Frantz Fanon theorized the concept, *colonized mind* to illuminate psychological consequences of colonial racism on

Black Algerians. He argued that through long-term exposure to White hegemony, the value of native culture diminished in the thinking of the people. They, instead, wished to embody the culture, measures of success, and oppressive power structure of their European oppressor. In 1978, Cross developed the Nigrescence model to describe the process of U.S. Black consciousness. The first stage was internalized racism, which he defined as when racism and white cultural values permeate the psyche. Cross and other scholars also complicated notions of internalized racism, illuminating how African Americans were able to maintain positive self-esteem, yet harbor negative perspectives of their racial group. Since the 1990's, several researchers have exposed the physical detriment of this psychological state of racism, linking internalized racism to health issues such as abdominal obesity, high blood pressure, and stress (Tull, Sheu, Bulter, & Cornelious, 2005). Much like racial battle fatigue (see Smith, 2016), internalized racism takes a toll on the mind and body of people of Color.

Because all racialized people in the U.S. are subjected to racism, they are also all susceptible to internalizing its impact.

Manifesting in multiple racial groups and contexts, internalized racism is far reaching. Padilla (2004) studied *internalized*

oppression within Latinx² communities, describing it as “the turning upon ourselves, our families and our people -the distressed patterns of behavior that result from the racism and oppression of the majority society” (Padilla, 2001, p. 1). Poupart (2003) used the concept to argue that when Indigenous people adopt Western ideologies and practices, they are actually adopting a lens that belittles and dehumanizes their community and culture. Research has also identified the internalized racism of Asian Americans who adopt deficit frames of their own community, using degrading terminology of recent immigrants (Pyke & Dang, 2003), or feeling shame and embarrassment about their parents’ speech and accents (Kohli, 2014).

INTERNALIZED RACISM AND EDUCATION

From the time children are five years old, they attend schools that, historically and through current policy and practice, are structured for the preservation of whiteness. At times this racism is overt (e.g., threats of deportation to undocumented students [Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016]), and in other ways it is subversive (e.g., discipline policies that over time push Black and Latinx students out of schools and into prison [Annamma, 2015]). From a Eurocentric curriculum, to an overwhelmingly White teaching force, grave resource

disparities, and systematic school pushout of students of Color, racism is woven into the fabric of our educational system. In the face of these racially oppressive structures, individualized explanations of inequity work to maintain the invisibility and normalization of racism in schools. This often leads to students of Color and their families misattributing school failure as personal, community, or racial group failure (Valencia, 2012).

Several CRT scholars have engaged in educational research to conceptualize internalized racism in a way that qualitatively connects the psychological toll to structural racism. To reframe explanations of individualized failure in schools, researchers have connected the internalized racism of students of Color to racial hierarchies in curriculum and resources (Pérez Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006), interrogated the internalized racism of micro-forms of racism called racial microaggressions using the case study of the mistreatment of the names of students of Color in schools (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012), and explored the labor teachers of Color engage in to not bring internalized racism into their classrooms (Kohli, 2014). When young people who have not been taught content on a test feel intellectually inadequate for not passing and give up on their educational aspirations, when students adopt

a deficit identity about their home language, family or community because a teacher says their name is “hard to pronounce,” or when teachers of Color chastise the laziness of their students for not being college ready without recognizing institutional barriers to college access, these are manifestations of internalized racism, that work to maintain the current social order. Building on the history and legacy of conceptualizing the toll of racism, existing education research on internalized racism calls for students, families, and teachers of Color to reclaim their truths as a means to disrupt inequity.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As a CRT concept, internalized racism names the way people of Color adopt dominant narratives that center false notions of meritocracy, individualism and otherness that can lead to distancing themselves from their community, or create paralyzing feelings of shame and inadequacy. Through the conceptualization of internalized racism, however, is a sharpened awareness of the mechanisms of racism. Naming it can be healing for people of Color, particularly because it serves to de-normalize whiteness, illuminate institutional culpability in inequity, and call for a re-centering of the history, values and epistemologies of communities of Color. There is

important but limited scholarship that connects internalized racism to racism in our educational system, and there is need for more direct theorizing and research on the profound consequences of racism and its intersectional reach. As a field, we must do more to uncover racism, but also examine its profound impact on the minds and bodies of people of Color, particularly in our educational system.

NOTES

¹ Throughout this brief, I use the term “of Color” to reference Asian American, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, middle eastern or any intersection of racially marginalized people. I also capitalize any terms that reference specific racial groups, such as “Black” and “White.”

² Latinx refers to communities traditionally referred to as Latino (male) or Latina (female), it is a term meant to disrupt gender binaries and be inclusive to gender non-conforming peoples.

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