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Racial Trauma and the Mental Health of High School Students of Color: Lived Experiences, Racial Silencing, and Implications for Schools

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Abstract

Racial trauma is an often-unrecognized form of psychological and emotional injury experienced by students of color who encounter racism, racial discrimination, microaggressions, stereotyping, and other race-related stressors. Although research has increasingly documented racial trauma among adults, comparatively less attention has been given to the experiences of adolescents within educational environments. This qualitative study examined the question: How does racial trauma impact the mental health of high school students of color? Using a qualitative interview design informed by narrative inquiry, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 African American, Asian, and Hispanic high school students between the ages of 15 and 18 attending public schools in the North-Central region of the United States. Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed through manual coding and thematic analysis. Four major themes emerged: racial stereotypes, derogatory labeling, culturally insensitive language, and racial silencing. Across these themes, students described sadness, anger, anxiety, mistrust, defensiveness, hopelessness, powerlessness, and diminished self-worth. Cultural ignorance emerged as a broader pattern connecting the four themes. Findings underscore the need for culturally responsive, racial trauma-informed school practices, professional development, accessible mental health services, and safe spaces in which students of color can process racialized experiences. Schools must recognize racial trauma not solely as an individual mental health concern but also as an educational equity and social justice issue.

Keywords: racial trauma, race-based traumatic stress, students of color, mental health, racial discrimination, racial silencing, school counseling

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1. Introduction

Schools are expected to provide safe environments in which adolescents can develop academically, socially, and emotionally. For some students of color, however, schools can also become environments in which racial discrimination, stereotyping, microaggressions, culturally insensitive language, and systemic inequities are encountered. These experiences can create psychological and emotional injuries that interfere with students' well-being, identity development, sense of belonging, and educational engagement.

Racial trauma, sometimes referred to as race-based traumatic stress, describes psychological, emotional, behavioral, and physiological responses associated with experiences of racism and racial discrimination. Racial trauma may result from direct encounters with racism, repeated microaggressions, discriminatory institutional practices, threats, racial violence, or witnessing racial harm directed toward others (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007). Unlike a single traumatic event, racial trauma may develop cumulatively as individuals repeatedly encounter racialized stressors.

The consequences are particularly concerning during adolescence, a developmental period characterized by identity formation, increased social awareness, and heightened sensitivity to peer and institutional relationships. Racial discrimination has been associated with depression, anxiety, anger, shame, diminished self-esteem, low self-worth, and difficulties with psychological adjustment (Brondolo et al., 2016). Race-based traumatic stress may also produce symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress, including hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, emotional numbing, avoidance, and physiological distress.

Schools represent important contexts for examining these experiences because adolescents spend substantial portions of their lives within educational institutions. Within these settings, racial trauma may arise not only from interpersonal encounters among students but also through interactions with teachers and other educational stakeholders, institutional practices, disciplinary systems, curriculum, and broader school culture. Students may consequently experience schools simultaneously as educational environments and sources of racialized stress.

Despite increased scholarly attention to racial trauma, much of the literature has historically centered on adults. Saleem et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of developmental and ecological perspectives when examining racial stress and trauma among youth of color. Understanding adolescents' lived experiences is therefore necessary for developing school-based responses that recognize racial trauma and provide culturally responsive interventions.

This study sought to amplify the voices of students of color by investigating their lived experiences with racial trauma. The guiding research question was:

How does racial trauma impact the mental health of high school students of color?

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The study was grounded in the premise that students' experiences provide essential knowledge for educators, school counselors, mental health professionals, administrators, and policymakers seeking to create equitable educational environments.

1.2 Relevant Scholarship

Racial trauma is rooted in experiences of racism and racial oppression. Carter (2007) conceptualized race-based traumatic stress as psychological and emotional injury associated with encounters involving racism and discrimination. Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005) similarly argued that experiences of racism can produce traumatic effects requiring recognition within counseling, research, and education.

Racial trauma can occur through overt discrimination as well as subtle racial microaggressions. Microaggressions communicate racial bias through everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental interactions. Although an individual incident may appear insignificant to an observer, repeated exposure can create cumulative psychological consequences. Students may experience anger, anxiety, sadness, shame, hypervigilance, or emotional detachment while simultaneously attempting to function academically and socially.

Historical and intergenerational experiences also provide important context. Racial trauma does not occur independently of the histories experienced by racial and ethnic communities. Historical trauma represents cumulative psychological and emotional wounds associated with collective experiences of oppression that can extend across generations. These histories can influence how students and families understand contemporary experiences of discrimination, safety, institutions, and belonging.

Schools can either reinforce or interrupt these experiences. Racial stereotyping, differential expectations, discriminatory practices, cultural invalidation, and silencing may communicate to students that their identities and experiences are less valued. When students repeatedly receive messages that they are inferior, dangerous, unintelligent, aggressive, foreign, or otherwise outside the perceived norm, their sense of identity and self-worth can be affected.

One particularly important consequence is voicelessness. Students of color may learn that speaking about racism creates additional risks. They may fear being perceived as angry, overly sensitive, disruptive, or threatening. Remaining silent, however, can also intensify feelings of helplessness and devaluation. Racial silencing can therefore become both a response to racial trauma and a mechanism through which trauma is maintained.

Healing approaches described within the racial trauma literature emphasize validation, racial storytelling, culturally responsive counseling, and trauma-informed practices. Comas-Díaz (2016) highlighted the importance of race-informed approaches that validate racial experiences rather than minimizing them. Schools are especially well positioned to incorporate such practices

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because educators and mental health professionals interact with students consistently and can establish environments that promote safety, affirmation, and belonging.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative interview design informed by an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm and elements of narrative inquiry. The approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand racial trauma through students' perceptions and lived experiences rather than reduce those experiences to numerical measurements.

Narrative inquiry was particularly relevant because storytelling allows participants to make meaning from personal experiences. Students were provided opportunities to describe racialized encounters in their own words and explain how those encounters affected them emotionally, psychologically, socially, and academically.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited from public high schools located in the North-Central region of the United States. Recruitment initially targeted students in Grades 10 through 12 from racial and ethnic backgrounds including Black or African American, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, and Alaska Native populations.

The final study included 10 male and female African American, Asian, and Hispanic students between the ages of 15 and 18. Participants represented different socioeconomic backgrounds and brought diverse perspectives to the research. Despite these differences, they shared experiences involving direct racial trauma or knowledge of racialized traumatic experiences affecting people close to them.

Parental or guardian consent and student participation agreements were obtained as required. The study received Institutional Review Board approval, and procedures were implemented to protect confidentiality, anonymity, and participants' psychological well-being.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted in person or through Zoom. Questions encouraged participants to discuss racial trauma they had experienced or witnessed, the effects of those experiences, how schools may perpetuate racial trauma, and how schools might better assist students of color.

Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Field notes documented participants' physical responses, pauses, emotional reactions, body language, and other

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observations that provided additional context. Researcher reflections were also maintained to acknowledge positionality and potential bias.

The transcripts were manually coded and analyzed thematically. Data were reviewed repeatedly, keywords and phrases were identified, codes were refined and grouped into categories, and recurrent patterns were developed into themes. Four dominant themes emerged: racial stereotypes, derogatory labeling, culturally insensitive language, and racial silencing.

3. Results

All 10 participants indicated that racial trauma affected the mental health of students of color either through direct experiences or through witnessing or knowing others who experienced racialized trauma. Participants described emotional reactions including sadness, anger, defensiveness, hopelessness, mistrust, anxiety, panic, powerlessness, and silence.

The coded data indicated that 50% of participants experienced racial stereotyping, 40% reported derogatory labeling, 70% described culturally insensitive experiences, and 90% identified racial silencing. Although the themes were distinct, they frequently overlapped. Collectively, they revealed a broader pattern characterized in the study as cultural ignorance.

3.1 Racial Stereotypes

Racial stereotyping emerged through participants' descriptions of assumptions made about their race, ethnicity, appearance, intelligence, socioeconomic background, and behavior. Students reported hearing stereotypical comments from peers, teachers, and other individuals within their environments.

One participant recalled assumptions that the student could not be Asian because the student did not "look Chinese." Another described being perceived as an "uneducated thug" because of living in an urban community. Such experiences illustrate how racial stereotypes reduce complex identities to socially constructed assumptions.

Participants' accounts suggest that stereotyping can create psychological burdens beyond the immediate encounter. Students must negotiate how others perceive them while simultaneously developing their own identities. Repeated negative assumptions can undermine belonging, produce defensiveness and mistrust, and contribute to emotional exhaustion. Stereotypes can also affect academic environments when educators hold diminished expectations about students' capabilities or behavior.

3.2 Derogatory Labeling

The second theme involved derogatory labels directed toward students because of race and gender. Black female participants described being characterized with terms such as "ratchet" and

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"hood rat," labels associated with assumptions about aggression, sexuality, social class, behavior, and upbringing.

Derogatory labeling can influence both how individuals are treated and how they understand themselves. During adolescence, when self-concept is developing, persistent negative labels may become especially damaging. Even when students reject such labels intellectually, repeated exposure requires them to continually defend their identity against externally imposed definitions.

Participants' experiences indicated that derogatory labeling contributed to internalized devaluation, diminished self-esteem, and threats to self-worth. Such labels communicate that students are socially inferior or fundamentally problematic rather than individuals whose identities, experiences, and strengths deserve recognition.

3.3 Culturally Insensitive Language

Culturally insensitive language was reported by 70% of participants. Students described comments ranging from seemingly casual racial microaggressions to explicitly discriminatory statements.

Examples included being told, "You are pretty for a Black girl," and being instructed to "go back to my country." Although intent may differ across incidents, participants emphasized the harmful impact of language that communicates exclusion, inferiority, or non-belonging.

These interactions can make students question whether educational and social environments are psychologically safe. Statements that dismiss or demean racial and cultural identities can evoke sadness, anger, fear, anxiety, and withdrawal. Culturally insensitive language therefore cannot be evaluated solely by the speaker's intent; the psychological and emotional impact on the recipient must also be considered.

The findings demonstrate the importance of cultural awareness among educators and other school personnel. Failure to recognize harmful language may normalize racialized interactions and communicate institutional tolerance of behavior that marginalizes students.

3.4 Racial Silencing

Racial silencing was the most prevalent theme, identified by 90% of participants. Students described silence, helplessness, numbness, powerlessness, and desensitization in response to racialized experiences.

Some participants who had not personally experienced specific incidents nevertheless reported feeling unable to speak about racial trauma experienced by others. Students perceived that

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society and institutions did not consistently protect people of color or validate their racialized experiences.

Silencing represents more than an absence of speech. It can develop when individuals conclude that speaking will not produce change or may expose them to additional judgment, punishment, or invalidation. Students may believe they must choose between speaking and potentially being characterized as disruptive or remaining silent while experiencing continued psychological harm.

The prevalence of racial silencing is especially significant because schools depend on students reporting concerns before institutions can respond. A climate in which students do not believe their voices will be heard may allow racial trauma to remain invisible.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that racial trauma can affect students of color through interconnected psychological, emotional, social, and educational pathways. Participants described responses including sadness, anger, anxiety, defensiveness, hopelessness, mistrust, panic, powerlessness, and diminished self-worth. These findings are consistent with literature connecting racial discrimination with psychological distress and race-based traumatic stress.

A particularly important finding was the emergence of cultural ignorance as an overarching pattern connecting racial stereotyping, derogatory labeling, culturally insensitive language, and racial silencing. Cultural ignorance in this context reflects more than lack of information about another culture. It includes assumptions, generalizations, misconceptions, insensitive interactions, and failures to recognize how words and behaviors may affect students whose cultural experiences differ from those of the dominant group.

The findings have direct implications for educational practice. Schools cannot rely exclusively on conventional trauma-informed practices without recognizing racism as a potential source of trauma. Trauma-informed education should incorporate explicit attention to racial identity, racial discrimination, cultural affirmation, and students' lived experiences.

Professional development should therefore extend beyond general diversity initiatives. Educators, counselors, administrators, and support staff need training that helps them recognize racial trauma, identify microaggressions and implicit bias, understand cultural differences, and respond appropriately when students disclose racialized experiences.

Schools should also develop safe and culturally responsive spaces where students can process racialized experiences. School counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other trained mental health professionals can play important roles in providing validation, facilitating racial storytelling, strengthening coping strategies, and connecting students with appropriate services.

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Access remains an important concern. Students of color may encounter barriers to mental health services because of cost, availability, stigma, distrust, cultural differences, and lack of racially or culturally responsive providers. School-based services offer one mechanism for reducing these barriers, particularly when mental health support is integrated into the school community rather than treated as separate from educational success.

4.1 Implications and Conclusion

The findings support three priorities for schools: racial trauma awareness and professional development, culturally responsive mental health services, and safe school-based healing environments.

First, professional development should help educational personnel identify racial stereotyping, derogatory labeling, culturally insensitive language, microaggressions, and racial silencing. Training should also challenge educators to examine their own assumptions and understand how institutional practices can unintentionally reproduce inequities.

Second, schools should strengthen access to culturally responsive mental health care. Students experiencing racial trauma need professionals who can acknowledge racialized experiences without minimizing, pathologizing, or misinterpreting them.

Third, schools should establish environments in which students of color can safely disclose racialized experiences. School-based healing spaces could provide opportunities for counseling, storytelling, cultural affirmation, relationship building, and development of coping strategies. Safety, trust, transparency, validation, and respect should form the foundation of these environments.

The study is limited by its small qualitative sample and geographic concentration. The findings should therefore not be generalized to all students of color. Future research should include larger and more geographically diverse samples, examine differences across racial and ethnic groups, explore gender and socioeconomic influences, and evaluate the effectiveness of school-based racial trauma interventions.

Nevertheless, the participants' narratives provide an important message. Racial trauma is not merely an abstract social problem occurring outside school walls. It can be experienced through everyday interactions, institutional practices, language, assumptions, and silence. When students repeatedly encounter racial stereotyping, derogatory labeling, culturally insensitive language, and environments in which they do not feel safe speaking about racism, the consequences can extend to their psychological and emotional well-being.

Addressing racial trauma is therefore both a mental health responsibility and an educational equity imperative. Schools have the capacity to interrupt rather than reproduce racialized harm. Doing so requires educators and mental health professionals to listen to students, validate their

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experiences, challenge culturally harmful practices, and create school climates in which students of color experience safety, dignity, belonging, and the freedom to use their voices.

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