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The Multifaceted Identity of Trauma

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You cannot fully appreciate the injuries of today without looking to the past, examining how generation after generation has been traumatized, subjugated, and marginalized. An individual's place and identity in this world is anchored in the experiences of their ancestors, and for oppressed communities this anchor often bears the weight of historical traumas. These historical traumas can contribute to mental health and addiction concerns, employment and housing difficulties, and unequal access to resources like education and employment. But this lineage is also a source of resilience, a source of strength, that allows for perseverance despite trauma and oppression that continues to dominate in so many spaces right now. As such, we must embrace the complicated multifaceted experiences of people, especially if we hope to address trauma and mental health needs. In his book, *There There*, Tommy Orange grapples with these ideas and informs the readers:

"If you have the option to not think about or even consider history, whether you learned it right or not, of whether it even deserves consideration, that's how you know you're on board the ship that serves hors d'oeuvres" (pp. 137).

We must grapple with the reality of history, even those who have the privilege to ignore it.

There is an interesting dialogue that often comes up, especially in *progressive* spaces like the Bay Area. "I don't see color," or "they can be blue, green, or purple and I won't care." Despite the obvious that humans are not blue, green, or purple, this narrative is problematic because it promotes the invisibility of communities of color. Even while some folks may be able to take a tiny, toe step forward and acknowledge that the U.S. has a long history of racism, they continue to neglect the current reality. Especially in spaces like the Bay Area, there is often the response that they are so happy to be in such a diverse and tolerant place like California. A mindset that not only ignores current institutional and societal racism, but also contributes to the invisibility of communities of color. As Orange explains, historical racism and its adverse consequences flourishes in this mindset, and this greatly impacts communities of color.

“We all been through a lot we don’t understand in a world made to either break us or make us so hard we can’t break even when it’s what we need most to do.” (pp.112)

Theories of [historical racism](#) acknowledge the [intergenerational impacts](#) of [oppression](#). The emotional and physical injuries that were inflicted on communities of color not only impact the individual, but also their families and communities. For example, when Native children were removed from their communities and placed in boarding schools that mandated their assimilation to the White dominant culture, there was a generation of children who lost connection to their native language, culture, and traditional practices. As a consequence, the children of these children would also not have the benefit of being fully connected to their cultural identity. This trauma was compounded by the continued oppression inflicted on these communities. It is this double-edged sword that makes historical racism so tragic—the oppression of a group simply because they belong to a cultural group, and then not allowing the group to be connected to their culture. This oppression sends the message that one’s cultural identity should be hidden or ignored, which is further reinforced by color blind ideology of *progressive* spaces like the Bay Area.

“Old songs that sang to the old sadness you always kept as close as skin without meaning to. The word triumph blipped in your head then.” (pp. 212)

The consequences of historical racism are highly visible within the criminal justice system. For instance, many women who have turned to substances as a way to deal with childhood trauma and adverse experiences are incarcerated for substance related offenses, which often are tied to their struggles with addiction. Instead of attending to these concerns, the societal response is to criminalize, and these women are removed from caring for their children, who in turn, will be more likely to now experience their own traumas.

Too often communities of color are blamed for their circumstances and their behaviors are attributed to individual level factors. However, the larger oppressive forces including racist social and economic policies, biased laws, and lack of access to resources are not considered. In this way, trauma is passed on from generation to generation, and the adverse outcomes of these traumas are compounded. Yet, when individuals in these situations understand this cycle they are able to move away from thinking there is something inherently wrong with them and situate their current struggles within this larger framework. This often opens the door for healing.

Ignoring a person's identity, and dismissing the impact of historical traumas, prevents a person from being seen as the complete and complex human they are. Embracing one's cultural history and complete identity can be a valuable tool in the journey of healing from historical and current traumas. When someone has a complete understanding of their ancestors' journey, it allows them to situate their current experiences with the larger social and political context. This can serve as a way to move the traumatic experiences away from being something inherent in the individual, and instead as an experience perpetrated by a larger oppressive society. While this does not remove the pain, it has the possibility of shifting the burden to where it belongs. It is essential that we come to a place that acknowledges that identity matters, and that connecting to one's historical and cultural background is a powerful and important tool in healing from trauma, both current and historical.

Lisa De La Rue is an Assistant Professor in the Counseling Psychology program. Her scholarship aims to increase access to therapeutic treatment and supports for individuals who have contact with the criminal justice system.