

2022

The Influence of Reparations, Internalized Oppression, and Racial Centrality Across Systemic and Psychological Factors Concerning the African American Community

Aimee L. Ford

Pepperdine University Graduate School of Education and Psychology, aimee.ford@pepperdine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/swbj>



Part of the [Community-Based Learning Commons](#), [Educational Sociology Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Multicultural Psychology Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ford, Aimee L. (2022) "The Influence of Reparations, Internalized Oppression, and Racial Centrality Across Systemic and Psychological Factors Concerning the African American Community," *The Scholarship Without Borders Journal*: Vol. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/swbj/vol1/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Scholarship Without Borders Journal by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

The Influence of Reparations, Internalized Oppression, and Racial Centrality Across Systemic and Psychological Factors Concerning the African American Community

The African American community has been affected socially, economically, and systemically through the intergenerational effects of African Chattel slavery (Craemer et al., 2020; King & Page, 2017; Prager, 2017; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). The current system that continues to promote economic disparities and oppress the African American community has been traced back to the denial of paid reparations to African slaves following emancipation. Racial subjugation has been passed down through the generations and has led to contemporary issues that affect the African American community such as internalized oppression, racial centrality, and economic inequity. Thus, racial centrality is defined as the connection to one's race and the characterization of that connection with one's identity (Bryant, 2011). However, the lack of identity that is caused by those who are not connected to their race can stem from internalized oppression. This is defined as a hierarchical system in which oppressed racial groups experience and accept themselves to be less equal or valuable by societal standards.

The literature suggests that examination of the denial of reparations can be utilized to understand the origin of contemporary internalized oppression and subsequent social and mental health consequences within the African American community (Barbarin et al., 2019; Bryant, 2011; Gillum, 2019; King & Page, 2017; Prager, 2017; Settles et al., 2010; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). Though reparations would be paid only to direct descendants of African slaves, internalized oppression from systemic inequity and disparities in economic mobility are social justice issues that affect the Black American and African American community holistically (Davidai & Walker, 2021). By utilizing academic literature, this article will compare various manifestations of systemic oppression with the historical and contemporary significance of reparations.

The Historical Significance of Reparations

The significance of reparations extends beyond monetary compensation. According to the literature, one of the purposes of reparations is to heal the deep-rooted wounds of African chattel slavery that were the result of violence, inhumane treatment, and crimes against humanity (King & Page, 2017; Prager, 2017; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). Historically, African chattel slavery began with a seasoning process in which enslaved Africans were systematically stripped of their humanity and broken down physically and psychologically to ensure complete obedience and acceptance of a lifetime of enslavement (Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). To establish obedience, newly enslaved Africans were branded, beaten, sexually assaulted, and tortured. The overall purpose of this seasoning process was to dehumanize by establishing the concept that African slaves were property rather than people.

Contemporary internalized oppression is rooted in intergenerational trauma and compounded by a lack of systemic and social accountability regarding the brutality of African chattel slavery, and the continued racial subjugation of African Americans (Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). Research by Ukombozi and McMillan suggests that African Americans have been historically and systemically conditioned to accept oppression, thus causing decreased racial centrality. To understand the foundation of decreased racial centrality and internalized oppression, the literature suggests there must be a collective recognition of African chattel slavery as, stolen identity and traditions, loss of freedom and human rights, and extreme violence and brutality (King & Page, 2017; Prager, 2017; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011).

Racial domination and subjugation continue to promote civil, economic, mental health, and social oppression within the African American community (King & Page, 2017). Due to such effects, African American individuals may reject reparations because they have been historically and contemporarily inclined to feel undeserving of restitution (King & Page, 2017; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). Accordingly, a challenge presented when promoting a united demand for reparations is convincing the African American community that they can win (King & Page, 2017). In contrast, Prager (2017) proposes that social shame may be the cause of internalized oppression because demands for reparations are dismissively viewed as an example of refusal by African Americans to move beyond the remembrance of African chattel slavery. Additionally, this theory reflects that there is a societal refusal to see the connection between African chattel slavery, reparations, and contemporary systemic oppression.

The denied recognition of the effects of African chattel slavery at an individual, institutional, societal, and systemic level can be a root cause of internalized oppression (King & Page, 2017; Prager, 2017; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). Thus, the significance of denied reparations provides a framework to understanding how an African American individual may internalize oppression through disconnection from identity and living within a societal system that continues to promote racial bifurcation and inequity. Along with the acknowledgment of the history of African Chattel slavery, monetary reparations would be a benefit that could offer a decrease in internalized oppression and emphasize positive racial centrality (Craemer et al., 2020).

Monetary Reparations for the Descendants of African Slaves

An advantage of reparations is paid restitution, which not only provides capital gains but offers the internalized benefits of societal recognition for the brutality and loss of identity caused by African chattel slavery (Prager, 2017). Reparations accounting for the intergenerational monetary and capital losses experienced by the descendants of African slaves would be a substantial first step in working toward closing the expansive White versus African American wealth

gap (Craemer et al., 2020). In 2016, the national median of a White household's net worth was \$933,700 as compared to the African American household, which was \$138,200, amounting to a \$795,500 household wealth gap (Dettling et al., 2017; Craemer et al., 2020). The most recent Survey of Consumer Finance in 2019 reflects no significant change in the wealth gap since 2016, the average net worth of African American households remains less than 15% of both the mean and median White household net worth (Bhutta et al., 2020). Based on the numbers reflected in the 2016 Survey of Consumer Finance, Craemer et al. (2020) propose a minimum reparation value of \$338,240 per capita and consider this to be a conservative number.

Conflicting research provides many different theoretical models that attempt to place a valuation on reparations for the descendants of African slaves (Darity & Mullen, 2020). Also, there remains a contentious discussion between policymakers regarding whether descendants of African slaves are owed reparation (Craemer et al., 2020). According to Craemer et al. (2020), the Senate minority leader for the Republican Party, Mitch McConnell stated that reparations should only be owed to the African slaves themselves. Being that there are no living emancipated African slaves, Mitch McConnell opposes monetary reparations for descendants of African slaves because they did not directly live through African Chattel slavery. Accordingly, research suggests that in general, living victims are given a substantially higher priority involving governmental consideration to qualify for reparations than that of ancestral descendants (David, 2017). However, according to Craemer et al. (2020), the government's choice to withhold reparations at the time in which disbursement would have been temporally appropriate should bear no influence on qualifying the descendants of African slaves as being owed restitution.

Lost wages alone do not comprehensively represent the capital losses resulting from African chattel slavery (Craemer et al., 2020). An additional financial consequence of African chattel slavery involves the denial of the possibility to accumulate further capital, which would have generated the opportunity for accumulation of wealth. African slaves would have been afforded the intergenerational opportunity to pass down the accumulation of earnings and capital if reparations had been paid at the time of emancipation. In other words, the living descendants of African slaves are victims of the systemic injustice of denied reparations. Due to reparations not being made at the time, African slaves began their newly emancipated life in the face of extreme racial oppression, and with no financial capital or economic opportunities (Craemer et al., 2020). The financial consequences of reparations not being paid at the time of emancipation has powerfully negative effects intergenerationally.

When a parent or caregiver can accumulate and transmit capital, the prospects of their children and descendants are enhanced in various ways.

Accumulated wealth and capital afford the chance for superior and higher education, travel, land and property ownership, and experiencing different cultures (Craemer et al., 2020). According to Roman (2017), among the benefits previously listed, monetary reparations provide empowerment and decreased internalized oppression, which correlates positively to racial centrality. Though the chance to prevent the negative intergenerational economic effects from the denial of reparations has passed, there remains an opportunity to offer the contemporary descendants of African slaves the financial advantages that research suggests they are owed (Craemer et al., 2020). In contrast to the benefits of monetized reparations for the descendants of African slaves, further symptoms of systemic oppression stemming from denied reparations are demonstrated throughout the literature to have negative consequences specifically regarding internalized oppression and racial centrality (Bryant, 2011; Davidai & Walker, 2021). A study by Davidai and Walker (2021) found that acknowledging the systemic history behind the Black-White wealth gap is imperative to understanding contemporary disparities in economic mobility.

The Cost of Unpaid Reparations

With equal opportunities to accumulate wealth and capital being a benefit of paid reparations, the cost would be the continuation of economic oppression and inequity (Davidai & Walker, 2021). Examination of the wealth gap and economic mobility disparities reveals why unpaid reparations have a direct correlation to modern financial, social, and psychological consequences that affect the African American community. A study by Gillum (2019) suggests that poverty and residential immobility are critical factors that affect the African American community and have a direct link to the legacy of African chattel slavery. In the United States, poverty is measured by total family income set as a ratio to the poverty threshold, which as of 2019 was \$31,275, if the total family income is below the threshold, then they are in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2020). A study by Davidai & Walker (2021) discusses common misconceptions regarding African American upward economic mobility potential, the most significant finding was that African Americans are to blame for their hardships, rather than systemic injustice. However, research supports the theory that economic inequity can be linked directly to denied reparations as a framework for understanding contemporary systemic inequality (Craemer et al., 2020).

One of the consequences of economic inequality is poverty, a systemic issue within the African American community that is expansive from the perspective of mental health (Gillum, 2019). First, poverty has been directly linked to violence within the African American community. Violence against African Americans has been historically reinforced and accepted which has fostered a lack of racial centrality (Bryant, 2011; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). The literature also suggests that a variety of mental health outcomes can be linked

to internalized oppression, and a lack of racial centrality (Baptiste & Hossain 2018; Barbarin et al., 2019; Bryant, 2011; Gillum, 2019; King & Page, 2017; Prager, 2017; Settles et al., 2010; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011).

Second, African American individuals, particularly those living in impoverished areas, are exposed to race-specific stressors that affect mental health outcomes, described as "minority stress" which is a form of internalized oppression (Gillum, 2019). Minority stress within the African American community is correlated with a decrease in racial centrality and an increased risk for suicide, substance use disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression (Baptiste & Hossain 2018; Gillum, 2019; Settles et al., 2010). The consequences associated with living in poverty can be used to illustrate the connection between how paid reparations could help support the African American community financially while fostering positive racial centrality and a decrease in internalized oppression (Barbarin et al., 2019; Bryant, 2011; Gillum, 2019; King & Page, 2017; Prager, 2017; Settles et al., 2010; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011).

Though poverty is used as a paradigm, the consequences of systemic inequity can be applied to the African American community across all socioeconomic statuses and ancestral backgrounds (Craemer et al., 2020; Davidai & Walker, 2021). The denial of reparations has become the foundation for contemporary economic inequity that affects the African American community and has social and psychological consequences, such as internalized oppression, decreased racial centrality, increased susceptibility to violence, increased risk for poor mental health outcomes, and continued economic disparity.

Limitations and Further Research

Further research that examines the economic oppression that the African American community faces throughout different socioeconomic statuses is needed. There is also a need for further research regarding how to determine the valuation of reparations. One of the limitations found was that genetic lineage could have a negative correlation between reparations and internalized oppression. The family trees of descendants of African slaves will always hit what genealogists call "the brick wall" (Ellis, 2020). This represents the fact that African slaves were not considered people, but property and as such were not included in the Census. To prove lineage, African slaves would need to be traced back through their owner's information. Consequently, an African American individual may know that they are a descendent of an African slave through passed down stories, but they would still possibly be denied reparations because of the inability to find the necessary documentation to prove lineage. This could be an issue that causes further internalized oppression for an individual if they possessed the knowledge that they are a direct descendant of an African slave but were unable to prove lineage. Research is also necessary that discusses ways to make finding African slave owner's information more accessible, and quantitative

data representing the number of African slaves who have already been traced back through their owners.

Conclusion

The African American community has been affected socially, economically, and systemically through the intergenerational effects of African chattel slavery (Craemer et al., 2020; King & Page, 2017; Prager, 2017; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). Racial subjugation has been passed down through the generations and has led to contemporary issues that affect the African American community such as internalized oppression, racial centrality, and economic inequity. The current system that reinforces economic disparities and oppresses the African American community continues to deny reparations to the descendants of African slaves.

Arguments made against reparations reflect the difficulty in determining the valuation of paid restitution. Also, living victims of crimes against humanity generally take precedence over direct descendants when deciding who is owed reparations (David, 2017). In contrast, along with illustrating a way to quantitatively determine what a conservative numerical value could be, Craemer et al. (2020) reinforce the idea that the denial of reparations intergenerationally has negative effects on the African American community in such a way that paid reparations would be a step toward economic and social parity.

There are common misconceptions that African Americans are to blame for economic and social hardships, rather than a system historically stacked against them (Davidai & Walker, 2021). However, the literature supports the theory that African chattel slavery, denial of reparations, and the intergenerational effects that followed are correlated with a large African American versus White wealth gap and contributes to high poverty rates within the African American community (Gillum, 2019; Craemer et al., 2020; Davidai & Walker, 2021). African American individuals who live in impoverished areas are susceptible to race-specific stressors associated with an increased risk for suicidality, substance use disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Baptiste & Hossain 2018; Gillum, 2019; Settles et al., 2010). Such outcomes discussed in this article reflect the consequences of unpaid reparations and illustrate the need for paid restitution.

Paid reparations would provide the descendants of African slaves not only a lump sum payment but the ability to make capital gains and accumulate assets that can be passed down intergenerationally (Craemer et al., 2020). Also, paid restitution would display a societal acknowledgment of the historical significance of African chattel slavery, which would lend itself to positive racial centrality and decreased internalized oppression (King & Page, 2017; Prager, 2017; Ukombozi & McMillan, 2011). Further research is needed to reinforce the connection between reparations, internalized oppression, and racial centrality.

References

- Baptiste-Roberts, K., & Hossain, M. (2018). Socioeconomic Disparities and Self-reported Substance Abuse-related Problems. *Addiction & Health, 10*(2), 112–122. <https://doi-org.lib.pepperdine.edu/10.22122/ahj.v10i2.561>
- Barbarin, O. A., Hitti, A., & Copeland, L. N. (2019). Behavioral and Emotional Development of African American Boys Growing Up in Risky Environments. *Child Development Perspectives, 13*(4), 215–220. <https://doi-org.lib.pepperdine.edu/10.1111/cdep.12341>
- Bhutta, N., Chang, A. C., Dettling, L. J., & Hsu, J. W. (2020b). Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances. *FEDS Notes, 2020*(2797). <https://doi.org/10.17016/2380-7172.2797>
- Bryant, W. (2011). Internalized racism's association with African American male youth's propensity for violence. *Journal of Black Studies, 42*(4), 690-707. <http://www.jstor.org.lib.pepperdine.edu/stable/41151366>
- Craemer, T., Smith, T., Harrison, B., Logan, T., Bellamy, W., & Darity, W. (2020). Wealth Implications of Slavery and Racial Discrimination for African American Descendants of the Enslaved. *The Review of Black Political Economy, 47*(3), 218–254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034644620926516>
- Darity, W. A., & Mullen, K. A. (2020). *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*. University of North Carolina Press.
- David, R. (2017). What We Know About Transitional Justice: Survey and Experimental Evidence. *Political Psychology, 38*, 151–177. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12395>
- Davidai, S., & Walker, J. (2021). Americans Misperceive Racial Disparities in Economic Mobility. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 014616722110241*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211024115>
- Dettling, L. J., Hsu, J. W., Jacobs, L., Moore, K. B., & Thompson, J. P. (2017). Recent Trends in Wealth-Holding by Race and Ethnicity: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances. *FEDS Notes, 2017*(2083). <https://doi.org/10.17016/2380-7172.2083>
- Ellis, N. (2020, February 25). *Lost Lineage: The quest to identify black Americans' roots*. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/02/25/lost-lineage-quest-identify-black-americans-roots/>
- Gillum, T. L. (2019). The intersection of intimate partner violence and poverty in Black communities. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 46*, 37–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.01.008>

- Kaufka, B. (2009). The shadows within: Internalized racism and reflective writing. *Reflective Practice, 10*(2), 137–148.
doi.org/10.1080/14623940902786115
- King, D. S., & Page, J. M. (2017). Towards transitional justice? Black reparations and the end of mass incarceration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 41*(4), 739–758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1381341>
- Phillips, Coretta (2011) *Institutional racism and ethnic inequalities: an expanded multilevel framework. Journal of social policy, 40* (01). pp. 173-192.
DOI: 10.1017/S0047279410000565
- Prager, J. (2017). Do Black Lives Matter? A psychoanalytic exploration of racism and American resistance to reparations. *Political Psychology, 38*(4), 637–651. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12436>
- Settles I. H., Navarrete C. D., Pagano, S. J., Abdou, C. M., & Sidanius J. (2010). Racial identity and depression among African American women. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 16*(2), 248-255. doi: 10.1037/a0016442
- Ukombozi, A. U. & McMillan, M. (2011). Reparation for the descendants of enslaved Africans: *What's Psychology got to Do with It? Race, Gender & Class, 18*(1/2), 111-124.
<http://www.jstor.org.lib.pepperdine.edu/stable/23884870>
- US Census Bureau. (2020, August 27). *How the Census Bureau Measures Poverty*. The United States Census Bureau.
<https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/poverty-measures.html>