Chapter 2

AFRICAN AMERICANS, EUROPEAN AMERICANS AND PATHOLOGICAL STEREOTYPES: AN AFRICAN-CENTERED PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Stereotypes are generally undesirable characteristics of a group used to facilitate the implementation of oppressive and unfair acts. “Adaptive” stereotyping allows us to organize and apply some basic commonalities to a group to help us interact more effectively. “Pathological” stereotyping is when group commonalities negatively impact interaction with a specific group that disproportionately limits opportunities. People of African ancestry, namely African Americans, have been the target of pathological stereotypes that have shaped exclusionary policies and fostered institutional racism in America. Pathological stereotyping has a significant impact on the perception of the target group, preventing others from viewing the group as possessing desirable characteristics or attributes. The perceived absence of desirable characteristics creates a fertile ground for the justification of unfair treatment. A critical factor of pathological stereotyping is the real/perceived and/or assigned power of the majority group and the vulnerability/lack of power of the target or minority group. Meaningful dialogue on prejudice, race, discrimination and stereotypes could evolve from the self-evaluation of persons who are aware of the individual and institutional impact of stereotypes. Adaptive stereotyping and pathological stereotyping are discussed from a Black perspective using African-Centered Psychology, within the context of primarily social psychology research findings and power dynamics. Psychological characteristics of individuals who embrace pathological versus adaptive stereotyping is presented, as well as, how pathological stereotyping fosters the perpetuation of violence in all of its forms, including oppression.

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Recommendations are offered for healing/countering pathological stereotyping and those affected by it, including public figures such as President Barak Obama.

**Keywords**: African Americans; ethnic differences; attitudes; stereotypes; prejudice; race; culture

**INTRODUCTION**

**What Is Race?**

Before beginning any discussion of racial stereotypes, it is important to clearly understand the terms used. Although race has been posited to represent real biological differences between groups, it is primarily a social classification that has been historically used to distinguish advantaged (White) people from subjugated (Black) people of African origin. Although African Americans are usually a biological mixture of many different races, including European and Native American, any discernable African ancestry classifies one as Black in the United States. Conversely, European Americans are only considered White if no non-European ancestry is apparent, although many White people are a mixture of people groups as well. It is important to understand that the term race includes biological, cultural, and social components. Ethnicity refers to a shared cultural and heritage, tradition, and experience (Shiraev and Levy, 2010). We prefer the term ethnoracial group as it as includes both the biological and ethnic components.

The word Black is used here with a capital “B” to indicate an ethnoracial group, whereas use of the lower case “b” is restricted to the color black. The word Black is sometimes used interchangeably with the word African and African American. Use of the ethnic identifier, African American is specific to those born in America while Black is an all-inclusive word used to refer to all people of African ancestry worldwide. The word White is used with a capital “W” to indicate the European American ethnoracial group in America.

**What Are Stereotypes?**

In social psychology, stereotypes are defined as beliefs that all people within a particular group possess the same traits or characteristics. Stereotypes may be held regarding ethnic groups (e.g. all Blacks can dance), gender (e.g., women are the weaker sex), age (e.g., older adults are not sexually active; young people don’t listen), weight (e.g., obese people overeat), political affiliation (e.g., Democrats are liberal and Republicans are conservative), geographic location (e.g., the crime rate is high in the North), jobs (e.g., Security Officers are not real police officers), I.Q. (e.g., geniuses are one step from insanity), height (e.g., short people have inferiority complexes), Greek affiliation (e.g., AKA’s are the best), etc. Stereotypes are often false or incorrect ideas attributed to particular members of a group, based on illogical reasoning, and represent unfair generalizations that do not change when presented with accurate information (Bringham, 1971). African Americans, in particular, are described with primarily pejorative stereotypes (Leonard and Locke, 1993). These include qualities such as lazy, ignorant, unintelligent, poor, criminal, loud, and hostile, although current stereotypes
include some seemingly “positive” terms as well, such as athletic, religious, and musical (Devine and Elliot, 1995).

Associated with stereotypes are four related concepts—prejudice, discrimination, ethnocentrism, and racism. **Prejudice** describes feelings about people based on group membership. **Discrimination** describes behavior that usually involves the inclusion or exclusion of someone based on his/her membership within a particular group. Discrimination may also involve the application of rules or regulations differently for people based on membership in a preferential or non-preferential group. These concepts, in and of themselves, are not negative, unhealthy, or pathological. Although most people associate unhealthy or pathological feelings and behaviors with stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice, one may possess positive feelings about people who belong to a stereotyped group or attribute positive characteristics to them. For example, we tend to discriminate against other people outside our families and feed and clothe our family members; we also tend to be prejudiced and believe that our children are special. **Ethnocentrism** according to Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, and Kraus (1995) “as the tendency to view favorably and show more preference for one’s own group”, and supports judgments about other ethnic, national, and cultural groups solely from the observer’s own cultural perspective. Oppressed groups are less likely to embrace an ethnocentric view, because in most cases being ethnocentric means judging from a position of the cultural majority (Shiraev and Levy, 2010). The psychological impact of being oppressed usually results in a group identity that may be best described as one of helplessness (Levy, 2006). Oppressed groups, and African Americans in particular, tend to feel unable to change undesirable living conditions or the way others react towards them. Because many African Americans are low-income, depressed, and undereducated/mis-educated, there may be a sense that the general condition of being Black will always be one of oppression, resulting reduced efforts at becoming successful (i.e., low-effort syndrome; Ogbu, 1991).

The definition for **Racism** probably is the most controversial. Depending on the source (African American versus European American), and within ethnic groups, there are very different definitions for racism. According to Ikuenobe (2011) **Racism** involves “immoral and negative dispositions and attitudes of contempt and disrespect... that are usually manifested in the negative and immoral actions, such as discrimination, oppression, denial of rights, and mistreatment.” According to Black psychologist, Bobby Wright (1975), Racism is defined as “The power to oppress and exploit people because of color.” From an African-centered perspective, Western society enforces a system of domination based on the belief of innate superiority correlated to a lack of melanin. Many Blacks who study the racism phenomenon insist, as do Frances Cress Welsing (1969) and Neely Fuller (1984), that racism is synonymous with “White supremacy.” Fuller goes on to expand on the concept in his book and stated, “...racism is ...a world-wide method of enforcing white supremacy rule and domination. This occurs on individual, group and institutional levels. The majority of the world’s white people either actively or passively participate in supporting racism.” Neely’s definition has a powerful impact on how one assesses all life activities and interactions. According to an esteemed Black psychologist, Robert L. Williams (2007),

“White racism is defined as the organized and systemized abuse of power that leads to physical harm or oppression of an individual or group in the form of discrimination, control, exclusion and/or subordination solely on the basis of skin color. The common denominator of white racism is power or the ability to define social, economic and political reality along with
the necessary instruments of domination to uphold that reality. Further, white racism is the activation, operation and/or institutionalization of prejudices, stereotypes, bigotry and abuse of power. It occurs when one takes racial prejudices and forces them on others either individually or institutionally. Finally, white racism involves action and much more than a set of beliefs and ideology.”

Healthy/Adaptive Stereotypes and Related Constructs

_Healthy/adaptive Stereotypes._ A healthy/adaptive stereotype is a belief that people belonging to a group possess characteristics, skills, abilities, or knowledge that are beneficial and will promote or contribute to a better understanding or outcome of life events. For example, “all university faculty have terminal degrees and are experts in their fields of study”, is a helpful stereotype. The stereotype that all faculty have terminal degrees and are experts is, of course, not always true, but it is based on the fact that most university faculty have terminal degrees and that terminal degrees are generally considered evidence of a mastery of the field of study in which the degree was awarded. All university faculty do not possess terminal degrees, and some faculty may not possess a mastery of their fields of study. Nevertheless, it is a stereotype to state that university faculty possess the highly valued terminal degree and have mastered their fields of study.

Possessing the ability to make generalizations and to discriminate is an important part of understanding, organizing, and effectively functioning in the world. For example, males use the restroom for men and females use the restroom for women. This requires the ability to generalize and to discriminate based on the stereotype that all females regardless of age prefer to use the restroom marked “women.”

A culturally specific adaptive stereotype about African Americans is that African Americans have retained some cultural values from traditional African culture. Relying on the principle of harmony within the universe, the core elements of African-centered psychology include: a spiritual connection with a higher entity who created the universe, usually referred to as God; belief in a natural order and interconnectedness of all things; emphasis on community, harmony, and relationships (kinship); and the importance of self-knowledge (Parham, 2009). Additional strengths include the ability to adapt changing societal and economic contexts, a strong work orientation, and drive to “make ends meet” (Royse, 1980; Lyle, 1985).

The ability to make generalizations helps to transfer information from one experience to the next. One must be able to make generalizations to understand that Blacks have the same desire to achieve as do non-Black children are naive and in need of nurturance, that one may go to college to learn the latest developments in various fields of study, that cars can kill if you walk in the street, that fire from a stove is the same fire in a fireplace, that (if one is Black) all people wearing the Klansman hoods should be avoided.

_Healthy/Adaptive Discrimination._ The ability to discriminate is equally as important. One must be able to discern the differences between concepts, people and objects. You must know the difference between good and bad, recognize your mother from other females, recognize the ladies restroom from the men’s, distinguish fruit from meat, recognize hot from cold, the street from the sidewalk, a friendly dog from a wolf, etc. Without the ability to generalize and discriminate, you would not be able to live long enough to attend school. Healthy
discrimination occurs when a professor awards “A”s to everyone who scores above a 90 on an exam.

Healthy/Adaptive Prejudice. Healthy prejudice may be demonstrated when people express prejudice for their own children because of their membership in the family. Parents believe their own children deserve certain privileges and opportunities that they would not necessary give to children from other families. Parents may withhold their emotional, physical and financial support for other children—not because they do not like other children nor because they think that they are not worthy. They are treated differently because they are not part of the stereotyped family group. People typically prejudge their own children as appropriate people to receive the family resources.

PATHOLOGICAL STEREOTYPES

Pathological stereotypes about people are a means of explaining and justifying differences between groups and using these differences to oppress the “out-group.” Social status or group position determines the stereotype content, not the actual personal characteristics of the group members (Jost and Banaji, 1994). Groups that enjoy fewer social and economic advantages will be stereotyped in a way that helps explain disparities, such as lower employment rates. Although disadvantaged group members may have greater difficulty finding a job due to in-group favoritism, racism, and related social forces, the disadvantaged group member is unjustifiably characterized as unmotivated (e.g., he could find a job if he looked hard enough), unintelligent (e.g., he's not smart enough to have that job), and lazy (e.g., he would rather take hand-outs than work). Evidence of this is seen in the negative terms used to characterize African Americans (Conway-Turner, 1995; Hall, 2001; Woodard and Mastin, 2005). Notably, these terms are similar to the stereotypes used to describe Blacks in Britain or Turks in Germany, despite the fact that these groups have a separate culture and history (Baltes and Rudolph, 2010; Lepore and Brown 1997; Turner and Kamdibe, 2008).

Competition between groups minimizes similarities and magnifies differences (Brewer, 1979). During times of economic distress or recession, as competition for employment and maintaining jobs grows, it is anticipated that racial discrimination will increase, as will other forms of violence. Pathological stereotyping may be used to justify not hiring, not promoting, or not retaining African Americans, regardless of the need for cultural diversity. In such cases, this may be justified if there is a token minority person on staff or a key European American who has completed a course on cultural diversity. Courses on diversity can helpful in reducing discrimination and promoting awareness (Camicia, 2007), but cannot substitute for having a diverse workplace (e.g., Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

Rationalizations can be made that cultural responsiveness is not a valid concern or need because a greater value is placed on sameness. For example, in the author’s own experience (AMCG), health insurance companies will often refuse to accept Black psychologists or Black professionals into their networks because they report that they have “enough” psychologists or professionals, despite the fact that Black psychologists are underrepresented in their networks and nationwide. They do not value diversity at this level, and will not assess the need for diversity in order to continue referring members to those White professionals who are already in their networks. Another justification for excluding African American
professionals is that African American members have not specifically requested an African American professional. The underlying belief is that African Americans do not need African American professionals because European Americans and other ethnic groups are just as qualified to provide services.

Pathological stereotypes about ethnic groups stem from ethnocentrism, which occurs when people who do not engage in thorough thinking, fear those who are different, believe that the other people are inferior, and/or have had negative experiences with individuals from the different group (Williams, 2007; Wilson, 1991). Stereotypes will focus upon, and thereby exaggerate, differences between groups, and subsequently group members will believe that the differences represent the superiority of one group over the other. Sometimes the differences between groups may be as minor as the language spoken or a geographical location. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1982), people may be driven to preserve and increase their self-esteem by embracing a belief that the group to which they belong is better than others. In addition to believing they are better, they must also believe that the other group (the “out-group”) possesses negative attributes. Psychologically, these are frequently individuals who have feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and cannot admit, even to themselves, that they harbor these feelings. In an effort to control the internalized anxiety, the feelings are projected onto someone who has been identified as “completely different” allowing the individual to control his/her anxiety. In essence, projection and low self-esteem are two factors that foster negative/pathological prejudice and discrimination (Welsing, 1970; Wright, 1984).

Embracing pathological stereotypes makes it seem as if groups are very different, when in fact, they may be more alike than different. Among Africans, identity as an American citizen, in many instances, is a more salient categorization than racial background, although many fail to realize that most Blacks are more culturally American than African (McAndrew and Akande, 1995). In the United States, we hyper-focus on differences in skin color, hair texture, and facial features, though many American Blacks would be considered “Whites” in places like South Africa or Brazil or may not be readily identifiable as “Black” without self-identification or historical research. For example, research conducted by Joel Augustus Rogers (1996) over eight decades ago documented that many famous historical figures were Black, such as composer Franz Joseph Haydn, Alexander Pushkin (hailed as the father of Russian literature), Alexander Dumas (author of the Three Musketeers and the Count of Monte Cristo), and Queen Charlotte Sophia (the Black wife of George III) and namesake for Charlotte, North Carolina and Charlottesville, Virginia. These people are as just a few of many notable figures from Western history with African ancestry that challenge traditional stereotypes and misconceptions about Black people. Blacks such as these were an important part of the cultural fabric of Europe, and shared many similarities to other notable Europeans of the day.

**Stereotypes versus Reality**

Stereotypes about African Americans do not correspond with reality. For example, historically Blacks have been stereotyped as ‘dirty/smelly’ (Devine, 1989). Yet, despite lower per capita incomes, African Americans spend more on laundry and cleaning supplies than European Americans, even after adjusting for differences in average annual spending (US
African Americans, European Americans and Pathological Stereotypes

African American women engage in increased hygiene practices and report more cleaning and grooming behaviors than European Americans (Aral et al., 1988; Thomas et al., 2000). In fact, greater awareness of cleaning behaviors appears to be a cultural norm for African Americans (Williams and Turkheimer, 2007). Historically, segregation statutes prevented Blacks and Whites from utilizing the same restrooms, drinking fountains, and swimming facilities under the assumption that Whites would be contaminated by shared usage. The medical establishment considered African Americans carriers of disease, “a social menace whose collective superstitions, ignorance, and carefree demeanour stood as a stubborn affront to modern notions of hygiene…” (Wailoo, 2006). Meanwhile, Blacks were typically employed in cleaning White establishments, illustrating the paradoxical nature of the pathological stereotypes. These realities illustrate a distortion of reality to justify the disenfranchisement of African Americans.

Because African Americans tend to be stereotyped as criminal, most people are surprised to learn that African American youth are significantly less likely to use tobacco, alcohol or drugs than European Americans or Hispanic Americans (CDC, 2000). In fact, African Americans spend 25% less than Whites on alcohol (US Dept Labor, 2002). This is an illustration of how a Eurocentric mindset employs the defense mechanism of projection to deny the statistical evidence of a moral and psychological challenge among European Americans.

Why Do People Believe Pathological Stereotypes?

Why, then, do people believe pathological stereotypes if they are so often not true? One reason for this may be explained by the concept of illusory correlation, described by Hamilton and Gifford (1976). Illusory correlation is the tendency for people to believe that co-occurring events happen more frequently than they actually do because of the event’s distinctiveness. For example, if a television viewer knows that African Americans are stereotyped as ‘criminals’ and then sees a picture on the nightly news of such a person wanted for armed robbery, the distinctiveness of the crime combined with the distinctive group membership of the criminal will make it more likely the event (Black man committing armed robbery, or, unusual man doing an unusual thing) will be remembered by the viewer. This memorable event combined with knowledge of the pathological stereotype will serve to confirm to the viewer that, indeed, Black people must be criminals after all.

Furthermore, news shows are developed by people with pathologically stereotypical expectations, reflected in the fact that news shows over-represent African Americans as criminals. One study of crime on Los Angeles news found that Whites were statistically overrepresented as victims of crime, Blacks were overrepresented as criminals, and Whites were overrepresented as law defenders (i.e., police), when rates of the images on TV were compared with actual crime statistics (Dixon and Linz 2000). Another study of Philadelphia news found that Whites were over represented as victims, and the intergroup victimization rate was presented as dramatically higher than reality for Black-on-White crimes (Romer et al 1998). News stories that emphasize deviant behaviors generate fear, leading to increased viewership, higher ratings, and the perpetuation of pathological stereotypes (Conway-Turner, 1995; Hazell and Clarke, 2008). As noted by Lawrence Grossman, former president of CBS
News and PBS, TV newscasts "disproportionately show African-Americans under arrest, living in slums, on welfare, and in need of help from the community" (Romer et al., 1998).

Stereotypes such as these are perpetuated throughout popular culture, and are seen in all genres of literature and film. For example, in several reviews of the box office hit, Avatar (Cameron, 2009), some voiced concerns that the movie appeared to reinforce the pathological stereotype that the people of color, or Melanics (a term coined to more accurately describe people of color – Melanics is derived from the term melanin, the chemical substance in the body that colors our internal and external organs including the skin), could not protect themselves without the assistance of a European American savior (e.g., Heaven, 2009).

Stereotypes resist change as people usually spend most of their time with their own group and may not know what people in other groups are actually like. In the face of limited information about a group member’s behavior or motivations, people will rely on stereotypes to fill in the blanks (Hamilton et al., 1990). When people learn more about a stereotyped group, they may encounter evidence that the pathological stereotypes are not accurate; but instead of discarding the pathological stereotype, the perceiver will 'subtype' the out-group member. This means the other will be perceived as an 'exception,' rather than taken as evidence of the failings of the pathological stereotype (Kunda and Oleson, 1995).

To add to the difficulty, pathological stereotyping is both automatic and unconscious (Devine, 1989; Devine et al., 1991; Conway-Turner, 1995). People pathologically stereotype without awareness that they are doing it. Worse yet, people cannot suppress stereotyped thoughts even when they try (Monteith et al., 1998; Macrae et al., 1994).

What If Pathological Stereotypes Are True?

Certainly in some cases, it would seem that the stereotype must represent real differences between groups. For example, African Americans are pathologically stereotyped as poor, and indeed on average more African Americans are poorer than European Americans, though not in numbers nearly as high as estimated by the average American (29% reality vs. 50% believed; Gilens, 1996). Wouldn't this amount to a 'kernel of truth,' about group members? Research has demonstrated that a kernel of truth is not necessary for a pathological stereotype to develop (Hamilton and Gifford, 1976). Though some pathological stereotypes may represent measurable differences between groups, consider that given any pathological stereotype, there will be many members of the group that possess some or none of the pathological stereotypical traits. If we pathologically stereotype Blacks as 'poor,' and two out of three Black people are not poor, we will be wrong most of the time.

Impact of Pathological Stereotypes on the Target

Knowledge of pathological stereotypes is pervasive among both high and low prejudiced individuals (Devine, 1989), thus pathological stereotypes affect everyone. Simply knowing a pathological stereotype can result in people responding in a pathological stereotypical manner, causing the pathological stereotype of that person to become true. Chen and Bargh (1997) demonstrated that when European American students were presented with even a subliminal picture of an African American, they responded toward another European
American student in a more hostile manner, generating more hostility in the other student. Thus, in a real-life situation, when a White person interacts with a Black person, this could cause activation of pathological stereotypes, leading to hostile behavior by the White person, leading to a hostile response from the Black person, validating the pathological stereotype (Hamilton et al., 1990). It is worth noting that a reaction to a pathological stereotype, is simply a reaction, not a fixed quality about the individual or his group. Individuals and groups can learn to resist, reject, or counter pathological stereotypes.

One of the outcomes of being the target of pathological stereotypes is a phenomenon called, stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat is the fear of being assessed based on a pathological stereotype and the subsequent impairment in performance that results from knowledge of the stereotype. One pathological stereotype is that Blacks are intellectually inferior. According to research by Walton and Spencer (2009), stereotype threat generally decreases the performance of African Americans on important exams, such as the SAT. For example, when Blacks are taking a difficult math test that will be evaluated by European Americans, they cannot help but think about how their performance will reflect upon themselves as individual Blacks and as Black people who belong to a targeted ethnic group. The anticipation of being evaluated as intellectually deficient results in a self-fulfilling prophecy and the redirection of mental resources, which would normally be used in problem-solving. African Americans become preoccupied with thoughts of possibly validating a pathological stereotype about Blacks and inferior intellectual abilities. As a result, African American performance on an academic test is negatively affected, resulting in lower test scores. Steele and Aronson (1995) were able to successfully eliminate the effects of stereotype threat on intellectual performance by giving subjects differing instructions whereby tests administered were presented as non-diagnostic or challenge tasks, instead of diagnostic tests. They found Black test scores were significantly improved in the non-diagnostic condition compared to the diagnostic condition where scores were significantly lower than those of European Americans.

**POWER DYNAMICS**

**Institutionalized Inequality**

One cannot begin a thoughtful discussion of Black-White power dynamics without first reviewing America's history of enslaving African people, which began over 300 years ago. When Africans were originally kidnapped and forced into servitude in the New World, differences in power, spirituality, and numbers facilitated the perpetuation of the institution of slavery. The U.S. legal system was controlled by those in power, therefore, laws regarding holding African people as slaves or property without rights were fashioned to protect European Americans and their financial interests in their human franchise.

As the proportion of Africans kidnapped and forced into servitude, in the New World increased, European Americans began to lose the advantage in numbers over slaves, and were required to depend ever more heavily on the legal system and force of arms to prevent the African people from posing a serious threat to European Americans, who began to increasingly fear for their safety and security. African people, held in captivity, who
attempted to escape or to threaten Whites in any manner were punished publicly to discourage any other attempts by Blacks to challenge the authority of Whites or to regain their freedom. To justify the institutionalized slave system, many conscience-assuaging pathological stereotypes were developed to rationalize European American dominance. Blacks were pathologically stereotyped as simple, child-like, and unintelligent to rationalize exclusion from decision-making and access to education. In an effort to rationalize harsh abusive working conditions, Blacks were pathologically stereotyped as strong and sturdy beasts of burden. When European Americans wanted to rationalize excessively violent and cruel punishments, Blacks were stereotyped as savage and dangerous.

After the Civil War, pathological stereotypes of Blacks persisted. Loss of the war left European Americans from the South embittered against African Americans who had formerly been forced to submit to their will and accept horrible abuses. These same Europeans Americans from the South were enraged by the protection of Blacks by U.S. soldiers during Reconstruction. By the end of the 19th century, White society managed to codify their recaptured dominance by instituting Jim Crow Laws and a legal system of segregation. Segregation did not mean that Whites and Blacks were separate, rather it was a system whereby Blacks could interact with Whites intimately as long as the power differential (“White supremacy”) was maintained. Blacks could enter homes in White neighborhoods to clean them but not to buy them. A White man could sexually assault a Black woman with impunity, yet even a Black adolescent would be brutally murdered for simply looking at a White female – and the European American guilty of such a murder would not be punished, but rather his acts would be celebrated by other Whites (i.e., Emmet Till). Few college students are aware that one of the largest acts of domestic terrorism in U.S. history occurred in 1921, when the prosperous section of Tulsa Oklahoma, known as “Black Wall Street” (because of all of the Black millionaires and doctors) was bombed by Whites – reportedly because a Black man looked at a White female in an elevator (Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, 2001).

The Civil Rights Movement brought these types of inequities to the foreground of American consciousness, leading to the abolition of legal segregation, yet vast inequities remain. Blacks are still the poorest ethnic group, the least educated, and a disproportionate number are incarcerated, despite the fact that according to arrest data more Whites commit crimes (67.7%) than Blacks (U.S. Department of Justice FBI, 2007). This situation is rooted in the aforementioned historical inequities and ongoing institutionalized racism. Examples include racial profiling by the police, discrimination in mortgage lending, lack of information regarding job opportunities, highest rejection rates for employment, lower salaries for Blacks even with superior credentials, Blacks being expected to live in certain poorer areas and areas with toxic waste hazards, legal exclusion from educational opportunities, as well as ongoing discrimination by those who create, perpetuate, and enforce the unequal policies and practices that lead to the subsequent demoralization of African Americans. Even if discrimination were to disappear today, it would take several generations before Blacks and Whites achieved parity.

Both “negative” and seemingly “positive” stereotypes continue to keep African Americans in a lower class status. Current negative stereotypes that suggest that all Blacks are intellectually deficient and lazy justify the denial of educational and employment opportunities. Positive stereotypes such as athletic prowess and musical abilities push African American youth away from college in favor of efforts to become athletes or entertainers
(rappers, singers, etc.) – professions in which the vast majority are destined to fail (Czopp, 2010; Johnson, Jackson, and Gatto, 1995).

**Belief in a Just World**

Many European Americans, realizing they are unfairly advantaged, experience a tentative discomfort about their status—an anxiety borne out of the dim realization that one's position has been elevated at the expense of others, by the action of one's ancestors, or simply the enduring climate which benefits European Americans and disadvantages African Americans (Helms and Carter, 1990; McIntosh, 1990). To remedy this anxiety, one would be generally compelled to accept one of two notions: "I am unfairly advantaged," and even "therefore it is partially my responsibility to make things right" or "I am fairly advantaged; others are disadvantaged by their own behaviors or inferior intrinsic qualities, therefore I am not responsible." As long as most European Americans prefer the later notion, racial equality and the elimination of pathological stereotypes will be an uphill battle (McIntosh, 1990).

There is a sentiment that in America everyone has an equal chance. Believing in equal access to fulfilling one’s life goals quells the anxiety, to a certain degree, allowing one to safely conclude that the poor must be poor because they want to be, and they could choose not to be poor. We are steeped in the American Myth – that if anyone works hard enough, that person will make it, they will prosper. We are told that every person regardless of his race has the same chance to be educated and rich. The proof offered – that there are no racial obstacles to wealth and education – is that people of many cultures and ethnic backgrounds who have come to America over the years have been able to succeed. Furthermore, a number of African Americans do succeed despite an impoverished environment and lack of resources. Currently, the President of the United States is a Black man. The logical conclusion: "Since every group has the same chance, and Blacks remain poor, then it can only be their own fault. They must have something in them to prevent them from getting to the top." Thus, the group position justifies and predicts that Blacks will be pathologically stereotyped as lazy, unintelligent, or unmotivated (Jost and Banaji, 1994). The safety and parsimony of this reasoning has an intrinsic appeal to those who want to believe that the universe is fair, and who also ascribe to the belief in a just world. People adopt these conclusions without consciously considering the issues, and in daily discourse, they are given no other options for why Blacks continue to struggle for equality.

**Stereotypes Justify Racism**

It would be naïve to think that one could grow up in a culture where prejudice exists and somehow not be affected by it. Many Americans, both Black and White, adopt the view that African Americans are inferior (Conway-Turner, 1995; Hazell and Clarke, 2008; Hall, 2001; Hall, 2005). It is a taboo in our society to admit this, rather one can instead subscribe to the new, sophisticated, subtle or symbolic racism. Interestingly, one can be a symbolic racist and claim it has nothing to do with race. For example, negative attitudes toward affirmative action programs, can be safely criticized as giving "other groups" (Blacks and Hispanics) an unfair advantage. Realistic conflict theory (Tajfel, 1982) asserts that groups show animosity toward
each other because they compete for limited resources, such as jobs or slots at top colleges. Many feel that affirmative action programs contribute to discrimination by taking jobs from European Americans, thus contributing to hostilities as groups vie over seemingly real opportunities. However, as demonstrated by Kinder and Sears (1981) in their study of anti-Black suburbanite voting behaviors, prejudice remains when there is no direct threat by outgroups. Even in the absence of direct competition over resources, people continue to display prejudice, indicating that a feeling of threat over limited resources is not the only issue.

Because of pervasive pathological stereotypes, many European Americans perceive that African Americans are violators of the “Protestant Work Ethic,” by deviating from traditional values (Levy, 2006). European Americans who ascribe more strongly to the Protestant Work Ethic are also more critical of Blacks (Katz and Hass, 1988). One common example is seen in opposition to federal spending on programs, which are perceived as disproportionately benefiting Blacks, i.e. “welfare.” In reality, there are more European Americans receiving welfare than Blacks, and the rich and middle class receive much more aid from the Federal government than the poor, in the form of tax breaks, subsidies, mortgage interest deduction, depreciation deductions, and cuts in capital gains taxes. 'Middle class welfare,' such as home buyer tax credits, tax breaks for health insurance, tax shelters for estates, guaranteed student loans, payments to war widows, graduate student subsidies, payments to farmers, and most recently, disaster relief to failing financial institutions, are somehow seen as legitimate assistance—even though it is all unearned income, given away by the Federal government. However, money given away to the poor is thought of as, "those people taking your hard earned money." Many European Americans believe disadvantaged Blacks are violating traditional values and harshly judge those African Americans who fail to make money, can’t hold a job, or have children out of wedlock. Maintaining negative stereotypes about Blacks justifies the projection, "It's their fault," and correspondingly, "...therefore it can’t be my fault."

This sentiment was recently captured in a comment made by former presidential candidate Rick Santorum (R), who, when discussing welfare, stated “I don’t want to make Black people’s lives better by giving them somebody else’s money. I want to give them the opportunity to go out and earn the money” (Downs, 2012). He illustrates his belief in the false pathological stereotype about Black people being poor welfare recipients in the first sentence, then in the second, fails to acknowledge the effects of the very stereotypes that prevent so many African Americans from realizing financial success. This sort of very public message reinforces and perpetuates pathological stereotypes.

**Aversive Racism**

Theories about pathological stereotypes do not explain all anti-Black sentiments. Sniderman, Piazza, Tetlock, and Kendrick (1991) demonstrated that both liberals and conservatives were more likely to oppose government aid to African Americans over European Americans and women in the same situation (laid-off), and this was not contingent on perceived violation of traditional values, once other factors were taken into account. At the end of their exhaustive study, the authors could only conclude that Blacks were "penalized merely by virtue of being Black."
The phenomenon of Black denigration may be best captured by Dovidio and Gaetner’s (1998) discussion of aversive racism. They argue that negative feelings toward African Americans stem from a combination of three natural processes: (1) the tendency of people to form groups and subsequently favor their group over others, (2) the motivational desire to satisfy needs—such as the need for power, or, as discussed previously, the need to feel justified in one’s preferred status, (3) and the fact that people tend to automatically absorb the beliefs and values of their society—such as pathological stereotypes about Blacks and the American Myth (that anyone can succeed in America if only he works hard enough). Aversive racists espouse a belief in racial equality, but harbor latent feelings of animosity toward Blacks, despite efforts to the contrary.

They behave in a non-prejudicial manner when under scrutiny, but will act like an old-fashioned racist when their motivations are harder to divine. A racist person may cheer a Black athlete to score points but the same racist would never hire the same athlete in a management position. The apparent difference in personalities is what the authors refer to as “cultural dissociation” and describes the expression of politically-correct racial views publicly in an attempt to avoid confrontation and anxiety while believing and espousing racist beliefs and views in the privacy of one’s home, with friends, or in one’s mind. A racist person believes that there are acceptable roles for Blacks, such as to serve Whites as a maid, nurse’s aide, or janitor, or to entertain Whites as musicians and athletes. As long as Blacks stay in these subservient or entertainment roles, they are acceptable.

When Blacks disprove stereotypes and defy the social order, this may result in anxiety in the racist individual, resulting in a microagression—a subtle racist slight. For example, racists may have difficulty calling a Black Ph.D. “doctor” and will prefer to refer to the person by his or her first name. Racists will reject a Black person in a managerial or supervisory position and may attempt to subtly discredit or even secretly sabotage the performance of the Black person. As a result of such acts, when Blacks are working on tenure or promotions in the academy, they are more likely to take longer to move up the promotions ladder, if they achieve tenure at all.

Cultural dissociation results in a frustrating experience for the American Black who always feels like he is being negatively regarded by Whites but usually cannot provide proof. For example, it may be the store’s policy to call the bank before accepting a check of a certain size, but is the rule enforced for everyone or just Blacks? Maybe most taxi drivers really do not see Black men standing on the street trying to get a ride, but could that possibly be true for all of the empty cabs that just drive by without stopping? After a series of experiments illustrating that European Americans do tend to behave in a more racist manner when they think no one is watching, Dovido and Gardner concluded that aversive racism is pervasive—but not excusable.

**Racial Stereotypes and President Obama**

The most powerful position in the United States is that of the President. As alluded to previously, in the last election, a Black man was elected to the presidency, much to the amazement of many and the dismay of others. Some were pleasantly surprised indicating that they never thought a Black person would become President due to the institutionalized racism that has been present since the foundation of the United States. Others were upset and felt
threatened at a very deep psychological level. In the article below, it is evident pathological stereotypes about Blacks were used to denigrate the first Black President of the United States, Barak Obama (Terkel, 2008).

A local California GOP women's organization's most recent newsletter claims that if Obama is elected, his face will appear on food stamps, rather than dollar bills like other presidents. The group then included a picture of "Obama Bucks"—a phony $10 bill with President Obama surrounded by racist imagery:

![Image of Obama Bucks]

The president of the organization, Diane Fedele, didn’t understand the charges of racism: "I didn’t see it the way that it has being taken. I never connected. It was just food to me." One African-American member of the club said that upon seeing the newsletter, she "cried for 45 minutes." "This is what keeps African-Americans from joining the Republican Party," she added.

This event was disturbing on many levels, most notably the complete failure of the organizational leader to recognize the pathological stereotypes embedded in the mailing. The alleged lack of awareness of the racially offensiveness of the material was further compounded by the apparent lie about her intention to reinforce the pathological stereotypes about Blacks and link them with President Obama. It seems impossible to combine five pathological stereotypes about Blacks (including equating Blacks with animals as Diane Fedele did) without knowledge or intent.

Black Racial Identity

It would be hard to live a society with such pervasive negative messages about African Americans and imagine these do not negatively impact people of all ethnoracial groups. Even stereotyped minorities can adopt pathological stereotypes. For example, the shooter, George Zimmerman, in the tragic Trayvon Martin case was a young Jewish-Hispanic man, who allegedly shot the unarmed Black youth because he reportedly felt threatened by Martin wearing a hoodie (Cloud and Altman, 2012). These actions were driven by pathological stereotypes about Black men being dangerous and violent. Although the same stereotypes...
exist for Hispanic males, the mere fact of the shooter being a person of color was not sufficient to help him see past stereotypes and thereby prevent this act of violence. It may well be that Zimmerman did not identify with his Hispanic ethnicity and was identifying with the cultural values and racial scripting (Williams, 2007) from his father. According to Williams (2007), “A racial script contains detailed instructions in our lives about ways we are supposed to view other races, and how we are supposed to feel about them...and play a major role in the continuance or discontinuance of racism, bigotry, prejudice and stereotypes in the USA.” Williams goes on to suggest that children learn racial scripting from their parents who verbally express or model their beliefs about Blacks. Likewise, young African Americans who do not receive pro-Black messages from their caregivers through a process called racial socialization, are more likely to believe these widespread pathological stereotypes, although such beliefs are also common among adults. Some African Americans believe that Whites are superior to Blacks and even perpetuate pathological stereotypes of Blacks. Although most people are not aware of the extent to which they are affected by pathological stereotypes, researchers have found a way to tap into unconscious bias through use of the Implicit Attitudes Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998). The IAT that has been designed to ferret out hidden attitudes about Black people requires people pair positive or negative words to faces of European and African origin. The results indicate that most European Americans have an automatic preference for White over Black. Among African Americans, however, the results are closer to even, with 45% showing a pro-White preference (Iyengar et al., 2009). Although African Americans have more positive feelings about Blacks than do Whites, about half of all African Americans show more positive feelings about Whites than their own ethnoracial group. This identification with the oppressor is what prominent Black psychologist Na’im Akbar (1981) calls an anti-self personality disorder. Akbar noted that Blacks suffering from the anti-self personality disorder completely identify with pathological stereotypes and are comfortable embracing Eurocentric values. These individuals deny racism and likewise blame Blacks for the effects of racism. William Cross (1978) observed that Blacks who reject their Africanness and embrace Eurocentric values are exhibiting low self-esteem, feelings of inferiority and anxiety. But rather than a personality disorder, Blacks who display this type of behavior are in the pre-encounter stage of Black identity, whereby they prefer European Americans and reject African American culture. As they learn more about their heritage and American racial dynamics, they move on to more advanced stages development. The next step is the immersion-emersion process as individuals increase their desire to represent their Black heritage and reject other cultures. Internalization is the final stage of being reconciled with a multicultural society, where the individual demonstrates a mature state of ethnic identity and demonstrates attitudes that are more accepting of other cultures. According to Cross’ model, termed Nigressence, these later stages represent a stronger ethnic identity and therefore greater psychological well-being. A strong positive Black racial identity has been linked to improved mental health, and a weak identity to symptoms of depression and anxiety in African Americans (Williams et al., 2012).

Stereotyping and Violence

Most people readily understand that physical aggression such as shooting, hitting, hanging, and killing are acts of violence. What is frequently missed is the tremendous
psychological violence and actual physical injury perpetuated against African Americans as a result of pathological stereotypes and racism. According to the Commission for Racial Justice (1987) toxic waste sites are placed primarily in Black and other Melanic (People of Color) neighborhoods. The omission of facts such as historical accomplishments of Blacks – from the pyramids to the potato chip, the universities from Timbuktu to the Grand Lodge at Luxor, and the ancient Olmec civilization – are also an act of violence against Blacks. Such academic omissions perpetuate stereotypes about Black inferiority and demoralize African American school children, meanwhile Eurocentric history falsely claims ownership of accomplishments by Blacks. Distorting the depiction of the race/ethnicity of Ancient Egyptian (Kemetic) people, who were Black, contributes to the sense that Whites are superior and Blacks are inferior based on the clear lack of historical accomplishments. When African Americans are taught that history for Blacks started with the institution of slavery, or that Blacks in Africa were uncivilized, naked savages running around in jungles, these distortions lend support to the pathological stereotypes that rationalize European Americans as benevolent givers of culture and improved living conditions to uncivilized savages. When the truth is illuminated, that Africans were the first to create math, science, and medicine; that Blacks had traveled to North, Central and South America before Christopher Columbus got lost and landed on what is now called Haiti; and that, Blacks in Africa had universities that trained Greek philosophers, these facts dispel the long held belief in the inherent inferiority of Blacks. It is no wonder that many museums still separate Egypt from the rest of Africa to help to maintain the distorted belief that the Egyptians were not Black.

The most powerful people in the United States are currently people who classify themselves as White (Fuller, 1984). These are the individuals who determine what children are taught in schools, who gets hired, for what salary, who gets promoted and to what level, who gets enrolled in a program and who gets mentored to succeed in any given program. Many people who employ pathological stereotyping are, at the very least, engaging in violence through distortion. When people believe that another group is inferior, it allows the believer to rationalize using psychological violence against the identified “inferior” group.

Healing Pathological Stereotyping

In healing pathological stereotypes it might seem reasonable to suggest the increase of Black-White interactions. It is logical to expect that getting to know people beyond a single characteristic (race) would challenge the generalization of stereotypes. However, Epstein (2010) found that when groups were integrated, stereotypes increased to sustain group distinction. The ineffectiveness of using social interactions to eliminate pathological stereotypes is evidence that just one approach to addressing pathological stereotypes is insufficient. Bryson and Davis (2010) write, “The concept of stereotype places blame for social inequality on biased individuals to the exclusion of the social processes that produce them.” Thus, countering pathological stereotypes is a multifaceted enterprise. The following are advanced as a means of reducing pathological stereotypes:

1. Providing accurate information about African Americans to African Americans and others.
2. Ensuring that African Americans are present in large numbers in every aspect of American society (schools, courts, companies, agencies, funding agents, law enforcement, media images, music, etc.), especially in decision making positions and as scientific experts.

3. Creating healthy representations of African Americans in the media by creating movies, articles, commercials, programs, etc. that transform the image of Blacks (i.e., the Cosby Show) and demonstrate Black strengths and accomplishments both ancient and current.

4. Creating an advertising strategy to counter pathological stereotypes.

5. Restructuring the information provided in educational institutions at all levels to include accurate and image-enhancing aspects of African Americans and Blacks in general (Sampson and Garrison, 2011).

6. Requiring that African American history be taught at all educational levels.

7. Hiring more African Americans to teach in colleges and universities who are trained to present accurate historical facts regarding Black contributions to world civilizations.

8. Providing increased opportunities for the establishment, growth and maintenance of Black businesses.

9. Providing more funding for research to find ways to counter pathological stereotyping of Blacks.

10. Research efforts to examine Black strengths and resiliency factors rather than an exclusive focus on problems or perceived weaknesses.

11. Incorporating African-Centered approaches in all aspects of life.

12. Creating opportunities for meaningful dialogues with people in various life positions to affect the belief systems that help to maintain pathological stereotypes.

**CONCLUSION**

Pathological stereotypes about African Americans are not accurate representations of the group as a whole or most Black individuals. Pathological stereotypes may seem accurate due to the awareness of group stereotypes and a willingness to accept evidence that confirms those pathological stereotypes. Nonetheless, the pathological stereotypes are not true. The content used to maintain pathological stereotypes are a by-product of a group’s social status rather than a representation of widespread personal characteristics. Pathological stereotypes may appear accurate, when the stereotyped person reacts to others' behaviors, consciously or unconsciously motivated out of pathological stereotypical beliefs. It is better to perceive each person as unique rather than as simply a group member who is defined by pathological stereotypes. Pathological stereotypes can have a pervasively negative impact on the individual who is the target of the pathological stereotype as well as on the perpetrator who loses his or her humanity.

Pathological stereotyping is reflected in prejudicial attitudes, perpetuated by differences in status and rewards between racial groups. Pathological stereotypes are used to justify the dominant group's position and privilege. Rewards include not only the elevated status held by the dominant group, but feeling entitled to one's elevated status, believing the elevated
position is justified, and failing to acknowledge the reality that dominant status exists at another group's expense. Racism is costly to every member of our society, and the only way toward true equality is for each person to take responsibility for his or her thoughts and actions, conscious or unconscious. A single aversive racist cannot change society, but they can and must change themselves. If each person acknowledged his/her own racial biases, and took responsibility for making healthy intrapersonal and interpersonal changes, it would improve life in America for all Americans, Black and White.

RESOURCES

Organizations

- Center for Mental Health Disparities, 2301 South Third Street, Davidson Hall, Louisville, KY, Phone: (502) 852-7164. http://mentalhealthdisparities.org
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 4805 Mt. Hope Drive Baltimore MD 21215, Phone: (410) 580-5777; Toll Free: (877) NAACP-98. http://www.naacp.org

Activities to Promote Awareness of Prejudice

Implicit Attitudes Test (IAT): Take the Race (Black - White IAT) to learn about your own unconscious bias. This IAT requires the ability to distinguish faces of European and African origin. It indicates that most Americans have an automatic preference for White over Black. Online at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit.

REFERENCES


Monnica Williams, Ayo Maria Casey Gooden and Darlene Davis


