



EFFECTS OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA ON AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND INTERVENTIONS

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ABSTRACT: *Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's coping ability with such a situation. Trauma causes helplessness and diminishes an individual's sense of self and the ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences. Intergenerational trauma is about the effects of trauma suffered or undergone by one generation which impacts future generations' lives and mental health. The problem has been pervasive among African-Americans, with law enforcement worsening the situation through racial bias and profiling that increases police brutality. This article describes the effects of intergenerational trauma as related to African-Americans and suggests trauma-informed interventions in U.S. law enforcement. The primary effects of intergenerational trauma among African-Americans include healthcare disparities, family problems, violence and abuse, and feelings of inferiority. The interventions to consider include offering continuous training lessons to law enforcement officers on police psychology, ensuring strict adherence to ethical conduct and enhancing healthcare and education sectors. Officers dismissed from the force for misconduct should not be rehired to increase public trust and to discourage the repetition of misconduct(s).*

KEYWORD: Trauma, intergenerational trauma, Trauma-informed intervention.



INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational trauma is a common problem that confronts African-Americans in the U.S. today. The concept of intergenerational trauma describes a situation where the effects of trauma are passed across generations. The related problems persist particularly if a parent encountered adverse childhood experiences or experienced abuse in childhood. Individuals suffering from intergenerational trauma depict symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as anxiety, hypervigilance, and mood dysregulation (Marschall, 2022). According to Clemmons (2020), African-Americans have experienced intergenerational trauma for centuries where one generation after the other experience the related effects often expressed through PTSD symptoms at the individual and cultural levels. The topic did not receive much attention in the past, but as it finds its way to the mainstream media, there is a need to explore the problem and solution(s) to confront related concerns (Clemmons, 2020). Halloran (2019) noted that the primary cause for the intergenerational trauma that the African-Americans face was the slavery that their ancestors encountered centuries ago, combined with social prejudice and poor economic circumstances. Consequently, chronic exposure to traumatic stress is increasingly understood as a common denominator among children, youth, and adults across service systems. Traumatic episodes include physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; family and community violence; natural disasters; wars; and the ongoing, cumulative impact of poverty, racism, and oppression (Gaurino, 2022). This article explores intergenerational trauma issues among African-Americans, the associated effects, and interventions that should be considered in law enforcement.

Background

Trauma is categorized into three, namely acute, chronic, and complex trauma. Acute trauma occurs because of solitary stressful events or horrific incidents. The related trauma could be after a motor accident, combat, or a natural disaster. Chronic trauma arises from continuous and extended exposure to very emotionally disturbing incidents such as child abuse, bullying, or domestic violence (Missouri Early Care & Education, n.d.). The third trauma category is complex trauma which happens when an individual experiences multiple or repeated types of trauma over some time. Effective interventions to complex trauma require a combination of intensive and extensive interventions and the adaptation of standard treatment. Examples of complex trauma are sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and physical abuse. The intergenerational trauma confronting African-Americans is categorized as complex trauma because they are constantly exposed to psychological, social, or physical traumatic experiences. A person's reaction to trauma is influenced by variables like individual characteristics, event(s) type and characteristics, and socio-cultural factors (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). After an incident of trauma, the subsequent reaction of survivors is complicated and influenced by personal experiences, access to quality care and service providers, self-management mechanism and personal skills, family disposition, and the reactions within the neighborhood where survivors reside. People exposed to intergenerational trauma hardly understand the associated effects and where to obtain help. The problems that exposure to traumatic experiences causes necessitate the need to introduce effective intervention programs for the problems. Trauma-informed programs shed light on people's reactions to stress and the common responses to trauma. Individuals should be conscious of the consequences of trauma in a group of people and individuals.



Effects of Intergenerational Trauma among African-Americans

Health Outcomes

As African-Americans are exposed to intergenerational trauma, this leads to adverse health effects at the individual and community level that are worth understanding prior to developing appropriate interventions. The first effect is a significant deterioration of health outcomes among African-Americans. Asare (2022) indicated that as a result of intergenerational trauma, the blacks face racial battle fatigue where the victims develop psychological, physiological, and emotional strains because of race-related stressors. Repetitive exposure to such experiences leads to deleterious health implications and negative health outcomes. This was evident in a 2010 study focusing on aging among black women. The study revealed that when black women are exposed to prolonged stressors, they tend to experience accelerated biological aging (Asare, 2022). Goosby and Heidbrink (2013) insisted that constant exposure to traumatizing experiences could lead to early mortality. For instance, constant exposure of blacks to aggressive law enforcers in the U.S. has resulted in a significant increase in mortality. Fatal police violence since the 1980s has been highest among African-Americans than in other ethnic groups leading to more deaths and injuries among the former (GBD, 2019; Police Violence U.S. Subnational Collaborators, 2021).

Equally, a different study established that when people are exposed to intergenerational trauma such as racism targeting the African-Americans, common in the U.S. law enforcement, this creates higher stress levels and contributes to increased risk for blood pressure. Statistics suggest that compared to other ethnic communities in the U.S., blacks have a higher likelihood of developing hypertension health complications (Asare, 2022). Bowden (2020) reiterates the mental and physical health implications of intergenerational trauma on the Black community. Adverse healthcare disparities in healthcare remain pervasive in the U.S., where African-Americans are the most affected, suggesting that the problems emanate from intergenerational experiences (Goosby & Heidbrink, 2013). This suggests that if the U.S. government and other stakeholders are genuine in their efforts to confront disparities in the healthcare system, the focus should be on introducing solutions that target the root causes; intergenerational factors persistent in law enforcement.

Deteriorated Self-Esteem

Furthermore, as African-Americans are exposed to intergenerational trauma, they lose self-esteem, affecting their quality of life. Bowden (2020) warns that as the Blacks are consistently exposed to intergenerational trauma, they develop fear and a sense of inferiority that affects their day-to-day lives. Similar observations have been reported following studies conducted to understand the segregation of black children because of intergenerational issues. For instance, a 1940 study to explore segregation among black children revealed that many black children opted for white dolls over black dolls as they perceived the black dolls as inferior to the white dolls (Asare, 2022). While in public, parents advise their African-American children to keep their hands out of pockets and keep receipts of their purchases at the store to avoid the consequences of racial profiling that could in extreme cases involve shootings by law enforcement officers (Bowden, 2020). Other studies conducted in recent decades have replicated the findings emphasizing how intergenerational trauma weakens self-esteem among African-Americans. Particularly, as the black community's ancestors faced slavery, they developed feelings of depression and hopelessness. The associated negative stereotypes have



become internalized and passed over generations (Asare, 2022). Trauma can make a person have negative views and lose hope in the future. It can make a person limit their life expectations, worry about sudden death, or be anxious that one's plans may not materialize (e.g., access to education, potential to keep important and lasting relationships, and the ability to take up any employment).

Many African-Americans generally believe that blacks have fewer opportunities to succeed in America. The concerns could be linked to intergenerational trauma, particularly the concept of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness describes a situation where individuals feel helpless and believe that they can never change their condition or situation despite what they do. Thus, when individuals get frustrated, they will stop trying to change circumstances (Asare, 2022). Many African-Americans find themselves in such situations. Quillian et al. (2017) lament that since the 1990s, although there are claims that workplace discrimination against blacks has reduced, data suggests otherwise; workplace discrimination against black applicants has remained the same since the 1990s. The law enforcement agency continues to disadvantage the blacks considering that people from the community continue to face racial bias and police brutality. African-Americans suffer from reduced confidence and self-esteem to actively look for justice.

Family Problems

Moreover, intergenerational trauma's effects on African-American families cannot be overlooked. Hill (2017) emphasizes the negative impacts of intergenerational trauma on families. Specifically, within families, intergenerational trauma leads to increased incidents of drug and substance abuse that often increases violence (Hill, 2017). Traumatized individuals abuse substances to regain emotional control over their lives. Sadly, it ends up worsening the problem of emotional dysregulation. (e.g., changes in behavior induced by alcohol, drugs, etc., which may return after the substance use). The behaviors will be passed from one generation to another, creating dysfunctional families (Hill, 2017). Intergenerational trauma could improve family connections (as they confront the generational trauma together) or cause them to drift apart, but the negative effects are more evident. The negative effects of related experiences on families include detachment, disconnection, neglect, abuse, estrangement, and violence (Ryder & White, 2022). Hill (2017) asserts that the negative impact of intergenerational trauma on families is caused by poor parent-child relationships, a repetition of negative behaviors and parenting beliefs, personality disorders and traits, and unresolved thoughts and emotions.

Common Experiences and Responses to Trauma

Researchers documented numerous reactions to traumatic events. The majority of trauma survivors react immediately to traumatic events without any serious permanent effects. The reason for this is that the majority of trauma survivors are very tough and come up with appropriate coping mechanisms, such as the use of social support, to cope with the fallout and effects of trauma. Many heal over time, display little distress and perform well in all major areas of life and stages of development. Many persons with minor impairment sometimes cause subclinical symptoms that are not similar to the diagnostic criteria for acute stress disorder (ASD) or PTSD. Very few people with past records of trauma manifest impairment and symptoms described as trauma-related stress disorders, anxiety, and mood disorders (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). Such response patterns are normal reactions to trauma



and can cause distress when experienced. Those reactions do not mean an individual has psychological issues or disorders. Stress caused by trauma is made up of unique sets of symptoms and criteria.

Triggers for Intergenerational Trauma

Triggers

The triggers describe personal events that lead to a recollection of a previous traumatic incidence or an aspect of the trauma episode. A trigger is any feeling capable of bringing memories of a traumatic event to one's mind. For example, sound, odour, temperature, physical sensation, or visual scene. Triggers can come from anything similar to past traumatic events, for example, returning to the trauma scene or environment, seeing one's child approach the age that a victim suffered the trauma, watching the same dog breed which attacked you approaching, or hearing loud voices. Triggers occur on the same anniversary, day, or time the event occurred. For example, when one momentarily got stuck in a car following an accident, some years later, one could fail to open a locked door after visiting a restroom stall. Consequently, the individual could start to experience a rush of panic resembling the accident, despite the other avenues of escape. Some triggers may be recognizable and expected; fortunately, most are mild and normal, often arising suddenly to the surprise of the survivor (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). It is vital to help the client know possible triggers during treatment, grasp the connection between strong reactionary feelings and triggers, and evolve coping mechanisms to handle such situations when a trigger happens.

Flashbacks

Flashback is a replay or re-experience of a past disturbing event as if it is happening presently. It involves reactions that always mirror the client's response during the trauma. Flashbacks are transient and usually fade away quickly, but the consequences following the reaction could stay for many hours. A trigger often prompts flashbacks. Sometimes, they spring up from nowhere. On other occasions, certain physical conditions elevate a person's susceptibility to re-experiencing a trauma. Flashbacks can resemble a scene from a movie that hits the clients unexpectedly. Take a case where a survivor observes noises or smells from a burning vehicle. This may make a veteran react in a way that suggests they are on patrol. Nightmares and the associated intrusive emotions and thoughts are another way people re-experience flashbacks (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). In the USA, regular reports of white police officers killing unarmed black men and women leads to a strong outpouring of emotions. Each time such police brutality against blacks occurs in America, the reaction from the black community is always elaborate as a result. This is a flashback phenomenon.

Re-enactments

A defining feature of trauma is a relief experience of the trauma in various ways. Trauma re-experience happens in many ways, one of which is called re-enactment (literally, to "redo"). Re-enactment is a process whereby trauma survivors continuously relive and recreate past traumatic events in their present lives. This is obvious in children who typically mimic others while playing. For instance, a child could act as if he is smashing a toy airplane inside a building made of toys upon watching videos of the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, by terrorists on the 11th September, 2001. Efforts to understand re-enactments are complex since it occurs for various reasons. Occasionally, people relive old traumas to master



them (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). Some examples of re-enactment include: reckless driving, self-injuring actions, hypersexuality, trekking alone in dangerous places, or entanglement from one catastrophic relationship (e.g., habitually entering new romantic relationships with toxic or violent people. In one recent incident in Galveston, Texas, a white cop on a horse was seen being escorted by a black offender. Although the police authorities stated that this was a normal procedure, the black American community was furious about it, as it was the enactment of the white slave master and the black slave. If the picture is reversed, it will not generate the same feeling.

Trauma-Informed Interventions

The trauma-informed intervention seeks to realize the general effects of trauma and map the road to recovery; recognize the manifestation of trauma in victims, relations, and personnel; integrate the current understanding of trauma into practices, policies, and procedures to actively avoid re-traumatization (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). Organizational-based care is a methodical approach to service delivery focused on knowing the causes and effects of trauma. It encourages toughness and recovery. Trauma-informed organizations ensure that their mission, culture, and practice areas are aligned to recognize and support trauma survivors (DeCandia et al., 2014). A broad approach to trauma-based programs must be adopted at the organizational level. The USA Police Department and Judiciary must imbibe a trauma-informed approach in their dealings and work closely with mental health services in employment, training, and continuing education of their staff. Training sessions should focus on police psychology that advocates for performing duties lawfully, effectively, morally, and safely. The suggestion will help mitigate the systemic risks that increase the potential for police racial bias and brutality among the vulnerable, such as the people of color.

Additionally, the U.S. law enforcement should adhere to a strong ethical code of conduct that needs to be regularly updated by involving community members including the vulnerable African-Americans. This will necessitate the need for law enforcement officers to act morally and ensure justice where their priority should be on the consequences of their behaviors and actions. The adherence to the ethical standards and expectations should be closely monitored, and misconduct immediately disciplined, for instance, through suspension or firing based on the nature of the misconduct. This will increase the confidence that the communities, specifically the African-Americans, have in the country's law enforcement system, consequently offering solutions to the underlying intergenerational problems that the blacks have previously faced. When law enforcement officers are fired or resign to avoid investigation, they should not be rehired because the public will lose trust in the police, not to mention that such law enforcers could repeat previous acts of misconduct if rehired. For instance, the 2014 Cleveland, Ohio fatal shooting of a 12-year-old by Officer Tamir Rice revealed that the officer had previously resigned to avoid investigation for misconduct and was deemed unfit to serve (Peeples, 2020). Thus, to avoid a repetition of such incidents, law enforcement officers fired for misconduct should not be rehired.

Furthermore, much of the learning and experiences about intergenerational trauma happens within the educational sector which emphasizes the need to consider the sector with appropriate interventions. The focus should be on offering coaching and training sessions to teachers and other stakeholders. The programs will increase the capacity of human and health services in the sector, consequently enhancing the ability to mitigate the negative effects of trauma on African-American youths, children, and adults (Guarino, 2022).



Other major principles of a trauma-informed approach to care that are necessary to transform a health care setting are:

Safety - within the healthcare establishments where clients and employees should feel physically, emotionally, and mentally safe. Decisions should be made transparently to create and maintain trust.

Peer Support - Persons with common experiences are brought into the establishment and considered central to service delivery.

Collaboration - Power difference between personnel and patients and among organizational staff is leveled to support shared decision-making. Through empowerment, workers' strengths are appreciated, fine-tuned, and validated—this includes a belief in toughness and the capacity to recover from trauma. Humility and responsiveness biases and stereotypes (e.g., based on sociodemographic characteristics) and generational trauma are identified and corrected (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014).

Way Forward

Training in trauma-informed care is vital for security agencies and health care providers to correct this issue. This education is necessary to enhance the abilities of caregivers to offer comprehensive patient care, being attuned to how a set of life experiences may contribute to an individual's present health disposition and status. Security agencies need to be conscious of the spectrum of unexpected potential responses they may encounter from clients so that when their attention is drawn to a case of abuse, they may discern that any perceived absence of emotions on the victims' part is not an indication that they have not been subjected to abuse.

CONCLUSION

Intergenerational trauma generally is about the effects trauma suffered or undergone by one generation impacts the lives and mental state of children in coming years. Such negative effects may involve a set of psychological symptoms in addition to increased vulnerability to stress and resilience. Adopting a trauma-informed approach will raise awareness, lower the incidents of destructive responses by security agencies, encourage better relationships amongst the races and reduce the negative outcome of interventions.



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