

Chapter 6

Addressing Racism as a Public Health Crisis: A Civic Duty

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ABSTRACT

The chapter will focus on three main implications for marginalization and critical race theory (CRT) on the future of social justice advocacy work. First, addressing racism as a public health crisis through the lens of CRT will be discussed in examining current policy and future declarations, specifically within the profession of social work and other public health and human service domains. Second, how to heal through fostering healthy co-created community relationships will be discussed in relation to individual and collective self-care strategies that address the whole person, group, and community. Third, a value in social justice as a civic duty will be examined as a new way forward in reducing systemic and structural racism.

The murder of George Perry Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and the COVID-19 pandemic, brought to light a magnification and undeniable acknowledgement that racism is a public health crisis for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) in the United States. As a result of these two major global impacts at the beginning of 2020, many leaders around the world are now advocating for formal statements and legal policy to be made in declaring the urgency for addressing systemic and structural racism in all systems of care within the United States and beyond.

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To prepare for implementing collective strategic action in combating implicit and explicit racial inequities that are embedded in our liberal order, a new narrative and lens must be used.

Having the capacity to fully comprehend the severity of the crisis will require those that identify as white to adopt a cultural humility approach from the perspective of Black consciousness while examining the harm of white supremacy thinking and culture that lies at the root of systemic racism in the United States. As a case in point, in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), James Baldwin's essay the *Stranger in the Village* recounts what the experience is like as a Black man in an all- white village. Baldwin captures the despair of absolute isolation from the village where he lived. While a person that identified as being white might have found the place to be a close-knit community and intimately bound in cultural belonging, he felt a profound sense of alienation.

Baldwin's narrative is missing from the majority of those in public positions that have the ability to make changes to our legal policies. Integrating Black consciousness into the dominant collective of those in positions of power is requisite for reconciliation and racial equity to occur and for all marginalized and historically minoritized people to be truly liberated in American society.

Compared to the maturity of many other countries, the United States of America as a society is still in its infantile stage. Yet, its citizens, mired in a belief in national exceptionalism, are often suspended in a perpetual egotistical and individualized state that is fueled by an imbalanced need to feed the id. The id often termed the pleasure principle, is highly dependent on instant gratification. When confronting racism as a social injustice, often individuals that identify as white experience extreme discomfort, which bestows a rejection of the id (pleasure principle) and an ensuing feeling of anxiety and tension remains. In the development of the ego on an individual level, psychoanalysts claim that identity development, consciousness raising, and the ability to understand reality are necessary skills that must be developed for progressive change and elevation to higher states of consciousness to occur. From a collective perspective, this same concept could be applied to American culture as a way to address racism as a public health crisis. Its plausible to assume that in the search for a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive world, America will need to mature into a shared identity, collective consciousness, and undivided reality.

As a repercussion of neoliberalism, white Americans have often been performative and optical in their actions to address systemic racism, oppression, and inequality. Performative and optical action serves the same purpose as tokenism, which is the perfunctory or symbolic effort to address social injustice by recruiting marginalized and historically minoritized people within a group or organization in an effort to appear inclusive and equitable. The difference is sizable with limited antiracist

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