

Promoting Empowerment in the Face of Societal Inequities: What I learned as a Psychologist in the Hood*

Bryan K. Nichols, Ph.D.

I'm going to share with you some of my experiences as a psychologist working in community-based programming over the past 30 years. I consider it a bit of an Odyssey, as I travelled from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles, program to program, spreading the good word of what self-awareness, appropriate emotional expression, and determined persistence could do for African American and other youth of color living under adverse conditions in South Los Angeles. In the tradition of great mythologies, I'd like to report this as a "Hero's Journey." However, after many humbling sidetracks, I have no heroic finale to report. I can only say with certainty that to more completely help our youth in seeking a fair chance at their "pursuit of happiness," something on a more "macro" scale of intervention in the whole of our society is necessary before our more "micro" interventions can fully take hold.

I am a graduate of Howard University, a great Historically Black Institution in Washington D.C. established in the aftermath of slavery where tens of thousands of ex-slaves were educated. In my freshman orientation at Howard, I was told that for each of us fortunate enough to be there, there were 10 others who couldn't, and that we owed it to those other 10 to do something of importance with our education.

I carried that value to my next academic institution on the West Coast, UCLA, the school of Jackie Robinson. My dissertation was a study of the effects of leadership training on a group of largely African American youth in a South Los Angeles middle school (Nichols, 1985). To my surprise, being a "leader in the hood" wasn't all it was

“cracked up to be.” Contrary to my prediction, those leaders, as a whole, did not gain in a sense of control and power as result of being in a leadership class, especially after the principal told them they’d be better served focusing on their grades than bothering with affairs of running the school. Upon further examination, the leaders who did buy into our message that they had the knowledge and power to suggest meaningful school wide changes actually suffered drops in self-esteem. On the other hand, those who weren’t “drinking our cool aid,” as it were, protected their self-esteem by not believing that anybody cared what they had to say about the functioning of their school.

This was a great lesson speaking to my naiveté about helping African American youth achieve greater personal and collective outcomes through activities designed to enhance personal power, or in the words of Psychologist Albert Bandura, self-efficacy (1982). It was as though those kids who protected their self-esteem by not

** Paper presented at the 27th Annual Interdisciplinary Conference of the International Forum for Psychoanalytic Education - SKIN. October 28, 2016.*

believing that they had any real power were telling me, “ain’t nobody gonna listen to us, Doc”.

On the other hand, those youth who did “buy into the program”, internalized responsibility for failure in a way that foreshadowed later research by Claude Steele on a phenomenon he called “stereotype threat” (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat is a kind of performance anxiety that occurs when individuals believe they are in situations that could confirm a negative stereotype, such as African Americans taking standardized testing fearing the results could confirm the stereotype of intellectual inferiority. It would seem to leave our kids facing a bit of a psychological “Sophie’s Choice,” choosing either to seek success through conventional means and suffer much anxiety and possibly self-doubt, or reject that path altogether and risk a life of social and material marginalization.

But, I am a hard headed sort and I persevered with community oriented programming, learning and training in a culturally oriented parenting program entitled *Effective Black Parenting* (Alvy & Marigna, 1985) and a culturally oriented Anger Management Program entitled *Dealing with Anger* (Hammond & Yung, 1991). Later, I thought that God had fulfilled my dreams when a community based organization contracted with me to work in a gang prevention program entitled, *L.A. Bridges*, which, 11 years later, the city of Los Angeles morphed into a program called *Gang Reduction Youth Development* (GRYD).

Throughout the many years of my work in these programs, I have never stopped being amazed at the tremendous strength and resilience I’ve witnessed in youth and

families contending with overwhelming social and personal obstacles. I've seen parents transform their parenting styles to create firm and loving households that nurture secure and curious children. I've seen middle schoolers at risk for gang involvement transform into high achieving high schoolers and distinguished college graduates. And, I've seen ex-gang members pursue a path of redemption through service to their communities and commitment to their families.

And yet, I've also seen a stubborn inertia that seems to limit program achievement to barely significant outcomes. I recall the young man in our gang intervention program whose progress was so startling and surprising that we called him into our staff meeting to congratulate him, only to find a few weeks later that he was the star of the most recent L.A. helicopter filming of a police car chase following a bank robbery. I remember the case of the middle school boy who left my Anger Management class where I had just imparted the wisdom and justification for not attending and "egging-on" fights. Soon thereafter, he attended a fight, pushed off a school administrator who fell onto him while trying to stop the fight, and was subsequently unceremoniously transferred to another school for having "assaulted" the administrator. Finally, I remember and mourn the 5 clients of my gang intervention program who were the victims of murder, or, perhaps more profoundly, were the victims of a nihilistic system of presumed self-defense that ushered them toward the streets.

Research has identified positive findings. Effective Black Parenting did result in warmer, more affirmative and loving parenting practices (Myers et al., 1992) and the culturally adapted Dealing with Anger program resulted in fewer teens going through the correctional system (Yung & Hammond, 1995). Yet, implementation of these programs is not as widespread as I think it should, possibly because there is often resistance to programs attuned to one cultural group. The GRYD prevention program does appear to reduce the risk of gang involvement for young program participants (Cahill et al., 2015), and the GRYD prevention/intervention programs as a whole appear to have reduced gang violence in city “hot spots” in comparison to comparable areas in other parts of Los Angeles County, but only slightly, and not to a level that reaches statistical significance across the city.

It feels like we work so hard just to take an “inch of ground.” But, from my perspective, the struggles of our community programs aren’t just due to the intractability of the problems of the families and youth with whom we work. They are also due to the difficulty in establishing a well-oiled cohesive collaboration amongst the providers of those programs, the funders of those programs, and the evaluators of those programs.

For instance, with the *L.A. Bridges* program, contractors responsible for evaluation were de-funded after year one for reasons unknown to me. No proper evaluation was ever conducted. An audit was conducted by the city comptroller and it was very unfavorable to the program, paving the way for the program’s ultimate demise

some years later. I wonder how a program that costs the city over \$10 million per year could get sidetracked to the extent that a contracted evaluation could never occur. What forces were at play here?

In the subsequent version of L.A.'s approach to gangs, the GRYD program, the city was keen on not repeating the mistakes of *LA Bridges*, and showed an "iron will" toward having evaluation conducted. This remains an on-going process and the ultimate results are yet to be known, but early meetings involving the city, the evaluators, and the providers often broke down into camps of finger pointers, providers not trusting intentions of the researchers, and researchers not accommodating the concerns of providers, all now with about a \$20 million dollar program at stake.

Psychological Underpinnings

I have spent many years pondering the issues that seem to impede the magnitude of success that feels so attainable, yet remains frustratingly elusive. We have done good work, and many youth and families have benefitted, but in my view, not as many as could, or should. What psychological factors underlie the struggles for program success?

A few years ago, with these questions persistently dominant in my mind, I happened upon a path that shed light on what I intend to boldly claim is “The Solution” to what ails us in community programming. I attended a conference with my friend and colleague, Dr. Medria Connolly, where we were invited to participate in a process of encouraging more diversity in future conferences. As a part of this process, Dr. Connolly and Dr. Pat Ogden, the founder of Sensorimotor Psychotherapy (Ogden, 2015), made a presentation on the potential derailing influence of implicit racial bias in bi-racial therapeutic dyads (Ogden, P., & Connolly, M., 2016).

Though I had been generally aware of the growing literature on implicit bias, the process of developing this presentation sharpened my focus. This literature essentially states that even the most well-intentioned Caucasian American is vulnerable to having stored unconscious racial biases that can impact their perceptions and actions toward African Americans. This process can affect a wide range of circumstances, from individuals determining whether to shoot potential criminal suspects (Kahn, K. & McMahon, J., 2015) to teachers assessing the severity of preschooler’s behavior (Gilliam et al, 2016).

I reflected on the writings of Psychoanalyst Dr. Kimberly Leary (2000), who described how racial enactments, the unconscious replaying of the oppressor/oppressed dynamic, can cause the break down of therapeutic process where the therapist is white and client is black. I also became aware of writings of an African American Jungian, Dr. Sam Kimbles (2014). Dr. Kimbles says that there is such a thing as a “Cultural Unconscious” that contains unresolved cultural conflicts aggregated into “cultural complexes.” Those cultural complexes may

then give rise to what he calls “Phantom Narratives,” that disrupt the cultural discourse.

Could it be that implicit bias is contributing to racial enactments corrupted by phantom narratives that undermine effective collaboration amongst well-intentioned people trying to remediate problems in the hood?

The Psychological Case for Reparations

With these questions in mind, I also became aware of the writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose popular book, “Between the World and Me” (2015), is a letter to his teenage son about the perils of being African American in contemporary America. I soon discovered that Coates had also written another quite compelling article in the Atlantic entitled, “The Case for Reparations” (2014). In that article, in great detail, he spells out the historical economic hardship suffered by African-Americans caused by explicit governmental policies over much of the 20th century. He notably identifies red-lining as a policy of restricting African American access to good and affordable real estate which has greatly contributed to the wealth disparity in which the median Caucasian American wealth is about 13 times the median wealth of African Americans (Pew, 2014). In response to these and other sources of economic

discrimination, Coates articulates the case for the American government to materially compensate the descendants of American slavery for the centuries of uncompensated work and stolen wealth. He notes that since 1989, Congressman John Conyers of Michigan has introduced legislation to study the possibility of reparations, but it has never gotten out committee for a full vote in the United States House of Representatives.

I had never given much serious thought to reparations before reading Coates. Practically every Black person has heard talk of “40 acres and a mule.” Spike Lee even gave his production company that name. But only recently did I realize that it was Union General William Tecumseh Sherman in 1865 who issued a proclamation that freed slaves should be granted “40 tillable acres of land” confiscated from former rebel plantation owners. He proclaimed further that the government should loan those freed slaves a mule to plow that land. In a pattern of ambivalence that has marked much of American history, that order was rescinded by President Andrew Johnson just 9 months later, taking land back from the 40,000 former slaves who enjoyed one brief moment in the reparations sun.

Twenty-Five years later, there was a movement to grant pensions to ex-slaves (Farmer-Paellmann, 2003) that lasted into the early part of the 20th century. About 600,000 ex-slaves lobbied for this pension. However, the ex-slave pension movement, led by a single mother of 5, Callie House, was ultimately destroyed by government officials who prosecuted and convicted House “under the pretext of protecting the ex-slaves from the exploits of fraudulent organizers” (Farmer-Paellmann, 2003, p. 27).

In reviewing these and other cases, I've come to realize that there is a long and serious history of seeking some form of compensation for the descendants of American slavery. Coates' case for reparations, in particular, is a plea for a moral, political and economic solution to a history of injustice. But I'm a psychologist, and I couldn't help but think of what this could mean, psychologically speaking, to the many youth and families I've worked with over the years. What would it mean that institutions such as the American government, various states, some corporations, and even some universities, acknowledged the incredible harm done through the Crime against Humanity that was slavery, and then offered material compensation? What entrenched negative psychological states of African American individuals might get loosened by this macro level policy of reparations?

Early in the 20th century, W. E. B. Du Bois, in his landmark book "The Souls of Black Folk," highlighted the pain of ambivalence embedded in the experience of African American life that still resonates today:

"One ever feels his two-ness, –an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 1903, p. 5)

More than 90 years later, in his book chapter entitled, "Nihilism in Black America," Cornell West stated:

"we must delve into the depths, namely the murky waters of despair and dread that now flood the streets of black America... to face up to the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America..."(West, 1993, p.19).

Unreconciled ambivalence! The torturous meaninglessness of nihilism! These are the kinds of painful psychological states worthy of our attention, and candidates as targets of a profound, history altering socio-political intervention.

But there's more. Molefi Asante, African American Studies professor, has suggested that reparations would address the psychology of both African and Caucasian Americans by promoting, "psychological relief for both blacks and whites in terms of guilt and anger, and... national unity based on a stronger political will." (Asante, 2003, p.10).

Asante is saying nothing less than reparations could have healing power for the whole of our country! This belief is echoed in the writings of psychoanalyst and sociologist Jeffrey Prager, who stated that the challenge for countries who have

traumatic pasts is, “to gain closure over a past that bifurcates the nation and establishes (at least) two national histories - history as told by the victims and by the perpetrators...” (Prager, 2008, p.405).

In my journey through various highly ambitious efforts to improve the lives of African Americans, I believe I witnessed many of these psychological issues at play, especially in the multi-cultural interfaces involved in planning a large scale urban program. I recall one meeting in particular between city government officials, program researchers, and agency providers regarding the researchers’ wish to establish an experimental design in conducting the program’s evaluation. Such a design would have required random assignment to program and to a no treatment control. This was anathema to providers whose orientation is to help all they can and not subject the needy to a no treatment control for the sake of science. As we walked out of the meeting that day, I heard utterances of “Tuskegee,” a reference to a 40-year longitudinal research project conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service with African American men (Reverby, 2013). The men were studied to learn about the long-term effects of syphilis, requiring, by their scientific methodology, that the men receive no treatment for their disease, or even that they be made aware that treatment for syphilis was available.

What emotions underlie such references? Certainly we could probably dig and find Du Bois’ ambivalence, and West’s nihilism, but what stuck out to me was mistrust

and suspicion. And just beneath that mistrust and suspicion was fear, a terror of the repeat of exploitation that carries all the dynamics of post-traumatic stress.

And what would reparations do for that fear? That's a question I don't think I can adequately address without simultaneously referencing the "psychological relief for... whites" hypothesized by Asante.

My assumption is that those researchers were good people, and totally correct when they made the case for Randomly Controlled Treatments as the "Gold Standard" for program evaluations. But how could they have missed, or been indifferent to, the fears of a historically oppressed people on guard for exploitation. My conclusion is that it is denial born of the necessity to distance from the role of oppressor, exploiter, and perpetrator of a crime against humanity responsible for, amongst other things, the deaths of millions of Africans. I imagine a denial that says, 'these acts were in the past, and I cannot, and should not, be held accountable.'

But there are myriad contemporary voices describing the condition of, "white privilege" that benefits present day Caucasian Americans (e.g., Emba, 2016; McIntosh, 1990). Simultaneously we have increasing awareness as a society of ongoing bias that allows for unarmed African Americans to be killed by police at 5 times the rate of unarmed Caucasian Americans (Lowery, 2016), and for African Americans to be incarcerated at more than 6 times the rate of Caucasian Americans (Alexander, 2012). What forces underlie these unfortunate statistics?

My contention is that this denial is a powerful defense against shame, the shame of having benefitted from actions that contradict conscious values and intentions. My former classmate, and shame researcher, June Price Tangney (Tangney, 1990), tells us that whereas guilt is feeling bad about 'what I did,' shame is feeling bad about 'what I am.' I do believe that most of my psychoanalytic colleagues will agree that shame, next to terror, may be the most painful and disrupting emotion we experience. My claim here is that it is the defense against shame that creates a denial that protects an un-reflected-upon part of the psyche that is a storehouse for unconscious bias; and that part of the psyche "fights like crazy" not to be recognized.

If it can be said that slavery has damaged the meaning of skin for all Americans, then let reparations be the salve that heals our wounds. I propose reparations as an antidote for both the terror, protected by the suspicion of African Americans, and for the shame, protected by the denial of Caucasian Americans. It is the missing apology, and un-tendered compensation, that has stood waiting since the emancipation proclamation as the remaining unfinished business of resolving the crime of slavery. And to be clear, this is not White Americans apologizing and paying restitution to African Americans. It is institutions acknowledging misdeeds on behalf of all Americans. But, it does allow Caucasian Americans to once and for all say "I acknowledge and see you for all the pain my country has put you through," and for African Americans to say, most profoundly, "Thank you for seeing me."

If the impact of reparations could be as powerful as I believe, then my middle school leaders wouldn't have experienced that "Sophie's choice" I described, choosing between an anxiety ridden striving toward success on the one hand, and an ego saving yet life risking existence in the margins of society on the other. Reparations says, "you have possibilities young lady"! The world really can be yours with a little luck and lots of hard work. You don't have to worry about that steady headwind that used to blow against your ancestors because adults have finally gotten to the last step in resolving old hurts.

And what of the young man who couldn't bear the pressure of striving for success where it was unprecedented in his immediate world. Reparations allows me to say to him, "the world sees you now and acknowledges your pain. It is not a purposeless existence leading down a series of blind alleys. I can tell you without reservation that pursuing a better life is worth the risk". And he has the reasonable opportunity to believe me, buttressed by the fact that he and all his "boys" have received material compensation affirming that his humanity is recognized.

This journey toward the idea of reparations has been my personal odyssey, and as tends to happen on odysseys, I've been confronted with many humbling experiences. One such experience has been my realization that my assumption that America has never apologized for slavery was incorrect. I learned that in 2008 the US House of Representatives passed a resolution apologizing for slavery and racial segregation. In 2009, the US Senate passed *Senate Congressional Resolution 26 (111th): A concurrent resolution apologizing for the enslavement and racial segregation of*

African Americans. In this resolution, the Senate remarkably acknowledges the extended legacy of oppression in one section that reads:

*“Whereas the system of Jim Crow laws officially existed until the 1960’s - a century after the official end of slavery in the United States - until congress took action to end it, but (nevertheless) the vestiges of Jim Crow continue to this day;
Whereas African-Americans continue to suffer from the consequences of slavery and Jim Crow laws—long after both systems were formally abolished—through enormous damage and loss, both tangible and intangible, including the loss of human dignity and liberty;”*

At the end of this resolution are two disclaimers stating that nothing in the provision supports a claim against the United States or serves as a settlement of a claim.

I wondered where I was the days those resolutions got reported in the news. Why were they not events of such historical proportion that they didn’t get burned into the fabric of my memory? I think the reason for that is that the two resolutions never got reconciled into a joint resolution that could be sent to the President for signing, so we never got that super-hyped photo op of the president signing the apology. Nevertheless, it is a start. I look forward to the day of that presidential

signing, but not just of a resolution, but of a bill apologizing for slavery and authorizing the payment of reparations to the descendants of American slavery.

And as for that mandate given me by my predecessors at Howard University to live a life of service that honors those not so privileged as to gain a college education, I'd like to think I'm halfway home. Encouraging empowerment in the face of societal inequities remains a valuable and necessary enterprise. But it must be complemented by advocacy for a broader social policy intervention, reparations, that makes those inequities a little less daunting.

Bryan Nichols may be contacted at: Bnicholsphd@drnicholsandassociates.com

References

Alexander, M. (2011). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.

Alvy, K.T. & Marigna, M. (1985). *CICC's effective Black parenting program: Instructor's manual*. Studio City, CA: Center for the Improvement of Child Caring.

Asante, M. E. (2003). The African American warrant for reparations: The crime of European enslavement of Africans and its consequences. In R. A. Winbush (Ed.), *Should America pay reparations?: Slavery and the raging debate on reparations*. (pp. 3-13) New York: Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Bandura, A. (1982). Self-Efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist*. 37, 122-147.

Cahill, M., Janetta, J., Tiry, E., Becker-Cohen, M., Paddock, E., Serrakos, M.,

- Park, L., and Hennigan, K. (2015). *Evaluation of the Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development Program: Year 4 Evaluation Report*. Urban Institute.
- Coates, T-N. (2015). *Between the world and me*. New York: Random House.
- Coates, T-N. (2014). The case for reparations. Retrieved from <http://theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-reparations/361631/>
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of black folk*. Chicago, IL: A.C. McClung and Co.
- Emba, E. (2016). What is white privilege? Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/01/16/white-privilege-explained/?utm_term=.fd58f54c83e7
- Farmer-Paellmann, D. (2003). Excerpt from black exodus: The ex-slave pension movement reader. In R. A., Winbush, (Ed.), *Should America pay? Slavery and the raging debate of reparations*. (pp. 22-31) New York: Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.
- Gilliam, W., Maupin, A., Reyes, C., Accavitti, M., and Shic, F. (2016). *Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions? [A Research Study Brief]*. Yale University Child Study Center.
- Hammond, W.R. & Yung, B.R. (1991). *Dealing with anger: Givin' it, takin' it, workin' it out - A violence prevention program for African American youth [Video Program]*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- House Resolution 194 (110th). (2008). Apologizing for the enslavement and racial segregation of African Americans. Retrieved from <http://govtracks.us/congress/bills/110/hres194/text>
- Kahn, K. & McMahon, J. (2015). Shooting deaths of unarmed racial minorities: Understanding the role of racial stereotypes on decisions to shoot. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*. 1, (4), 310-320. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tps0000047>.
- Kimbles, S. (2014). *Phantom narratives: The unseen contributions of culture to psyche*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kochhar, R and Fry, R. (2014). Wealth inequality has widened along racial, ethnic lines since end of Great Recession. Retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/>

- fact-tank/2014/12/12/racial-wealth-gaps-great-recession/
- Leary, K. (2000). Racial enactments in dynamic treatment. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*. 10, [4], 639-653.
- Lowery, W. (2016). Aren't more white people than black people killed by police? Yes but no. Retrieved from http://washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/07/11/arent-more-white-people-than-black-people-killed-by-police-yes-but-no/?utm_term=.0302c13694ec
- McIntosh, Peggy. (1990). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. Retrieved from http://people.westminstercollege.edu/faculty/jsibbett/readings/White_Privilege.pdf
- Myers, H., Alvy, K., Arrington, A., Richardson, M., Marigna, M., Huff, R., Main, M., & Newcomb, M. (1992). The impact of a parent training program on inner-city African American families. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 20, 132-147
- Nichols, Bryan (1985). *Self-perceptions of control and esteem as related to participation in a leadership training program*. University of California at Los Angeles. Unpublished Dissertation.
- Ogden, P. & Fischer, J. (2015). *Sensorimotor psychotherapy: Interventions for trauma and attachment*. London: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.
- Ogden, P., & Connolly, M. (2016). *The implicit influence of culture in psychotherapy: What the body knows, how the body speaks*. Presentation at UCLA's Annual Interpersonal Neurobiology Conference: The Cultural Lens in Psychotherapy: Identity, Empowerment, and Context.
- Prager, J. (2008). Healing from history: Psychoanalytic considerations on traumatic pasts and social repair. *European Journal of Social Theory*. 11, (3), 405-419.
- Reverby, S. (2013). *Examining Tuskegee: The infamous syphilis study and its legacy*. United States: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Senate Congressional Resolution 26 (111th). (2009). A concurrent resolution apologizing for the enslavement and racial segregation of African Americans. Retrieved from <http://govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/sconres26/text>
- Steele, C. & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 69, [5], 797-811.

- Tangney, J. P. (1990). Assessing individual differences in proneness to shame and guilt: Development of the self-conscious affect and attribution inventory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59, 102-111.
- West, C. (1993). Nihilism in Black America. In C. West. *Race Matters (pp. 9-20)*. Boston: Beacon Press
- Yung, B. R. & Hammond, W.R. (1995). *Positive adolescent choices training: A model for violence prevention with African American youth [Program Guide]*. Champaign, Ill. Research Press.