

# The Role of Racism in Black Mental Health and Medicine

“The Vital Need for Reparations”



Dr. Joy DeGruy President & CEO of JDP, Inc.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE IN SAFE GUARDING THE SELF

Let me begin with the common empirical observations that people feel incomparably more alarmed by a threat to the psyche or the soul or the self than they are by a threat to the body.

. . . People will willingly sacrifice their bodies if they perceive it as the only way to avoid “losing their souls,” “losing their minds,” or “losing face.” In addition, **a person only develops a stable, integrated, and differentiated sense of selfhood or identity through the process of interacting with other humans in the community, or culture. The psyche is as dependent upon being nurtured by those modes of relationships and community, of childrearing and education, which we call culture, as the body is being nourished by food.** One consequence of that fact is that a perceived threat to the integrity and survival of a person’s culture is perceived as a threat to the integrity and survival of the individuals personality or character, and to the viability of one’s ethical value system . . . Those are among the reasons why the death of one’s culture is tantamount to the death of one’s self . .

James Gilligan, MD. (1997)

# James Marion Sims (1813-1883)



J. Marion Sims was a physician in the mid-1800's who was credited with the creation of the first vaginal speculum which was made from a pewter spoon. Sims built a makeshift hospital in his back yard where he conducted surgical experiments on countless un-anesthetized enslaved African women. Sims reasoned that slave women were able to bear great pain because their 'race' made them more durable, and thus they were well suited for painful medical experimentation.

# Shoemaker's Awl



Black infants (*the most innocent of Sims' victims*) suffered from what he termed “*trimus nascentium*,” now commonly referred to as neonatal tetanus. Sims attributed the condition to the indecency and intellectual flaws of black slaves, together with skull malformations at birth. Sims attempted to treat this malady by trying to pry the bones in the skulls of the tiny infants into alignment with the use of a shoemakers awl.

## Medical Dehumanization of African Women

Their first pathological symptom was their primary racial characteristic: their skin color. In a medical world that categorized life as either normal or pathological, people of the African Diaspora were continually condemned to the category of pathological, their 'abnormal' skin color serving as a foil for 'normal' white skin. Pathological causes for this condition were concocted in order to explain its prevalence.

Sander Gilman explains, "*Medical tradition has a long history of perceiving this skin color as the result of some pathology. The favorite theory, which reappears with some frequency in the early nineteenth century, is that the skin color and attendant physiognomy of the black are the result of congenital leprosy.*" Such medical arguments, in collusion with racist and stereotypic scientific and cultural explanations and excuses, provided the grounds for differential 'treatment.' <sup>22</sup>

# **Body Type: Another Example of Black Female Pathology & Rape Law**

Black females were perceived to be irreligious, lustful, and immoderate. Their protruding buttocks and genitals were offered as physical evidence of their pathology. This was in stark contrast to white females who, while still thought of as pathological, were perceived as fragile and frigid.

**Terri Kapsalis “Public Privates” (1997)**

“No white could ever rape a slave woman” The regulations of Law, as to the white race, on the subject of sexual intercourse do not and cannot, for obvious reasons, apply to slaves, their intercourse is promiscuous.”

**Dorothy Roberts “Killing The Black Body” (1956)**

# Misdiagnosing The Mind

In the early years of the nineteenth century, a physician named Samuel A. Cartwright argued that two particular forms of mental illness, caused by nerve disorders, were prevalent among slaves.

One was **drapetomania**, which was diagnosable by a single symptom: the uncontrollable urge to escape from slavery.

The other disorder **dysathesia aethiopica**, revealed many symptoms: destroying property, being disobedient, talking back, fighting with their masters and refusing to work.

Drapetomania was a psychiatric diagnosis proposed in 1851 by physician Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright, of the Louisiana Medical Association, to explain the tendency of black slaves to flee captivity.

The Mismeasure of Woman, Carol Tarvis, 1992

# The New York Times

## **Drug Overdoses Propel Rise in Mortality Rates of Young Whites**

January 16, 2016

There is a reason that blacks appear to have been spared the worst of the narcotic epidemic, said Dr. Andrew Kolodny, a drug abuse expert,

Studies have found that doctors are much more reluctant to prescribe painkillers to minority patients, worrying that they might sell them or become addicted.

“The answer is that racial stereotypes are protecting these patients from the addiction epidemic,” said Dr. Kolodny, a senior scientist at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University and chief medical officer for Phoenix House Foundation, a national drug and alcohol treatment company.

**By Gina Kolata and Sarah Cohen**



# Henrietta Lacks 1920 - 1951



Henrietta Lacks was born in Roanoke Virginia, she was poor and lived on a tobacco farm. In 1951 Henrietta was diagnosed and treated at Johns Hopkins for an aggressive form of cervical cancer that eventually lead to her rapid, painful and agonizing death.

Her cells now called (HeLa) were harvested without her knowledge and later became one of the most essential tools in medicine. Her cell cultures were used to develop the field of virology and later to the creation of polio vaccine, cloning, and gene mapping among other advancements.

The selling and shipping of Henrietta Lack's cells grew to be a multi-billion dollar industry However, the Lacks family have not received any financial benefits and today, are without sufficient income to meet their basic needs.

The statute of limitations and the potential disastrous impact on science and medicine from halting HeLa cell use, has resulted in no promising legal recourse for the family.

## 1951 - THE AUTOPSY OF HENRIETTA LACKS

“Mary stood beside Wilbur, waiting as he sewed Henrietta’s abdomen closed. She wanted to run out of the morgue and back to the lab, but instead, she stared at Henrietta’s arms and legs— anything to avoid looking into her lifeless eyes . . . Then Mary’s gaze fell on Henrietta’s feet, and she gasped: Henrietta’s toenails were covered in chipped bright red polish. “When I saw those toes, . . . I nearly fainted. I thought *she’s a real person*. I started imagining her sitting in her bathroom painting those toenails, and it hit me for the first time that those cells we’d been working with all this time and sending all over the world, they came from a live woman. I’d never thought of it that way.”

**Myths about physical racial differences were used to justify slavery,  
Are still believed by doctors today.**

New York Times - 2019

“A 2016 survey of 222 white medical students and residents published in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences showed that half of them endorsed at least one myth about physiological differences between black people and white people, including that black people’s nerve endings are less sensitive than white people’s. When asked to imagine how much pain white or black patients experienced in hypothetical situations, the medical students and residents insisted that black people felt less pain. This made the providers less likely to recommend appropriate treatment.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/racial-differences-doctors.html>

# 'Racial Battle Fatigue' Seems to Fuel Anxiety Disorder Among African-Americans

By RICK NAUERT PHD *Senior News Editor*  
Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on March 4, 2011



**Emerging research suggests chronic exposure to racial discrimination is analogous to the constant pressure soldiers face on the battlefield.**

**And, just as soldiers experience debilitating stress when they return home, African-Americans face race-based battle fatigue, according to Penn State investigators.**

**African-Americans who reported in a survey that they experienced more instances of racial discrimination had significantly higher odds of suffering generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) some time during their lives, according to Jose Soto, Ph.D.**

# IATROPHOBIA

*(Greek: Iatros= healer, phobia= fear )*

*Fear of Medicine*

## Harriet Washington: Medical Apartheid

“The much bewailed racial health gap is not a gap, but a chasm wider and deeper than a mass grave. This gulf has riven our nation so dramatically that it appears as if we were considering the health profiles of people in two different countries –a medical *apartheid*. Researchers have proffered a cornucopia of theories for this medical divide, many of which focus upon putative biological dimorphisms, especially genetic differences. **But in dissecting this shameful medical apartheid, an important cause is usually neglected: the history of ethically flawed medical experimentation with African Americans. Such research has played a pivotal role in forging the fear of medicine that helps perpetuate our nation’s racial health gulf.**”

# STRESS AND LEARNING

Joan Lessen-Firestone, Ph.D.

The remarkable growth and development of the neural cortex during the earliest years of life can only occur when a child feels emotionally secure in warm, stable relationships. **When young children are stressed, fearful, or insecure, the limbic (emotional) area of the brain actually prevents learning from occurring.**

Whenever a child feels stressed or frightened, a structure in the limbic systems responds by secreting cortisol into the bloodstream. This circulates through the body and washes over the neural cortex, where it prevents neural connections from being formed and strengthened. Even if excellent opportunities for stimulation and learning are present in the environment, children who are stressed cannot take advantage of them to develop their brains. . . .It is only when the period of stress ends and children again feel secure, that learning and higher-level thought processes can resume.

**June 6, 2021 Preschool Teacher Assaults a 4 year old non-verbal child**



Roswell Georgia day care under investigation for withholding food from Black children  
**April 12, 2021**





**March 7, 2017**

Nursery worker is fired after she was caught on camera 'pushing a four-year-old girl down the stairs' Sarah Gable, a daycare worker in Pennsylvania, was caught on camera pushing a 4-year-old girl down a set of steps. She has since been arrested. Shocking footage shows daycare worker pushing child down a flight of stairs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=az8C1kAsTq8>

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