The Impacts of Racism on Health

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“Race”-associated differences

- Routinely documented
- Poorly explained
- Treated as confounding
Dangers

- Impedes advance of science
- Limits primary prevention
- Perpetuates biological determinism
“Race” as a proxy

- Socioeconomic status
- Culture
- Genes
“Race” is a precise measure

- Social classification
- Differences in life experience
- Effects of racism
“Race” is a social construct

- Born with a heritage
- Assigned a “race”
- Variable between countries
- Variable over time
Levels of racism

- Institutionalized
- Personally-mediated
- Internalized
Levels of Racism:

A Gardener’s Tale
Institutionalized racism

- Initial historical insult
- Structural barriers
- Inaction in face of need
- Societal norms
- Biological determinism
- Unearned privilege
Personally-mediated racism

- Intentional
- Unintentional
- Acts of commission
- Acts of omission
- Maintains structural barriers
- Condoned by societal norms
Internalized racism

- Reflects systems of privilege
- Reflects societal values
- Erodes individual sense of value
- Undermines collective action
Who is the gardener?

- Government
- Power to decide
- Power to act
- Control of resources
- Dangerous when
- Allied with one group
- Not concerned with equity
Socioeconomic status and health

Isolating the impacts of racism
Isolating the impacts of racism

• Distribution of SES by “race”
  – Institutionalized racism

• Dependence of health on SES (slope)
  – Differences in meanings of SES measures
  – Differential exposures at a given SES

• Level of health at highest SES (intercept)
  – Differential access to health care
  – Differential treatment within health care system
  – Accelerated aging
Systolic blood pressure by “race”

Comparing full distributions
NHANES I

- Survey design
  - Probability survey
  - All 50 states
  - 1971-1975
  - Medical history
  - Direct examination

- Systolic blood pressures (n=20,428)
  - 2,178 “black” females
  - 9,778 “white” females
Systolic blood pressure by “race”

- Same-age comparisons
  - No differences in childhood
  - Shape differences in middle age

- Age-shifted comparisons
  - Acceleration of age-dependence
  - Shift of entire distributions
Significance of age-shifting

- Blood pressure and age
- Social meaning of “race”
Accelerated aging hypothesis

• Black-white differences in health outcomes in the US are due to accelerated aging of the black population.

• Accelerated aging of the black population in the US is due to racism.
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Implications for practice
Vigorously investigate the basis of observed “race”-associated differences in health outcomes

Interpret all “race”-related findings

Propose follow-up studies

View “race”-associated differences as important clues to be mined
Acknowledge that “race” is a social construct, not a biologic determinant

Explicitly measure genes if there is a genetic hypothesis

Model “race” as a contextual variable in multilevel analysis
Acknowledge the diversity within “racial” groups

Explicitly measure culture if there is a cultural hypothesis

Collect information on ancestry, migration history, and language
Acknowledge the association between “race” and social class, an association perpetuated by institutionalized racism.

Explicitly measure social class if there is a social class hypothesis.

Include measures of wealth, neighborhood characteristics, changes over lifespan.

Measure class on all federal and state data.
Acknowledge the present-day existence and impacts of racism

Develop explicit measures of institutionalized, personally-mediated, and internalized racism

Examine the role of racism in “race”-associated differences and in diminished health for all
Continue to collect data by “race” as long as there are “race”-associated differences in health outcomes

Specify why information is collected

Describe how “race” is measured

Collect other data, including measures of racism, social class, culture, and genes
Train persons from stigmatized backgrounds as epidemiologists

These scientists will bring new perspectives to the questions we have already asked

They will also raise new questions
Partner with communities to raise questions, generate hypotheses, and share findings

Recognize and respect the capacity within communities

Return information to communities so they can advocate for change
Initiate a national conversation on racism

Poor health of the stigmatized

Diminished health for all

Waste of human resources
Measures of institutionalized racism

• Aggregate
  – Degree of residential segregation
  – Median home value
  – School spending per pupil
  – Number of toxic dump sites
  – Community voter registration rates

• Individual
  – Education
  – Occupation
  – Income
  – Wealth
  – Family economic history
Measures of personally-mediated racism

• Aggregate
  – Differentials in medical procedure utilization
  – Patterns of hiring, retention, and promotion
  – Differentials in criminal sentencing

• Individual
  – Experiences of unfair treatment
  – [Measures adapted from available scales]
  – Formal discrimination complaints

• Experimental
  – Double-applicant test cases
Measures of internalized racism

- **Aggregate**
  - Distributions of skin color in exclusive clubs

- **Individual**
  - Personal voting history
  - Hiring or purchasing preferences and history
  - Dating histories by “race” and skin color
  - Perceptions of beauty
  - Measures of self-efficacy