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The Japanese American Wartime Incarceration: Examining the Scope of Racial Trauma

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Abstract

Ten weeks after the 1941 Japanese military attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the U.S. government authorized the removal of more than 110,000 Japanese American men, women, and children from their homes in Western portions of the country to incarceration camps in desolate areas of the United States. The mass incarceration was portrayed as necessary to protect the country from potential acts of espionage or sabotage that might be committed by someone of Japanese ancestry. However, an extensive government review initiated in 1980 found no evidence of military necessity to support the removal decision and concluded that the incarceration was a grave injustice fueled by racism and war hysteria. The Japanese American wartime experience represents a powerful case example of race-based historical trauma. This article describes the consequences of the incarceration for Japanese Americans during and after their unjust imprisonment, their coping responses and healing strategies, as well as the impacts of receiving governmental redress more than four decades after the war's end. Examination of this specific event provides a perspective for understanding the long-term, radiating effects of racial trauma and the process of healing, over a broad arc of time and across social contexts. Current relevance of the Japanese American incarceration and implications for the field of psychology are discussed.

Keywords

Japanese American; incarceration; internment; trauma; racism

History and racial trauma are inextricably linked. Given the complex multicultural and multiracial nature of contemporary society, an understanding of the history of racism and its impacts on communities of color is essential. Research on specific historical and race-based traumas can offer insights into these impacts and their long-range consequences. The present

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paper describes the World War II (WWII) Japanese American incarceration, a case example of racial trauma that occurred over 75 years ago, to provide a perspective on the scope of racial trauma and healing over a broad arc of time and across changing social contexts.

Historical Background

On February 19, 1942, 10 weeks after the Japanese military bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 and authorized the removal of all persons of Japanese ancestry from the western United States. More than 110,000 Japanese Americans were labeled as “potentially disloyal”; ordered to leave their homes, careers, and communities; and forced to live in isolated camps located in interior deserts and swamplands. They lived imprisoned behind barbed wire, watched by armed guards, for an average of two to four years. No charges were ever brought before the Japanese Americans, nor were they given the opportunity for a review. Included under the removal order were three generations: first-generation Japanese immigrants (*Issei*), U.S.-born second-generation Japanese Americans (*Nisei*), and their third-generation offspring (*Sansei*; see Figure 1 for generational terms).

Neither citizenship nor age mattered: two thirds of those imprisoned were U.S. citizens by birth (U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians [USCWRIC], 1997), including infants and young children. Instead, Japanese heritage alone was the basis for imprisonment: Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, the Commanding General for West Coast security, argued “The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become “Americanized,” the racial strains are undiluted ... It, therefore, follows that along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies, of Japanese extraction, are at large today” (USCWRIC, 1997, p. 6).

The injustice of framing the incarceration as a military necessity is striking given that, prior to Roosevelt’s issuance of E.O. 9066, the FBI, members of the Naval Intelligence, and Army General Staff did not see the need for mass removal and incarceration as there was no evidence of espionage or sabotage committed by a Japanese American citizen or resident Japanese alien on the West Coast (USCWRIC, 1997). In addition, although proximity to Japan was presented as the reason for removing Japanese Americans from the West Coast, no mass incarceration was implemented in Hawaii, which was significantly closer to Japan, and neither German nor Italian Americans were subjected to mass incarceration even though the United States was also at war with Germany and Italy. Racially charged post-Pearl Harbor fears and the economic self-interests of agricultural groups who would profit by taking over lands farmed by Japanese Americans played important roles in the calls for removal (Okiihiro & Drummond, 1991). Later investigations would conclude that the incarceration decision was not a justified military necessity but was instead shaped by “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership” (USCWRIC, 1997, p. xi)

The Incarceration as Trauma

Japanese Americans carried psychological burdens and an undeserved stigma from the unjust imprisonment long after the war's end. The incarceration remained "the mournful reference point from which these Americans describe changes in their communities, their personal lives, their aspirations" (USCWRIC, 1997, p. 301). Its powerful impacts reflect four important forms of trauma: individual, race-based, historical, and cultural. Individual and race-based traumas occurred at the time of incarceration, while the historical and cultural traumas emerged after the war ended at an intergenerational level. At the individual level, the suspicions of disloyalty from non-Japanese and their own government, sudden uprooting and imprisonment without wrongdoing, and uncertainty about their future shattered Japanese Americans' assumptive world, sense of self, and well-being (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). It is important that the incarceration also represented a powerful race-based trauma (Bryant-Davis, 2007). Japanese Americans were deliberately targeted for discriminatory treatment motivated by racial stereotypes, while German and Italian Americans were not. Decades of anti-Asian racism driven by perceptions of Japanese as untrustworthy and unassimilable foreigners preceded the war and resulted in laws restricting immigration, miscegenation, rights to citizenship, and land ownership (Daniels, 1988). This exclusion of Japanese Americans from mainstream society paved the way for a swift response following Pearl Harbor, with little objection from others. Poll data from the spring of 1942 showed that a majority of Americans favored removal (USCWRIC, 1997). Chinese Americans, who supported the incarceration given the history of conflict between China and Japan, helped spread the belief that Japanese Americans were untrustworthy and wore "I am Chinese" buttons (Wong, 2005). At the same time, nearly all Black and Jewish community organizations and civil liberties groups remained silent (Greenberg, 1995).

Two additional forms of trauma, historical and cultural, surfaced after the incarceration ended and are associated with long-term intergenerational impacts. Historical trauma has been defined as a trauma that is shared by a group of people and has impacts that span across multiple generations (Mohatt, Thompson, Thai, & Tebes, 2014). Consistent with this, evidence points to extended incarceration impacts that affected subsequent generations of Japanese Americans (Nagata, Kim, & Nguyen, 2015). Cultural trauma can be seen as a more specific manifestation of historical trauma. While historical trauma concerns intergenerational impacts broadly, cultural trauma focuses on the way in which a shared traumatic event impacts group consciousness and identity. It is defined as occurring "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a traumatic event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking memories forever and changing their future identity" (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). This article highlights both the immediate individual and race-based incarceration traumas experienced by the unjustly imprisoned Issei and Nisei Japanese Americans, as well as the long-term historical and cultural traumas experienced by their Sansei children and Yonsei grandchildren born after the war.

Incarceration Stressors and Coping

To comprehend the extent of incarceration-related traumas, it is important to understand the range of stressors that were involved. The psychological stress of helplessness and

uncertainty began within 24 hours of the Pearl Harbor attack. Approximately 1,500 Issei immigrant community leaders, deemed “high risk”, were abruptly taken from their homes by the FBI and sent to alien internment camps without any explanation for their arrests or information about their destination (USCWRIC, 1997). Anxiety grew quickly throughout the Japanese American community about who would be taken next and only increased as the government froze families’ assets and swept through homes confiscating radios, cameras, and items they believed might be used to aid the enemy. Panicked community members burned or buried anything that might link them to Japan, including family heirlooms. Fear, a gap in leadership after Issei leaders were arrested, and a cultural value of obedience and respect for authority resulted in broad compliance with the government’s incarceration orders (USCWRIC, 1997; Weglyn, 1976). Three Nisei—Gordon Hirabayashi, Fred Korematsu, and Minoru Yasui—bravely challenged the government’s orders at the time but were unsuccessful in their efforts and convicted of violating the government’s curfew and removal orders.¹

With less than two weeks’ notice of their removal and restricted to taking only what they could carry, Japanese Americans were suddenly forced to sell life’s possessions at a fraction of their worth and leave behind homes, businesses, unharvested crops, and family pets. The stress of grief and loss was exacerbated by the fact that they had no information about where they were being sent or for how long. For some, the indignity of the removal and anticipated confinement proved overwhelming. One Issei man committed suicide because he suffered from uncontrollable trembling and did not want to bring shame to his daughter if seen together in camp (Jensen, 1997). Another, who shot himself, was found holding an Honorary Citizenship Certificate that expressed gratitude for his prior military service to the United States (Weglyn, 1976).

Most Japanese Americans endured two separate dislocations. First, they were moved from their homes to temporary “assembly centers,” where they lived in hastily converted horse stalls at racetracks and in livestock pavilion halls as the government worked to finish the more permanent camps. After an average of three months, Japanese Americans were moved once again to the incarceration camps in trains with drawn shades and armed guards. Uncertainty sparked fears among many that they were being taken somewhere to be shot and killed.

Once incarcerated, the severe conditions of the barrack-style camps created additional physical and psychosocial stressors. Entire families were forced to live in a single room furnished only with cots, a coal-burning stove, a single ceiling light bulb, and no running water. Toileting, bathing, and meals all took place in communal facilities that required waiting in lines for activities that had previously taken place in private homes. Incarcerates endured harsh camp climates (including extreme temperatures and dust storms), substandard medical care and education (USCWRIC, 1997), as well as instances of food poisoning and malnutrition (Dusselier, 2002). Camp conditions also affected important aspects of traditional Japanese family relations (Morishima, 1973). Without a home base, children

¹Evidence was later found indicating that tainted records were deliberately presented to the Supreme Court during their original trials. The cases were re-raised in the 1980s and the convictions were eventually vacated (Irons, 1983).

spent more time socializing with peers than with family. Gender roles were disrupted as fathers lost their breadwinner role and mothers worked in the same low-wage camp jobs as men. At the same time, the camp governance structure required English for transactions and allowed only citizens to participate on community councils. This created intergenerational tensions as young adult bilingual Nisei held more powerful positions than their Japanese-speaking Issei elders (USCWRIC, 1997).

Additional stressors related to camp governance emerged around a mandatory “loyalty oath” questionnaire for all camp inmates 17 years and older. One question asked about willingness to serve in the armed forces of the United States. A second question asked each respondent to “swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States ...” and to “forswear allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization” (USCWRIC, 1997, p. 192). Although the majority of incarcerated viewed this as an opportunity to express their loyalty and answered “yes” to the two questions, serious concerns arose. Some were outraged at being asked to declare allegiance to a country that unjustly imprisoned them. Others worried that forswearing allegiance to Japan could (a) be misused as evidence that one had prior fealty to the emperor, or (b) leave the Issei stateless because they were barred from becoming U.S. citizens. Some young Nisei men felt the best way to show loyalty was to answer “yes-yes” and fight for the United States. This led to almost 33,000 Japanese Americans, including “yes-yes” volunteers and draftees, serving in segregated military units during WWII while their families were held behind barbed wire. The 442nd all-Nisei regimental combat team went on to become among the most-decorated units of the war (USCWRIC, 1997). Other Nisei men, however, believed that American loyalty meant resisting their draft orders until Japanese Americans were constitutionally released from incarceration. Convicted of draft evasion, they spent close to three years in federal prison (Muller, 2001). Incarcerated who responded “no-no” to express their anger and distrust were segregated into a more restrictive camp. Disillusioned by their treatment in America, 20,000 of these “no-no” individuals applied to go to Japan (USCWRIC, 1997). Families and friends became divided around what determined a “loyal” American, and tensions developed into riots and revolts in several camps (USCWRIC, 1997). The bitter differences between those advocating compliance, draft resisters, veterans, and “no-no’s” continued for decades after the war (Murray, 2008).

Outside the strain of the loyalty questions, camp life evolved as time progressed. Guided by core cultural values, incarcerated developed positive ways of coping with camp stressors individually and as a group (Nagata & Takeshita, 1998). Japanese collectivistic values of interdependence and social harmony encouraged adaptation and flexibility (Fugita & O’Brien, 1991), while an emphasis on *gaman* (perseverance through hardship) and *shikata ga nai* (fatalistic acceptance) encouraged remaining focused on each day, rather than looking to the past or worrying about the future. They actively engaged in individual artwork, hobbies, and connected with one another through social activities (e.g., camp sports teams, clubs, dances). Issei and Nisei also found ways to be resourceful with what was available to them (Nagata & Takeshita, 1998). Some, for example, transformed barren camp soil into areas for raising vegetables and fruits (Dusselier, 2002). However, the psychological stress proved too much to bear for others. Camp records indicate that 190 incarcerated were institutionalized for psychiatric problems and the number of reported on-site suicides were

estimated to be four times higher than the pre-incarceration rates for Japanese Americans (Jensen, 1997).

Eventually, Nisei who answered “yes-yes” to the loyalty questions but were not assigned to the military were eligible to leave camp before the war’s end—if they located employment away from the West Coast. Anxious to leave the confines of incarceration, many took low-status jobs as domestics and farmhands in states including Illinois, New York, and New Jersey, while their siblings and parents remained imprisoned until the war ended. These Nisei were given only a one-way bus or train ticket and \$25 as they ventured into new areas of the country with uncertain levels of anti-Japanese sentiments. Adding to the stress of this daunting transition, the government inhibited their ability to seek support from each other by instructing that they not live next to or congregate in public with other Japanese Americans (USCWRIC, 1997). Guided by their strong cultural commitment to a sense of family, most relocated Nisei later returned to the West coast to join parents and siblings who moved there after being released from the camps.

Postwar Impacts on Incarcerees

Japanese Americans returning to the West Coast were met with verbal abuse, rejection, and discrimination (Loo, 1993). In California, signs reading “No Japs Wanted” were frequent and communities held mass meetings to argue against their return. Seventy instances of terrorism and 19 shootings were identified (Girdner & Loftis, 1969). The actual numbers, however, likely were higher given the hesitancy of Japanese Americans to call attention to their situation.

Immigrant *Issei* faced particular hardships as the war ended. Although the exclusion orders were rescinded on December 14, 1944, the *Issei* were afraid to leave the isolated camps for potentially hostile communities. Half were 50 years or older just before the war and among those, 17% were older than 60 (Thomas & Nishimoto, 1969). Being older adults who had lost homes and businesses, most were unable to regain their livelihoods and became dependent on their children. Many also carried a strong sense of shame from being imprisoned and some committed suicide; this occurred especially among those who were elderly bachelors (USCWRIC, 1997).

The *Nisei* offspring, in their late teens and twenties, still had their lives before them. Despite significant barriers of racism and severe economic setbacks from the incarceration, they focused on building their future and assisting their *Issei* parents (Daniels, 1993). Many went on to establish successful livelihoods, leading some to portray them as a model minority who overcame the wartime hardships (Nakanishi, 1993). Such a portrayal, however, failed to recognize that Japanese Americans—*Issei* and *Nisei* alike—did not talk about the incarceration experience with outsiders or each other for decades. They displayed symptoms of avoidance and detachment associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Loo, 1993), mirroring the “conspiracy of silence” observed in trauma survivor groups across the world (Danieli, 1998). Results from a survey of over 400 *Nisei* indicated that more than 12% never spoke with their *Issei* parents about the camps, 50% spoke less than four times, and 70% of those who had any discussions conversed less than 15 minutes (Nagata, 1995).

Adding to this, the topic of incarceration remained absent from public discourse and textbooks. The resultant silence among Japanese Americans was more than an individual response and instead represented a form of “social amnesia” by the entire group to suppress the experience (Kashima, 1980).

Silence frequently serves as a means for individuals or communities to cope with trauma (Danieli, 1998) but it does not signify that the trauma has healed. In fact, silence can influence identity constriction, attitude formation, decision-making, and action at both the individual and collective levels (Stone, Coman, Brown, Koppel, & Hirst, 2012) and the incarceration silence had critical postwar consequences for the identity of Japanese Americans (Fugita & Fernandez, 2004; Nagata & Takeshita, 1998). Avoidance of their connection with Japan served as one way to cope with the wartime experience and racist realities of the larger society. Some Nisei shunned all products manufactured in Japan; for example, buying only American car brands (Inouye, 2016; Nagata, 1993). Others avoided associating with fellow Japanese Americans to blend in. These efforts, as well as an accentuated drive to succeed, were in hopes of being accepted and proving they were more than 110 percent American (Mass, 1991).

Traumas stemming from deliberate, human-designed action can have especially insidious impacts. For Nisei Japanese Americans, the unjust imprisonment by one’s own government has been described as a betrayal by a trusted source (Mass, 1991). One Nisei interviewee recalled that “Being labeled as an enemy alien and incarcerated in a concentration camp was the most traumatic experience of my life. My thoughts at the time were, this country which I loved and trusted had betrayed me” (Nagata et al., 2015, p. 360). Another recalled, “I felt like a second-class citizen, but it really confirmed, it really emphasized that I didn’t belong in this country, that my face, my yellow face made the difference and I will never belong” (Nagata et al., 2015, p. 360). The rejection, in turn, created “a psychic damage” described as “‘castration’ and ‘a deep consciousness of personal inferiority’” (Weglyn, 1976, p. 273). Rather than directing blame outward toward the government, many Japanese Americans tended toward self-blame: that they somehow should have been “more American” (Miyamoto, 1986). This sense of humiliation and shame has been seen as paralleling the feelings reported by rape victims (Hansen & Mitson, 1974).

The biopsychosocial model suggests that racist environmental events can lead to heightened psychological and physiological stress responses that, when chronic, result in disease risk and adverse negative medical outcomes (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Avoiding discussion of one’s traumatic experiences is also associated with worse physical health (Pennebaker, Barger, & Tiebout, 1989). Mass (1976) attributed the high Nisei postwar rates of psychosomatic disorders and peptic ulcers to the incarceration. Former incarcerated’ vital statistics support this notion: they had near twice the risk of cardiovascular disease, mortality, and premature deaths than their nonincarcerated counterparts (Jensen, 1997).

Detrimental health stemming from adverse effects of incarceration trauma and silence affected some more than others, depending on their demographics. Experiences of trauma leave a stronger imprint at certain developmental stages (Maercker, 1999; Ogle, Rubin, & Siegler, 2013). The average age of Nisei at the beginning of their incarceration was

approximately 18 years (Fugita & O'Brien, 1991). Given that a majority were incarcerated in adolescence, a critical period of identity and worldview formation (Erikson, 1968), the long-term impacts on older Nisei are not surprising. Those who were in their late teens to early twenties and most likely to have had their education and career plans derailed, reported a stronger sense of injustice and stress around their incarceration (Fugita & Fernandez, 2004; Nagata & Takeshita, 1998). Older Nisei from Fugita and Fernandez's (2004) sample of over 150 Nisei from King County, Washington, also reported no positive memories when recollecting their incarceration 50 years later. Postwar national heart mortality data suggests that the toll placed on older Nisei extended beyond the war: the most vulnerable group were 22–26 years of age while in camp, followed by those 17–21 years, and the least vulnerable were 7–11 years (Jensen, 1997). In contrast, Nisei who were younger while in camp were more likely to recall a sense of adventure or anticipation (Nagata & Takeshita, 1998), and positive memories of their experience such as friendships and social activities (Fugita & Fernandez, 2004).

Additional research highlights gender differences in post-incarceration impacts. Men, particularly those who were college-aged while in camp, held more negative feelings overall about their past incarceration, especially about prejudice and discrimination, and reported more difficulty with being confined than women (Fugita & Fernandez, 2004). Nagata's (1993) survey of nearly 500 third generation (Sansei) Japanese American adults also suggests serious health consequences for Nisei men. While Sansei adult children reported equivalent rates of early death (before the age of 60 years) for mothers regardless of whether their mother had been in an incarceration camp, twice as many previously incarcerated fathers had died early when compared with nonincarcerated fathers.

Across demographic groups, individual differences also influenced long-term incarceration coping. Nisei who reported higher coping had higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of negative emotions about their incarceration-related experiences (Nagata & Tsuru, 2007). Better coping was associated with greater attributions of control to external powerful others and lower attributions to chance or fate suggesting that, over time, less emphasis on fatalism and an acknowledgment of governmental power may have been adaptive. Qualitative data also provides examples of adaptive approach-oriented coping across individuals. Many Nisei positively reframed the incarceration as a time of skill development and the forced resettlement as expanding personal horizons beyond their ethnic community (Nagata & Takeshita, 1998).

Intergenerational Impacts

Massive traumas result in radiating and long-term effects that are transferred as a “family legacy” to children born after the trauma (Danieli, 1998). For the third-generation *Sansei* born after the WWII, these legacy effects were multifold. The severe economic losses following the forced removal and years of confinement meant an absence of “nest eggs” for the Sansei to inherit (Nagata, 1993). For some, the lost acres of prime agricultural lands would have been worth millions of dollars. Other impacts that cannot be easily quantified included experiencing the compromised physical and mental health or premature death of a

parent. More generally, the postwar Sansei generation grew up wondering how their lives might be different if their parents had not been incarcerated (Nagata, 1993).

Many critical intergenerational trauma effects are transmitted through parenting interactions (Danieli, 1982). One primary impact of trauma on Nisei parenting manifested in family silence about the incarceration. The vast majority of Nisei did not discuss the camp experience with their Sansei offspring, not only to avoid their own traumatic memories but also to protect their children from the burden of knowing what happened. One Nisei interviewee noted, “I want them to grow up straight and tall and beautiful as they can, without all the sadness, sort of branding them that they are different” (Nagata et al., 2015, p. 362). Sansei described conversations with parents as “cryptic,” “oblique,” and “evasive” or limited to only brief, humorous, “before” and “after camp” anecdotes. Data gathered from 491 adult Sansei born after the war, indicated they had approximately 10 conversations about “camp” lasting an average of 15 to 30 minutes in their entire lifetime. When the topic was raised, mothers were reported as having been more likely than fathers to initiate the conversation. This may reflect a gendered tendency for mothers to communicate with their children in the home or the socialization of fathers, as men, to avoid appearing vulnerable or too verbally expressive. The overall absence of discussion created an acute Sansei awareness of an ominous gap in their family history. They noticed shadows of the incarceration when a Nisei parent displayed an unexpected harsh and curt reaction toward a particular food that reactivated negative memories of camp meals (e.g., apple butter or mutton). Yet, with stories untold, these unexplained interactions left the Sansei feeling upset by their parent’s sudden sad or angry response (Nagata, 1993).

While the Nisei had hoped the silence would protect their children from the burden of knowing what happened, parental silence about trauma can have negative consequences for the next generation (Wiseman et al., 2002). Sansei survey data found partial support for this relationship. Lower levels of Nisei parents’ incarceration-related communication were associated with Sansei perceiving greater familial distance and lower positive impacts from their parent’s incarceration. However, higher levels of parental incarceration-related communication were also associated with greater Sansei anger and sadness, suggesting that while more communication may have helped Sansei feel closer to their parents, greater emotional distress accompanied the knowledge they gained. Regardless of level of parental communication, most Sansei reported anger about the incarceration injustice and sadness from recognizing the ways their parents were thwarted from achieving their full potential (Nagata, 1993).

A second important trauma impact on post-incarceration parenting was the Niseis’ efforts to blend into mainstream society by de-emphasizing Japanese culture and language. This resulted in an accelerated loss of Japanese language and cultural practices for the Sansei. “I think it (the internment) affected them (my parents) a lot ... the way they raised us very much as non-Japanese,” shared one Sansei interviewee, “they encouraged us to do everything so-called ‘American’ (Ivy League, football). We didn’t do any judo. We didn’t do any kendo. We didn’t do anything Japanese” (Nagata, 1993, pp. 137–138). This diminishment of ethnic heritage had important psychological consequences for the Sansei who described themselves as having “inherited” the need to become “super” American and

prove their worth to society. Though a majority of Sansei succeeded in meeting their parents' expectations, some Japanese Americans attributed increased drug abuse, suicides, and gang activities among a subset of Sansei in the 1960s and 1970s to parental wartime incarceration (Mass, 1976). Survey data indicates additional reverberations of the incarceration on the Sansei generation. Compared with those whose parents were not incarcerated, adult Sansei who had a parent in the camps were significantly less confident that their rights as an American citizen would not be violated. Forty-four percent of Sansei who had both parents in camps also agreed that a future incarceration of Japanese Americans could happen (Nagata, 1993).

Although sadness and anger about incarceration trauma sequelae are predominant, the Sansei also point to positive consequences. Most prevalently, they mention the pride they take in their parents' and relatives' resilience in the face of the wartime experiences. Some Sansei also report satisfaction in completing a specific educational or career goal that their parent was unable to complete because of the incarceration. A third positive is a heightened sensitivity to injustice and the finding that Sansei survey respondents strongly agreed they would actively resist a future governmental incarceration (Nagata, 1993).

Research conducted with the fourth (*Yonsei*) generation Japanese Americans suggests continued incarceration trauma impacts. Though the Yonsei have been eager to learn about the incarceration from their Sansei parents and Nisei grandparents, they still encounter aspects of silence (Mayeda, 1995; Yamano, 1994). One might expect the Yonsei to be less connected with their ethnic history than previous generations. However, influenced by an increasingly multicultural environment, Yonsei are reviving their knowledge of Japanese heritage, cultural practices, language, and Asian American history (Tsuda, 2015). Yet, the specifics about the camps remain "cryptic or nonexistent", a gap they attribute to their Sansei parents being raised by the Nisei to assimilate (Mayeda, 1995, p. 135). As a result, most Yonsei have relied on books to learn what happened. Yonsei also attribute their loss of Japanese culture and language to their family's incarceration and express a lack of trust in the government similar to the Sansei (Mayeda, 1995). However, Yonsei and Sansei generations differ in their coping strategies. Mayeda (1995) found that while Sansei used a range of avoidant and confrontational coping strategies, Yonsei mostly reported implementing confrontational coping strategies. This, in combination with their increased ethnic identification and desire to educate the next generation, suggests the Yonsei will remain engaged with issues surrounding the wartime incarceration. More research will be needed to explore whether a similar trend continues into the fifth generation (*Gosei*).

Redress for Incarceration Trauma

The Japanese Americans' trauma remained largely unaddressed for decades. In 1980, however, Congress formed the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians to assess the circumstances surrounding the incarceration. In addition to reviewing extensive documents and records, the commission gathered testimonies from over 750 witnesses in 20 cities across the country. Many of those who testified were former internees who, for the first time since the war, spoke of the suffering they endured. The commission concluded that the incarceration was a "grave injustice" and recommended that

Congress issue a public written apology along with a one-time payment of \$20,000 to each surviving incarcerated (USCWRIC, 1997, pp. 462–463). More than 40 years after the war, the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 was signed into law and followed the commission recommendations.

Historical traumas are rarely formally acknowledged at a governmental level. While the U.S. government has acknowledged a small number of the injustices against ethnic minority groups, its effort to redress the incarceration trauma was unusual because of the large number of eligible recipients and the formal apology being accompanied by Congress-approved monetary reparation (Nagata et al., 2015). The commission was critical in achieving redress success. However, the movement to address the injustice was part of a much longer trajectory shaped by other social forces. Collective silence can mute the past but suppressed traumatic experiences still result in experiences of “haunting,” a term Inouye (2016) used to describe the lingering feelings of disturbance that can persist across generations and eventually propel collective actions, as with the redress movement. Those who drive the processing of cultural trauma often come from the next generation, a “carrier group” that brings to public attention the significance of the trauma as situated in the larger social structure (Alexander, 2004). For Japanese Americans, the Sansei became the carrier group that encouraged former incarcerated to verbalize their traumas and seek governmental redress (Nagata et al., 2015). The Sansei were acculturated to the mainstream American society and more comfortable speaking out. Furthermore, the mid-1960s Black Power movement allowed for a reshaping of ethnic identity: Sansei began taking ethnic studies classes and were able to see the incarceration as a form of racial oppression much like that of other racial minority groups (Maki, Kitano, & Berthold, 1999). This redefinition of group identity motivated Sansei to take part in various incarceration-related activities (Nakanishi, 1993).

The move to seek redress also converged with the Civil Rights movement as African American leaders voiced their concerns regarding Title II of the 1950 Internal Security Act which referenced the Japanese American incarceration and allowed the attorney general to “apprehend and ... detain ... each person as to whom there is reasonable ground to believe that such person probably will engage in, or probably will conspire with others to engage in, acts of espionage or sabotage [in the event of] war, invasion, or insurrection in aid of a foreign enemy” (Internal Security Act of 1950, Title II). Title II generated public attention in the late 1960s. African Americans and activists raised concerns that it could justify confinement of those involved in ghetto riots and antiwar demonstrations and campaigned to have it repealed (Nagata et al., 2015). This broader attention to the injustice of the wartime incarceration within and outside of the Japanese American community, and the successful repeal of Title II, served as crucial precursors to redress. The importance of legal strategies in postwar incarceration coping was also reflected in the 1980s campaigns led by Sansei activist lawyers to overturn the convictions of Gordon Hirabayashi, Fred Korematsu, and Minoru Yasui, the three Nisei men who had refused to comply with the government during the war. The lawyers’ success in invalidating the men’s original wartime convictions drew increased attention to the incarceration injustice and exemplified both the importance of these Niseis’ commitment to see justice four decades later and the inspired efforts of the Sansei who advocated on their behalf (Parham & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017).

The majority of Japanese Americans supported seeking redress. However, some in the community were concerned that “making waves” would re-raise negative sentiments toward the group. Others worried that accepting monetary compensation would trivialize the pain and suffering Japanese Americans had endured. Important differences also emerged on the best redress approach, many of which reflected the continued tensions between the Japanese American Citizens League (which urged cooperation with the government during the war and praised Nisei military heroism), no-no’s, and draft resisters (Murray, 2008). Nonetheless, the redress process and its ultimate success were critical for Japanese American healing by publicly acknowledging the incarceration trauma, replacing self-blame with public system-blame, and promoting recovery from longstanding silence (Fugita & Fernandez, 2004; Loo, 1993). The break in silence, in turn, facilitated an additional form of coping that focused on educating the public in hopes of preventing similar injustices in the future. These educational efforts have included the establishment of the Japanese American National Museum which includes an entire section on the incarceration and the Densho website (<http://densho.org>), a nonprofit organization that provides extensive information about the incarceration as well as oral histories from former incarcerated.

Respondents from a national survey of more than 500 Nisei former incarcerated (Nagata & Takeshita, 2002) reported moderately positive reactions to receiving redress and tended to agree that, overall, redress brought some sense of relief. Interviews conducted with 30 of the respondents further suggest that the government’s apology and acknowledgment of wrongdoing was most important. While the monetary award was appreciated, interviewees noted that it could never address the losses they had sustained. There also was particular sadness that their Issei parents did not live to receive redress (Daniels, 1993). It is important to note that survey respondent attitudes toward different aspects of redress impact varied, with the strongest perceived positive impact reported for “increasing faith in government” and the lowest impact on “reducing negative feelings about the incarceration” and “relieving physical suffering from the incarceration.” In addition, qualitative analyses of the Nisei interviews indicated that 40% of interviewees mentioned “angry/bitter” emotions when describing their post-incarceration views (Nagata, Cheng, & Nguyen, 2012). These findings suggest the enduring impact of trauma and the limits of redress.

Demographic variations and differences in individual beliefs also occurred with regard to reactions toward redress impacts. Older Nisei respondents, those with lower income, and those with a preference for associating with other Japanese Americans reported greater overall personal redress benefits (Nagata & Takeshita, 2002). It is possible that these groups suffered more hardships from the incarceration and in turn, experienced more positive benefits from redress. Women reported experiencing more redress relief than men, perhaps reflecting a tendency for women to approach justice from a more relational and caring perspective than men (Gilligan, 1982). Religious affiliation may also impact Nisei response to redress. Buddhist former incarcerated reported greater emotional, physical, and economic redress benefits than Christians (Wu, Kim, & Nagata, 2018) possibly because they endured greater difficulties before, during, and after the war (Fugita & Fernandez, 2004). Individual differences in belief systems also appear to be related. Nisei who subscribed more strongly to the belief in a just world were found to report greater benefits from redress (Kim, Nagata,

& Akiyama, 2015). This suggests that redress may be especially effective as a means of restoring a sense of justice if one believes justice can be restored in the first place.

Strategies for Healing and Intervention

The redress movement significantly empowered Japanese Americans by addressing the social injustice of the incarceration. It facilitated healing by directly addressing the suppressed trauma and bringing the community together around a demand for government acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Public and community discourse became a significant source of healing, providing a forum to express previously hidden pain and anger. “It became obvious that a forty-year silence did not mean that bitter memories had dissipated; they had only been buried in a shallow grave” (USCWRIC, 1991, p. 297).

Similarly, group pilgrimages to former camp locations and annual ceremonies to remember the incarceration have also promoted healing. Pilgrimages allow children of survivors to vicariously witness their parents’ traumatic past and allow survivors to revisit traumatic memories amid positive support and respect (Loo, 1993). Initially undertaken by a few individual Nisei in the 1960s, pilgrimages have evolved into larger, organized and multigenerational events. Day of Remembrance ceremonies, which began in the 1970s with the redress movement (Maki et al., 1999) and are now held yearly on February 19th (the date of the removal order), also provide healing. Both pilgrimages and Day of Remembrance gatherings provide camp survivors, their children, grandchildren, and the community an opportunity to remember to the past, a process that fosters group resilience and survival in traumatized groups (Lee & Clarke, 2013).

Japanese American community groups, such as the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, along with Buddhist and Christian organizations also have further promoted healing. By offering opportunities to join with other Japanese Americans in cultural, social, and educational events, they help generate ethnic pride and support for all generations of Japanese Americans. These connections, in turn, have provided ways to alleviate post-incarceration impacts in a non-stigmatized way that does not require professional mental health services. This is particularly important given the stigma that many Japanese Americans attach to utilizing such services (Henkin, 1985).

Some Japanese Americans, however, have sought psychotherapy. True (1990) describes a Nisei woman who became aware during therapy that the anger she felt toward her husband stemmed from her childhood camp experiences. Similarly, Nagata’s (1991) case illustrations reveal how Sanseis’ initial presentations of seemingly generic concerns of self-esteem, confidence and relationship problems were linked to their parents’ incarceration experiences. Ethnic identity is especially important given the powerful consequences of the incarceration related to Japanese heritage. Because such themes may not appear clearly linked to presenting problems, it is important for therapists to provide a supportive context in which a family history of incarceration trauma is assessed and the possibility of incarceration-related themes can be explored over time. Providing a safe place to explore, recognize, and affirm these impacts is consistent with adopting a race-informed clinical model of trauma treatment (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006; Comas-Díaz, 2016). More specifically for Japanese

Americans, narrative therapy, using guided imagery related to the incarceration, and having clients view videotaped interviews of former incarcerated have been suggested as potentially useful therapeutic techniques (Nagata, 1991). When the therapist does not share the same background of racial trauma, taking an interpersonal stance of cultural humility (other-oriented, respectful, lack of superiority) is especially critical (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013). Therapists might also prioritize facilitating a client's process of empowerment that continues after the therapeutic encounter (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). This empowered understanding of the trauma in conjunction with community support can help facilitate future resilience.

Small group approaches have also been used to facilitate healing. In one group, Sansei participated in intergenerational dialogues with Nisei to explore their family camp legacies (Miyoshi, 1980). Another group therapy approach focused on uncovering the unique traumatic experiences of Sansei who were interned as young children (Ina, 1997). Yet another small group approach to healing took place in 1994, when Sansei joined a group of Nisei former internees to dismantle original barracks from the Heart Mountain, Wyoming campsite and move them to Los Angeles, California, to be resurrected as a museum exhibit (Yamato & Honda, 1998).

Community healing also has occurred through the arts and humanities. Early Asian American jazz musicians of the 70s and 80s were activists whose compositions were inspired by the incarceration and redress testimonies (Hung, 2012). In addition, postwar Asian American writers and poets (e.g., Lawson Inada, John Okada, Julie Otsuka, Jeanne Wakatsuki-Houston), plays (e.g., "Miss Minidoka, 1943," "Hold These Truths," and the musical "Allegiance"), and numerous films have promoted engagement with the incarceration trauma.

Continuing Relevance of the Incarceration

By the end of WWII, 117,000 innocent Japanese Americans had been affected by the government's order for removal and incarceration (U.S. National Archives and Research Administration, 2017). Their imprisonment, based solely on country of ancestry, represents one of the greatest constitutional injustices in American history. The impacts of this race-based trauma resulted in a culture of silence that had far-reaching consequences extending across multiple generations of Japanese Americans. Healing has occurred at individual, group, and community levels, drawing upon psychotherapeutic, artistic, and legal efforts, including a successful demand for a governmental acknowledgment of wrongdoing and redress. While it is tempting to view redress success as signaling the "end" of the incarceration trauma, Japanese Americans have continued to experience race-based stressors. A chapter building of the Japanese American Citizens League was spray-painted with a swastika and the words *White Supreme* as redress efforts were underway (Arizona JACL, 1990) and anti-Japanese sentiments increased significantly during the economic downturn in the 70s and 80s when angry U.S. autoworkers bashed Japanese-made cars. In 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who had been called "Jap" and accused of causing American unemployment, was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two white autoworkers (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992). Contemporary social media and the Internet can

also facilitate the spread of offensive racial stereotypes, such as the video of a major league baseball player pulling the corners of his eyes into “slant eyes” after hitting a homerun from a Japanese pitcher.

Despite the passage of 75 years, the Japanese American incarceration remains highly relevant. Terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 elicited calls to round up and confine individuals who might be a security threat, as was done with Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor (Groves & Hayasaki, 2001). Even before the attacks, Saito (2001) had cautioned, “Just as Asians were ‘raced’ as foreign, and “presumptively disloyal”, Arab Americans and Muslims have been ‘raced’ as ‘terrorists’” (p. 12). Reference to the incarceration has also re-emerged amidst more recent national security tensions. It is important to note in this context that although judicial decisions in the 1980s vacated the wartime convictions of the three Nisei who challenged the exclusion orders, they did not overturn the Supreme Court’s original 1944 *Korematsu v. United States* decision supporting the government’s actions.

In June, 2018, the Supreme Court decided to uphold President Trump’s executive order on national security banning or severely restricting travel from specific countries to the U.S. The original *Korematsu* case was noted in the case opinions. Justices on both sides agreed that the *Korematsu* decision, justified at the time as necessary for national security during World War II, had been gravely wrong. Chief Justice John G. Roberts, writing for the majority opinion, stated that “the forcible relocation of U.S. citizens to concentration camps, solely and explicitly on the basis of race, is objectively unlawful and outside the scope of presidential authority.” However, there was marked disagreement regarding the relevance of the *Korematsu* case to the travel ban. Chief Justice Roberts noted, “... it is wholly inapt to liken that morally repugnant order [Executive Order 9066] to a facially neutral policy denying certain foreign nationals the privilege of admission”. In contrast, the opinion of dissenting Justice Sonia Sotomayor saw the decision to uphold the travel ban as “redeploying the same dangerous logic underlying *Korematsu* and merely replaces one ‘gravely wrong’ decision with another.” Response to the decision by the Japanese American Citizens League’s (JACL) also voiced concern, pointing out that the original World War II exclusion order was also “facially neutral ... and did not specify Japanese or Japanese Americans ... However, in its application, it was entirely discriminatory in its effect, and that is what the court has failed to recognize in its ruling today” (Japanese American Citizens League, 2018, p. 5).

Obvious differences exist between the context and nature of the travel ban and the incarceration. Japanese Americans already living in the United States were rounded up and imprisoned solely because of their ethnic ancestry, without regard to citizenship. Nonetheless, national security arguments underlay both the incarceration and the travel ban policies. Clearly, critical problems often lie between written intent and actual implementation, and the traumatic sequelae experienced by Japanese Americans demonstrate the serious consequences of governmental policies that are enacted in unjust, discriminatory ways.

The incarceration also has continued relevance to psychology’s long history of addressing social justice (Leong, Pickren, & Vasquez, 2017). Japanese Americans’ incarceration-based

experiences encourage psychologists to consider the broad scope of racial trauma impacts, coping, and resilience in relation to individual differences, family and multigenerational processes, and community responses. It also points to the value of a psychology that “is fully grounded in history and culture” and attends to the silence surrounding memories that accompany major social and political disruption (Apfelbaum, 2000, p. 1008). At the same time, the incarceration trauma underscores the importance of psychological research on the processes that underlie racism and discrimination. The long history of racial prejudice that fueled the exclusion and imprisonment of Japanese Americans characterizes the experiences of ethnoracial minority groups. Contemporary studies indicate that most people unknowingly sort others into “us” versus “them” with minimal effort, systematically reinforcing inequalities (Richeson & Sommers, 2016) and that subtle and unintentional mechanisms such as in-group favoritism contribute to racism and discrimination (Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014). Continued efforts to understand these processes and identify conditions for reducing prejudice can assist in tackling these challenges. Finally, the incarceration highlights the importance of studying cross-group alliances and community activism in response to racial trauma. Japanese Americans collaborated with African American activists to address 1960s civil rights at the infancy of the incarceration redress effort. Today, spurred by a sense of responsibility to draw attention to the dangers and consequences of wrongful incarceration, they focus on supporting Muslim and Arab American communities facing ongoing hostilities and suspicion (Japanese American Citizens League, 2016; Rahim, 2017).

Conclusion

Psychology often looks inward for explanations of behavior by examining cognitions, unconscious processes, and brain functioning. These are important approaches. However, the Japanese American WWII incarceration reminds us of the need also to look at aggregate sociocultural phenomena that shape lives. Individual differences in response to traumas vary depending on the circumstances but shared group experiences of historical and contemporary events can powerfully frame subsequent reactions and sense of well-being across time and generations. Psychologists are urged to attend to this broader level sociohistorical context when addressing racial trauma and injustice.

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Figure 1.
Japanese American generations.

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