Discrimination, Violence, & Healing within Marginalized Communities

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This Special Issue of the *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* presents six articles on the impact of discrimination and violence in marginalized communities, with a mind toward identifying avenues of healing. Individuals and communities who find themselves at the margins of mainstream society have been placed there by oppressive and discriminatory systems, institutions, and policies. Different types of discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, Islamophobia) often intersect (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989), resulting in various forms of marginalization and continued oppression. From the inception of this special issue, our goal was to contribute timely research, as discrimination and violence are historical and modern cornerstones of our society. However, we could not have predicted just how timely this special issue now is in light of the socio-political shifts that occurred in Spring 2020. The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic increased focus on physical and mental health disparities (Hooper et al., 2020; Laurencin & McClinton, 2020) and anti-Black police violence in the U.S. and the resultant protests in the U.S. and abroad shifted the mainstream narrative of trauma and discrimination (Dreyer et al., 2020).

Now with heightened awareness, trauma researchers and practitioners have a responsibility to work toward understanding the impetuses, functions, and implications of interpersonal trauma for all people. Though mainstream trauma research historically has focused on decontextualized interpersonal trauma experiences, the sociocultural context is vital in understanding posttraumatic outcomes that are relevant to mental health and posttraumatic growth (e.g., Brown et al., this special issue; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; 2019; Crenshaw, 1989; Gómez & Gobin, 2020; Valencia-Weber & Zuni, 2003). For example, a couple of articles included in this special issue (McClendon et al., this special issue; Mekawi et al., this special issue) have a structural intersectional perspective in their work (Crenshaw, 1989) through recognition that multiple forms of oppression, such as that based on race and gender, influence an individual's experience of trauma and recovery. Taken together, the purpose of this special issue is to understand the impact of discrimination, marginalization/ oppression, and interpersonal trauma for individuals who are marginalized.

Joint Impact of Trauma and Discrimination

The first two articles in this special issue examine the joint impact of interpersonal trauma and discrimination on marginalized people. In the first article, Balbus and Kantorová (this special issue) interviewed 11 families of Color in which a member(s) of law enforcement killed their respective family members. The harm of the violent murder was compounded by the institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014) of the police department. Specifically, two themes arose: 1) the police's treatment of the deceased victim and 2) the bereaved family's experiences with law enforcement. This article is particularly relevant now given the spotlight on police brutality against Black communities in the U.S. The second article examines how interpersonal trauma and anti-Black discrimination work together to impact African American women's mental health (Mekawi et al., this special issue). In this study, the association between interpersonal trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was stronger when the women also experienced separate incidents of racial discrimination. The findings from this study highlight how discrimination can impact PTSD, particularly among African American women with interpersonal trauma histories. Put together, these articles personify what is so often missed in trauma research: not only does interpersonal trauma happen within the context of larger inequality, but the instantiations of that inequality truly affect survivors (e.g., Gómez, 2020b). With that reality, however, comes good news: addressing inequality can have downstream positive effects for marginalized survivors (e.g., Gómez, 2020a).

Discrimination as Trauma

The next two articles in this special issue examine discrimination as trauma in and of itself, akin to Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005) conceptualization of racist incident-based trauma. First, McClendon and colleagues (this special issue) examined the differential impact of various forms of discriminatory stress (e.g., racism, sexism) on changes in PTSD severity in Black, Hispanic/Latina/o/x, and White Veterans. Two major complementary findings in this study were that the association between discriminatory stress and PTSD was stronger for Black women and Hispanic/Latino/x men compared to Black men. This work shows the importance of using intersectional frameworks (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989) to both assess and treat diverse Veterans, given that homogeneous groupings by race or gender can mask unique risk and outcomes of discriminatory stress. In the next article, Tineo and colleagues (this special issue) assess discrimination, PTSD, and posttraumatic growth among Muslim American youth. This work found that perceived discrimination was associated with posttraumatic growth, with PTSD mediating this association. This study demonstrates nicely the two-sides of the discrimination coin, as Muslim American youth experience both PTSD and posttraumatic growth. As such, these studies provide needed information for nuanced, culturally sensitive, trauma-informed interventions for diverse populations exposed to discrimination.

Trauma with Theory Embedding Inequality and Discrimination

Our special issue concludes with two articles that examine trauma within cultural and historical contexts. Brown and colleagues (this special issue) highlight the gender-specific

challenges faced by women Veterans, noting health, vocational, and post-deployment adjustment-related consequences. Using a qualitative design, the authors identify gender-based discrimination, the military's inadequate position and response to military sexual trauma (MST), and disadvantages to women service members living in a man-dominated environment as three themes that characterize the challenges women Veterans face while transitioning from military service to civilian life. This study underscores how gender inequities can impact trauma recovery and provides specific strategies for enhancing cultural sensitivity in MST service provision. The last article of the special issue expands on the concepts of historical trauma and posttraumatic growth (Ortega-Williams et al., this special issue). Ortega-Williams and colleagues (this special issue) offer an integrated theoretical framework for understanding and addressing the long-term impact of ongoing systemic violence and discrimination among communities of Color. Centering social context, traditional cultural practices, and healing at the community level, as opposed to individualistic notions of recovery, the authors identify five domains of mass group-level growth: (a) collective strength, (b) collective spiritual change, (c) new possibilities for our destiny, (d) the practice of relating to our ancestors and culture, and (e) appreciation of our lives. This work challenges the dominant discourse around trauma recovery by centering group-level healing and provides a theoretical model that is ripe for researching among communities of Color. In identifying how cultural and historical contexts contribute to marginalization across settings, these articles provide an avenue for how culturally centered frameworks of harm and healing can contribute institutional and community-level healing.

Future Directions

Work from this special issue provides several avenues for future work to build upon. Multiple articles (Mekawi et al., this special issue; Tineo et al., this special issue) identified the need to combine interpersonal trauma and discrimination, both empirically in research and clinically in private practice and interventions. Direct implications include assessing for structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and discrimination in the design and implementation of evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions for diverse trauma survivors. This supposition bolsters the calls for the true incorporation of the impact of discrimination and marginalization on trauma survivors (e.g., Gómez & Gobin, 2020), while demonstrating that such work is not only necessary but possible. Moreover, Brown and colleagues (this special issue) identified the need for institutional change in which resources, support services, and mental health interventions were tailored for the unique needs of women Veterans. McClendon and colleagues (this special issue) suggest that such culturally sensitive research and interventions take an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) that examines the ways in which oppression across classes (e.g., based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status, etc.) co-constitute each other (Hames-Garcia, 2011), creating a specific amalgamation of multi-faceted oppression.

Finally, two articles (Balbus & Kantorová, this special issue; Ortega-Williams et al., this special issue) make the case for larger systemic change – from group- and community-level healing using strength-based approaches to policy change, with the ultimate goal of eradicating societal inequality as the ultimate cause of marginalization. These calls are in line with French et al. (2020) psychological framework of radical healing for people of

Color and Indigenous individuals (POCI): (a) collectivism, (b) critical consciousness, (c) radical hope, (d) strength and resistance, and (e) cultural authenticity and self-knowledge.

Concluding Thoughts

In a time of shocking yet predictable societal unrest, hate violence, discrimination, oppression, fascism, and inequity, this special issue highlights how marginalization does not occur in a vacuum – uninfluential to trauma survivors' meaning-making, experiences, and mental health trajectories. Instead, such marginalization is not only at the core of the violence itself; marginalization and its impacts are also living and breathing throughout survivors' lives. As such, this special issue rediscovers what subversive activists, advocates, and researchers have envisioned for future society: a world in which discrimination, marginalization, violence, and oppression is not insidiously laced within every fabric of our culture and our lives. Through institutional courage (Freyd, 2014; Freyd & Smidt, 2019) at every level – our homes, schools, training programs, research programs, interventions, journal review process, governments – we can get closer to the world we want. In line with the 2021 ISSTD International Conference, with plenary speakers Freyd, Gómez, and Yehuda focusing on the impact of marginalization within trauma across generations (International Society for the Study of Trauma & Dissociation, 2020), together we can radically and courageously fight for a version of the world we so desperately need: One of true equity and equality in which discrimination and violence are replaced with solidarity and healing.

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