Historical Overview of Black Suffering in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA:

Depth of Contemporary Social Work Challenges

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Abstract

This article is an overview of how slavery created a contemporary psychological and emotional condition in Black Americans. As a case study, this manuscript reviews how black history shaped Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the United States of America (USA) to fair the worst for Black residents: low school graduation rates, income levels, homeownership, net worth, and available savings, high unemployment rates, high chronic disease mortality rates, and low life-expectancy.

Keywords: Black slavery, Racial bias, Racial discrimination, Post-Traumatic slavery syndrome, Black history

Like many other regions in the United States of America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Pennsylvania (with Pittsburgh as its second-largest city) capitalized on slavery and authorized profitable rewards to slave owners (Bales, 2004). Finally, in 1779, the Pennsylvania legislature decided that it no longer wanted to remain a slave-sanctioning state (Simpson, 2008). However, nearly twenty years after the Pennsylvania legislature ratified the gradual end of slavery, Pittsburgh's population census still registered 64 slaves out of 2,400 residents. At that time, there was still indentured slavery and citywide profiling; thus, unencumbered black residents were well advised to carry a "Certificate of Freedom" (University of Pittsburgh, 2008). Along with well-documented immense pain and suffering, servitude and social suppression also imposed a systemic hostility to black families' efforts to embrace expressions of African philosophy and traditions (Mitchell, 2009).

Joy Degruy-Leary (2005) asserts that slavery created a contemporary psychological and emotional condition in Black Americans that is passed through generations at the family, community, and societal levels. DeGruy-Leary's theory, called Post-Traumatic Slavery Syndrome (PTSS), suggests the evidence of this transmission is represented in current racial economic disparities, consumerism, higher rates of morbidity and mortality, and decreasing overall life-expectancy among contemporary Black Americans. DeGruy-Leary's PTSS theory relates to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a socially maladaptive condition that also occurs when an individual experiences severe psychological trauma due to extremely stressful events such as war, rape, or violence. According to DeGruy-Leary (2005), PTSS and PTSD disorders among African Americans are caused by centuries of chattel slavery and second-class citizenship. Based on social, economic, and political perspectives, black residents of Pittsburgh are showing the effects of the historical maltreatment, which lead to immeasurable emotional and untreated psychological traumas, as well as injury and damage to the psyche, identity, esteem, and self-worth (Byrdsong et al., 2013).

1. Historical Overview of Pittsburgh

In the late nineteenth century, huge coal deposits were uncovered in various regions of southwestern Pennsylvania (Hinshaw, 2002). Pittsburgh's direct connections to trade routes lead the city to develop into an industrial complex. When steel, iron, and glass fabrication began, a huge number of immigrants, together with black families from southern regions of the United States (U.S.), transferred to Pittsburgh to be employed in the steel mills and coal mines. Although blacks continually faced discriminatory hiring practices by the coal and steel industries, by 1900, nearly four percent of the labor forces in steel mills were black immigrant workers (Hinshaw, 2002). World War I and World War II lead to an intensified need for the goods and services manufactured in Pittsburgh; the city led the U.S. in the production of steel, glass, and coal products (Pittsburgh Pennsylvania History, 2009). Even though blacks were paid less than their white counterparts, they still earned wages much higher than from previous types of jobs. Meanwhile, from the early 1900s to the late 1970s, the nation began to encounter extensive racial unrest and disorder. Various interest groups and leaders emerged to speak openly about social injustice and discriminatory treatment of blacks in the U.S. For the first time in its history, the organized forces against racial segregation, discrimination, and victimization became visible through mass media and town hall meetings.

2. Historical Overview of Black American Leaders and Organizations

Founded in 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is a civil rights organization with a mission to eliminate Jim Crow segregation, lynching, and prejudice in order to improve the quality of life for "people of color" (NAACP, 2016). Initially, their primary strategy was to focus on using the judicial system to overturn the Jim Crow statutes that endorsed black segregation. In 1913, the NAACP initiated opposition to President Woodrow Wilson's inclusion of racial segregation into nation-wide policy and practice. The NAACP spent enormous amounts of energy towards enacting federal legislation against lynching; however, by the 1920s, southern white stakeholders and residents were either voting as a block against such legislation or employing filibusters in the legislature to block the voting. Because of organized blockages, there were no black political legislatures from the South in Congress, essentially making the region a single democratic political system. The NAACP regularly displayed a black flag stating "A Man Was Lynched Yesterday" from the window of its offices in New York to mark each lynching. The organization also brought litigation to challenge the "white primary" system in the South. Southern states had created white-only primaries as another way of barring blacks from the political process (NAACP, 2016).

In contrast, the Supreme Court ruled against the white primary (i.e., the 1944 case of Smith v. Allwright). Through the federal mandate, states were instructed to retract legislation associated with the white primaries, but the legislatures immediately enacted new methods to reduce the involvement of blacks (Wikipedia, 2010). However, organized movements to eliminate racial exclusion and discrimination gave rise to victory with some significant court proceedings. Starting in 1950, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund focused on litigating Charleston, South Carolina's school desegregation case. Two years later, the U.S. Supreme Court decided to hold a hearing along with cases from Delaware, Virginia, Kansas, and the District of Columbia—this became the now well-known case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (BBET). NAACP lawyers, lead by Thurgood Marshall, contended the case and won. BBET symbolized a landmark victory in the challenge for complete citizenship rights and initiated new optimism that local, state, and nationwide segregation was unquestionably immoral (Appiah & Gates, 2004).

In addition to the NAACP, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was also a prominent leader in the Black American civil rights movement, securing progress on human entitlements in the United States (Carson, 2001). Dr. King became a universal icon, as well as a recognized martyr by a vast number of Christian churches. Dr. King, as a young Baptist minister, became a human rights activist early in his career. He organized the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and initiated the 1957 Southern Christian Leadership Conference as its first organizational president. Dr. King's efforts resulted in the 1963 March on Washington, where he famously delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. This particular speech, as well as numerous others delivered to southern communities, raised public consciousness of the human rights movement. He successfully established himself as one of the most extraordinary orators of humanistic insights in U.S. history.

As a global recognition, Dr. King became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to eliminate racial apartheid and discrimination through non-violent civil

disobedience (Library of Congress, 2008). The human rights ideologies that Dr. King promoted, however, led to his 1968 assassination in Memphis, Tennessee. For his efforts, Dr. King was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and Congressional Gold Medal, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was observed as a U.S. national holiday for the first time in 1986. A vast number of local and national leaders acclaim Dr. King as having successfully provided critical leadership for the enactments of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965—both of which helped to reveal and outlaw racist legislation that suppressed Black American to underclass citizenship (Library of Congress, 2008).

Malcolm X, also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, was another black leader who gained national attention, being more radical and assertive then Dr. King. He was a Black American Muslim minister, human rights activist, and public speaker. He was a daring promoter for the rights of Black Americans, a man who charged White America for its wrongdoings and misconducts against Black Americans. His adversaries accused him of proselytizing black supremacy, anti-Semitism, and violence incitement (El-Shabazz et al., 1987).

Malcolm X declared that black people were the original human group of the world, and superior to whites. While the civil rights movement struggled against racial segregation, he encouraged the absolute separation of Black Americans from whites. He repeatedly advocated that the United States owed reparations to black families for the enslaved and unpaid workforce of their ancestors. He also vetoed the nonviolence strategy of the civil rights movement and instead advocated that black people should use any means necessary (including violence when needed) to protect themselves. Eventually, his intensified concern of perilous sufferings among ethnic minorities around the world and a tension between him and the head of the Nation of Islam led to his departure from the organization in 1964 (Salman, 2012).

After leaving the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X announced his desire to cooperate with leaders of the civil rights movement. However, he advocated that the civil rights movement should elevate its focus to a more universal human rights movement. He felt that a fight limited to civil rights alone would simply remain a domestic problem. By framing the Black American struggle for equal rights as an advocacy for human rights, it would become a universal issue and the struggle could bring its protest for the United Nations to deliberate. Wasting time and resources in civil courts as equal rights issue limited the scope of the crucial, universally relevant human rights issue.

Malcolm X believed that numerous developing nations of the world would issue their support to the cause of Black Americans. He emphasized the global paradigm learned from his international journeys and articulated the "direct connection" between the domestic struggle of Black Americans for equal rights with the liberation struggles of developing nations. He professed that Black Americans were wrong when they thought of themselves as a minority; in a global context, black people were a majority. Soon after he disengaged with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965 (Salman, 2012).

Another unique black resistance group, which gained national attention during 1960s, was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This movement began as several black college students from North Carolina A&T University refused to leave a lunch counter in

Greensboro, North Carolina where they had been denied service. This event generated a wave of other sit-ins in college towns across the South. Subsequently, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was formed, and the term "Black Power" was created and adopted by the ensuing civil rights movement (University of Virginia, 2010).

The goal of Black Power was to establish a strong racial identity and empower Black Americans, to promote a departure from white culture, and to encourage Black Americans to develop social, economic, and political institutions and document their own histories. The SNCC stipulated that it was necessary for a Black American's sense of self-worth to see that oppression could be fought and justice procured without the interferences of whites.

Black Americans also needed a milieu that would allow free expression of their frustration with the current social, economic, and political suppression and oppression. It is notable that many members of the SNCC became contemporary black leaders, such as NAACP Chairman Julian Bond, Congressman John Lewis, and former Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry. Together with hundreds of other SNCC members, they left a lasting impact on the history of the black civil rights movement (Chicago Public Library, 2016).

From the mid-1960s to the late-1970s, the Black Panther Party (BPP) achieved U.S. and global recognition through their intensive involvement in U.S. politics, improved minority communities, and Black Power movement. The group's militant rhetoric, provocative posture, and cultural and political indictments permanently altered the global image of American identity. By the late 1960s, the BPP had expanded into numerous cities throughout the United States, including Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Los Angeles, Newark, New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Diego, Seattle, and Washington D.C. BPP membership exceeded 5,000, and their newspaper, called *The Black Panther*, had a circulation of over a quarter million under the editorial leadership of Eldridge Cleaver (Wikipedia, 2010). The group advocated for the Ten-Point Program, a document that demanded for "Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice, and Peace," as well as exemption from conscription for Black American men, among other requirements. With the Ten-Point Program and its mandates of "What We Want, What We Believe," the BPP captured the collective economic and political grievances as others (including black radicals and liberals) joined the action.

The BPP also instituted a variety of community social programs designed to alleviate poverty and improve health among communities deemed most needful of aid. It also recognized that different minority communities (those it deemed oppressed and discriminated) needed to unify around their own issues and encouraged alliances with all such groups (Asante, 2005). The Black Panther Party's most well recognized programs were its armed citizen patrols to help protect black residents and its "Free Breakfast for Children" program.

However, their confrontational and combative tactics against police often lead to massive political and legal casualties (Byrdsong et al., 2015). Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director J. Edgar Hoover called the party "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country." He initiated an extensive program of counter-organizing that included incitements through surveillance, eavesdropping, police harassment, infiltration, perjury, and a host of other tactics designed to incriminate BPP members and exhaust the organization of resources and reduce manpower. Numerous local law enforcement officials also went to great lengths to

discredit and obliterate the organization, including assassinating key leaders (Lazerow & Williams, 2006).

In retrospect, the BPP described their organization as a progressive social and political organization that stood in the frontline of the strongest drive for social progress in U.S. since the Revolution of 1776 and the Civil War. It is the sole black organization in the history of black struggle and oppression in the U.S. that promoted a revolutionary agenda, armed its members, and represented the last great push by Black Americans for equality, justice, and freedom (Black History, 2016).

3. New Jim Crow and Black Underclass

The eventual abolition of slavery and Jim Crow "laws," and efforts to achieve greater racial equality, have been replaced recently by new forms of social structural racism, causing the creation of an underclass racial caste system (Alexander, 2009). For example, contemporary racism is well signified in the current criminal justice system with its selective law enforcement, racial profiling, prosecutorial discretion, inequitable access to resources, poor quality of indigent defense, and disparate sentencing laws. Results of the racially biased criminal justice system are well reflected by the following sets of evidence reported by the U.S. Department of Justice (2011) and other researchers as follows:

1) The United States incarcerates more than any other country in the world; the top three incarcerated populations are: U.S. (2.4 million), China (1.5 million), and Russia (890,000). However, the total population of the U.S. is just over 300 million, compared to China's 1.3 billion (Yamatani & Solveig, 2011).

2) Black Americans are incarcerated at a rate that is six times higher than White Americans: black (one in 41), white (one in 245). Recent statistics show that three out of ten black males will serve time in prison. The scale of consequential economic liability facing black males should be an alarm of the imminent crisis (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).

3) The number of drug arrests in the U.S. nearly tripled in recent decades, from 580,000 in 1980, to over 1.5 million in 1997, and is currently stabilized at 1.1 million per year. At the same time, the black arrest rate increased 350 percent. Contrasted with whites, this number decreased by tenfold, with a 32-percent arrest rate during the same period (Caulkins & Menefee, 2007).

4) The number of inmates serving time for drug offenses increased by over 1000 percent between 1980 and 2000, and 53 percent of those convicted for drug offenses (including all illicit drugs) are black, even though blacks constitute only 12.7 percent of the total U.S. population (Mauer & King, 2007).

5) By 2006, 82 percent of people convicted of federal crack cocaine offenses were black, compared to 9 percent for whites (Drug Policy Alliance, 2007).

Lynch and Sabol (2000) note that the mass incarceration of black men drastically reduced the marriage capacity of men and significantly increased the number of female-headed households. Between 1960 and 1985, female-headed families increased from 20.6 to 43.7 percent among black families, compared to an increase from 8.4 to 12 percent for white counterparts. Currently, the national rate of black female-headed households exceeds 65 percent, compared to 23 percent for white families. Challenges and disadvantages associated

with raising children in single-headed households are obvious—lower family income, less help taking care of children, lack of a father figure, parental participation with school activities, and so on. The poverty rate of black families with young children indicates a rate nearly three times higher than white families under the same condition (24.7 percent versus 8.6 percent, respectively).

4. Black Families in Pittsburgh

While the rest of the country watched the immense deliberations of black leadership organizations and the massive national followings these groups gained, the Pittsburgh region hardly surrendered to racial segregation and discrimination. For example, the Hill District in Pittsburgh was a highly sophisticated community of businesses and working residents. Major music executives in the jazz industry looked to the Hill District for a new sound and artists who played a more refined style of music that they had never heard before. As a community, the Hill District thrived with fine restaurants, movie theaters, and small bars with visiting jazz bands from all over the country. However, during the early 1960s, the lower Hill District, an area inhabited predominantly by people of African descent, was completely destroyed. Ninety-five acres of the lower Hill District were cleared using eminent domain, forcibly displacing hundreds of small businesses and over 1,200 residents to make room for a cultural center that included the Civic Arena. Save for one apartment building, none of the buildings planned for the cultural center were ever built (Pittsburgh Post Gazette, 2000).

Soon afterwards, during the 1970s, the U.S. steel manufactures in Pittsburgh came under increasing competition from foreign steel makers. Manufacturers in Japan and Germany were thriving with high quality and low prices of their steel products. Foreign steel mills and factories, loaded with advanced technology, benefited from economical labor costs and collaborative partnerships between government and corporations. This allowed them to increasingly capture and take over the U.S. market share of steel and steel products. Concomitantly, demand for steel in the U.S. moderated due to economic recession, the 1973 oil crisis, and increasing use of cheaper non-metal materials by former manufacturing consumers of steel-related products (Couvares, 1984).

At this critical juncture, in the name of economic efficiency, the free market, anti-union policies, and import deregulations came into play, especially during the Reagan Administration in the 1980s. The initiatives associated with free market policy exposed the U.S. steel industries' own internal inefficiencies, which included an outdated manufacturing base that had been over-expanded in the 1950s and 1960s. Some steel mills in Pittsburgh were still using parts for their manufacturing machines made in the1940s for World War II initiatives. Hostile and uncooperative management and labor relationships, vertical management styles, and inadequate strategic planning by both unions and management, along with hostilities with workers on wage cuts and work-rule reforms, deeply undermined the sustainability of the domestic steel industry. In particular, Pittsburgh faced its own challenges associated with depleting coal and iron ore deposits, as well as the rising costs of raw materials. The large mills in the Pittsburgh region also faced competition from newer, more profitable "mini-mills" and non-union mills with lower labor costs (Hoerr, 1988).

5. Impacts of "Trickle Down Economics" in Pittsburgh

Supply-side economics (often called "Reaganomics") is a theory of economic principle that rejects the need for interventions to alleviate poverty and redistribute wealth; such interventions are believed to be unnecessary and counterproductive. This paradigm asserts that wealthy individuals should be allowed to become wealthier by imposing very low tax rates on high incomes (or a flat tax, for example) rather than using the tax system to redistribute wealth. The result will be that their wealth will "trickle down" towards the lower classes. However, such outcomes were never realized. In fact, "Reaganomics" induced the opposite effect during the 1980s—a higher concentration of wealth in fewer hands, a reduction of the number of middle-class citizens, and a high concentration of poverty among black people and their children.

By the early 1980s, steel manufacturers in Pittsburgh began to collapse. Subsequent to the 1981-1982 recession, the mills laid off over 150,000 workers (Hoerr, 1988). One by one, the steel mills began to shut down. These closures caused collateral damage, with transportation businesses, mines, and other factories and services across the region losing business and becoming bankrupted. The local economy suffered genuine and visible economic depression, marked by high rates of unemployment and underemployment, as laid-off workers took lower-paying, non-union jobs. As with other "Rust Belt" cities, Pittsburgh began to suffer from a significant decline in population. Pittsburgh also saw white flight away from the inner city, experiencing a fate similar to many other major cities across the country. Thus, beginning in the 1980s, Pittsburgh's economy began shifting from heavy industry to services, medicine, higher education, tourism, banking, corporate headquarters, and high technology (Pittsburgh Regional Alliance, 2007). Today, there are no steel mills within the city limits of Pittsburgh. Unfortunately, however, the shift in economy left a vast number of workers behind and further reduced economic viabilities of black residents.

Along with "Reaganomics," the social policies designed to provide a basic social safety net (e.g., welfare payments, food stamps, affirmative action, job training services for minority members, and community development programs) were affront to a majority of Black American families. The civil rights protections from the previous fifty years became a target for reduction and elimination in the name of welfare reform and reversing "white discrimination." As the Greater Pittsburgh region suffered a momentous economic crisis, black families encountered even bleaker prospects. Throughout the 1980s, black employment in manufacturing fell by 50 percent, and the vast majority of decent jobs in the service sector went to white residents. Steel companies had largely denied black workers access to the skilled trades in the mills. Consequently, with the mills gone, only a few black former steel workers could find decent paying jobs as plumbers, carpenters, electricians, or construction workers. As a result, adult black unemployment remained at nearly 19 percent, with considerably higher levels among the black youth population, with rates of unemployment over 40 percent (Economic Policy Institute, 2016).

6. Conclusion

Centuries of racism, prejudice, and discrimination have created a myriad of socio-cultural risk factors among contemporary Black Americans that continue to cause a host of survival and quality-of-life issues. Major challenges for social work professionals are: (1) determining

how to develop a new strategic plan to effect desirable changes in social policies and instructional practice behaviors through social advocacy, and (2) specifying how to treat the wounded Black Americans that requires acute analysis and deeper understanding of emotional and mental states. However, relatively few intellectuals and social intervention scholars are blessed with the necessary insight for discernment and understanding of the complexities that typical Black Americans face throughout their entire lives. Although a number of Black American families eventually may have secured economic advancement, gaps in wages, benefits, and opportunities continue to reflect deep and acute prejudices and injustice that refuses to go away (Aymer, 2016).

Racial demographic reports generated by the University of Pittsburgh (2007 and 2015) looked at the lives of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in the city of Pittsburgh and in Allegheny County. It explored family life, economics, intergroup relations, and mental health. In almost all of these areas, black people in Pittsburgh are still lagging behind their white counterparts, and, in professional employment and family life, they are at the bottom ranks.

Throughout the 1990s, Pittsburgh's white poverty and unemployment rates remained among the worst in the country, but black poverty rates were four times higher, with overall income levels at half of that of whites (Hinshaw, 2002). Pittsburgh communities also began to show an increase in drug abuse, gang wars, murder rates, chronic unemployment, and continually rising black poverty rates. Corresponding with the region's economic evolution, Pittsburgh has become one of the most segregated neighborhoods in urban America, and the quality of life among black people became more brutal and disadvantaged than most other major cities (University of Pittsburgh, 2007).

Community organizers of the social work profession must also address Pittsburgh's infrastructure strain. New generations of black people with educational credentials have began their decisive outward migration into white suburbs and well-endowed communities. Realtors' pronouncements of black invasion of racially concentrated communities created a white hysteria that divested homes and rental units for black people. Black businesses, entertainment facilities, and basic goods stores also began to close or move out of Pittsburgh's black communities. Increasing apathy and indifference among black residents invited disorder and ailments of disinterest and crumbling unity among community residents. Additionally, imperative faith-based organizations began to lose their eminence and suffer mass migration of young worshippers. Black families also began to see a dramatic transformation in family configuration, with two-parent families often being replaced with more challenging single-parent households.

Based on our organization's community mental health assessment, a large number of second- and third-generation Black-American families have began to show new symptoms of strain caused by the lingering effects of PTSS. Young Black Americans have started to turn toward disassociation and rejection of Afro-centrism and its cultural values (e.g., family bonding, honoring of elders, connection to spiritual veracity, communal attachment, and neighborhood merriment). Slowly, black youth have begun to signal overwhelming malfunction—diminished educational aspirations, high rates of truancy, school failures, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, gang violence, and incarceration.

In Pittsburgh, social work professionals must focus on major issues associated with the fact that black people live largely in segregated communities where they are disadvantaged by poor transportation and diminished public safety, and where as much as 75 percent of the families are headed by poverty-stricken black females. On the education front, black students in public schools are far less proficient than their white counterparts. Black people in Allegheny County are also consistently suffering from significantly higher rates of arrests among juveniles and adults, including those for violent offenses such as murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. The city's black adults are arrested nearly five times more than their white counterparts for drug abuse and drug-related offenses (University of Pittsburgh, 2007). Economically, black males are hit hardest in Pittsburgh. They have unemployment rates that are two-to-three times higher than their white counterparts, and, when they are working, nearly sixty percent are employed in low-paying service or sales positions. Consequently, Pittsburgh's black residents are three times more likely to be poor and greatly compromise their diet, healthcare, housing adequacy, and childcare options.

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