

Anti-Racist Psychotherapy:

Confronting Systemic Racism
and Healing Racial Trauma



DAVID ARCHER, MSW, MFT



PREFACE

We must solve the problem of
Anti-Black racism

FIRST TRAUMA

One of my first traumatic memories was at the age of 5. Even though I did not know much about race at that time, I would soon come to realize the significance of our differences.

During that autumn evening, the wind shifted against the trees as the sun gently receded. In front of my home, I rode my red tricycle. The wheels twisted and turned in circles over and over again where my parents took turns supervising me. As the light in the day waned, I noticed a group of adolescents. Their sneers, their language, their shaved heads, all of it was foreign to me.

As one of my parents went inside to switch turns supervising, I was the only one outside. My circles grew wider and the perimeter of my cycling expanded. The group took issue with this liberty. One of the biggest and baddest of the teenagers clenched his fist, moved toward me and spat in my face.

While at that time I did not understand what had happened, I knew that that was an act of aggression. I cried and ran back home.

“Daddy,” I cried, as he leaped up instinctually. He grabbed a baseball bat, ready to confront this group of cowards. The neighbors called the police on my father. No charges were laid, but I learned at that time that the world could be unsafe. Those in positions of authority have a responsibility to protect the public. My father did what he could to protect me, and the police maintained the peace. All was well and as it should be in Quebec, Canada.

THE RATIONALE

Presently, there is an even greater bully that confronts our young. As I write this, we are living in a world that has been confronted by a dual pandemic: COVID-19 and the sickness of systemic racism. Both of these tend to have severe complications as their viral load becomes sufficient enough. To date, neither of them appear to have a reliable vaccine, and the prognosis, when left untreated can lead to severe complications.

This renewed interest in talking about systemic racism has been spurred on by the public lynching of many notable brothers and sisters. George Floyd’s death by a police officer was especially symbolic in that it was recorded on a viral video that was replayed

millions of times around the world. The reason why we say Black Lives Matter is because Black life is not equal to White life in a society that privileges Whiteness over Blackness. Neutrality is a fallacy.

We must solve the problem of Anti-Black Racism. I emphasize racism toward Black people because all other people are caught up in this false dichotomy of good and evil, of Whiteness and Blackness, of light and dark. Whiteness is held to be justice and the ideal, while my skin color represents deviance and malevolence. This sickness needs to stop, and we are all implicated. The only way that it can do so is to remove the cultural taboos about discussing racial trauma, train better therapists/change workers and have the courage to act despite fear.

Much has been discussed about the impact of systemic racism in the past few months, but there are not as many people talking about the psychological consequences of our repeated exposure to racial trauma. Trauma is rarely discussed when countries decide to go to war, when refugees come to our borders. We rarely address trauma caused by social or political events. We are training people to dissociate from trauma and to see healing from it as unlikely, or worse—impossible.

Racism is endemic in North America and can influence not only police officers but all professionals, including teachers, psychologists and employers. Any occupation that has the capacity to determine who “passes” and who “fails” is susceptible to the biases of racism. The guy who spat on me could very well be in a management position to this day or even one day be the president of the United States. He could even be someone’s therapist. You never know nowadays where these kinds of people end up. But we need to get over this idea that it is only police officers and that we, you and I, are also not also susceptible to abuses of power.

I write this knowing that many people will disagree with me, but there is so much at stake. If this understanding can save at least one life, I will have accomplished my task.

So, I just offer fair warning in advance. Many of the terms I will say in this book may cause a variety of feelings from rage and anger to disgust. Not all White people are racist, but all non-Black people benefit from Anti-Black racism. This is because the trauma of White supremacy not only harms Black people; it ensnares even those who happen to be White. This is why we must all seek to eliminate it together and forever. So, let us be brave together and undertake this journey together.

THE BASIC PREMISE

Racism was once created, so it can also be destroyed. The true nature of racism is systemic and trauma-based. We have all of the theories we need to get to the root of this. What I have written is a compilation from my own research and clinical practice. These are perspectives, tools and approaches from a variety of sources that have made differences in the lives of thousands. I endeavor to share them with the world to set a foundation of individuals who can build on it and advance it. Anti-Racist Psychotherapy is not only mine; it belongs to the people who seek to heal the trauma of racism.

But what is key is that we cannot just do another course on cultural competency, another course on “diversity and inclusion” or whatever any of that means. Our cultural competency has failed us in that we claim to know others without truly knowing ourselves. We need an updated cultural foundation that is both anti-racist and is trauma-informed.

This book is written for the change workers, those of you who have been affected by racism and want to make a difference. You can be any race and be an anti-racist. White supremacy is fatal to all of us, and even non-White people can be White supremacists. As Dr. Kendi writes, it is either that we support policies that are anti-racist or policies that are racist; there is no non-racist. And as Mr. Menakem explains, White people also suffer from White body supremacy. Dr. Degruy explains that the trauma of slavery still has ripple effects to this day. I write in a spirit of culling together the ideas of those of the giants who have preceded me. We all seek the same goal of making the world stronger together.

THE PATH TOWARDS ANTI-RACIST PSYCHOTHERAPY

Anti-racist psychotherapy is exactly as its namesake suggests. It is an approach that is meant to eliminate the suffering caused by this socially constructed sickness, by treating the mind, body and spirit of those impacted by it.

Because racism is systemic, impacting individuals and communities simultaneously, anti-racism must also be as self-reflective as it is goal-directed. There is no person who has not suffered under the sickness of racism either directly or indirectly. By reading this work, I will do my best to ensure that you have the appropriate vocabulary and understanding to navigate the chasms of this scourge. You will also be able to view

mental health through a trauma-informed and anti-racist perspective. I will provide you with anti-racist perspectives on some psychotherapeutic approaches and interventions that are designed to eliminate the trauma caused by White supremacy and Black suffering. So, in learning about this approach, it is my hope to help even you, the reader, to heal and help others to heal from these socially constructed means of suffering.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. Let's give it our best shot.

CHAPTER 1: TOWARD SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF RACISM



SKIN LIKE DIRT

“Oww!” I said as I pulled back my arm. The grade-school children laughed amongst themselves. They were practicing what they then called “Indian sunburns,” where one child would take another’s arm, and attempt to pull or twist the skin in two different directions. The children took turns grabbing one another’s forearms, looking at the red marks that would appear after releasing their grips. They laughed at pain.

No such marks appeared on mine. I did not understand why it was called an “Indian” sunburn or why this was a form of entertainment. I kept my distance. One of the other kids noticed I did not have a red mark on my skin and jeered. The others laughed.

“It’s still Black!”

One boy laughed.

“Maybe it’s because his skin is like dirt,” another boy said. “We have to wash it off first.”

They giggled, and I distanced myself.

I refused to play their games. I was not like them. I could never be like them. I was given a Blackness that could never come off.

IS RACE REAL?

To explain race, I like to use a cultural icon. Stevie Wonder.

(<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/aug/30/stevie-wonder-blind-black-disadvantage>) He is a world-renowned artist who opposes the view of seeing blindness or being “racialized” as a disadvantage. People who are disabled are rarely discussed or given a voice in the media, and so are often considered a marginalized group. But Stevie Wonder is unique in that he is a high-profile artistic genius who happens to be both blind and Black.

Oftentimes too, we live in a world where the title of Black is seen as insignificant or undesirable compared to the title of White. But his case is important because he is a person who has high self-esteem despite these labels given to him. Does the concept of Black exist to a person who cannot see the label? Is Black real? While the challenges of blindness are in some cases biological, the categorizations of race are not substantiated by science and are not uniformly supported by geneticists.

Ruttherford (2020) explains that this idea of “White” racial dominance is based on pseudoscience and that any concept of racial “purity” is nonsense. He explains that race as a taxonomy is not well-supported by our current understandings of biology or evolution. It is not because of genetics that Black people have rhythm or excel in sports. It is not because of a country’s flag that you can see Asian students excel. These stereotypes are racist for a reason because they discount hard work, determination and resilience.

But whether or not it is real, there are real consequences to race. Here we must consider differential outcomes depending on race.

DIFFERENTIAL OUTCOMES FOR RACIAL MINORITIES

On multiple levels, racial minorities encounter societal problems in a different way from members of the majority racial group. For example, in consideration of violence against women, much research describes the extent to which gendered violence is widespread in the world across cultures, ethnic groups and different races (Bunch, 1997). However, even in cases of domestic violence, some writers suggest that the media often associates domestic violence in higher proportions to racial minorities (Abdo, 2006). But it is not only the media’s conceptions. Researchers have often indicated that there are higher proportions of Black women in comparison to Whites who are victims of gendered violence (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). In Canada, much research has pointed toward an overrepresentation of incidences of violence towards women of color and specifically toward Aboriginal women (Brownridge, 2003, 2008).

Additionally, research suggests that racialized and immigrant youth of diverse backgrounds encounter an increased risk of social alienation and involvement with the criminal justice system (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009), as well as an increased risk of taking part in peer delinquency and gang violence (Le & Stockdale, 2008). Moreover, in regard to youth outcomes in the educational sphere, Light and Strayer’s (2002) review of the literature reports that racial minorities are less likely than their White counterparts to succeed academically. Even as early as high school, researchers found that American youth from different racial groups (Blacks, Hispanics and Asians) all described their limitations and goals in terms of racially sanctioned stereotypes. Stereotypes acquired in high school link ethnic group membership to academic ability and other skills, many of which are in comparison to White students (Kao, 2000).

Research suggests that Black children are more likely than children in the general population to be investigated for cases of maltreatment in Canada (Lavergne, Dufour,

Trocmé, & Larrivée, 2008). Espinoza and Ek (2011) mention that race still contributes to longer sentences and harsher penalties, leading to juveniles being tried as adults. Wright and Younts (2009) explain that African Americans are vastly overrepresented in all stages of the criminal justice system. Additionally, when considering victimization studies, Blacks were frequently identified as the offenders in crimes such as robbery, rape or assault. This occurred despite researchers reporting that, in their study, there was in fact very little difference between the criminal behavior of Whites and Blacks.

SYSTEMIC FACTORS

Of specific concern is that despite these issues, researchers explain that differential rates are not solely attributed to race in and of itself. Freeman (1991) writes that in addition to societal and historical considerations, "economic status, irrespective of race, prevails as a more powerful surrogate of human conditions and circumstances" (p.526). Furthermore, rates of youth deviance, violence or criminal involvement are more appropriately attributed to systemic discrimination, broken families and poverty rather than specifically the race of the individual (Wright & Younts, 2009; Brownridge 2008; Williams, 1999).

Despite evidence that these differential outcomes may be attributed to external influences rather than on some intrinsic deficiency based on race, the internalization of negative beliefs about one's identity can be damaging. Drawbacks to possessing socially induced beliefs about one's racial inferiority are corroborated by Williams (1999). The author explained that racial minority children can be affected by limiting beliefs about their race. He proceeds to mention that racial minority adults who live their lives in the context of a racist society are less likely to have comparable ratings of educational, socioeconomic or even mortality rates to White adults.



Hence, we see the cyclic nature of these differential outcomes. Challenges are faced by racial minorities in health, relationships, childcare and the criminal justice system. Mental health workers of multiple domains are thus likely to encounter diverse populations based on high representations of these groups in the literature. This requires the necessity of professionals who are trained to assist and support racially diverse children and their families.

WHEN DID RACE START?

There is both a historic and present-day creation of race and culture in order to explain our perceptions in future encounters. The only way that you can justify the subjugation of others is through constant delegitimization. This is best illustrated through reading a dictionary. It is likely that if you go to a section that labels what "black" means, besides seeing my racial group, you will likely see things that are unpleasant such as dirty, soiled, condemnation, discredit, despair or disaster (Black, n.d.). Additionally when we are talking about the color "white" now, it's another thing entirely. "White" can mean that something is free from blemishes, favorable, fortunate, pure, or innocent (White, n.d.). You will see this in any dictionary; this dichotomy between Black and White is striking yet ever present. Black and White are really just neutral colors, but it is our use of the terms that breathes life into them.

A 2014 Huffington post article caught my attention. It explained that one of the most influential people in the world was not Jesus (gasp). Instead it was Carl Linneaus. (https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/06/12/wikipedia-most-influential-person-jesus_n_5487516.html). Although this was definitely typical media clickbait, it referred to an important article. Eom and colleagues (2015) discussed an analysis of Wikipedia articles showing that most articles you read there will have a slant toward being White men from Western countries after the 17th century. The actual article's discussion section critiques this while the Huffington post article celebrates this. Although Wikipedia is not intentionally racist, there is a clear bias in who we generally see as being in possession of knowledge or significance in the world and perhaps a bias in authorship.

Regardless of the bias of Wikipedia, Carl Linneaus is important. The reason why he is significant is because he was one of the first and major proponents of the concept of race. Müller-Wille (2014) explain that part of the controversy with Linneaus is that, in his seminal text, he instructs the reader to "Know Thyself" and then dissects all human races into four different categories: White Europeans, Red Americans, Yellowish-Brownish Asians and Black Africans.

(https://www.academia.edu/11935913/Linnaeus_and_the_Four_Corners_of_the_World)

The trouble is not only that he is using an expression of “Know Thyself,” despite people not knowing was first recorded on Egyptian precepts on the Temple of Luxor and then culturally appropriated and arguably plagiarized from the Greek philosophers who we know and love (James, 2013). It is not this that is problematic. It is that this racist (and largely inaccurate) categorization of pseudoscientific interpretation of all races was consistently used to prop up beliefs of racial hierarchies with White people being more valued than others. Race has this as a function. The idea was not to follow the dictum of our Egyptian ancestors and focus inward. Race as a general concept was constructed and reconstructed for the purpose of outward conquest and subjugation (Rutherford, 2020).

WHO IS RACIALIZED?

Race creates a caste-based system that allows for certain people to be granted privileges to the extent that others are not. While we are all racialized, it is not intended for White people to “have” a race as much as Black people.

Race is often not for White people, so we will hear the term “racial minority” more common than “the racial majority” purely because we are not supposed to target White people with such words. Words such as “ethnic” and “race” are supposed to refer to the out-group rather than the in-group. We can gain cultural competence about indigenous people and/or African studies, but we will not see Caucasian studies because Whiteness is the default and standard of our society. White people don’t have race like men don’t have gender. The absence of this form of categorization grants a privilege, issuing a lack of categorization and compartmentalization. You can be anything if you are White—except you most definitely cannot be Black.

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF RACISM?

The function of racism is two-fold, requiring an in-group and an out-group. The in-group is meant to benefit at the expense of the out-group. The out-group becomes subjected to classification, dehumanization and exploitation while the in-group simply benefits. In the absence of these stresses, the in-group has but to have the out-group be in a state of subjugation for there to be a passive benefit. When the time comes for solidifying or reinforcing subjugation, then the active benefit is realized not only by actions of the in-group, but by beliefs about the out-group shared by both group memberships. The two enemies then are not only the in-group perspective concerning the out-group, but even the out-group’s perspective on itself.

THE “IDENTIFIED PATIENT”

When the function of racism is discussed, including during conversations about a family system, we have to see who in the system actually possesses power. Parents can at times request that a family therapist fix the child’s problem, but will be surprised when parents and siblings are invited in for a session. In a family hierarchy, the child does not always have as much power—economically or physically, in both literal and figurative senses, when compared to the parent. So, the child’s problem becomes a shared responsibility to all members of the system.

This idea of complementarity is important not only for family relationships; it exists in friendships, intimate relationships, businesses and even in international relations between countries. When we look at the “identified patient” who is seen as the problem, we must also look at who is part of their family. The identified patient did not start off this way. They came from somewhere. They have family too.



THE BLACK WHITE BINARY

In a White supremacist society, you will see that “Black” must be the identified patient. Black is seen as childish, never mature. Black is problematic because of their dress, which is never proper. Black is unkempt because of their hair, which could never be naturally straight. Black must be maintained as being the absolute worst—or else. Black must be bad in order for White to be good.

Black music must be bad so that we know that White music is proper. Black skin must be bad so that we know that White is more “fair.” It is only “fair” that Whiteness is seen as ideal because deep down inside there is an unconscious fear of not living up to the expectations of myth-making. White has to be good because Black is bad. If Black were not bad, then White would no longer be perfect. This binary has very little room for interpretation. Hence, White supremacy is the game where everyone plays and everyone loses. White cannot accept Black because White cannot *yet* accept its own imperfection and instead projects it.

Any therapist would be a fool to categorize a teenager as being “bad” because of their own desire for self-expression. They would also be foolish to deem a child the problem in an alcoholic household. We do not (except in oppressive cases) blame the woman who has been beaten by the abusive partner. So why do we blame the African for the siphoning of their natural resources? Why do we blame the homeless in a society that has billionaires? The function of racism is to excuse the moral failings of an imperfect society that strives to project perfection. This lunacy must not continue.



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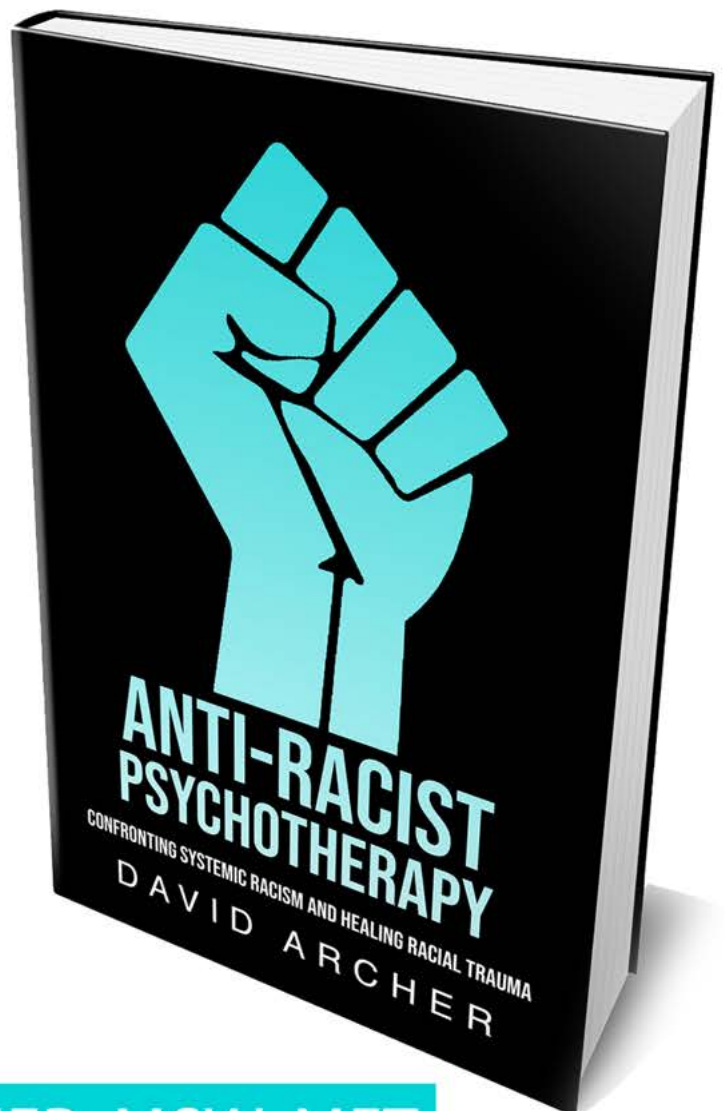
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Thank you for reading. Comments or questions?
Feel free to email me.

@ www.antiracistpsychotherapy.com

🌐 david@archertherapy.com



DAVID ARCHER, MSW, MFT