

PSYCHOLOGY

Is Racism an Illness?

Some psychiatrists believe that racism is a mental disorder, but medicalizing social ills gets us no closer to a solution

By Noliwe M. Rooks @nrookie | May 04, 2012 | 17 Comments

Is racism an illness? Psychiatrists and psychologists are debating the issue. The forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Personality Disorders*, due for publication in August 2012, will [include](#) a chapter on identifying and assessing pathological bias. This is the form of racism that could lead supremacists to violently and randomly maim or massacre those of another race. Meanwhile, a team of British psychologists recently [announced](#) they had stumbled upon a secondary use for Propranolol, a commonly prescribed medication for high blood pressure. They [claim](#) it could cure implicit bias, or the form of racism that can even occur in people “with a sincere belief in equality.” Scientists believe the discovery can be explained by the fact that implicit racism is fundamentally founded on fear, and the drug acts both on nerve circuits that govern automatic functions, such as heart rate, and the part of the brain involved in emotional responses.

Thinking of any form of racism as an illness is very troubling. Historically, psychiatrists, psychologists, the medical establishment and lay people have all agreed that the roots of racism are cultural or societal — a set of beliefs and behaviors that are learned and, as a result, can be unlearned. If it were to ever be declared an illness that can be treated, racists would no longer be legally or ethically responsible for their actions. Just imagine it: a medical justification for discriminating against, or even killing, those of another race.

(MORE: [Inside the Racist Mind](#))



Hank Walker / Time Life Pictures / Getty Images

Members of the Ku Klux Klan burn a cross at a night rally in 1946.

RELATED

Study Finds Heart Disease Drug Combats Racism *CBS News*

Bigotry as Mental Illness Or Just Another Norm *New York Times*

problem.” He thinks there is some validity to those concerns but [believes](#) that while “95–98% of racist behavior is socially, culturally or politically determined, there is still a sliver of racist behavior that may be based on psychopathology.”

He might be right, but how would we differentiate between socially learned and the pathological forms of racism? Do they really present themselves in the world looking that different, one from the other? In addition to providing justification for behaviors currently deemed immoral, or even illegal, medicalizing racism also reduces the pressure to eliminate racist behavior by social and political means, a task at which we are not now excelling. For example, as sociologist Devah Pager’s work has [made clear](#), in contemporary America, black men with no criminal records, solid work histories, and college degrees, fare no better on the job market than do white men with less education who have been newly released from prison. Does declaring racism an illness in any way remedy, address, or lead us toward a solution for this inequity?

(MORE: [The Problem with the ‘Some of My Best Friends Are Black’ Defense](#))

Though it has been asked to consider the issue several times, the American Psychiatric Association has never recognized racism as a mental health problem. The issue was first raised in the mid 1960s by a group of black psychiatrists led by the Harvard professor Dr. Alvin Poussaint. After several race-based murders in Mississippi during the civil rights era, the group [asked](#) the APA to have racism entered into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II.) The association rejected the recommendation, arguing that because so many Americans are racist, even extreme racism in this country is the norm — a problem for culture to solve, not medicine. In 2004, the organization again rejected a proposal to include extreme forms of pathological bias, such as racism, in the new edition of the [DSM-5](#), due for publication next summer.

And of course, there are reasons to be suspicious of the racial and political consequences of medical and psychiatric diagnosis. In the 19th century, enslaved black people who escaped from their owners were diagnosed as having drapetomania, a disorder characterized by an irrational desire for freedom. The treatment involved beating the afflicted into submission. According to a 2010 book by psychiatrist Jonathan Metzel, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease*, doctors began to diagnose black people involved in the civil rights movement as having a form of schizophrenia characterized by a desire to agitate for their rights. Those receiving this diagnosis were institutionalized.

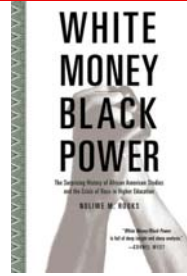
(MORE: [The Myth of Desegregation](#))

Race in and of itself does not dictate, or even explain behavior like running away from an owner, or protesting for civil rights. Humanity explains those behaviors. The same questionable thinking that led to the stigmatization of black people who desired freedom is at the heart of the decision to medicalize racism. It is clear that we as a society have a lot of work to do to end racism, and almost none of it will start in the lab.

MORE: [The New Black Irony](#)



Rooks is an associate professor at Cornell University. The views expressed are solely her own.



*the Crisis of Race
in Higher Education*

PSYCHOLOGY

Is Racism an Illness?

Some psychiatrists believe that racism is a mental disorder, but medicalizing social ills gets us no closer to a solution

By Noliwe M. Rooks @nrookie | May 04, 2012 | 17 Comments

[f Share](#)
[Like](#) 1.3k
 [Tweet](#) 388
 [+1](#) 15
 [Share](#) 25
 [Pin it](#)
[Read Later](#)

Is racism an illness? Psychiatrists and psychologists are debating the issue. The forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Personality Disorders*, due for publication in August 2012, will include a chapter on identifying and assessing pathological bias. This is the form of racism that could lead supremacists to violently and randomly maim or massacre those of another race. Meanwhile, a team of British psychologists recently announced they had stumbled upon a secondary use for Propranolol, a commonly prescribed medication for high blood pressure. They claim it could cure implicit bias, or the form of racism that can even occur in people "with a sincere belief in equality." Scientists believe the discovery can be explained by the fact that implicit racism is fundamentally founded on fear, and the drug acts both on nerve circuits that govern automatic functions, such as heart rate, and the part of the brain involved in emotional responses.



Hank Walker / Time Life Pictures / Getty Images
Members of the Ku Klux Klan burn a cross at a night rally in 1946.

Thinking of any form of racism as an illness is very troubling. Historically, psychiatrists, psychologists, the medical establishment and lay people have all agreed that the roots of racism are cultural or societal — a set of beliefs and behaviors that are learned and, as a result, can be unlearned. If it were to ever be declared an illness that can be treated, racists would no longer be legally or ethically responsible for their actions. Just imagine it: a medical justification for discriminating against, or even killing, those of another race.

(MORE: [Inside the Racist Mind](#))

Dr. Carl C. Bell, the coauthor of the Oxford University Press chapter and a member of the APA is, nonetheless, convinced that some forms of racism are a mental illness. He notes that many of his colleagues are "concerned about having the conversation about racism and mental illness because, for them, it is akin to medicalizing a social problem." He thinks there is some validity to those concerns but believes that while "95–98% of racist behavior is socially, culturally or politically determined, there is still a sliver of racist behavior that may be based on psychopathology."

He might be right, but how would we differentiate between socially learned and the pathological forms of racism? Do they really present themselves in the world looking that different, one from the other? In addition to providing justification for behaviors currently deemed immoral, or even illegal, medicalizing racism also reduces the pressure to eliminate racist behavior by social and political means, a task at which we are not now excelling. For example, as sociologist Devah Pager's work has made clear, in contemporary America, black men with no criminal records, solid work histories, and college degrees, fare no better on the job market than do white men with less education who have been newly released from prison. Does declaring racism an illness in any way remedy, address, or lead us toward a solution for this inequity?

(MORE: [The Problem with the 'Some of My Best Friends Are Black' Defense](#))

Though it has been asked to consider the issue several times, the American Psychiatric Association has never recognized racism as a mental health problem. The issue was first raised in the mid 1960s by a group of black psychiatrists led by the Harvard professor Dr. Alvin Poussaint. After several race-based murders in Mississippi

RELATED

Study Finds Heart Disease Drug Combats Racism *CBS News*

Bigotry as Mental Illness Or Just Another Norm *New York Times*

[Email](#)
[Print](#)

[+ Share](#)
[Comment](#)

[Follow @TIMEIdeas](#)

LATEST FROM OUR PARTNERS

Donald Trump Escalates War With Lindsey Graham — *NBC News*

Lola Lolita: I Cry for My Son — *Huffington Post*

Robotic Surgery Involved in 144 Deaths in 14 Years — *NBC News*

Dad Died After Being 'Hogtied' by Cops: Lawyer — *NBC News*

Uruguay eliminates Italy; Did Suarez bite again? — *Sports Illustrated*

New York Couple Adopts Dying Friend's Four Daughters — *People*

POPULAR AMONG SUBSCRIBERS [SUBSCRIBE](#)

Japan's Booming Sex Niche: Elder Porn



Young Kids, Old Bodies



medicine. In 2004, the organization again rejected a proposal to include extreme forms of pathological bias, such as racism, in the new edition of the *DSM-5*, due for publication next summer.

And of course, there are reasons to be suspicious of the racial and political consequences of medical and psychiatric diagnosis. In the 19th century, enslaved black people who escaped from their owners were diagnosed as having drapetomania, a disorder characterized by an irrational desire for freedom. The treatment involved beating the afflicted into submission. According to a 2010 book by psychiatrist Jonathan Metzel, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease*, doctors began to diagnose black people involved in the civil rights movement as having a form of schizophrenia characterized by a desire to agitate for their rights. Those receiving this diagnosis were institutionalized.

(MORE: [The Myth of Desegregation](#))

Race in and of itself does not dictate, or even explain behavior like running away from an owner, or protesting for civil rights. Humanity explains those behaviors. The same questionable thinking that led to the stigmatization of black people who desired freedom is at the heart of the decision to medicalize racism. It is clear that we as a society have a lot of work to do to end racism, and almost none of it will start in the lab.

MORE: [The New Black Irony](#)



Noliwe M. Rooks @nrookie

Rooks is an associate professor at Cornell University. The views expressed are solely her own.



Rooks' book is *White Money Black Power: African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education*

WE RECOMMEND

- [50 Cent Has an Amazing Instagram Response to His Bankruptcy](#)
- [Here's What Jennifer Lawrence Called Taylor Swift After Her Apple Crusade](#)
- [Everything You Know About Boys and Video Games Is Wrong](#)
- [What to Know About Mexican Drug Lord 'El Chapo' Guzman](#)
- [Why There Are No Female Minions](#)

ELSEWHERE ON THE WEB

- [Krauthammer Flat-Out Calls Obama A Liar](#) (Downtrend)
- [John Kasich Flattens Hillary Over Voter ID Comments](#) (Downtrend)
- [Michelle Obama in Another Lavish Vacation, This Time Spending Millions to Visit London, Italy](#) (Hillary Daily)
- [Cops Tell All: The Top 4 Ways to Get Pulled Over](#) (The Esurance Blog)
- [10 Amazing Motorcycles You'd Do anything To own](#) (Gleams)

Recommended by

17 Comments

Sign in

2 people listening

@ +Follow Conversation
 Share

Post comment as...

Newest | Oldest | Top Comments



Carl Mitchell

Jun 29, 2015

Placing racism in the context of "mental illness" is a deeply troubling trend that only takes us further from understanding its nature. Racism is a result of tribalism - something that ALL human beings inherited. White supremacy is an IDEOLOGY - like Islamism, its a collective reinforcement of hate. What was worse is promoting an understanding of racism that attempts to assign blame to "white people" using political constructs like "people of color" in a diagnostic mental health manual for HUMAN BEINGS. This a new low in Mental Health treatment. Attempting to call it mental illness is completely backwards. Political rhetoric has no place in a diagnostic manual for PEOPLE.

Obama's Trauma Team



Get all access to digital and print **SUBSCRIBE**

Most Popular

FROM IDEAS

- 1 Who's Biggest? The 100 Most Significant Figures in History
- 2 Secrets of the Most Successful College Students
- 3 Singing Changes Your Brain
- 4 Cremation Is on the Rise, but Where to Put the Ashes?
- 5 Why Second Marriages Are More Perilous

FROM TIME.COM

- 1 Russian Forces Double Along Ukraine Border
- 2 Gangs of 'Powerfully Built' Women Are Mugging Tourists on the Streets of Hong Kong
- 3 Putin Phones Obama To Discuss Ukraine, White House Says
- 4 Colbert Tweet Draws Accusations of Racism and #CancelColbert
- 5 There's A Scientific Reason for Why You Look Weird In Selfies

MORE ON TIME



The 13 Most Influential Candy Bars Ever



17 Memorable Kisses Throughout History

CONNECT WITH TIME

Follow @TIME <7.76M followers Like <8.3m

+8,390,693

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[View More](#)

Ynottruth05

Oct 29, 2014

On the face of the primary question, no, racism is not an "illness" because it is a system that is designed for white genetic survival. This system, designed and supported by those persons who classify themselves as white consciously or unconsciously structured for white genetic survival is used and promoted against people of color (or non-whites: Asians, Blacks, Hispanic, Indians [native-American]), in all areas of human activity: economics, education, entertainment, healthcare, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war.

Victims of this system acquire health-related symptoms (low self esteem, high-blood pressure, depression, anxiety, stress, frustration, dependency, sex obsession and obesity, among other human pathological health issues).

These socially-induced, or symptoms influenced by human interactions/environment within a system, such as racism/white supremacy ultimately leads to alcoholism, drug use/addiction, teen pregnancy, bi-sexuality/homosexuality, assault/homicide, robbery/theft, massive unemployment/underemployment, among other cultural and national maladies.

Judge for yourself, but racism is a system that is all around us, locally, nationally and globally.

The Truth

Like Reply



Carl Mitchell

Jun 29, 2015

@Ynottruth05 No, that's NOT what "racism" is.

Like Reply

OhJeeze!!!

Oct 8, 2014

I believe that racism is a spiritual illness that stems from the inability to acknowledge one's own nobility, resulting in denying others theirs. Low self esteem has murdered many people.

Like Reply



mark.helsinki

Oct 8, 2014

@OhJeeze!!! People have murdered many people - it's silly to find a 'condition' and then phrase it in such a way that it is the 'condition' that commits the crimes. The only way out of the cage of 'low self-esteem' is to realise that we do have some control over it, or even, that we can and must exercise some control - then, we are truly actors in our own lives and not merely 'reacting'.

Like Reply

SteveMcCrea

Sep 12, 2014

"Medicalizing a social problem?" Isn't that what the DSM is all about? Kids who can't tolerate a standard classroom "have ADHD." Mothers who are depressed in the wake of intense social and emotional changes (including an intense lack of support in many case) are diagnosed with "Postpartum Depression." Men who abuse their partners are diagnosed with "Intermittent Explosive Disorder." Someone (like me historically) who is shy and dislikes big social scenes has "Social Anxiety Disorder." Psychiatry today is almost exclusively about medicalizing social problems. Even Schizophrenia is heavily influenced by urbanization, trauma, race, and immigrant status. Why shouldn't they add racism to their pile of social constructs? Or better yet, why not stop diagnosing people and actually deal with them as human beings?

---- Steve

Like Reply

mark.helsinki

Jan 5, 2013

I would say that any discussion of the psychopathology of racism has to look at harms, both to the individual, to close others, and to society. That is the normal criteria for deciding when aspects of human personality become distorted to the point of becoming disabling and pathological. Fear of others is understandable in some situations, but when it becomes harmful, socially disabling or even becomes a social phobia against a specific group, then clearly it has become a disorder that needs to be categorised.

Racism is a psychosocial phenomenon with a very strong mental health component. It could probably never be 'reduced' to a mental illness, but it breeds psychological harms that can lead to phobia, addictive behaviour, adjustment disorders etc. Indeed, psychological bias is probably the most sensible grounds on which to 'medicalise' racism, with other features becoming typical secondary diagnosis.

Ironic isn't it that the medical profession are quite happy to medicalise things like ageing, menopause, and sexual function and yet are reluctant to medicalise a very real social ill like racism, which finds violent and abusive expression. Yes, not all racists are violent, but then not all drug addicts are obviously harming others either, but they are certainly harming themselves. Yes, racism is a social phenomenon. But so is substance-abuse. Alcoholics often indulge their addictive behaviour in a drinking community. Does that make it any less pathological? Of course not. Saying racism is a 'social' problem is merely another way of saying it has a social dimension that can act to reinforce the pathological behaviour. The pathology doesn't disappear by recognising its social elements.

I fail to see how a 'desire for freedom' can be irrational or even what are the harms that come from this desire. I say that because this idea of political activism as being mental illness is very easily challenged and should not leave us reluctant to challenge the psychopathology of some 'political ideas'.

Indeed, when people kill others and claim God inspired them to do so, we do not handcuff ourselves by saying that this cannot be seen as psychopathology because of the 'freedom of religion' principle. Indeed, genocide is

It won't be easy to pay for reducing greenhouse gas emissions when we won't be the primary beneficiaries

The NSA Has Changed the American Way of Life

August 18, 2013

It's clear that a reasonable person will not expect very much privacy regarding personal information in the future

Childless By Choice: It's Not Always Family v. Career

August 15, 2013

Quite a number of women know better than to take parental responsibilities they're not up to.

Send us your letters

Send a letter to the editor [here](#). These letters may be edited and posted on TIME Ideas.

Note: The views expressed on TIME Ideas are solely those of the authors.

Sponsored Links

TOP 5 Senior Dating Sites

Don't Waste Time on Fad Date Sites! See Our Top Picks & Register Free.
consumer-rankings.com/Dating

Want To Publish A Book?

Learn How To Get Published Today. Claim Your Free Publishing Guide.
www.iuniverse.com

'I Ended My Acid Reflux'

(1) Little Secret to Stopping Acid Reflux for Good - Read More
startalocure.com/Acid-Reflux

Like Reply

GuyHolder

Nov 26, 2012

Stop making excuses for yourselves - pick yourselves up and offer better guidance to your young. Any illness is within your own community. Until you can accept responsibility and take steps to change what appears to be a black culture in decline - all our legislative efforts and focus on political correctness won't make a difference. I'm old enough to see how useless these efforts have been and old enough to see a marked decline in blacks attitudes towards whites, a decline in blacks attitude toward society and a decline in blacks attitude towards improving themselves. On an individual level we see many blacks become leaders in all fields. Those that have drive and separate themselves from the pack do well. Stop carrying a chip and make the changes you have to. I wasn't brought up to be racist - but what I have observed over 50 years leaves me wary and without much hope when I see articles like these. Born in 62, I interacted very normally with blacks throughout my formative years. The soulful and thoughtful black man of the seventies is a far cry from the crude rapper / gangster wanna be so many young blacks emulate today. Just stop it - stop blaming us and look inward towards your own community and fix what is wrong.

Like Reply



cromartie890

Jul 26, 2013

@GuyHolder You total ignorance is staggering.

2  Like Reply

tokenguy09

Dec 20, 2014

@GuyHolder So let's just tally up your list of prejudices... I mean beliefs about black people

1. Black people are making excuses.
2. Black people are not picking themselves up.
3. Black people don't offer sufficient guidance to their young.
4. None of the sickness of racism rests upon White racists, instead any and all of it resides with Black people only.
5. Black people don't accept responsibility.
6. Black people aren't taking steps to avoid a decline within their communities.
7. Whites are remedying the situation with legislative efforts and political correctness.
8. Black people have an increasingly poor attitude towards White people.
9. Black people have an increasingly poor attitude towards society.
10. Black people have an increasingly poor attitude towards self-improvement.
11. Only Black people who separate themselves from other Black people do well.
12. Black people carry a chip and are resistant to making necessary changes.
13. You apparently weren't brought up to be racist.
14. You've apparently interacted very normally with Black people in your youth (whatever that means)
15. Black people blame White people and aren't sufficiently self-reflective or self-examining.

Phew! As Cromartie80 stated, your ignorance IS staggering. Your statement completely lacks reason, objectivity, perspective or knowledge. Worse still is the fact that you come off as a neurotic hypocrite, narrow minded and racially prejudiced. You've condescendingly insisted that Black people acquire the qualities you yourself are desperately lacking. Time obviously hasn't been good to your intellectual capacity! I hope life offers you the opportunities to grow in the very same ways you've projected on to Black people.

1  Like Reply

GuyHolder

Jan 2, 2015

@tokenguy09 @GuyHolder

I stand by my statement - the problem is within your community. Perhaps I should have prefaced my sentences with the word "some blacks" to make this more clear. The fact you don't recognize these issues is staggering. What do you want - more laws? Try parenting. We all have to make the effort and compromises to be part of a larger society - blacks are no different, and those that do have a greater chance for success.

Like Reply



mark.helsinki

Jan 5, 2015

@GuyHolder The fact you don't understand how racism is constructed through prejudice is rather staggering. And I can tell you, prefacing it with 'some' doesn't dilute it from what it is, a caustic judgmentalism that sees the problems of race, poverty, oppression only in the terms defined by the privileged (in this case

hark back to days of segregation. To even reference such thinking only underlines how much of a problem remains in convincing whites to stop pointing fingers at 'black' people and start lifting the foot of oppression.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



GuyHolder

[@mark.helsinki](#) [@GuyHolder](#)

Jan 7, 2015

Mark, you need to step back into the real world. I think you are experiencing something called white guilt. We have a society and opportunity for anyone who wants to participate. Discourage your children from emulating the thug life - make it clear the path forward can be long and hard and encourage them to put forth the effort we all have to. The prejudice and oppression is largely in your head. Shake it off and take advantage of the very short life you've been afforded. The black community doesn't need your help.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



mark.helsinki

[@GuyHolder](#) White guilt? hahaha. Yeah, lazy thinking or what! Of course, your idea that opportunity is for everyone is certainly NOT located in the real world. The black community is my community GuyHolder, as is the white, Hispanic, Asian communities that live in this same country as me. And I'm not helping them in responding to you, I'm helping YOU. :)

Jan 8, 2015

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



GuyHolder

[@mark.helsinki](#) [@GuyHolder](#)

Jan 10, 2015

You're right.

2000 black elderly, disabled and children were just slaughtered by black extremist muslims in Baga, Nigeria. It is not the lead story at any of the main stream news outlets.

Black lives don't matter, not only here where the violent death of a black man will likely be at the hands of another black man but around the whole world.

Political correctness keeps us from speaking in a plain manner about problems within the black community and within Islam.

You're right there is a problem and it's past time to speak boldly and abandon political correctness, white guilt, and wanting to appease or placate.

I'm furious this morning, not about some perceived anti-black sentiment in this country but about the complacency of everyone of all ethnicities willfully ignoring this violence.

A black man doesn't fear violence on a walk through my neighborhood but in many black communities around the world, individuals are at risk of wildness every day.

Black and white leaders need to speak up - it's not ok. Its not ok.

The atrocity at Baga today comes after a year of similar unspeakable violence and the enslavement of females. This horror on blacks by other blacks is virtually ignored by the entire world. The horror of Islam is ignored by the entire world.

You're right.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



GuyHolder

[@mark.helsinki](#) [@GuyHolder](#)

Jan 10, 2015

It's telling, the picture accompanying this article is 70 years old because you'd be hard pressed to produce a similar picture today. And yet I could spend the rest of my life posting current pictures of black on black violence.

The level of complacency is sick - it is a mental illness.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

One FAITH And BAPTISM
GIFT OF HEAVEN ABOVE
ALL THE WAY UP
>+<

Like Reply

