SOUL SPACE

CRDP African American Technical Assistance Project

RACIAL IDENTITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

By Will Walker, PhD

ONTRACK Program Resources is pleased to present this "Black paper" for the Winter 2019 Edition of *Soul Space,* the semi-annual publication of the African American Technical Assistance Provider for the **California Reducing Disparities Project (CRDP)**. This issue of *Soul Space* is dedicated to the role of racial identity and the power of naming the mental health of African diasporic people who reside in the United States. A recent PEW poll found that seventy-four percent of Blacks surveyed indicated that race was either extremely important or very important to their identity. A mere fifteen percent of Whites agreed. What is racial identity and why is it central to dark-

hued Americans of African descent? Where did the racial identity of the African diaspora come from and who decides how racial identity is constituted in the United States? Do recent immigrants of the diaspora share the same racial identity as dark-skinned American descendants of slavery (ADOS)? What is the relationship between group identity and individual identity among people of African descent? Why has this topic taken on special salience during this time in which American White nationalism is ascendant, and the resurgence of discussions related to reparations? And what is the relationship between racial identity and the mental health of Black Americans?

Identity, Labels, and Belonging

Labels are critical to the socialization process among humans, playing an important role in defining groups and individuals who belong to those groups. Consequently, identity labels are used to define in-groups and out-groups in systems of domination, which sort advantages and disadvantages among different individuals and

Blacks are more likely than other groups to see their race or ethnicity as central to their identity

% of each group saying being ____ is extremely or very important to how they think about themselves

	Extremely important	Very important	Net
White	5	10	15
Black	52	22	74
Hispanic	31	28	59
Asian*	27	29	56

*Asians were interviewed in English only.
Note: Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding. Whites, blacks and Asians include those who report being only one race and are non-Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 22-Feb. 5, 2019.
"Race in America 2019"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

From *Race in America 2019, Pew Research Center*

groups. This has been true for people of African descent in the United States where racial labels have been particularly salient. For the descendants of the African diaspora, then, racial identity is a question of belonging. What psycho-social toll do these questions of group and individual identity take on individuals, and collectively, on communities?

Social Death: Enslavement and Homelessness

The experience of the Black people of African descendants in the United States has been fundamentally different from that of other American groups. There is no immigrant analogy to the Black American experience. Brought to the United States from a continent peopled with diverse ethnicities and over two-thousand language groups, but in which there was no racial identity or notions of Black inferiority, Africans would become chattel, and experience dehumanization, or what Orlando Patterson, in his magisterial comparison of 66 slave societies, *Slavery and Social Death*, refers to as *social death*, "the permanent, violent domination of nataly alienated, and generally dishonored persons." According to Patterson, enslavement was a ritual process. Central to the ritual process of enslavement were the traumatizing acts of the branding and re-naming of slaves to indicate their social condition as chattel, property of their masters. The naming and branding of captive Africans severed them from their previous identities, and were symbols of their lack of freedom and powerlessness. Patterson uses the term *natal alienation* to refer to the "alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of 'blood' and from all 'rights' or claims of birth"
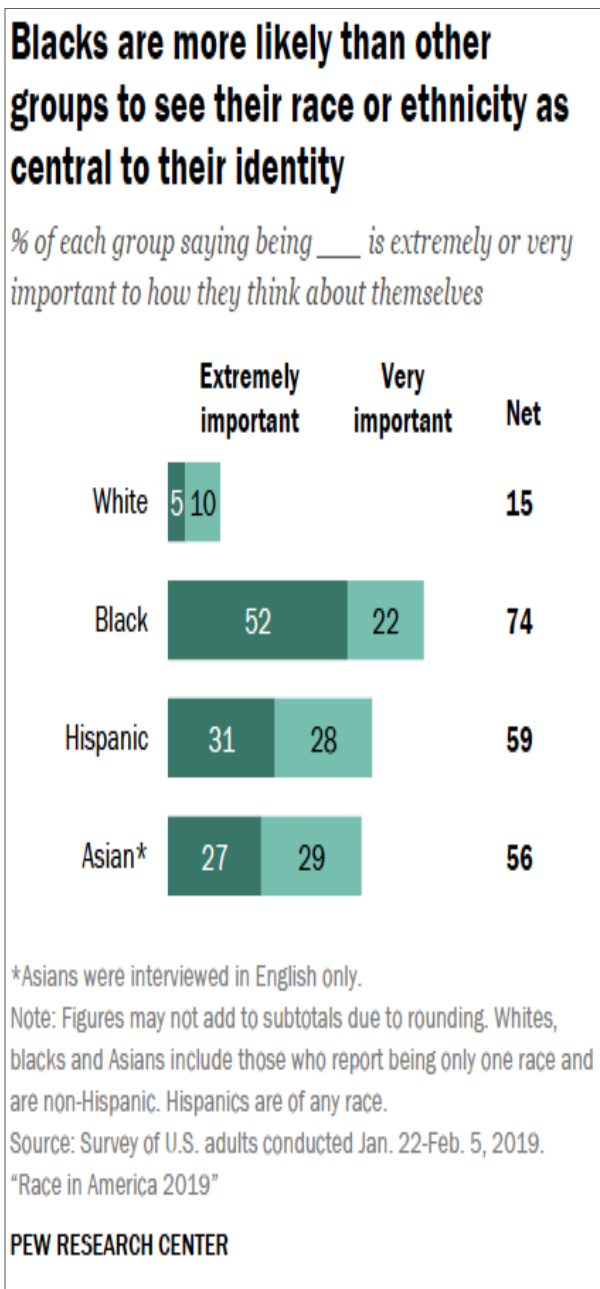
(Patterson, 2018, p.5). In short, African relationships of parents and children held no legal status. Families could be separated at any time. For Patterson (2018), the separation of slaves from their culture and the taking on of new identities meant that Africans in the new world were becoming "deracinated," and "rootless," living under the continued trauma and threat of being separated further from their literal and cultural origins. Cornel West (1982) refers to this condition of living under the state of fear and precariousness, "existential homelessness." Africana existentialist philosopher, Lewis Gordon describes the irony encapsulated in this sense of existential homelessness for African Americans:

> *"To be free, one must have a home...one must appear without qualification, to be able to appear with legitimacy, and to have justification for that appearance. That condition is the meaning of home. But home in this sense need not be a formal domicile. One can for instance achieve a form of freedom through finding one's intellectual home, one's artistic home, Black people and Africana people are supposedly illegitimate in the world in which they are indigenous. There is no other world in which Black and Africana people existed, and perhaps could exist, but the modern one. This leads to the unfortunate circumstance of being homeless in the only world to which they could belong* (Gordon. *2012*, p. 104)."

Patterson, West, and Gordon – three Black scholars working from different Black American intellectual traditions share the following themes in their writing that frames the experience of Africans in the United States:


www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/african_languages.htm

- The fact of being ritually and systematically cut off from their collective histories and individual identities over time made Africans in the United States the most American of modern people. **Black American Americans**, if you will, may have the feeling of never belonging though they have nowhere else to go. This **insider/outsider status** led to **Double-consciousness**, the sense of a dual self among the descendants of enslavement, striving to attain a self-conscious integrated sense of self and community rather than death (literal and social), disempowerment, and isolation.

- The inability to be home in the only home descendants of enslaved Africans have ever known has left psychic scars and wounds on individuals and the communities they developed throughout their history in the US.

Inter-Generational Trauma

Resmaa Menakem's book, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, is a tour de force of how historical trauma is passed on genetically in the bodies of Black descendants of slavery and White Americans. In his discussion of the uniqueness of African American trauma, Menakem

(2017) raises an important question posed by present-day African immigrants: "Why are so many of us doing well after being here only a few years, while so many African Americans are doing badly, even though their ancestors were here for centuries?" (p. 89). Menakem provides two responses to their query. First, the majority of recent Black immigrants made a decision to come to the U.S., even if they were fleeing persecution,
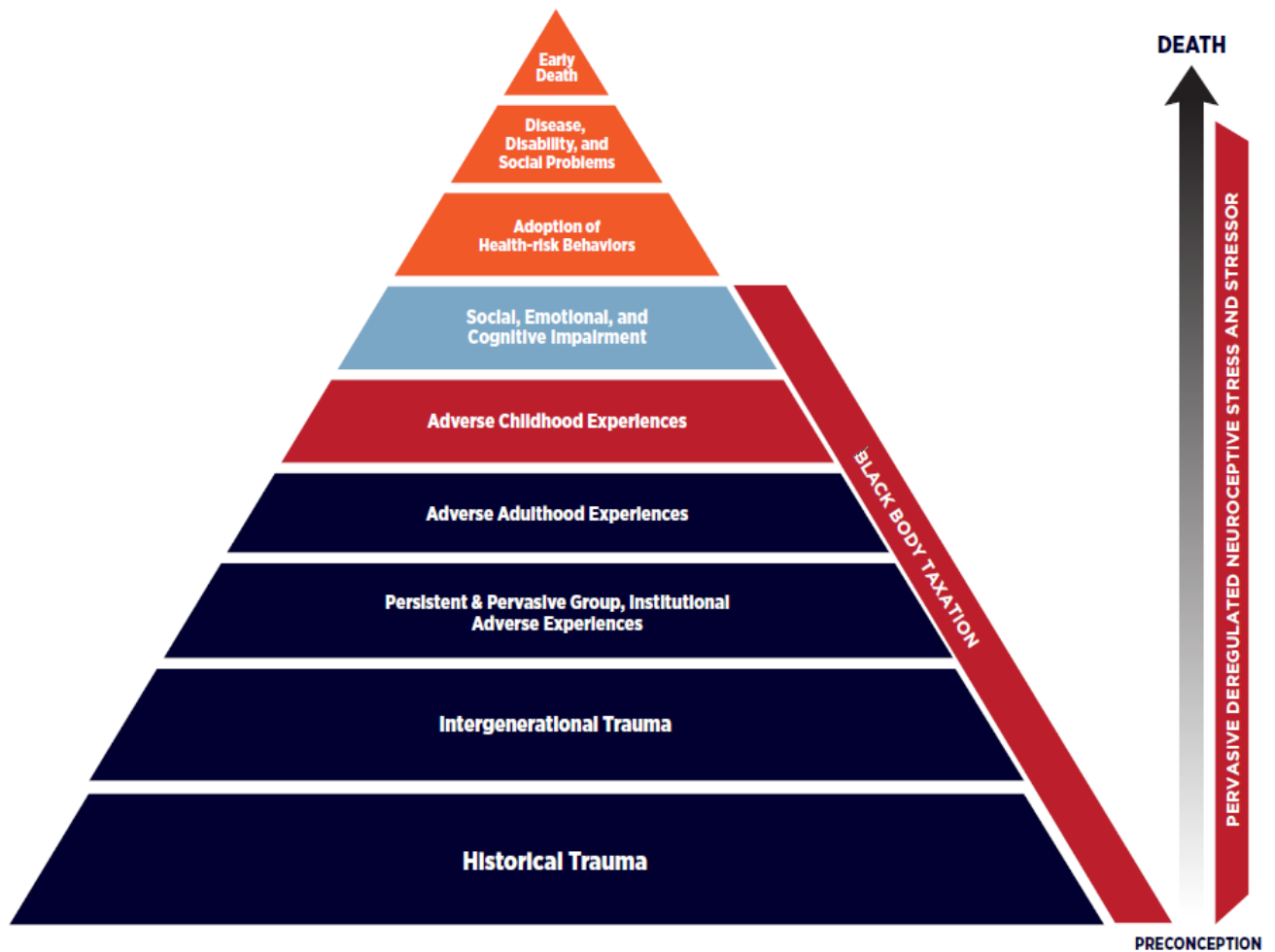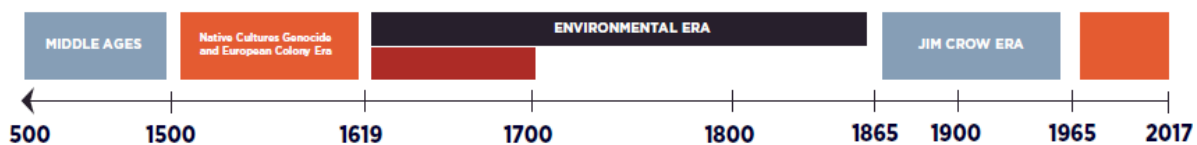
From *Whole People: A Study Guide for the Documentary Series*, produced by CentraCare Health and Twin Cities PBS, p. 21

tyranny or war, and were allowed to maintain their languages, origin stories, and symbols and, to a point, their cultures and the right to name their children. Second, Menakem states that "for well over 300 years the Black Body in America has been systematically brutalized, abused, controlled by laws, policies, codes of behavior and by images and concepts" and for "centuries trauma upon trauma [were] compounded. [see illustration and Menakem's guide book below]." The traumatization and root causes of the Black American descendants of slavery are different from that of recent African immigrants. Also see Menakem's free 5-session video e-course in which he discusses the adaptive behaviors developed over centuries by the African descendants of slavery.

Adaptive Behaviors and Group Identity

In the midst of legal enslavement, social death, segregation, and extra-judicial terrorism of Black Americans of African descent developed multigenerational adaptive behaviors, and community-defined practices that sustained their minds, spirits, and bodies over centuries of group oppression, denigration, and insult. The authoritative and empowering act of self-naming as a group and individually were central to these adaptive cultural practices, and like all cultural practices, it has had a contentious history, as captured by a video featuring "A Black American (I Love Being Black)" poem by Smokey Robinson on Def Poetry Jam which itself is contentious.

In his book, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, Sterling Stuckey addresses the practice of naming, arguing that "we must understand the African background as regards the naming practices and the importance

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.
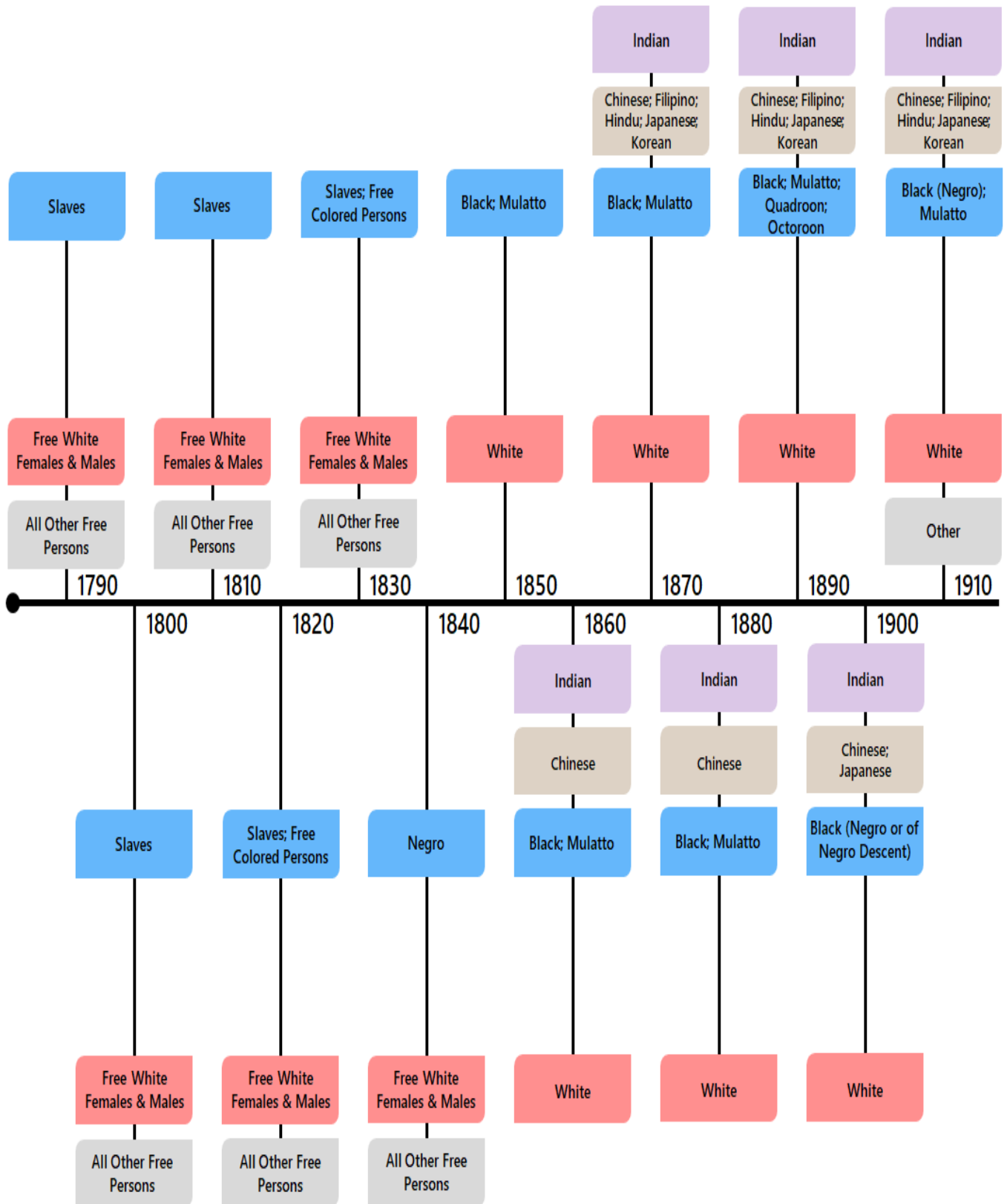
—W.E.B. Du Bois

of names to the slaves, to appreciate the emotional force behind the names controversy." Through a rich analysis of primary sources, Stuckey explored the fragments of African culture that slaves cobbled together. In addition to the ancestral collective healing circles known in West Africa, story-telling through folklore, and singing and dancing, Stuckey maintains that group-naming was a central way through which ante-bellum Blacks confronted and reclaimed their African heritage as a form of group resistance, accountability, and the reclamation of their wholeness as people. Indeed, the first documented group designation adopted by Black people arriving in 1619 was as *African*. This was especially true among the free literate population of Blacks, which constituted nearly 8% of blacks in 1790 when the first national census was conducted.

Since this initial period during which Blacks defined themselves as African, Lerone Bennett's assessment reports that African American group self-naming practices "have raged with religious intensity" over the course of the history of Black Americans. These race designations have included such contested designations as Colored, Anglo-African, Hamite, Negro, Ethiopian, Afro-American, and Aframerican to name a few. While the importance of self-definition to self-esteem and worth may not seem

Measuring Race and Ethnicity Across the Decades: 1790–2010

Mapped to 1997 U.S. Office of Management and Budget Classification Standards, U.S. Census

Indian	Indian	Indian	American Indian or Alaska Native	American Indian or Alaska Native
Chinese; Filipino; Hindu; Japanese; Korean	Chinese; Filipino; Hindu; Japanese; Korean	Chinese; Filipino; Hindu; Japanese; Korean	Asian Indian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; Vietnamese; Other Asian	Asian Indian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; Vietnamese; Other Asian
Negro	Negro	Negro or Black	Black or Negro	Black, African Am., or Negro
Mexican		Mexican	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin; Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano; Puerto Rican; Cuban; Another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin; Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano; Puerto Rican; Cuban; Another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin
		Hawaiian	Hawaiian; Guamanian; Samoan; Other APO	Native Hawaiian; Guamanian or Chamorro; Samoan; Other Pacific Islander
White	White	White	White	White
Other	Other	Other	Other Race	Some Other Race
1930	**1950**	**1970**	**1990**	**2010**

[timeline axis]

1920	**1940**	**1960**	**1980**	**2000**	
Indian	Indian	Aleut; American Indian; Eskimo	American Indian or Alaska Native	American Indian or Alaska Native	
Chinese; Filipino; Hindu; Japanese; Korean	Chinese; Filipino; Hindu; Japanese; Korean	Chinese; Filipino; Japanese;	Asian Indian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; Vietnamese;	Asian Indian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; Vietnamese; Other Asian	
Black (Negro); Mulatto	Negro	Negro	Black or Negro	Black, African Am., or Negro	
			Spanish/Hispanic Origin or Descent; Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano; Puerto Rican; Cuban; Other Spanish/Hispanic	Spanish/Hispanic/Latino; Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano; Puerto Rican; Cuban; Other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	
		Hawaiian; Part-Hawaiian	Hawaiian; Guamanian; Samoan;	Native Hawaiian; Guamanian or Chamorro; Samoan; Other Pacific Islander	
White	White	White	White	White	
Other	Other		Other	Some Other Race	

(Continued from page 5)

direct for some, it is necessary to understand that the process of group definition came within the context of a government—state, local, and national—that was obsessed (the measuring of Black blood quantum) with racial designations as a means of policing the boundaries between Whites and Blacks in order to control the distribution of social goods, such as employment, voting rights, housing, and freedom itself (convict leasing). The chart below demonstrates how these categories shifted over time. It wasn't until 1960 that citizens were given the right to choose their own race.

The new census coincided with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and the Black Power Movement, its more strident continuation. It was one of the singular achievements of this period that the term "Black" was elevated to a term of positive identity, inverting the conceptual scheme of racial meaning in America. While the term found initial animus, Martin Luther King, Jr., famously referring to Black Power as "racism in reverse," by the late 1960s, uniting around Black identity became viewed as consistent with American pluralism and how other groups such as Italians, Poles, Jews, and the Irish had become American citizens through the political process by liberal Whites who had previously advocated color blindness and individualism. Charles Hamilton, in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* on April 14, 1968, put it succinctly, "Black people have not suffered as individuals but as members of a group; therefore, their liberation lies in group action." Embracing Blackness was not just a matter of individual assertion but of group pride, power, and its concomitant, belonging. However, not all people accepted the use of the term.

In 1987, Jesse Jackson, echoing Malcom X's sentiment that if you "destroy the root, you destroy the fruit," led a movement for the use of the designation African American. Jackson stated: "To be called African American has cultural integrity. It puts us in our proper historical context. Every ethnic group in this country has a reference to some land base, some historical, cultural base. African Americans have hit that level of cultural maturity." (NY Times, Negro, Black and African-American, December 22, 1998). Jackson's movement was a hit, but not without many detractors who maintained that Black Americans' connection to Africa was more fictive than real; nevertheless, African American, along with Black, became a conventional designation for American-born descendants of African slaves. The recent immigration of Blacks from African countries has fueled the debate in recent years, especially as it relates to reparations for the oppression the Black descendants of slaves have experienced for centuries.

## Mental Health and Identity Development among African Americans

Racial identity development has been among the most researched area of African American mental health. Additionally, a number of studies have established a link between racism and mental health outcomes, including self-esteem, depression, substance use, and overall psychological distress; yet, neither racial identity or racism are listed in the DSM-5 as a protective factor or cause of post-traumatic stress disorder. First, what is racial identity development, and how does it relate to the larger racial context and history of the United States and [mental health](#)?

Racial identity refers to the ways and the degree to which individuals and communities shape and are shaped by race. There are a number of Black racial identity theories. The first was developed by William Cross, and subsequent theories of Black identity development and the identities of other races and ethnicities have built on his work. Cross' paradigm charts the course of a psychologically healthy Black identity to a psychologically unhealthy one, as can be seen from the chart below. The model does not take into account historical trauma. According to Cross, the initial phase of an African American child's life is characterized by a **Pre-Encounter** during which the person is largely unaware of race or its general

Blacks about twice as likely as any other racial or ethnic group to say legacy of slavery affects blacks' position today a great deal

% of each group saying the legacy of slavery affects the position of black people in American society today ...

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
All adults	31	32	19	16
White	26	32	22	19
Black	59	25	6	9
Hispanic	29	38	19	11
Asian*	33	35	17	15

*Asians were interviewed in English only.
Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown. Whites, blacks and Asians include those who report being only one race and are non-Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 22-Feb. 5, 2019.
"Race in America 2019"

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From **Race in America 2019, Pew Research Center**

implications in U.S. society. The **Encounter** phase, is marked by an event or series of external events that make the person consciously aware of racism and its devaluation of African Americans. The **Immersion/Emersion** phase is the period in one's life where they actively seek to explore and attach themselves to their own racial community, peers, and culture (this may happen in adulthood for some). **Internalization** is the phase in which one is strongly attached to their racial identity and have done it in a way that they may develop healthy relationships with Whites who are race conscious and are respectful and lacking in **Negrophobia**.

The **Internalization/Commitment** phase is when someone commits her personal sense of blackness to anti-racist actions and community building. Janet Helms later expanded on Cross' model and added **Integrative Awareness**, a dimension of healthy racial development where an individual appreciates one's collective identity and that of other groups that have also experienced racial and other forms of oppression.

Another racial identity model was developed by Robert Sellers and his colleagues: the **Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI)**. This model has four dimensions of African American identity: salience, centrality, ideology, and regard. **Salience** refers to the extent to which race is a relevant part of a person's life at any given moment. **Centrality** refers to the degree to which race is a normative part of how a person defines herself. **Ideology** refers to beliefs, opinions, and attitudes concerning how a person believes Blacks should behave toward self and others: *Nationalist* (emphasis on uniqueness of being of African descent), *Oppressed minority* (emphasis on commonalities among oppressed groups);
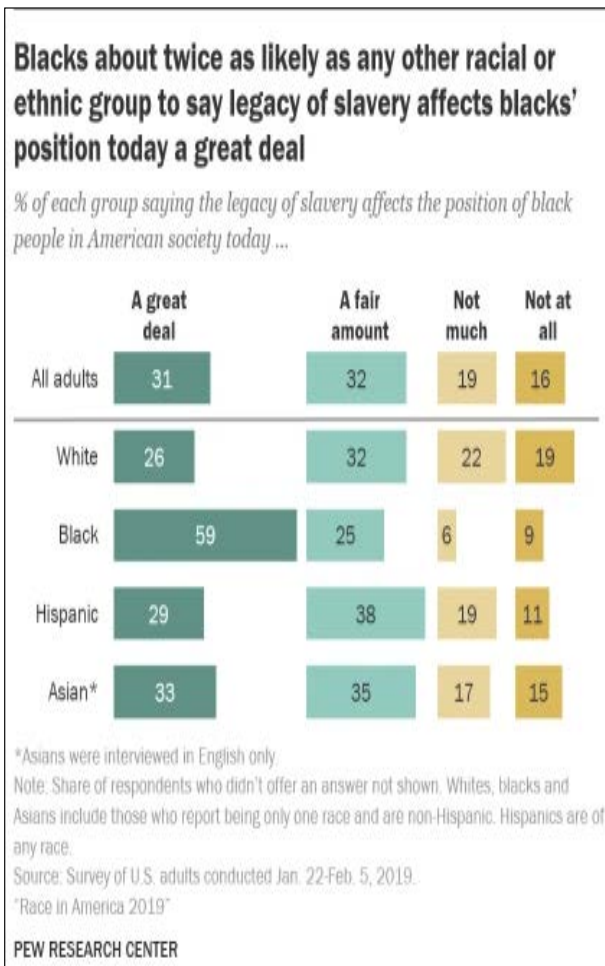
assimilationist and; *Humanist* (emphasis on commonalities between African Americans and the rest of American society). It is most likely, according to Sellers, that a person holds a variety of these philosophies. The fourth dimension is **Regard**. It measures how a person feels about membership in their racial group. Regard is divided into public and private. *Public regard* "refers to a person's affective and evaluative judgment of his or her race. *Private regard* refers to the extent to which individuals hold positive or negative attitudes towards Black people and their personal membership. Sellers created the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) to measure three of the dimensions of this model: Centrality, Ideology, and Regard. Salience was not included because of its susceptibility to situational influence. Though Sellers' model builds on Helm's and Cross' model, it is more complex and has had more standardized use in the field.

The UnRESTS

There are a number of scales that have been developed, but a recent one developed at the University of Connecticut shows promise for inclusion into the next version of the DSM-5. Structured as an interview, the [University of Connecticut Racial/Ethnic Stress & Trauma Scale (UnRESTS)](#) is motivational by intending to help the

> *Living without your story, without memory, is like driving without a rearview mirror except it's more dangerous.*
>
> — *Randall Robinson*

> ## William Cross' Theory of Racial Identity Development (5 stages):
>
> *1. Pre-encounter* – Black child absorbs beliefs of White culture including the idea that it is better to be White.
>
> *2. Encounter* – an event triggers the acknowledgement of the personal impact of racism.
>
> *3. Immersion/emersion* – individuals desire to surround themselves with the visual symbols of their racial identity and actively avoid symbols of whiteness.
>
> *4. Internalization* – individual is secure in own sense of racial identity; willing to establish meaningful relationships with White who acknowledge and are respectful of their own self-definition.
>
> *5. Internalization/commitment* – (same as above) individual is anchored in a positive sense of racial identity and is able to perceive and transcend race proactively.
>
> From: https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/Compilation_of_Racial_Identity_Models_7_15_11.pdf

largely White female practitioners build rapport with African American clients for whom it is not easy to open up about racism. The format models the DSM-5 Cultural Formulation Interview (APA, 2013), but adds an explicitly racial inventory component. The inventory has four sections. The first section allows the client and clinician/counselor to become comfortable talking about race. The second section addresses racial identity development and asks a range of questions concerning pride, and attachment to group. The third section addresses overt racism and queries the client regarding their experience of overt racism. The fourth section introduces a series of questions about "Experience of racism by loved ones," which is followed by questions on "vicarious racism," and "covert racism." Finally, a **Racial Trauma Assessment** is given following the guided

conversation. Monica Williams, one of the developers of the assessment has also created a companion version of **Prolonged Exposure Therapy,** culturally adapted for African Americans.

Conclusion

Race has been the primary category by which the United States has enumerated its citizens since the first Census in 1790. This process of the racialization has resulted in unevenly distributed benefits, burdens, and racialized meanings to its citizens, such as the ability to access social goods, including housing, employment (including union membership), voting rights, access to adequate healthcare, and a positive social identity. Consequently, African Americans have put significant energy into defining themselves against a system of racialization that has defined them negatively, some going as far as to "racially pass" as social goods. The conclusion of a recent study of African American men clearly defines the task of improving the mental health of African Americans includes both the public healing of a society for which racialization is normative, and of individuals who have borne the conscious burden of radicalization: who have borne the conscious burden of radicalization:

> "We may be better able to intervene on personally mediated and internalized racism by intervening at the institutional level, including addressing structural barriers such as unequal access to opportunities and resources" (Molina & James). https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5386401/
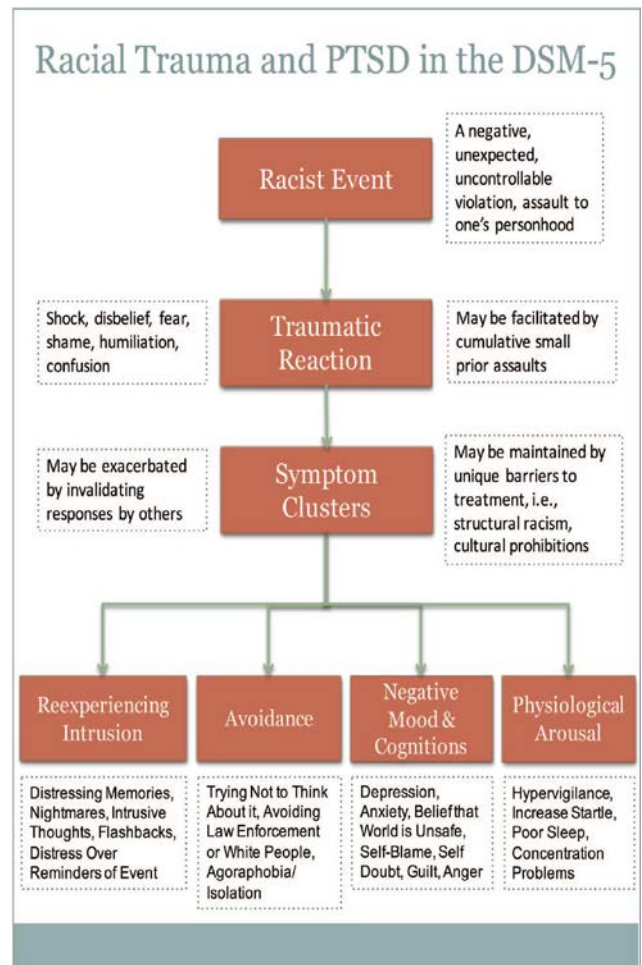
From *Assessing racial trauma within a DSM–5 framework: The UConn Racial / Ethnic Stress & Trauma Survey*.

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