

Implicit Bias & Older Adults of Color

VICTOR ARMSTRONG, MSW

DIRECTOR OF NC DIVISION OF MENTAL HEALTH, DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES, AND SUBSTANCE
ABUSE SERVICES

What Is Perception?



The ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses.

Our way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression

2 Things



Disposition or personality.



Lived Experience

Everything that we have:

- Learned
- Been taught, or
- Been socialized to see.

Lived
Experience
Of:

Clinician &

Patient/ Client/
Consumer



A Chance
Encounter.....

What If....

based on your life experience, your perception is incomplete or flawed?



Are you as a clinician finishing my story based on your perception?

Implicit Bias

I would argue that implicit bias woven into the fabric of behavioral health.

Implicit bias influences a provider's ability to engage in truly patient-centered care.

How can you engage in person centered care with me when you don't acknowledge, understand, or accept my perception of my life and my place in society?

Vulnerability of the Profession

Behavioral health is particularly vulnerable to implicit bias because the diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions rely heavily on provider discretion.

The providers' unconscious attitudes, particularly toward historically marginalized populations can have a direct impact on outcomes for individuals seeking mental health treatment.

Historically:

Only about 20% of blacks get treatment for a mental health issue, compared to 41% of whites.

Compared with whites, African Americans are:
Less likely to initiate treatment
More likely to terminate treatment prematurely

Consider

Outpatient treatment centers are less likely to be located in predominantly Black neighborhoods, so how are Blacks introduced to the system?

Consider Also:

Historical Treatment models were built and designed from the perspective of White males, during a time when people of color and women were thought of as “lesser”.

Historically, there is a lack of diagnostic and treatment studies on mental health in African Americans. As a group African Americans are underserved, understudied, and misdiagnosed.

They were not designed to account for or accommodate the nuances of race, ethnicity, or culture. (inward versus higher power)

Lack of Diverse Clinicians

African Americans Make Up 13% of US Population

4% of Psychologists in the US were Black.

20% of Social Workers in the US were Black

2% of Psychiatrists in the US were Black.

Many Clinicians Don't Have The Framework to Acknowledge and Understand:

Historical adversity, which includes slavery, sharecropping and race-based exclusion from health, educational, social and economic resources, translates into socioeconomic disparities experienced by African Americans today.

Socioeconomic status is linked to mental health: People who are impoverished, homeless, incarcerated or have substance abuse problems are at higher risk for poor mental health.

Historically, there is a lack of diagnostic and treatment studies on depression in African Americans. As a group African Americans are underserved, understudied, and misdiagnosed.

Being Black In America

- ▶ Being treated or perceived as “less than” because of the color of your skin can be stressful and even traumatizing. Additionally, members of the Black community face additional challenges accessing the care and treatment they need.

Older Adults

Elderly people experience a prevalent type of discrimination that has nothing to do with the color of their skin, their religion or their socio-economic status.

- ▶ “What do you expect at your age?”
- ▶ “You’re not getting any younger!”

As People Age....

- ▶ As people age, they often experience stigma and discrimination related to growing older. To make matters worse, if an older person is also living with a behavioral health problem, they face a double stigma—
 - ▶ negative pre-judgments, attitudes, and behaviors against older adults as well as those about people with behavioral health challenges.

Think About It

- ▶ When an older person visits a doctor with valid health concerns, such as loss of bladder control, decreased mobility or memory impairments, and is met with a ‘what do you expect?’ attitude from a doctor or nurse, the mindset rubs off on the patient
- ▶ They leave the doctor’s office thinking, “What do I expect? My health problems are just an irreversible part of getting old.”

Barriers for Seniors of Color

► Cultural mistrust of and/or bias against mental health and health care professionals.

- Due to prior experiences with historical misdiagnoses, inadequate treatment and a lack of cultural understanding.
- African Americans are much more likely to seek help through their primary care doctors as opposed to accessing specialty care.
- African American men are more likely to receive a misdiagnosis of schizophrenia when expressing symptoms related to mood disorders or PTSD.

Barriers for Seniors of Color Continued

- ▶ **Cultural reliance on trusted entities like family or religious and social communities for emotional support (rather than health care professionals).**
- ▶ **Mental health stigma.**
 - ▶ **Mental illness is frequently misunderstood.**
 - ▶ **Fear of appearing weak or fragile in the workplace.**

Stigma

- ▶ For many Black communities, discussing mental health can be a difficult subject.
- ▶ For example, one study showed that 63% of African Americans believe that a mental health condition is a personal sign of weakness.
- ▶ This stigma can act as a deterrent from people seeking mental health care when they need it.

How We Describe Mental Health Challenges

African Americans may be more likely to identify and describe physical symptoms related to mental health problems. For example, they may describe bodily aches and pains when talking about depression. A health care provider who is not culturally competent might not recognize these as symptoms of a mental health condition. Additionally, men are more likely to receive a misdiagnosis of schizophrenia when expressing symptoms related to mood disorders or PTSD.

When I'm Right
I'm Right.....

Consider That:

African Americans are 7.3 times as likely to live in high poverty neighborhoods with limited to no access to mental health services

African Americans comprise 40 percent of the homeless population.

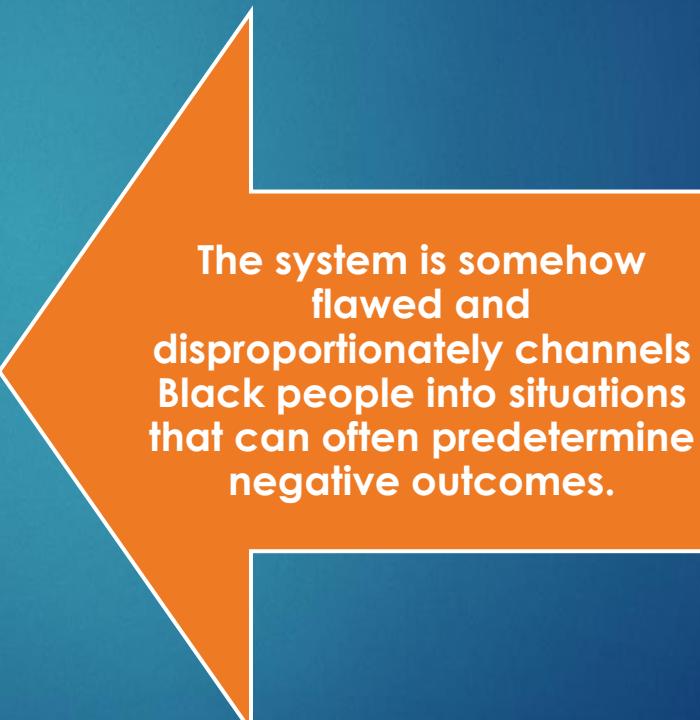
African American youth make up 40% of youth in the criminal justice system and 45% of children in foster care are African American.

There are almost 400,000 inmates currently behind bars in the United States suffer from some type of mental illness. $\frac{1}{2}$ the inmates in the US are Black.

One Would Have To Believe That Either:



African Americans are genetically flawed and therefore pre-disposed to failure.



The system is somehow flawed and disproportionately channels Black people into situations that can often predetermine negative outcomes.

Critical Issues Faced by Historically Marginalized Communities

Less access to treatment

Less likely to receive treatment

Poorer quality of care

Higher levels of stigma

Culturally insensitive health care system

Racism, bias, homophobia or

discrimination in treatment settings

Language barriers

Lower rates of health insurance

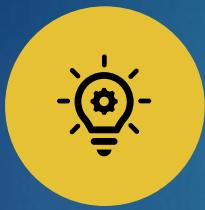
What To Ask the Clinician:

- ▶ Have you treated other African Americans?
- ▶ Have you received training in cultural competence or African American mental health?
- ▶ How do you see our cultural backgrounds influencing our communication and my treatment?

What To Ask Yourself As a Patient:

- ▶ Did my provider communicate effectively with me?
- ▶ Is my provider willing to integrate my beliefs, practices, identity and cultural background into my treatment plan?
- ▶ Did I feel like I was treated with respect and dignity?
- ▶ Do I feel like my provider understands and relates well with me?

Tackling Implicit Bias.....

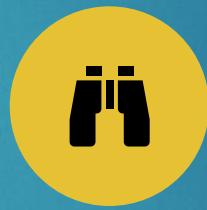


....TAKES TRAINING
AND FORETHOUGHT.

CLINICIANS SHOULD
SEE MORE THAN WHAT
IS IN FRONT OF THEM.



YOU HAVE TO SEE
WHAT IS LIVING INSIDE
OF YOU.



TO TRULY SEE ME, YOU
HAVE TO SEE THROUGH
MY LENS.



TO TRULY HEAR ME,
YOU HAVE TO HEAR
WHAT I HEAR.

Do You Hear What I Hear?

When you listen to what's in the ground, buried in the soil of America, do you hear what I hear? Do you hear the rattle of chains as my forefathers were huddled together as cattle, sold into bondage or do you only hear the stories of slave owners who "built America" with the sweat of their brow?

Do you hear the spatter of bloodshed and the crack of the whip as it pierced the back of my great great grandfather toiling in the cotton field, or do you only hear the clatter of Eli Whitney's cotton gin as it spun out fine linens that adorned generals and business men?

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Do you hear the wails of African mothers as their babies were stripped from their arms and sold to the highest bidder, or do you only hear the stories of the daughters of the confederacy, who showed their grit as they supported their men in battle?

Do you hear the sound of the gavel as Black fathers were taken from their families and sold on the auction blocks, or do you only hear the stories of today's "absent Black fathers"?

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Do you hear the cries for freedom from the bondage of slavery, or do you only hear the rebel yell, and battle hymns, of oppressors to whom monuments were erected?

Do you hear the last gasp for breath as a Black man was lynched in the Jim Crowe south for no other reason than being Black, or do you only hear of the strength and mettle of poor white farmers who survived the Great Depression?

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Do you hear the screams of the 300 Black citizens murdered in the Wilmington, NC “massacre” of 1898, their businesses burned to the ground by a mob of 2,000 angry white men, simply because they dared to prosper, or do you only hear angry Black protestors in 2020?

Do you hear the spirituals ringing out as freedom marchers locked arm in arm, sang “We shall overcome”, while being set upon by dogs and fire hoses, or do you only hear of how great the 60’s were, prompting you to long for days gone by, and to seek to “Make America Great Again”?

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Do you hear the cries for justice, for equality, and freedom, as I take a knee, or do you only hear the Star Spangled Banner, and avert your eyes?

Do you hear the voice of 14 year old Emmett Till, lynched in Mississippi in 1955 for speaking to a white woman, or do you only hear the tales of Black male “predators”?

Do you hear Eric Garner’s stifled “I can’t breathe”, or do you only hear the often repeated, “he should have complied”?

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Do you hear the screams of a startled and frightened Armaud Arbery who, while out jogging in Georgia, was murdered for something someone thought he might have done, or do you only hear their pleas of innocence, and that they have to protect their property?

Do you hear the cries of Breonna Taylor asking “why”, as she was shot 8 times, in her own home, by law enforcement officers who were at the wrong residence, or do you only hear how we shouldn’t “police the police” when Black lives are lost?

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Do you hear George Floyd crying out to his mother; to all Black mothers, as he lay dying on the concrete with an officer's knee on his neck for 8 minutes & 46 seconds, or do you only hear the call for law and order against the “base elements” of society?

Listen. Do you hear what I hear, as I place my ear to the ground? Do you hear the spilled blood crying from the depths of the soil? Can you hear it? Can you hear my pain? Can you hear my anguish? Can you hear me? I hear you, and sometimes the silence is deafening.



If you can't see me and if you can't hear me, you can't effectively treat me. If you can't identify with, and feel empathy for the historical trauma that I have to live with, your interaction may become another traumatic experience that I have carry.