



How Racism Has Changed the Human Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Chronic Stress of Everyday Racism in Contemporary America

Joseph R. Gibson Jr.

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Much like Eric Jensen has argued for about a decade that the cumulative stress of experiencing chronic poverty can literally change the human brain, I believe that the cumulative stress of experiencing everyday racism every day has literally changed the brains of Americans both Black and White. All of this is largely attributable to the interplay of chronic stress and neuroplasticity.

Richard Davidson and Bruce McEwen identified that “the brain is constantly being shaped, wittingly and unwittingly, by environmental forces that impinge upon organisms. Among the influences on brain structure and function that are most powerful in inducing plastic change are social influences.” One of the most consistent, ubiquitous social influences available in America is racism; thus, it’s only logical to conclude that racism is one of, if not the most powerful influences on (changers of) brain structure and function (i.e., neuroplasticity) of Americans.

While this book examines the neuroplastic impact of various versions of American racism, our foremost focus is on what Philomena Essed dubbed “everyday racism.” Everyday racism (a concept I had never even heard of until I needed to find it) is extremely multifaceted yet surprisingly underacknowledged. Moreover, it most accurately describes what racism (and its intrinsic presumption of Black inferiority/delusion of White superiority) looks like in 21st century America.

Believe it or not, this is not merely an accusatory book (against White people). I am far more concerned with how chronic everyday racism-related stress and the accompanying neuroplasticity somehow causes racial inequality and presumed Black inferiority to become reflexively self-reinforcing. In other words, it appears that beliefs such as “Black people are inferior” become inevitably hardwired in the typical American’s brain, which makes us all vulnerable to acting unconsciously in ways that confirm those beliefs.

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