



**REPARATIONS AS A KEY TO RECONCILIATION WITH
COMMUNITIES OF SLAVERY DESCENT: A MATTER OF SOCIAL
JUSTICE**

By: Pamela A. Bridgeman & Debbie Kemp

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Reparations as a key to reconciliation with communities of slavery descent:

A matter of social justice

Pamela A. Bridgeman

Debbie Kemp

Author Note

Wellstar College of Health and Human Services

Department of Social Work and Human Services

Prillaman Hall, 520 Parliament Garden Way NW, Kennesaw, GA 30144

Georgia Highlands College

Division of Social Sciences, Business, and Education

5441 Highway 20, NE Cartersville, GA 30121

Abstract

While there are myriad ethnicities in the United States, for purposes of this examination, the topic is a matter of black and white. Arguably, one of the most egregious injustices committed by the government and peoples of this nation resulted from the institution of chattel slavery. The bodies ferried through the middle passage were black. The enslavers were white. While other peoples like Native American Indians/First Nation Peoples and Japanese have also experienced injustices by this nation, they have received some form of compensatory reparations. The descendants of chattel slavery were forced to return the post-civil war compensatory reparations of forty acres and a mule. Reparations is a complex issue with far more questions than answers. The focus of this paper is specifically to explore reparations from a social work perspective and determine ways both clinical and community focused professionals can promote healing and reduce the current racial tensions.

Keywords: reparations, slavery descent, reconciliation, social justice, social work advocacy, chattel slavery

Reparations as a key to reconciliation with communities of slavery descent

The actual and perceived social injustices against black bodies starting with death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 have catapulted the issue of race, reconciliation, and reparations into the national consciousness (Bridgeman, 2015). Movements and counter-movements question whether the outcomes of the Civil Rights Era remain. There are cries of black lives matter, blue lives matter, all lives matter. What does it matter? It, meaning the focus on reparation, matters because through the years the notion of compensating blacks has always been held out as a hope of reconciling historical bitterness between descendants of white slavers and descendants of former black chattel. And as Coates (2014, p. 55) states, "...Until America reckons with the moral debt it has accrued – and the practical damage it has done – to generations of black Americans, it will fail to live up to its own ideals".

What form of reparations, if any, can lead to reconciliation between white communities and institutions and black Americans? If there is to be a unified United States, that question must be addressed. This is a complicated issue. It involves few answers to many questions; "Who is responsible to whom?" "Should this be compensatory or non-compensatory?" "What is payment enough for the atrocities committed?" Are the recipients entitled to monetary compensation or some other form (Berger, 2002; Corlett, 2016)? How do we determine, in today's transient living, who is a descendant of a chattel slave?

The authors of this paper assert that as a community we can neither authorize nor pay reparations that are enough. However, as social workers, counselors, mental health providers, clergy, and all other social work persons, there are changes we can institute to help build the bridges necessary to improve our current climate. What can we as, a community of professionals,

do to help bridge the gap between black Americans and white Americans for a more positive and productive future? While it is our goal to explore how our community can play a role in being the “repairer of broken walls and restorer of streets with dwellings” (Isaiah 58:12), there must first be a historical exploration of where we have been, to define our role in where we are going.

In contemplating the complexity of reparations and community relations repairs, J. Angelo Corlett (2016, p.15) offers the following eight (8) categories that reparations are meant to address:

“(a) acknowledging the oppression of the group; (b) acknowledging the responsibility for the oppression of the group; (c) disavowing the oppression of the group; (d) upholding the law and order responsibility with respect to the oppression of the group; (e) rectifying societal evils against the oppressed group; (f) expressing sympathy, concern and benevolence toward the oppressed group; (g) paying a debt owed to the oppressed group; (h) promoting the self-respect and self-worth of the oppressed group.”

This paper has incorporated the elements that Corlett suggests into three overarching categories: macro, mezzo, and micro practice in social work. From a macro perspective, it considers what policies should or can be implemented locally, statewide, and federally. Regarding the response of social workers on a mezzo level, community and institutional reforms are considered. Finally, clinical issues are explored concerning micro practice. Those clinical issues include post slavery trauma syndrome identified by DeGruy (2005) or as Azibo (2016, p. 51) notes “...the mental problems resulting from enslavement and colonialism that still today disable individuals...”

Historical Overview

Making amends for slavery was first addressed during the American Revolution. George Washington, who personally owned slaves, set a precedent for reparation by providing compensated emancipation for his slaves upon his death. While Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin favored eventual abolition of slavery (Craemer, 2009).

At the end of the American Civil War, freed slaves were promised forty acres and a mule. This undertaking was borne out of a meeting between General William Tecumseh Sherman and a group of black men, including some who had been slaves. (Grimsley, 2014). In fact, 400,000 acres in lower South Carolina, Georgia and Florida were distributed between 40,000 men. Upon the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, his predecessor Andrew Jackson withdrew this payment. The land was then redistributed to captured enemy soldiers. Adding insult to injury, a committee of newly freed men were to determine how they were to be removed from their new homes and land. Since that time a series of attempts at reparations have been made. In 1915 a lawsuit was filed against the United States demanding the \$68 Million in tax revenue from cotton sales between 1862-1868 be distributed among the freed slaves who earned that money. It was determined that the United States could not be sued without its consent and the cases were dismissed (Nelson, 2016).

Most recently in 2007, reparations have been attempted by various states, including Alabama, Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. These have come in the form of apologies. Apologies serve as resolutions but do not replace and make up for the reparation needs. Yet, these resolutions offer no actual restitution. Audley Moore, considered the “Queen Mother” of the reparations movement said it most plainly, “They owe us more than they could ever pay. They stole our language, they stole our culture. They stole our mothers and fathers and took away our names from us.” (Nelson, 2016, p. 115).

Whether or not reparations or restitution are due has been addressed in the past. The issue is still a topic of interest without a resolution. The following review of the literature offers a glimpse at the continuing debate.

Review of the Literature

“Reparations – or repairing for harm done – is an ancient concept, which has resurfaced in public debates, most notably for demands for reparations led by African American and Afro-Caribbean communities for centuries of enslavement” (N.A., August 2016). Reparations and legal restitution are vastly different concepts. These debates have persisted since reparations for Japanese internees were passed in the early 1990s (Craemer, 2009). A major aspect of reparations is “to acknowledge the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the 13 American colonies between 1619 and 1865... (Civic Impulse, 2017). Finally, reparations are not just about money or even mostly about money. It is about reconciling dissonance within the African-American community and between the African-American community and the white community. Primarily, it is about individuals being willing to let go of the “sins of the fathers” because they have a strong sense of personal value and worth (Obuah, 2016) and community resilience.

The ongoing discussion about reparations for chattel slavery in the United States involves various viewpoints. These are espoused by contemporary researchers. In a 2002 essay, Berger argues that reparations have been paid. He contends that was the purpose of the civil war. That the war paid monetarily by its cost to the economy and the salary of soldiers. Quoting Abraham Lincoln calling the war the will of God, Berger says the war was moral pay as well. And he counts the loss of lives on both the Confederate and Union sides of the conflict as reparations for the slavery. He asserts that subsequent atrocities such as those that happened during the Jim

Crow Era and the Civil Rights Movement are an altogether different matter. Glenn Loury also rejects the notion of reparations due. In 2007 he declared, “We Black Americans have little to gain and much to lose from making “Reparations Now” the next civil rights rallying cry” (p. 87). He further allows that the very language of reparations continues to inflict harm.

McCarthy (2004, p. 752), Corlett (2016) and Coates (2014) believe that the United States still owes a moral debt to the descendants of chattel slaves. McCarthy states it matter-of-factly. He observes that a very basic principle applies – if one party harms another and is in a position to rectify that harm, there is an ethical obligation to repair the damage to the extent it is possible. He goes on to assert that simply feeling remorseful, admitting guilt, or apologizing does not rise to the benchmark of reparation. However, Corlett (2016) includes this as a key to fulfilling reparations.

Others like Azibo (2016), DeGruy (2005) and Bridgeman (2015) make arguments for reparations to address the psychological/mental health challenges manifested in contemporary African-Americans because of the legacy of slavery. Based upon her 12 years of research, DeGruy (2005) offers a cogent argument for the ongoing psychological injury of black Americans as a group because of what she calls Post Slavery Trauma Syndrome. It is a proposition that the terror experienced by slave ancestors is encoded in the DNA of their descendants.

This review of the literature demonstrates the range of views regarding reparations. It demonstrates that the “race debate” still has advocates both for and against reparations. The authors contend some form of reparations is due. Importantly, social work is an conduit through which to ensure the need continues to be addressed. Social workers have roles at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels of implementation. The following sections will explore these.

What implications does the discussion of reparations have for social work in policy reform, social justice, and advocacy: A macro perspective

Apologies for slavery have been made by faith communities and former presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush. Additionally, one of the major areas that reparations are being addressed is major corporations that profited from slave labor. Aetna is one of these companies. It was found that Aetna provided slave life insurance policies to slave owners. In March of 2000, Aetna agreed to issue apology for their role in slavery and provide monetary restitution. While they issued the apology, the promise of payment was rescinded (Nelson, 2016). But these are not policy reform. Nor does apology resolutions passed by various states meet the criteria for affecting social justice. Rather, in keeping with the social work ethics of public participation and social and political action (NASW, 2017), social workers must advocate for an extensive legislative process that results in the passage of legislation on a federal level that addresses reparations for chattel slavery. As mentioned earlier in this discourse, part of the deliberative process would necessarily include what form the compensation would take – compensatory, non-compensatory, or both. Legislators are elected to carry out the will of the people. Regarding reparations, public opinion research suggests that support for it depends on who is to receive reparations, from whom, how and for what reasons (Craemer, 2009, 2015). Importantly, as McCarthy (2014) observes, before even considering legislation, Congress “would have to establish a plausible connection between past racial injustices and present racial inequalities” (p. 750).

In a study that examined Dutch behavior in Srebrenica during the Bosnian war, researchers Zebel et al (2008) found that dehumanizing the victims and feelings of guilt predicted support for reparation policies. Within the last decade, that same kind of

dehumanization surfaced with an upsurge of young black men being killed by police officers (Bridgeman, 2015; Desmond-Harris, 2015;).

Social workers are charged with ensuring marginalized persons are seen through humane lenses. As such advocacy should also attempt to ensure that racial bigotry and institutional racism does not prohibit legislation in support of reparation. That kind of advocacy begins on the mezzo level.

Social Work role in mediating expectations: A mezzo perspective

As groups and individuals our goals are to help, accept, foster, and build-up other individuals and groups. We work to avoid placing any further harm (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017) on any individual or group and attempt to be as accepting as possible. Our barometers for hate and not offending are extremely sensitive. This is a double edge sword which both helps us battle hate and oppression, as well as, makes us fearful of accidentally committing an atrocity with good intentions. The most difficult truth is that the only power of change we have is the power to change ourselves. However, we are running into more and more difficulties in our attempt reconcile these groups as language becomes more political and thereby increasingly divisive (Loury, 2007). Our ability to communicate and talk through issues is being hindered by more and more words that are “not okay” to use due to offense.

Research conducted at the University of California found that the way a situation is framed and presented effects how we view a particular subject (Sparks & Ledgerwood, 2017). Gain frame (positive) versus loss frame (negative) presentation of a topic has a significant, possibly long-lasting impact on how we perceive a subject. This research found that when a subject is framed in a positive way, we tend to view it in a positive manner. However, negative framing creates a negative view. More importantly, Sparks and Ledgerwood (2017) found that

the positive view is easily moved to a negative frame but we become “stuck” in the negative frame, which is not easily altered. In our professional lives we see this in many areas. Finding the positive perspective helps us to change our views.

What then is the social work role in mediating the expectation of, not if reparations will occur, but of how recurrent focus on reparations will affect relationships between African-American groups and communities and white ones? Perhaps the most effective undertaking would be to promote cultural humility (Fisher-Born, et.al, 2015). Regarding the discussion about reparations, cultural humility acknowledges the debt owed and the resilience of slave descendants. In some sense, this is a payment toward the moral debt.

While policies can be developed on a micro level and advocacy engaged on the mezzo one, ultimately it is the individual member of the aggrieved group that must experience reparations. Without individuals believing they are viewed as valuable and worthwhile by those who previously oppressed them, there can be no reconciliation. This begins with an increased sense of esteem and worth. That is where the micro level work is done.

What are the clinical/therapeutic implications of reparations and how do we become repairers of the breach (Isaiah 58:12): A micro perspective

To make sense of a societal issue that involves so much controversy, finger pointing, blames and demands, as professionals, instinct is to reduce it to a diagnosis and attempt to treat surface symptoms instead of root causes. Bessel van derk Kolk (2014, p. 38) said:

“The brain-disease model overlooks four fundamental truths: (1) our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another. Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being; (2) language gives us the power to change ourselves and others by communicating our experiences, helping us to define what we

know, and finding a common sense of meaning; (3) we have the ability to regulate our own physiology, including some of the so-called involuntary functions of the body and brain, through such basic activities as breathing, moving, touching; and (4) we can change social conditions to create environments in which children and adults can feel safe and where they thrive. When we ignore these quintessential dimensions of humanity, we deprive people of way to heal from trauma and restore their autonomy “

Our role is made more complex by the multifaceted impact of individuals who are impacted by history but were not present or the history. It would seem that the past is only being used as an excuse. However, the past is the very minute you are in now, when trauma is a factor. Trauma is the physiological, psychological, and spiritual bruises that make us flinch at every new encounter and sometimes make us despair of any new outcomes—is ongoing and low grade (The Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice, May 2015). To truly conceptualize the idea of physiological connection to trauma, consider studies done by Damasio in 2000. Using brain scans, it was determined that when a client recalls a traumatic event the visceral sensations are equal to those experiences with the original exposure to the event (van der Kolk, 2014). This means that simple recall creates increased heart rate, increased need for oxygen, increased blood pressure, and increased body temperature, even when safety is not in question.

Evidence-based arguments contend African-Americans descended from chattel slaves suffer from trauma and other forms of psychological and mental health maladies (DeGruy, 2005; Azibo, 2016). To repair the breach between blacks and whites, individuals must procure clinical intervention for mental illness or emotional distress resulting from a toxic environment of racial bigotry or marginalization or historical trauma/PTSS. There are still debates of nature versus nurture within our community. It is safe to say that both play a role in the development of a

person and their views. Eric Kandel (2013) details how genes can mutate with both nature and nurture. Experiences can mutate a specific gene and have a possibility of being passed on to our offspring. This information becomes important with the idea that traumatic experiences can be genetically imprinted and passed on.

The instinct for therapists in dealing with trauma is to back off when a client seems in pain, however that is a disservice to the client and promotes more avoidance. As a community we must begin the difficult task of having conversations. In her talk to the RSA, Brene Brown may have said it best, “in the absence of love and belonging, there will always be suffering.” We cannot shame one group for “sins of the father” to elevate another group and expect positive results. The equal sharing of love and belonging is the only way to positively move forward. We must stop running from terms by calling them “offensive.” Our ability to communicate and truly overcome the obstacles is hindered through our constant labeling of words as negative. The true intent behind the language can be seen in the heart of the speaker, when you truly look and listen.

Brene Brown also said “rarely will a response make something better. What makes something better is connection.” We have to struggle through the uncomfortableness and find the connection. It is the only way to make our futures better and to lift one another up as whole human beings.

Conclusion and Implications for further Study

In conclusion, it is important that we say, NO amount of money or apology will change our history. Our futures however, depend significantly on how we help one another move forward as whole human beings. Clinical practice provides some information and promising direction, if we re-conceptualize our views of racial unrest. Working with trauma victims, we know that avoidance is a traumatic response, that only breeds more avoidance and does not “fix”

the issue. One popular method of trauma treatment is narrative, which promotes talking about the experience. However, in today's climate we continually try to remove words that allow us to talk to one another. We have stopped talking so as not to offend. We have increased systemic anger and made no progress in terms of race relations.

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