

Untold Stories of John Henryism: Being Black in the PA Profession

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First, a couple of acknowledgments...



Thank You to our Indigenous Peoples!

Objectives

- Define John Henryism (JH).
- Discuss the association between JH, health status, and burnout.
- Understand the role of JH in decreased job engagement and retention.
- Discuss strategies for creating inclusive practices.

Disclosures

Non-Declaration Statement: We have no relevant relationships with ineligible companies to disclose within the past 24 months. (Note: Ineligible companies are defined as those whose primary business is producing, marketing, selling, re-selling, or distributing healthcare products used by or on patients.)

Before we begin, lets develop some shared agreements that will guide this conversation on today.

The Legend of John Henry

- The fabled John Henry was a former enslaved man in the United States (U.S.) who later become an industrial laborer tasked with steel driving into bedrock.
- John was known for his exceptional strength and for his hammer which was forged out of the chains that were once used to keep him in bondage.
- He found himself in a contest (human vs. machine) building the railroad as he realized the machine would put him and other Black laborers out of a job.
- John used his great strength to overpower the mechanical drill. Right after his victory, he fell dead from complete mental and physical exhaustion.



The Allegory of John Henry and Black Americans

- John was viewed as exceptional.
- The fable represents a powerful history of historically marginalized, low-resourced individuals (e.g., Black Americans) fighting against the "machine."
- To navigate the changing social mores of the U.S., high-effort coping is deployed to overcome obstacles to upward mobility (e.g., merely existing in medicine, promotions).
- This level of coping can accelerate the aging process and lead to negative health outcomes.



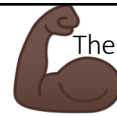
Oh, deep in my heart
I do believe
We Shall Overcome, some day.

Foundational Terms and Definitions

- Lazarus and Folkman's *Transactional Model of Stress and Coping*.
 - This health behavior model helps frame the discussion and foster understanding of John Henryism.
 - Argues that if the individual's *appraisal* of the person-environment dynamic (e.g., stressor) registers as a threat, then overall wellbeing is compromised.
- **Stress** – existing relationship between individual and environmental stimuli that is perceived to exceed available internal/external resources.
- **Appraisal** – the process that leads individuals to perceive situations as stressful or non-stressful (e.g., threat or challenge)
 - **Primary**; evaluating potential for harm
 - **Secondary**; evaluating if one can successfully navigate the associated harm.
- **Coping** – emotions, cognitions, and associated behaviors representing attempts to overcome stress.

John Henryism (JH) Hypothesis

- Defined: Strong behavioral predisposition to cope actively with psychosocial environmental stressors
 - Three major themes: Efficacious mental and physical vigor; Strong commitment to hard work; and a single-minded determination to succeed.
 - Are these themes supported by common societal tropes placed on the Black community in the U.S.?
- Posits associated negative health outcomes for those with inadequate resources, who continuously engage in high-effort coping to overcome stressors and barriers.
 - Discrimination and racism
 - Respectability politics
 - Standards rooted in whiteness



The Activation of JH

- JH is more prevalent among Black individuals compared to white counterparts.
- Psychosocial stressors; discriminatory acts; exposure to physical, structural, and psychological violence; and limited access.
- Organizational racial composition serves as a contextual factor that may impact the primary or secondary appraisal process.
 - Only one? Tokenism? Different expectations? Questioning qualifications?
- JH may be used more frequently as a means to negotiate race-related stressors and negative messages that devalue Blackness in the larger society.

John Henryism Scale for Active Coping (JHAC12)

- 12 items, 5-point Likert scale
- Assesses the three main JH themes
- Items reverse-coded and summed to determine a total JH score (range from 12 to 60)
- Higher scores represent higher levels of JH
- Acceptable internal consistency





JH's Effects on Health Status

- Continuous and active engagement with unrelenting psychosocial stressors promotes sustained and dangerously elevated physiological reactions e.g., increased BP, elevated cardiovascular reactivity → leads to HTN, CVD.
 - High levels of HTN prevalence found among higher SES Black Americans accounting for higher levels of perceived stress.
 - Black Americans with high JH and “high status jobs” had significantly higher ambulatory BP levels during the day when compared to white Americans and Black Americans with “lower status occupations.”
 - Do these finding come as a surprise to you?
- Suboptimal psychological adjustment
- Depletion of psychological resources over time due to high effort coping leads to mental health issues
- Reliance on JH to overcome stressors within situations that provide limited resources (e.g., institutions, organizations, clinics) or support increases risk of negative health outcomes
- Racial Battle Fatigue

- ### Allostatic Load
- Maladaptation to stress causes “wear and tear” over time.
 - **Stressors:** biological, psychological, environmental, and/or social
 - **Inputs:** neuroendocrine, autonomic, metabolic, and inflammatory responses
 - **Outputs:** turbulent coronary and cerebral artery blood flow, increased BP, atherosclerosis, cognitive dysfunction, decreased mood, DEATH
 - **Weathering:** environmental and social contexts that affect allostatic load; prolonged high-effort coping → premature aging and deterioration of health
 - Occupational stress leads to burnout symptoms (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, decreased personal achievement), which leads to decreased job engagement, which then may result in decreased retention.

Narratives – Experiences from Your Black Colleagues

- Superwoman schema
- Strong Black Woman
- Angry Black Man
- Angry Black Woman
- Diversity Hire
- Not Qualified
- Work Twice as Hard for Half as Much
- Heart Attack Waiting to Happen

- ### Next Steps – How can you support?
- Awareness
 - Social support
 - Culturally appropriate workplace interventions and policies
 - Question the view of the race neutral psychological construct of grit
 - May not be assigned to Black Americans
 - Black Americans routinely respond to stereotypes and racist micro/macro assaults which may inhibit maintaining efforts in face of adversity.
 - However, simply showing up (sometimes to their own detriment) in predominately white spaces, is the embodiment of grit.

- ### Important to Know
- The JH construct does not seek resolution.
 - It invites a dialogue about the gray areas that exist for historically minoritized individuals in the U.S.
 - Continue to fight against and dismantle structures of oppression in the PA profession and beyond.

Lets hear from you if you're comfortable.

Reflections
Suggestions for Inclusive Organizational Practices



Questions



Thank
you



Daytheon, DeShana, Terry, and Jacqui

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