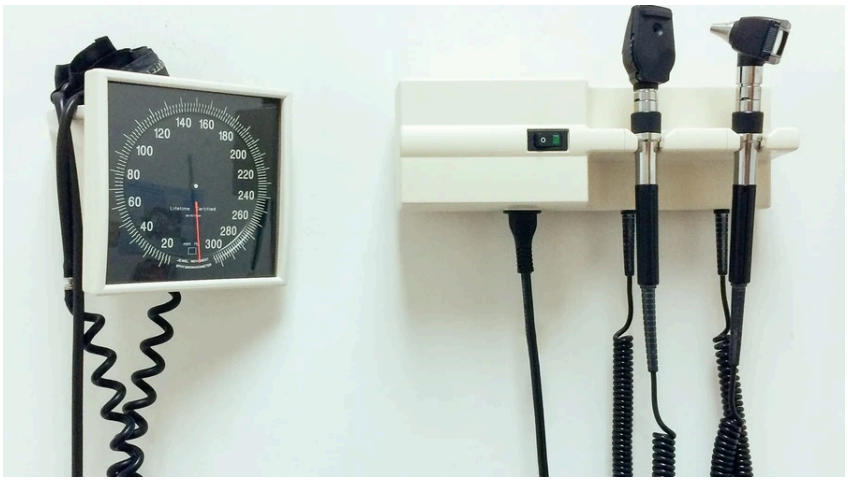

John Henryism and the Life-Threatening Stress Affecting Black People in America

In America, black people are two to four times more likely to develop heart-related problems by age 50, and systemic racism may be to blame.

*By Fariha Roisin, August 24, 2015,

Last year, two black men, Mike Brown and Eric Garner, were both murdered by white police officers. Their killers were both separately acquitted by two separate Grand Juries. In Cleveland, Tamir Rice, a twelve year old boy, was killed by a white police officer responding to a dispatch call "of a male sitting on a swing and pointing a gun at people" in a city park. Rice was playing with a toy gun; he was fatally shot on sight. In South Carolina, in April of this year, Walter L. Scott, a fifty-year-old black man, was shot at seven times by a police officer after being chased in a park, handcuffed as he lay dying, and later planted with a taser gun. More recently, Freddie Gray was arrested in West Baltimore. By the time he arrived at the police station, a half hour later, he was unable to breathe or talk. He died a week later from spinal injury wounds inflicted while he was in police custody.

Since these deaths come up every time another unarmed black man is killed, they are familiar to us. Every story about police violence invokes these deaths because it has to: It has to prove that this obscenely demonstrable reality is, in fact, *real*. The stories we have to repeat are horrifying; the statistics, perhaps, are even worse. In 2015 alone, over 700 people have been murdered by police officers so far, with black people more than twice as likely to be killed.

In a society where black people are murdered, discriminated against and disenfranchised as part of quotidian reality, but where white people are unwilling to discuss the effects of racism—" I don't see color," "You're being too sensitive," "That's reverse racist!"—racial fatigue is a common sentiment for people of color. The fatigue, however, is not just mental: According to the theory of John Henryism, which was coined by Professor Sherman James of Duke University, the pressures of systematic racism can harm the body as well, making it significantly more susceptible to both depression and heart-related disease.

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In a phone interview, James explained that John Henryism is a "synonym for the determination of black Americans that engage, on a day-to-day basis, with life stressors." The experience of John Henryism is specific to the dehumanization that people of color—in this case specifically, and exponentially, black people endure in a racist society.

Sherman James grew up in the South, where, according to him, he "suffered all the restraints and insults of trying to live out one's life in the segregated south." He was a college student from 1960 to 1964, and he graduated just three weeks before Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. As he puts it, he was "a child of the modern civil rights." Fittingly, during his time at school, James became fascinated by the discrepancy between the physical and mental health of black people and white people.

The story of John Henry

The fact that Professor James decided to call this condition John Henryism is particularly meaningful. The name "John Henry" didn't just belong to the retired black farmer he had the honor of meeting. It was also the name of a folkloric character, known throughout the South as the "steel driving man," who was said to have extraordinary physical strength and endurance. As the legend goes, he collapsed and died after overworking himself one day. There's a song about him with the following lyrics: "John Henry was a steel drivin' man/He died with a hammah in his han'/The steam drill was on the right han' side/John Henry was on the left/Says before I let this steam drill beat me down/I'll hammah myself to death/I'll hammah myself to death."

His interest peaked when he met John Henry Martin in the summer of 1978. As an uneducated and (initially) unskilled black man, John Henry Martin struggled against great odds to raise himself from the lowly status of a landless, exploited sharecropper to a "man of property." This was a common occurrence then, black people working in arduous conditions to achieve some kind of autonomy. But John Henry was particularly noteworthy to James; to him, Henry's life revealed "the complex interplay between economic and social factors that shaped the race relations of our nation," Professor James said.

John Henry Martin managed, almost miraculously, to overcome the "ruthlessly exploitative sharecropping system of the rural South." Born into an extremely poor sharecropping family in 1907, Martin "owned 75 acres of fertile North Carolina land" by the time he was 40, James said. By his late 50s, however, Martin suffered from a combination of hypertension and arthritis, and he also had a severe peptic ulcer that eventually resulted in 40 percent of his stomach having to be removed. This "larger protracted struggle," as James explained, is emblematic of the pervasiveness of "deeply entrenched systems of social and economic expression."

Through studying the case of John Henry Martin and others like it, James began to see a trend: Hard work and reliance were the only means by which black people could achieve real freedom, and this physical exertion, mixed with severe racism that most, if not all, black people faced, could cause severe health repercussions.

He has now devoted nearly 40 years of his life to studying this phenomenon. According to James' extensive research, black people in the United States are two to four times more likely than white people to develop hypertension and other heart-related problems by age 50, a result of the adverse effects of "high stress coping." Because of their greater risk for hypertension, black Americans are also three to four times more likely than white Americans to suffer a stroke and two to five times more likely to develop end stage kidney disease.

In the course of his research James has found that most black people, whether men or women, are exposed to an indecent amount of racial discrimination, which erodes their economic security and psychological well-being. John Henryism isn't just the result of high psychological stress, but rather the product of both high stress and prolonged high effort from coping with the turmoil of racism. The combined pressure of the two forces creates it.

John Henryism was born out of a coping mechanism; it's the best available strategy to survive hostility.

In 1970—eight years before Professor James met John Henry Martin—Brooklyn College professor Ronald Howell noticed a similarly disturbing trend in higher education. A Yale Graduate, Howell discovered that, while African-Americans made up three percent of the class of 1970, they accounted for more than 10 percent of the student deaths. "It was haunting," Howell said over email. "There were a total of about 80 names on the list, and more than half a dozen were names of black men, as I recall." Intrigued, Howell started to delve deep into exploring how and why this occurred. In the *Yale Alumni* magazine he wrote that much of the inequality and "difference can be ascribed to poverty, violent crime, and inequitable access to health care."

But how could one explain the accounts of the deaths of black men in the higher socioeconomic status brackets? He quickly began to see a trend: "Are the black men who went to Yale and similar institutions—who represented the first significant presence of African-Americans on Ivy League campuses—now experiencing inequality in death, as their forebears did in life?" The answer, he found, was yes.

When asked what he thought of John Henryism, Professor Howell responded: "I believe that honest, race-aware Americans understand the underlying truths of the John Henry Syndrome, today more than ever in post-Civil Rights America. That's because of the unfolding drama in Baltimore and all the evidence-filled tragedies that came before it—the open abuses of black citizens, especially black men, in Missouri and right here where I live in New York City. I see the dangers of John Henryism where I work. Work places, even the self-asserted fair-minded halls of academia, often have very poor records with respect to the fair treatment of black employees... The key to survival is understanding that stress, properly handled, can be a good thing, even taking an individual to the victory in his dreams. Life is stressful but as much as we can we should make sure we turn stress into eustress, or good stress."

Professor James shares this sentiment. "I don't necessarily think that John Henryism is intrinsically bad," he said. "At the core of John Henryism there is a very strong work ethic—contrary to the media where black people are portrayed as lazy, living off of handouts—but those who have John Henryism are very civic minded. They are people who care about family, who care about being successful, who care about being law-abiding citizens." In his study, *John Henryism and the Health of African Americans*, he explains that, actually, people who suffer from John Henryism become incredibly culturally adaptive. The concept of John Henryism embodies an emphasis on hard work, self-reliance and freedom—ironically the core "American values" as James points out. "John Henryism was born out of a coping mechanism and their best available strategy to survive hostility."

Arguably, African Americans who suffer from John Henryism are the poster children of the United States ethos. This is when the words of John Henry Martin heart-wrenchingly resonate: "I feel I worked too hard. Why did I do it? Well, I didn't have no other choice. Had nobody to help me."

As I think of John Henry—"the steel driving man"—I can't help but think of Mike Brown, just about a man, standing at 6'4, terrifying to his slayer, the proverbial white man who fears blackness like it's an insult. Darren Wilson and so many men like him forget to appreciate, or glean, that the African-American experience is a specific one; living under a system that resents your existence, marred by the fear of being killed when you're too young. In the Mike Brown-inspired episode of *Scandal*, Olivia Pope (extraordinaire problem solver) talks

about her experience of being captured and psychologically tortured: "I thought I was going to die. I lived in fear everyday. Imagine feeling that way your whole damn life." She is, of course, referring to not only the Mike Brown character, but the entire neighborhood in which he was shot, and killed, by a police officer.

Black people in America, especially young black men, are most at risk, statistically, to meet violent ends by those who are governed to protect them. According to a Vox report on a study about police bias, "On average, 30 to 40 percent [of police officers surveyed] were more likely to mistake a black man's phone for a gun and to shoot to kill him than they were to make the same mistake with a white man." There's perhaps no greater terror than the one where your life is supervised and limited by the cold violence of threat, the slow violence of neglect, of your law enforcement; John Henryism explains the insidious repercussions of that cold violence and gives voice to the psychological perversity of living in constant fear of reproach—one that so easily can, and historically has, turned into murder with impunity.

The suffering of people of color, especially black people in the United States, is rendered invisible. So often, when the suffering manifests, white people find a way to say that manifestation is caused by their constitutional inferiority. The statements made by Hoffman in the late 19th century still hold today: Fox commentators still gleefully insinuate that racism is not real, and that the real reason that black men and women are routinely being shot at is because they're asking for it. Last year, Fox godfather and pundit Bill O'Reilly set "everyone straight" by insinuating that Dr. Michael Eric Dyson (a professor of sociology at Georgetown) was "exaggerating" and "paranoid." He then went onto provide statistics of death rates at the hand of the police without giving context of the disparity between white and black murders by police, conveniently forgetting that it's black people that are murdered when they're unarmed, without justification, and that is what's being challenged.

Language is powerful because it gives meaning to experience. John Henryism is an explanation of the reality of fear. It's also an assurance that black men and women are not crying wolf when they declare that police brutality has an enormous, malignant impact on their lives, that systematic racism is not just a hoax. James' understanding has the lofty authority of science behind it—it's been justified with almost four decades of research, and it quantifies an experience that's normally swept to the margins and overlooked. John Henryism interprets the data of black lives with basic empathy, and it posits that black men and women's bodies are more susceptible to disease because of the pressures of living in the periphery of constant fear. That it's not because they are built inferior, but that we make it socially unsafe for them to thrive.

The reality of the lives of black men and women in America, still in 2015, is the phrase "Can I live?" It has been memefied, turned into a slogan, but it's a question that comes with an unanswered silence. The future is uncertain. Maybe, then, "Can I live" shouldn't be a question, but rather, an acknowledgment that, for some, living comes with both a struggle and a price. Psychological trauma has significant physical repercussions. John Henryism is a medical declaration that black lives don't matter to our racist society—but they should.

**please note, this is not the full article but an extended excerpt for use in the Equity Experience.*