

Racism within the Foster Care System

Monique Bristol-Mathison

Nyack College

Systematic racism is a social injustice that runs deep in the roots of this country named the United States of America. You would think with a name like that there would be unity and justice for all, but instead there is a broken legal system in place. This system continues to create institutions that promote racial disparity among its citizens. The outcomes tend to be in favor of one race over another. This can happen without intent by one party or person, but based on the systems make up, it tends to be in favor of the group or individuals who are deemed superior in society's eyes. A lot of what is happening has to do with the laws that govern this country. Looking back on the history of this country one would have hoped that by now this injustice would have been a thing of the past. Instead of making change the process is dragging on and has at times caused great injustices that have allowed great tensions between the races.

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History

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In the Jim Crow Era laws were established by state and local officials that were made as justification to enforce racial segregation among its citizens in the southern states. The basis of the laws were to intentionally segregate the races and keep one race superior over the other. This was the mindset of the majority as means of classing everyone other than themselves as inferior. When doing that they created an environment that encouraged cruelty and unjustified persecution to certain groups. In that time the Jim Crow laws restricted the economic growth and civil rights of African Americans. Intimidation and various tactics were used to deter the race from seeking basic human rights and becoming social equals among the white race. It was not until the mid-1950's that the tensions rose to the point where change was evident. The civil rights movement began to take form. They began seeking civil liberties and were faced with many adversities among the way, but they kept going forward. As we look at the various issues with racism today

you can begin connecting the lines to the legal system. The parallels are clearly seen and the continuing issues in the legal system continues to unfold.

Main Issue

The social justice injustice I would like to focus on are issues pertaining to NYC's foster care system. I believe that these issues cause a breakdown in family values and functioning among the black communities. The families are already unable to access the same resources as their counterparts and are limited in the progress they can achieve as a complete family unit. I have seen firsthand how these systems breeds dysfunction upon the black community. It breaks apart families and causes great distress for many generations to come. It also turns people against each other. The motto goes "United we stand divided we Fall". If we help them help themselves we would all be successful in the end.

When looking directly into the Foster care system in the US there is a disproportionate amount of black and brown children being greatly affected by the Foster Care system. When a child is removed from their home there are numerous studies that show that it is very traumatic. If this is the case then why do we continue to remove black children from their home at such an alarming rate. Many people ask the question why, some get answers and some don't. At the end the breakdown continues. I located a breakdown on the stats when it comes to the number of black children currently in foster care in NYC. When I read the findings my skin crawled. From a research and analysis finding done in 2018 by NYC children services it states “ **Black children are overrepresented in the foster care system. While 23% of the child population, they are more than 53% of the children in foster care.**” That is an astonishing amount. This means that more than half of the children in Foster care are black.

How did this happen. These are some of the common factors that kept coming up in various articles as a reason why this was happening. The factors that were mentioned were disadvantaged communities, racism and the bad parent. Each factor could be looked at separate but collective. They intertwine and could be seen as the same. What does it mean to be a disadvantaged community. Let me break it down in two words first then combine the meanings of this compound statement. Disadvantaged as defined in the Webster's dictionary (which gave two very compelling definitions) is: loss, or **damage especially to reputation**, credit, or finances, an unfavorable, **inferior**, or prejudicial **condition**, and lastly a quality or circumstance that **makes achievement unusually difficult** and right next to it was the synonym **handicapped**. I inserted all three explanations to express how words have power and how a label can be used as a stereotype. The second word is Community. This word has many explanations so I took the ones closely associated with the context: a unified body of individuals such as people with common interests **living in a particular area**, a group of people with a **common characteristic living together** within a **larger society** and a group **linked by a common policy**. If you look at all the words highlighted you can clearly see that the definition alone has its own negative connotations that classes these groups of individuals and families in one large pot that they might not even necessarily belong.

The second factor is the idea behind the definition of a bad parent. When I saw this word I was baffled. What constitutes a bad parent in the eyes of someone who has no real communication with that supposed bad parent. In terms of the foster care system a bad parent is someone who is deemed unable to provide their child or children with the basic needs, abusive towards them in a physical or emotion manner as well as being neglectful. I work first hand with the child welfare system and have been a CPS for over 15 years. Many cases are called in by

school staff, doctors, therapist and other mandated reporters. Many of these reporters are Caucasian whose definition of basic needs differ from the community or individual they service. With this being said does it constitute them calling in a report on that parent because there understanding of what a good parent should be is not the reality for someone else. When a child comes to school and has on the same clothes from the day before does it mean that the parent is a bad parent or does it mean that the child's clothes comes second to putting food in his stomach. Is a parent labeled as a bad parent because there child keeps coming to school with missing homework because his mother is unable to help with it due to her own academic challenges. Lastly is a parent a bad parent because they have not attended any of the parent teacher conferences because she is a single parent who works at night and sleeps during the day in order to provide for her family. In my time as a worker I have seen many cases being called in stemming for lack of communication between a parent and source because of the parents unavailability due to circumstances. I have seen cases called in due to the difference of lifestyles between the source and the family. I have seen cases called in because the source sees the parent as a threatening based on their own interpretation of the person. Labels based on the physical look. For example labeling a parent as aggressive, uneducated, and unapproachable. Our reality is that we live in a sad world and it is easier to look for issues rather than solve them. When a question is asked and answered but you don't believe the response. Do you try to find the truth or is it easier to draw your own conclusion based on what you know. This happens a lot and as a result the families are turned upside down and sometimes broken to the point of no return.

The last factor is Racism. This word is what links all of these factors together on a larger platform. Racism by definition is a political or social system founded on race. Like I mentioned earlier on in my paper racism is the foundation of this country. It was the basis for most if not all

the laws to keep one race superior over the other. Many people do not believe in these belief systems anymore but the foundation and core is what built this country. It is so deeply rooted into our core beliefs and personal biases that we sometimes are unaware that it intertwines with our decisions. At this time I would like to make note that it doesn't only affect race against race it can be with in the same race as well. Many people are not able to separate our own personal beliefs with facts. Stereotyping as well as cultural beliefs also interfere with our decision making process. The best thing an individual can do is admit and recognize there biases and try their best to keep it out of casting a decision that can have detrimental effects on someone else. Many people are at fault when this destruction against the family units are being done. The judges that make the decision to remove the children from the home, the law enforcement who answer the calls when the police is requested, the CPS who are taught to draw up a hypothesis based on words on a paper before even meeting the family face to face. All of these functions cause trauma to the families.

All though in some cases things play out in the best interest of the families being serviced there are still large number of African American families being intentionally destroyed by the system. They are being targeted and labeled and it is not fair. Why is it that there is such an overwhelming amount of black children in care. I believe that the system has targeted them. They look for things that are not there and use their own personal and taught biases to single out these families. It has been taking place for so long that it was seen as normal so now that there is more research being done the skeletons are coming out of the closet.

When it comes to child welfare system there are a lot of contributing factors that come into play when coming down to the decision making and whether a child should be removed. I have observe cases identical in circumstances with the only difference being race come out with

two different outcomes. The deciding factor behind many of these decisions has a lot to do with race, support systems as well as education on the system. Many of the parents we service are not informed of their basic rights. With that being said the entire process starts out different for them than it does for a white counterpart. In often cases Black parents are criminalized from the onset of the case. The temperament and tone of the conversation is completely different. They are stripped of their parental right from the first interaction they have with the system. When a parent questions the system they are often penalized for their knowledge. Many of them are afraid and tend to just comply and settle out their case because of long drawn out adjournments by the court, breach of confidentiality, and sometimes fear of their children remaining in care. With all of this said when the child enters the foster care system getting them out becomes very taxing and emotionally overwhelming on the parents and children.

The families are mandated to complete services many of which are duplicate and do not connect to the initial reason of why they kids are in care. They are also given overwhelming amount of services which at times are unattainable. I call this process “setting them up for failure”. The services at times does not correspond with their daily life. The schedule does not accommodate their work schedules. Some of the parents even lose their jobs, apartments, and end up worse off than they were when the case didn’t exist. Not to mention the cases where the children are harmed while in the care of someone else.

There are also situations where the kids are out of control and don’t want to return to their parents care due to lack of supervision. These case are for too many to even count. Some kids are harmed while in Foster Care. Children are trafficked and recruited for prostitution. Kids are sexually abused while in foster care. Kids become delinquent when they are in foster care. All of this is happening at a high rate. At the end of it all the kids who are being affected are the

group of children that have gone unnoticed, that is until they commit a crime and do something negative and get a mug shot that puts them on the evening news.

The article from Chronicle of Social change states “ If an entire system never says once that a child is removed for being poor, yet poor people are consistently surveilled and targeted, then you are going to have a system that penalizes poor people with alarming efficiency, and where race and poverty are closely paired together, you are absolutely going to see black children in disproportionate numbers.” This could not have been said any better. The clients are being victimized twice. Once for being poor and the other for being Black. When I decided to work at ACS I decided to work there because I wanted to make a change. I was already aware that the system was set up for failure and I thought that my presence would bring about change in some of the lives of the families that I worked with. I was already provided with the deficiencies surrounding the system but not until I began working in the system did I actually understand the extent of the failed and unjust policies. Openness, faith, compassion, knowledge and humility has allowed me to be an advocate for my clients. I see them as individuals and acknowledge their struggles without discrediting their achievements. When you are seen as having sincere human connections with your clients it allows the process to work more freely. Everyone has a story and they all want to be heard. I realize that a lot of families in this situation have had negative experiences with the government at some point in time. These families are already damaged and to be honest they know it. They experienced many struggles day to day that when the broken system is added it becomes overwhelming. They are filled with frustrations to the point that they shut down. Living and walking in similar situations to theirs gives me the strength I need to work even harder to see them make it out. The fight in me to really help them comes out and I am able to breath a breath of fresh air.

As a CPS for over 15 years I finally decided to go back to school to obtain my master's degree. My teachings and personal experiences have provided me with the knowledge to make more informed decisions based on the individual regardless of race, ethnicity, or economic standings. Knowledge is power and knowing that I can keep a family together gives me a sense of achievement. I became stagnant in my position to the point where I was feeling as though I was not servicing my clients to my fullest potential. There is too much red tape and inadequate policies coupled with an extreme lack of services. How do we expect disadvantaged communities to flourish if we do not provide the resources they need to change their outcome. We acknowledge that something needs to happen but do little to make effective change.

Right now there are a number of social service agencies that are in the process of being closed. Apparently the reason is that they are underperforming. So the response to the situation is to close the agencies down. There is a lack of funds and a lot of resources have been cut. When the identified agencies are closed the remaining agencies are expected to take on the load of those cases that are open. When this happens the workers caseload goes up and the services get watered down because they have time constraints to complete the work. This limits their ability to provide adequate services. The engagement period is cut short and the significance of the services become meaningless.

The agency protocols are not in line with the real issues. A reason this happens is because the policies are sometimes outdated and are made by those who are not able to relate to the obstacles facing the people they are servicing. I was in bias training a few years ago. There were various people there stemming from attorneys, preventive, foster care, CPS and there were Caucasian women there. The discussion was on privilege. She was very honest and stated that she is from somewhere in the Midwest and would definitely consider herself as being privileged.

We listened as she spoke and then she was asked what part of the agency she was employed. She stated that she was employed in the Policy and Planning division of the agency. I was flabbergasted. I was even upset. Many of my co-workers as well as myself have applied for those positions and have not even been scheduled for interviews. I keep questioning why, she does not know or identify with the communities being serviced, she can't even begin to understand their struggles. Then it hit me, this happens all the time. How can these agencies really want to make effective change if they are stagnating its workers and have unqualified people making policies? 85% of the field staff are African American while the workers in the office not engaging with the clients and making policies are Caucasians. For things to work it has to start from the top. Identifying the problem and making effective change for the betterment of the families in the Foster Care System.

In order for me to become more competent and compassionate in my field I need to be more open in my thinking. I also need to become more spiritual. I believe that in this job having to deal with other individuals' personal issues along with the bureaucracy that are put in place can cause one to be overwhelmed mentally and physically. Carrying the burdens of the client coupled with your own personal stressors can cause burnout. Being able to not cross lines and over identify with your clients is hard. Sometimes wanting a positive outcome more than your client wants for themselves can also cause frustration. Knowing how to balance it is what having faith and spirituality is really about. I guess that this is the main reason why I returned to school. I believe that I have the skill of engagement with my clients. To function at my full capacity I need to be taught boundaries as well as gain a balance between the client and worker relationship. There is always more to gain and having all the right tools would make me more effective.

This course has been an eye opener for me. When I decided to return to school I saw that Nyack was a Christian college. I went back and forth about applying or not applying. I went home and heard a voice say it's time. I have been so complacent with my situation that I never finished my own goals. I have a family, a son in college and two teen girls at home. Year after year I did the same routine and then I woke up. I have been so out of touch with God that I had begun to question my purpose. This class has given me the clarity I need to make it through. After being out of school for over 20 years it had been a hard decision to make. Now that I have attended this course I see that it was all worth it. This school and course has grounded me and given me back my spirituality. It has drawn me closer to my calling and to God. It has given me a purpose, something that I want for myself. Most of all it has given me a new approach to my clients. The word is compassion.

References

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