**The Impact of Racism on First Nations Australian Child and Adolescents’ Social and/or Emotional Development.**

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# Key Messages (200 words)

* Background: This section defines racism and the pressures imparted on a child into adolescence and adulthood, such as the individual physiological health effects, followed by the maladaptive coping strategies. particularly a child’s exposure to traumas experienced by family members. The final section of the discussion attempts to investigate the combination of the three elements of racism as an interaction with past events impacting parents and caregivers, and how these elements may further impact children.
* Implications: Not Completed
* Recommendations: The primary recommendation I have considered at this point was intending to write a review of the upcoming “Voice to Parliament” referendum addressing the underlying component of structural racism. There were some interesting observations about this that I read, with structural racism having strong ties to societal health inequity undermining individual development.
* Program Evaluation: Not Completed**The Impact of Racism on First Nations Australian Child and Adolescents’ Social and/or Emotional Development.**

**Background (800 words)**

Racism is a phenomenon described as an avoidable set of behaviours, practices and beliefs emphasizing inequalities between societal groups based on race, religion, culture, or ethnicity (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 2012). While this common definition of interpersonal racism (physical or verbal exchanges between individuals) is familiar to most of us, we are largely unfamiliar with the far reaching effects of racism experienced by Indigenous Australians through the additional facets of systemic (implemented through the institutions that shape our society) and structural (brought about via the policies and doctrines that our institutions adopt or enforce) racism (Braveman et al. 2022).

The combined emotional and psychological effect of these sources of racism initially affect our national population of Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders in several ways. The rate of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) across multiple nations (US, NZ and Australia) is around 1.5 to 2 times higher in Indigenous populations compared to non-Indigenous populations of these nations. (Gee et al. 2023). A distinct relationship exists between interpersonal discrimination inciting psychological distress, negative emotions, and negative impacts to general wellbeing in its recipients (Thurber et al. 2021). Emotional problems and disruptions to sleep patterns are also imparted on individuals, potentially stunting neural development (particularly in adolescents), because of ­­­­­­­exposure to racial discrimination incidents . It may be considered that at an individual level, the effects are no different to the everyday experiences of the wider population in Australia, however, a growing body of evidence suggests otherwise.

The impacts of racism further impact the experience of Indigenous Australians through maladaptive behavioural responses. Deleterious health behaviours are prevalent within Indigenous Australian societies, such as the uptake of a large proportion of adolescents and adults in drinking alcohol, and smoking cigarettes (which are 5 times more prevalent and twice as prevalent than in non-Indigenous populations, respectively) in response to negative emotions imbued through the various sources of racism (Thurber et al. 2021). Miller and Berger (2020) have pointed out that school can be an intimidating place to be for children and adolescents from an Indigenous background (through the sustained exposure to racial discrimination), where a heightened stress response promotes hypervigilance, leading to longer term physiological effects of the nervous system. The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (2012) further explores the prevalence of developing maladaptive behaviours, pointing out that as many as 79% of Indigenous Australians simply avoid social situations where there is a perceived threat of racial vilification, while others just accept it or put up with it. It is also of note that these coping mechanisms have been found ineffective in diminishing the instances and impacts of repeated interpersonal racial discrimination.

The risk factors of damaging psychological affects to adolescents caused by racial discrimination have been well documented in the literature, with a growing body of examination into the cumulative effect of such experiences. Priest et al. (2019) suggest that ongoing exposure to interpersonal racism events has negative effects on the individual of an incremental nature, (culminating in higher risk of obesity at a minimum), citing a study in the UK that found evidence of such an effect on mental health in minority citizens. Information gathered by Thurber et al. (2021) has confirmed the cumulative nature of interpersonal racism across continents, stating that its negative outcomes may have been underestimated in terms of the human lifespan.

The multiple elements of racism (interpersonal, systemic, and structural) against Indigenous Australians can be seen across nations, and indeed generations, with intergenerational trauma starting to take a hold in childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. Evidence of such trauma is visible with reports of large scale systemic and structural oppression among the collective Koori clans in Victoria dating back to colonisation (Gee et al. 2023). The evidence of such trauma is also demonstrated through the upbringing of children of the stolen generations through factors such as dysfunctional family life, increased rates of incarceration, substance abuse, attachment trauma, and cultural neglect compared to non-Indigenous populations, resulting in a negative impact on brain development in children of the stolen generations (Basu & Isaacs, 2019). The protective factors working to mitigate the effects of racism at large are explored by Macedo et al. (2019), suggesting that racial identity is a key protective factor against the effects of racism. While it is acknowledged that both commitment to, and acceptance of an individual’s place in-group determines the intensity with which an individual’s affect is moderated, the strength of belonging within a community is unlikely to insulate the individual completely from the effects of systemic and structural factors.

## Implications (200 words)

In addressing the developmental needs of the individual, various sources have identified the benefits of belonging and a strong family network as an insulating force regarding self-esteem and typical developmental milestones of childhood for Indigenous Australians.

## Recommendations (400 words)

The groups and organisations showcased in the “Close The Gap” report (Lowitja Institute 2022), demonstrates a concerted effort towards a refocus of support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and family through the various programs aimed at reigniting passion in, and awareness of protective factors against the effects of racism.

Australia’s Indigenous Voice to Parliament Referendum seeks to “unwind” the structural element of racism (as set in law through the Australian Constitution), or at least start to dismantle a cornerstone of the overall architecture of racism (Morris et al 2020).

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