

# Is Extreme Racism A Mental Illness?

Yes; It can be a delusional symptom of psychotic disorders

By Troy T. Thomas

The American Psychiatric Association has never officially recognized extreme racism (as opposed to ordinary prejudice) as a mental health problem, although the issue was raised more than 36 years ago. After hundreds of racist killings in the civil rights era, a group of African American psychiatrists sought to have extreme bigotry classified as a mental disorder. The association's officials rejected the recommendation, arguing that because so many European Americans, especially males are racist, even extreme racism (white supremacy) in this country is "normative"—a cultural problem rather than an indication of psychopathology.

The psychiatric profession's primary index for diagnosing psychiatric symptoms, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), does not include racism, prejudice, or bigotry in its text or index. Therefore, there is currently no support for including extreme racism (white supremacy) under any diagnostic category. This leads psychiatrists and clinical psychologists to think that it cannot and should not

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be treated in their patients.

To continue perceiving extreme racism (white supremacy) as normative and not pathologic is to lend it legitimacy. Clearly, anyone who scapegoats a whole group of people and seeks to eliminate them to resolve his or her internal conflicts meets criteria for a delusional & psychotic disorder, a major psychiatric illness.

Extreme racists' violence should be considered in the context of behavior described by the late psychologist Dr. Gordon Allport in his "The Nature of Prejudice". Dr. Allport's 5-point scale categorizes increasingly dangerous acts. It begins with verbal expression of antagonism, progresses to avoidance of members of disliked groups, then to active discrimination against them, to physical attack, and finally to extermination (lynchings, massacres, genocide). That fifth point on the scale, the acting out of extermination fantasies, is readily classifiable as delusional psychotic behavior. It's my observation as a race relations trainer that there are associations between highly prejudiced people and ~~other~~ other indicators of psychopathology. The extreme racist is a paranoid/delusional individual.

using the DSM IV's structure of diagnostic criteria for delusional disorder, I suggest the following subtype:

Prejudice type: A delusion whose theme is that a group of individuals, who share a defining characteristic, in one's environment have a particular and unusual significance. The delusions are usually of a negative or pejorative nature, but also may be grandiose in content. When these delusions are extreme, the person may act out by attempting to harm, and even murder, members of the despised group(s).

Extreme racist delusions can also occur as a major symptom in other psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Persons suffering delusions usually have serious social dysfunction that impairs their ability to work with others and maintain employment.

As a race relations trainer and consultant, I have counseled several clients who projected their own unacceptable behavior and fears onto people of color, scapegoating them for society's problems. Their strong racist feelings, which were tied to fixed belief systems impervious to reality

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checks, were symptoms of serious mental disorder. When these clients became more aware of their own problems, they grew less paranoid— and less prejudiced.

It is time for both the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association to designate extreme racism (white supremacy) as a mental health problem by recognizing it as a delusional psychotic symptom. Persons afflicted with such psychopathology represent an immediate danger to themselves and others. Clinicians need guidelines for recognizing delusional racism in all forms so that they can provide appropriate treatment. Otherwise, extreme delusional racist will continue to fall through the cracks of the mental health system, and we can expect more of them to explode and act out their deadly delusions we see periodically on the world news.

In order to elucidate the origins and psychological structure of racism (white supremacy) dynamics, one needs a psychological formulation that accounts for the universality of misperception and deprecation and pathological callousness displayed by the

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majority of white males, which history verifies most powerfully. At the end of the day white males in particular need to heal themselves from unrealistic maladaptive narcissism and a sense of entitlement, from self-aggrandizement and denigration of African-Americans (and others) that prevents understanding, introjection, and identification with Africans as humans of equal worth.

I welcome feedback:

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