

Coping with Stress and the John Henryism Hypothesis

Erin King, MPH, MS



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Introduction

What is John Henryism?

- “An individual’s self-perception that he can meet the demands of his environment through hard work and determination” (James et al., 1983, p. 263).



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

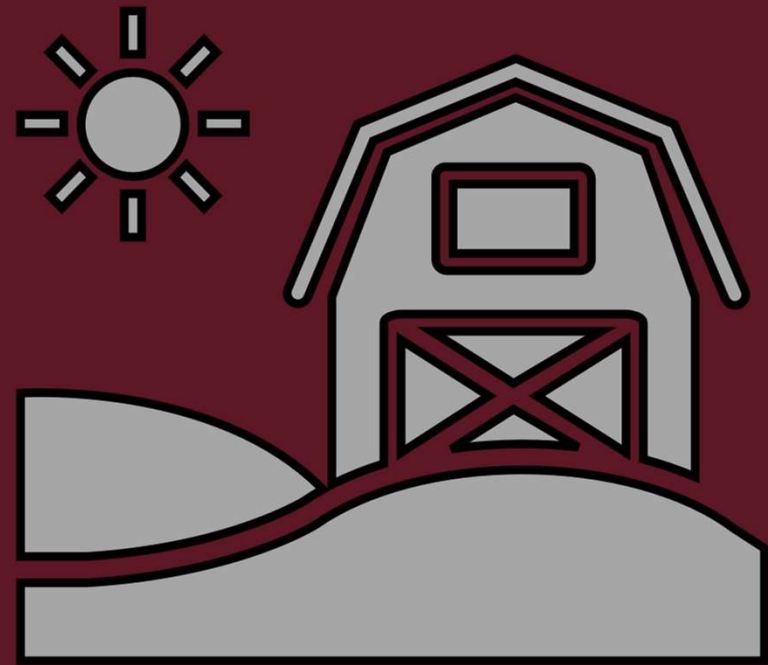
History of John Henryism

- The term was created by Dr. Sherman James in 1978 after working with a black farmer named John Martin in North Carolina (James, 1993). At the time of the interview, Dr. James was planning to conduct a research study titled "Black Men: Their Lives and Their Health" (James, 1993).



History of John Henryism

- James discovered that Martin had overcome numerous obstacles in his life and that his success had also impacted his health.



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

John Martin's Life

Martin's Life

- Born into a poor sharecropping family in 1907
- Taught himself to read at age 21
- Freed himself and his family from the sharecropping system
- Paid off his \$3,725 FHA loan for 75 acres in 5-years instead using the 40-year period that he was allotted

Metabolic outcome

- Hypertension
- Severe arthritis
- Peptic ulcer disease that resulted in the removal of 40% of his stomach

(James, 1993)



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

The creation of the John Henryism Hypothesis

- Towards the end of the interview, James was made aware of Martin's middle name, Henry.
- James was shocked to find out the resemblance of Martin's name to the folklore story of John Henry.
- The combination of John Henry Martin's life and the symbolism of the folklore story led James to create the concept of John Henryism.

(James, 1993)



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

John Henry the "Steel Driving Man"



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Characteristics of John Henryism

- powerful mental and physical strength
- "strong commitment to hard work"
- "a single-minded determination to succeed"

(James, p.169, 1994)



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Definitions and Research Questions

Definition

- “An individual’s self-perception that he can meet the demands of his environment through hard work and determination” (James et al., 1983, p. 263).

Research Question

- With lower socioeconomic status is such self-perception connected to poor health outcomes (James et al., 1983)?



The John Henryism Hypothesis

- "The John Henryism hypothesis assumes that lower socioeconomic status individuals in general, and African-Americans in particular, are routinely exposed to psychosocial stressors (e.g., chronic financial strain, job insecurity, and subtle or perhaps not so subtle social insults linked to race or social class) that require them to use considerable energy each day to manage the psychological stress generated by these conditions. However, the hypothesis also assumes that not all individuals so exposed will respond to these noxious conditions with high effort coping" (James, 1993, p. 168).



Components of the John Henryism Hypothesis

Socioeconomic
Status

Stress

Coping

Outcome of
Stress



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Socioeconomic Status

SES is measured through a combination of social and economic factors that include:

- Income
- Education*
- Occupation
- Ownership of property



(LaVeist & Isaac, 2013)



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Stress

- Source of Stress
 - Eventful experience
 - Life Strains



(Pearlin et al., 1981)



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Coping

- "The things that people do to avoid being harmed by life strains" (Perlin & Schooler, 1978)"
- John Henryism is a form of high effort coping.



Outcome of Stress

- The manifestation of stress



(Pearlin et al., 1981)



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Video Clip



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Research and John Henryism

- Early research on John Henryism focused on hypertension in African American men.
- Since the term's creation, research on John Henryism has expanded to different health outcomes, diverse racial and ethnic groups, youth populations, and women.



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

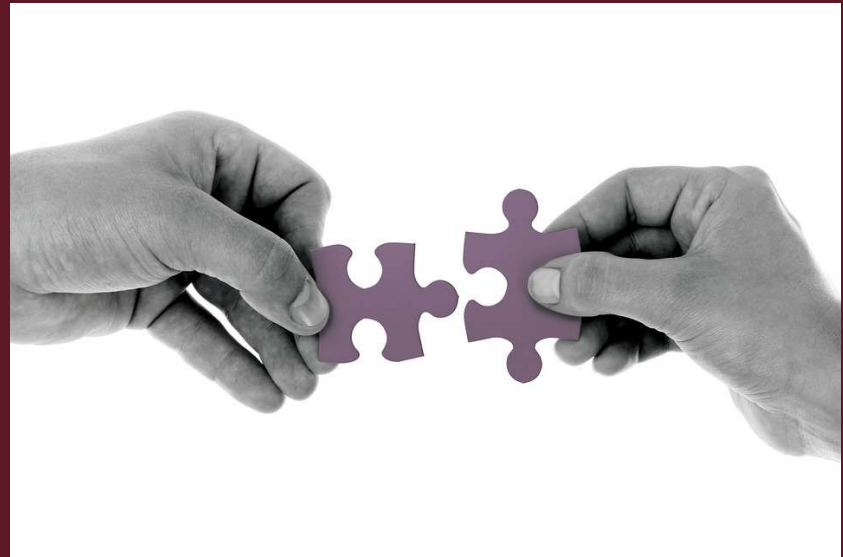
Mental Health Research and John Henryism (JH)

- A study conducted with data from the NSAL, but limited to African Americans found that increased levels of JH increased the occurrence of major depressive episodes in African Americans (Hudson et al., 2016).
- A study inspired by the JH theory found that rural African American youth with high levels of competency and high SES-related risks also had higher levels of allostatic load in young adulthood (Brody et al., 2013).
- In my thesis, conducted with data from the adolescent supplement of the National Survey of American Life, I found that JH slightly helped to explain the relationship between discrimination and depressive symptoms in black youth (King, 2020).



Making Connections

- John Henryism shows us that in some instances high effort coping can impact one's wellbeing and that having to consistently actively cope with unjust environmental barriers without having access to resources can result in poor health outcomes.



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology



Moving from information to application



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Additional Terms to Consider

- Health Disparities
- Health Inequalities
- Health Equity



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Health Disparities VS Health Inequalities

Health Disparities

- "... refer[s] to differences in morbidity, mortality, and access to health care among populations and groups defined by factors such as SES, gender, residence, and especially race or ethnicity" (Dressler et al., 2005 as cited in LaVeist & Issac, 2013).

Health Inequalities

- "Differences in health that are 'avoidable', 'unjust' and 'unfair.' (Whitehead, 1991 as cited in LaVeist & Issac, 2013).



Health Equity

- "Equity in health is "the absence of systematic and potentially remediable differences in one or more aspects of health across populations or population subgroups defined socially, economically demographically, or geographically" " (Starfield, 2001 as cited in LaVeist & Issac, 2013).





ADVOCACY



POLICY



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Social Advocacy and Policy



Confrontation of health inequalities



Address power imbalances to bring about change



Engage people in dialogue that links root causes and community actions

(Minkler, 2015)



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology

Socioecological Model

1. Individual
2. Interpersonal
3. Organizational
4. Community
5. Policy



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

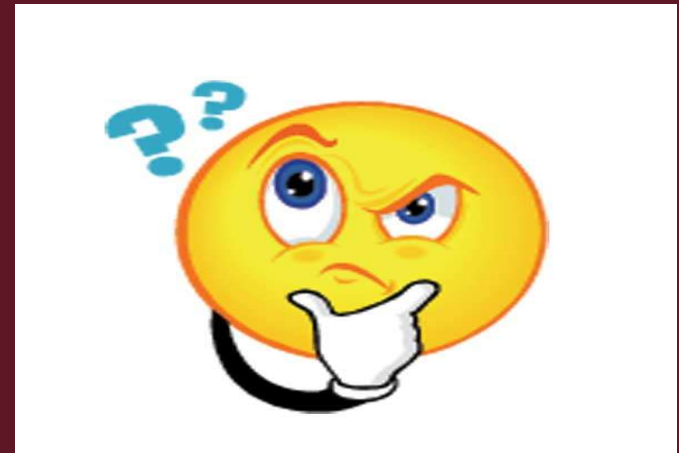
Department of Sociology

References

- James, S.A., Hartnett, S.A., & Kalsbeek, W.D. (1983). John Henryism and blood pressure differences among black men. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 6(3), 259-278.
- James, S.A. (1993). The narrative of John Henry Martin. *Southern Cultures, Inaugural issue*, 83-106.
- James, S.A. (1994). John Henryism and the health of African-Americans. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 18, 163-182.
- LaVeist, T.A. & Isaac, L.A. (2013). *Race, ethnicity, and health: A public health reader* (2nd). John Wiley & Sons. ISBN 978-1-118-04908-2.
- Pearlin, L.I. & Schooler, C. (1987). The structure of coping. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 19(1), 2-21.
- Pearlin, L.I., Menaghan, E.G., Liberman, M.A., & Mullan, J.T.(1981). The stress process. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 22(4), 337-356.
- Hudson, D.L., Neighbors H.W., Geronimus, A.T., & Jackson, J.S. (2016). Racial discrimination, John Henryism, and depression among African Americans. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 42(3), 221-43.
- Brody, G.H., Yu, T., Chen, E., Miller, G.E., Kogan, S.M., Beach, S.R.H. (2013). *Psychological Science*, 24(7), 1285-1293. doi:10.1177/0956797612471954.
- Minkler, M. (2015). *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health and Welfare* (3rd). Rutgers University Press. ISBN: 978-o-8135-5300-9.
- King, E.M. (2020). *Discrimination, depression, and John Henryism in African American and Caribbean Black adolescents*. (Master's Thesis). Available from Mississippi State University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, (28029583).



Additional Questions?



This Photo by Unknown author is licensed under [CC BY](#).



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Department of Sociology