



Commentary

An International Perspective on Racism: Foster Self-Determination Among Youth and Oppose Systemic Racism Globally

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“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...”

(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948)

The Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine (SAHM) condemns systemic racism [1]. International members of SAHM stand with all our SAHM colleagues in improving healthy adolescent and young adult (AYA) development, supporting opportunities for young people, and protecting their families. We condemn the violent acts that took the lives of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others [2]. As a group of International SAHM members, we commit to enact antiracist initiatives and find effective solutions to enhance diversity, equity and inclusion within our SAHM community, our AYA patients and their families, the communities we serve, and our respective countries. It is essential that all individuals who work with AYA globally stand against pervasive inequities that create insurmountable barriers to the best care for our patients. This article provides an international perspective on how “self-determination theory” (SDT) [3] in youth can promote the rejection of racism.

Changes in underlying brain structure and parallel intellectual development during the course of adolescence affect the way young people think and behave [4]. During adolescence, teens acquire abstract thought and reasoning and become more aware of themselves and the long-term impact

of their behaviors. Although initially under the influence of parental and societal value systems, the development of self-awareness and self-determination in the later stages of adolescence and into young adulthood makes this period an opportune time for teaching the need to deconstruct racism and oppose it.

SDT asserts that the more self-determined a goal or value is, the more likely it is that one will act in accordance with it [5]. SDT highlights the importance of personal agency, in this case, to strive against racism. SDT also explores the environmental factors and conditions that foster those positive developments of agency and self-determination and those that potentially hinder or undermine them. The motivation to reject racism can be intrinsically or extrinsically driven [3]. Intrinsically motivated behavior means that people reject racist thoughts, feelings, or behaviors because it is inherently believed and desired. For AYA, education that increases their critical consciousness [6] and involves racial and political socialization provides the context to start their internalization and self-determination against issues around racism and oppression. This knowledge should come from the different contexts and spheres that contextualize the “world” for AYA, including human rights education and an appreciation of tolerance and mutual respect and understanding. This can happen at home, at school, in the community, and through conversations with their providers. This is key to prevent the internalization of racism and to propel them to action toward antiracism.

Adolescence and young adulthood are a crucial developmental period in which to expose them to the manifestations and

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effects of racism that they may reject racism and explore anti-racist practices. We propose that:

1. All AYA health care providers take every opportunity to foster positive antiracist self-determination thoughts and behaviors among AYA. We are in a position to foster reflexivity and insightfulness and should be having the same conversations about racial and political socialization currently entrusted to parents [7].
2. International members of SAHM commit to use their privilege advocating and actively opposing systemic racism in their home countries. As an international society, SAHM calls for the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion through positive youth development that takes into consideration how the context of power can propel or stall growth in AYA [1].

As a group of international members of SAHM, we believe that together with all our SAHM colleagues, we can create a new era of universal human rights in which we—and the AYA we serve—work for positive change and pursue the means to end racism by

rejecting and challenging the prejudices and attitudes that sustain it.

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