

Hanging Nooses: Hate as a National Health Risk

Daryl Rowe, Shelly Harrell, Miguel Gallardo, Thema Bryant-Davis, and Joy Asamen

Members of the Psychology Faculty

Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Pepperdine University

The recent increase in the number of hanging nooses in public spaces targeting African Americans has been highly disturbing, given the horrific legacy of lynching in this country. Since three white students hung nooses from a tree outside a Jena high school in Louisiana, nooses have been found in a disturbing number of places. A brief Google search of nooses found in 2007 resulted in at least nine separate incidents: four nooses found within the U.S. Coast Guard; on the campus of East Carolina University; at the University of Maryland, outside the African-American cultural center; at a Long Island police station; outside a post office near Ground Zero; at a North Carolina high school; a Home Depot outside Chicago; at the Performing Arts Centre in Germantown, Tennessee; and on a Columbia University professor's door.

Hanging nooses are powerfully heinous symbols of hate and white supremacy that evoke an especially hideous epoch in U. S. history, from 1882 – 1968, when more than 4,700 African Americans were lynched, tortured, mutilated, burned, castrated, and terrorized – with the active or implicit support of entire communities. Not only did the hanging noose come to symbolize the *de facto* total disregard for the sanctity of African American life and liberty, the public participation in these ritualistic murders marked the dehumanization of the perpetrators. Thus, hanging nooses – far from being pranks –

signify blatant racism and contempt for the lives and dignity of African Americans, requiring constant vigilance to identify, prosecute, and punish its perpetrators, to the fullest extent of the law.

As psychologists, we are in the business of understanding, healing, and preventing human suffering. Hate crimes, including the hanging of nooses, are sources of psychological trauma and suffering. Multiple research studies have found that targets of racism may exhibit negative emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physiological, and relational responses. Post-trauma symptoms can include depression, anxiety, distrust, difficulty concentrating, unhealthy forms of self-medicating such as substance abuse, and physical health consequences such as hypertension. In addition to the traumatic impact on the direct target, witnessing or hearing about traumatic experiences, particularly for those who are vulnerable to future attacks by virtue of shared race with the victim, can also have important psychological consequences. In addition, psychologists have explored the phenomenon of intergenerational trauma where current generations continue to be impacted by the collective memory of genocide, colonial occupation, slavery, and other atrocities.

It is important to pay attention to the far-reaching consequences of racially motivated hate crimes. The consequences of hate crimes in any form (e.g., religious, sexual orientation) permeate all levels of society, creating communities soiled by distrust, fear, and isolation. Addressing, preventing, and eradicating hate is not just a "Black issue", it is a human rights issue. Racism is, at its core, about the dehumanization of others. When we tolerate racism, we are giving our society permission to dehumanize people on the basis of phenotypic expression. It is imperative that these incidents not be

ignored, dismissed, or treated lightly. Responses such as “what’s the big deal” and “just get over it” indicate a denial of the lived experience of others, an externalizing attitude of “blaming the victim”, and an unwillingness to get out of our own comfort zones and privileged lenses to see the world through the eyes of another. Healthy human functioning requires us to have the courage to look in the mirror and face what we see. As a nation, we are at risk for regression, for descending into a previous state of unhealthy functioning. Choice and free will are important concepts in mental health. What is our will as a nation? Do we choose to ignore these signs of impending illness and let the sickness of racism ravage the soul of our nation? Or do we choose the path of health, growth and transformation?

Indeed, the measure of a society can be determined by the justice, or lack thereof, afforded to its people. Human suffering that is caused by the injustices of a society is preventable human suffering. Prevention of human suffering means we must rise to the challenge of living our claimed identity as a nation of justice and equality. The psychological well-being of individuals, the health of our communities, and integrity of our nation depend on the expression of our fullest and highest human potential, individually and collectively.

Hate is a preventable illness. But its prevention must begin early and involve opportunities for cooperative and interdependent contact between individuals of different racial/ethnic groups. As an educational institution, we take seriously the responsibility of engaging young people in experiential learning, which is a fundamental pedagogical principle for creating learning experiences that endure. As psychologists and educators, we suggest that the development of positive intergroup relationships, characterized by

October 18, 2007

respect, compassion, and an understanding of our interconnectedness, should become a fundamental component of the basic educational experience of children and youth, no different from reading, writing, and arithmetic. The health of our society depends on it. In the end, our goal must be even greater than the common contemporary call for tolerance. Ultimately, we are being called as a nation to *truly* live our most treasured values and be accountable to live in ways that honor the humanity that we share.