

Abstract

This project explores the negative impact of racism in literature on the mental health of Black students through two theoretical frameworks. Intersectionality and the Ecosocial approach help to identify the group most affected by racist literature presented in classrooms, as well as establish it as a mechanism through which racial trauma negatively impacts the health of young, Black students in high school and post-secondary courses. The perspective of Black students and Black educators shows that racism in literature is a source of racism-related stress in schools, and an increasing number of studies show that discrimination and the fear of discrimination activate the body's stress response system, which can affect both mental and physical health. The resulting analysis speaks to the responsibility and agency of institutions or individuals to understand and confront the issue. While there is not yet a definitive answer to this problem, this paper proposes a solution that will leave literature intact and help restore the dignity of the racialized groups affected.

Introduction

The link between racism and mental health makes racialized Canadians particularly at-risk and is increasingly being recognized as an important area of research¹.

Racism consists not only of interpersonal, overt acts, but is built into institutions in society (e.g. justice or education system) and operates systemically. Sources of racism in the education system include exposure to mandatory racist literature taught in English classrooms (e.g. the use of the n-word over 200 times in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain)².

This project seeks to understand how the mental health of students is affected by racism in literature through two theoretical frameworks, Intersectionality and an Ecosocial approach, and proposes a suggestion that could minimize harm.



Figure 2. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, a book containing the n-word and various tropes or stereotypes about Black people

Methods

To analyze this issue, two theoretical frameworks were used in order to systematically approach the research question:

Intersectionality takes into account how various aspects of people's identities intersect to create a unique vulnerability to and experience of discrimination, and was used to identify the particular group most negatively affected by the racism in classic literature presented in Canadian classrooms as well as understand how that group is affected by the material³.

Ecosocial analysis focuses on how disease is socially produced through biological and ecological mechanisms⁴. Concepts within this approach were used to help elucidate the pathways that mental health issues arise as a result of racism, as well as develop a proposed solution.

Findings

- Many studies show a link between racial discrimination (overt/subtle) and poor mental health⁵
- Racism impacts health through a stress response both during the event and in the future due to fear of a repeat event, which can lead to structural changes in the brain^{6,7}

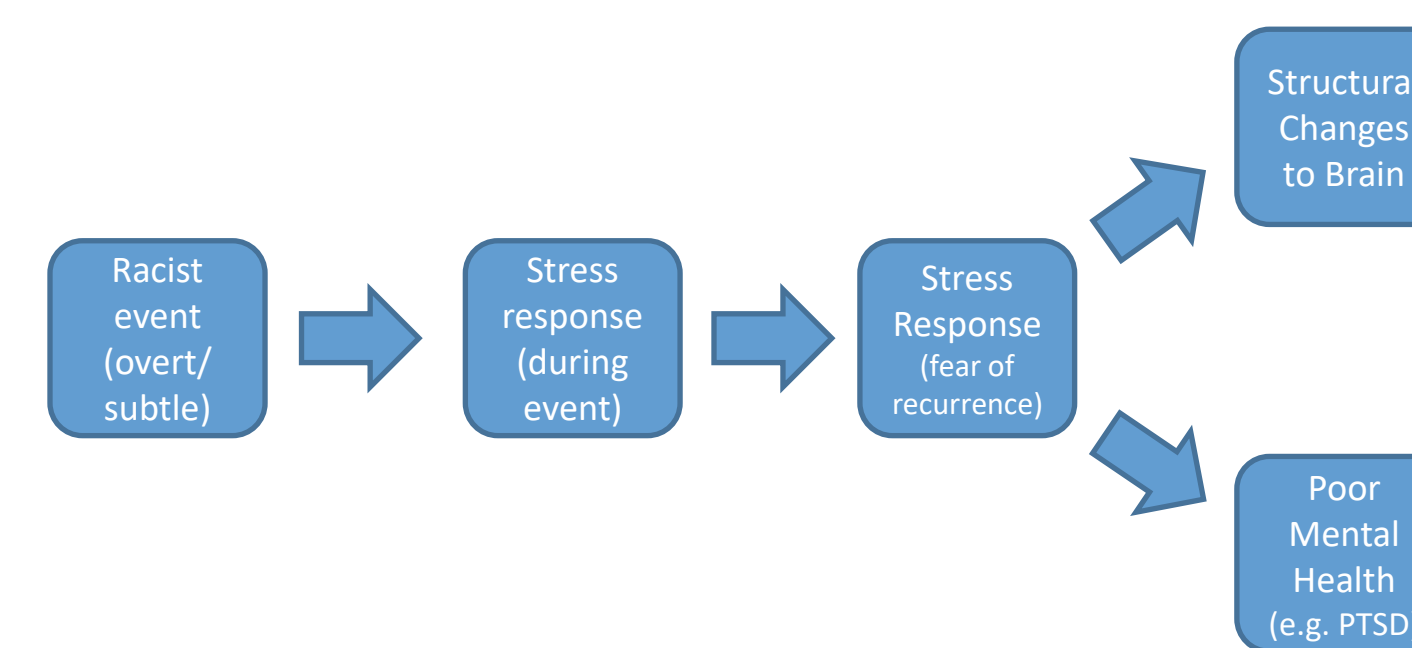


Figure 3. Mechanism through which racism affects mental health

- Some Black educators, including Dr. Carl James (York University) believe that older texts, especially those with the repeated use of the n-word, can be problematic and should periodically be re-evaluated as course material⁸
- Use of the n-word by two white professors at Western while teaching classic literature left students feeling sad, angry, devalued and embarrassed^{9,10}
- Black students who raise concerns feel they are not listened to¹¹
- Witnessing words or images of Black suffering at the hands of racism brings back memories of people's own experiences with racism¹²
- internalizing racist attitudes through reinforcement of negative stereotypes in literature can lead to "unfavorable self-evaluations"¹³

Discussion

Black students are often traumatized by books, discussions and visual depictions of racism and brutality against Black people, which can lead to poor mental health. As an essential institution in society, schools have a responsibility to understand how their students are affected by racism built into the curriculum, and should minimize harm done to their mental health⁴. Despite decades of controversy, many schools continue to teach inflammatory books without guidelines on how to approach the issue.

This project proposes an **acknowledgement** (see figure 4) to be included in the syllabus of every course that covers historical literature that is overtly or even subtly racist and is known to be inflammatory, as this would acknowledge the wrongs done to the group affected and will confirm to them that their voices are being heard.

We at Glendon/York acknowledge the difficulty in discussing the horrors of enslavement that appear in history books and literature as well as the stereotypical references to Black and Indigenous people that insult their intelligence and deny them humanity. Some of the classic literature in our curriculum today appear to abuse the power of the written word by demeaning those who were written about, and for that we apologize. For those of you who experience discomfort in reading and discussing the material in class, please feel free to speak to your professor and/or to contact the Accessibility, Well Being and Counselling Centre (Glendon)
<https://www.glendon.yorku.ca/counselling/>.

Figure 4. Proposed acknowledgement to be included in every course syllabus containing racism in classic literature

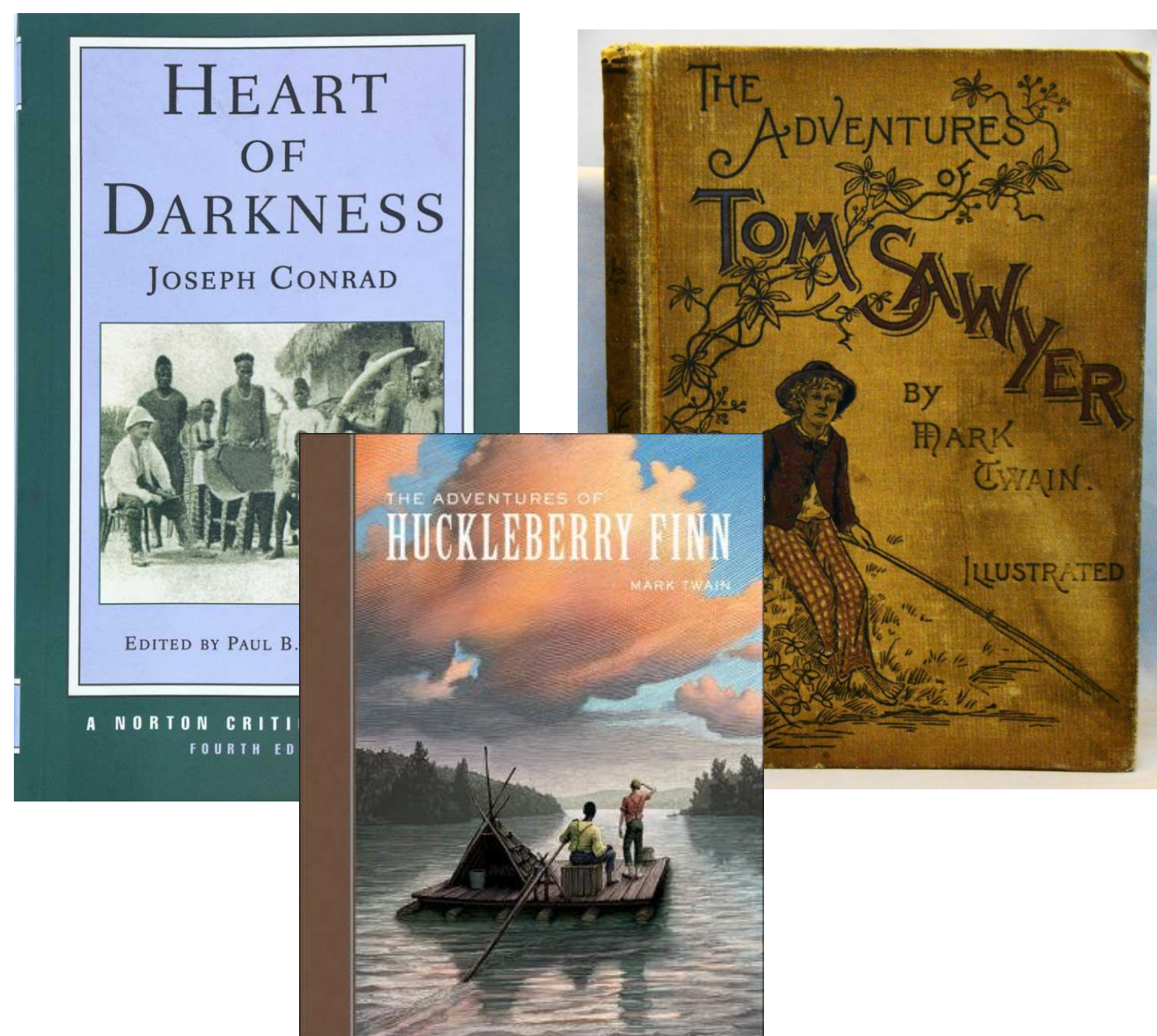


Figure 1. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, three classic books containing racism, including the extensive use of the n-word and descriptions of violence toward Black people.

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