

These Stories Matter: Race, Levinas, and Psychology's Responsibility for the Other

In an article (Smith, 2015) discussing the details of Sandra Bland's final days and funeral, it was revealed that the young woman had disclosed a history of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Though this diagnosis was unfamiliar to her family and friends, the sheriff of the jurisdiction where Bland died emphasized her mental illness as the primary factor in her controversial demise. Bland's jarring death, along with those of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Samuel DuBose, to name a few, have stirred heated discussions across the country about the continued oppression of African-American citizens. However, there has been a notable silence from the psychotherapeutic field, a characteristic that has existed since the beginning of psychology's history and continues today. The ethics of Emmanuel Levinas offer practitioners both a challenge to this avoidance of racial issues and an alternative way of entering this timely conversation. According to Levinas, we are personally responsible for the vulnerable, fully human Other before us – even if they are Black. By acknowledging the insidious impact of racism in the lives of Black clients; addressing the need for more culturally appropriate research and clinical practices; and supporting therapists of color, this paper strives to present a possibility for how psychology can provide restorative healing.