

CHICAGO LAWYER®

CLIFFORD'S NOTES

The “weathering” hypothesis is an important concept in the diversity, equity and inclusion sector of law. This hypothesis is that chronic exposure to social and economic disadvantages leads to an accelerated decline in physical health and could partially explain racial, gender, ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in a wide array of health conditions.

People’s lives can be devastatingly impacted by bias other than violent acts, hate crimes or verbal confrontation. Studies have demonstrated that discrimination in a race-conscious society can slowly chip away at one’s well-being to the point of individuals engaging in high-coping efforts that can marginalize or deteriorate health and lead to premature death. Black women initially were the focus of the impact of this unhealthy environment, but others also have been found to be affected.

The “weathering” hypothesis first was coined in 1992 by Dr. Arline Geronimus, professor at the School of Public Health and the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan. As a graduate student Geronimus recognized a disparity in health among races but saw that the patterns were not due strictly to poverty.

Her research indicated the weathering effect can create an erosion of professional, mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health from unconscious bias and the daily “microaggressions” that diverse persons are often forced to endure. Microaggressions are subtle or subconscious ways people communicate biased thoughts. This behavior can impact the way one responds to certain situations and can ultimately impact one’s outlook, health or longevity in the profession.

In 2006, Geronimus set out to test her hypothesis that Black women “experience early health deterioration as a consequence of the cumulative impact of repeated experience with social or economic adversity and political marginalization.” She and her research team tried to quantify what may appear to be the immeasurable through health indicators such as pregnancy outcomes, excess mortality and disability.

Biomarkers such as cortisol levels, sympathetic nerve activity, blood pressure, cytokine production, glycated hemoglobin levels and waist-to-hip ratios were examined. These became known as the allostatic load of the physiological “cost” of chronic or repeated exposure to stress. Researchers then linked these biomarkers to social measures, including socioeconomic status, occupation, birth outcome and environmental risk.



‘WEATHERING’ BIASES

Well-being hurt by continued exposure to disadvantages

By **BOB CLIFFORD**

Geronimus’ team concluded this load was much higher in Black women. The wear and tear on the body’s adaptive coping mechanisms cumulates over a period of time to the point where it has real and quantifiable physiological effects.

Geronimus wrote: “These findings provide evidence that the impact of chronic stress on health has important implications not only for individuals but also for the population as a whole and suggest ways that dynamic social relationships between racial and ethnic groups may shape health in a race-conscious society. The findings suggest that progress in understanding and eliminating racial health inequality may require paying attention to the ways that American public sentiment on race, including its gendered aspects, exacts a physical price across multiple biological systems from Blacks who engage in and cope with the stressful life conditions presented to them.”

Members of the legal profession, like the clients we serve, have many differences, and when they involve gender, race and/or ethnicity, religion, disabilities, and other diverse factors, repeated stressors — in addition to those associated with the actual practice of law — can arise. Members of diverse groups at times apply substantial pressures on themselves, and the intersectionality of all of these factors can have detrimental impact on the individual lawyer and the profession itself.

This phenomenon will be the subject of a free Clifford Law Offices webinar Feb. 17. In a two-hour seminar accredited for an hour each in wellness and diversity/inclusion, an all-star panel will discuss wellness and the weathering effect.

Hour one includes Clifford Partner Erin Clifford, Founder/CEO of Erin Clifford Wellness; Brian Cuban, lawyer and author of “The Addicted Lawyer”; Tracy Kepler, CNA Risk Control Director; and David Shaheed, a retired judge and associate professor at Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs.

Panelists for the second hour include Lea Gutierrez, DEI director at Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office; Leslie Davis, CEO, National Association of Minority & Women Owned Law Firms (NAMWOLF); and Lindsey Draper, former Milwaukee County Assistant District Attorney, Assistant Public Defender and Judicial Court Commissioner primarily with the Children’s Court and the current vice president of DEI for the Institute of Well-Being in Law.

I will be moderating both programs. We hope you enjoy an in-depth discussion on the health of the legal community through many prisms. [CL](#)

Bob Clifford is the founder of Clifford Law Offices. He practices personal injury and regularly handles complex damage cases.

rclifford@cliffordlaw.com