

My name is Maurice Nicoleau, LCSW, and I am an experienced New York-based healthcare professional with expertise in psychodynamic psychotherapy and crisis de-escalation. Recently I delivered a workshop to members of the Suffolk County Psychological Association titled “Racism and Identity Formation: Exploring the Impact of False Narratives.” The research and experiences that I discussed in this lecture, particularly the idea of false narratives and how they impact lives at both the individual and community levels, are grounded in my own experiences and my work as a trained psychotherapist who has also worked for hospitals and mobile crisis units.

In these roles, I have seen firsthand how deeply certain narratives, particularly surrounding race, can be internalized by individuals, just as I have recognized how these false narratives have impacted my own mental wellness. I have dedicated my life to undoing these false narratives in my personal life through analytic treatment, and I would encourage all psychotherapists to undertake similar work to address narratives they may have been told and may be (however unconsciously) repeating themselves.

False narratives are socially constructed stories. Their purpose is to maintain power in the hands of some and to distribute power into the hands of others. When the power is distributed into the hands of others, the purpose is to serve the creator of the narrative. Those who are the recipients of the power given to them may think that they are powerful, but it is a loan that can be taken at any time if the receivers are not fulfilling the bestower’s wishes. The creator of the narrative decides who receives power and for what purpose. An example of this is that groups of people (Italians and Irish for example) were not considered White at one time in American history but were later granted the status of being White to extend the White population and maintain the false racial narrative between Black and White. There are narratives in our society about all types of conditions: there are narratives about being overweight, there are narratives about being in shape, there are narratives about being tall, there are narratives about being short. But my primary interest is in narratives surrounding race and difference.

As an African American with Brown skin in the social work profession, I experience my own narratives and have the narratives of others imposed upon me, just as we all do. What’s important is that, as practitioners of psychology, we examine our

own false narratives and always keep in mind that patients come to us with their own set of imposed false narratives. In therapy, patients impose narratives onto the therapist, to get the therapist to fulfill some expectation that would help perpetuate the narrative that the patient is living under. In my work with patients, I seek to understand what these narratives are (which are often unconscious to the patient) and help them begin to develop awareness of them. My goal is that through helping patients develop greater emotional and psychological awareness, they can free themselves from these false narratives.

One of the things I have found crucial in this process is a commitment to becoming aware of one's false imposed narratives. I realized that if I or any therapist is living underneath a narrative in which they have no awareness, then it is very challenging to keep themselves from inviting the patient to fulfill an unconscious expectation of theirs within the therapist's personal false narrative. I believe that if therapists undergo a personal process of becoming more aware of their false narratives, they can become personal agents of liberation.

What can we do to understand and address how race and trauma intersect in American society as psychologists and therapists? I suggest the following steps:

Acknowledgement

Acknowledge how we feel when we hear new information. Try not to dismiss it immediately. Try to tolerate the discomfort as much as we can. Sometimes we can learn about how we've fallen into the racial false narrative trap by working backwards. We can pay attention to how we felt or are feeling, and then observe what we are doing. Developing this awareness is like a muscle that strengthens over time. We can then eventually begin to not react within the false narratives in situations in which we did in the past.

Education

Seek out new information. Try not to only seek out information that confirms what we already believe. Spend time with individuals from different backgrounds, and who do not think like we do.

Personal Awareness

Commit to a path of discovering our blind spots. This can be through psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, supervision, mentorship or other modalities. Many of us who are participating in this lecture are psychotherapists or psychologists. It is highly recommended that one is in therapy who is providing therapy for others.

Empathy

Work towards possessing the mental and emotional understanding that we are all much more alike than different.

Advocacy

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." Learn to defend the oppressed because one day it could be you.

Although most if not all of us are living underneath racially imposed false narratives, or other false narratives, it is possible to free ourselves from them. This freedom does not happen quickly. It's a lifetime journey, in which one becomes freer with time. We can become less and less burdened by the patterns that we find ourselves in. The first step of this journey begins with admitting that we are all enslaved, in one form or another, whether we are wearing gold handcuffs or steel ones. We can stand together in this fight with renewed understanding and tolerance, willing to try and look inward more before judging outward.

Please contact me if you wish to discuss these issues further. You can learn more about my work and advocacy on my website: <https://thetrueinneryou.com/>.