Using social media to understand and guide the treatment of racist ideology

Karen R. Kaiser*, Kaiser Therapeutic Services, LLC, 16000 Tryon Way, Gainesville, VA 20155, U.S.A.
Dierich M. Kaiser, Kaiser Therapeutic Services, LLC, 16000 Tryon, Gainesville, VA 20155, U.S.A.
Ryan M. Kaiser, Kaiser Therapeutic Services, LLC, 16000 Tryon, Gainesville, VA 20155, U.S.A.
Arianna M. Rackham, Kaiser Therapeutic Services, LLC, 16000 Tryon, Gainesville, VA 20155, U.S.A.

Abstract

Social media, including sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, provides a platform for racist ideology, making this dysfunction of American society more evident. Social media can provide insight into the world of the racist—individuals who cling to their tribal identities, irrationally rejecting those who they perceive as different. Studying social media may provide insight into processes that can assist in the healing of American society of its segregationist views—a way toward healing the racist. The purpose of this paper is to analyse social media posts to better understand racism, its causality and to develop initial steps for addressing racist ideology. A qualitative review consisting of a content analysis of 600 American Facebook posts was completed to reveal patterns in cognition, problem solving, personality structures, belief systems and coping styles. The content analysis consists of both a descriptive account of the data and an interpretive analysis.

Keywords: Racism, social media, violence, social conditioning, sexism, ageism, antisemitism, able-bodyism, heterosexism, paranoia, Christianity, cluster B personality traits, clandestine.

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* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Karen R. Kaiser**, Kaiser Therapeutic Services, LLC, 16000 Tryon Way, Gainesville, VA 20155, U.S.A
  E-mail address: kaiser.therapeutic@comcast.net / Tel.: (703) 721-4468

1. Introduction

Many thought racism was no longer a problem in modern day America with the election of the first African American president Barack Obama only to find that racism and racial hatred are alive and well in the U.S. Racial hatred is illustrated by the profusion of racist commentary on the Internet, and particularly on social media sites such as Facebook. Individuals with racist ideology and delusions have become emboldened since the election of President Donald J. Trump resulting in a proliferation of hate speech on social media and Facebook.

President Trump consistently has made his contempt for people of different ethnicities clear, with his early-on television claims that President Barack Obama was not an American citizen, his attack on the Khan family, Gold Star Parents of Muslim descent, his labelling of a United States Federal Judge a 'Mexican' and his failure to condemn the Alt-Right terrorists who marched on Charlottesville, Virginia in the Summer of 2017, resulting in the murder of the young Heather Heyer. Following the incursion of the rabid Alt-Right mob on Charlottesville and the murder of Miss Heyer, President's Trump's comments were there were 'some very fine folks on both sides'.

Racism is often confused with prejudice. Prejudice is prejudging an individual or group of people that often leads to discrimination. Racism is more than prejudice resulting in discrimination. Racism is systemic. It is the belief that one race or ethnic group is superior or inferior, and results in the denial of equal rights, goods and opportunities on every level to the racial groups that are considered inferior. Racists, at their most extreme, not only believe that other ethnic groups are inferior but also they do not view other ethnic groups as human. Rather, they view other ethnic groups as being equivalent to livestock and to be used for the racists' benefit. This is well-documented in the treatment of slaves in the United States prior to manumission when slaves became freedmen. Slaves were brutalised, if not killed, raped, whipped, atrocities were too great to address in this document (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. 'Scars of Peter' (Silkenat, 2014).

Racism is based on the capitalist, patriarchal western-centric, Christian-centric and modern/colonial world system (Grosfoguel, 2016). Racism and racist ideology is, and has been, upheld for centuries by institutions of this world system.

Social media provides a platform for racist propaganda and racist predators. The young, lonely, isolated, angry, disabled and disenfranchised (the less fortunate among us) are recruited by the racist social media troll and are given validation, a home and sense of belonging for which they long. Social media and the Internet are largely unregulated, making them a valuable recruitment tool for not only racists but also for other extremists. Here, we have described the racist as an extremist, in fact a terrorist, as some of their activities are meant to strike fear in the hearts and minds of others. The racist extremist all too often feels free to inflict atrocities on others due to their self-indulgent, self-serving, distorted and misguided views. While inflicting atrocities, they do so with righteous indignation, and appear to lack insight into the brutal and sadistic nature of their behaviour and empathy for the individuals and/or groups they target. The racist extremist in fact places blame on their victims—they blame their victims for the abuse, much like perpetrators of domestic violence and other violent crimes.

Individuals with racist tendencies and delusions target more than just individuals from other races (which they feel are inferior). Racism is often co-occurring with sexism, ageism, able-bodyism, classism, heterosexism, antisemitism and xenophobia. The racist often denies equal rights, opportunities and compensation to individuals from targeted groups primarily for their (the racist's) benefit.

Treatment for the racist and their victims is an urgent need in the United States. The United States government must choose to promote and celebrate diversity. Multiculturalism and celebration of diversity should become a government priority. Rather than celebrating diversity, steps are taken by the current U.S. government to segregate and punish individuals in the above groups. In recent years, thousands of parents who crossed illegally into the U.S. have been held with their children in detention centres (Hennessy-Fiske, 2018). A pattern has emerged for separating immigrant children from their parents solely at the U.S. southern border, traumatising children and parents and causing profound emotional suffering. Separation of immigrant children and parents in this manner does not occur at the northern U.S. border. The role of governmental racism has yet to be examined regarding the differential treatment of immigrants at the U.S. southern and northern borders.

Developmental research shows that racism is taught from parent, or caregiver, to child. Consequently, the numerous negative effects of such primitive thinking are also passed on from one generation to the next. Without corrective intervention, and true treatment, the negative effects can remain free to contaminate the function of the affected person. The potential for racist ideologies to be spread from one generation to the next shows the profoundly negative effect that racism can have on an ethnically diverse and evolving society such as that in America. Figuratively, the American 'melting pot' has historically been a boiling pot that overflows when social irrationally prevails.

From a mental health perspective, it is undeniable that the level of dysfunction that accompanies racist ideologies causes racism to meet the same criteria by which we define mental illness. The brain of the racist can be designated as sick due to the fear, hatred and delusions that characterise the racist ideologies. The verbiage and behaviour of the racist spread the ideology to vulnerable citizens and inflames divisions between dissimilar cultures. Such events can only serve to weaken a vulnerable society. The ultimate survivability of the society will depend upon its ability to challenge the divisive racist views and energise the social motors of cultural acceptance and diversity.

The unregulated Internet and social media make it much easier to spread racist ideology. There is an energetic, un-checked exuberance of racist ideology on social media. That media is available to all who can access the Internet. The mere existence of the racist comments serves to authenticate the existence of the racist and likely emboldens the racist population further as the comments validate the perceived appropriateness of racist ideologies. Comments that challenge the racist statements are met with primitive defences such as projection and outright denial. Consequently, the racist tends to be un-swayed from their divisive attitudes and continually justify their pathological perspective

without any sign of flexibility, insight or moral decency. Their opportunities for finding social diversity that could challenge their distorted thinking are limited by their behavioural tendency to associate with people of their own cultural and racial standing.

The purpose of the paper was to analyse social media posts to gain insight into the mind of individuals suffering from racist delusions, and/or reveal patterns in their cognition, problem solving, personality structure, belief systems and coping styles in hopes to develop treatment strategies.

2. Methodology

Six hundred public Facebook posts from 2016 to 2018 were reviewed and analysed using content analysis. The analysis consisted of both a descriptive account of the Facebook posts and an interpretive review of emerging themes. The review of Facebook posts did reveal themes indicative of patterns in cognition, problem solving, personality structures, belief systems and coping styles.
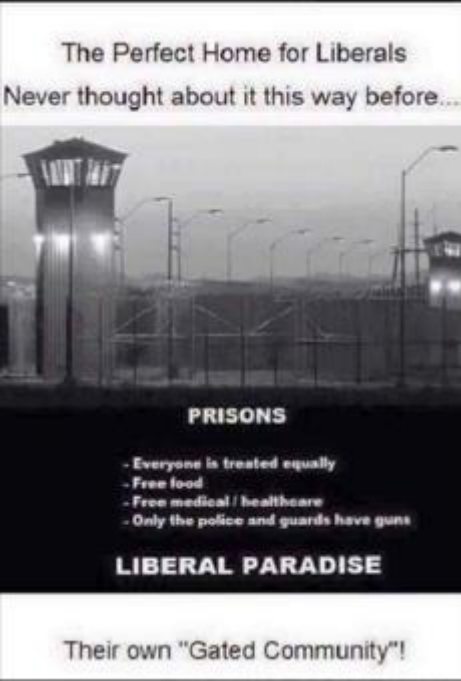
3. Results

The following themes emerged from the reviewed 600 Facebook posts: 1) fear/intolerance for people of dissimilar cultures that can progress to threats and violence; 2) strong, but distorted, sense of family structure and function/loyalty; 3) irrational and/or delusional belief systems; 4) low intellectual capacity, lack of awareness with regard to cultural differences; 5) hyper-religiosity; 6) 'racist speak' and 'hidden symbols and 7) cluster B personality traits'. See Table 1. below for themes that emerged from the data, examples of Facebook posts demonstrating the themes and number of posts believed to support the theme. It is important to note that Facebook posts often represented more than one theme.

Table 1. Facebook social media posts (Facebook, 2016–2018).

Themes	Facebook Posts Demonstrating the Theme	Number of Posts
Fear/intolerance for people of dissimilar cultures that can progress to threats and violence	'Sing me one of those Nigger working songs'. 'Can we go ahead and just have another revolutionary or civil war'. 'We either have to outlaw Islam and deport it entirely from our lands. OR accept this as the new normal without end. Courage or suffer. No options'.	323

Themes	Facebook Posts Demonstrating the Theme	Number of Posts
	When the prey is armed, predators think twice. 'Schools need to start issuing firearms to their students'.	
Strong, but distorted, sense of family structure and function/loyalty	'Ever notice Fam that leftists are control freaks'? Response: 'That's why they watch every move we make and rat us out'. 'This rifle serves two purposes: 1) to defend my castle and 2) remembrance of my good old buddy_____, who once owned this bad boy'.	155
Irrational and/or delusional belief systems	'Watch your back [Trump]!!!! Obama is trying to undermine him again with all of his treacherous ways'!!!!	91
	'So wrong, but so white'. 'I don't speak Ebonics or Walmart'. 'Islams kill, liberals assist, we resist'.	109
Low intellectual capacity, lack of awareness with regard to cultural differences		55

Themes	Facebook Posts Demonstrating the Theme	Number of Posts
Hyper-religiosity	'If you're an heir of salvation, you should be the happiest person in the world' preceding 'banning guns is not the answer, hanging bad guys is the answer… *in public*', and following post of family carrying guns. 'Cuck' [Democrat] Figure 2. White power hate symbol. 'Send our senior citizens to the prisons for the care and protection. Send liberals to nursing homes where there are no guns. They'll love it! Plus, they will have income equality since they will each have a \$30 per month allowance'.	105 93
'Racist speak' and 'hidden symbols'	'Stop the pussification. Everybody needs to know what it feels like to be punched in the face at least once in their life' [bullying in schools]. 'I'm cut from a different cloth and they don't make that cloth anymore'. 'Take a personal stand for your freedom and join the NRA today'. 'I just joined the NRA'. 'Money can't buy happiness, but it can buy guns and	

Themes	Facebook Posts Demonstrating the Theme	Number of Posts
	ammo which is the same thing'. Figure 3. 'From my cold dead hands'. 'Can we go ahead and just have another revolutionary or civil war'. 'Last month you ate Tide Pods, this month you are Constitutional Experts. Dear Millennials, please shut up'.	115
Cluster B personality traits		
Primitive defence mechanisms and coping styles	'Gun-free zone to a maniac—because they're all cowards—a gun-free zone is let's go in and let's attack because bullets aren't coming back at us. By adopting a policy where '20%' of teachers were armed would reduce or eliminate the perception of weakness, making schools a riskier target to strike'.	

Note: Posts often fell into more than one theme.

4. Discussion

The following are pathological themes that were commonly revealed by the analysis of the social media sites involved in this research. These themes were consistent with, and representative of, the symptoms of a psychiatric illness. We consider that illness to be racism itself. The specific and singular

symptoms are notably the components of larger symptom themes that most comprehensively describe the pathology of the racist.

1. The racist exhibited a fear and intolerance for the people of a dissimilar culture. That fear and intolerance progressed to threats to the sanctity of those people. Those threats often progressed to acts of violence towards those people. Those symptoms finally culminated in persistent obsessive thoughts about conflict or war with the dissimilar people.

2. The racist exhibited a strong, but expendable, sentimentality and loyalty toward like-minded persons. The racist considered those persons family, brethren or fellow soldiers.

3. The racist possessed highly irrational belief systems that showed a lack of acceptance of people of a dissimilar culture, an outright rejection of the people in question and a distorted interpretation of the content and meaning of events that involved the people in question. The racist then appeared to become free to interpret social phenomena as they liked and entertained fantasies that fulfilled their distorted emotional needs.

4. The more extreme racist displayed delusions that could take different forms. We noticed delusions of grandeur that easily allowed the racist to conclude that he was inherently superior to the dissimilar people and entitled to a range of privileges over those people. There were paranoid delusions that made the racist mistakenly suspect other people of targeting them in a variety of potential ways.

5. The racist often demonstrated a low intellectual capacity and lack of awareness with regard to cultural differences. The racist usually had difficulty with abstract thinking, judgment, insight and decision making. These deficits, by definition, indicated a problem with executive functioning. Likely related to these findings was the concurrent finding that the racist often displayed an aversion to multiple forms of education and seemed threatened by the presence of potentially helpful modes of education.

6. The racist also displayed a religious preoccupation with belief systems that seemed to support the racist ideology expressed. However, the racist usually failed to adhere entirely to the religious doctrines of the theology he chose. Instead, he tended to pick and choose religious doctrines that suited his needs.

7. The racist often utilised vocabulary and symbols that were unique to the racist community examined in this paper. Some social scientists have referred to this as 'racist speak'. These rather coded communication styles seemed to add a layer of secrecy and obscurity to the racist's communications. This observation was consistent with the racist emotion of fear described in theme one.

8. The racist tended to display a strong but distorted, sense of family structure and function. He would readily share racist philosophies with loyal family members and encourage those members to practice the same philosophies. The racist would express endearment and support of the loyal members. However, disloyal family members were easily disrespected, shunned and ultimately abandoned because of their differing views.

9. The racist often exhibited antisocial personality traits. More specifically, he would behave with a lack of empathy towards dissimilar people, oppose and ignore adaptive societal norms, and justify controlling, predatory and even harmful behaviour. The ultimate behaviours often included the well-known antisocial triad of lying, cheating and stealing.

10. The racist often exhibited histrionic personality traits. More specifically, he would look for ways to find attention and seek fame beyond that provided by the social media platform examined here. Vulgar pictures, videos and language were frequently used in an exhibitionistic style consistent with a histrionic personality construct. Firearms, blood and dead bodies were shown apparently to maximise the shock value of the demonstration conveyed by the racist.

11. The racist often exhibited narcissistic personality traits. More specifically, he would view his ideations as superior to those of others and likewise, dismiss concepts and arguments that would run counter to his own. The racist would even sacrifice potentially adaptive family ties for the sake

of remaining in a controlling and superior role. One racist wrote on social media 'That child is dead to me' after his son expressed views that opposed his own.

12. The racist often exhibited dependent personality traits. That is, he would tend to cling to the distorted views of the racist group even when the views became extremist and potentially destructive. Some media posts showed racists expressing support and encouragement for group posts that expressed threats of violence on targeted people. Even when the risk of harm and legal retribution appeared high, the need to belong to the racist group appeared to override any sense of risk.

13. The racist often exhibited addictive personality traits. This was shown by expressions of delight and emotional arousal when startling racist communications and images were conveyed. Competitiveness was revealed on social media posts, wherein one racist would try to surpass another with posts of greater and greater shock value. These behaviours were like those of drug-dependent patients who tend to pursue a drug-induced arousal with stronger and stronger drugs.

14. Finally, the racist would display primitive defence mechanisms and coping styles. For instance, he would blame the targeted people for their perceived shortcomings and wrongdoings. He would minimise and deny the social destructiveness of his behaviour. He would portray himself as the real victim, possibly to gain sympathy and attempt to recruit others to his cause. The racist would tend to hold grudges and adopt a vengeful demeanour even when the perceived wrong was long past in time and not directly experienced by the racist. Most ominously, the racists tended to rely upon aggression as the primary means of conflict resolution. References to assault, rape, war and Armageddon were commonly seen on social media posts.

5. Potential causes and treatment

A comprehensive discussion of the full range of potentialities regarding the treatment of the racist lies beyond the scope of this paper and will be addressed in future writings. The essential concepts and possibilities, however, are outlined below.

An effective treatment for racist conceptualisations and behaviours will have to be versatile and multimodal. That is, the act of changing erroneous human beliefs and behaviour must take into consideration multiple factors that define causality of the pathology, the variable character of the pathology and the level of insight possessed by the racist.

The causes of racism have not been clearly defined. However, if racism is a kind of mental illness, then causality likely involves genetic, biologic and experiential factors. Anyone racist likely has enough contributing factors at play to render him ill. To date, no specific gene or biological problem has been directly associated with the onset of racism. A collection of case studies implies that a history of negative experiences regarding race and culture can leave a person vulnerable to developing racist views. Most cases of racism demonstrate the complexities and challenges of determining the cause of racism because many psychological and social maladies can influence human behaviour and thinking. One profound case study is that of American racist James Earl Ray (Waxman, 2018).

James Earl Ray was found guilty of the 4th April 1968 assassination of renowned social activist Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Luker, 2000). Much speculation remains as to the specific causes of Ray's racist behaviour. From a biological standpoint, he was found to have Hepatitis C which ultimately leads to his death through the liver and kidney failure (Posner, 2003; Thomas, 1998). Developmentally, Ray was troubled, in that he experienced extensive childhood trauma. His father became a fugitive from the law due to check forgery, causing the family to fear exposure and move often. When Ray was 9 years old, his younger sister died after accidentally setting herself on fire. Ray remained poorly educated after dropping out of school at 15 years of age. An attempt at US Army enlistment met with an early discharge because of ineptitude, alcohol abuse and a difficulty in adapting to military codes of conduct. After returning home, he struggled to keep jobs. In 1949, he was arrested for robbing a café and served 90 days in jail. Between 1950 and 1959, Ray committed several small crimes that escalated

to the armed robbery of two grocery stores. In 1960, he started a 20-year prison sentence and managed to escape from that prison in 1967. His flight from the law took him to Canada and Mexico before he returned to the US. While still a fugitive, he assassinated Dr. King and immediately continued his flight from law enforcement. The ultimate FBI manhunt covered five countries and was said to be the biggest and most expensive in history. While evading capture, Ray changed his name just as did his fugitive father a generation before. Ray was finally caught in July of 1968 in London, after spending time in Lisbon and Portugal.

An American Psychological Association (APA) delegation at a United Nations' Plenary Session of the World Conference against Racism (WCAR) addressed 'psychological causes of racism' as 'complex' and 'involving legal vulnerability and discrimination, economic and educational disadvantage, social and political marginalisation and psychological victimisation (Tendayi, 2018)'. That delegation stated that 'racism in all its horrific forms is transmitted across generations and is manifested in individual behaviours, institutional norms and practices, and cultural values and patterns' (Tendayi, 2018). Developmental research suggests that racism is indeed transmitted from one generation to the next by role-modelling and communication between the racist parent and his child.

6. On treatment

The APA delegation proposed broad-based 'corrective strategies' such as 1) assisting the victims of racism; 2) establishing 'Institutes on Racial and Ethnic Equity and Mental Health Promotion'; 3) establishing 'programmatic support for mental health' within the World Health Organization and United Nations (UN) ; 4) eliminating biases in research; 5) supporting the use of existing educational resources; 6) establishing a 'focal point' on racial equality based on the UN' Office of the Secretary General; and 7) establishing an 'International Research and Public Policy Institute on the Program of Action adopted at the WACAR (Tendayi, 2018)'. As an attempt at deterrence, hate crime laws have been defined and upheld by both the US Supreme Court and lower courts. Many other countries have adopted similar legislation. However, these strategies do not recognise racism as a mental illness or directly address the mental condition of the individual racist.

The following is a description of potential treatment modalities for consideration once the racist individual is found amenable to psychological treatment.

1. Psychodynamic psychotherapy: This treatment modality, though considered archaic in many modern-day psychological circles, has potential value regarding treating the racist. This modality can help the racist to gain some insight into the influence of early-life experiences, especially regarding parents and siblings. The traumas experienced, lessons learned and the role modelling done undoubtedly play some role in later-life conceptualisations and behaviours. The early formation of the identity of the racist could be revealed to the racist himself. The severe faults in the racist's ego formation and functioning could be defined. Out of this will need to raise an awareness of the effect of victimisation and the significance of the severely dysfunctional characterological defence mechanisms that become the mote of the racist's behaviours.
2. Cognitive behaviour therapy: This treatment modality can confront ongoing problems regarding dysfunctional emotions, thoughts and behaviours. This modality can help the racist to better understand the cause and effect relationship between problematic emotions, thoughts and ultimate behaviours. In doing so, this modality can also directly confront the negative social consequences of racist ideology. The emphasis on negative consequences would have to be energetic and convincing because of the well-habituated and well-justified defence mechanisms of the racist.
3. Group psychotherapy: This modality should intentionally expose the racist to very people whom the racist professes to dislike. In this way, the group therapy could incorporate a desensitisation element that may reduce some of the reactive negative emotions that spontaneously arise within the racist when he sees his target. This therapy could allow the racist to see himself behaving in a

gradually more civil manner over time as appropriate social interactions are modelled and fostered—while inappropriate interactions are discouraged and replaced. Managing such a group would require significant skill in anger and dispute de-escalation on the part of the group leader(s).

4. Immersion therapy: This modality would involve an expanded form of group therapy that would immerse the racist into cultural elements and traditions of the targeted persons. This process would be labour intensive on the designer of the therapy due to the planning involved and the number of positively influential people who would be needed to generate a change of perspective within the racist. This therapy would involve imbedded interpersonal therapy that would guide the racist through a series of social interactions that are problematic and reveal more adaptive behavioural options that would lead to more positive interpersonal outcomes.

Unfortunately, there are many impediments to the success of the above-mentioned therapies. The primary obstacle is the inevitable unwillingness of the racist to agree to therapy. The very nature of the racist involves fear, avoidance, intolerance, blaming, anger, hate, superiority, oppositionality, exhibitionism and often violence. These character traits will easily upend attempts to obtain treatment consents, design treatment plans and carry out treatment regimens. It should be expected that the idea of treating the racist as one who has a mental illness will meet with opposition from many directions for many reasons. However, the challenges of defining, recognising and treating the personality disorders are being actively confronted by the scientific community and taken on by psychologists and psychotherapists as we speak. The pathology that defines racism is too closely associated with, and like, established mental illnesses for it to remain an 'ism' that avoids scrutiny, objective study and meaningful resolution.

The United States Federal Government, through the US Department of Education, needs to promote a nationwide curriculum that integrates the study of multicultural issues and concepts of cultural diversity into the general educational curriculum that all American children undertake. Such a curriculum could be included with the already established subject referred to in American education as 'social studies'. The modified curriculum would delve deeper into matters of cultural diversity and the vital need for multicultural awareness, tolerance and acceptance. Educational exercises in social diversity will need to be tailored to the age and learning capacity of the student, just as is any other educational curriculum.

7. Conclusions

It is the opinion of the authors of this document that the above-mentioned pathological themes embody symptom complexes that can be used to define the overall psychopathology of the racist. In doing so, these themes can be used to define racism as a recognisable mental illness. We expect that the themes above will be observed to recur in future studies of racist ideology and behaviour. Once a wholly reproducible pattern of symptoms is defined, it appears likely that racism can and will be defined as a mental illness, just as major depression and bipolar disorder have been defined in modern society. Of course, an illness demands effort at the designing of a treatment.

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The APA delegation proposed broad-based 'corrective strategies' such as assisting the victims of racism, establishing 'Institutes on Racial and Ethnic Equity and Mental Health Promotion', establish 'programmatic support for mental health' within the World Health Organization and UN, eliminate biases in research, support using existing educational resources, establish a 'focal point' on racial equality based in the UN Office of the Secretary General and establish an 'International Research and Public Policy Institute on the Program of Action adopted at the WACAR (Tendayi, 2018)'. However, these strategies do not recognise racism as a mental illness or directly address the mental condition of the individual racist.

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