Jacob Lawrence and Anxiety

THE PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF MIGRATION ON MENTAL STRESS
HYPOTHESIS - BASED ON MODERN DATA ABOUT THE BIOLOGY OF STRESS, THE MIGRANTS IN JACOB LAWRENCE’S PAINTINGS HAD VERY DEFINITE PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS BECAUSE OF THEIR SUFFERING FROM ANXIETY.

PERSPECTIVES: Jacob Lawrence’s Artwork • Modern Data on Mental Stress

GLOBAL SCALE: African-American migrants from the Great Migration

BIOLOGICAL SCALE: Amygdala size • Bloodflow
During the Great Migration, which took place from 1916-1970, approximately 6 million black Southerners relocated to urban areas in the North and West.

Many of them were fleeing the South because of poor economic conditions, which were heightened due to the limitations of sharecropping and farm failures. Additionally, they had to deal with the ongoing racial oppression posed upon them by the Jim Crow laws. Cities like Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland and New York City took in large numbers of migrants, all of them searching for better wages and living conditions. However, they had to face new challenges such as segregation into ghettos, social challenges, discrimination and competition for living space.

Due to these unfamiliar obstacles that the migrants had to face, they were most likely experiencing anxiety and were under a lot of stress.
The following painting by Jacob Lawrence represents the race riots that took place during the Great Migration, which were numerous and often ended in hostility towards the migrant who was hired to break the strike. African American workers were seen as competitors for scarce jobs and therefore, working-class whites developed a resentment towards them. Out of the disturbing wave of riots, the most serious was the Chicago Race Riots of 1919, where 38 people were killed, 584 injured and over 1,000 black families were left without homes, all in the span of 13 days.

The following study showcases amygdala reactivity in ethnic minorities and its relationship to the social environment. There was an increased amygdala response to white faces demonstrated in individuals of black ethnicity, compared to white individuals looking at a black face. This portrays the fear that has been programmed into the brains of individuals of black ethnicity after years of cruel treatment and the fear and stress they most likely felt during race riots.
After moving to the North, the migrants found themselves in a very crowded and unhealthy environment. Tuberculosis spread like wildfire and the death rates rose. In some cities, the death rates for African-Americans during the First Great Migration were 4 to 5 times higher than those of the white population. Combining factors such as the influx of migrants along with discriminatory housing policies limiting the availability of housing for the migrants, created the perfect environment for Tuberculosis transmission.

The following study looks at the link between negative emotions and amygdala volume. Due to what we know about diseases during the Great Migration, it can be inferred that most migrants had larger amygdala volumes than the average person. They had to constantly deal with the stress of contracting tuberculosis or a loved one getting sick. In many cases, they probably lost a loved one to TB and the amount of stress and sorrow that it would’ve caused is immense. Therefore, all of this stress would’ve lead to a larger amygdala volume.
LIVING CONDITIONS

Although some could argue the living conditions were better, they were still far from ideal and brought heaps of new challenges for the migrants to overcome. As more and more migrants came to the North, good housing was very scarce leaving many people to live in dilapidated and overcrowded tenement housing. Seeking to find better housing, they attempted to move into new areas, however, this only resulted in their new homes getting bombed. Sometimes, migrants even lived without heat, light or running water. Segregation was enforced through a array of social norms and residential codes.

Anxiety causes the amygdala to increase in size, however, constant anxiety can easily lead to PTSD which would actually lead to a decrease in amygdala volume because of how overworked it becomes. Based off of what we know about household living conditions of the migrants, it’s clear to see some of them were suffering from constant stress due to fear of the white communities, diseases, overcrowding and poor living conditions. When first moving to the North, they probably simply experienced anxiety but after time it’s possible it would have developed into PTSD. Therefore, I can hypothesize that in some cases, rather than having a larger amygdala volume some migrants would’ve had a smaller one.
In conclusion, I believe my hypothesis was right because moving to the North posed many new challenges for the migrants, which based off of what we know now from modern data, had definite physiological effects on them. Firstly, the fear implemented into their lives by large portions of the white population, would’ve led to an increased blood flow to the amygdala and stress when viewing a white person with events such as race riots reigning their everyday lives. Also, the majority of the migrant population would’ve had larger amygdala sizes after experiencing anxiety associated with epidemics of Tuberculosis and watching your loved ones get sick. Due to their inhumane living conditions, some of these migrants could’ve easily developed PTSD due to the constant stress, leading to a smaller than average amygdala volume. However, moving to the North could’ve also alleviated stress. Firstly, most migrants found stable jobs that paid well and allowed for them to provide food for their family. Additionally, they had more educational opportunities and even had to right to vote. Although moving to the North came with new stressors, conditions for the migrant community were still better than they were in the South. In the status quo, we can play a part in helping migrants by making sure they always feel included in the environment since they are already dealing with the social barriers of accepting different customs.
race-riots-were-numerous-white-workers-were-hostile-toward-the-migrant-who-had-been-hired-to-break

SOURCES:
https://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/migration-series
https://dcc.newberry.org/collections/chicago-and-the-great-migration
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3674506/