

In a compelling presentation today at Boston College, author and journalist Linda Villarosa delivered a passionate and eye-opening speech that challenged the notion that African Americans are to blame for their own poor health outcomes. Instead, Villarosa identified long standing ideas of racism as the key contributor to the racial gap in health outcomes seen in America.

“It’s not race, something that Black people are doing wrong, or something wrong with our bodies. But, it’s racism,” Villarosa said, an idea that she developed in her book, *Under the Skin: The Hidden Toll of Racism on Health in America*. “And racism is a risk marker for discrimination, bad treatment, fear, stress, it shortens lives, and makes pregnancy and childbirth dangerous.”

Villarosa identified discrimination in the health care system as one of the main reasons for the disproportionate amount of African Americans with health issues, and recalled her family’s own personal experience. When her father was hospitalized, her mother called her and said that the hospital staff was “treating your father like an n-word.” In response, Villarosa and her mother presented staff with photos of her father, who was a bacteriologist, in the Navy, in an attempt to establish his dignity.

“But then we realized, why are we having to do this? Why are we having to play this respectability card?” Villarosa said. “He should just be treated like everyone else, and no one deserves to be treated like this.” Villarosa stated that this experience caused her to “have a different lens on the healthcare system.”

Villarosa also shared the health issues she faced herself as a Black woman, such as having a low birth weight pregnancy with her first daughter. It wasn't until she heard of Dr. Arline Geronimus' hypothesis of weathering that she began to understand the effects of racist treatment on her own life. Weathering, according to Dr. Geronimus, is the physical effect discriminatory actions have on one's body.

"Your heart rate goes up, your blood pressure goes up, you're breathing faster, your body is flooded with cortisol, and you're just ready for battle," Villarosa said.

"When I read about the weathering hypothesis, I thought about my childhood, and I thought about battling this discrimination in my youth, and of course, always," Villarosa said. "Could that be part of the reason I had this low birth weight baby?"

Villarosa also enforced the idea that the environments that Black Americans live in is one of the contributors to poorer health in Black communities.

"Black folks are 75% more likely to be situated near a polluting facility," Villarosa shared. "We lack healthy access to green space, to healthy places to exercise, to safe and healthy housing, and to grocery stores that sell healthy food."

The audience, which filled up each of the approximately 250 seats and even had a number of people standing in the back, was composed of professors and students alike, all listening attentively to Villarosa's address. Gabby Edwards, a freshman at Boston College, felt that the

speech really “intersected with her identity,” as she is an African American woman attending a predominantly white institution.

“It was very informative, and I feel like I need to pay more attention to my health and stand for my rights in the healthcare system as a black woman,” Edwards said.

Diana Wicks, a junior studying neuroscience and public health, felt that Villarosa’s address caused her to begin thinking about what changes need to be made to fix this racial gap.

“I was left with a lot of questions that maybe don’t have answers right now, like what actionable things can we do to combat this, but the knowledge is a good first step,” Wicks said.

Villarosa ended the speech on a hopeful note, crediting activist groups and students entering the medical field as being the ones responsible for making changes in the health outcomes of Black communities.

“When I get depressed about some of the things I talked about earlier in this talk, I just look at these people and think, ‘this is our future,’” Villarosa said. “This isn’t a story of all bad news.”