INYI JOURNAL

Commentary

Racial Trauma Unfolds: The Spectacle of Witnessing George Floyd`s Murder

Donna Richards[1], Paul Adjei[2]

[1] School of Social Work, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
[2] School of Social Work, Memorial University, St. Johns, Newfoundland, Canada

This is a peer-reviewed (double-anonymized) article
Published online:
INYI Journal TBD

ISSN: 1929-8471
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25071/1929-8471.141

Abstract: In this article, we chart some of the detrimental emotional impacts of what we consider a human disaster: denying Black people's humanity. We focus on the highly publicized and violent killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in 2020: 9 minutes and 29 seconds of state-sanctioned, anti-Black violence that was filmed and circulated globally and has sparked the largest racial justice protest and beyond since the civil rights movements of the 1960s. We consider the impacts of viewing this footage, this spectacle, on Black people, seeing this human disaster playing out in front of their eyes through the lens of anti-Black racism (ABR), which serves as an analytic lens to theorize this trauma within the context of visceral and ubiquitous anti-Black racism. We further contextualize these links between racism and trauma by drawing from our firsthand experience, as well as the stories, worries, and feelings shared with us by Black professionals, families, and members of the community. We focus specifically on that shared by Black youth, which has primarily been the focus of our professional work. We conclude by highlighting strategies of resistance to counteract these impacts, as well as shifts to clinical practice that might better address them and structural shifts towards social justice.

Keywords: Human-made disasters, mental health, trauma, anti-Black racism, resistance, resilience.

Corresponding author: Donna Richards
Trent University, Peterborough Campus
1600 West Bank Drive
Peterborough, ON Canada, K9L 0G2
Email: donnarichards@trentu.ca
ORCID # 0000-0002-3716-0345

Introduction

The sensationalized mainstream and social media coverage of George Floyd`s murder on May 25, 2020, by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, galvanized an increase in global awareness of the harsh realities of police brutality, particularly against Black bodies, sparking global unrest and protest on a scale that has never been seen before. This reality is particularly true for young Black men, who are constructed as violent and dangerous criminals in individual interactions as well as structurally and through the news media. Historically, Black people have faced systemic racism and oppression that impacts their worldview, how they are forced to see the world's perception of them, and how they should navigate the world within this frame of reference. With the increased media attention providing filmed evidence of law enforcement brutality against Black bodies, Black people are visually reminded of the dangers of living while Black. On the flip side, many people contend that having the ability to capture such injustice through social media is good for bearing witness to what has been kept silent for so long. Within this reality, through the professional experiences of the authors of this article, as well as those of Black youth, families, and communities we have engaged with in our work, the impacts of witnessing such acts of violence on well-being will be examined.

Aftershocks: The Societal Impacts of Floyd`s Murder

Several weeks after the brutal murder of Mr. George Floyd, Daryl Austin, a White conservative cisgender male, journalist, and Donald Trump supporter, wrote an opinion piece in NBC News to describe his traumatic experience watching viral video footage of the horrific murder of Mr. Floyd:

> Like many other people, I watched in horror and anger when I saw former Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd for nearly nine agonizing minutes as Mr. Floyd pleaded for air to breathe and two additional officers used the weight of their bodies to push Mr. Floyd's body into the filthy concrete. I could not help but wonder how everyone could participate in such an act of sheer inhumanity; I did not understand how it could have come to pass that they somehow saw George Floyd as being less.
>
> Seeing it unfold before my eyes—or maybe seeing this act unfold after seeing so many similar acts unfold similarly over the last few years—has profoundly affected me. George Floyd's death was a tipping point, not just for the Black Lives Matter movement or the movement to reform policing, but even for many white Republicans like me who once chose to believe—perhaps were taught to believe—that the fight to end institutionalized racism had already been won. Something inside me had been reluctant to believe the system was still being perpetuated today. No more. (Austin, 2020, para. 1-2)

Arick Wierson, another White cisgender male who is married to a Black woman, also penned this opinion piece in CNN News:

> What I saw in the video of George Floyd finally ruptured that bubble. … As a grown man, helplessly pinned to the ground, likely knowing his life was ending, Floyd cried out for his "mama." His mother, who was known as Cissy, had passed away, but in this hour of most dire need, he called out to her – his protector, his source of unconditional love. That cry pierced the bubble of my own White blindness, awakening me to the reality of what it means to be a parent to Black children. For too many years – my entire life, in fact – I had failed to realize that by and large law enforcement has one set of rules for dealing with White citizens and another for people of color. (Wierson, 2020, para. 14-17)

What is interesting in these two opinion pieces is that, although these authors do acknowledge that anti-Black racism has always existed in the United States, it took the visceral and highly publicized killing of an innocent Black man to concretize this reality for these (and many) white men. Prior to this incident, anti-Black racism may as well have been a figment of the imagination of Black people,

a reality of the past, or in the present only in specific, unique circumstances.

In her profound analysis of Mr. Austin's and Wierson's opinion pieces, Angela Onwuachi-Willig (2021) poses an interesting question: "Did the tragic killing of George Floyd result in cultural trauma for Whites?" Onwuachi-Willig (2021) argues that the murder of George Floyd forced many White people to rethink their racial privileges in relation to policing in the United States and Canada. Some White people even came to the realization, for the first time, that policing in the United States and Canada presents a potential danger to Black lives, where the concept "to serve and protect"— a known mantra of policing — does not include Black people. Onwuachi-Willig (2021) cited tweets from Mark Cuban, the owner of the Dallas Mavericks, and Mike Sexton, a White cisgender male living in an affluent community, to buttress her point. Days after Mr. Floyd's murder, Mr. Cuban tweeted:

> Dear White People: We are the ones that need to change. This is not one man's story, which is why the problem is ours. We need to find OUR way to change what we do. There is no quick fix. It is a moral imperative. (Gaydos, 2020, para. 4)

Mike Sexton also confessed that although he had previously heard several complaints of racial profiling and police harassment from his Black friends and acquaintances, the viral video footage of the horrific murder of Mr. Floyd made him realize "the powerlessness and sheer panic that Black people often experience in the presence of officers" (Beason, 2020, para. 13). Onwuachi-Willig (2021) concludes that Whites may have experienced a cultural trauma after being exposed to video footage showing the murder of George Floyd. Though there has been broad discussion about the state of our institutions and ways forward together following this murder, little attention has been paid to how viewing these violent videos across both mainstream and social media impacts Black people, their emotions, and the ways they walk in the world.

In this reflective article, we share our personal experiences, as well as those shared with us by Black youth, families, and other community members through engagements at community forums and clinical and counselling contexts who watched the viral video footage of Mr. Floyd's murder. We argue that Black people experienced racial and cultural trauma after witnessing Mr. Floyd's death, an upsetting reality that has not been given much attention in the literature. The video footage of George Floyd's murder reveals the metaphor of living Black in a White space. For Black people, nothing is more traumatic than to watch the 8-minute and 46-second footage of George Floyd pleading for mercy while his assailants look unconcerned. Such images remind us of institutional disregard for Black lives. We end the article with recommendations on how understandings of racial trauma may be integrated into practice when working with Black survivors.

The Agony of Witnessing Black Suffering

Elizabeth Alexander (1994) argues that viral footage of Black people suffering can create a national spectacle for White audiences. For Black audiences, however, such footage elicits emotional trauma, one which forces them to question what the future holds for Black lives in a visceral, anti-Black racism context (Alexander, 1994). Jeffrey Alexander (2004) expands on this reckoning, defining cultural trauma as qualifying events — real or perceived — in which "members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (p. 1). Alexander (2004) further identifies four key components that must be present in any narrative of cultural trauma: (1) the nature of the pain or the injury the group endured; (2) the nature of the victim or the group affected by the traumatizing pain; (3) the relation of the trauma victim to the broader audience, or the extent to which "members of the audience for trauma representations experience an identity with the immediately victimized group"; and (4) attribution of responsibility, or who the perpetrators of the trauma are/were (p. 12-15). Angela Onwuachi-Willig (2016) expands on Jeffrey Alexander's (2004) conditions of cultural trauma by drawing on the Black community's reactions to the acquittal of the two White men, John William Milam and Roy Bryant, who murdered Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Black male accused of rape of a White woman in 1955. For Onwuachi-Willig (2016), cultural trauma does not only happen to a community when

unexpected occurrences disrupt their routine lives, but it also happens when the community is continuously exposed to such occurrences. Onwuachi-Willig (2016) outlines three elements that cumulatively create cultural trauma for a group:

> (1) an established history or accumulation of the routine harm for the trauma group; (2) widespread media attention, usually based on preceding events, that brings regional, national, or international attention to the occurrence of the routine harm; and (3) public discourse (whether in familial homes, in schools, through protests, or in public streets) about the meaning of the routine harm, which consists of public or official affirmation of the subordinated group's marginal status (p. 346).

Onwuachi-Willig (2016) argues that these three factors were present and collectively produced cultural trauma for the Black community after the acquittal of Milam and Bryant.

Extrapolating on Onwuachi-Willig's (2016) and Jeffrey Alexander's (2004) analyses of cultural trauma, we argue that the viral video footage of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, created cultural trauma for the Black community, who already were witnessing the state of Black vulnerability in the face COVID-19 pandemic that had disproportionate effects on Black people's lives and livelihoods (Plater, 2020). Data available showed that Black people were more exposed and less protected from the COVID-19 virus and once infected, were more likely to die because of racial gaps in accessing quality health care in Canada and in the United States. For example, in Chicago, more than 50 percent of COVID-19 cases and nearly 70 percent of COVID-19-related deaths involved Black individuals, despite Black people making up only 30 percent of the population in Chicago (Reyes et al., 2020; Yancy, 2020). In Louisiana, Black people represented 70.5 percent of COVID-19-related deaths, although Black people only constitute 32 percent of the state's population (Deslatte, 2020). The Johns Hopkins University and American Community Survey showed that of 131 predominantly Black counties in the United States, the COVID-19 infection rate was more than 300 percent higher than in counties with predominantly White populations (Yancy, 2020). Further, the COVID-19-related death rate for predominantly Black counties was 600 percent higher than what existed in predominantly White counties (Yancy, 2020). In Canada, COVID-19-related deaths among Black people were higher than any other race: 49 deaths per 100,000 Black people, 31 deaths per 100,000 South Asian people, and 22 deaths per 100,000 White and Chinese people (Gupta & Aitken, 2022). Particularly disturbing was the claim of health officials that many, if not most, of those deaths were preventable if access to healthcare was equitable (Reyes et al., 2020). In the United Kingdom, COVID-19-related deaths among Black people were four times higher than among White people (Picheta, 2020). Alarming was the claim of health officials that many, if not most, of those deaths were preventable if access to healthcare were equitable.

Further, studies reveal unequal access to COVID-19 vaccines across countries, with racial differences as the common denominator. While many countries in the Global North, which are primarily White-populated, had largely vaccinated their population in 2022, countries in the Global South, in particular sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, which consist of countries with heavy Black populations, are yet to do the same and are even projected to successfully vaccinate only 70% of their population by 2024 (Ahlberg & Bradby, 2022). Not that these largely Black-populated countries did not have funding to buy the vaccines for their people, but because countries like Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom had pre-ordered and hoarded far more vaccine doses than they even needed for their populations, there were simply not enough. Of the 11 billion total doses available by the end of 2021, almost 9.9 billion were promised to largely White-populated countries (The World Bank, 2021). In a podcast featuring Mamta Murthi, the World Bank's Vice President for Human Development, and Dr. Ahmed Ogwell, the Deputy Director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control, they noted that countries like the United States paid for enough vaccines for twice its population, while the UK paid for enough vaccines for four times its population, and Canada for more than five times its population (The World Bank, 2021). While many low-income and largely Black-populated countries were struggling to vaccinate their populations, Canada, the United States, and the UK were talking about a third booster vaccine.

Taking this information together, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, if previously not clear, that any life that is not White or/and middle/upper class is easily disposable. In Necropolitics, Achille Mbembé (2003)

states, "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (p. 11). Mbembe's (2003) thesis raises a critical question about the conditions under which some lives deserve to live or must be allowed to die. For Black communities, the COVID-19 pandemic was not "a medical nor an epidemiological crisis; it was a crisis of sovereignty" over Black lives (Lee, 2020, para. 1). As the above data show, the COVID-19 pandemic created conditions for the slow death of Black peoples in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. As Sandset (2021) rightly argues, the necropolitical outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic were not only part of a "state of exception" but instead were indicative of "the state of acceptance" or normalization of Black tragedies in the Global North and beyond (p. 1411). The framing of the COVID-19 pandemic as simply a health crisis covers the racist state project that prioritizes the healthcare needs of the upper and middle class White people, thereby creating "death worlds" for Black and Indigenous lives and "life worlds" for White middle/upper class (Lee, 2020, para. 7). We saw a snippet of this racist state project in the UK when, at the time more Black people were dying from COVID-19 pandemic than other races, the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson suggested the United Kingdom is creating "herd immunity" whereby COVID-19 will be allowed to run its course.

Judith Butler (2004, 2016) argues that recent issues of global violence demand answers to questions like, "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And What makes for a grievable life?" (Butler, 2016, p.20). These questions are relevant through a necropolitical (Mbembé, 2003) frame of reference on healthcare provision during the COVID-19 pandemic; conditions were set to accept when certain lives must die or allowed to die and when certain lives must be saved and protected. In this case, Black lives were allowed by white supremacist necropolitical forces to be lost to the slow violence of a systemic lack of resources and access to healthcare.

While the COVID-19 pandemic raged on, the Black community was forced to bear witness to the murder of Mr. George Floyd. The viral video recording of close to 9 minutes revealed a young Black man, who we would learn was Mr. Floyd, being held down by his assailants — Derek Chauvin, Tou Thao, Alexander Kueng, and Thomas Lane — as his life slowly leaves his body while his assailants watched unconcerned. In many ways, the killing of George Floyd enacted the very same necropower propelling disproportionalities in COVID-19 infections and care, as the virus sucked the lives out of Black people while healthcare practitioners watched unconcerned. Mr. Floyd's death adds to the long list of Black homicides at the hands of White police officers in the United States and Canada: Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Kurt Reinhold, Philando Castile, Rayshard Brooks, Stephon Clark, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Pierre Coriolan, Eric Osawe, Abdirahman Abdi, Jean-Pierre Bony, Sonya Massey, and many others. These examples of Black homicides at the hands of White officers are neither flaws in policing nor aberrant behaviours of a few rogue police officers, as is often touted in mainstream media coverage. Instead, they are examples of how policing is supposed to work for Black people. The viral footage of Mr. George Floyd was a stark reminder of the precarity of Black life in a visceral anti-Black racism context.

Author One and Author Two Experiences in the Aftermath

Though the footage of Mr. Floyd`s murder and its impacts were felt on a broad scale, of particular focus to both us as Black individuals and professionals is how these shockwaves continue to be felt in Black communities. Along these lines, we share stories of members of Black communities, including the experiences of Author One and Author Two, in the aftermath of Floyd`s murder:

Author One

I (Donna Richards) am a faculty in the social work department at a Canadian university. I am also a Black Canadian-born woman of Caribbean descent who has had extensive professional experience working with racialized youth populations, particularly Black young adults, within the context of social services, criminal justice systems, and clinical practice. When the news of George Floyd`s murder first broke, and I began to witness the repeats via news and social media in the weeks ensuing, I anticipated that at least some parents and youth with whom I previously worked might reach out for moral support and to talk through this horrific event.

Shortly after the news broke in the days and weeks that followed, I received numerous phone calls and text messages from professional colleagues in clinical

practice, school social workers, and even requests from past clients and parents requesting consultation regarding any available strategies to console their young adult children, often facing shock and hurt as a result of this human disaster. While I have extensive experience listening to narratives from Black and other marginalized youth who have experienced injustice within our society to varying extents, nothing had prepared me for the emotions experienced as I watched the repeats of Floyd being murdered and listened to past clients, parents, and colleagues voice the traumatic emotions that they continue to experience today.

I became engaged as much as I could in events and forums that spoke up about the continued injustice rendered against Black personhood and sought ways to support Black youth groups, individuals, and parents in deconstructing and coping with what they were witnessing. As a past therapist and active frontline social services advocate, I was shocked at how helpless I felt at times, thinking all the time of what I could do to advocate for and uphold Black humankind as worthy of recognition and protection. To this end, I participated in community presentations and other events that shared strategies for coping with the aftershocks of Floyd`s murder and the increased presence and experiences of anti-Black violence and racism.

Author Two

I (Paul Banahene Adjei) am a social work professor and a senior administrator (Associate Vice President — Indigenous Research) at Memorial University, Canada. I am an Asante Black cisgender male who migrated to Canada 21 years ago from Ghana. I have taught and practised social work in various contexts. I first heard about Mr. Floyd's death through an African mother who called me on the phone in the middle of the night crying. She asked me if I had seen the viral video of a police officer killing a Black man. I immediately went online to search for the story. One could say that not 20 years of knowledge of anti-Black racism prepared me for the viral video showing Mr. George Floyd's murder. Mr. Floyd's viral video is not my first time seeing a viral video recording of Black suffering. I have seen the killing of Eric Garner and Philando Castile and many other equally disturbing videos of Black suffering; however, the viral video recording of George Floyd haunted and traumatized me. Growing up as a child in Ghana, I once saw a cow being slaughtered at the slaughterhouse. The cow's legs were tied with a rope while two men knelt on it. The butcher then sliced the cow's throat with a sharp knife and watched the cow bleed out. I could still remember the eyes of the cow as it helplessly saw its life leaving its body while its assailants held it to the ground. The incident lasted about four minutes, but I could not forget that image, not even in my adult life. That trip became my last and only visit to any slaughterhouse. The 8-minute and 46-second viral video of Mr. Floyd took me back to this childhood trauma of witnessing the cow being slaughtered. However, this time, it was not an animal but a Black man. This video lasted for only 4 minutes; it lasted for a full 9 minutes. Like the cow, I could see Mr. Floyd's life leaving his body as his assailants — Derek Chauvin, Tou Thao, Alexander Kueng, and Thomas Lane — watched unconcerned. Even as a child, I knew then that the cow was inhumanely slaughtered. So, one could imagine the trauma of watching a human being killed in the worst way that made the killing of the cow somehow charitable and palatable. More worryingly, I know I am not far from George Floyd; what happened to Mr. Floyd could easily happen to me, my family, friends, and colleagues.

I was among the individuals who organized and spoke at the Black Lives Matter protest rally at St John's, Newfoundland. It was the first time over 1,000 people of multi-racial backgrounds (mostly Whites) came together to support the Black Lives Matter movement. Mr. Floyd's death inspired me to start anti-Black racism training. I have so far offered training to several federal and provincial governments and educational institutional employees. I also partnered with the Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience of McMaster University to develop nine online training modules on anti-Black racism and critical race education. SKL 800: Anti-Black Racism and Critical Race Education, an online training course, is now offered by McMaster University Continuing Education. The course is an Accredited Self-Assessment Program as defined by the Maintenance of Certification Program of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and approved by McMaster University Continuing Professional Development Program. So far, over 400 Health professionals have taken the course. Relatedly, I have worked with the Office of Professional and Educational Development (OPED) of the Faculty of Medicine, Memorial University, to develop Six training modules on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Anti-racism education for health professionals. The

training Modules are now housed on the OPED Memorial University website and certified as an Accredited Group Learning activity. Further, I have consulted and trained employees of several federal and provincial governments and public institutions on EDII-AR, including employment counsellors, senior administrators, community leaders and faculty members at MUN and beyond. I hope these efforts will go a long way in raising awareness as well as educating people about anti-Black racism in Canada.

The Terror of Living While Black

bell hooks (1996) notes, "all Blacks in the United States [and Canada], irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness" (p. 46). This Black fear of Whiteness is rooted in the racist history of the United States, marred in trauma, anguish, and violence (hooks, 1996). Marable (1983) agrees, writing that every Black is a prisoner of "White terror" informed by White ethos that Blacks are less human and, therefore, should not have the same rights as Whites. Indeed, Whites who have doubted Black people's sense of fear of Whiteness learnt through their experimentations that there is an existential threat of showing up Black in a White supremacist society. In 1961, John Howard Griffin, a White male, darkened his skin to pass as a Black male in order to investigate whether Black people are acting paranoid when they complain about "White terror" in the United States. In his findings, Griffin (1961) recounted an encounter with a White southern male who gave him a ride. Although Griffin saw this individual as a decent person, he (Griffin) believed the man was capable of killing any Black person deemed a threat to whiteness. Griffin (1961) summed up his experience of living temporarily in 'a Black body' in the US in the following words:

> When all the talk, all the propaganda has been cut away, the criterion is nothing but the color of skin. My experience proved that. They judged me by no other quality. My skin was dark. That was sufficient reason for them to deny me those rights and freedoms without which life loses its significance and becomes a matter of little more than animal survival. I searched for some other answer and found none. (p. 67)

Inspired by John Griffin's experimentation, Grace Halsell, a White female reporter, was convinced that the outcome would be different for a Black woman. In 1969, she too darkened her skin to pass as a 'Black woman' to experiment in the south of the United States. Halsell (1969) describes her fears of inhabiting, albeit temporarily, a Black woman's body in the US:

> Caught in this climate of hate, I am totally terror-stricken, and I search my mind to know why I am fearful of my own people [White people]. Yet they no longer seem my people, but rather the "enemy" arrayed in large numbers against me in some hostile territory. (p. 156-157)

John Griffin and Grace Halsell's narrations gave remarkable sincerity and validity to Black people's fear of whiteness in the United States and Canada. Their works show the severity and saliency of issues when one shows up Black in a White supremacist society. For Author Two, the thought of living as a Black man amidst the reality that your life could be cut short by a White assailant, as it happened to George Floyd, is both terrifying and emotionally traumatizing.

What We Heard from Black Youth, Families and Communities

The spectacle of watching George Floyd`s murder has often been classified as modern lynching, terrorizing Black people deeply and causing significant harm and trauma. With this in mind, we seek to explore the following question: How do young Black people navigate this hostile and potentially deadly reality of Black lives?

In Author One`s own experience working with Black youth during the height of the pandemic and amidst the breaking news of Floyd`s murder, as well as in conversations with colleagues working with Black youth, it was clear that Black people experienced total fatigue and unrest. This was particularly true for Black parents and their young adult children as they looked towards their children entering a hostile world. Narratives from these youth indicate that they felt numb, fearful, stressed, and displaced. In practice with these youth, many questioned and felt uncertainties regarding their future. A common question emerged: What does this mean for my future as a young Black man regarding employment and educational attainment? Parents of youth also voiced their concerns regarding how safe their children, especially their sons, would be from police harassment. Some even spoke about sleepless nights

and sleep disturbances they had been experiencing since the murder.

On the other hand, colleagues shared that Black youth with whom they worked both within the school boards, in clinical practice, and in other settings were questioning the authenticity of support shown by White people and others. Since the murder of George Floyd and the anti-racism uprisings, it was common to see companies and institutions alike contributing to the trending of BLM on social media and making commitments to countering anti-Black racism (ABR) in their spaces. However, there remain no substantive changes to their ideological underpinnings and practices. Though commitments and supportive statements were shared at the institutional level, Black youth found no substantive changes in the Canadian context, with some even identifying push-backs within workplaces and educational systems. Other Black youth also spoke to the level of violence against Black people to which they have been exposed and the damage it causes to their sense of self, self-esteem, and mental well-being. These youth also reported that their parents demonstrated more hypervigilance regarding their whereabouts when they are not at home, often reminding them of their non-safety in the world in general as Black people. This, some youth reported, led to high levels of anxiety. Racial socialization, or the "process of transmitting culture, attitudes, and values to prepare youth to cope with stressors and oppression associated with a racial minority status" (Metzger et al., 2021, p. 17), is not new to many Black children and youth. Author One vividly recalls being warned by their parents to be careful in all that she did from elementary to high school and to remember that she is Black and will never enjoy the same privileges as her non-Black peers.

Anti-Black Racism, Black Identity and Mental Health: Ramifications of Floyd`s Murder

Clarke and colleagues (2018) identify anti-Black racism (ABR) as the;

> pervasive, overarching climate of attitudes, beliefs, institutional practices, and policies that are embedded in Canada's White supremacist history and culture that denigrate people of African descent, and it is manifested in various forms of structural violence and racialized inequities in multiple social systems, including education, housing, racialized poverty, workplace, and criminal justice (p. 44).

It includes any form of racist incidents such as discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice enacted against Black people. Essed (1990) further refers to "everyday racism," or the racism faced by racialized people in the course of everyday interactions between people. Kumsa and colleagues (2014) further expand on the multifaceted nature of ABR as follows: A-BR as the type of racism relegated against Black people; AB-R that Black people perpetuate, and A-B-R as the struggle against ABR and the struggle against racism perpetuated by Blacks" (p. 21). Within the current push for change provided by global anti-racism protests, it is now more widely recognized that ABR is a structure that has always been a part of the Canadian landscape (Mullings et al., 2016). Adjei (2018) asserts that "within a visceral anti-black racism context, there is a hypervisibility of blackness that is not accorded to any other community of colour ... and that the white gaze of Blackness can make black bodies feel insufficient" (p. 277). Symbolically, the police officer's knee on Floyd`s neck back in 2020, while being a representation of brutality, also represents both the historical and contemporary institutions that have upheld white supremacy. We ask, then, how does this ongoing injustice against Black bodies impact Black youth identity?

Black youth's racial identity is part of their self-concept related to their collective membership within a race (Sellers et al., 1998, 2003). Their identity is tied to culture, race, and shared experiences. As stated by Eichstaedt and colleagues (2021), "experiences of racism and discrimination are the cornerstone of Black identity" (p. 1). A positive racial identity is one that has developed a sound understanding of culture, pride, values, and history as a preparation for racist experiences (Pieterse et al., 2010). Additionally, some youth who identified as being bi- or tri-racial expressed emotions that indicated they were experiencing an identity crisis.

In speaking and working with Black youths post-Floyd`s murder, it became clear that having to watch the vivid images and listen to Floyd as he cried for his mother while the police kneeled on his neck has had a devastating impact on Black youth's perception of self to an extent that resulted in adverse mental health outcomes. Data from a Canadian study that explored the

intersecting impacts of ABR and the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Black youth "found that the pandemic, along with the highly publicized incidents of racism and the Black Lives Matter movement, negatively impacted Black youth's mental health" (Osman et al., 2024, p. 1). Racism is a traumatic experience that has material impacts on the lives of racialized people, functioning as a sort of human disaster. While most Black children and youth are socialized to the reality that racism will impact Black people "from the cradle to the grave" (Comas-Diaz et al., 2019, p. 2), it is still traumatizing to helplessly watch and listen to one`s collective race mercilessly being downtrodden over and over again. The spectacle of Floyd`s death can be understood as a lynching that terrorized Black people deeply, causing significant harm and trauma.

Racism is a significant life stressor for Black youth, and the "effects of racism-related encounters … should be conceptualized as a distinct form of traumatic stress, otherwise referred to as 'racial trauma'" (Bernard et al., 2021, p. 236). Racial trauma is the emotional and psychological response to trauma-related incidents that are unexpected, experienced as threatening, and result in significant psychological distress (Pieterse, 2018, p. 205). It was most apparent after Floyd's murder while engaging with Black youth in a clinical context that they were burdened by the harmful experience of ongoing witnessing of police brutality against Black bodies both in Canada and the USA to an extent that left them with feelings of helplessness, lethargy, anxiety, and uncertainties about their future. Images of police brutality against Blacks, particularly in the US, Canada, and the UK, are no aberration to Black people, as it has been a constant in the media in contemporary times. Viewing these images often triggers racial trauma, especially among Black youth who are still in the process of identity development. Many of the youth that Author One and her colleagues worked with post-Floyd's murder reported traumatic symptoms such as anxiety, fear, feelings of sadness, apprehensiveness, helplessness, hopelessness, and overall emotional exhaustion and disappointment in the fact that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Resilience/Resistance: The Flipside

While the witnessing of George Floyd`s murder has had devastating repercussions on Black populations worldwide, particularly Black men and Black youth, people are demonstrating resistance to White supremacy and anti-Blackness to varying extents. We have watched as #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) has evolved into a positively impactful national and international movement, inspiring all Black populations to resist oppression and racism against Black people. Black resistance in this context is seen as the "uprising of Black people in opposition to the enduring racism and white supremacy that allow white people to maintain economic, political and overall control" (Haynes et al., 2019, p. 1067). Black resistance fights back against police brutality on Black bodies while centralizing Black experiences and maintaining a positive sense of self in the face of racism and discrimination (Nissim, 2014). With all that violence and pain that has occurred prior to and following Floyd's murder, Black people and Black youth are demonstrating both digital and offline activism. In Author One's work with Black youth after Floyd's murder, she found that with support, these youth began advocating for themselves; some participated in the local protests, and others spoke to establishing boundaries in their professional lives to allow for self-care.

Globally, Black youth have become more emboldened in fighting back against racism and discrimination. One study conducted with Black African Australian youth (Moran & Gatwiri, 2022) indicated that after Floyd's murder, there was a turning point when the social media practices of youth changed; they began using social media to verbalize their varied experiences with racism, irrespective of how their followers or others may react. Similar activism was also obvious nationwide in Canada, the US, and beyond.

Opportunities to educate and implement tools to support liberation and transformation were also made possible to some extent, as exemplified by Author Two's project in implementing anti-Black racism training as part of the continuing education programs at McMaster University in Ontario. Education can create transformation for both general populations and particularly Black youth, which will result in how they are viewed and made to feel in society. The struggle to "transform education for Black youth is now at the forefront for #BlackLivesMatter" (Helper & Joubert, 2021, p. 34). The goals are to see ethnic studies added to the school curriculum, the hiring of Black educators, and see counsellors being held accountable for counteracting racial violence against Black students (Helper & Joubert,

2021, p. 35). Additionally, many organizations, particularly in Canada, the USA, and the UK, are now re-examining their association with historical wrongs done to Black people. Overall, in the wake of Floyd's murder and many other Blacks who died at the hands of police officers, the movement for Black lives has ignited a mass of youth voice and participation (Helper & Joubert, 2021).

Implications/Conclusion

The murder of George Floyd and the witnessing of this horrific event has been a watershed moment in various ways for Black people worldwide. Witnessing Floyd's brutal murder by law enforcement officers reminds us that racism historically shapes the vulnerabilities of Black communities but also that racism exposes structures, policies, and practices that have created this social vulnerability (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020). It is also no secret that publicized acts of violence and the negative impact on Black bodies have taken a toll on the psychological well-being of Black youth. Anti-Black racism is also often overlooked in policy implementation at all levels, including educational systems, the labour force, and other social settings. Social workers and other professionals, such as educators in elementary and high schools and practitioners in clinical mental health practice, must invest in developing cultural understandings of the populations they serve and promote sensitive service delivery at all levels.

Social workers, clinicians, and other practitioners working with Black youth must start with an understanding of the impact of historical trauma, mass-level oppression, and the subjugation of Black people both historically and contemporarily. Hence, best practices should include mechanisms that uplift Black youth voices and advocacy to promote social change in systems that impact their daily lives. Furthermore, it must be considered that promoting youth engagement will serve not only to encourage but also to validate the collective political power of youth and their ability to contribute. Youth programs should be developed that afford Black youth opportunities to develop strategies that facilitate healing from ABR and historical trauma.

In all, we are hopeful that movements gaining ground each day that call out the historical, contemporary, and continued dehumanization of Black bodies, supported by intentional and critical choices in our practice and beyond, will result in affording Black youth a positive concept of self and racial identity, as well as safety as they grow and take space in the world.

*The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

References

Adjei, P. B. (2018). The embodiment of blackness in a visceral anti-black ableism context. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 21(3), 275–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248821

Ahlberg, B. M., & Bradby, H. (2022). Ethnic, racial and regional inequalities in access to COVID-19 vaccine, testing and hospitalization: Implications for eradication of the pandemic. *Frontiers in Sociology, 7*, Article 809090. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.809090

Alexander, E. (1994). "Can you be Black and look at this?": Reading the Rodney King video(s). *Public Culture, 7*(1), 77–94. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7-1-77

Alexander, J. C. (2004). Toward a theory of cultural trauma. In J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, & P. Sztompka (Eds.), *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (pp. 1–30). University of California Press.

Austin, D. (2020, June 14). *George Floyd's death has to be a tipping point - White people like me must fight racism*. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/george-floyd-s-death-has-be-tipping-point-white-people-ncna1229181

Beason, T. (2020, June 28). *'Something is not right:' George Floyd protests push white Americans to think about their privilege.* Los Angeles Times. https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-06-28/white-voters-racism-reckoning-george-floyd-killing

Bernard, D. L., Calhoun, C. D., Banks, D. E., Halliday, C. A., Hughes-Halbert, C., & Danielson, C. K. (2021). Making the "C-ACE" for a culturally-informed Adverse Childhood Experiences framework to understand the pervasive mental health impact of racism on Black youth. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma,* 14(2), 233-247. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-020-00319-9

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence.* Verso Books.

Butler, J. (2016). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso Books.

Clarke, J., Hasford, J., Gudge, L., & Mills-Minster, S. (2018). Imagining a community-led, multi-service delivery model for Ontario child welfare: A framework for collaboration among African Canadian community partners. *Journal of Law and Social Policy,* 28, 42–66. https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/jlsp/vol28/iss2/3

Comas-Díaz, L., Hall, G. N., & Neville, H. A. (2019). Racial trauma: Theory, research, and healing: Introduction to the special issue. *American Psychologist, 74*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000442

Deslatte, M. (2020, April 7). *Louisiana data: Virus hits blacks, people with hypertension*. AP News. https://apnews.com/general-news-cde897293f88f788d3f3bfdb3d46c466

Eichstaedt, J. C., Sherman, G. T., Giorgi, S., Roberts, S. O., Reynolds, M. E., Ungar, L. H., & Guntuku, S. C. (2021). The emotional and mental health impact of the murder of George Floyd on the US population. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 118*(39), Article e2109139118. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2109139118

Essed, P. (1990). *Everyday racism: Reports from women of two cultures*. Hunter House.

Evans-Winters, V. (2019). *Black feminism in qualitative inquiry: A mosaic for writing our daughter's body.* Routledge

Gaydos, R. (2020, June 2). *Mavericks owner Mark Cuban has message for 'white people' in wake of George Floyd's death.* Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/sports/mavericks-mark-cuban-message-white-people-george-floyd-death

Gaynor, T. S., & Wilson, M. E. (2020). Social vulnerability and equity: The disproportionate impact of COVID-19. *Public Administration Review, 80*(5), 832–838. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13264

Griffin, J. H. (1961). *Black like me*. Wings Press

Gupta, S., & Aitken, N. (2022). COVID-19 mortality among racialized populations in Canada and its association with income. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2022001/article/00010-eng.htm

Halsell, G. (1969). *Soul sister*. World Publishing Company.

Haynes, C., Castillo-Montoya, M., Hailu, M., & Stewart, S. (2019). Black Deprivation, Black Resistance, and Black Liberation: The influence of #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) on higher education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 32*(9), 1067–1071. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1645911

Helper, G. A. S., & Joubert, E. (2021). Activism in the boonies for black lives and educational change: A critical conversation with youth rural activist Gem Amber Sun Helper. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 37*(7), 34–37. https://doi.org/10.26209/jrre3707-05

hooks, b. (1996). *Killing race: Ending racism.* Holt Paperbacks.

Kumsa, M. K., Mfoafo-M'Carthy, M., Oba, F., & Gaasim, S. (2014). The contours of anti-black racism: Engaging anti-oppression from embodied

spaces. *Journal of Critical Anti-Oppressive Social Inquiry, 1*(1).

Lee, C. A. (2020). *The necropolitics of COVID-19*. Africa is a Country. https://africasacountry.com/2020/04/the-necropolitics-of-covid-19

Marable, M. (1983). *How capitalism underdeveloped black America: Problems in race, political economy, and society*. Allyn & Bacon.

Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics (L. Meintjes, Trans.). *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40.

Metzger, I. W., Anderson, R. E., Are, F., & Ritchwood, T. (2021). Healing interpersonal and racial trauma: Integrating racial socialization into trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy for African American youth. *Child Maltreatment, 26*(1), 17–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559520921457

Moran, C. & Gatwiri, K. (2022). #BlackLivesMatter: Exploring the digital practises of African Australian youth on social media. *Media, Culture & Society, 44*(7), 1330–1353. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221089246

Mullings, D. V., Morgan, A. & Quelleng, H. K. (2016). Canada and the great white north where anti-Black racism thrives: Kicking down the doors and exposing the realities. *Phylon, 53*(1), 20-41.

Nissim, R. (2014). *Building resilience in the face of racism: Options for anti-racism strategies*. Sydney Social Justice Network. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/30673444.pdf

Onwuachi-Willig, A. (2021). The trauma of awakening to racism: Did the tragic killing of George Floyd result in cultural trauma for whites? *Houston Law Review, 58*, 817–846.

Osman, S., Aiello, O., Brouillette, K., Taylor, M., McKenzie, K., Renzaho, A. M. N., Henderson, J., Hamilton, H., & Salami, B. (2024). "Dual pandemics": Intersecting influences of anti-Black racism in the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Black youth. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/08445621241253116

Picheta, R. (2020, May 7). *Black people in the UK four times more likely to die from Covid-19 than white people, new data shows*. CNN News. https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/07/uk/uk-coronavirus-ethnicity-deaths-ons-scli-gbr-intl/index.html

Pieterse, A. L. (2018). Attending to racial trauma in clinical supervision: Enhancing client and supervisee outcomes*. The Clinical Supervisor, 37*(1), 204–220. https://doi.org/10.1080/07325223.2018.1443304

Pieterse, A. L., Carter, R. T., Evans, S. A., & Walter, R. A. (2010). An exploratory examination of the associations among racial and ethnic discrimination, racial climate, and trauma-related symptoms in a college student population. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 57*(3), 255–263. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020040

Plater, R. (2020, April 14). *Why the African American community is being hit hard by COVID-19.* Health News. https://www.healthline.com/health-news/covid-19-affecting-people-of-color

Reyes, C., Husain, N., Gutowski, C., St Clair, S., & G., P. (2020, April 7). *Chicago's coronavirus disparity: Black Chicagoans are dying at nearly six times the rate of white residents, data show*. Chicago Tribune. https://www.chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-coronavirus-chicago-coronavirus-deaths-demographics-lightfoot-20200406-77nlylhiavgjzb2wa4ckivh7mu-story.html

Sandset, T. (2021). The necropolitics of COVID-19: Race, class and slow death in an ongoing pandemic. *Global Public Health, 16*(8–9), 1411–1423. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.1906927

Sellers, R. M., & Shelton, J. N., & Diener, J. (2003). The role of racial identity in perceived racial bias. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*(5), 1079–1092. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.5.1079

Sellers, R. M., Smith, M. A., Shelton, J. N., Rowley, S. A. J., & Chavous, T. M. (1998). Multidimensional model of racial identity: A reconceptualization of African American racial identity. Personality and *Social Psychology Review, 2*(1), 18–39. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0201_2

The World Bank. (2021). '*Absolutely unacceptable' COVID-19 vaccination rates in developing countries | The development podcast [Podcast episode].* https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/podcast/2021/07/30/-absolutely-unacceptable-vaccination-rates-in-developing-countries-the-development-podcast

Wierson, A. (2020, June 19). *White dad with Black kids: George Floyd was my wake-up call.* CNN News. https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/19/opinions/white-dad-black-kids-george-floyd-wake-up-call-wierson/index.html

Yancy, C. W. (2020). COVID-19 and African Americans. *JAMA, 323*(19), 1891–1892. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.6548

INYI Journal

Editor-in-Chief: Nazilla Khanlou
Managing Editor: Luz Maria Vazquez
Assistant Editor: Attia Khan
York University, 4700 Keele Street
Toronto, ON, Canada, M3J 1P3
Website: https://inyi.journals.yorku.ca/
Email: inyi.journal@gmail.com
Follow us at X-Twitter: https://x.com/YorkUOWHC
ISSN 1929-8471