Whiteness and Privilege:

Lifting the Veil on Systemic Racism

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Executive Summary

Racial injustice and anti-Blackness in the United States have risen to staggering heights with a surge of civil unrest (Carmen et al., 2020; Ziarek, 2020). Black Americans from all socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels, and vocations are suffocating from the proverbial "knee on their neck." Festering concern dominated news and social media after the highly publicized murders of Ahmaud Arbery on February 23, 2020 and Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020. Americans were frustrated following the 911 call made on the morning of May 25, 2020, by a White woman in Central Park. This woman used her Whiteness as a weapon to demonize a Black male birdwatcher after he asked her to leash her dog based on park regulations.

On the evening of May 25, 2020, it was the words, "Mama, I can't breathe," repeated over and over by George Floyd, moments before his death that would capture the attention of the entire nation. When the Floyd murder was streamed online, the veil on systemic racism was lifted and witnessed by millions of viewers in the United States as well as those around the world. This was an arrest with an outcome turned fatal over an alleged counterfeit twenty-dollar bill.

Prior to the death of George Floyd, the United States was grappling with dueling pandemics. The first was the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which forced nationwide shutdowns beginning on March 13, 2020. By March 16, 2020, governors of multiple states issued stay-at-home orders for their residents. The second pandemic was the economic chaos caused by the slowdown of commerce and enterprise due to COVID-19 (Scavette, 2020, p. 3). The economic recession reinforced what has been described by Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2006) as a "racialized social system" (p. 469). Food insecurity along with disparities related to racial health and mortality characterize the oppressive social systems experienced by underserved and underrepresented communities across the nation. The spiraling effect of COVID-19 and the resulting economic recession exposed the "400-year-old pandemic of foundational racism" that has devalued Black lives since the start of American chattel slavery (Ziarek, 2020, p. 2).

The more than 15 million protestors who gathered in support of racial, gender, political, economic, or social justice have been documented as the largest protest in the United States history (Buchanan et al., 2020; McLaughlin, 2020; Ziarek, 2020). Whiteness and privilege have worked in tandem to oppress, suppress, and withhold freedoms that benefit some to the detriment of others. Systemic racism is not a them or we problem; it is a White problem. Dismantling racism and antiquated systems of oppression calls for White Americans to recognize, verbalize, and disavow racism. It also requires that they recognize their privilege and use it to empower the oppressed.
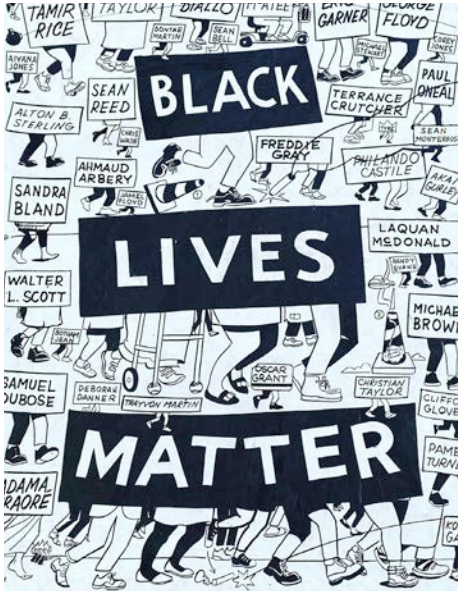
INTRODUCTION

A modern-day civil war against Black and Brown populations, immigrants, and other minoritized communities has threatened democracy in the United States. The cumulative effects of police brutality, racial disharmony, healthcare inequality, and economic disparities highlight the racial injustices, systemic racism, and lived experiences of minoritized populations within American society. Specifically, the repeat of 1991, when Rodney King was beaten by police officers and captured on video created scrutiny, anger, and distrust from Black communities. The 2020 deaths of hundreds of unarmed Black men, women, youth, and children mirrored the same patterns of the murders of Abner Louima in 1997, Rekia Boyd in 2012, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, and Michael Brown in 2014, Sandra Bland and Freddie Gray in 2015, Terence Crutcher in 2016, and Atatiana Jefferson in 2019. In 2020, police brutality experienced by Black communities was an instant replay from 2014 and 1991 with protests in Ferguson, Missouri and Los Angeles, California, respectively (Gately & Stolberg, 2015; Thorsen & Giegerich, 2014).

BACKGROUND

According to Yancy (2016), Whiteness is oppressive and serves as the culprit of exclusion, derailment, segregation, policing, and brutality toward Black Americans. Using this underlying premise of Whiteness in a recent opinion essay, I sought to disrupt the dominant narrative in three ways. First, the essay articulated frustration by Black communities who were expected to explain racism to a group of people who by default benefit from privilege. Second, readers were asked to self-study and not appease their White guilt by imposing conversations about race and racism on their Black friend, coworker, neighbor, acquaintance, or a stranger. Third, the article offered recommendations on how to relinquish inherited privilege, become an ally, work towards racial equity, and dismantle systemic racism.

The overall response from readers ranged from appreciation for setting the record straight to offering sympathy, extending pleasantries, and accumulating social media *shares* and *likes*. One reader's response revealed reticence by some people to align Whiteness with White supremacy and racism. The vulnerability of another reader reinforced my decision to curate a candid conversation. By writing the opinion essay, I sought to highlight the importance of Black and White Americans coming together to converse and confront social issues within our society. Candid conversation on the historical ramifications of slavery, race, and culture in the context of repeated murders of unarmed Black and Brown bodies by police was a primary step to a racial reckoning.

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Over the next three weeks, I developed the theme, "Racism, Whiteness, and Privilege," marketed two panel events as honest conversations and chose participants to serve as guest panelists. The events included two panel discussions featuring eight panelists over a two-day period. The two-day discussion drew a national audience. The three primary goals for the panel series involved: (1) having a candid conversation about race and racism; (2) unpacking privilege, its meaning, and how it is experienced through the lens of White Liberals and White Conservatives; and (3) providing strategies, practical advice, and resources for moving through the spectrum of ally to accomplice.

Throughout the duration of the panels, the eight panelists—Ashley Bennett, Michon Benson, Candace Brawner, Michael Elchoness, Brandon Mack, Melanye Price, Joey Ratcliff, and Aswad Walker—shared stories reflective of their positionality, worldviews, beliefs, and experiences. The panelists' professions and expertise varied. They were professors, scholars, and lecturers; K-12 and higher education administrators; community organizers and activists; private sector bankers, community volunteers, and ministers. Some of the panelists espoused their political and religious affiliations as either Conservative, Liberal, Republican, Democrat, Jewish, or Christian.

Research Approach

The panel discussions were video recorded via Zoom and sent to a third-party company to complete the process of transcription. I performed a qualitative content and thematic analyses (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Contextual analysis of notes taken from the transcripts provided me with categories (explicit), major themes (implicit), subthemes, and descriptive meanings for emphasis on salient points made by the panelists. Categorical themes for the panel discussions included: the history of law and order, 21st century law and order, Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 and racial injustice, White privilege, performative allyship, social institutions' role and response (e.g., K-12 and higher education), central agents of systemic racism, and the continuum from racist to anti-racist.

As a primer to the discussions, I posed questions to the panelists under the heading of White privilege and Whiteness. These included:

What does [White] privilege look like for you?

What can White folks do to aid in the elimination of systemic racism?

How can the educational system aid in the elimination of racism?

What would you say to individuals who use the weaponry of Whiteness?

What does it mean to be non-racist versus anti-racist?

Where do we go from here?

What advice would you share with those seeking to be allies?

In recounting the footage of George Floyd's death, panelists were asked to:

• think about their characterization of systemic racism based upon the treatment of Black and Brown people;

• reflect on the treatment of Black and Brown people by police officers and their ability to de-escalate situations;

• discuss conversations in their communities and households; and

• consider the term anti-racist in the context of "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter" versus "Black Lives Matter."
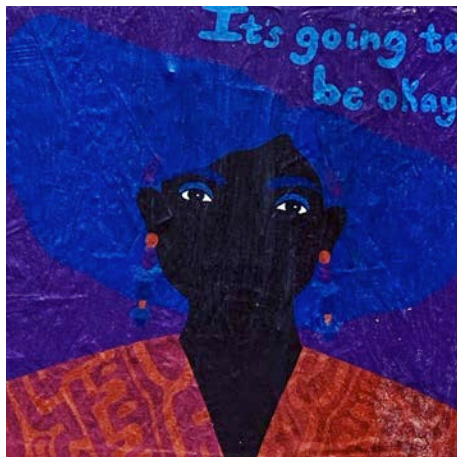
Dating back to the 17th century in Virginia, corporal punishment has always been harsher for [African] Blacks than [European] Whites (Browne-Marshall, 2013).

LAW AND ORDER'S COMPLICATED RACIAL HISTORY

Dating back to the 17th century in Virginia, corporal punishment has always been harsher for [African] Blacks than [European] Whites (Browne-Marshall, 2013). Two documented examples of harsher punishment of Black men happened on July 9, 1640, and on July 18, 1640. The first example involves three servants employed by Hugh Gwyn who escaped. The escapees were a Black man by the name of John Punch, a Scotsman named James Gregory, and a Dutchman only known as Victor (Browne-Marshall, 2013; Jordan, 1962; McLaughlin, 2019). All three men were captured. As punishment, James Gregory and Victor were whipped 30 times and received one additional year on their servitude contract with their master and three more years of servitude to the colony (Jordan, 1962; McLaughlin, 2019). John Punch received 30 lashes and was sentenced to serve his master "for the time of his natural life here or elsewhere" (Browne-Marshall, 2013; Jordan, 1962, p. 23; McLaughlin, 2019). On July 9, 1640, the life sentence of John Punch by the General Court would mark the beginning of a historic criminal judicial decision (McLaughlin, 2013).

A second example, also from 1640, was the case of six indentured servants—Europeans (Andrew Noxe, Richard Hill, Richard Cookeson, John Williams, Christopher Miller, and Peter Wilcocke) and one enslaved Black man (Emanuel). They attempted to escape a plantation (Jordan, 1962; McLaughlin, 2019. After appearing in General Court, as punishment, the man, who was already in "service for life," which is the distinct characteristic of enslavement, received 30 lashes (Browne-Marshall, 2013; Jordan, 1962, p. 19; McLaughlin, 2019). Five of the six European men received no lashes but as punishment, they received two extra years of indentured servitude with Captain Pierce, a merchant and plantation owner (Browne-Marshall, 2013; McLaughlin, 2019).

Policing, as an institution of law and order, has a complicated racial history in the United States (Durr, 2015; Drakulich et al., 2019, 2020). In the North and South, policing was "both informal and communal" (Potter, 2013, p. 1). In the North, cities such as Boston in 1636, New York in 1658, and Philadelphia in 1700, solicited volunteers who were referred to as Night Watchmen or Night Riders (Browne-Marshall, 2013; Castle, 2020; Potter, 2013). In the South, policing was entrenched in slavery with the first formal slave patrol traced back to 1704 in the Carolinas (Bass, 2001; Bell, Ogilvie, & Lynch, 2000; Cooper, 2015; Ritchie & Mogul, 2008; Reichel, 1992; Russell, 2000). In 1794, the South employed a system of salaried overseers whose sole job was "racial surveillance" "limited to the plantation" (Castle, 2020, p. 5; Platt, 1982). Southern slave patrollers or bounty hunters had unlimited territorial authority to track, catch, and return runaway enslaved Black people to plantation owners (Browne-Marshall, 2013; Potter, 2013).

By 1837, the Charleston Police Department employed 100 slave patrollers. The duties of slave patrollers involved checking documents to regulate the movement of enslaved and free Blacks, enforcing slave codes, guarding against revolts, and catching runaways (Durr, 2015). After the abolishment of slavery, racially-biased state-sanctioned laws referred to as "Black Codes" allowed for longer sentences with "hard labor for such minor infractions as vagrancy and loitering" (Browne-Marshall, 2013, p. 105; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2010; Hartfield et al., 2018; McCoy, 2020).

DISPARATE SYSTEMS OF MODERN MASS INCARCERATION

Mass incarceration is an $80-billion-per-year business with 6.6 million people under some form of correctional control beyond jail and prison (Alexander, 2020b; Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018 as cited by Sakala et al., 2018; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020; Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). The United States has the world's highest prison population rate accounting for "5% of the world's population but 25% of its prisoners" (Alexander, 2020b; American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2020; Johnson, 2019, p. 316; Sakala et al., 2018). Out of the 6.6 million, 2.3 million offenders are incarcerated (Alexander, 2020b; Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018; Sakala et al., 2018). According to Western (2006), 1 in 4 Black men will be incarcerated during their lifetime. Since the enactment of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, hundreds of thousands of Black Americans have lost their freedom (Forman, 2012). Upon conviction and release from the criminal justice system, ex-offenders are stigmatized as second-class citizens (Alexander, 2020a; Forman, 2012).

Racial disparities in the criminal justice system (e.g., policing, sentencing, and prison populations) are prevalent when comparing how Black and White convicted offenders are penalized (Kovera, 2019; Starr & Rehavi, 2014). Out of the 2.3 million individuals incarcerated in the 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails, and other facilities such as military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in United States territories, 40% are Black (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). As shown in Table 1, state and federal data over a 10-year period between 2007 and 2017 indicate Black people have a higher rate of incarceration at 33% (or 475,900) in 2017 than other racial and ethnic groups. The 2.3 million convicted offenders represent a 700% increase since 1970, an increase that has surpassed the population growth and crime rates (ACLU, 2020).

According to Alexander (2020a), author of the *New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration*, in 1972, the number of convicted offenders was less than 350,000. Forman (2012) "reported street crime quadrupled in the twelve years from 1959 to 1971," while "homicide rates doubled between 1963 and 1974, and robbery rates tripled" during that same time period (p. 114; Garland, 2001, 2004). Today, Black men comprise 6% of the United States population and represent 35% to 40% of the prison population (Bronson & Carson, 2019; Sawyer & Starr, 2020; Starr & Rehavi, 2014; Carson & Sabol, 2012). In comparison to White men, Black men are 6 times more likely to go to prison or jail (Carson & Anderson, 2016); while Black women are 2 times more likely to receive jail or prison time than White women (ACLU, 2020; Bronson & Carson, 2019). "Prosecutorial discretion" that results in "mandatory minimum, truth in sentencing, three-strikes," as well as "changes in sentencing law" account for 50% of the "[B]lack-[W]hite sentence disparity" (Johnson, 2019, p. 314; Starr & Rehavi, 2014, p. 1343).

TABLE 1

Ten-Year Comparison Data of Inmates in Federal and State Prisons by Race and Ethnicity, 2007-2017

YEAR	TOTAL	FEDERAL	STATE	WHITE	BLACK	LATINX
2007	1,532,851	179,204	1,353,647	499,800	592,900	330,400
2008	1,547,742	182,333	1,365,409	499,900	592,800	329,800
2009	1,553,574	187,886	1,365,688	490,000	584,800	341,200
2010	1,552,669	190,641	1,362,028	484,400	572,000	345,800
2011	1,538,847	197,050	1,341,797	474,300	557,100	347,800
2012	1,512,430	196,574	1,315,856	466,600	537,800	340,300
2013	1,520,403	195,098	1,325,305	463,900	529,900	341,200
2014	1,507,781	191,374	1,316,407	461,500	518,700	338,900
2015	1,476,847	178,688	1,298,159	450,200	499,400	333,200
2016	1,459,948	171,482	1,288,466	440,200	487,300	339,600
2017	1,439,808	166,203	1,273,605	436,500	475,900	336,500

Note. Data taken from the United States Department of Justice compiled by Bronson and Carson (2019).
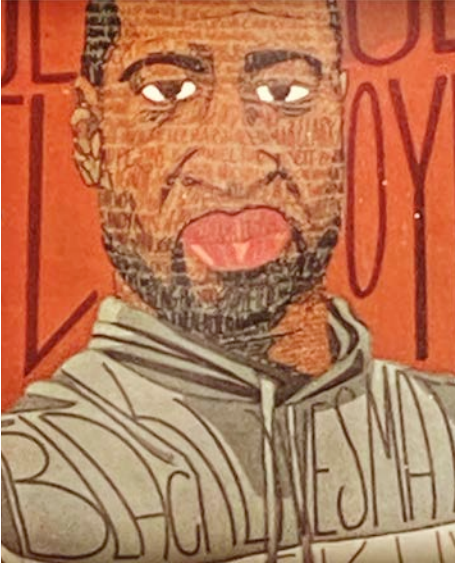
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LAW AND ORDER

In the 19th century, police officers emerged in response to "disorder" (Potter, 2013, p. 3). In the 21st century, police forces have been tasked with "enforcing both racist and anti-racist laws" (Drakulich et al., 2019, p. 6). Policing was designed as "institutional social control," which socially, politically, and economically benefits White Americans (Durr, 2015, p. 1; Feagin, 2014). Panelist Bennett purported police officers contribute to "countless deaths in the Black community." Panelist Price added, "police statistics reveal police officers are overwhelmingly in contact with Black and Brown bodies."

Black men and women are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than White men and women (Edwards et al., 2019). "Regardless of whether or not Black and Brown men get arrested," Price further stated, "if you are stopping people and not arresting them, then you are just harassing them." For Bennett, harassment is personal because history has shown that a presumed threat of Black men can lead to police brutality and the loss of life as a result of shooter bias. "I have a 15-month-old son. I also am wife to a large Black man, who may appear to be menacing to someone who maligns him. This can be frustrating for those of us who live this reality daily."

BLACK LIVES MATTER

Panelist Mack, who is 1 of 3 organizers for the Black Lives Matter Houston chapter (#BLMHou), provided the genesis of the movement. After the murder of an unarmed Black high school student, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012, his murderer was acquitted in 2013 (Garza, 2016; Richardson, 2019). Upon reading the news of the acquittal, Alicia Garza penned and posted a Love Letter to Black Folks on Facebook. The love letter read: "We don't deserve to be killed with impunity. We need to love ourselves and fight for a world where Black lives matter. Black people, I love you. I love us. We matter. Our lives matter." Garza's friend, Patrisse Cullors, tweeted the love letter to Twitter with the signature hashtags, #BlackLivesMatter and #BLM. Twitter erupted with a record 5,106 social media impressions (e.g., *likes, retweets, and shares*) (Howard, 2016; Jennings, 2020; Nummi et al., 2019). As told by Mack, the love letter symbolized "a rallying cry from the most marginalized groups" who were murdered and beaten by police officers.

A year later in August 2014, the wrongful death of Michael Brown, followed by Eric Garner, 12-year-old Tamir Rice, and Ezell Ford prompted more hashtags, which increased the number of social media impressions to 58,747 in 2014 (Howard, 2016; Jennings, 2020). By 2016, social media impressions reached 11.8 million (Jennings, 2020). The #BlackLivesMatter and #BlackTransLivesMatter hashtags served to memorialize the lives of unarmed Black men, women, teens, children, cisgender, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LBGTQIA) communities. On May 27, 2020, Tony McDade, an unarmed transgender man, was murdered by police in a case of mistaken identity. In a 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey Report of nearly 28,800 respondents, 58% of respondents reported mistreatment, harassment, and misgendering by police while in custody (Eckhouse & Saxen, 2017; James, et al., 2016).

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Mack added, BLM founders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi were sending a message that in the United States "fundamentally, Black lives do matter, but they have not always mattered in this country." With increased momentum in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom in 2013, Black Lives Matter as a global network, used the #BlackLivesMatter and #BLM hashtags to garner international attention. BLM is not a moment. Instead, BLM is a movement—an intersectional, intergenerational movement—and an "ideological and political intervention" (Garza, 2014, p. 1). BLM is a "decentralized network, enhanced by social media, with no formal hierarchy, elected leaders or prescribed structure" (Howard, 2016; p. 101). Mack emphasized that two out of the three founders identify as members of the LGBTQIA community. BLM organizers planned non-violent demonstrations and strategically convened at political events (Lowery, 2016).

As the BLM movement gained popularity, its mission expanded with millennials who represent not only Black, but other racialized groups, as well as White allies. As a global movement, BLM's mission is to eradicate White supremacy and encourage local power to address and intervene in the violence inflicted on Black communities by the state, police, and vigilantes. A question that concerns the public is: What exactly is BLM? Mack provided this response, "In terms of what Black Lives Matter is, it is a simple, declarative statement" that "Black lives matter. Period. There should be no, but. There should be no anything else after that. It is purely, Black Lives Matter, first and foremost."

Next, Mack confirmed that BLM "is a movement in which we [the founders, organizers, and volunteers] are declaring that we need to move this country to a place where Black lives matter." Additionally, BLM advocates to influence and shape policies, systems, and institutions to understand that all Black lives have to matter. Lastly, Mack stated BLM "functions as an organization. There is a central organizational structure. Every single city, for the most part can have a Black Lives Matter chapter." Each chapter has "one leader or spokesperson" and a "collective of loosely affiliated activists and protesters" that work towards a unified set of goals (Drakulich et al., 2019, p. 4).

BLACK LIVES MATTER COUNTER-FRAMING

As a contemporary social movement, BLM is sometimes mislabeled specifically by older, Republican, Conservative, White men as a deviant, disorderly, unlawful, violent movement (Campbell 2015; Diamond, 2016; Updegrove et al., 2018, 2020). BLM demonstrators do not acquiescence to racial terror and intimidation (Hooker, 2016). Throughout history, and today, protests displaying a modus operandi of "Black defiance" "increase the possibility that police officers will use lethal violence against public expressions of legitimate political grievances" on demonstrators (Castle, 2020, p. 15; Hooker, 2016, p. 461). This mindset has remnants of colonialism when the movement of enslaved Black people was under constant surveillance because not only did the Europeans fear escape, they, also, feared "uprisings and planned retaliation" (Browne-Marshall, 2013, p. 101). Modern-day civil rights protestors are vilified because by "advocating for racial equality," BLM is perceived as a "direct threat to status quo race relations" and there exists fears of uprising and retaliation (Browne-Marshall, 2013; Drakulich et al., 2019, p. 5).

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>
> —**Ashley Bennett,** PANELIST

Political baiting has a history of pitting groups against each other. Pro-segregationist politicians in the 1960s manufactured the narrative that protests for civil rights were unlawful and criminal (Alexander, 2020a). Opponents of Black Lives Matter counter-respond with All Lives Matter to ignore racial injustice and express Blue Lives Matter as a display of solidarity with police (Bacon, 2016; Carey & McAllister, 2014; Markon et al., 2016). Panelist Brawner, who self-identifies as a White, Republican, and wife of a police officer, agreed, "There is a structure out there that engineers the Blue Lives Matter counter-response." The framing of Blue Lives Matter as the immediate counter-framing to BLM incites counterproductive empathy to promote one group as being superior above the other (Drakulich et al., 2019).

All Lives Matter attempts to reframe the narrative of unlawful murders of unarmed Black men and women and the difference in treatment between Black and White perceived offenders in police custody (Drakulich et al., 2019). The All Lives Matter counter-response to BLM misconstrues the rhetoric to mean that only Black lives matter. Panelists Bennett, Brawner, and Walker view the All Lives Matter response as a tactical deflection. Walker believes that what "they [White people] are conveying is that": "Black lives do not matter to them, and they want to be excused for their racist ideas, thoughts, and behaviors. Because one second they will say, "All Lives Matter," but on the other hand, they are not standing up against the murder of Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Rekia Boyd, Sandra Bland, John Crawford, III, Terence Crutcher, Aiyana Jones, and Ahmaud Aubrey."

Another example Walker provided was Philando Castile, a licensed gun owner, who was pulled over by police for a traffic offense. Walker explained:

> Castile did what the law required that he do, and let the officer know, "I'm a licensed gun carrier. I have a gun in the vehicle." Within 40 seconds, he was dead. Within 40 seconds, he was shot dead. And you did not hear one person from the [National Rifle Association] NRA stand up for his rights as a gun owner. Because I am sure folk in the NRA, say all lives matter, but for Philando Castile, his life [didn't] matter to them.

Panelist Bennett added, "I should not have to explain why my life matters, why my children's lives matter. If I say the phrase, Black Lives Matter and your response is anything other than, "Absolutely!" Then, I'm good on you."

POLICE REFORM AND DEFUND POLICE EXPLAINED

At the local levels, lead organizers and activists of BLM city chapters advocate for police reform. Behind education, police funding is the second largest category of local government spending. Police funding comprises one-third of the budgets for cities and counties (Ray, 2020a). A primary goal of police reform is eliminating racially biased and excessive policing of Black bodies. Blakenship et al. (2018) refers to this as "hyperpolicing" (p. 3). Panelist Price stated, "If one examines and compares statistics of the general populous in White neighborhoods, and then examines Black people in those neighborhoods, it is still Black people in those neighborhoods being stopped." In 2006, 43% of the Black population expressed concern that they were victims of the driving while Black phenomena in comparison to 26% Latinx and 3% White populations (Weitzer & Brunson, 2015). In 2019, Black adults perceived themselves as 44% more likely to have negative encounters with police as compared to 9% of White adults (Desilver et al., 2020).

Price further added, "It is not like if you go to a White neighborhood, all the crime automatically becomes White. It is whatever space a Black body finds itself." Considering a person as property dates back to 1705, when the enslaved African was reduced to property according to Colonial statute (McLaughlin, 2019). Thus, Blacks inhabiting a particular space "risks devaluing that space or neighborhood," Mack added.

Further dialogue around this topic included a summary with examples that aptly described BLM chapters' national directives on "hypersurveillance" and "hyperpolicing" in Black and Brown communities (Blakenship et al., 2018, p. 4). Mack gave insight into what the Defund the Police movement is by addressing the following:

> What the Defund the Police movement relates to is that a lot of money is spent. If you look at city budgets, if you look at the United States' overall budget as a country, a lot of federal and state money is towards police, military, and all those different types of agencies. When those agencies receive all that funding, they are using it to put more cops on the street. They are using it more towards weapons, tactics, and things of that nature.

Responding to the increase in mass incarceration from the 1970s, in the early 2000s, "justice reinvestment" was recommended as a way to intercept the prison pipeline with offenders and redirect funding resources in communities that build capacity to manage offenders locally (Sabol & Baumann, 2020). Criminal justice reformists and activists have proposed that policymakers and elected officials move toward a community-driven, public-safety investment model to address the systemic issues identified by Sakala et al. (2018) as:

- building and reinforcing community relationships,
- increasing employment, education, and economic opportunity,
- increasing access to healing and trauma recovery supports,
- fostering participatory policymaking and political mobilization,
- seeking racial justice and helping repair past harms,
- improving public health and community well-being,
- supporting safe and stable housing,
- reducing exposure to the criminal justice system and its [intended] consequences, and
- strengthening community infrastructure (p. 3).

In 2018, a study by the Urban Institute elevated the debate on police reform (Sakala et al., 2018), which in 2020, morphed into a Defund the Police campaign. During the political cycle and 2020 presidential campaign, some argued over semantics of the language *defund* versus *reform*. Criminal justice reformists and activists in support of the Defund the Campaign aim to accomplish three objectives: (1) "harness savings from reform and channel them to community initiatives," (2) "generate new sources of funding for community initiatives," and (3) "shift funding away from traditional law enforcement and correctional entities toward alternative community priorities" (Sakala et al., 2018, p. 5). Discourse involving policymakers, BLM activists, and police have focused primarily on the third objective representing the invest-divest model (Sakala et al., 2018). In his comments, Panelist Mack clarified, "When we [BLM] call for defunding the police, we are saying we need to allocate those funds that are going towards police to other areas that could really solve the problems that you are expecting police to deal with."

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> **—Brandon Mack,** PANELIST

MANIFESTATION OF WHITE PRIVILEGE IN ACTIVISM

Some White Americans offer work ethic and meritocracy as justifications for their survival and ability to thrive. For Panelist Elchoness, who self-identifies as a White, Jewish, Liberal, privilege is not just about work ethic. Instead, Elchoness recognizes his unearned advantage over disadvantages that racially minoritized individuals have and uses that privilege to support and call out racism on behalf of marginalized persons. The rationalization of privilege can sometimes serve as a form of racial color-blindness or oppression blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Ferber, 2014). For Panelist Walker, White privilege is "having the ability to care about police violence, or not." Walker goes on to provide further explanation on his idea of privilege:

> White privilege is being cool [sic] with unlawful, undemocratic, voter suppression. Yet calling Black people, who are fighting for the right to vote, un-American. White privilege is being able to celebrate and consume Black culture, while rejecting Black people. White privilege is shopping in a grocery store, traveling down aisle K, hearing over the intercom, "code black on aisle K," and never even considering that YOU might be code black on aisle K. White privilege is listening to the news and never having to go into Black mode.

For Panelist Mack, White privilege manifests itself in activism among different groups. For certain protestors, their acts of rebellion were met with respectful interaction with police officers. "We all know that we have a First Amendment right to protest. But yet, I see the way protests were done by Black Lives Matter and other movements, where it is centering Black people, the response is not the same." For example, Mack recalled:

> When COVID-19 was first happening, and we were seeing these protests primarily by White individuals, who would go to the state houses and talk about how they wanted their haircuts, they wanted to go to the beauty salons, they would get up in police faces, yelling and cursing, doing all sorts of things, not a gun was pulled, not a riot gear was worn, they were allowed to do that. I have seen it directly in every single action that I have done as an organizer and activist of Black Lives Matter Houston, where we go, and we just organize. Centering Black lives, centering what has been going on with us, and immediately, we are met with riot gear, immediately, talked negatively at, and immediately perceived as being dangerous. That is White privilege.

On January 6, 2021, on live television, the world witnessed insurrectionists overtake the United States Capitol. There were no helicopters, riot gear, dogs, or use of excessive force. Whiteness as property, Whiteness as ignorance, Whiteness as colorblindness, Whiteness as racial comfort, and Whiteness as social dominance were on display without repercussion (Cabrera et al., 2017). Panelist Mack states, "If you are White and protest, you automatically get perceived as being positive, good, boys will be boys. All those old adages give grace and space to you, for doing bad behavior." Conversely, Mack added:

> I am met with a gun. I am met with a nightstick or riot gear. All for doing the exact same thing. [Black activists] automatically get criminalized and dehumanized, but yet, White individuals don't have to even deal or think about that," which is an example of White privilege. When in reality, what all any of the activists are all doing is asserting their right.

ALLYSHIP

For those individuals who witness the disparate treatment of protestor groups and causes, there is an opportunity to show support as an ally. Within this context of allyship, the term, ally, is "not an identity, but instead an ongoing lifelong process that involves learning and unlearning oppression" (Clark, 2019, p. 7). Panelist Ratcliff stated, "Allyship has the added layer of using White privilege to benefit those groups that Whiteness and White supremacy oppresses." Panelist Benson provided this interpretation of effective allyship. She appreciates those White allies who "are brave enough to begin to examine and reflect on the various ways in which their bodies successfully negotiate this society."

When Panelist Walker thinks about allyship, he gets "extremely excited and welcomes their support in being present, verbally supportive through funding, or just getting out the way." While allyship is a positive concept, Walker does not put his energy into worrying about White allies. Instead, his energy is getting into the work that Black people must do to confront the Black community's own issues. For Walker, there are two struggles to which Black people must contend. "One is for citizenship and securing the rights that they are supposed to have. The second struggle is for self-determination. Whether Black people get those rights or not, as a community, we are still building our own institutions, controlling our own stuff."

Panelist Bennett commended those persons who might be at the "infancy stage of social justice work." Conversely, Bennett noted that even "The most well-intentioned, White person has racism to unpack." This statement by Bennett echoed the sentiment of many scholars (Scully & Rowe, 2009; Spanierman & Smith, 2017; Sue et al., 2019, p. 129). Subtleties of racism can be seen as aversive or racial color-blindness (Dovidio, 2001; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000, 2004; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Pearson, Gaertner, & Dovidio, 2009). Other categories of racism manifest in the following ways: (a) covert bias, (b) trivializing an incident as innocuous, (c) transference of responsibility, (d) inaction out of fear of retaliation or repercussion, and (e) being unclear on how to respond or what to do (Goodman, 2011; Kawakami et al., 2009; Scully & Rowe, 2009; Shelton et al., 2006; Sue et al., 2019).

Panelist Price stated, "Action is pivotal in the success of being an ally." However, there is a caution in taking action that may be perceived as performative. Panelist Ratcliff posited, "Optics is action." He delved deeper by stating:

> You can be optic. You can be performative and poised. Your university can submit a diversity and inclusion statement on the murders and these other racial injustices that are happening. But then, if you are not holding your employees, and your staff, and your students accountable, on the other end, and if you are not having affinity spaces, and allowing people a space to talk through those things, or if you are not also having ongoing training, then you were just being optically pleasing to your base.

"Anti-racism is being active."
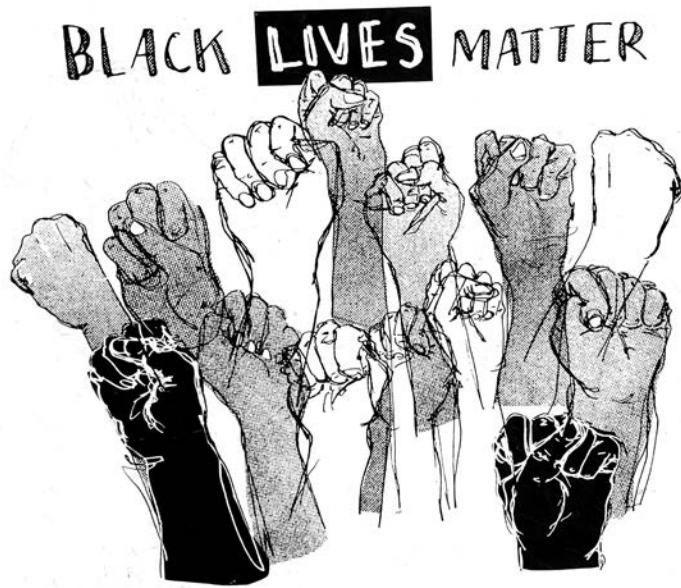
Taking a more direct tone on the role of an ally, Panelist Bennett stated the following:

If you are a White person, and whether or not you are just coming to this awakening, or you have been trying to do the work, you have got to demonstrate action. Just as Ratcliff touched on performative allyship earlier, wanting to go viral, being seen on social media, posting pictures with your little fists in the air, etc. is normal. But if you were not confronting your racist grandma, because she grew up in a different time, if you are not confronting your supervisors who are clearly maligning Black and Brown employees, if you are not confronting the school system that continues to perpetuate violence against Black and Brown students, then you, too, are racist.

Panelist Bennett further warned:

If your allyship is quiet, that is not being an ally. You are being a person on the sideline, and you are watching Black bodies drop, and you have nothing to say about it. That is racism. If you are not leveraging your privilege and tapping into spaces where you know you have influence to affect change, you, too, are racist.

Panelist Price has provided this advice:

White allies have to be willing to say, 'But I am going to remedy this.' You have to be willing to say that my child is no more special than other children. You have to be willing to believe my life is no more special than other people's lives, in that there are some basic things, that we all should be able to get. This is the hard part in moving towards being an ally.

MOVING FROM ALLY TO ACCOMPLICE

The road to becoming anti-racist is an action. Panelists Ratcliff and Benson agreed "Anti-racism is being active." For Benson, the act of anti-racism is more than "creating policies that legislate people's heart." There is also an accountability factor for those who graduate from being racist to anti-racist. As stated by Panelist Price, "Some White people believe racism can be fixed by elevating others to White standards." From their formative years, White students are taught the history that centers Whiteness as the dominant culture (deKoven, 2011).

> "
>
> "You have to be willing to believe my life is no more special than other people's lives, in that there are some basic things, that we all should be able to get."
>
> **—Melanye Price,** PANELIST

Panelist Walker urged White allies, "Do not go around apologizing for being White. You are how God made you. Be proud of that!" White allies do not walk around colorblind. In fact, "they see color, and they recognize it, and that is a good thing because that is recognizing and respecting other people's differences." In describing his own friends who are allies, Walker shared, good allies "walk it and talk it." Walker further added:

> They [White allies] preached equality and they live equality, and they challenge anyone and everyone, family members, friends who are standing in the way of that equality. They raised their children in homes that reek of equality. They go to events that promote this racial equality. They do not just talk it, they do not just read it, and they do not ignore it. But they stand firmly in acting in ways that seek to bring about this kind of equal, social reality that we say we want.

As Panelist Walker described, there are questions for those allies willing to do the work. Panelist Price asked of individuals who purport to be allies:

- What kinds of sacrifices have you had to make?
- What kinds of things have you gotten that were undeserved, that you now have to give back?

"As champions for change, racial justice, equality, and equity," Price added, "We have to be willing to talk about the ways in which White allies are willing to accept the remedies" and be willing to give up something.

As an activist and community organizer, Panelist Mack provided an opposing viewpoint on allyship by disputing the utility of the term and viewing it as problematic. When pointing out how the infestation of systemic racism has created a blind spot by the dominant culture towards marginalized groups, Mack relayed this to the unintended consequence of allyship. Mack posited:

> Allyship is one of the weak paradigms, and it is one of the paradigms that is allowing what we're seeing, to perpetuate itself. An ally is someone who can step in and out of the fight when the fight happens. They are there, but at the end, when you're having to deal with the remnants of that battle, allies can step away and just say, 'I was there for you in this fight, now that this impact did not necessarily go the way that we wanted, I am going to go over here, and stepping out.' And then, you are left with the cleanup.

Mack used the term accomplice or comrade over ally. An accomplice, Mack describes, is someone who says, "If we go to jail, we both going to jail. We both feel the same sense of loss. We both feel the same sense of win. We are both in it because we're accomplices." For "a comrade," Mack adds, it is the "same situation. We're both in it" together. One example he gave is the BLM movement having to step up and advocate for Black transgender lives, who are being murdered in great numbers. Mack further lamented:

> When it comes to the disproportionate amount of Black transgender individuals, who do not have the same employment opportunities, who do not have the same housing opportunities, we have all these other -isms. Where are they [White LGBTQIA] allies? It is easy for you to say we are an ally because you got what you wanted out the deal.

To the previous point about opting in and out, Mack added, "Now that you got what you wanted out the deal, and we still have these other -isms, that I, as a Black individual am dealing with, where are you?" Co-opting when convenient and when it suits allies' interest means stating, "Oh, I'm here as your ally, but I got what I want, so now I'm going to go over here. Good luck dealing with that. Call me when you need me." In response, Mack states: "Oh no, no. I do not need to call you. If you are an accomplice, you are still in this with me. You are going to make sure that I am okay, as well."

Recommendations

Bringing about racial solidarity and social justice is multifaceted and complex. As shared previously, race and racism have a complicated history in the United States. Emerging themes from this content analysis include: (a) the dismantling and disruption of White supremacy; (b) the decentering of Whiteness and centering Black lives, (c) a lack of a finish line, and (d) the (re)framing the Defund the Police campaign.

Dismantle and Disrupt White Supremacy

Dismantling the ideology of White supremacy, racism, and anti-Blackness requires disruption of this patriarchal construct within American society. Through the lens of Black Americans, "White Americans live a deceptive lie of White supremacy while preaching democracy but practicing oppression, especially racism" (Morris, 2020, p. 1). Panelist Price provided context for "the role disruption plays in American politics and American life." Panelist Walker further reasoned, "For every single issue the United States has had, Black Americans were willing and able to confront the issue." To confront means to disrupt. Disruption can lead to change. Recognizing privilege exists means using it as a mechanism to dismantle systems that were designed to elevate Whites while suppressing non-Whites. *Price challenges White Americans to consider what actions they will take to change behaviors and influence legislative policy to remove institutional barriers that prolong oppression.*

Decentering Whiteness and Centering Black Lives

Continuing the theme of privilege interwoven throughout the discussion, the topic of race fed into the narrative that well-intentioned White people have a fear of being labeled the "R-word" or racist. This is an example of centering Whiteness. According to Panelist Ratcliff, many White people may feel, "It is okay to talk about race as long as you do not label me a racist." Within the same context, centering Black lives is not a reflection of dismissiveness for another racial or ethnic group. Based on the historical precept of how America came to be, some individuals in society do acknowledge the diverse experiences of White Americans. Some of their ancestors may have been colonizers while others may not have been descendants of slave owners. In either scenario, no matter the socioeconomic status or pedigree, they still have White privilege.

Panelist Price noted historically, "White Americans have a limited palette for racial remedy." Well-intentioned allies who view small acts against racism as a short-term fix can do more harm than good. Once the act is complete, for some well-intentioned allies, Price stated, "moving on means returning to that White privilege and going back to the things they had before." Decentering Whiteness requires that individuals wanting to become allies exit from what Bonilla-Silva (2015) described as deep Whiteness by reconfiguring their "mental and emotional racial map" (Bonilla-Silva, 2020, p. 8). *Newfound allies must reflect on, and in many instances, be willing to diversify their White networks of friends, as well as venture outside their White neighborhoods and churches. They must ponder whether or not they will "return to their segregated lives every night"* (Bonilla-Silva, 2020, p. 8).

A Lack of a Finish Line

Through a critical Whiteness lens, the racial justice conversation includes the everlasting fight to eradicate racism. Panelist Ratcliff stated being an ally requires giving up something. "This work does not end. There is no finish line. There is not a pinnacle. There is not an apex." The act of working to be anti-racist is a lifelong commitment, meaning "there is not a finish line," Ratcliff added. "The pendulum swings," and as Price stated, involves a "growing curve" from racist to anti-racist. There is also an accountability factor for those White individuals who graduate from being racist to anti-racist. There is a belief that racism can be fixed by raising everybody up to White standards. *A perpetual deprogramming and deconstructing of the dominant narrative involves (re)training, (re)educating, and (re)learning by White allies.*

For allies, retraining is recognizing implicit biases and covert racist policies are inherent in the criminal justice system. The intentionality in bringing law and order to American society has resulted in harsher sentencing and more convictions of Black men and women in comparison to their White counterparts for the same offense. Acknowledging that oppression exists requires a moral identity, an increased privilege awareness, and an elimination of meritocratic ideology that disregards race, ethnicity, and culture. Acknowledgment of privilege by White allies is a form of reeducation on the importance of dismantling systems that they have constructed, participated in, and benefited from. There is a relearning within society of "symbolic privilege" including "being born heterosexual, able-bodied, male, cisgender, Christian, or into a financially stable family" (Alexander, 2020a; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Garrett-Walker, 2018, p. 43). If this is who you are, then as Panelist Walker suggests, "Be proud of that!" In addition to retraining, reeducating, and relearning, individuals born into symbolic privilege are encouraged to, as Panelist Benson says, "Examine and reflect on the various ways in which their bodies successfully negotiate this society."

(Re)framing the Defund the Police Campaign

Police reform tactics address redirecting or reallocating funding (Ray, 2020b). Prior to the George Floyd protests in Minneapolis, there were other instances when a defund police stance had been proposed. In addition to the fiscal request, there is an emphasis on retraining. Mack provided examples to support this demand:

Many times, police get calls for dealing with individuals who are going through a mental health episode. They are not trained to deal with mental health issues. So instead, they use their militarized methods of trying to get someone to comply, instead of trying to understand this person is going through a mental health episode. Therefore, they cannot comply with what you are asking them to do. Instead, you are pulling a gun, asking them to comply, but they are not hearing you. They are not even seeing you right now, because of what they are going through. Mack, along with other advocates, agree "shifting funding to social services" that can "go towards having more social workers, having more psychiatrists" is vital (Ray, 2020b).

As told by Ray (2020b), the reallocation of funding sources means public service officials and police officers can be better trained to "address mental health, addiction, and homelessness." Mack added, "food insecurity" is another major issue that could be addressed with those funds. Ray (2020b) advised reallocation to these issues is a "better use of taxpayer money." Overall, "all those -isms" activists and private citizens speak about, are a "part of the same systemic problems that we could be using resources towards, in order to address those central issues," Panelist Mack added.

Conclusion

In summary, the veil of systemic racism was lifted on May 25, 2020 when loss of life became imminent for George Floyd. While the United States was entrenched in protests for racial justice and police reform, on July 17, 2020, the nation mourned the loss of the Honorable John Lewis, 80. Recognized as one of the last of our civil rights icons, Representative Lewis was a member of the United States Congress. During Lewis's memorial services, his friend and fellow civil rights activist, James Lawson, 91, provided a perspective on racism that resonated with many Americans. Lawson stated, "John saw the malignancy of racism. These forces of wickedness must be resisted. Do not let any of our hearts drink these poisons." By poisons, Lawson referred to "racism, sexism, violence, and plantation capitalism." This is the "unearthing of America and privilege" to which Panelist Bennett was referring. By confronting it, as Lawson stated, we will be better able to "dismantle the wrong in our midst."

Finally, on January 20, 2021, the United States witnessed a history-making moment when Kamala Harris became the first woman, the first Black, and the first South Asian Indian Vice President of the United States. She took her place next to Joe Biden, who was sworn in as the 46th President of the United States. The nation is positioning itself towards racial reckoning, healing, and unity across racial, cultural, and nonpartisan boundaries. As the nation embarks on a new era, I leave the readers of this report with the three questions:

• **How can systemic strongholds release the knee off the neck of Black Americans?**

• **What next steps towards racial reckoning and healing should be taken?**

• **Do you have the courage, capacity, and resilience to facilitate change?**

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