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"I Felt What was Happening in Our Country [USA] with Race was So Much Scariest than the [COVID-19] Virus." Black Lives Matter Protesters' Beliefs and Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Cover Page Footnote

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**“I Felt What Was Happening in Our Country [USA] with Race was
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INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, was first detected in December 2019, in Wuhan, China. It has rapidly spread throughout the globe, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). SARS-CoV-2 can result in severe respiratory infection, causing coronavirus disease (COVID-19). As of April 21, 2021, COVID-19 has infected over 31.6 million individuals in the United States, and resulted in over 565,613 deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Chronic illness, older age, smoking, and obesity have been identified as vulnerabilities for more severe COVID-19 outcomes (Garg et al., 2020). To combat this novel coronavirus, governments have recommended frequent hand washing, wearing masks in public spaces, and keeping six feet distance from others (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

For years, racism in the United States has been a deeply entrenched public health issue resulting in numerous health disparities (Gee & Ford, 2011), including racial and ethnic minorities being more likely to suffer from chronic illness, die from cancer, and die during childbirth compared to their white counterparts. These long-standing systemic health and social inequities have placed racial and ethnic minorities at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19 (Cyrus et al., 2020; Ogedegbe et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020). Racial and ethnic minorities have an increased burden of comorbidities, are more likely to work closely with the public, and are more likely to reside in crowded housing (Hooper et al., 2020), all conditions that propagate the spread of, and worsen the prognosis of, COVID-19.

Research also shows that racial and ethnic minorities are significantly more likely than whites to be killed by a police officer (Edwards et al., 2019). Risk is highest for black men, who face about a one in 1,000 chance of being killed by police compared to thirty-nine per 100,000 for white men over the life course. The killing of George Floyd (Bogel-Burroughs, 2020), an adult black male, on May 25, 2020 strengthened Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests (Taylor, 2021) against police brutality and social injustices in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. An estimated fifteen million to twenty-six million have taken to the streets to partake in these protests (Arora, 2020), with participation of all racial and ethnic groups (Fisher, 2020). Many of them were protesting for the first time, recognizing and acknowledging racism (Buchanan et al., 2020; Gibson et al., 2020).

Numerous protests have and continue to occur in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health officials have warned that mass protests could lead to a reduction in social distancing behavior and cause a spike of COVID-19 infections (Bacon, 2020; Harmon & Rojas, 2020). Because of this, it is important to collect data on protesters’ prevention practices and beliefs while protesting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to assess the COVID-19 prevention practice and beliefs of individuals protesting during the COVID-19 pandemic. This data may make an important contribution for

policies for controlling the spread of the disease, and also understanding human behavior of protesting for social justice during a pandemic.

METHODS

Study Design

A pilot mixed methods study was employed (Maxwell, 2013). The survey and qualitative questions drew on principles from the Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus, 1984), which posits that "...stress is a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing ... and endangering his or her well-being.". This connection involves two phases: 1) cognitive appraisals and 2) coping. Cognitive appraisal occurs when one evaluates a situation as potentially stressful and/or dangerous. The individual then evaluates their coping situation, assessing their resources and behavioral course of action to the situation in an effort to reduce the threat of the situation (Lazarus, 1984). Since 2012, the BLM movement has been protesting against oppression and violence; however, in 2020, significantly more individuals have taken an interest in protesting against racial injustices (American Psychological Association, 2020). This study sought to understand individual's behavioral responses to these stressors and why these protests are occurring in record number despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was approved and monitored by the University of Rochester Research Subjects Review Board.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were recruited using reactive convenience sampling from a post in the JustUs4 Facebook group, a group based in St. Louis, MO that organizes BLM protests. A recruitment announcement was posted in this group on July 13, 2020 calling for interested individuals to participate in this study. Interested participants messaged the JustUs4 organization directly via Facebook to assess eligibility and, if eligible, to schedule time for the assessment. From July 15 to July 21, 2020, twenty participants were recruited into this study.

Eligibility included 1) being eighteen years of age or older, 2) speaking English, and 3) having attended at least one protest in 2020. Verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant. All participants received a \$20 gift card.

Measures

Quantitative phase. Participants enrolled in the study participated in an interviewer administered survey that included questions on demographics and prevention practices and behaviors while protesting. For example, participants were asked Likert questions such as 'How often did you properly wear your face mask while protesting (this involves wearing a face mask over your mouth, nose, and chin)?' and 'How often were you able to practice social distancing while protesting (keeping at least six feet apart from others)?' Response options included Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Almost Always, or Always. The survey took approximately ten minutes to complete and was administered via Zoom.

Qualitative phase. Immediately upon completion of the quantitative survey, all participants were asked questions to elucidate their quantitative responses. This phase included open-ended questions such as 'You mentioned you were able to keep your distance sometimes during protests. Please explain why.' and 'In your perspective, what has been the impact of the protests?' This interview took approximately fifteen minutes to complete and was audio recorded and administered via Zoom.

ANALYSIS

Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated for all variables using Microsoft Excel. The first author transcribed the interviews into Microsoft Word. Transcripts were then coded by the first and second author. An inductive approach to coding was used, given that this is one of the first studies to explore this topic and we sought to explore new themes that may emerge from the interviews (Marks &

Yardley, 2004). An iterative process was employed to achieve consensus between the two sets of codes, resulting in a codebook that included agreed upon definitions (Ando 2004). Emergent themes were labeled during a secondary phase of focused coding.

Results

Table 1. Subject Characteristics (n=20)

Variable	n (%)
Age , mean (SD, range)	29 (12.5, range 19-59)
Ethnicity , Non-Hispanic Latino	19 (95%)
Race	
American Indian	1 (5%)
Black/African American	15 (75%)
White	3 (15%)
Multiracial	1 (5%)
Sex – Female	16 (80%)
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	14 (70%)
Bisexual	4 (20%)
Not Sure	1 (5%)
Refused	1 (5%)
Education Level	
More than High School	7 (35%)
High School Graduate	13 (65%)
Marital Status	
Divorced/Separated	4 (20%)
Married/Cohabiting	2 (10%)
Never Been Married	14 (70%)
Annual Income	
\$10,000 - \$59,000	5 (25%)
\$60,000 +	10 (50%)
Not Sure	4 (20%)
Refused	1 (5%)
Health Status	
Excellent	4 (20%)
Very Good	6 (30%)
Good	10 (50%)
Health Insurance	
Yes	17 (85%)
Morbidity Present	
Yes*	8 (40%)

* These participants have depression (n=5), hypertension (n=1), or chronic lung disease (n=2)

Twenty participants completed this study. Their mean age was twenty-nine (SD 12.5, range 19-59). Most were female (80 percent), heterosexual (70 percent), had a high school diploma (65 percent), and had health insurance (85 percent). The majority identified as Black/African American (75 percent) and have never been married (70 percent). Half of the participants reported being in 'Good' health, while 40 percent reported having one morbidity present.

Table 2 shows participants' protest practices and beliefs during the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, participants attended 3.8 protests since March 11, 2020 and spent an average of 3.7 hours at a single protest.

Participants reported that attendance at the smallest protest they attended was on average 149 individuals (range 45-1,000) while the largest protest they attended reached an average of 4,137 individuals (range: 500-10,000). Almost all participants attended a protest without having any COVID-19-related symptoms (95 percent), always or almost always properly wore their masks (25 percent and 50 percent, respectively), and washed their hands during a protest two to three times or more than three times (35 percent and 50 percent, respectively). Almost all participants believed that COVID-19 testing is important (90 percent). However, most had never been tested for COVID-19 (85 percent) and almost all participants did not self-quarantine for fourteen days after protesting (95 percent). Moreover, most participants reported never or rarely following social distancing guidelines at a

protest (25 percent and 30 percent, respectively). When asked whether other protesters around them at a protest followed these COVID-19 guidelines, similar results were obtained (Table 2). Most participants reported being Not at all or Slightly concerned about COVID-19 while at a protest (25 percent and 30

percent, respectively). The majority of participants believed that protesting is extremely important (70 percent).

Table 2. COVID-19 prevention practices and beliefs while protesting (n=20)

Variables	n (%)
Average # of protests attended, mean (SD range,)	3.8 (2.9, range 1-10)
Average # of people in largest and smallest protests attended, mean, (SD, range)	
Smallest	149 (236.6, range 45-1,000)
Largest	4,137 (2673.3, range 500-10,000)
Average Hours in 1 protest, mean (SD, range)	3.7 (1.5, range 1.5-7)
Ever tested for COVID-19	
No	17 (85%)
Yes, Viral Test*	3 (15%)
Believe COVID-19 testing is important	
Yes	18 (90%)
Attended protests while having COVID-19 symptoms	
No	19 (95%)
Yes (cough)	1 (5%)
Proper Mask Wearing	
Sometimes	5 (25%)
Always	5 (25%)
Almost Always	10 (50%)
Proper Social Distancing	
Never	5 (25%)
Rarely	6 (30%)
Sometimes	4 (20%)
Almost Always	4 (20%)
Always	1 (5%)
Other Protesters Wearing Masks Properly	
Rarely	1 (5%)
Sometimes	3 (15%)
Almost Always	11 (55%)
Always	5 (25%)
Other Protesters Practicing Social Distancing	
Never	5 (25%)
Rarely	6 (30%)
Sometimes	5 (25%)
Almost Always	4 (20%)
Times Washed Hands at Protests	
Never	2 (10%)
Once	1 (5%)
2-3 times	7 (35%)

More than 3 times	10 (50%)
Concern for COVID-19	
Not at all concerned	5 (25%)
Slightly concerned	6 (30%)
Somewhat concerned	3 (15%)
Moderately concerned	5 (25%)
Extremely Concerned	1 (5%)
Importance of Protesting	
Somewhat Important	3 (15%)
Moderately Important	3 (15%)
Extremely Important	14 (70%)
Self-quarantined for 14 days after protest	
No	19 (95%)

* These tests came back negative.

Table 3 shows the themes and select quotes that were identified when analyzing the qualitative data, which included 1) Fighting for social justice (e.g., "I protest because I'm tired of police brutality"), 2) Protesting is more important than COVID-19 (e.g., "I was more concerned about organizing the protest and thinking about the BLM movement more than the pandemic"), 3) Unable to keep six feet distance (e.g., "You gotta keep up with leaders/organizers to hear what they say and chant. Everyone forgets about distancing"), 4) Masks worn most of the time (e.g., "I was chanting a lot. When not chanting, I tried to keep my mask up"), 5) Protests sparked global movement (e.g., "I think they [protests] brought attention because they haven't been in one specific city but all over the county and the world. It's united people"), and 6) Increasing awareness of injustices (e.g., "It's been bringing awareness to a lot of people. It's been pressuring our local officials to make change"). Saturation of themes was reached (Ando et al., 2004).

Table 3. Themes and quotes from participants regarding COVID-19 prevention practices and beliefs while protesting (n=20).

Theme	Select quotes from participants
Fighting for social justice	<p>"George Floyd happened and that hit me. I couldn't ignore what was going on. I wanted to help other people." - Male, 19 years old</p> <p>"My people are getting killed every day whether it's getting caught on camera or not. Our voices are finally being heard so why not go out there and try to make a change." - Female, 21 years old</p> <p>"I protest because I'm tired of police brutality and tired of people killing black people." - Female, 30 years old</p>
Protesting is more important than COVID-19	<p>"I personally felt what was happening in our country with race was so much scarier than the virus." - Female, 31 years old</p> <p>"I was more concerned about organizing the protest and thinking about the BLM movement more than the pandemic." - Female, 21 years old</p> <p>"I think the cause to protest was greater than me thinking about COVID-19. Would I do it again? Yes." - Female, 49 years old</p>

Unable to keep six feet distance	<p>"You gotta keep up with leaders/organizers to hear what they say and chant. Everyone forgets about distancing." - Male, 19 years old</p> <p>"Sometimes there was just so many people that when we were marching there wasn't room to be six feet. It was more like three feet." - female, 52 years old</p> <p>"It's important to look at also the state and police and their role exacerbating the pandemic issues for protesters. When the government and police work together to militarize and commit violence against protesters, then it makes it harder for protesters to maintain distance practices." - Female, 52 years old</p>
Masks worn most of the time	<p>"We did our best to wear masks and sanitize our hands. We tried our best to not spread the virus while still protesting and trying to make a difference." - Female, 20 years old</p> <p>"I was chanting a lot. When not chanting, I tried to keep my mask up." - Female, 21 years old</p> <p>"I kept my face mask on aside from drinking water." - Female, 49 years old</p>
Protests sparked global movement	<p>"There is nationwide and worldwide response and support. People are recognizing there is a problem happening. The world has woken up." - Female, 20 years old</p> <p>"There are BLM protests in other countries that have far smaller population of black people that haven't had same history of oppression as USA has. It's a global movement." - Female, 52 years old</p> <p>"I think they [protests] brought attention because they haven't been in one specific city but all over the county and the world. It's united people." - Female, 28 years old</p>
Increasing awareness of injustices	<p>"BLM is getting more powerful and making sure people are aware of social injustices and puts pressure on systems oppressing minorities." - Female, 21 years old</p> <p>"It's been bringing awareness to a lot of people. It's been pressuring our local officials to make change." Male, 19 years old</p> <p>"So many people have been coming out and giving support and people who I haven't thought were for the BLM are coming aboard and have a better understanding of why we're protesting. We're changing people's opinions and lawmakers are listening." Female, 24 years old</p>

DISCUSSION

This study reports on COVID-19 prevention practices and beliefs of individuals protesting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although our data suggests that protesters may consider the social justice related to addressing systemic racism more important than the COVID-19 pandemic, our data also suggests that protesters understand the importance of COVID-19 and try to practice the recommended guidelines to prevent the spread of the virus. However, there are suggestions that some protesters do not consistently adhere to preventive guidelines, such as not going into quarantine after protesting and taking off their masks when chanting, the latter of which can exacerbate the spread of respiratory droplets (Wei & Li, 2016). There is a compelling moral reason to protest racial injustices: black lives are at stake and the racial injustices that have persisted for centuries need to change immediately (Resnik, 2020). Nevertheless, when protesting during a pandemic there are ethical issues to take into consideration. Fear that protests may lead to more COVID-19 infections is understandable. For one thing, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to maintain six feet distance while protesting. Individuals who protest therefore have a moral obligation to do what they can to reduce the risk of catching and spreading COVID-19. Individuals with COVID-19 symptoms or who were exposed should consider not protesting until they have recovered or completed an appropriate quarantine. Given that people can spread the virus asymptotically, the most ethically responsible way to protest is by doing so as carefully as one can, including getting a negative COVID-19 test just before protesting. Wearing a mask properly, bringing hand sanitizer, and minimizing transmission of droplets when chanting or shouting by always wearing masks are effective ways to prevent COVID-19 infection (Barkley, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued a recommendation that individuals who shout or chant during mass gatherings use cloth face coverings (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a). As stated by Dr. Karen Stohr, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University, during an interview with *The Washingtonian*, “Whatever you choose to do, the most ethical task is to make sure your behavior is easing the burdens of racial justice, not adding to them.” (Stohr, 2020).

Moreover, as reported by one participant, it is also important to consider the role that law enforcement may play in exacerbating the virus when responding to protests. While BLM protests have been mostly peaceful, looting and rioting also occurred nationwide. As part of their obligations to protect the well-being of members of society, tear gas and pepper spray is used by law enforcement for riot and looting control. Nevertheless, the use of tear gas and pepper spray trigger coughing and watering of the eyes, increasing the likelihood of spreading the virus (Hout et al., 2020; Khuller, 2020). In order to use tear gas and pepper spray in ways that cause the least harm to people and is the least restrictive, it is important that they be used only after officers give people adequate warning before releasing the chemicals and people have a practical route to escape any gas. Any use of these chemicals by law enforcement police should only be used if necessary under the United Nation’s Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials (United Nations, 1990) and its Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials (United Nations, 1979). These steps help ensure these chemicals are used in a manner to not potentially spread COVID-19 and is the least harmful to individuals.

A nationwide study of protests in 315 U.S. cities estimated the impacts of mass protests on social distancing, COVID-19 incidence increases, and COVID-19 mortality rates (Dhaval et al., 2020). They reported that protests have unintentionally caused an increase in social distancing behavior from individuals *not* partaking in protests who chose to avoid public places, thereby having an offsetting effect in spreading COVID-19. In fact, their study found no evidence that protests caused a spike in COVID-19 cases or deaths after more than five weeks from the start of protests. Although these protests are lawful activities, this type of avoidance behavior is consistent with the literature on violence and safety amongst the general population (Bennett et al., 2007; Stolzenberg et al., 2019), who choose to remain home. It is possible that in our study, this same avoidance behavior was observed among those not protesting, leveling out any potential increase in COVID-19 cases.

In this study, most participants have never been tested for COVID-19 despite recognizing the importance of testing. At the time this study's data was collected (July 2020), the CDC advised people to get tested if they have COVID-19 symptoms, if they had close contact with someone positive for COVID-19, or if they have been referred by a healthcare provider (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020b). It is possible that participants not only did not meet these criteria, but also may not have had easy access to a COVID-19 test. However, this was not assessed in the study. Given the relatively young age of participants in this study, if infected with COVID-19, they may have had less severe symptoms, or no symptoms at all (Liao et al., 2020), and thus may also partially explain why they never got tested. Moreover, young adults have been shown to be less likely to social distance, as supported by our study where most participants did not self-quarantine after protesting, possibly because they underrate the likelihood over whether they will get sick (Pinsker, 2020). Public health campaigns with young adults showcasing the importance of social distancing can be useful to target this behavior. It is important to note that all but one participant was asymptomatic while protesting. However, it takes just one person to spread the virus among others (Shereen et al., 2020). It would be helpful for future studies to assess if participants have self-quarantined prior to attending a protest as they can help clarify whether they were truly asymptomatic while protesting (Ali et al., 2020). Additional research that follows protesters for a few weeks after protesting would help determine if they became infectious or were tied to an increase in COVID-19 cases. Moreover, research that is more inclusive of the demographics of protesters (e.g., race, ethnicity, age, gender) is important in understanding the practices and beliefs of all protesters. Despite COVID-19 concerns, our data suggest that protesters felt compelled to participate in protests and have their voices heard. This study's results make an important contribution to the current discussion around policies for controlling the spread of COVID-19, and also to the understanding of human behavior of protesting for social justice during a pandemic.

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

This study has several important limitations. The small sample size and convenience sample may differ from the general population of protesters. Furthermore, there may be volunteer bias, where participants in this study may be different from those who chose not to volunteer (Sacket, 1979). All data collected were self-reported; thus, there is a potential for over or under-reporting as participants may have felt compelled to offer socially desirable responses (Robert, 1993). This study also has a sampling bias with our sample being predominantly female (80 percent), limiting generalizability with respect to male protesters. Moreover, protesting behaviors may be different in St. Louis, MO, an urban city with a much lower population per square mile (5,157.5 people per square mile) (United States Census Bureau, 2020a) compared to other denser urban cities such as New York City (27,012.5 people per square mile) (United States Census Bureau, 2020b). Despite these limitations, this study also has strengths. This is the first study to assess COVID-19 preventive practices and beliefs among protesters in the United States. The collection of qualitative data also strengthened and supported the quantitative portion of this study.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the COVID-19 prevention practices and beliefs of protesters. Twenty participants completed the study. Our results suggest that although many protestors understand the importance of preventing the spread of COVID-19 and follow guidelines to prevent spread of COVID-19, there are suggestions that some protestors do not consistently adhere to preventive guidelines. Qualitative data highlight themes that arose, including 1) Fighting for social justice, 2) Protesting is more important than COVID-19, 3) Unable to keep six feet distance, 4) Masks worn most of the time, 5) Protests sparked global movement, and 6) Increasing awareness of injustices. Results may contribute to the formulation of policies for controlling the spread of COVID-19 and in understanding human behavior of protesting for social justice during a pandemic.

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