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Reflections on Black Lives Matter in the Context of Human Rights and Family Science

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Reflections on Black Lives Matter in the Context of Human Rights and Family Science

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In Brief

- While all lives do matter, the humanity of all lives is not collectively recognized.
- Violent contexts place an extraordinary amount of stress on Black youth, families, and communities.
- Systemic violence causes multiple transitions in families and threatens families' psychosocial adjustment.
- The collectivistic approach served as an adaptive response to varying levels of oppression faced by Black people since arriving in the Americas.
- Black Lives Matter has significant implications for the work of family life educators, researchers, and practitioners.

Black Lives Matter

For some, "Black Lives Matter" is a highly politicized statement that fuels resentment, galvanizes resistance to perceived racialized conversations, and incites rage that targets social activists. However, it is this statement that united many people enraged by the acquittal verdict of George Zimmerman, the man who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012. Black Lives Matter (BLM) became a resounding resistance to the posthumous trial of Trayvon Martin's humanity that occurred in the news media and various social media outlets as they publicly questioned Trayvon's dress, drug usage, and response to being followed as a rationale for Zimmerman's acquittal. For organizers Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, BLM manifested as a social justice movement. The founders of the BLM movement articulate it as "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black Lives are systemically and intentionally targeted for demise . . . and an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to

society, humanity, and resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (see the Black Lives Matter website at http://blacklivesmatter. com/guiding-principles/).

BLM continually addresses the criticism of its focus on Black lives. The movement reifies the understanding that family scholars have long had: As Burton and colleagues put it, we live in a society that "assigns racial meaning to differences among individuals or groups that produces hierarchies of power and privilege among races." Thus, while all lives do matter, the focus on Black lives asserts that some lives are valued more than others (e.g., White lives matter more than Black lives), and the humanity of all lives is not collectively recognized. Widespread police brutality toward Black lives includes the murders of Black lives in U.S. cities from east to west, north to south, and many cities in between. Such incidents underscore the critical need for a national movement of collective resistance that affirms the humanity and value of Black lives.

BLM has significant implications for the work of family life educators, researchers, and practitioners engaged in the work of understanding, educating, and serving Black families. Espousing the principles of diversity, empathy, and restorative justice, BLM challenges Family Science to examine, and reexamine with a sense of urgency, the current state of Blacks in the context of the United States. This movement unveils the emergent trauma of Black families in a context where police brutality disproportionately disrupts Black family life cycles, rituals, and routines, as well as compounds family stress and threatens family resilience across economic and gender lines. Implications for family professionals include understanding how violence against Black lives affects family transitions, the psychosocial adjustment of

Black families, and the collective response to societal oppression.

Family Transitions

Family Science scholars have routinely found that experiencing multiple transitions, particularly in family structure, has been linked to lower well-being among children and youth, and children and youth fare much better when they have stable and positive routines in family life. The disruption in these routines and stability can lead to uncertainty and stress, which decreases psychosocial well-being. This aspect of family life has largely been examined in the context of marital dissolution. We suggest that BLM provides an opportunity to apply these findings in the context of family disruptions that occur when lives are lost as a result of the devaluing of Black lives. Through espousing principles of Black villages and Black families, the BLM guiding principles embrace a commitment to "supporting each other as extended families and 'villages' that collectively care for one another . . . and making [activists'] spaces family friendly and enable parents to fully participate with their children." This emphasizes both a need and an opportunity for Family Science professionals specifically to better understand implications for Black families' continual tragedies that force them into traumatic "off-time" life transitions. Family Scientists must question how children and youth, who are systemically targeted by police brutality, continually deal with the murder of youth and young adults around them. Additionally, family scholars can reflect on and learn from what happens to family routines when families constantly have to relive tragic experiences and construct new routines that allow them to grieve in a way that leads to healthy psychosocial adjustment.

numbers of studies are finding that many (or most) cultures possess degrees of both, Black culture is consistently described as being highly collectivistic; the collectivistic approach served as an adaptive response to varying levels of oppression faced by Black people since arriving in the Americas. Our examination of the BLM movement reveals that Black families and communities have continued to rely on collectivistic responses to combat the violence against people and community. In fact, the BLM movement itself can be viewed as such a response! The collective value principle of BLM, one of its guiding principles, states, "All Black lives matter regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability, disability, religious beliefs, or disbeliefs, immigration status or location." Although unapologetically focusing on the state of Black lives, BLM is an inclusive organization with significant implications for Family Science.

BLM's collective response to societal oppression at the community level affirms the worth and dignity of the lives that were systemically taken at the same time that society dehumanizes and justifies the murders of Black lives. To this end, BLM is committed to restorative justice. The movement articulates this guiding principle as a commitment to "working vigorously for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension, all people." Perhaps the most visible illustration of this approach is the bond that was created among the parents of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Jordan Davis. These parents of Black youth who were killed violently call for peace, unity, and justice despite the societal oppression manifested in the deaths of their children. Such a collective response to societal oppression is rooted in strength of the collective to fortify efforts of resistance. Overall, the BLM movement focuses on raising consciousness in America to enact change that fundamentally values and affirms the inherent worth and dignity of Black Americans. Moreover, there is a shift to recognize the humanity of Black people in a way that results in more humane treatment from the law enforcement community. Family scholars have the important role of working toward affirming human rights and alleviating societal oppression through our

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Psychosocial Adjustment of Black Families

Family scholars have identified cultural characteristics such as racial socialization, extended family and fictive-kin networks, and racial identity development as factors that Black families use to resist societal marginalization. While these characteristics are proven contributors to the psychosocial adjustment and resilience of Black families, the increased emergence of police brutality against Black families poses a significant threat to psychosocial adjustment. In a societal context where cultural characteristics alone do not protect Black families from the reality of police violence, BLM emphasizes helping Black families navigate racialized contexts. The continuation of tragedies that force Black families into traumatic "off-time" life transitions calls into action Family Science professionals who are committed to enhancing the psychosocial adjustment of Black families.

BLM underscores the critical need for Family Science professionals to address the reality that violent contexts place an extraordinary amount of stress on Black youth, families, and communities, who often need to live out their grief in the public eye. This chronic stress threatens Black families' capacity for healthy psychosocial adjustment. BLM manifests the strength and resilience of Black families through collective movement, creating an opportunity for family scholars to understand the resilience of Black families amid systemic oppression.

Finally, BLM consistently addresses the critique that the movement resists police brutality while "Black on Black" crime continues to occur in communities that are saturated with violence. In response, BLM situates such claims in the context of both structural and internalized forms of racism, which contribute to community violence. While within-group violence is certainly a crisis that deserves attention, addressing law enforcement malpractice unveils the power dynamics involved in systemic oppression, which exacerbate internalized racism.

Regardless of the source of violence, its impact on Black families is a public health crisis. Black youth, families, and communities are experiencing loss and grief at such high rates that they have little time for healthy adjustment to these tragic experiences. Whether social, academic, or kinesthetic, systemic violence creates a strong barrier for families and communities to heal and to create rituals and routines for healthy psychosocial adjustment. Thus, it is imperative for Family Science professionals to examine how Black children, youth, and families develop a sense of trust and safety in order to continue believing that they will be able to reach their maximum potential in the face of such violence.

Collective Response to Societal Oppression

A primary academic approach to examining different cultures is looking at collectivism versus individualism. Although increasing

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harm, and treated with dignity and respect. As family life educators, we are uniquely equipped to use our expertise as a powerful tool for reducing prejudice and furthering greater access to human rights for all. ❊

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represented by Haque-Hausrath and his legal partner, then in 2012 sued the State of Montana on the grounds that LR-121 was unconstitutional. And we prevailed. The courts—all the way up to the Montana Supreme Court—agreed that LR-121 was unconstitutional and violated the rights of immigrants. In partnership with courageous immigrants who testified in court, our legal victories prohibited the state from implementing LR-121. In 2013, to address migrant reports of racial profiling on the highways, MIJA also sued the Montana Highway Patrol. MIJA settled that suit, which required the Highway Patrol to retrain officers and change its practices on the roadways.

From Scholar to Scholar-Activist

An ancillary purpose of writing this piece is to share some of my journey from "neutral" scholar to a scholar-activist seeking to advocate legal and policy change in support of migrant justice. My transformation was inhibited by my own fears of not getting tenure, not being respected as a scholar, and not succeeding in the academy. Conducting research using a CBPR approach is time intensive, and typically not aligned with or valued in promotion and tenure processes. Engaging in both scholarship and activism, for me, has had personal and professional costs. Yet upon reflection, I am most proud of, most humbled by, and most thankful for the work I get to do with immigrant families and our community partners to actualize the human rights of those marginalized and disenfranchised in our society. ❊

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scholarship, family education, and professional practice. BLM offers implications for how we can accomplish this goal as it relates to Black youth, families, and communities in ways that are culturally relevant. For a more in-depth understanding of the history of this movement and its future goals, we encourage you to visit the BLM website at http://www.blacklivesmatter.com. ❊

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