

## BLACK LIVES MATTER IN COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

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*Members of the African diaspora have faced systemic anti-Black violence in multiple contexts. The Black Lives Matter movement emerged from these various contexts. Given community psychology's roots in social change, we wanted to provoke discussion on this growing social movement and to push back against some of the false narratives surrounding the movement. In this special issue, authors will discuss the connections between Black Lives Matter and community psychology: highlighting areas of similarities and new frameworks informed by this movement. This introduction will provide a brief overview of Black Lives Matter, discuss the development of this special issues, and highlight the theoretical and methodological contributions of each article.*

**Keywords:** Black Lives Matter, activism, anti-racism, social movements

### 1. Introduction

The #BlackLivesMatter movement emerged after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his killer George Zimmerman. Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza created this call to be an affirmation of Black lives in the context of systemic anti-Black racism (Garza, 2014). The movement encapsulates the fight against the systemic oppression and structural violence faced daily by members of the Black diaspora; it has grown into a coalition of organizations also collectively known as the Movement for Black Lives. Scholars across several disciplines have discussed and examined the movement, but there is little research in psychology, specifically community psychology. Nonetheless, the interconnected nature of social media and the internet have propelled the awareness of and platform for this 21<sup>st</sup> century movement. Given community psychology's focus on social justice, activism, and change, there is a unique opportunity to learn #BlackLivesMatter and the current societal discussion on systemic oppression and anti-Black racism. The goal of this special issue is to ignite discussion around several key questions regarding what can be learned about social activism and how community

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psychology can be used as a tool to advance the Movement for Black Lives. We hoped to (and succeeded in) initiating a push towards more research and work in this area as well as giving a space to those who are doing this work.

Racism manifests as systemic anti-Black violence, coming in the forms of institutional racism, cultural racism, and individual racism (Jones, 1997). Institutional racism refers to policies and practices within organizations and institutions that contribute to discrimination. This structural or systematic racism continuously leads to negative outcomes for Black people and it is the primary reason for racial inequalities. Cultural racism deems a group's culture inferior (language, dialect, values, beliefs, worldviews, and cultural artifacts). This is probably the most pervasive form given that culture by its very nature is institutionalized. Individual racism manifests as racial prejudice. This assumes the superiority of one's own racial group and rationalizes the power of White people over Black people.

The Black Lives Matter movement developed in the context of persistent and systemic anti-Black racism experienced by African Americans on multiple fronts. Black Lives Matter organized to protect and advocate for African Americans. Only July 13, 2013, George Zimmerman was not found not guilty of the shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. In response to this founders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometti created both the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and the beginning stages of a political movement (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018).

Black Lives Matter is “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression (Garza, 2014; Herstory, n.d.)” The guiding principles of BLM are diversity, restorative justice, globalism, queer affirming, unapologetically Black, collective value, empathy, loving engagement, transgender affirming, Black villages, Black women, and intergenerational. According to founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors (2018) this means:

- Ending all violence against Black bodies
- Acknowledging, respecting, and celebrating difference(s)
- Seeing ourselves as part of the Global Black family remaining aware that there are different ways we are impacted or privileged as Black folk who exist in different parts of the world
- Honoring the leadership and engagement of our Trans and gender non-conforming comrades
- Being self-reflective about and dismantling cisgender privilege and uplifting Black Trans folk, especially Black Transwomen, who continue to be disproportionately impacted by Trans-antagonistic violence
- Asserting the fact that Black Lives Matter, all Black lives, regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability, disability, religious belief or disbeliefs, immigration status or location
- Ensuring that the Black Lives Matter network is a Black women—affirming space free from sexism, misogyny, and male-centeredness
- Practicing empathy and engaging comrades with the intent to learn about and connect with their contexts

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- Fostering a Trans-and Queer-affirming network. And when we gather, we do so with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking or rather, the belief that all in the world are heterosexual unless s/he or they disclose otherwise
  - Fostering an intergenerational and communal network free from ageism. We believe that all people regardless of age, show up with the capacity to lead and learn
  - Embodying and practicing justice, liberation and peace in our engagements with others.

Black Lives Matter as an organization has engaged in several projects over their short history. The Mama's Day National Bailout raised more than \$500,000, bailing out more than 100 Black mothers to be reunited with their families on Mother's Day. In a similar vein, Black Lives Matter-Toronto staged an intervention at Toronto Pride to re-center Black queer and trans experiences. They demanded police officers be barred from future Pride events and that pride increase its Black staff and commit to actively supporting Black events. This intervention caused a ripple effect that resulted in other BLM chapters shutting their local Pride marches and making similar demands. These two interventions illustrate resistance against physical and epistemic violence inflicted on Black women and LGBTQ (Matthews & Moor, 2017).

Their Channel Black program trains future Black leadership to "construct, optimize, and implement strategic interventions on race." In the short term their goal is to diversify the faces of people identified as experts and featured in media discussing and intervening in vital issues that impact Black communities. Their long-term goals are to overcome barriers to emphasizing with and understanding Black communities, developing the skills of Black millennial leaders, and supporting organizing tactics with empirically backed interventions leading to a reduction in implicit racial bias and prejudicial treatment (Matthews & Noor, 2017). Through increasing the number of Black experts called upon to discuss Black communities, BLM is resisting against the epistemic violence inflicted on Black communities that silences and erases the Black experience.

## **2. Developing the Special Issue**

### **2.1. *SE ECO Roundtable***

We sought to begin this discussion in a safe space among graduate students and community faculty alike. While many of us were having these conversations in silos with few other graduate students and faculty members (often the few of other students or faculty of color) we sought to bring these conversations to a larger space. We wanted to discuss ways in which we can incorporate and learn from the Black Lives Matter movement but to also learn from our colleagues about work they do, within and outside of academia, that reinforces the tenants of #BlackLivesMatter. We began by contextualizing the current climate regarding the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin and the continued national emergence of police and civilian level violence against Black boys, girls, men and women without justice for families or communities. This first roundtable was born largely from conversations between us about the role of social justice in community psychology and where #BlackLivesMatter fits into larger conversations about social justice.

We asked the following questions at the 2016 SE ECO roundtable:

1. Are you or is anyone you know involved in the Black Lives Movement?

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2. What is the value of community psychology in understanding the Black Lives movement?
  3. How can community psychology be used to explain the emergence of the Black Lives matter movement?
  4. What role should community psychologists play in the Black Lives Matter movement?
  5. How can we balance personal forms of activism and professional forms of activism as community psychologists?
  6. What are some ways we can use this experience and take what we have discussed here to our home institutions?

We utilized discussion generated from the questions above to help construct our next roundtable at SCRA. For example, we discussed the varying degrees of activism, both personal and professional and what it means to be an activist. This arose from our question about balancing personal and professional forms of activism. Questions arose including: How are people conceptualizing the two? How is this related to Black Lives Matter, particularly for those of us for whom the personal is often political? Lastly, we ended with various ways in which we could take this experience and discussion to our home institutions. Examples included having these conversations and asking them among our colleagues, starting a collaborative to make this an ongoing conversation and bringing this to a national platform.

## **2.2. *SCRA Biennial Roundtable***

We hosted our next roundtable at the 2017 SCRA Biennial. Our discussion started with a synopsis of Black Lives Matter. We described the organization and presented the website to the audience to go over all the resources provided and their stated goals. We made the point that there had been little discussion in CP about BLM and posed several questions to the audience, including:

1. How can we learn from the ways Black Lives Matter uses grassroots organizing to further social movements?
2. What can past social movements influenced by community psychology teach us about the current movement?
3. Which values (CP vs. BLM) are compatible with one another? Which are incompatible?
4. Can we look at Black Lives Matter as a framework for a new type of social movement?
5. Do Black lives matter in community: across all aspects? In both theory and practice?

While preparing for this roundtable, the aforementioned came up: do Black lives matter in community psychology? These doubts led to another question: what does it mean to use theories and frameworks normed and created by White men to apply to marginalized communities? Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, W.E.B. Du Bois, bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, Kenneth and Mamie Clark have conducted research that has influenced social movements spanning over the last half century, yet their names are rarely, if ever, mentioned in the field as influences or even adjacent to community psychology. Frameworks such as critical race theory and intersectionality are aligned perfectly with the social criticism inherent within community psychology, yet these theories and the scholars who develop them are not included in the canon of community psychology. When we discussed these points at the roundtable, many nodded their heads in agreement that there was an issue to be fixed. Others began to point out that similar issues had

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been brought up before with not much changing afterwards. The goal in that question was to promote a critical reflexivity. We wanted to ensure that in this future research area, CP does not end up perpetuating the same oppressive structures and hierarchies that it seeks to dismantle.

At the end of the roundtable, we provided a list of articles and books relevant to the discussion. We dubbed it the #BlackLivesMatter Syllabus for Community Psychology (Thomas, Zuckerman, Lewis, & Cormier, 2017). We hope to expand the conversation and spur more research within this field. Initially, we only planned to publish the syllabus or some other piece based on our biennial roundtable. Urmitapa Dutta, a member of the editorial board of *Community Psychology in Global Perspective* suggested that we submit something to the journal. During the process of figuring out which direction we wanted to go with the syllabus, we decided that we needed to expand our scope and create a special issue that would hopefully serve as a launching pad for the topic and for scholars who were interested in the topic. The current special issue emerged two years after our first roundtable as a response to a growing need to increase the presence and discussion of #BlackLivesMatter within community psychology. With national attention being given to daily instances of racial injustice across the country, the need for a greater presence of Black Lives Matter in community psychology has only increased since our first roundtable two years ago.

### **3. Theoretical and Methodological Contributions to Special Issue Goals**

This special issue highlights some of the amazing work being done with respect to #BlackLivesMatter in community psychology. In keeping with tradition and spirit of the movement, a global perspective truly encompasses the systemic nature of racial injustice across the African diaspora. Specifically, Black Lives Matter-Toronto has emerged as another example of social justice activism for marginalized groups, particularly those of us whose intersectional identities comprise multiple marginalized groups (e.g., lesbian woman of color).

We encouraged papers from scholars, educators, practitioners, and activists. We posed several questions for authors to address. They discussed the value of community psychology in understanding the Black Lives Matter movement and the guiding principles and orienting concepts are most appropriate to consider. Darden and Godsay talk about the values embedded within community psychology that can help advance the issues tackled by the Black Lives Matter movement. We also asked authors to address the role of community psychologists in the Black Lives Matter movement. Mbilishaka proposes a collaboration between Black hair care spaces and psychologists to tackle racial experiences using Racial Narrative Therapy techniques. Such spaces are ideal settings for an intervention to address mental health disparities and sociopolitical development.

Authors discussed what participation in Black Lives Matter and other social/political movements for racial justice (Black Panthers, Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, etc.) looks like. Furman, Singh, Darko, and Wilson use perspectives from critical race theory, queer theory, transgender studies, and intersectionality to discuss the intersection between the Black Lives Matter movement and the LGBTQ movement. Godsay and Brodsky discuss how Black Lives Matter influences resilience and empowerment for young Black men. For them, Black Lives Matter provided awareness about racial injustice, reinforced racial pride, offered resources, and opened a window of opportunity to enact change in their local setting. Tran, Nakamura, Kim,

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Khera, and AhnAllen discuss the multilayered relationship between Black and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. The authors call to challenge the miseducation of Black and AAPI histories and communities and to prioritize the preservation and healing of communities of color, especially Black lives.

Particularly important for this time, we asked how can we look at Black Lives Matter as a framework for a new type of social movement? Bartholomew, Harris, and Maglalang talk about how Black Lives Matter promotes a framework of healing justice that can inform culturally appropriate therapy that addresses the historical and contemporary trauma that Black women continue to face. This discussion was sparked by BLM Toronto's protest at the 2016 LGBTQ Pride parade to demand more funding, access to space, and the removal of police presence from future pride events. Perhaps most importantly, do Black Lives Matter in community psychology? In both theory and practice? Syed, Wilson, McKie, Marcotte, and Travers examined the perspectives of African, Caribbean, and Black youth in Ontario on their interactions with law enforcement. Too often, the perspectives of these youth are not included or properly acknowledged in the broader discourse regarding interactions with law enforcement.

The articles in this special issue use such frameworks such as critical race theory, intersectionality, queer theory, transgender studies, and race narrative therapy. BLM itself is proposed as a framework for addressing Black women's health and wellness. These theories and frameworks center the experiences of those most marginalized, just as BLM represents activism through a Black queer feminist lens, "a political praxis based in Black feminist and LGBTQ traditions and knowledge, through which people and groups seek to bring their full selves into the process of dismantling all systems of oppression" (Carruthers, 2018, p. 10).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Knowing one's history plays a vital role in promoting mental health. The West African concept of Sankofa reflects this fact: to move forward, one must look back at their own history. The Black History Knowledge Framework (Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2016) is based on Black Liberation psychology, which itself is influenced by Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire. In this model collective history is more important than individual histories. Members of the Black diaspora experience a vulnerability based on displacement segregation, institutionalized oppression, deculturation, and destruction of capital. BHK Black Liberation tasks are having an awareness of the structure of race and racism, contributions and achievements of Black people, their capital positioning (social, political, economic), and cultural strengths that foster empowered action. Completing these tasks through gaining awareness positively impacts mental health.

Given the current sociopolitical environment and the recent resurgence in Black activism (Livingston et al. 2017), it is vital to properly document this growing social movement. Black Lives Matter is a contemporary manifestation of the Black Radical Tradition, a collection of cultural, intellectual action-oriented labor aimed at disrupting social, political, economic, and cultural norms originating in anticolonial and antislavery efforts (Carruthers, 2018; Robinson, 2000). The movement highlights historical issues from within contemporary contexts and provides a framework towards Black liberation. This special issue is an intervention in that same

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vein. It is not an exhaustive list of programs, initiatives, and victories, but it does provide a starting point for anyone who may be engaged in the struggle and movement for Black lives.

## Acknowledgement

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We provided a syllabus to attendees of our roundtable at the biennial based on all the readings that informed our discussion. We wanted to provide something similar to accompany this special issue. It is important to understand social movements from multiple vantage points, perspectives, and disciplines. Here is a brief list of the readings that have helped to inform this special issue.

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