

Circulating Racial Trauma:  
How Black College-Age Students Experience and Cope with Police Brutality on Social

Media

by

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## ABSTRACT

Police brutality is a major opposing force to racial justice today. While police brutality in the United States is nothing new, the increase in accessibility to videos, images, headlines, and discussions that stem from police brutality has only risen due to the rise in social media usage and the speed at which information is shared. As the views rise, so does the likelihood that Black college students may experience an emotional and psychological response to the racial violence seen and develop symptoms of race-based traumatic stress. Black college-aged students who spend ample amounts of time on social media and engage with police brutality content are more likely to experience episodes of anger, exhaustion, guilt, irritability, avoidance, depression, and fear for their physical safety. These are symptoms of race-based traumatic stress (RBTS), an emotional and psychological reaction to a racial incident, which views racism as a potential traumatic stressor.

The aim of this thesis was to use Dr. Robert Carter's (2007) theory of race-based traumatic stress as a framework to explore the experiences Black college students have when engaging with police brutality content online and investigate the various mechanisms used to cope with the nonstop media coverage and viral nature of Black Death. The use of existing scholarship, including theories, other studies, and primary data gathered from focus groups, provides a fresh angle to the conversation of police brutality and the effects of widely sharing its content via various social media platforms. This study found that Black college-aged students experience's online when engaging with police brutality content is overwhelmingly negative, the incident occurs suddenly, and the user has no control over the situation. In addition, participants experienced the core

reactions of arousal (anxiety, anger, hypervigilance, and sleeplessness), avoidance (pushing the events out of mind and not using social media often), and intrusion (reoccurring thoughts about the incident). It is reasonable to conclude that witnessing police violence online can lead to the development of race-based traumatic stress, as all participants fit its criteria, as outlined by Carter (2007).

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the many Black women, men, and children who are victims of police brutality, anti-Black racism, and racial discrimination each and every day in the United States of America and across the world. May this gross abuse of State power and infringement upon our human rights be eradicated in our lifetime.

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I would like to thank my mentor, Dr. Angeletti. Charles, you were the first person to tell me that I could go on to pursue a master's degree and one day a Ph.D. You saw potential in me when I saw nothing. From the beginning of our relationship, you have challenged me to think critically and to speak truth to power. You taught me the invaluable lesson of not being objective on matters you are passionate about and that not every opinion is worth listening to. I would also like to thank my close friends who have offered their unwavering support and loyal friendship for more years than I can count.

I acknowledge that an immense amount of support, guidance, and privilege have helped me arrive at this current place in time. It would be a profound regret of mine to not acknowledge God and the many people who have contributed to both my life's journey and my academic endeavors.

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## PREFACE

For the past decade I have been interested in studying race and racism in the United States with a specific focus on police brutality. My interest in this matter piqued after my first negative encounter with the police; while living in a predominately white and wealthy neighborhood, one of my neighbors called the police on me when I was raking leaves in my garden citing it as a suspicious activity. In less than fifteen minutes two squad cars pulled up and I was harassed, questioned, and embarrassed for almost an hour. It was a traumatic and rage-inducing event for me, but I knew I was fortunate in my experience, as just a few months earlier Trayvon Martin was murdered for walking through an affluent neighborhood while eating skittles. I became increasingly aware that these everyday acts could easily end up with me – or someone who looked like me – being murdered.

As time went on, I remember being retraumatized when I watched the video of Walter Scott, a Black man in South Carolina, be shot in the back by the police. The video circulated far and wide on social media and I regrettably watched it. I found myself unable to sleep properly for almost a week. Each night I was haunted by images of what I had seen and in several of these nightmares it was me who was shot in the back. I would often spend the morning crying. This is just the worst experience and the one that compelled me to study racism and police brutality, but like many Black people, I have had dozens of other negative encounters. These experiences have left me with anxiety whenever I see police officers and my heart races when I am alone and a police car approaches, even to drive by. I now have a willingness to walk with my hands outside of my pockets so officers can see my hands are empty of any – either perceived or real –



threatening items. I feel enraged when I see the police get away with murder. I rarely walk outside of my home at night and I avoid venturing into or casually walking through and exploring wealthy neighborhoods, even though I currently live in one. I try to dress in a non-intimating fashion, I never wear a hood, I cover my tattoos when I can, yet my Blackness is often perceived as threatening. I am exhausted when I see police brutality headlines, images, or videos on social media. I cannot shake the images or experiences from my mind and often cannot control when they come to mind, and when not studying it, in all honesty, I try to avoid the topic of police brutality because of the emotional labor attached to it. However, its effects are inescapable.

Only within the last year or so was I able to put a name on my emotional response to these incidents; race-based traumatic stress. Once I discovered this theory, I knew it had to be the backbone of my work. This thesis is a culmination of my experiences, the experiences of other Black college students, and existing scholarship on racism and its effects on Black people. The target group for this thesis is primarily fellow Black people who have had similar experiences and also suffer from race-based traumatic stress, even if they do not know that term. This is an academic paper, and my secondary audience are those who are studying police brutality and race, I hope this work assists and possibly advances the conversation within our field. However, I feel it would be a disservice to write in such an academic fashion that the very people I study cannot understand or comprehend. For that reason, an accessible narrative format will be used when discussing my focus group findings.

During the data collection and write-up stages, I felt a profound sense of grief for the many victims of police brutality and for the participants in my focus groups. Hearing

about their experiences was both sacred and illuminating, but highly disturbing and frustrating. Writing this thesis has been a life-altering experience, as it has often been accompanied by more emotions than I anticipated. While I feel honored that my participants felt safe enough to entrust me with intimate, difficult, and sometimes violent stories based upon their experiences, I also hoped that I did not have to do it and that such experiences would not need to be recorded, shared, or lived through.

I would like to thank my focus group participants. Your vulnerability and willingness to participate has been paramount to this study. Without you this work would not exist. Finally, I would like to thank my committee members; Dr. Swadener, Dr. McGuire, and Dr. Chénier. The academic prowess that you all possess is undeniable. I am honored to have such established individuals serve on my committee. Your belief in me to complete this work, and to do it justice, is humbling. I know you are ‘just doing your jobs’, but not everyone does their job this well. You have excelled. I thank you for the many hours spent reviewing, discussing, and guiding me through the process of conducting research and writing a thesis. I would also like to thank Arizona State University and the School of Social Transformation for equipping me with the necessary tools to complete this work.

Marcus R. Donaldson

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

It is heavily documented that there is a disproportionate number of Black people killed by the police each year, with being killed by the police as the number one cause of death amongst young Black men in America (Edwards et al., 2019). However, scholarship on the relationship between racist police violence and trauma is scarce, and even less literature exists when analyzing police violence, racial trauma, and social media. At the start of the millennium, Dr. Robert Carter created a theory named Race-Based Traumatic Stress (RBTS). The creation of this theory stemmed from the lack of literature considering racism and racial violence as catalysts for trauma-related symptoms. RBTS refers to the psychological and emotional injury “caused by encounters with racial discrimination, racial harassment, hostile race-based physical or verbal assaults, ethnic discrimination, racism, and hate crimes” (Helms et al., 2010, p. 58). RBTS occurs as a result of living under a racist system, such as white supremacy, and is considered traumatic because of its “emotionally painful, sudden, and uncontrollable” nature (Carter et al., 2017, p. 35) and involves the individual experiencing at least two of the three core reactions of intrusion, arousal, and avoidance (Carter, 2007).

This chapter, Chapter 1, serves as the introduction and includes the study rationale, the research questions asked which guided this study, and my positionality as a researcher. Chapter 2 covers the three assumptions for the study that I, and my focus group participants, operated under. Chapter 3 provides the literature review and analyzes preexisting scholarship that relates to this study. It is divided into three sub-sections. Chapter 4 covers the methodology used in this study and includes recruitment protocols,

data collection techniques, data coding and analysis, and a small section on the trustworthiness of this study. Chapter 5 contains the findings, which is separated into overarching themes found during the data collection process, as well as the discussion section, and a section on limitations and parameters of the study. The final chapter, Chapter 6 contains the conclusion, implications, and researcher reflection.

### ***Study Rationale***

The rationale behind this study is twofold: I believe that educational institutions and practitioners, scholar-activists, and community organizations, can benefit from this study by better understanding the individualized experiences that Black college-aged students, have when engaging with police brutality content on social media, what the symptoms of race-based traumatic stress are and how this potentially stems from traumatic events online (TEO), and how Black college students cope with RBTS due to the constant social media coverage of police brutality and the media's fascination with and profitability from Black Death. I also believe that this study can positively help other Black people better understand their racial experiences. Race-based traumatic stress provides a framework in which racism can be viewed as traumatic stressors and the aftermath of racial encounters can be better understood. This study also provides several ways in which Black students cope with racial trauma and offers insight into the importance of creating sanctuaries at the University level for the discussion and dissection of what it means to be living with racism while being Black.

For this study, I gathered a mixed gendered group of Black identifying Arizona State University students, ranging from the undergraduate to the doctoral level with an age range of 21–37 years old. I hosted three focus group discussions to understand their

experiences engaging with police brutality content on social media and how they cope with seeing racist and traumatic events online. I also researched current and existing scholarship on racial trauma, police violence, and the effects of seeing traumatic events in the digital space. It was my goal to put police brutality, social media, and racial trauma into one conversation.

I specifically recruited Black college-students for my focus groups, due to the history – and current ongoings – of police brutality in the Black community. I thought it would be unwise to not study the community that I am a part of and to use the availability and accessibility of Arizona State University students as potential participants. Also, communication with my participants and the distribution of incentives was simpler, as all transactions and communication e-mails were securely shared through the ASU server – which is readily available for use by all current ASU students.

### ***Research Questions***

In this thesis, I address the following three research questions:

1. What do Black college students experience when engaging with police brutality content on social media?
2. How may symptoms of race-based traumatic stress due to these experiences manifest in Black college students?
3. What are some of the ways Black students cope with the constant social media coverage?

### ***Positionality***

I am a Black male. I know some would argue and question the validity of my Blackness due to my mixed-race heritage, but that is not the area of interest or a topic of

discission. I consider myself to be Black British as I was born in England and spent most of my childhood and all of my formulative years there. However, both of my parents are U.S citizens– which has given me the perk, or curse, of dual-citizenship. My positionality is unique, as I do not consider myself to be American, but yet I have spent the last 12 years in the U.S and all of my research focuses on Black Americans. I believe the ability to remove myself from the equation, and to not have been born and raised in the United States, gives me an outsider perspective and an ease of which I can question the norms and status quo of the United States. I can do this without feeling guilty for implicating myself or having to wrestle with the previously held beliefs of superiority that many Americans have clung to.

This project stems from my own traumatic experiences with the police and encountering police violence on social media. It is my hope that I can continue with this work, even once this degree is completed, and at the doctoral level. I hope to maintain the relationships I have begun with my focus group participants and my thesis committee. In addition, I hope that this work aids those who study within the intersections of racial trauma and police brutality and offers a newer lens to this conversation through the analysis of social media. This thesis is just one attempt to work for my community and to produce something of substance to help the Black community understand their experiences better and to learn more about a reality far too many of us share.

## CHAPTER 2

### ASSUMPTIONS FOR THE STUDY

There are three assumptions for this thesis. That all parties involved (1) are familiar with and understand the definitions of key terms used in this thesis; (2) have at minimum, a basic understanding of the severity and current climate regarding police brutality against Black Americans in the United States and believe police brutality is a public health issue; (3) believe race-based traumatic stress is an applicable theory to use when examining an individual's negative online encounter with racism and racist content.

Participants displayed all three of these assumptions throughout the data collection and screening processes. It is from these findings that I draw these assumptions, as they were not pre-written. To address the first assumption, I will provide a brief and current overview of police brutality in the United States. To address the second assumption, I will briefly present the current scholarship and research surrounding racial trauma and RBTS. However, the third assumption will be explored further in Chapter 3, under Literature Review.

#### ***Assumption 1: Comprehension of Key Terms Used***

For this study, I use several key terms that will reappear throughout my thesis. It was displayed and understood that all parties involved in the data collection process have a firm grip on the definitions and usages of these key terms and it makes sense to provide these definitions to the reader.

*Black Americans* is a term used synonymously with *African Americans* and refers to any person who lives in the United States and identifies as Black, or mixed-race Black, with total or partial ancestry descending from the African continent.

*Race* is a social construct that in the United States identifies people by their skin color, language, and physical appearance.

*Racism* is a term hard to define, and many scholars would define it differently, but for this thesis, *racism* is the complex set of beliefs and ideas that attempt to dominate a racial group and rob minorities of their dignity through individual acts and systemic forms of racial discrimination. Individual acts, such as using racial slurs or lynching, can also be named *overt racism*. *Overt racism* is named as such for its easily identifiable racist nature and is deemed socially unacceptable. Systemic forms of racism, are also known as *covert racism* as they are shielded from public view, are typically socially accepted. Examples of *covert racism* include policy-making that directly impacts marginalized groups – such as voter suppression, funding education from property taxes, mass incarceration, and those who deny the existence of racism.

*White supremacy* is a belief system upheld by white Americans that instill white people are superior and exceptional and therefore have the right to dominate all other races, by any means necessary, in all aspects of society. White supremacy is the dominant ideology in this country and has been since its inception. The United States was founded upon white supremacist ideologies thus it has been purposefully ingrained into every institution and system in this country making its tentacles inescapable. White supremacy does not require one's belief in it to validate its existence but operates most viciously under the mask of disbelief or denial. Under white supremacy ideology, "whiteness" is the norm and anything outside is considered the other. As a result, whiteness is seen as a bar of excellence and a status quo that must be upheld in all social, economic, and political arenas. While extreme white supremacy calls for the total exclusion and



extermination of other races and promotes a white ethno-state, one can be complicit in perpetuating white supremacy without advocating for extremist beliefs, as white supremacy itself is not a fringe idea, but widely accepted in various forms and is central to most U.S institutions.

*Race-based traumatic stress* (RBTS) refers to the traumatic mental and emotional injury caused by one's encounter with racism. RBTS is a theory that implies targets of racist encounters may experience them as traumatic which often provokes symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), however, RBTS is not considered a mental disease but an emotional and or psychological injury. Certain criteria must be met for a racist encounter to be considered RBTS (Carter, 2007).

*Social media* is used as an all-encompassing term to describe modern social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and news media outlets. *Black Death* is a term used to describe the death of Black people at the hands of the police. It also is used as a descriptive term to encompass the viral sensation and media obsession with plastering pictures and videos of brutalized Black bodies online and in print, while profiting from such content. *Black Death* is also known as *Trauma Porn*, by some scholars and researchers, and although I do not use this term in my thesis it is one that is highly appropriate.

*Police brutality/police violence* is the excessive use of force by police officers against any citizen. It is always unwarranted in nature, violent, and a violation of one's civil rights. *Police killings* are defined as, "a case where a person dies as a result of being chased, beaten, arrested, restrained, shot, pepper-sprayed, tasered, or otherwise harmed by police officers, whether on-duty or off-duty, intentional or accidental" (Mapping

Police Violence, 2021). *Police brutality content* is defined as any content associated with the act of police brutality that a person may engage with online or in-person. It involves videos, images, headlines, court decisions, rhetoric, and the general public conversation surrounding the issue of police brutality.

***Assumption 2: A Shared Understanding of the Problem at Hand***

Racism and police brutality in the United States are two issues that one operating in good faith cannot ignore. A massive “92% of Black Americans [in 2017] said that racial discrimination exists against their racial group today” (Bor et al., 2018, p. 308), while The Counted, a group of data-researched dedicated to tracking police killings, at The Guardian, found in 2016 that “1,093 citizens were killed by the police” (Swaine et al., 2017). More recently, an end-of-year-report produced by Mapping Police Violence found that “1,127 people were killed by the police in 2020” (2021). These numbers are far higher than any other developed nation in the world. Part of the frustration surrounding police brutality is the fact that justice is often denied. Regardless of race, officers are rarely ever charged for their on-duty crimes, “98.3% of killings by the police from 2013-2020 have not resulted in officers being charged with a crime” (Mapping Police Violence, 2021). The other frustration with police killings – minus the loss of loved ones – are the racial disparities surrounding these killings.

Mapping Police Violence states, “Black people make up 13% of the U.S. population, but 28% of those killed by the police and are 3.5 times more likely to be killed by the police than whites” (2021). Fryer (2018) supports these claims and concluded that although Black males aged 15-34 make up only two percent of the population “in 2015 they accounted for 15% of all deaths logged...Roughly 25% of

Blacks that were killed were unarmed, eight percentage points higher than whites” (p. 228). Police violence disproportionately affects Black Americans who are almost 50-percent more likely to experience force in their interactions with the police (Fryer, 2016). Even five years later there has been no significant changes in current available data. In fact, there was nearly a three-percent increase in police killings between 2019 and 2020 according to Mapping Police Violence (2021). Most would argue that police violence is connected to violent crime, but that is not true. When analyzing the largest 50 cities in the country, “there appears to be little connection between police killings and violent crime... Some cities with high rates of violent crime have fewer police killings than those with higher violent crime rates” (Mapping Police Violence, 2021).

Not only are police killings frequent, but according to a study conducted by Edwards et al., “being killed by the police is a leading cause of death amongst young Black men ages 25 to 29 in the United States” (2019). As a result, Edwards et al., have urged community leaders and health officials to address and treat police brutality as a public health issue (2019). In 2018, Bor et al., suggested that police violence be treated as a public health issue and in the same year, the American Public Health Association (APHA) stated, “law enforcement violence is a public health issue” (Benjamin, 2020). The APHA echoed this again in June of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd and were joined by the American Medical Association and the Physicians for a National Health Program (Strazewski, 2020; PNHP, 2020). There is growing momentum to view and treat police brutality as an issue of public health, and for good reason. Sewell and Jefferson (2016) used 7 years of microlevel health data from the New York City Community-

Health Survey to analyze the health impacts of police surveillance practices, such as stop and frisk, and found:

Individuals living in a neighborhood where a greater proportion of Black or Latino stops involve force (relative to white stops) are more likely to perceive their own health as poor/fair, to be diagnosed with diabetes and high blood pressure, and to be overweight/obese than an individual living in a neighborhood where the distribution of force among stops is less unequal. (p. 50).

The negative health impact that police brutality has on Black Americans is clear and the racial disparities in police use of force are also clear. In addition, the impact of racial discrimination and racial violence is well documented, and it has been “consistently linked to poor physical and mental health outcomes across various racial and ethnic minority groups” (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016, p. 2). My next assumption will highlight how these racial encounters can potentially be traumatic and can often fit the criteria for race-based traumatic stress, even when the encounter takes place online.

***Assumption 3: Online Racial Encounters Fit the Criteria of RBTS***

Several studies have concluded that there is a correlation, and likely causation, between police brutality and mental health issues (Tynes et al., 2019; Bor et al., 2018), that racism and discrimination does produce negative mental health effects such as depression, anxiety, and psychological stress (Edwards et al., 2019); and young Black men who witness police violence in childhood and emerging adulthood can meet the DSM’s criteria for trauma exposure (Robinson & Smith, 2019). However, according to Carter (2007) these studies all miss the mark.

While there is plenty of scholarship available that addresses the political and socio-economic effects of racism, as well as the connections between racial discrimination, trauma, and mental health, these studies and research projects rarely overlap (Carter, 2007). This leaves the direct effects of racism to not be studied, but even when “race-related stress has been studied, trauma was not considered a possible reaction” (Carter, 2007, p. 14). While mental health experts have studied stressful life events, racial discrimination, and trauma, they have not considered whether racism may produce trauma (Carter, 2007). Racism, therefore, is not a by-product of the trauma but is the key producer of said trauma.

This is why Carter’s theory on race-based traumatic stress (RBTS) is critical to my study. RBTS view one’s negative and emotional encounter with racism as a traumatic experience, but only if certain criteria are met. RBTS seeks to explore the specific aspects of racism that are “directly linked to the particular psychological effects or reactions of its targets...to connect particular types of experiences with racism to specific mental health effects” (Carter, 2007, p. 15). The reason why RBTS is such a useful and helpful framework is that it differs from the standard criteria that is used by trauma and PTSD researchers. While it seems reasonable that racism can produce tension as well as a range of negative mental health problems for its targets, “trauma researchers typically do not focus on racism as a factor in the development of posttraumatic stress disorder after exposure to a potentially severely stressful event” (Carter, 2007, p. 15). With that being said, I agree with Carter’s outline of why PTSD is not useful for analyzing or studying race-based experiences that may also be traumatic.

According to Carter (2007), PTSD criteria is too limited due to the fact it ignores a person's subjective perceptions, it requires the event that triggers reactions to be physical or life-threatening, and using PTSD criteria would indicate the victim of racism has a mental disorder and while it makes sense that they would experience distress and be made ill by a racist experience "focusing on the person leaves out consideration of the acts or experiences of racism responsible for the stress or trauma that one has had to endure" (Carter, 2007, p. 33). When analyzed, PTSD criteria leaves out major life experiences that may have produced trauma. Using a PTSD framework also suggests that only an encounter with racism that was physically violent or life-threatening could meet its criteria. This ignores subtle and less public acts of racism, also known as covert racism.

Therefore, a newer model of traumatic stress is needed and has been provided by Carter's use of the Carlson 1997 model of traumatic stress. Carlson's model will be briefly discussed in Chapter 5 when used in conjunction with Carter's criteria for RBTS. It is for these reasons that I chose to use the theory of RBTS, as it is more apt for this study on racial trauma and includes a more inclusive framework when addressing one's experience with racial violence. In addition, my findings suggest that all of my participants did indeed meet the criteria for RBTS and since this theory does not indicate or suggest that the negative racial encounter has to take place in person, it was suitable to use when focusing on social media usage. In Chapter 5, I will further discuss how RBTS is an applicable theory to use when examining Black college students experiences online with racist content, such as police brutality.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I discuss current scholarship that has guided my research process and will be used to validate the findings of my study. I discuss and evaluate previously published bodies of work in this literature review and it is separated into three primary sections: (1) racism, trauma, and negative health impacts; (2) traumatic experiences online; (3) coping mechanisms. These categories correlate with my three research questions, mentioned in Chapter 1. First, I examine the research conducted on racism, trauma, and negative health impacts on targets of racial encounters. Then, I detail how experiences online can be traumatic. Finally, I cover some of the coping mechanisms that victims of racial trauma use to promote healing and positive self-progression.

#### ***Racism, Trauma, and Negative Health Impacts***

There are many studies that would have offered valuable content to the discussion of police violence, racism, and trauma. Some of the most prominent literature is provided by Bor et al., (2018) who analyzed the relationship between police killings of unarmed African Americans and the impact on mental health as well as potential spillover effects. Bor et al., (2018) employ a quasi-experimental design and combine it with nationwide data on police killings pulled from the Mapping Police Violence database, and regional surveys. Bor et al., admit that research highlighting the causal link between racism and health outcomes is indeed limited (2018). This may be due to the fact that police killings are attributed to everything but acts of racism, especially by vocal members of pro-police groups and unions. Bor et al., (2018) state that police killings of unarmed Black

American men are an expression of structural racism. Bailey et al., (2017) define structural racism as “the totality of ways in which societies foster [racial] discrimination, via mutually reinforcing [inequitable] systems that in turn reinforce discriminatory beliefs, values, and distribution of resources” (p. 1455).

Bor et al., (2018) build upon recent works surrounding police shootings and also found that police killings have adverse health effects on the Black adult population in the United States. When an unarmed Black person is killed by the police in the U.S., Black men who are residents of that state experience increased mental health problems that lingered for up to two months afterwards: “each additional police killing of an unarmed black American was associated with 0.14 additional poor mental health days among black American respondents...The largest effects on mental health occurred in the 1–2 months after exposure” (Bor et al., 2018, p. 302). To put these numbers into context they were compared with the mental health burden that 75 million Black Americans carry when dealing with diabetes and found “the mental health burden from police killings among Black Americans is nearly as large as the mental health burden associated with diabetes” (Bor et al., 2018, p. 307). Which is a clear indication of just how grave of a health crisis police killings of unarmed Black American adults is.

Similarly, Smith and Robinson (2019) found that due to the media’s nationally publicized incidents of police killings, young Black American men from the ages of 18-24 cited being killed by the police as their number one fear. This led to grave concerns over personal safety and their mortality when interacting with police officers (Smith & Robinson, 2019). While no two people experience grief, stress, or trauma in the same way or for the same duration, it is important to note the sociocultural context of grief,



“with the legacies of slavery, lynching, and police brutality serving as a backdrop to the grief and meaning Black families construct about police violence and killings” (Smith & Robinson, 2019, p. 150). In the same way that lynching’s are often met with impunity and were used as scare tactics to terrorize and assert social control over Black Americans, incidents of racially motivated police killings and brutality, are modern versions of lynching and also operate as forms of racial terror and social control (Smith & Robinson, 2019). Unsurprisingly then, even the current rhetoric used in defense of police killings and the justification of Black Death is almost identical to that of the early 1900s surrounding lynching’s (Ore, 2020).

Using this backdrop, there are some shared similarities in the collective history of racist police violence against Black communities and negative police sentiments. Smith and Robinson (2019) identified police violence as a traumatic stressor in the lives of their participants which stemmed from witnessing police violence in childhood to directly engaging with police officers and being victims of brutality in their adolescent and emerging adulthood years (Smith & Robinson, 2019). Therefore, Smith and Robinson’s (2019) conclusion that “young men’s actual exposures to police violence and police killings, the threat of such violence, and consequently, even police officers themselves, are traumatic stressors in the lives of Black boys and men” (p. 170). The impact on Black people witnessing state violence be committed against members of their own ethnic and racial group is severe. Bor et al., (2018) found that police killings of unarmed Black Americans were not associated with changes in mental health among white Americans “nor was exposure to police killings of unarmed white Americans” (p. 307). This indicates that Black Americans are adversely impacted by police killings and it

contributes to more days of negative mental health, which screams of the role structural racism plays as a motivator behind health disparities (Bor et al., 2018).

As observed by Bor et al., (2018) spillover effects of police killings of unarmed Black Americans could result from “heightened perceptions of threat and vulnerability, lack of fairness, lower social status, lower beliefs about one’s own worth, activation of prior traumas, and identification with the deceased” (Bor et al., 2018, p. 308). Therefore, these spillover effects suggest there needs to be a historical and institutional context when analyzing these negative mental health impacts (Bor et al., 2018). This lends credibility to the long history of institutional and systematic oppression which violates and targets Black Americans in the form of over-policing, police brutality, rarely charging and convicting officers who murder, and sentencing disparities. These are undeniably products of systematic and institutional racism; the former is also known as structural racism. At each turn, the devaluing of Black life continues and is projected to Black Americans through the institutions they engage with. As stated by Bor et al., (2018):

In this context, police killings of unarmed black Americans are perceived by many as manifestations of structural racism and as implicit signals of the lower value placed on black lives by law enforcement and legal institutions—and by society at large. (p. 308).

Structural racism has developed continuously since the first colonies of the United States were created, it is deeply engrained into the behaviors, actions, and thoughts patterns of those in the U.S and other countries around the world (Bailey et al., 2017). As previously discussed, there are severely negative health impacts that police brutality, and other examples of structural racism, have on Black bodies. For generations, public and

private institutions have reinforced racial hierarchies and have allowed white Americans unprecedented access to earning more, acquiring more wealth, and maintaining dominance in the political sphere (Bailey et al., 2017). Thus, structural racism has played a significant role in the distribution of positive life chances and an increase in detrimental health effects. This has been showcased recently, during the entirety of the COVID-19 pandemic, structural racism and economic inequality have played dramatic roles. According to a report from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) “factors such as discrimination, neighborhood and physical environment, housing, occupation, education, income, and wealth gaps put some racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of exposure to COVID-19” (CDC, 2020; EPI, 2020). These are racist structural issues that have led to worsened health impacts for racial minorities in the United States.

The correlation between structural racism and the health of African Americans, however, is not one that has been frequently researched. According to Bailey et al., (2017), “the stark reality is that research investigating the relationship between structural racism and population health outcomes has been scant” (p. 1461). Similarly, a decade prior, Carter (2007) argued that a main factor that contributes to racism and its negative health impacts are the “failure to clearly understand the emotional, psychological, and, to some extent, physical effects of racism on its targets” (p. 14). There seems to be two main gaps in research. The first being investigating structural racism’s effect on African American’s health and the second being a failure to understand the emotional and psychological impact racism has on its targets. In addition, “prior to the introduction of the race-based traumatic stress (RBTS) model, a specific link to an experience of racism

and the symptoms associated with it did not exist” (Carter et al., 2017, p. 31). However, in recent decades more work has been produced “providing evidence that racism is experienced as a stressor which has a negative impact on the mental health of people of color” (Carter & Forsyth, 2010, p. 183). There is a structural (macro) issue that has to be attended to, which must be followed by analyzing the structural impact on the individual (micro). Research has shown that people of color are in fact stressed due to “individual, institutional, and cultural encounters with racism” (Carter, 2007, p. 14). These encounters impact one’s psychological and physical health, as it is highly documented that racist encounters, as with other forms of stress, “produce psychological arousal... certainly increase anxiety...and cause one to worry” (Harrell et al., 2003, p. 247).

In an online study conducted by Carter and Forsyth (2010) over 300 hundred participants were asked several questions about their racial discrimination experiences. Carter and Forsyth (2010) found that “91% of the participants had an experience with racial discrimination sometime in the past 10 years, and that the majority of those experiences were recurring” (p. 189). These findings are consistent with similar studies that have been conducted in the past 15-20 years and as the frequency of racial encounters rise so does the severity of mental health problems (Carter & Forsyth, 2010; Harrell et al., 2003; Kessler et al., 1999).

According to Carter and Forsyth, almost half of the participants stated their stress continued for periods of time ranging from 2-12 months (2010). A nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, independent of age and gender, found that “perceived racial discrimination was associated to a lifetime history of major depressive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder and substance use disorder” (Chou, Asnaani &

Hofmann, 2012, as cited in Polanco-Roman, 2016). Several other symptoms were outlined by Carter and Forsyth:

Participants reported a range of emotional responses to their experiences. Feeling disrespected and feeling angry were the most frequent reactions, followed by feeling insulted, disappointed, frustrated, outraged, hurt, and shocked. These findings are consistent with previous research that reported racism to be stressful and a source of emotional distress. (p. 189).

These are emotions and reactions that suggest people of color who are targeted by racism may experience traumatic stress. Each emotion is not always shared, and reactions vary from individual to individual as trauma manifests differently in each person (Robinson, n.d.). For instance, Hoggard et al., (2012) found that when African American college student's experiences were compared with general everyday stresses, they "reported significantly greater levels of rumination and avoidance in response to race-related stress" (as cited in Polanco-Roman et al., 2016, p. 3). In addition, trauma-exposed individuals may experience dissociative symptoms that vary across different dimensions, such as "distortions in perception of the self, events and sensory information; intrusions of trauma-related experiences, and gaps in memory and awareness (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016, p. 4). These psychological issues are obvious and negatively impact the mental well-being of targets of racist encounters. Other work has been done with college-age students, Pieterse et al., (2010) "reported that higher levels of perceived racial discrimination were significantly associated with higher levels of self-reported posttraumatic stress symptoms among a sample of Black and Asian college students even

after adjusting for general life stress” (Pieterse et al., 2010 as cited in Polanco-Roman et al., 2016).

Carter (2007) contends that a racial encounter that is emotionally painful, out of the individual’s control, and produces a sudden reaction may “overlap with PTSD symptoms (e.g., hypervigilance, intrusion, and/or avoidance) and also involve other criteria unrelated to PTSD (e.g., processing and understanding race and racism) that can result in a RBTS injury” (Carter et al., 2017, p. 31). Symptoms that one may develop from an encounter with racism include cognitive impairments such as memory loss or confusion but also headaches, self-blame, and guilt (Helms et al., 2010).

While some researchers argue that a racial encounter must be violent for it to be traumatic, Carter (2007) argues that a racial encounter does not have to be life-threatening or violent for it to be considered traumatic and highlighted this in his 2005 study, stating, “98% of participants did not report being physically assaulted or threatened” (Carter et al., 2005, as cited in Helms et al., 2010, p. 56). The insidious nature of racism means that an event does not have to be physically violent for an emotional and physiological response to occur. Carter et al., (2005) found an individual’s emotional and psychological reactions to racial harassment were more intense and lasted longer than their reaction to racial discrimination. However, it is difficult to know for certain if specific types of racism, such as discrimination or harassment or violence, impact people differently (Carter et al., 2005; Carter 2007).

Helms et al., (2010) offers some insight into the results of encountering racist incidents and claims the levels of victimization in survivors of racist encounters are similar to survivors of rape and domestic violence. They write, “as is the case for rape

and domestic violence, racism may involve physical and psychological assaults that might be overlooked if racism is not considered to be an important cause of physical and emotional distress” (Helms et al., 2010, p. 55). The idea that racism needs to be considered as a primary cause of distress is largely borrowed from other researchers (Carter, 2007; Carter & Forsyth, 2010; Carter et al., 2017).

### ***Traumatic Experiences Online***

Witnessing undocumented immigrants be locked up in cages and police killings of Black people are two of the most trauma-inducing events adolescents of color can witness online (Tynes et al., 2019). Adolescence is a period of life where one’s racial identity becomes more noticeable, thus giving way for individuals to view their experiences as racialized (Tynes et al., 2019). This has called for an urge in understanding the offline consequences of Black adolescents’ experiences online, as there is ample evidence to suggest a significant correlation between traumatic events online (TEO) and heightened symptoms of depression and PTSD (Tynes et al., 2019). However, there is little other work done on the impact TEO have on adolescents of color, specifically Black adolescents. According to Tynes et al., (2019) “Furthermore, to date, there is no study that explores repeated exposure to these traumatic events online (TEO) among minority youth populations” (p. 372). The same can be said for Black college-age students.

While adolescents are not my target population with this thesis, it does give insight into this problem as we continue to rise in the age of social media. Pew Internet Research’s 2018 survey of technology usage amongst adolescents found that “45% say they are online almost constantly... a figure that has doubled since the 2014-2015 survey”

(Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Similarly, a vast majority of Millennials some “86% use social media each day” (Vogels, 2019). Social media usage is more popular now than it ever has been before, yet, in regard to gathering data on traumatic events online and how frequently users witness them, there has been no large-scale data efforts.

Several studies describe how TEO correlates with depressive and PTSD symptoms in the local communities they occur, there is good evidence to suggest that these traumatic events spillover beyond the regions of occurrence (Bor et al., 2018; Tynes et al., 2019). Simply put, these traumatic events are not contained to one single geographic location or where the event took place as they are shared "through a relative or friend and discussing these events...watching media such as television, listening to the radio, or reading the newspaper” (Tynes et al., 2019, p. 372). This can lead to indirect exposure which can also be traumatic in nature. As stated by Holman et al., (2014) “unlike direct exposure to a collective trauma, which can end when the acute phase of the event is over, media exposure keeps the acute stressor active and alive in one’s mind” (p. 93). It is understood that constant media exposure to traumatic events can perpetuate fear and contribute to long-term trauma-related symptoms (Holman et al., 2014). In addition, Tynes et al., (2019) found that Black and Latino adolescents who encounter images or videos of police shootings are self-identifying with the individuals directly impacted by the trauma “perceiving a potential threat based on membership in a particular ethnic-racial group may also make adolescents keenly aware that individuals in the video could easily have been them” (p. 376). Self-identifying with victims is a finding echoed by my own study, which will be elaborated upon further.



While Tynes et al., (2019) has findings that are consistent with literature highlighting the effects of trauma and mental health, it has no mentioning of race-based traumatic stress and uses PTSD as the guiding and concluding criteria. It would have been of value for the researchers of this study to incorporate RBTS and to view it as a potential outcome from seeing traumatic online events. Carter (2007) argues extensively that PTSD does not adequately diagnose victims of racial encounters and the authors themselves admit that “DSM-V criteria for PTSD excludes exposure to traumatic events through media” (Tynes et al., 2019, p. 372) yet PTSD is still the co-main diagnosis used.

Social media usage is gathered almost every year with race, gender, income, and age factored in. There is no shortage of this data, however, there are significant gaps in research when studying the impact viewing traumatic events online, such as police shootings, has on Black adults in the United States and if such experiences can lead to the development of RBTS. This is largely why I conducted my own study, albeit smaller in scope, but to address key elements that others have missed. I wanted to incorporate RBTS, police violence, and social media together. Individually, much work has been done on these three fields, but rarely have all three been put in conjunction. With the rise in social media usage and a rise in police violence, it seems sensible to study TEO and racial trauma. Why this gap in knowledge and extended research exists is uncertain, especially as the connection between racial trauma and witnessing viral incidents of police brutality online has been frequently produced in popular writing and opinion pieces (Adetiba & Almendrala, 2016; Downs, 2016; Gregory, 2019).

### *Healing and Coping Mechanisms*

There are a number of coping mechanisms that one could use in response to experiencing racism and to adapt, respond, and cope with race-based traumatic stress (Carter 2007; Polanco-Roman, 2016). Although Black people are subject to more frequent encounters with racism and are likely to develop RBTS symptoms, they typically do not share their experiences of racial discrimination with anyone other than those within their immediate support system (Carter & Forsyth, 2010). This indicates several problems.

Carter and Forsyth (2010) they found that out of 300 study participants “only 12% of participants sought help from psychologists and other mental health professionals...African American participants were the least likely to seek professional mental health services to deal with their experiences” (p. 190). While this result could be because of a lack of access to mental health experts, it is more likely the result of mental health professionals not having adequate race-based training and a lack of knowledge on racial issues (Carter & Forsyth, 2010). African Americans believe that health care officials do not have proper resources for addressing and resolving their experience with racism and have a distrust of health care professionals as racism is often deemed an invalid stressor that does not produce negative health symptoms and trauma (Carter 2007; Carter & Forsyth, 2010).

The most frequently used coping mechanism by Black Americans is to confide in their support system of friends, families, and spouses. However, this may not be the best way to cope with trauma as families may not be able to provide adequate support in resolving the issue, yet, health care professionals may also be unequipped for the task, if

it is even brought to their attention to begin with (Carter & Forsyth, 2010). More research must be done on how targets of racism cope with their racist encounters and on the effectiveness of specific help-seeking and coping strategies in comparison to others (Carter & Forsyth, 2010). Many researchers work towards internal solutions that help an individual deal with the symptoms of trauma on a personal level and others believe an analysis of both the internal symptoms and a critique of the oppressive systems that create mental health problems need to be adopted (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019).

One potential mechanism that could promote healing and produce more inclusive healing mechanisms is to create sanctuaries for targets of racism to share, explore, heal, and work through their experiences. These could be done through focus groups, informal meetings at workplaces, multicultural centers on college campuses, places of worship, and made available in the health care and education systems. The creation of safe spaces, and not sanctuaries, for victims of racial trauma, is a hard goal to accomplish as ethno-racial minorities “live in a society where their humanities are constantly under assault, therefore the notion of “safe” spaces are unrealistic” (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019, p. 55). Following this framework, the word “sanctuary” refers to the term made popular by Immigrant communities which describes “a place created to offer protection, affirmation, and validation to those who live in fear” (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019, p. 55). A sanctuary, in whichever format, allows for targets of racism to cope with their trauma on a community level, thus creating a more sustainable and solid platform for healing and restoration to take place.

The aforementioned framework, named the HEART (Healing Ethno and Racial Trauma) framework is one that could allow for holistic healing mechanisms to be

adopted for victims of racial trauma. This framework requires one to focus on the internal symptoms and external oppressive systems that create and sustain psychological issues (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019). Focusing solely on the internal would miss the mark and it fails to address “how different systems of oppression (i.e., intersectionality) impact clients' presenting concerns” (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019, p. 55). While the HEART framework was primarily created for Latino people, it could be adopted by other ethnic and racial groups as well. Trauma-informed care is one tool proposed by Chavez-Dueñas et al., (2019) that could seek to respond to and understand the impact trauma has had on the lives of targets of racial encounters. Trauma-informed care “highlights the need to address: (a) physical, psychological, and emotional safety; (b) trustworthiness, (c) choice, (d) collaboration, and (e) empowerment” (p. 56). These tools stem from Liberation Psychology and when used in conjunction, focus on both the internal symptoms and acknowledge the oppressively racist systems that can produce psychological effects on the individuals who live within them.

Less is known about how individuals respond to trauma and cope with racial encounters and if certain coping mechanisms are better for promoting well-being than others (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016; Carter & Forsyth, 2010). Polanco-Roman et al., (2016) conducted a study to expand research upon racial discrimination as a race-based traumatic stressor and found a “significant association between racial discrimination and dissociative symptoms” (p. 8) which are “momentary lapses from reality in response to a threatening situation that is perceived as emotionally taxing and results from a loss of control over the environment” (p. 4). Polanco-Roman et al., (2016) found that the majority of individuals in their study used active coping strategies, such as attempting to

resolve the issue themselves, staying indoors to avoid confrontations with police, or talking to someone else about it, when responding to encounters with racism. These strategies are congruent with similar conclusions (Carter & Forsyth, 2010; Smith & Robinson, 2019).

Even in my own study, I found that participants were more likely to use active coping mechanisms instead of seeking medical and mental health assistance. Carter (2007) contends that further research on racism – and its many manifestations – needs to occur so that there can be adequate employment of effective coping and healing mechanisms. In addition, Polanco-Roman and colleagues (2016) join Carter and Forsyth (2010) in calling for further research to be carried out studying the relationship between the different forms of racism and various coping responses. By doing so, more inclusive coverage would be made available which could offer proper coping mechanisms, depending on the form of racism, to targets of racism.

Hoggard et al., (2012) also echo similar sentiments after conducting a study with African American college students, who were asked to keep a daily diary and track their responses and coping mechanisms to racially stressful events and nonracial stressful encounters. Hoggard et al., (2012) found that participants “used less planful problem solving and more confrontive, ruminative, and avoidance coping strategies in the racially stressful events as compared with the nonracially stressful events. These findings suggest a need for race-specific models for coping with racial discrimination” (p. 329).

Avoidance coping mechanisms, as frequently used by African American college students in response to individual forms of racism, could be viewed as an act of self-preservation which reduces the physical toll it takes to exist in a society where racial discrimination

and violence is unavoidable (Utsey et al., 2000, as cited in Hoggard et al., 2012). In contrast, confronting the offender may restore a victim's self-esteem, power, and reduce feelings of victimization (Hoggard et al., 2012). The ruminative aspect, as found by Hoggard et al., (2012) highlights the viciousness of racism, it is implausible to believe that Black Americans could simply get over or forget about their experience as "victims repeatedly think about the event while simultaneously experiencing or reexperiencing it" (p. 337). Such a response to a racial experience may put the individual at a higher risk of negative mental health outcomes as well as depressive symptoms (Hoggard et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2009; Sellers et al., 2006).

Regardless of the coping mechanism used or the framework adopted by African Americans, it is essential to understand that "coping" is in fact taking place (Hoggard et al., 2012). Black Americans are not passive victims and are not being walked over and dominated by racial stressors and racist encounters without countering. Black Americans are engaging with their racial encounters and are actively coping to alleviate the burden of living under oppressive and unjust systems. These are acts of survival and resilience (Hoggard et al., 2012). One of the most difficult tasks when healing from racial trauma is the fact that racial wounds do not have time to heal as they occur within a sociopolitical and socioeconomic context on an uninterrupted basis (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). Researchers and mental health professionals are met with a difficult task; creating adequate coping mechanisms and healing models for those who are continuously wounded. According to Truong and Museus (2012):

Most of the models on coping are race-specific, and many of them are limited in that they do not explain ways that the victim managed relationships with the

oppressor. In addition, these models do not include methods for healing. Many coping models focus on dealing with the specific race related problems, but do not provide strategies for how people of color can cope with knowing that racism is permanent. (p. 229).

While there are numerous coping models that exist to explain how racial minorities respond to racism, there are still some significant gaps in the literature surrounding coping mechanisms for race-based trauma and stress. Most researchers acknowledge this gap, and even when attempting to fill it, admit that further research is needed. Specifically, more inclusive, detailed, and race-specific coping mechanisms and frameworks must be created to cater to the various and continuous forms of racism, both individual and systemic, that one may encounter (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016; Carter & Forsyth, 2010; Carter, 2007; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019) while promoting healing (Truong & Museus, 2012) and not minimizing the coping strategies and mechanisms that are already in use by Black Americans (Hoggard et al., 2012) such as speaking to friends and family about their experience or staying indoors as much as possible to avoid traumatic and potentially fatal interactions with the police (Smith & Robinson, 2019).

In this literature review, I evaluated relevant existing research surrounding areas of interest pertaining to my study. In this chapter I addressed three main sub-topics: (1) racism, trauma, and negative health impacts; (2) traumatic experiences online; (3) healing and coping mechanisms. In this next chapter I outline the methods used to conduct my focus groups to gather data on Black college-age students' experiences viewing police brutality on social media.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

In this exploratory research study, I employed qualitative methods and conducted focus group interviews with Black college-age individuals who were current students, including undergraduate and graduate students at Arizona State University. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather data on their experiences witnessing police brutality content online and to how symptoms of race-based traumatic stress may manifest from seeing such content. I also sought to understand how the participants coped with race-based trauma. Relevant literature was used to inform my study and to provide scholarship addressing themes related to my research questions. The study is guided by these three research questions:

1. What do Black college students experience when engaging with police brutality content on social media?
2. How may symptoms of race-based traumatic stress due to these experiences manifest in Black college students?
3. What are some of the ways Black students cope with the constant social media coverage?

#### ***Recruitment and Screening***

In order to gather focus group participants, I first had to create a recruitment script. I circulated the script via e-mail on the ASU server. I was assisted by my research committee and close friends within my cohort in circulating the script to potentially gather interest amongst students. Once interest was gathered, potential participants were sent a screening questionnaire to identify if the interested individual would be a suitable



fit for the focus group. The questionnaire contained questions about their own experiences with social media and perception of anti-Black racism and police brutality in the United States. If the potential participant was suitable, meaning they were a current ASU student, frequently used social media, had witnessed police brutality incidents online or in-person, and were aware of police brutality being a major issue, they were invited to participate in the three focus group sessions. The screening questionnaire was used to filter out potential participants who held views and opinions that would have been detrimental to the well-being of other participants and our group as a whole.

Potential participants had to have, at the least, a basic understanding of the severity of police brutality and its impacts on the Black community. The purpose of the study was to gather experiences and examine the manifestation of symptoms, it would have been impossible to gather experiences pertaining to racism, police violence, and social media if a participant did not have any relevant experience with either of these three topics. Lastly, each participant was required to sign a short consent form prior to moving on to the first focus group sessions.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection included individual and focus group interviews as well as maintaining a researcher journal and discussing emergent themes and preliminary findings both with my graduate committee members and the study participants. The latter measures contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings. The journal also provided a space for me to reflect about how I was processing the issues discussed.

Each of the focus groups was conducted virtually via Zoom. Prior to conducting

the focus groups, I met with participants one-to-one. Each one-on-one session lasted for approximately 30 minutes and included learning a bit about each other and providing information on the study. I also answered questions and clarified my areas of concern, but most importantly the first focus group was used as an icebreaker. It was an informal meeting where I could get to know each participant better and create a relationship where we were both comfortable engaging in a dialogue. During the one-on-one interviews, each participant was asked to create a pseudonym to ensure they could remain anonymous to other participants and throughout this thesis. Anonymity and confidentiality were crucial to the sanctity of the study. I wanted to offer every measure I could that would allow for participants to speak freely and to model vulnerability without worrying about fear of retaliation or judgment.

The two focus groups were between 60 and 90 minutes long and were attended by each participant. They were also conducted on Zoom in a group setting and focused on gathering data about the participants' experiences with viewing police brutality content online, racism and trauma, and coping mechanisms. All focus group sessions were video recorded for data collection purposes. The Zoom chat function was utilized for question asking purposes but did not play a role in the discussion or as a means to answer questions. The interview questions asked in the focus groups were semi-structured and conversational. The questions involved asking about participants' *mindbody*<sup>1</sup> reactions to witnessing police brutality content online, if their reaction differed depending on who

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<sup>1</sup> *Mindbody* is a term used in disability studies and was coined by Eli Clare. It refers to the intricate relationship between the body and the mind and often views the two acting as one inseparable unit. It is used in my thesis to embody the serious nature that racial encounters, either individual, systemic, or both can have on Black people in the United States.

shared the content, describing the emotions they felt when police officers who commit murder are not charged or convicted of their crimes, and law enforcements preferential treatment of white Americans over Black American. Several themes emerged from my study, such as participants experiencing similar emotions; hypervigilance, tiredness, the inability to forget about the experience, frustration, as well as events like the murder of George Floyd and white insurrectionists storming the Capitol on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021. These themes and findings will be examined in full in Chapter 5.

### ***Data Coding and Analysis***

I transcribed all of the one-on-one interviews and focus group recordings and then printed and compiled them into three sections, one for each of the groups. Once transcription was completed, I assigned a color-code to each of the participants and coded for reoccurring themes throughout all three session transcripts as well as answers to my research questions and important quotes. Once the necessary information was highlighted it was sorted into three different Google Docs: (1) Focus Group Themes; (2) Focus Group Quotes; and (3) Participant Answers to Research Questions. Google Docs was used for its accessibility, safe storage of information, and familiarity.

### ***Trustworthiness***

While reliability and validity are constructs far more used in quantitative research, I worked to increase trustworthiness by member checking with one focus group participant to ensure that my findings, quotes, themes, and overall transcription were consistent with what participants shared and what the video recordings showed. At the beginning of each focus group, I spent several minutes going over the issues discussed in the previous session and double-checking the accuracy of my transcription with the

participants. In this next chapter, I present the findings of the study. It is organized around major themes and participant answers related to my research questions from the individual interviews and the two focus group sessions that followed.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I explore and report the findings of my study. To protect the identity of my participant's pseudonyms were assigned to each of them. My findings are divided under separate sections, each correlating with a major theme found in the study. Some of these themes do overlap and all information provided is drawn from participants' answers to the research questions spanning the one-on-one interview and two focus group sessions. Participant answers are left in their original format and original language.

Carter (2007) references and builds upon Carlson's (1997) model for traumatic injury and claims that for race-based traumatic stress to occur three criteria must be met: (1) the event must be perceived as negative; (2) it must occur suddenly; (3) it must be uncontrollable. Carter (2007) elaborates on this:

If one does not perceive an event as negative, it will not produce harm...It is more difficult to adapt to an event that occurs without warning than to one that is gradual and takes place over time...The belief that one has some degree of control over events serves as a form of protection. Trauma is more likely in situations in which one believes that he or she is not able to control the highly noxious event(s). p. 34-35.

In addition to these three criteria, individuals who suffer from RBTS "share three core reactions that may be expressed through one or several physiological, emotional, cognitive, or behavioral modalities" (p. 36). The core reactions are intrusion, arousal, and avoidance. *Intrusion* refers to the reexperiencing of the encounter as thoughts, memories,

or images of their experience will often “intrude” upon individuals as they go about their day which creates difficulty in concentration (Carter, 2007). *Arousal* refers to the hypervigilance or hyperactivity that one may experience such as anxiety, anger, frustration, worrying, sleeplessness, and panic (Carter, 2007). Finally, *avoidance* refers to the rejection of events, not engaging in discussions about the event, avoiding people or the place associated with the event, as well as the loss of memory or the inability to recall particular elements of the encounter (Carter, 2007). For race-based traumatic stress (RBTS) to be present one must perceive the racial encounter as negative, sudden, and uncontrollable and display some of the three core reactions: intrusion, arousal, and avoidance (Carter, 2007). These criteria make up race-based traumatic stress.

The above criteria do not distinguish or claim that solely in-person or offline events can be traumatic; therefore, it is my belief that racially traumatic events seen online can also fit the bill of RBTS. Police killings that are shared, discussed, and viewed online are mostly viewed as negative by African Americans. They occur and are posted suddenly, often without warning or a chance to prepare, as police killings happen randomly and without warning. Lastly, these events are uncontrollable. The user of social media has no possible way to control the situation and prevent the police killing they are witnessing on that platform or stop it from becoming widely shared or going viral. It is important to note that a person can experience all of these reactions in different ways and the manifestation of said reactions varies from person to person as we all experience trauma differently (Robinson, n.d.). One could potentially experience all three core reactions in one medium, such as depression or severe anxiety. Furthermore, individuals may express feelings of guilt, shame, personal responsibility for causing the racial

encounter, low-self-esteem, and have difficulty sharing their experience (Carter, 2007). In these next sections, I display how participants in my focus groups meet the criteria for race-based traumatic stress when engaging with police brutality content on social media and ways they cope with the constant media coverage of Black Death.

### *Arousal*

After the one-on-one interviews were conducted each participant was tasked with creating a journal, in the medium of their choice, to record their mindbody reactions to witnessing police brutality content on social media over a four-week period. It was not limited to any particular platform and there was not a minimum word requirement or certain parameters that had to be met. It was an opportunity for each participant to journal in the way they are most comfortable. Some participants chose to do this mentally, others chose to write about it in a physical journal, and at least one used voice recordings to document these reactions. By purposefully asking each participant to engage in a journaling exercise, this essentially forced them to have to witness potentially traumatic events which opened up the possibility that re-traumatization could take place and that arousal could be, in a sense, induced. The participants had an opportunity to share how they thought the journal assignment went and to give their feedback on what they noticed about the reactions. Anna, a first-year master's degree student, shared the following:

It was very heavy to have to record and write down my feelings to everything I saw, but it definitely helped as it was a means for me to process and release my emotions in a safe place. However, afterwards I found myself having thoughts of could this be me one day? It was super draining.

Imagining oneself as a potential victim, after witnessing a traumatic event, is

something most of the participants mentioned throughout the meetings. CJC, an undergraduate student, said the journal assignment left him with more questions than answers:

I found it to be really interesting. I have never had to do a journal assignment before, but this really just drove me into a place where I was wondering, like, “well, what would happen if that were me, like would people care?” Would people defend the cops and be like “well, whatever happened to me happened and that sucks, but you deserved it!” I was really just left asking a lot of questions.

When prompted to dive into how they felt, participants began to open up more and dive into their emotional and psychological reactions to the police violence they had seen online. Ezra, a master’s degree student, said that it was an exhausting assignment to complete due to the repetitive nature of police violence. He felt as if he could never get a break from it:

While it was refreshing to express my emotions in a private place, a place where I knew they would be valid, recording my reaction to police violence was exhausting. I found myself exhausted from the repetitive nature of police violence and how it seemingly never ends. I did not want to become desensitized to it, but it happens so frequently that I can see how it leads to desensitization. It was equally as exhausting to have offline conversations with people, who adamantly support the police, about the events that took place online.

Stephan, a first-generation American and doctoral student, had a more positive reaction to the journal assignment than the other participants and found it to be therapeutic, stating “journaling is good, and it is therapeutic to think through one's



emotions...The journaling assignment was not too difficult as it was something I was already familiar with.” For James, an Immigrant and doctoral student, his experience was the complete opposite to that of Stephan’s:

I found the assignment to be difficult as I found myself revisiting previous experiences and emotions that I had felt in the past. I felt incredibly angry when I saw these situations unfold online and this journal assignment brought to light these emotions and the way I have been handling incidents involving police violence and racism. I was angry with the situation and angry with not being able to explain to myself why I feel this way.

Anger is one of the most notifiable and easily identifiable reactions that one can experience when arousal takes place. Anna, who has family members in law enforcement, was not only fearful of what she saw online but at times throughout this journal assignment imagined herself as the victim in these police killings which is “really fucking scary, and it makes me feel depressed, as I already have really bad anxiety.”

***Social Media: “It Only Amplifies Black Death”***

Anna offered insight into what may be the source of her anxiety. She said that “it [social media] only amplifies Black Death and it provides nonstop documentation of the killings of Black people but also the commentary and the extreme lengths people go to in justifying police killings.” Anna also mentioned that social media reinforces that Black people are “the other” because people make excuses for your treatment:

Your personal character is examined, and your online history is looked up, as a way to justify what happened to you. What does my high school history or the

fact I got a speeding ticket have to do with me dying and being killed for no reason today?

This comment about social media being a platform that amplifies police killings and what it means to be Black in America seemingly opened the floodgates and made the other participants eager to share and respond back and forth to one another. Ezra was the first to comment further on social media and what it means to be Black in America:

Social media is very degrading to Black people and because of social media people act like America is getting worse. But in reality, America has been this way... To be Black in America is to be seen as a constant threat. You're always a threat to somebody.

Anna then offered her thoughts and put together one of the most memorable quotes from our focus group sessions:

Yeah, I agree. Even though you don't see yourself as a threat, you are one in society. It's dangerous to be Black, but you need to learn how to navigate it. Being Black is complicated, it's scary, and it's not for the weak at all.

After Anna's comment marinated for a second, it was followed up by CJC who offered this poignant statement:

To be Black in America is to be handicapped. It doesn't mean you can't win, but you have one arm tied behind your back. You have an ankle weight on... It's a real thing...It is inescapable. But it doesn't mean that life is over or that you can't survive. It just means you have to try that much harder than everybody else.

According to my participants, social media is an echo chamber of sorts. It

highlights the killings of Black people but does little to help the overall status of Black Americans and it does nothing to prevent Black bodies from being victims of police violence. Social media is an amplification of the violence Black people face and to a degree it glorifies it. Social media turns Black Death into nothing more than likes, retweets, shares, and views and is detrimental to the well-being of Black people.

Anna believes that social media enhances the issue of police brutality, too. She gave the example of her father, who just recently joined Facebook and now has a willingness to speak about the issue of police violence against Black people after seeing it constantly being broadcasted, uploaded, and shared online. Anna suggested that while it is important to be informed, her father's perspective only changed because he realized "damn, this shit could really happen to me and Facebook definitely reminds him every time he looks at it." This is the double-sided nature of social media. For some, it is a good tool for educational purposes. Anna's father, since joining Facebook, is now more aware of these incidents as they are being recorded and shared more frequently, but he is also potentially opening up himself to a traumatic experience as Black Death continuously circulates the internet at lightning speeds. James concluded this section of questions with the following statement:

Okay, here we go again. Nothing is going to change, especially on social media as it amplifies the violence and puts Black people in a very bad space. Social media is like a rocking chair, it gives the illusion of progress and movement, but in reality, you aren't going anywhere. Hashtags and retweets amplify the news, but more is needed to create change.

### *George Floyd: An Awakening*

Participants were then asked to detail their experiences and reactions to high profile cases of police brutality in the United States. I gave a few examples in order to help everyone get on the same track and mentioned examples like Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, and George Floyd. With George Floyd, at that time, being the most notable and memorable, it was no surprise that after just a few seconds of silence and thought, George Floyd instantly became a major talking point. CJC, seemed to have an epiphany and referenced back to the journal assignment:

When I was doing the journal assignment I, like James, found myself going back to experiences of my past. I remember back in May or June, around the time George Floyd was killed, I had such bad anxiety that I was almost having a panic attack. It kept me up all night and I found myself sitting there utterly shocked, not at what I saw on video, but at the online comments and conversation surrounding the defense of police officers and the justification of why a Black man should have been murdered.

When asked to explain why he was shocked at the rhetoric surrounding police killings, CJC answered with “I had a sense of profound frustration and felt as if Black lives really did not matter to these people. People really had such strong feelings about something so basic and they get it so wrong.” James echoed similar sentiments of surprise and claimed that before the incident of George Floyd, he was not aware of the impact it had on him. Prior to the murder of George Floyd, James felt angry but could never pinpoint exactly why he was angry. After the death of George Floyd, he knew it stemmed from seeing police brutality on social media. He then backtracked his

experiences and connected that “extreme anger” to the watching of videos and the media frenzy surrounding Black Death, stating:

When George Floyd was murdered it was everywhere. It evoked such feelings of anger. Even now, I am not sure why it was this case that connected the dots. I cannot pinpoint why this particular incident had me feeling the way it did or what about it that shifted my thought.

After a few seconds of thought it appeared as if James, like CJC, had a fresh revelation surrounding the murder of George Floyd. James offered the following statement:

I guess part of the anger comes from when the police kill someone. But what makes me even more angry is the conversation of “well, I’m not racist” as a defense for those who are upholding white supremacy without even recognizing it. There are those who dismiss the experiences Black people have and are unwilling to listen to victims of racial violence and instead justify why racist and violent actions should be or were taken. This is where my anger comes from.

As with James, CJC said that the death of George Floyd was a turning point for him, too. The thing that shocked him the most, while being a constant social media user of seven years and seeing online incidents of police brutality frequently, was the sheer amount of conflict surrounding Floyd’s death:

It was a big combination of emotions for everybody. So, the fact that it was getting flooded everywhere didn’t help. I saw it all over the place and I was really able to go in and see what everybody thought about it and I really did not expect there to be such conflict... I just couldn’t understand it at all. I found myself, as I

kind of mentioned earlier, wondering would people defend the cops if I were killed? Would people care? Or would people just say I deserved it?

Ezra, a mixed-race Black male, had a similar experience and had similar questions he asked himself. However, in a slightly different manner, his questions stemmed from real-life conversations and arguments with his white Mother. Ezra found himself angry when talking to his white family members, especially his mother, who used a variety of justifications as to why George Floyd died. According to Ezra, it ranged from “there is not enough evidence” to “he was dangerous and resisting arrest” to “he was high on fentanyl.” These conversations were “extremely frustrating.” In Ezra’s own words, “Dylann Roof was arrested without incident after he killed nine people who were having a prayer group. George Floyd allegedly used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill and was high on fentanyl, and he ended up getting murdered.” In addition, Ezra discussed the Breonna Taylor case with his family, which they also attempted to justify:

So, my Mom came at me and was like “but the dude had a gun” and I was like “but the dude was a registered gun owner. Just like me. I’m a registered gun owner... He has rights. He can defend his property.

Ezra called these conversations an “emotional roller coaster” as he is a Black male who has a family that “argues for the police” which usually leaves him “crying and hurt.” He offered this gut-wrenching statement, “to be Black means to have to explain and justify your right to exist peacefully and right for human dignity, even amongst family members.” Stephan said the general discussions surrounding police killings also leave him feeling “very sad” and that they are “emotionally taxing and draining.” They stated that the death of George Floyd over the summer was “the shot that killed the

camel, because the back was already broken.” Which lead to them feeling as if “no one was safe.” They said that 2020 had been “incredibly rough from a racial equity standpoint.” As Stephan’s thoughts and feelings were being shared, Anna indicated that she wanted to respond and validate what had been said:

When George Floyd died back in May [2020], I found myself incredibly upset, like, I was really sad that day. I watched the video and got chills and I was very nauseous. My whole day was ruined... So, to avoid the situation, I just slept the whole day away.

### ***Avoidance***

While most of the participants experienced avoidance, it manifested in different ways. None of the participants experienced difficulty in remembering the events they witnessed or the inability to accurately retell them. However, most did describe in detail the ways avoidance was part of their emotional and physical reaction to witnessing police violence online, which has real-world offline impacts. Furthering her recent comments from above, Anna described different ways in which avoidance is part of her daily life. Anna shared her own story of traveling while Black and mentioned that when she sees police killings online, of people being shot in their cars or while running away during a traffic stop as a means of escaping violence, “it is really freaking scary...and really freaking traumatic” especially when she has to go travel somewhere:

I’m like, oh, shit, I’m not going to leave the house today because I don’t know if I can still go to this place? Is it still safe for me outside? We cannot just do basic things on our own, it can be dangerous. Like running or like traveling somewhere. When I travel, I have to Google everywhere I go, just to make sure it is safe for

me and my cousins to drive. Sometimes when these police killings happen, and it is during school, I won't even go to class because I don't wanna talk about it.

As Anna was talking, her words reminded me of the Negro Motorist Green Book, or the Green Book, for short. It was an advice book used by African Americans who traveled through or to the segregationist South during Jim Crow. The Green Book offered advice on safe places to sleep, eat, drink, or stay. The very fact that Anna, in the year 2021, had to use the same tactics as Black travelers 73 years ago, makes the words from the 1948 edition of the Green Book hit that much harder:

There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published. That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States. It will be a great day for us to suspend this publication for then we can go wherever we please, and without embarrassment. (Andrews, 2017).

While the Green Book is no longer published, the same tactics are still being deployed several generations later. In addition to feeling as if it is not safe to leave home, James shared that he too would Google each place before visiting to be aware of police brutality incidents that took place in that city or town. James also shared that when he travels, he broadcasts his location to his work colleagues and friends at all times, so they know if an “unscheduled stop” such as a traffic stop by the police occurred:

It's a little bit scary, but I had to share my GPS signal with them, so they know where I was at all times. One time I made an unscheduled stop when I was coming down to take a meeting and my phone lost signal and when I got signal again my phone was blowing up because they're like, “are you okay? You



disappeared for like two hours? We didn't know where you were!” It was more traumatic for them. It was so traumatic for them.

Furthering these thoughts James added an accurate analysis of the state of this country and lamented on how much has changed regarding everyday activities becoming increasingly more deadly for Black people to engage in.

Regular everyday things that you do have become so dangerous, like driving. For Black people it was always dangerous, but we're more heightened and aware of it, but you know, I'm careful. I like to go hiking. I like would like to go camping and I'd love to be outdoors, but so many people say to me, please do not go outside at night. Please do not sleep outside in a tent overnight, please do not go camping, because this is a dangerous place and you almost have to change what you like to do and be so on edge... When did we get to this place that simple everyday things lead to murder?”

Other avoidance techniques used were not as drastic but were of equal importance. Ezra, Stephan, and CJC, all said that in addition to being careful about where they physically place their Black bodies, they all avoid social media when incidents of police brutality occur due to the overwhelming nature of the event. If they do choose to use social media, they purposefully do not read or engage with the comments section, as this usually leaves them feeling angry, depressed, anxious, or filled with rage. CJC stated:

I'm with James, in how I don't really like to look at comments that much anymore. I used to have hope that there would be some logic or some kind of like progress in understanding. But I've come to figure out, people will do anything to remain

ignorant. The hope that people could turn a new leaf kind of a withered. So, I kind of just avoid it now.

While avoidance can be physical, such as not visiting a place where the incident took place, the participants were more likely to avoid the general conversation or social media entirely, so that they do not inject oneself into public discussion surrounding an incident of police brutality or the rhetoric of those who defend violent police actions—which they found emotionally taxing. To perfectly conclude this set of questions, Anna added her final remarks, which encompassed most of what had already been discussed:

The Jacob Blake case hit home for me as I have family who live in Kenosha. It was traumatic to witness it, to hear about it, and to talk about it. But what really bothered me is now I can't intervene if I see some shit in the street because the police might get called and then when they get there, they might shoot me. So now it's like, damn, you can't even like help other people out, you know? I can't stop things from happening without thinking "shit, I might lose my life today? Is this worth it?"

As the conversation was underway, I made a mental note that each incident of police brutality that had been mentioned so far was one in which the officer was never charged or convicted of a crime. Therefore, justice is often denied. As I write these findings, I am reminded of the ongoing Derek Chauvin trial. Many witnesses have testified that they felt helpless to save George Floyd, as he lay on the ground suffocating, as they were either rooted to the spot in fear or were instructed and threatened to not move or issue aid. As a result of witnessing such an event and the lack of intervention, several witnesses have expressed feelings of guilt, shame, and other emotional and

psychological pains. The next sub-section is based upon responses to this question, “justice is often denied in these cases and officers are not found guilty after these incidents. Why do you think that is? Describe how that makes you feel?”

***What is Justice? “Not Seeing Black Folks Get Lynched For Petty Crimes”***

Almost instantly after asking that question James replied with:

Justice in this country and so many other things relies heavily on the criminal justice system, which is not just, there's nothing just about it at all. I think if we're relying on our criminal justice system that is flawed and does not grant people justice, then none of those families will actually get justice. None of the folks responsible will be held accountable for their actions because it's a systemic thing.

After James mentioned the lack of accountability, I was reminded of how the lack of accountability for police officers who commit murder can lead to a greater fear of being victimized by the police. As it appears, they operate with near-total impunity. This is reflected in the work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as cited in Smith and Robinson (2019) which found that “a sense of powerlessness to hold police officers accountable in the future...intensified young Black men’s vulnerability to police violence and trauma (p. 171). Stephan then offered a very crucial point and asked an important question asking about the concept of justice and how it should be applied on an individual basis:

I think we have to also first then define what Justice is...what are we calling justice? Because for some people seeing those officers be shot is also

justice. Right? Like, for some people capital punishment is justice. For some people it is not. For some people restorative justice is more just.

Stephan continued their dialogue and added that justice looks different to each person and added their own opinion of what justice is:

But for me, what Justice really means is that we need to see the system change. Like, let's remove all these barriers and boundaries that are preventing Black and Brown people from being successful. Justice for me, means that this system needs to be blown the fuck up and started back all over.

Ezra added his thoughts and claimed that due to the police's long history of participating in unjust and violent acts, like the 1921 Black Wall Street Bombing in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that when victims hear the term "justice", they have no clue what justice is:

The police have been involved with so many violent acts against Black folks that when we hear justice nobody knows what justice is because to some people, like Stephan said, seeing the police officers get shot is justice. Justice is not seeing Black folks get lynched for petty crimes.

Ezra went on to say that asking the questions of "what is justice?" and "what does just look like for you?" are very good questions, as it is different for every single person. "If America wants to become like the countries it aspires to be like, it's got some changes to do because right now America is fucked." This comment left participants laughing but also nodding in agreement.

## *Intrusion*

The next section focuses on intrusion and highlights how several of the study participants experienced intrusion, or intrusive thoughts, as a psychological reaction to witnessing incidents of racism, namely police violence. Intrusion seemed to be one of the most experienced reactions by all participants as they were all unable to forget their experiences and had flashbacks often. These flashbacks most frequently occurred when a participant would witness a different encounter of police violence. It almost served as a trigger and would have them returning back, thinking back, or having flashbacks to other times they witnessed police violence. As evident by James and CJC discussing how witnessing recent events had them returning back and thinking upon the murder of George Floyd. The most frequent example of intrusion came in the form of participants asking themselves “what if this were me?” and envisioning themselves as the victim in police shootings while simultaneously recalling the police brutality content they encountered. Anna expressed the inability to participate and concentrate in her classes at times:

But like this one [Jacob Blake] was like to the fact where I couldn't even participate in class because it was like shit. Okay, this is like really hitting home and like this can happen to anybody at any time, you know?

James echoed this statement and added that he could not forget the video of Ahmaud Arbery, who was not killed by the police, but was still a victim of racial violence, “I keep thinking about the video of Ahmaud Arbery who was running. Anyone could be running in their neighborhood, right?” CJC and Ezra both nodded in agreement when James was speaking, as if silently agreeing that they too had the same thought.

At the time of writing this, Derek Chauvin, the officer who murdered George Floyd's by kneeling on his neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, is on trial. Seeing this in the background as I type brings back intruding thoughts of my own experiences with the police. I can vividly recall my first negative and racial incident with the police when I was 19 years old. I was harassed, targeted, and embarrassed for simply tending to my garden, in my own back yard, in a white affluent neighborhood. When I close my eyes, I can see myself standing outside of my house utterly shocked that this was occurring but frozen to the ground, unable to move, out of a mixture of fear and silent panic.

I can recall the smug look on the officer's face as he pulled myself and my older brother over for "driving like shit" while looking for any excuse to arrest us as we peacefully drove home from the airport in Salt Lake City, Utah.

I can see the image of Walter Scott, wearing a green jacket, turning and sprinting in the opposite direction of Officer Michael Slager as bullets fly into his back. The video plays over and over in my mind on a frequent basis and often interrupts my thoughts, just as it did years ago. Whenever the term "police brutality" is mentioned I automatically remember this video. It is a subconscious reaction that I cannot control.

I also see young Tamir Rice, just a boy playing with a pellet gun, get slaughtered in two seconds by Officer Timothy Loehmann. This is often accompanied by the screams of Philando Castile's partner as his body lay slumped in the front seat, riddled with bullets, and blood gushing from wounds, as seen from its viral Facebook video. When I think of "police brutality" I think of the montage of Black bodies and Black faces that are no longer with us, killed for simply existing. But when I think of my own experience at age 19, I cannot help but think about how fortunate I am, as both Trayvon Martin and

Ahmaud Arbery were killed for simply existing in an affluent white space. Being victimized while engaging in everyday activities is one experience many Black people can relate too, staying alive while participating in acts of violence is one privilege many Black people could never imagine.

***Capitol Riots: “The Double Standard is the Point of Policing”***

Just a few days prior to our third focus group session, insurrectionists, spurred on by now-former President Trump and other Republican leaders, stormed the Capitol. This took place on my birthday and it was a birthday poorly spent, witnessing the obvious double standard of policing unfold before my very eyes and the eyes of every American. The double standard being white mobs being allowed to riot, destroy property, assault and murder police officers while ironically screaming “Blue Lives Matter”, with seemingly no lethal or physical retaliation by police officers or even many arrests. I am not suggesting that white people need to be killed by the police, rounded up and arrested, or that I am fine with police violence, I am simply highlighting the glaring preferential treatment of white mobs over unarmed Black citizens. In January, one side was fueled by the President’s lies, misinformation stemming from myths surrounding voter fraud, and a “stolen” election. In the summer of 2020, when Black protestors took to the streets en masse, they were fueled by centuries of systemic racism, police brutality, violent oppression, and political repression. To compare the two is asinine.

We know from history and recent protests that Black protestors are not treated the same as white mobs. They never have been. Funnily enough, while witnessing white supremacists, neo-Nazi’s, and deluded individuals’ storm one of the nation’s most cherished buildings, this thought dawned on me: am I really shocked at what I am seeing?

Am surprised by yet another clear example of the double standard in policing, when the double standard *is* the point of policing? I answered a swift no and attempted to enjoy the rest of my birthday.

This section discusses the events at the Capitol. It was a hot topic to discuss in our third and final focus group, and while it was not planned or part of my original set of questions, it flowed perfectly into our discussion of coping mechanisms and it was a fruitful conversation with many shared emotions. It began with me asking “how do you cope with seeing the double standard of policing and the preferential treatment of white people over Black folks? How did you cope seeing it take place during the Capitol riots? What did you do to take your mind off it?”

Anna said that she remains aware of police brutality incidents but stayed away from Facebook and other social media platforms when the riots in Washington, DC, occurred. “I know the Capitol riots took place, but I didn’t go on Facebook, because I didn’t want to see the comments supporting it.” Anna stated it is “annoying as hell” to witness and exist within the double standard of policing and she copes by “essentially ignoring social media”, sometimes not attending class, and is particular with who she discusses the issue of police brutality with.

CJC answered by saying that he also coped by “avoiding the comments section” but admitted this was also due to him experiencing hopelessness. He believes the people who still do not understand the issue of police brutality and the existence of white privilege simply choose to not understand it. For Stephan, who was facing a monumental decision the week of our focus group, they questioned if they truly wanted to become a U.S citizen after witnessing the insurrection at the Capitol, “I just sat there and asked



myself, do I really want to do this? It made me sad. Really sad. It's more sad than anything else." When prodded further on how they felt seeing the Capitol riots, not just how they coped, most of the participants had a lot to say.

Anna expressed it was draining to witness the events at the Capitol because she knew that if the roles were switched and Black people were rioting, they would have been shot and killed. "White and Black people are treated differently. You've seen us protest - like we fucking got shot, and killed, and maced. White people do it, and nothing bad happens to them." I followed up on Anna's reply with the question "should Black people even concern themselves over the Capitol riots since we were not involved?" She replied as followed:

I definitely look at it a little bit differently. It doesn't hit me as hard because it's not people being directly killed... I'm not as emotionally drained as I would be by seeing a Black person being killed...I'm mostly drained because people feel so entitled and feel like they can get away with this shit and the fact is, they did. Like, are people now going to get the guts to do some shit to me because of the shit that happened at the Capitol?

In addition, Anna expressed being fearful stating she was "mostly scared" because she now wonders "how the rest of white America is going to act on this." Ultimately, she does feel "appreciative" of what happened at the Capitol, but only because the double standard in policing and the preferential treatment of white people by the police, was evident for the entire world to see:

In a weird fucking sense, I kind of appreciate what happened and it being in the forefront and it being publicized so people can stop denying the fact that, like,

white people, and Black people are treated differently... So, I appreciate, in a sense, that this showed that difference.

Similarly, to Anna, James had very little sympathy for what happened at the Capitol, at all. "This should happen to this country...It's a continuation of this country's original sins... We only talk about progress in this country and then make excuses for our blatant support of white supremacy ideology." This point rang true for several of the participants which had them discussing how security at Targets and Malls in New York City had more adequate security than the Capitol building in Washington, DC. Several participants pointed out there was uproar by the white majority when shortly after George Floyd's murder a police precinct building in Minnesota was set ablaze, but silence, when it came to the nation's Capitol building, set alight. We now know the fire in Minnesota was started by white right-wing extremists who posed as protestors but were outside agitators. To many of the participants, this only highlighted the fact that not all buildings actually matter, and that most white people did not care about the Capitol being attacked:

They didn't care because the offenders weren't Black or Brown... And law enforcement and the government allowed it [white mobs to riot within the Capitol] because ultimately their ideas align. This country is not dedicated to progressive values. It is not dedicated to racial equity. It is not dedicated to ensuring that Black lives matter.

As this dialogue unfolded, Ezra had several comments that he wanted to make in response to what had been said:

I saw some old white lady at the Capitol say "why are you shooting at us? You're supposed to be shooting at the Black Lives Matter protesters!" And I was like,

bingo, that's the kind of law-and-order y'all want! Blue Lives Matter, right? As you're literally trampling police officers and as you're smashing them. It's only Blue Lives Matter when it's convenient, which we all saw and which we all knew.

The final responses to this question of a double standard were given by James and Ezra chimed in to round us out. James found an issue with several news networks calling those who rioted, looted, and attempted to harm members of Congress while trying to burn down the Capitol "heroes." James exclaimed:

Unfortunately, you know, somebody was killed, or in some reports had at least four people killed, but they are referring to those folks as heroes. And I'm like, where the hell do we get off calling people who decided to destabilize our country heroes?

Ezra's issue was with the calculated effort of the media to avoid using the term terrorism or terrorist to describe the events and people at the Capitol, "Trump was rising up his troops and you know everyone's calling them fucking patriots, they are not fucking patriots. They are fucking terrorists. Let's put it simply."

### ***Participant Coping Mechanisms***

Some of these coping mechanisms participants described are similar to the avoidance techniques mentioned in previous sections. There were several coping mechanisms used by the participants with the most frequent being avoiding using social media, removing or blocking toxic people from friends lists, and avoiding the comments section on certain articles or posts. The following section is based on the question "How do cope with seeing and processing incidents of police brutality? How do you manage your emotions and feelings and your mental state?"

Stephan started us off and mentioned that for them, “sitting there and thinking and finding a space to just think, is how I cope. I will just sit there and just stare into space, or just listen to music and think about things.” James added that when a police killing happens, he deliberately stays away from social media and mainstream media to avoid “stupid people who post insensitive and dumb comments” he calls this an act of “self-preservation”. James chooses not to engage with people who purposefully avoid learning about what is happening to the Black community but admitted that he attempts to educate those who are willing to learn and not just those who “are asking for their own benefit and public appearance.” These are both coping mechanisms he has used for years. Choosing who to converse with and the avoidance of social media were the two most popular coping mechanisms discovered during the data collection process.

Ezra stated that he is similar to James in which he only engages with people he has the emotional energy and time to talk with. Ezra only talks in-depth about police brutality with people who understand it:

I will engage in conversations with those who are like-minded to me, so I can be fully able to articulate and verbalize my frustrations and how I’m feeling. Just to know that I am speaking with someone who understands what I’m saying.

Stephan countered these two statements from James and Ezra and believed it was important to speak with and educate those who wish to learn about the Black experience and racism in America otherwise they never will learn:

In an effort to be cooperative and to have a better society I believe we have to engage in this conversation, we have to find ways to do that and educate people who we can and share our experiences with.

In addition, and possibly ironically, Stephan does “regular Facebook purges” as a way to control what they see and to “not have to worry about seeing bullshit all the time on Facebook.” He weighs the pros and cons of engaging before doing so. Emotional labor plays a big part in this. If they have the emotional energy to reply, they will. If not, they do not. “Do I have emotional labor today? If I do, I might give them some of it.” For Anna, she experiences a real bind. She mentioned that coping is a difficult task and somedays she just wants to be able to exist without the emotional toll and weight of being Black, but also that these issues matter, and they should take a toll on her. It seemed as if Anna was expressing just how difficult it was to live in a country that does not value her and that she is often stuck between existing authentically and having to pretend as if these problems do not bother her:

Coping is sometimes hard because it’s like, this shouldn’t bother me, like, it’s hard to get to that point where it doesn’t bother you. So, I try to work on acting like, not that it doesn’t matter, but in a way where it doesn’t dictate me and affect my life as well. So, it doesn’t prevent me from certain things, like, it shouldn’t dictate my entire day, you know? But it’s also shitty because this is some real ass shit, so it should affect me, you know?!”

The coping mechanisms mentioned in this section were largely the same. Not once was seeking medical help, speaking to a religious leader, counselor, or therapist mentioned. Admittedly, we did not spend as much time as I wished discussing coping mechanisms and healing techniques used by those who have witnessed police violence online. This was largely due to the extended surprise conversation about the Capitol riots.

I cannot say with certainty that the use of seeking professional help as a coping mechanism would not have been brought up.

### *Discussion*

The findings in this study are similar to findings from previous studies. The participants all viewed police violence as a traumatic event online, displayed trauma-like symptoms such as anger, frustration, anxiety, intrusive thoughts and the inability to forget their experiences, and used a variety of avoidance techniques (Hoggard et al., 2012; Carter, 2007). Participants were unable to control the online police brutality incident from taking place, they could not predict its sudden nature or how quickly it was shared online and viewed police brutality content as overwhelmingly negative. These emotional and psychological reactions are fully aligned with the criteria of race-based traumatic stress (Carter, 2007). This study would indicate that all participants do indeed suffer from race-based traumatic stress and fit its criteria. The findings are also congruent with the findings of Carter et al., (2005) who found that when analyzing all racial groups, the most experienced emotional response, after extreme and mild distress were hypervigilance or arousal, avoidance, and then intrusion (Carter et al., 2005, as cited in Carter, 2007).

In addition, participants self-identified with the victims of police brutality incidents and considered them traumatic (Tynes et al., 2019). This study found that the participants identified police violence and the fear of being victimized by police officers as a traumatic stressor in their lives (Smith & Robinson, 2019). Participants also suggested that police violence against other Black people lead to changes in their mental health and their daily routine but did not experience such changes when other ethno-

racial groups were the targets of police retaliation (Bor et al., 2018), such as the white mobs during the Capitol riots.

Unsurprisingly, none of the participants mentioned seeking medical or professional help to cope with witnessing police violence or their emotional or psychological reactions to it. This is supported by Carter and Forsyth (2010) who found African Americans were the least likely to seek medical assistance to help cope after a racist encounter. This also indicates that there could be potential trust issues between Black college students and the medical community, a lack of effective race-based coping tactics within the medical world (Carter, 2007; Polanco-Roman et al., 2016), or this is not something worth talking about in therapy as it is not considered trauma.

Drawing from conversations during the one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions, it is my belief that the participants felt as if their encounters with racism and their experiences are often misunderstood, pushed aside, not taken seriously, and that their emotional and physical reactions to racist encounters are often dismissed by those in positions of power such as professors, workplace managers, and even doctors. James highlighted a story about his encounter with racism at Arizona State University and claimed the University's response was "shocking" as they told him "to give leeway to somebody as they unlearn being racist" but did nothing to resolve the issue which was "very problematic to me." The failure by institutions to address individual acts of racism but also the role the institution plays in perpetuating institutional racism, by failing to put in place safety measures for victims of racism, is indicative that new methodologies must be created that center resolving internal symptoms while providing a critique of the larger

systems that create and perpetuate mental health issues stemming from racism (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019).

When considering the avoidance techniques used by the study participants were almost all individually based, such as refusing to use social media, not attending class because of poor mental health or the desire to not speak about police violence, and not visiting cities and towns that have excessively violent police forces, this indicates that race-based coping models need to be further researched and employed to take the responsibility off of the victim and creating frameworks that promote healing (Truong & Museus, 2012). It is worth noting that regardless of the avoidance technique or coping mechanism used, the participants of this study are constantly coping with trauma, by simply existing under and enduring racially unjust systems (Hoggard et al., 2012). The participants of this study described having long-lasting psychological effects due to their encounter with police brutality content online and is evident from the fact most of them are still negatively aroused and distressed by witnessing these events in their past, but also from the reoccurrence of the events today, as police brutality persists and occurs more frequently now than any previous year data has been available (Mapping Police Violence, 2021).

### ***Limitations and Parameters of Study***

Although the findings of this study are largely in alignment with previous scholarship and offers key contributions regarding what Black college-age students experience online when engaging with police brutality content, how symptoms of race-based traumatic stress have manifested in them, and the role social media plays in



circulating Black Death, this work is not without limitations. There were several limitations to this study which could have impacted the findings.

The first limitation to my study was the small focus group. I only had five focus group participants to work with throughout the data collection process. Since this study was exploratory and for a master's degree requirement, as well as conducted during COVID, I had only a short window of time to complete the study. As such, had more time been given a larger study sample with more focus group sessions would have been used. In addition to the size of the study and the timeline, all of my participants were Arizona State University students, and all were in the School of Social Transformation, meaning they were in majors related to social justice and ethnics studies and may have held similar opinions on key issues that we discussed. Different viewpoints, opinions, and beliefs, while prioritizing the well-being and sanctuary type feel of the group, could have been beneficial.

Another limitation was that the group was not gender-balanced; it contained four men and one woman. Ideally, it would have been great to have equal numbers of men and women. With that being said, another limitation is the fact that all sessions were virtually based and held on Zoom. They were originally going to be held in-person and most of the participants expressed a desire to have been able to see how the group would have looked if we were in-person. There are several personal limitations that I feel are appropriate to mention. First, before this I had never conducted a research project before or led a focus group. Second, I have a limited understanding of trauma and models of trauma. I am not a trained psychologist and it was not my intent to take a medicalized approach.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### *Implications*

The largest implication from this study is the increasingly obvious need for the eradication of police brutality. Police violence is baked into the foundation of policing in the United States and the eradication of police brutality will never be achieved while we live within and operate under a hyper-militarized police state. While many call for the abolition of the police, which is a call I echo, the eradication and abolishment of one of the oldest institutions in the United States will not take place overnight, or maybe even in our lifetime, therefore, a model of harm reduction must be adopted as we work towards zero police killings or abolitionist goals of police-free communities. Simply calling for the abolition of the system of policing is impractical without taking practical steps to work towards it. If we want a different result, things must be done differently. We cannot allow ourselves to be stumped due to a lack of political or social imagination. To continue down the same path “because we have always done it this way” is absurd. We can no longer solely raise issues about police brutality on social media, engage in performative allyship, offer hollow thoughts and prayers, have Presidents express their condolences, while sitting idly by doing nothing to address the issue at hand. The research is clear that police brutality is a grave problem – it is now time to implement and work towards concrete solutions. These ideas must be used in conjunction and even then, are still not exhaustive. I welcome every idea and potential solution that can assist any of the issues raised in this section.

In order to begin on the road of eradicating police violence, the defunding of the police and the rerouting of those funds to better organized, educated, and trained groups who can deal with homeless people, the mentally ill, and intervene in moments of crisis is needed. Police are often tasked with more than they are capable of achieving, so putting the care of the community into the hands of people who do not harm and are trained in caring for it, is a great first step. Police budgets across the country are swollen with taxpayer money and must be reduced dramatically, as the police do not adequately protect the communities they operate within, especially Black communities. It is the right of the taxpayer to suggest where our tax dollars are being spent. The defunding of the police must also include its de-militarization. There is no reason for police departments to have vehicles or weapons of war in their precincts unless their intention is to wage war against citizens.

This is the catch-22 of the entire situation. Police departments use tanks, tear gas, pepper spray, and riot shields in an attempt to quell the actions of protestors, instead of holding their officers accountable for the violence they commit. So, by using military-style tactics the police engage in even more acts of violence against the communities they are supposed to serve and protect. It never ends; the police kill someone, the community protests and calls for justice, the police violently engage with and arrest protestors for being angry, justice is not served, and in a few weeks the police kill someone else and the entire cycle repeats. It is a cycle of violence. It is a system designed to be violent. We know that over-policing, mass incarceration, and wars on drugs do little to prevent crime from occurring and other avenues of community healing must be explored. Social woes

have not been solved by criminalization or the mass imprisonment of offenders. The past five decades has showed us this.

In addition, the ending of police union contracts with local governments has to happen. Police unions often, through backroom deals, reinstate officers who have no business being on a police force and use precedents like qualified immunity to shield officers from being charged or convicted. Police unions have too much influence and establish unfair protections for violent officers. There must be civilian review boards and community-led police accountability boards that can suggest and formally charge police officers who engage in misconduct. The lack of convictions for police officers who kill citizens is evident that police departments do not fairly investigate themselves or hold their officers accountable. Police officers are funded by tax-payers money and are civil servants. They are accountable to the communities they are supposed to serve and sworn to protect, yet not each community has this privilege.

Finally, the implementation of student-led task forces and initiatives on college campuses, like the one I was involved with at Arizona State University, to provide evidence-based policy recommendations to improve relationships between campus police departments and students, faculty, and communities of color would be beneficial. These task forces would review and recommend changes to police hiring practices, training requirements, and use of force techniques, thus ensuring a more community-driven approach to policing and one that does not center on violence. These boards would offer suggestions for departments and could be adopted on major college campuses around the country. Police departments that implement use of force techniques as well as accountability measures for those officers who use excessive force, as well as tighter

hiring practices, have seen fewer police killings occur in their cities (Campaign Zero, 2021). These changes cannot be isolated but must be used together. Simply offering “better training” to officers is not going to stop police violence. Kim Potter, the cop who killed Daunte Wright on Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021, was a field training officer. As was Derek Chauvin, the cop who murdered George Floyd. You cannot just train away police violence without analyzing the institution that perpetuates it. With that being said, there are several other implications that result from the findings of this study that are not directly centered on eradicating police violence.

All focus group participants expressed sentiments of gratitude for this study and the opportunity to discuss such a relevant topic. Participants were hesitant to join a focus group that contained those who may have offered views that denied their own experience or were not well-versed in the topic of police brutality and anti-Black racism in the United States. U.S universities would benefit from creating sanctuaries or safe spaces and multicultural centers for victims of racial discrimination, violence, harassment, and police brutality. These sanctuaries would promote healing and as found in this study, even discussing the experiences Black college-age students have is beneficial and produces feelings of solidarity and reduces one from feeling isolated within a predominately white institution. Universities should also analyze how they have upheld institutional racism and work towards a spirit of anti-racism, although the best way to do this is unclear. However, failure to know the best solution does not mean doing nothing is acceptable.

Social media platforms must change the way that Black Death is circulated, shared, and profited from on their platforms. The mass-circulation of police brutality content creates an environment ripe for trauma. The restriction and regulation of such

content could involve flagging certain images and videos of police brutality, issuing trigger warnings on graphic videos and images, and allowing users the ability to not see or engage with such content, ever. This would be similar to how users can already “mute” keywords and hashtags from appearing on their Twitter timelines, however, using this function does not always work so technological changes will have to be made. While some would argue that these videos and images need to be seen for educational purposes and so others can see the horrific treatment of Black people, it is the belief of the participants in this study that social media only amplifies and profits from Black Death by turning police violence into likes, retweets, views, and shares. This does nothing to prevent or stop these police killings from occurring, even when it is shared by activists and journalists, whose careers are based on such coverage. Black Death is a lucrative business, and it has to end.

According to the participants of this study, they can all easily remember their own encounters with racism and the police brutality content they have viewed online. The fact that some of these events occurred years ago is evident that these experiences linger for a long time. Therefore, further studies that focus on the role social media has in propagating police violence and the traumatic effects that can stem from seeing such content would be beneficial. We simply do not know what the long-term effects of witnessing traumatic events online are or its effect on Black American adults. A future study on this could be groundbreaking and would do well to build from existing research.

Additionally, research could also focus on how traumatic events online, including police brutality, potentially reinforce negative and racial stereotypes against Black Americans. If social media becomes a megaphone for police violence, it is not unlikely

that this will be accompanied by racist stereotypes and myths surrounding Black people, such as Black people being prone to violence and thus worthy of police retaliation, Black on Black crime, and the denial of racial biases in policing. Lastly, and maybe obviously, more research on police violence and its effects on the mental health of Black Americans would be appreciated. Creativity is needed with this research so that studies are not simply reproducing previously completed works but are creating entirely new angles and discussions.

Further racism-related coping strategies and healing models for victims of racial discrimination and those living with racial trauma must be created. Right now, there is a severe lack of medical and professional approaches that help victims of racism deal with their traumatic experiences and there is a serious lack in the research on racism as a traumatic stressor. The medicinal field must unite with social scientists, scholar-activists, and others who study racial violence in order to generate well-rounded approaches that promote healing and effective coping mechanisms. The fields of psychology and medicine would do well to adopt Carter's (2007) theory of race-based traumatic stress and its criteria, which views encounters with racism as a potentially traumatic stressor. These new approaches could be holistic in nature and should focus on resolving individual acts and responses to racism, as well as analyzing systemic forms of racism and oppression and its effects on ethno-racial minorities.

The goal of each of these solutions should be to work towards the ultimate end goal: the abolition of white supremacy. White supremacy is the mainstream ideology in the United States today. If it were just a fringe idea or one circulated in extremist groups, its reach would not be as widespread or as pervasive as it is, nor would it be central to the

foundation of every institution in this country. Police brutality is not a matter of just a few bad apples, but the very institution of policing itself is rotten. Policing stems from slave patrols and the founding of this nation as a slavocracy. These are fruits from the tree of white supremacy, which is rooted in anti-Black racism, domination, and racial violence. Therefore, if long-lasting changes are to occur, this status quo must be overthrown. This will require a total reconstruction and reorganization of Western society as we know it. The idea of “safety” and what “safety” is has been monopolized by police and prisons for decades. They market fear and have convinced so many people that they are paramount to our safety and well-being. I ask whose safety and well-being? People struggle with the question of “what will we do without police?” We will survive. We must not allow our imaginations to be policed and lack the political, social, and economic imagination to think about what a society may look like that does not have white supremacist ideologies at the core of its DNA.

### ***Researcher Reflection***

A couple of weeks ago, I heard the good news that one of my peers in the doctoral program successfully had their charges dropped by the Phoenix Police department, charges that were based on exaggerations and bald-faced lies. ABC15’s “Politically Charged” investigation uncovered a large-scaled effort by the police and prosecutors who worked together to create a slew of phony federal charges, including criminal street gang activity, for my colleague and a handful of other Arizona-based residents for peacefully protesting against police brutality in late 2020 (Crenshaw, 2021). The Phoenix Police department spent hours surveilling the small group of protestors while premeditatedly calling them “targets” prior to their arrest. This incident served as an eye-opening



reminder that the State can and does employ tactics of suppression against those who criticize its police presence. In this case, the charges were dropped, but many activists in Black Lives Matter and community organizers around the country are not always this fortunate, especially in small towns or even an epicenter like Ferguson, Missouri. This example drives home the importance of dissent and free speech protections, but also the unimaginable power that Police departments yield over those who believe in eradicating their violence.

I purposefully left this section for last. I successfully defended my thesis a couple of days ago, and it was terrific to see such an outpouring of support from over 30 of my near and dear family members, friends from around the world, colleagues, and past and present professors. It was a stark reminder of the timeliness of this study and I caught myself viewing my thesis defense, which was hosted virtually on Zoom, as my final focus group of my master's degree. The collection of different people, from all backgrounds and corners of the world, sharing one space in a collective and respectful effort to listen and learn. It was a bittersweet moment.

During my defense one of my thesis committee members, Dr. Keon McGuire, pointed out that the very focus groups I had conducted were indeed contributions to the healing, restoration, and transformation of others and myself. This was a powerful moment, as before this, I had not viewed the work I had done as an example of the community healing process suggested in this thesis. The entire conversation was rich, and I left feeling proud of myself, but even more determined and dedicated to build from this research and to continue working towards the implementation of these solutions.

Seven weeks ago, I was looking at an empty Microsoft Word document and found myself pondering exactly how I would begin this thesis. I thought to myself, how on earth will I do it justice? How can I ensure that I elevate the voices of my brave participants through writing? I wanted nothing more than to accurately share their powerful words in a manner that resonated with many. Over these past weeks, I have answered both questions, and I hope they help any primary researcher who may find themselves in a similar situation. You elevate the voice of others by listening, not by talking for them. To actively listen is to model one of the oldest methods of learning. To do justice work justice, you must inwardly practice justice and outwardly work towards a more just society. In theory, both of these answers are simple, yet in praxis, both can be difficult. I aim to master both. Writing this thesis and conducting my study were both challenging. This process challenged my intellect, my comfort boundaries, and I hope it inspires others to challenge the status quo.

I am thankful for this opportunity to do this work. I believe this study has assisted and advanced the conversation within our field, given members of the Black community a better understanding of their traumatic experiences, and provided some of them with a chance to begin the healing process. I stand in solidarity with all peoples, from every community, that are fighting against police brutality and striving towards its eradication.

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APPENDIX A  
IRB DOCUMENT



EXEMPTION GRANTED

[Elizabeth Swadener](#)  
[CLAS-SS: Social Transformation, School of \(SST\)](#)  
 480/965-1452  
 Beth.Swadener@asu.edu

Dear [Elizabeth Swadener](#):

On 10/7/2020 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Circulating Racial Trauma: How Black Undergraduate Men Experience and Cope with Police Brutality Content on Social Media.
Investigator:	<a href="#">Elizabeth Swadener</a>
IRB ID:	STUDY00012549
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informed Consent Form, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Marcus IRB Social Behavioral 2019_final BBS edits.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;</li> <li>• recruitment_methods_email_flyer_advertisement_09_15_2020_questionnaire.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li> <li>• recruitment_methods_email_flyer_advertisement_09_15_2020_script.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li> <li>• supporting_documents_focus_group_procedures_09_15_2020.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> </ul>

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 10/7/2020. In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at [research.integrity@asu.edu](mailto:research.integrity@asu.edu) to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Marcus Donaldson  
Raphael Charron-Chenier  
Marcus Donaldson  
Keon McGuire  
Elizabeth Swadener

