NEWSLETTER

Guest Spotlight Edition

Black Americans have been subjugates to slavery, the Jim Crow laws and segregation, a privatized prison industrial complex, medical eugenics, medical negligence, healthcare disparities, unequal quality of education, redlining, institutional racism, torture, and killings. These disparities have led to what can be best described as a public health apartheid in the US.

Featured in this "Guest Spotlight" special edition newsletter, AMHP invites Black community members to voice their opinions.

Rethinking Resilience-- Decolonizing Healing

by Tariro Nussinov, MSW and Brittany Ribeiro Brown, MSW

Over the years, my fellow Black friends and I have shared stories of our repulsion to being cast as resilient, especially by white therapists. It feels patronizing to go to a therapy session, share our struggles with anxiety and depression intertwined with a traumatic past and be dubbed as "resilient". Resilient people are not extraordinary, we are living in an oppressive society. When "resilient" people work hard within a system that has not afforded them the same opportunities as others, their physical and mental health deteriorates. 400 years of racial oppression causes psycho-social harm. A mental health system weighted heavily towards white values and white supremacy is damaging and ignores the barriers that disproportionately affects Black people. An environment that does not promote inclusivity and therapists that do not completely understand people's backgrounds and identities are harmful. What happens when we are tired of being "resilient"? What happens when we can no longer be "strong" or "brave"? We are not superhuman, we are human.

We live in a white supremacist society where the dominant culture is anti-Black. As a result, racism kills us not only through formal and informal policing but from everyday actors, actions, systems and structures. The current world, Black and white, expects superhuman resilience. Dr. Courtney Cogburn of Columbia University posits that cultural racism undergirds the social conditions that shape racial inequities in health, including social and health policy decision making, governance,

practice, and public reception (Cogburn, 2019). When Black people experience anti-Black racism (ie. Central Park Karen; being followed in stores; getting the names of the only two Black employees mixed up, watching Black people die on camera), they experience stress. The stress affects both mental & physical health. Racial stress affects physical health as one's fight and flight sympathetic nervous system is engaged and increases cortisol levels. After the stress exposure, the parasympathetic nervous system (the system that helps one's body to return to baseline after a stressful situation) is engaged. Dr. Cogburn states that after chronic incessant racialized stress the efficacy of one's psychological and physiological systems begin to get worn down (Cogburn, 2019). When acknowledging systemic and structural racism (i.e, environmental racism, decreased quality and access to health care), it's no wonder why Black people are disproportionately dying from covid-19, have higher rates of hypertension, diabetes, and maternal mortality rates. Black people are under constant stress. Our resilience and perseverance do not (and will not) make us superhuman.

The earliest images of resiliency in public and scholarly discourse have always thought of those that were deemed "resilient" as "invincible", "invulnerable", and more "developed". (Masten, 2015). However, an examination of converging findings from variable-focused and person-focused investigations suggest that resilience is common and that it usually arises from the normative functions of human adaptational systems, with the greatest threats to human development being those that compromise these protective systems. (Masten, 2015). Dr. Masten states that resiliency is "ordinary magic". It is important to It is important to remember that what we choose to call people matters. We have all read the scholarly work

(along with the think pieces) about the dangers of labeling others. Categorically labeling is a tool that humans have long used to resolve the impossible complexity of the environments we grapple to perceive. (Markman, 2014). However, it contributes to some of the deepest problems that we face. Just as there is understanding of the deliberate use of policy to disadvantage groups, therapists (especially white therapists with Black and Brown clientele) must critically analyze the ways in which language can be a tool to disadvantage groups. At the root of understanding the harm of the word "resiliency" lies the understanding of how whiteness threads and colors into everything. All too often "success" and "well-being" are lifted up as a goal that is attainable through resiliency. We must remember that resilience as a measure of success and well-being is a poor measurement. Black communities are confronted with mental health stigma, and relying on resilience alone to achieve good health is detrimental because it fails to address the true barriers faced by our communities.

Healing is essential for Black liberation. We need therapists who understand how white supremacy has negatively impacted Black lives and family units. According to the American Psychological Association, 86% of the psychologist workforce is white (2018). Thus, there needs to be post-graduate and graduate training to provide the majority of psychologists with tools to scrutinize white supremacy and treatment modalities most efficacious for Black clients. We need anti-racist mental health professionals who see beyond resiliency. We need therapists who see Black depression and anxiety as bi-product of an oppressive society. Healing cannot happen if therapists short-hand our coping mechanisms to resilience. Healing can and only happens when Black people can have mental health partners in the fight against white supremacy.

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Contextualizing Contemporary Black Resistance

by Durrell Malik Washington Sr., MSW and Alizé Hill, AM

The tragic and senseless murder of Ahmed Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and George Floyd by the hands of white men and police have sparked revolutionary movements across all 50 states in the U.S. as well as several other countries around the globe. Collective protest against the systematic oppression and targeted violence against black people, specifically by the hands of police officers is something that is not new to this country. What makes the protest of today slightly different is that black people and allies across the world are all speaking out against anti-black racism amid a global pandemic. It could even be said that we are experiencing a pandemic while fighting against the oldest pandemic in American history, that no vaccine, quarantine, or randomized control trial can help us to cure. But in order to fight against anti-black racism that has been embedded in the foundation and fabric of a country built on stolen land, we must see a complete system abolishment,

transformation and the birth of a new world built on equity and that is community driven. While some may be witnessing resistance beyond the likes that some may have seen in their lifetime. For Black people, resistance, resilience, and the fight for the liberation of all black people are intrinsically a part of their DNA.

When speaking of the displacement and enslavement of black people from their homeland of Africa, we predominantly speak of those

who were brought to what is now the United States. However, there were many stops in different parts of the Caribbean, including the island of Hispaniola, and the islands that make up the Lesser Antilles. One of the most significant resistance movements that were started by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean was that of Marronage. Maroons were escaped slaves who settled in small communities outside of concentrated slave areas. Many of the areas they escaped to were in forest, swamp and mountains areas. They strategically used these areas to be able to defend themselves against colonizers.

Beyond the physical, resistance has been shown through many different art forms by black creatives in the past. We've been exposed to songs like "Get Up, Stand Up," " Burnin' and Lootin,' " and "Redemption Song, " by Bob Marley; Strange Fruit by Billy Holiday; "People get ready," by Curtis Mayfield; and "Mississippi Goddam," by Nina Simone. We've been exposed to poems like "Afterimages" by Audre Lorde, "Short Speech to my Friends," by Amiri Baraka, "Riot," by Gwendolyn Brooks, and "A Fable," by Ethridge Knight.

We've seen economic resistance in the form of boycotts of white businesses led by Ida B. Wells in the 1890s in Memphis as a response to mass lynchings. The Montgomery Bus boycotts which were sparked after the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955. And the Christmas boycotts led by Dr. Martin Luther King in 1963. Resistance shows up in many shapes and forms. It often comes with great sacrifice. Maroons who were caught were often killed, the Freedom Riders of 1961 were beaten, and thrown in jail. And former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick who famously took a knee in 2016 during the United States National Anthem in protest of police brutality, sacrificed his career in the National Football

League because of what he believed in. But in the midst of those sacrifices new leaders, and movements were born to continue the fight for equality that black revolutionaries of the past have fought so hard for.

Black people have always shown up on all fronts to fight against systemic racism and oppression. The same issues that have kept their people from seizing opportunities that were promised to them. All while trying to survive in a country that has always looked at them as second class citizens. And that has claimed the lives of countless people who look like them. Black people have been consistent in the development of new visions of freedom aimed at eradicating the current political, economic, and cultural life that is America.

The violence done to Black folks is nothing new, and Black resistance is just as old. However, technological modernity has brought forth social media as a new outlet for Black resistance. Indeed the interactiveness embedded within social media resembles that of storytelling, which is one of the oldest forms of Black intellectual resistance within the United States. You will still see resistance showing up in different ways as previously mentioned, but now in the technological age, messages are rapidly spread through various social media platforms. Where hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatters and #ICan'tBreathe is used to spread awareness and show solidarity amongst groups of people.

There are still many Black folks doing the essential work of protesting in the streets, which has been an indispensable tool in gaining local government commitments to defund the police, ban chokeholds, and no-knock warrants, tear gas, and the unseating of confederate statues. Protests serve to agitate and disrupt 'normalcy.'

Social media has been co-opted as a way to educate and organize by allowing for information exchange, story sharing, the passing of petitions, event organization, and the collective confrontation of individuals exhibiting anti-blackness. Most importantly, social media has offered Black folks a way to confront anti-blackness without exposing their bodies to immediate physical danger, and a form of participation for those unable to attend protests.

Black people have demonstrated an extraordinary amount of resistance throughout history. However, the resilience of Black folks should not be used as an excuse to allow the current oppressive structures and ideologies to remain woven into the core of the U.S. Anti-blackness is not something to get used to, to compromise with, nor to simply tinker with. Black people have, can, and will continue to resist in abundance, using various creative facets, until anti-blackness is eradicated.

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Laboring Aspirations

by R.E.A.L. (Asante Livingstone)

Ever wake up and feel like this is a never ending dream?
And when you close your eyes,
You understand what life really means,
Watching the water grow in the pot,
Before you plant the seed,
In the midst of all this chaos,
You are expected to remain serene,
Remain silent in fear of retaliation,
Seems to be the everlasting song that has been stuck in rotation,
Plaguing this nation for centuries,
False promises of advancements,
While nepotism plagues corporations like cancer,
Fallacies of camaraderie designed to keep you in your place,
Being told to have tougher skin,
Is one of the many obstacles in this world wide race,
As we near the finish line refusing give up or fail,
Always keep in mind,
In the absence of compromise,
The greater force will always prevail!

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Asante Livingstone

My name is Asante Livingstone. I am a proud husband, father and ambassador for equal rights. I work for the IT department at Princeton University and I produce music.For too long complacency has somehow become the narrative. Doing just enough to get by has almost become habitual for survival. Today that ends!

Racism: From Chains of Bondage to Chains of Disparate Outcomes

By: Dominique Martin, Policy Research Analyst, MSW

Amidst the Coronavirus pandemic, another virus has caught the nation's (and the world's) attention. This longstanding and omnipresent virus has infected and wreaked havoc on nearly every facet of American life. This virus is racism, and like COVID-19 it is all around us and creates devastating consequences for those most vulnerable. Unlike COVID-19 however, racism is easier to detect. Racism is ubiquitous in our society due both to historical and contemporary factors engrained in systems and this is born out in disparities across major indicators of health and well-being. Most importantly, these impacts, these disparities, are all linked and intersect to create chains of disparate and negative outcomes for black people along with people of color. Let's lay out the facts.

Since racism is ubiquitous, it follows that we live in a racist environment. And there may not be a better starting point in our chain than environmental racism.

The environmental justice movement began in the early 80's in Warren County, NC though resistance to environmental harms occurred previously. Residents there, poor, rural, and overwhelmingly black, protested the dumping of toxic materials in their area and gained national attention (1). However, the residents ultimately lost in their cause. This trend has continued into the present day where low income people of color (2) are overburdened (3) by exposure to hazards and are at increased risk to suffer from those hazards (often referred to as environmental justice communities (4)). These include "Superfund Sites" which are Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identified contaminated areas that the EPA has the authority to clean. The body of research also provides evidence that this phenomenon occurred in conjunction with white flight, gentrification, and gerrymandered districts. The most notable environmental justice issue of our time is still occurring in Flint, Michigan (6) where over half the population is black and median household income (7) below $28,000. These pollution practices persist today even with this wealth of knowledge as corporations continue to fight for their own interests on battlegrounds with the least resources for resistance (8). Living near these waste facilities causes health impacts on neighboring communities the EPA found. One example of such manner of pollution is "Particulate Matter (9)" Particulate matter can affect your lungs and exposure to these particles leads to effects such as: premature death in people with heart

or lung disease, nonfatal heart attacks, irregular heartbeat, aggravated asthma (10), decreased lung function, increased respiratory symptoms, such as irritation of the airways, and coughing or difficulty breathing. This is not unlike COVID-19 which also attacks the respiratory system. But I suppose this would be a great time to talk about the link between environmental justice communities and health.

Social determinants of health (11) are the factors that influence health risks and outcomes based on one's environment. Director of the Center for Climate, Health, and Global Environment at Harvard University Aaron Bernstein said, "The evidence we have is pretty clear that people who have been living in places that are more polluted over time, that they are more likely to die from coronavirus. (12)" Environmental justice communities simply put, experience worse outcomes due to their exposure to pollution. Pollution leads to underlying health conditions, such as cancer and asthma, and people in these communities are more likely to lack healthcare (13). Black people are nearly three times more likely to die from asthma as white people, black children are hospitalized at four times the rate, and black children died at ten times the rate of white children from asthma (14). In New Orleans, where COVID-19's death rate was the worst in the nation at nearly double the rate of New York City, is a city where levels of hypertension, obesity, and diabetes are above national average levels. Of COVID-19 deaths, 97% of those people had underlying health conditions. (15)

"Underlying health conditions" is a term you have likely heard recently for yet another reason. This term specifically was used after the initial autopsy after George Floyd's death. The underlying conditions (coronary artery disease and hypertensive heart disease) were meant to give context about the cause of death but were

the actions of the officers during the incident to shift the blame. This is nothing new of course. Police officers have been protected from accountability in our legal system. The combination of exceedingly high standards required to convict like qualified immunity (16), a hesitance to convict by judges and juries, the ever reliable "I feared for my life" defense, and relationships between police and legal officials are just some of the barriers (17) to achieving justice against law enforcement. In America, police shoot and kill nearly 1000 people per year (18), yet since 2005 only 35 officers have been convicted of an on-duty crime. Policing as an institution has been essentially unchecked regarding uses of force. Perhaps nothing exemplifies this more than the former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (19) testifying to Congress (20) in 2015 that he could not tell them how many people were shot by the police in the United States. Independent databases began tracking incidents of police violence and have confirmed what implicit bias scholars and many in the black community have believed for some time: that police disproportionately shoot and kill black people whether armed or unarmed (21). Justice is difficult to come by, both for law enforcement officers in these cases and the citizens whose lives are forfeit to them. However black citizens' issues with the criminal legal system do not stop there

Black Americans' suffering at the hands of the criminal legal system is well documented. Mass incarceration, the drug war, over-policing, policies like stop and frisk, pretrial detention, bail/ bond outcomes, sentencing disparities are just a few areas marked by systemic racism. For brevity's sake here is a collection of research detailing the disparate outcomes produced at different levels of this system and a useful definition to understand the meaning of

systemic racism. The criminal legal system as we know it did not form in a vacuum. The system is rooted in oppression and discrimination targeted at black people (22).

The chains do not end with the topics covered in this piece. I have not mentioned the lingering effects the criminal legal system has on areas like voting power, census tracking and the subsequent allocation of resources, housing, employment, poverty, access to public assistance, and wealth building. I have not discussed education, and how white flight, redlining, and gentrification removed resources from neighborhoods that would have better funded schools. Nor did I mention how those very same practices robbed wealth from black communities creating conditions for sustained poverty and created a 10 to one wealth gap favoring white families compared to black families (23). This situation is further exacerbated by economic downturns like COVID-19 now, or the Great Recession which saw a housing market collapse that set black wealth back. The mere stress derived from these struggles creates very tangible health consequences.

It is fitting that the events during May and June have the overarching theme "I can't breathe." Black people in America have been fighting for their right to breathe, to live since arriving on this land. The time for meaningful, long lasting change is now. America is listening. The world is listening. We must all work to break these longstanding chains racism has created.

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