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Racial Battle Fatigue and the Black Student Affairs Professional in the Era of #BlackLivesMatter

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Historically, predominantly White institutions represent racial climates where Black student affairs professionals must combat racism, blocked opportunities, and various levels of environmental stress (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Research suggests that predominantly White institutions are prime environments for producing racial battle fatigue amongst Black people. Recent media coverage highlights the racialized experiences and treatment of Black people in the United States by various branches of law enforcement. The #BlackLivesMatter Movement continues to build momentum in an effort to bring awareness to racial injustices and affirm Black lives. In addition to this awareness, the movement contributes to the larger conversation on the negative impacts of racism and its tragic consequences. This article will address the implications of oppressive systemic conditions of racism and their impact on the mental health of Black student affairs professionals.

Over the past few decades, colleges and universities have become increasingly more diverse due to both changing demographics in the United States and educational policies that are increasing the number of students from underrepresented groups on campus. While this diversity can be viewed optimistically across campuses nation-wide, it has brought to the forefront elements of campus environments that are unwelcoming, alienating, unsafe, and hostile in nature to Black students. The current literature has termed these environments, "chilly climates" (Hurtado, 1992).

"Chilly climates" continue to contribute to high attrition rate of African American students matriculating at predominantly White colleges and universities. Hurtado (1992) stated, "that instances of overt racial conflict can no longer be viewed as aberrations or isolated incidents, but rather are indicators of a more general problem of unresolved racial issues in college environments and in society at large" (p. 540). Racial discrimination takes various forms and intensities. In a study, 75%

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of Black students reported at least one racial discriminatory experience over a year's time associated with questioning their academic competency (Cook, 2010).

As the expression of racial discrimination on college campuses continues to be a concern, the author will (a) discuss the ways in which the #BlackLivesMatter movement contributes to a more hostile environment on college campuses for Black students, (b) illuminate how these environments produce racial battle fatigue for Black student affairs professionals, and (c) conclude with implications for the field.

#BlackLivesMatter Movement

We know that ALL lives matter but we have to say
#BlackLivesMatter to remind people of our humanity, which is far too
often forgotten. @Luvie

#BlackLivesMatter is a hashtag originally created by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, in response to George Zimmerman's 2013 trial and subsequent acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Rogers, 2015). The hashtag became a trending topic following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. On Saturday, August 9, 2014, at 12:03 p.m., Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Within the hour, a post appeared on the social media platform Twitter followed by a photograph taken overlooking the scene of the shooting on Canfield Drive. The photograph displayed Michael Brown's uncovered, lifeless body, hands alongside his head, face down on the street. Michael Brown's murder by a police officer sparked a series of mass protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Shortly following Michael Brown's death, the news of Eric Garner's death happened in New York City at the hands of New York Police Department officers fueled the flames as it burned down the illusion of a post racial America. Their deaths happened within a month of each other. #BlackLivesMatter has grown into a movement that has awakened and empowered a new generation of activists.

In the events that trailed Michael Brown's death, images of these confrontations circulated widely in national and international news coverage. News of these events quickly went viral across social media networks. During the initial week of protests, over 3.6 million posts appeared on Twitter documenting and reflecting on the developing details surrounding Michael Brown's death. Several hashtags were generated after killings following Michael Brown's death. #ICantBreathe was created after Eric Garner was killed by police in New York City for selling cigarettes on the street. #WeAreTrayvonMartin followed the death of Trayvon Martin, a young Black boy in Sanford, Florida on a trip to the corner store. #IfIDieInPoliceCustody began after Sandra Bland, a young Black woman, was killed

in police custody after a routine traffic stop. Additionally, #HandsUpDontShoot, #IfTheyGunMeDown, #Ferguson and many other hashtags were used to bring awareness and promote dialogue during the fatal violence against Black people happening nationwide (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Rogers, 2015).

Online Activism

Social movements have long used media and technology to disseminate, escalate, and enlarge the scope of their struggles. Today, 56% of the United States population carries video-enabled smartphones, and other mobile technology. This increase in technology use combined with the creation of social media has shaped the way people communicate and engage with each other (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

In 1991, before social media's existence, a VHS tape of Los Angeles resident, Rodney King, being viciously beaten by police officers sparked outrage across the country and galvanized thousands in what is widely recognized as one of the most influential examples of citizen journalism in the United States. The increased use and availability of these mobile and cellular technologies has provided marginalized and racialized populations with tools to both document incidents of police violence and contest media representations of racialized bodies and marginalized communities.

Those familiar with Twitter know that the hashtag symbol (#) is often used as a way of marking a conversation within this platform. The hashtag serves as a cataloguing system in both the clerical sense and the semiotic sense. In the clerical sense, it allows the ordering and quick retrieval of information about a specific topic. Hashtagging, although implemented in other platforms like Facebook and Instagram, predominates Twitter as the means to maximize access and engagement to these discourses (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Rogers, 2015).

Social networking sites have allowed for users who are regionally displaced to feel like they are united across space and time. It has become a powerful platform to document incidents of police brutality and other injustices impacting Black Americans in the United States (Bonilla & Rosa 2015; Rogers, 2015).

Since #BlackLivesMatter began, the police and civilian killings of unarmed Black people have become highly publicized and quickly turned into hashtags. This news circulates via social media and national news outlets instantly. This is traumatizing. It is a daily reminder through media coverage that, while positive to the movement, increases awareness and perpetually traumatizes Black people. It also instills a level of fear and lack of safety in spaces that counterattack the persistence of Black valuation by #BlackLivesMatter. Challenging and necessary, #BlackLivesMatter has forced America to engage in an honest and essential conversation about race

relations and the historical systemic racism that persist (Rogers, 2015).

The Counter Movement

> *To say #BlackLivesMatter doesn't diminish the value of other lives. It simply states something that this nation has never believed #Ferguson*
> *@BroderickGreer*

While #BlackLivesMatter users shared powerful narratives of oppression and struggle in the movement for social change, counter movement hashtags such as #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter emerged. These movements aimed to dismantle narratives of brutality and violence against Black people and promote the idea that all lives matter or police lives matter, not just the lives of Black people. This unfolding discussion revealed that although #BlackLivesMatter brought solidarity through empowerment and justice, #AllLivesMatter found solidarity through narratives of hate and violence (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Rogers, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

#AllLivesMatter and other counter #BlackLivesMatter movements seek to invalidate the existence of racism and its negative impact on lives of Black people. However, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework that highlights racism's presence and unfortunate consequences for such reality. Racism is an enduring and permanent aspect of life in the United States and continues to be an enduring force governing all political, economic, and social domains (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT is a theoretical framework that is committed to examining social structures, thoughts, and principles with a focus on highlighting their role in the construction and maintenance of social dominance and subordination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Racial Microaggressions and Racial Battle Fatigue

Racism's permanence has affected Black Americans in individual and institutional ways, as stated by CRT. This rooted discrimination has created the fallacy that Black people are lazy, unintelligent, lacking work ethic and violent. These negative stereotypes and their perpetuation, through media and personal attitudes, continue to influence how Black Americans interact with others, how others interact with them, and how they see and feel about themselves.

Racial microaggressions have been defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that

communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue, 2010). A survey conducted by Alleyne (2004) found that Black professionals experience co-workers' a) failure to notice their presence; b) refusal to make eye contact; c) repeated instances of exclusion; d) overuse of adjectives such as aggressive, scary, angry frightening, threatening, problem, difficulty, when referring to them; e) offensive language and inappropriate jokes.

Racial battle fatigue results from constant physiological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments. The constant use or redirection of energy for coping with mundane racism depletes psychological and physiological resources needed in other important, creative, and productive areas in your life (Smith, 2008). Environments loaded with experiences of unfair treatment are stressful and produce racial battle fatigue amongst Black student affairs professionals on college campuses.

Racism's Impact on Mental Health

Experiencing racial microaggressions in both work and social spaces have tangible consequences. Empirical research has provided valuable evidence that racism is experienced as a stressor which can have a negative influence on the mental, emotional, and physical health of Black Americans. In fact, Black Americans have been found to experience a heightened level of racism compared to other people of Color (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012).

Stressors of racism are proven to impact life satisfaction, self-esteem, and health. Due to the constant perpetuation of White superiority in United States culture, there are psychological consequences for Black people. For some, this message devalues any conflicting cultural norms and can lead to a lesser perception of self. This is called internalized racism. In a study that surveyed 289 Black women, a positive correlation was drawn between internalized racism and alcohol consumption (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). The same was found for stress, social support, and physical health. Additionally, studies reveal higher rates of hypertension recorded amongst Black American. Hypertension is associated with depression and anxiety. Literature draws similarities between psychological responses of racism to trauma symptoms such as physical pain, impersonal sensitivity, and anxiety (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). This research illustrates the interconnectedness of physical, mental, and emotional health, and the need for holistic intervention when discussing the prevalence of anti-Black violence and the impact racism has on mental health of Black Americans as the #BlackLivesMatter movement continues.

Self-Care in Student Affairs

Self-care is, "something someone does to improve the sense of subjective well-being. How one obtains positive rather than negative life outcomes" (Barnett et al., 2007). Black student affairs professionals experience racial battle fatigue and racial microaggressions. These burdensome experiences reduce capacity to focus on the needs of students. Additionally, racial battle fatigue is exacerbated when these negative racialized experiences are combined with meeting the demands of the job. Student affairs work in itself holds challenges to attain balance. Many positions demand that professionals commit their time after traditional business hours and weekend commitments. These responsibilities range from 24 hour on-call crisis response to late night student programming. Student development extends past nine to five. Therefore, many student affairs professionals' roles often exceed the 40 hour work week. This often leads to burnout and exhaustion because professionals' self-care needs are disregarded.

It is important to promote self-care in this state of national trauma. While personal self-care strategies vary from person to person, Black student affairs professionals have a responsibility to be intentional about efforts to sustain their holistic well-being. Before Black professionals can care for themselves or support each other, they must first address systems of oppression and the resulting trauma across generations. Examining and confronting White supremacy, universal health care, economic liberation, and prison and police eradication will be the only source of relief. The importance of self-care in the field while taking care of each other and dismantling systems of oppression are necessary for collective wellness (Barnett et al., 2007; Rogers, 2015).

Implications to the Field

As the diversity of college and university environments increases, it is important to understand why Black students and professionals interpret these spaces as hostile, unwelcoming, and unsafe. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has provided a catalyst to discuss not only racial violence, but also how that violence affects us psychologically. However, the social media inspired movement can only do so much. CRT provides a framework that equips one with the tools to persist through racialized life experiences and still continue the conversations that begin on the internet and then continue in our classrooms and residence halls.

Counterspaces

Critical race theorists believe in raising consciousness of individuals who have been silenced and eliminating every form of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Counter spaces, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2001) are affirming locations

within an environment that are comfortable niches of verbal and nonverbal interactions, for marginalized people. It is important to create empowering spaces that resist societal oppression for Black student affairs professionals that enable them to process how power, privilege, and oppression impact their lives. Black student affairs professionals are then able to affirm their identity and heal from past, present, and future racialized trauma. These spaces are supportive communities that can embrace each other and share narratives. Cultural centers and Black professional organizations, for example, are considered counter spaces on predominantly White campuses.

Concluding Thoughts

While the circumstances in which #BlackLivesMatter was generated are beyond tragic, it has challenged people to reevaluate the conditions of negative racialized life experiences of Black people in the United States. #BlackLivesMatter will be documented in history as a form of online activism that ignited an inspirational response to the persistent devaluation of Black lives by social structures like law enforcement. However, if Black lives truly matter, this mattering must extend beyond a hashtag. It must be incorporated into the way we take care of ourselves in the profession and how we support Black students at predominantly White institutions. The distance between Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Eric Garner and myself is closer than I would like to acknowledge. This is truly a frightening realization. Let this be a call to action to affirm Blackness and restore Black humanity. As we understand the psychological and emotional impact of racial oppression and anti-Black violence, we must educate our community and others, promote healing, empowerment, and wellness to combat the systems of oppression.

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