

*Black Lives Matter!: Systems of Oppression Affecting Black Youth*

*Special Series: Dismantling Systems of Racism and Oppression during Adolescence*

**Black Lives and Black Research Matter: How our Collective Emotions  
Continue to Drive a Movement**

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The author discusses (1) how the collective emotional experience of the Black community has propelled two parallel movements, Black Lives Matter and Black Research Matters, (2) the state of developmental science as it pertains to Black youth, and (3) suggestions for future research to integrate across fields and to evolve beyond Black pain to incorporate Black joy. The author suggests that the palpable anger collectively felt and expressed as a community has propelled a host of social-political actions to dismantle anti-Black systems of oppression, including within academia. She highlights that the scholarship on Black youth development has driven innovations in theory and methodology that have influenced the field of developmental science broadly and recommends future research areas for consideration.

Key words: Black Research Matters – collective emotion regulation – Black youth development – racism

Developmental research on Black adolescence has burgeoned following the publication of pioneering conceptual frameworks that captured the lived experiences of Black youth and the systemic structures and promotive factors that impact their adjustment (Boykin & Toms, 1985; García Coll et al., 1996; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). Frameworks like Cynthia García Coll's ecological model for minority youth development and Margaret Beale Spencer's phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory continue to provide an organizing structure by which researchers analyze models to understand the interrelations of fundamental phenomena, including multidimensional and multilevel systems of oppression, Black youth

adjustment, and individual, family, peer, and school-level promotive and inhibitive factors.

Building from these foundational models, we now have a slew of innovative and rich theories that attend to Black youths' family, cognitive, and emotional processes (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Dunbar, Leerkes, Coard, Supple, & Calkins, 2016; Jones, Anderson, & Stevenson, 2021; Lozada, Riley, Catherine, & Brown, 2021; Smith-Bynum, Anderson, Davis, Franco, & English, 2016), and that have social-political and clinical application (Berger & Sarnyai, 2015; Carter, 2007; Hope, Hoggard, & Thomas, 2015; Saleem, Anderson, & Williams, 2020); for example, the conceptualization of discrimination as a social determinant of health (Paradies et al., 2015). The active engagement of scholarship in movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the social-political applicability of research is important to the relevance of developmental science to impact public health policy that better the lives of Black youth and their families.

As a researcher positioned in the fields of Black youth development and emotion research, in this commentary, I will discuss (1) how the collective

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emotional experience of the Black community has propelled the current social-political moment, (2) the state of developmental science as it pertains to Black youth, and (3) suggestions for future research to integrate across fields and to evolve beyond Black pain to incorporate Black joy.

## BLACK LIVES AND BLACK RESEARCH MATTER

### Black Lives Matter: The Outcome of Collective Pain

As we navigate day-to-day activities on the micro-level or cultural periods on the macro level, emotions help motivate and direct our behavior in the pursuit of our goals. Emotions are affective states in response to external (an event) or internal (thoughts) stimuli that we perceive as relevant to our goals and reflect our individual or collective stream of experience (Bericat, 2015; Cicchetti et al., 1995; von Scheve & Ismer, 2013). Emotions can be short-lived discrete states that last seconds to minutes or moods that reflect an ongoing experience, such as witnessing the back-to-back murders and mistreatment of unarmed Black children. The “collective stream of experience” aspect of emotions is often neglected. However, if you have ever attended a sports event or the viewing of a high-profile criminal trial, you know firsthand that groups of individuals with shared goals often share and collectively express emotional states (Scheve & Salmella, 2014).

Emotions are at the center of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which arguably arose out of the mounting collective frustration of the Black community in response to repeated institutional apathy toward Black suffering. An abundance of empirical research finds that experiences of racism and discrimination adversely impact the emotional wellbeing of Black youth, including increases in trait anger and externalizing behaviors such as aggression and conduct problems (Benner et al., 2018; Nyborg & Curry, 2003; Pachter, Caldwell, Jackson, & Bernstein, 2018; Vines, Ward, Cordoba, & Black, 2017). However, most of this work does not distinguish the *feeling* and constructive expression of anger—a normal and healthy response to acts of injustice—from the behavioral or mental health consequences if emotions go unregulated. Recent work from my colleagues and I found that while Black adolescents who reported experiencing discrimination said they felt anger, frustration, and disrespected, these emotions were not associated

with depressive symptoms or the fighting and rule-breaking behaviors that are typically attributed to an underlying anger problem (Dunbar, HaRim Ahn, Coates, & Smith-Bynum, 2021). Instead, sadness, shame, and embarrassment—which may reflect youths’ internalization of denigrating racist messages and self-blame—were associated with depression/anxiety *and* externalizing problems (Dunbar et al., 2021).

According to emotion theory (Russell and Mehrabian, 2018; Turner, 2007), anger and frustration motivate individuals to regain control when threatened or violated. Thus, these assertive emotions may be a healthy response when being discriminated against by facilitating active coping such as social-political activism (Hope, Gugwor, Riddick, & Pender, 2019; Hope & Spencer, 2017). As such, the palpable anger we felt as a community has propelled a host of social-political actions to dismantle anti-Black systems of oppression through movements like BLM, which has had the active participation of Black youth.

We have emerging research, including work from this special issue, demonstrating that vicarious experiences of anti-Black racism through the viral sharing of pictures and video have a significant impact on the emotional well-being of Black youth (Maxie-Moreman & Tynes, 2022). The seemingly ubiquitous and inescapable presence of traumatic social media content in the lives of youth may greatly amplify the pain of racism. Youth not only must contend with their own painful racism experiences but also now bear the burden of the collective pain of the Black community, a vicarious pain that may be equally detrimental as individual-level experiences, with effects on youths’ distress, intrusive thoughts about racist events, and fears for their safety (Mason et al., 2017; Zimmerman & Miller-Smith, 2022). However, we know less empirically about how social media platforms like Twitter provide a mechanism for real-time mass expression of thoughts and emotions in response to current events and facilitate other collective emotion regulation behaviors such as support seeking, humor, and organized political action.

### Black Research Matters: Our Progress

Concurrent with the BLM social-political uprising, academia has faced its own unrest. In recent decades, Black and Brown scholars have confronted and continue to hold accountable the institutional racism of funding agencies such as the National Institute of Health that underfund Black scholars

and scholarship (Ginther et al., 2011; Hoppe et al., 2019). We have pushed back against peer-review editorial boards that insist on between-racial group comparative designs that reinforce White supremacy and deficit framing of Black experiences (Iruka, Lewis, Lozada, Bocknek, & Brophy-Herb, 2021). We are demanding greater equity in the tenure and promotion of the Black and Brown scholars who do this work. Despite many barriers faced by scholars who study Black youth development, the science has made significant strides.

The replication and reproducibility of research findings—across research labs, time, space, and methodology—is a hallmark of the rigor of a field. The impact of racism on Black youth adjustment and the moderating roles of individual (e.g., gender and identity) and contextual factors (e.g., family, schools, and peers) is perhaps the most studied model in Black youth development (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012; Perkins, Durkee, Banks, & Ribero-Brown, 2021). Although there are numerous variations to the model, this is a basic moderation that says (1) racial discrimination negatively impacts Black youth adjustment and (2) the strength of this association is weakened under certain conditions. The first part of this model alone has been replicated across various levels and dimensions of racial discrimination, including interpersonal and institutional, peer and teacher, using a range of methodology including survey, daily diary, experimental designs, and public records (Cooper, Burnett, Golden, Butler-Barnes, & Innis-Thompson, 2022; English et al., 2021; Giordano et al., 2021; Ortega-Williams et al., 2022), and with multi-informant reports of youth social-emotional, psychological, and academic adjustment (Benner et al., 2018). Certain moderators have also demonstrated consistent results, such as the benefit of parental cultural socialization (Gibson, Bouldin, Stokes, Lozada, & Hope, 2021).

Furthermore, the scholarship on Black youth development has engaged traditional phenomena in adolescent development, including pubertal timing (Carter & Flewellen, 2022), identity development (Durkee, Perkins, & Smith, 2021), and family conflict and autonomy seeking (Smetana & Rote, 2019) while simultaneously engaging contemporary challenges faced by Black youth such as online racism (Stewart, Schuschke, & Tynes, 2019) and the public health crisis of Black youth suicidality (Assari, Lanarani, & Caldwell, 2017). The scholarship on Black youth development, often conducted by Black and Brown scholars, has not only evolved internally, but we have also driven innovations in theory and

methodology that have influenced the field of developmental science broadly to be more rigorous and nuanced in our asking and analysis of questions.

For example, rather than making inferences about “culture” underlying differences found using between-group comparative designs, developmental science is now recognizing the need to directly measure constructs like racial-ethnic identity as more proximal indicators of cultural salience and measuring systemic oppression rather than assuming individual and cultural deficits (Williams & Deutsch, 2016). Similarly, there seems to be greater acknowledgment that youth have intersectional identities that shape their experiences in ways that are holistic rather than additive (Clauss-Ehlers, Chiriboga, Hunter, Roysircar, & Tummala-Narra, 2019; Rosenthal, 2016). For example, although not uncommon, designs that compare the adjustment of Black youth vs. LGBTQ youth ignore the existence of Black LGBTQ youth who have an entirely different experience than what can be extrapolated from synthesizing work on Black youth and [White] LGBTQ youth separately. Finally, there is much greater acceptance of the benefit of within-racial group designs to capture the heterogeneity of youth experiences (Gaylord-Harden, Barbarin, Tolan, & Murry, 2018).

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

My suggestions for future research include (1) continuing to integrate the scholarship on Black youth development with foundational constructs from developmental science and other areas such as public health and (2) conducting research that moves beyond Black pain.

### Integrating Subfields

Several scholars have called for Black youth development work—which focuses heavily on core constructs such as racial discrimination, racial-ethnic identity, coping, and racial socialization—to integrate relevant constructs from other areas of developmental science. Simultaneously, areas of developmental science whose theoretical and empirical work primarily rely on White populations must draw from the rich scholarship on Black youth development to better represent the lived experiences of Black youth more accurately (Coard, 2021; Dunbar et al., 2016; Murry et al., 2021; Stern, Barbarin, & Cassidy, 2021).

We have an emerging body of work that situates constructs studied in Black youth development

work within public health, attachment research, emotion research, cognitive science, and more. For example, in public health, Bernard and colleagues proposed a more culturally informed model of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) to include racial discrimination as a distinct ACE category (Bernard et al., 2021). This work is pivotal because typically accepted ACE categories have been restricted to “universal” phenomena such as abuse, neglect, and homelessness. Along with work conceptualizing racism as a social determinant of health (Paradies et al., 2015), this work makes a bold statement that racism is a potentially traumatic event with equal potential for long-term adverse health outcomes as other forms of adversity and abuse. It effectively transitions the study of racism from a “niche” or “specialty” category of research to a core phenomenon to be studied broadly in human development.

As such, continuing the work of integrating subfields does not only benefit the expansion and rigor of Black youth development, but it also benefits developmental science broadly. Integrative models may help address some of our most pressing public health crises, such as the disproportionate and rising rates of suicide attempts and death among Black youth (Sheftall et al., 2021). Such work challenges the validity of widely studied and widely accepted constructs and tests the boundaries of these constructs by asking, “what is and is not included in the pie?” For example, does racism as an ACE contribute unique variance in public health outcomes such as suicidal thoughts and attempts? Does the inclusion of racism as an ACE account for the growing disparity between Black and White youth suicidal behavior to an extent that other variables have not?

### **Black Lives Matter Beyond Our Oppression**

My final suggestion is for Black youth development research to extend beyond the study of the impact of systems of oppression on the well-being of Black youth and even beyond the study of Black youth resilience and resistance. Black youth continue to live, laugh, and love in tandem with the ubiquitous presence of oppression. Thus, our scholarship can examine the presence of Black joy in tandem with our study of Black pain. What I am suggesting is not simply a matter of studying positive adjustment as an outcome or moderator of adversity, but rather to have complete studies on non-oppressive everyday aspects of Black youth culture and development. For example, what is the cultural impact

of online social movements such as #blackgirlmagic and #blackboyjoy that have risen alongside BLM?

Boykin and Toms (1985) Triple quandary theory proposed that Black families simultaneously navigate three different but overlapping contexts in the United States: the mainstream context, life as a racial-ethnic minority within a White majority culture, and the Black cultural experience. Black culture, although shaped in some ways in reaction to systems of oppression, exists beyond oppression and has been shaped by a mix of African cultural traditions and the dynamic give and take of Black and non-Black cultures.

We have a growing and rigorous body of work that examines how systems of oppression impact minoritized youth’s lives. However, little research focuses on areas such as the normative development of Black youth friendships and romantic relationships. Keeping with the example of peer relations, a prominent area of research focuses on the formation and intricacies of friendship and peer interactions that rely on predominantly White samples (Graham & Echols, 2018). Peer relation studies that include Black youth often focus on peer discrimination and racial bullying or the role of bias in the development and maintenance of interracial relations (Graham & Echols, 2018). Although this work is very much needed, work on normative, positive peer and family relations among Black youth is also needed. The study of Black joy, friendship, love, and hope is of equal value as the study of Black oppression.

### **CONCLUSION**

The collective anger, frustration, and pain of the Black community in response to anti-Black oppression has propelled parallel BLM movements in the public realm and within social science. A powerful transition currently happening in Black youth development work is a move from studying resilience—the study of the ability to adapt or thrive in the face of adversity—to studying Black youth resistance (Glover et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021). Distinct from resilience, resistance captures Black youth and families’ exercise of agency to confront and dismantle anti-Black systems of oppression. The parallel BLM movements are at their foundation a representation of this paradigm shift that says, “we will not simply navigate, we will dismantle.”

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