

Black Lives Matter and COVID-19: Lessons in Coincidence, Confluence, and Compassion

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Abstract

There is a profound lesson in the coincident timing of the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic: in each case, support for the most oppressed or most ill amongst us portends support for ourselves. We are humbled to concede that if we do not respect everyone, we do not respect anyone, just as if we don't prevent, treat, and cure disease everywhere, we don't do so anywhere. Our collective dignity and health depend upon the dignity and health of the most vulnerable amongst us. The preservation of oneself depends upon the preservation of all people. Our humanity is inevitably, inexorably, forever entwined with one another.

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Introduction

The year 2020 most assuredly will be remembered for two extraordinary phenomena: the markedly increased, international attention to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement following the murder of George Floyd, and the COVID-19 pandemic. At first blush, these two events seem wholly separate and distinct from one another, having in common merely the timing and gravity of their concerns, and the scope of attention they commanded. Yet, there are lessons to be drawn from their concurrence, the most profound of which lies in the inexorable and urgent conceptualization of our own humanity.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The viral transmission of COVID-19 rapidly spread to pandemic proportions, impacting the global population in a way that was “unparalleled in scale and geographical extent since the influenza pandemic of 1918” (Howard-Jones & Kok, 2020, p. 115). By mid-August 2020, more than 22,500,000 cases had been reported to the World Health Organization (WHO), tragically resulting in nearly 800,000 deaths (WHO, 2020).

The BLM Movement

The BLM movement dates back to 2013, developed as “a Black-centered political will and movement building project” in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who had fatally shot Trayvon Martin (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). The project has now been described as “a member-led global network of more than 40 chapters, [whose] members organize and build local

power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, n.d.).

Attention to the movement increased exponentially following the death of George Floyd in May 2020, when a Minneapolis police officer forcefully pressed his knee on Floyd’s neck for approximately eight minutes to restrain him during his arrest for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill at a shop.

Videotape of the murder was as ubiquitous as it was appalling. The entire world watched in horror as Mr. Floyd was slowly and painfully deprived of the ability to breathe even as he pleaded for his life.

Racial Inequities

Despite the known formidable contagiousness of COVID-19 at the time, the police officer who had physically restrained him was not wearing a mask. Had the police officer been infected with COVID-19 at the time, the proximate cause of Mr. Floyd’s death undoubtedly was not due to the virus; the officer’s failure to take basic precautions against disease transmission was simply another indignity to which Floyd was subjected. But just as that additional insult to Mr. Floyd was by no means the most grievous to which he had been subjected, neither was he the only African American to have been especially impacted by COVID-19. In the United States, the Black community indisputably has been affected disproportionately by the disease; according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), non-Hispanic Black persons have been afflicted at a rate approximately five times more than that of non-Hispanic white persons (CDC, 2020a).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a tragic and stark example of the predominant impact of disease on Black citizens. By mid-July 2020, the CDC reported that amongst laboratory-confirmed tested COVID-19 cases, rates for non-Hispanic Black persons and Hispanic or Latino persons were approximately 4.7 and 4.6 times the rate among non-Hispanic White persons, respectively (CDC, 2020b). Even two months earlier, the disease’s disproportionate toll on Black people in the United States was readily apparent; “[c]ounties with the highest proportion of [B]lack residents are also seeing the highest death rates. The larger the share of [B]lack residents, the worse the health outcomes get” (Green & Gu, 2020). For example,

[t]hough [B]lacks are only 22% of New York City’s population, as of mid-April they constituted 28% of fatalities from the virus. In Chicago, where [B]lacks are 30% of the population, they comprise 70% of those killed by Covid-19. In the state of Louisiana, [B]lacks are 32% of the population but 70% of those dead from the disease. (Wingfield, 2020)

The injustices to which Black citizens in the United States continue to be subjected include lack of access to healthcare, and therefore not surprisingly, poorer health outcomes. “Inequities in the social determinants of health, such as poverty and healthcare access, affecting these groups are interrelated and influence a wide range of health and quality-of-life outcomes and risks” (US HHS, 2020). There are myriad, inter-related causes, such as chronic stress resulting from discrimination, lack of adequate healthcare and access, lack of health insurance, and crowded housing conditions (CDC, 2020a).

Indeed, the tragically disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Blacks and other non-white races

should have been expected. So pervasive are racial disparities in health conditions that the phenomenon has merited its own nomenclature, “the weathering hypothesis,” which is a term used to connote chronic exposure to social and economic disadvantages that lead to accelerated declines in physical health outcomes (Forde et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2020).

African Americans’ disproportionate representation in certain essential occupations that have greater risks of disease exposure is yet another significant factor in COVID-19’s greater impact on the Black community. While some states have implemented stay-at-home orders in an effort to contain the disease’s spread, individuals employed in “essential” businesses must still report to work (Rogers et al., 2020). Only approximately 20 percent of non-Hispanic Blacks report being able to work from home, compared to nearly 30 percent of white workers (Rogers et al., 2020).

The glaring gap in the rates to which Black citizens are affected, and the reasons for that gap, vividly illustrate the systemic injustices to which the Black community has long been subjected. “Black people and other minorities who live in poverty, in dense conditions, on the street, or on reservations or who perform ‘essential’ jobs are at unusual risk for infection” (Evans, 2020, p. 409). The pandemic exposes and exploits inequities that are the long-term product of structural racism. Work that cannot be done remotely—“in transportation, emergency response, health care, and agriculture—are essential for a functional society but pay near the minimum wage and do not compensate workers for the risks they incur” (Evans, 2020, p. 409). Dependence on these critical work functions increases during pandemics, as those privileged to be able to self-isolate in safe-distanced residences increasingly rely on those who cannot to continue to respond to healthcare, food production and delivery, and other needs.

Lessons in the Confluence of BLM and COVID-19

But amidst the regrettably expected and blatant racial inequities revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there are valuable lessons to be learned. These lessons, which are poignantly articulated by the BLM movement, resonate profoundly in the concurrence of the movement and the viral crisis.

The Inclusive Message of the BLM Movement

Generally speaking, BLM addresses all forms of racial discrimination, including violence borne of racial animus, to which Blacks in the United States have been subjected, beginning with the widespread, government-sanctioned, enduring depravities of enslavement, over four centuries ago.

There is also nuance to the BLM movement, as to which reflexive protestations that “all lives matter” miss the point. The very name of the Black Lives Matter movement highlights the long-standing marginalized position of Black citizens in the United States. Additionally, the founders of the BLM movement “were equally committed to the rights of working people and to gender and sexual equality” (Cobb, 2020). The movement’s name and emphasis draw attention to extraordinary prejudice to which the Black community has been—and continues to be—subjected. The point of BLM is not to exclude others from its demands for social justice. Nor does the movement denigrate the ignominies or difficulties other groups have suffered and continue to endure. Rather, the “Black Lives Matter” verbiage “espouses inclusivity, because ‘to love and desire freedom and justice for ourselves is a necessary prerequisite for wanting the same for others’” (Cobb, 2020).

COVID-19's Transnational and Comprehensive Peril

Although no disease respects geographical boundaries, the formidable COVID-19 contagion is one of our era's most conspicuous large scale, transnational perils. We now are inexorably humbled to concede that

if we are to be prepared now and in the future, ... there has to be an absolutely fundamental change in our mind-set. We have to think that we have to work together as a human species to be organized to care for one another, to realize that *the health of the most vulnerable people among us is a determining factor for the health of all of us* [emphasis added], and, if we aren't prepared to do that, we'll never, ever be prepared to confront these devastating challenges to our humanity. (Chotiner, 2020)

Thus, “the way that we respond very much depends on our values, our commitments, and our sense of being part of the human race and not smaller units.” It's why New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo pointed out, “[u]nless you solve this everywhere, you don't solve it anywhere” (Cuomo, 2020).

It's also why Kareem Abdul-Jabbar recently declared in the context of social justice:

No one is free until everyone is free. As Martin Luther King Jr. explained: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” So, let's act like it. If we're going to be outraged by injustice, let's be outraged by injustice against anyone. (2020)

BLM as Exemplar and Portent

Support for BLM also presupposes a commitment to extrapolating its principles to all people. And there is a lesson here in the temporal coincidence of the COVID-19 pandemic: the movement matters because it is an exemplar and a portent of a path to overt assertion of the dignity of every human being.

Ultimately, there is cause not just for reflection about the coincidental timing of BLM and COVID-19, but grounds even amidst the struggles and the challenges for optimism as well. Lawrence Wright noted that “[g]reat crises tend to bring profound social change, for good or ill” (Wright, 2020). He quoted Gianna Pomata, a retired professor at the Institute of the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University, who observed: “[t]he Black Death really marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of something else.’ That something else was the Renaissance” (Wright, 2020). Pomata anticipates that now “something [else] dramatic is going to happen, not so much in medicine but in economy and culture. Because of danger, there's this wonderful human response, which is to think in a new way” (Wright, 2020).

The current “new way,” if we are committed to improving both health and social conditions, is an explicit, deliberate rejection of racism and other forms of discrimination. The “new way” is a mobilization of individual and community compassion that transcends recognition of any particular group in order to apply the point of the BLM movement universally. The “new way” is an active counterpoint to transform rhetoric to reform.

Black lives matter because anything less demeans the lives of everyone. Preventing, treating,

and curing COVID-19 for the most vulnerable and geographically distant amongst us matters because anything less imperils the health of everyone.

Just as understanding the key virological etiology and clinical manifestation of COVID-19 is critical to mitigating the effects of the disease and to preparing for future viral outbreaks (Howard-Jones & Kok, 2020), so too is our self-reflection, advocacy, and vigilance about racial equality.

Recognizing the intersectionality of concurring pandemics is a matter of proprioception of ourselves within the global community, orienting us to one another. “To extinguish the outbreak, we must confront and accept our individual and societal responsibility to respect and care for one another” (Evans, 2020, p. 409). This stance applies to the pandemic of COVID-19 just as it applies to the pandemic of racism, because the preservation of oneself depends upon the preservation of all people because our humanity is inevitably, inexorably, forever entwined with each other.

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