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Do #BlackLivesMatter? Implicit Bias, Institutional Racism and Fear of the Black Body

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In the past several years, especially after the election of President Barack Obama, the Nation's first Black[1] president, the resurgence of racism, civil unrest and police violence in the United States has become the focus of national attention. Dialogue has changed as it applies to issues of social (in)justice, to include institutional racism and implicit bias. The likes of both can be seen in a variety of ways and range in intensity and presentation. The current mood of the country appears to range from tolerance of racial microaggressions launched at individuals on social media (e.g., the 2015 Twitter post by Nancy Lee Grahn regarding Emmy-winner Viola Davis' acceptance speech), to discriminatory hiring practices at the institutional level (e.g., study by Bertrand and Mullainathan [2003] related to differences in employer callbacks based on "Black names"). Both are staunch realities in this country and are largely reflected and enforced by a pervasively negative view of people of color, in what continues to be a White (male) dominated U.S. culture (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Cashin 2011; Richardson and Goff 2012)

Currently, the widely held erroneous belief by many Americans is the idea that we should not be as concerned with racial issues because we live in a color-blind, post-racial society. Although many Americans believe that race is no longer an issue, racism, structural inequalities and implicit bias continue have real consequences in the lives of Black Americans. Research demonstrates that most, if not all people, possess some sort of implicit bias (Project Implicit 2008). Implicit bias "is unintended bias that operates without our conscious awareness" (Lee 2013, 105). More specifically, implicit bias relates to the attitudes and stereotypes within our subconscious that impact our understanding of our environment and our subsequent actions (Kirwan Institute 2015). The awareness of implicit bias is imperative in understanding the influence that race and racism has on the perception of and interactions with Black individuals.

Given the aforementioned, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, the authors aim to provide a cultural analysis of the ways in which implicit bias, and subsequently, institutional racism, have placed a negative cloud over Black bodies in the US. Second, using this cultural analysis, the goal is to then provide an overview of the current framing of "Black Lives" in this country. Using the cases in Sanford, Florida, Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland as exemplars, the authors present ways in which implicit bias, institutional racism, and fear of the Black body may have contributed to the notorious killings of these three, unarmed Black men and cast national spotlight on the social justice framework of the Nation, to include the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Understanding the Impact of Institutional Racism and Implicit Bias

Racism is defined as any action, intentional or unintentional, that is based on race or skin color and subordinates a group or individual based on their skin color or race (Sue 2005). Institutional racism is defined as institutional inequality based upon race (Hardie and Tyson 2013). More specifically, Sue (2006) indicates that institutional racism refers to a policy by an entity, organization, school or business that makes decisions unfairly based on race. Examples of these practices include red lining, school segregation and unfair lending laws.

[1] The term Black is used to identity individuals who are U.S. born and descending from the African Diaspora.

Because institutional racism requires some form of action (e.g., policy implementation) based upon a belief system (e.g., stereotypes), institutional racism can be viewed as one of many products borne from implicit bias. For instance, according to the American Civil Liberties Union ([ACLU] n.d.), both implicit and explicit bias can be attributed to the racial disparities observed in the criminal justice system. The ACLU notes that Blacks are 10 times more likely to be put in jail for drug charges than Whites, and "three times more likely to be arrested for marijuana use than White people are" (n.d.); although, there is no statistical difference between the rates at which Blacks and Whites use drugs. As noted by Greenwald and Krieger (2006), when we are able to determine that there are no inherent differences in behavior based on race, and other forms of explicit bias can be explained away, then we must consider the role of implicit bias in actions and policies that result in discriminatory behaviors.

Implicit Bias and Fear of the Black Body

Fear is a factor associated with the implicit racial reactions of Whites against Blacks (Banks and Hicks 2015). For instance, a majority of Americans associate Black men with criminality and violence, even if they do not always acknowledge it (Hannon 2004). Young Black men in particular are subjects of this "Black-as-criminal" stereotype, especially when wearing baggy clothes or a hoodie (Lee 2013, 127). This typecast of the Black male body can result in society viewing non-violent acts performed by Black males as being violent and aggressive, while viewing violent acts performed by White males as unintentional or a result of uncontrolled consequence (i.e. mental health) (Lawson 2012; Lee 2013; Richardson and Goff 2012). Take for example Dylann Roof, the 21-year-old White male who killed nine people in a Black church in Charleston, South Carolina. Following his apprehension, it was reported that he was taken to Burger King to get a meal because he indicated he was hungry (DeBerry 2015). The post-homicide treatment of Dylann Roof by police is in stark contrast to that of Freddie Gray, the 25-year-old Black male in Baltimore, Maryland who died in police custody as a result of spinal injuries following a foot-chase with police (Hermann and Cox 2015). While it was alleged that Freddie Gray had a switchblade when apprehended, he was actually not arrested as a result of assault or homicidal behavior. On the contrary, records of the arrest indicate that Gray, while walking in a neighborhood, simply made eye contact with a police officer, ran (for unknown reasons), and shortly after, gave himself up with no threat to police or others (Ford 2015). Gray, however, was then dragged by police and placed in the back of a van. One week later, he was dead as a result of spinal injuries that are (allegedly) linked back to police misconduct. Roof, on the other hand, was pulled over by police one day following the mass shooting of individuals in a church. An article in CBS News (2015) notes: "Police dash cam videos show the moment that North Carolina officers pulled over Dylann Roof…In the footage, two officers can be seen drawing their guns as they approach the car. One of the officers puts his gun back in his holster as he approaches the driver's window... The accused gunman is frisked and placed in handcuffs."

What leads officers in a non-violent case (Freddie Gray) to arrest and allegedly harm one man in custody to the point of death, yet holster their firearm and peacefully detain a known mass-shooter (Dylann Roof) – and even take him for a bite to eat? Some might suggest that it is the implicit fear of the Black body to blame. Specifically, the perception of "Black-as-criminal" can be said to result from a pervasive fear of the Black body that often influences malicious actions of racial discrimination (Lee 2013). The biased belief that a Black person is suspicious, threatening and dangerous can produce deleterious consequences when interacting with law enforcement, and specifically deadly outcomes for those stereotyped

individuals. And this is not germane to Black men only, but to the fullness of the Black body. Take for instance Sandra Bland, the 28-year-old Black woman who died in police custody of reported suicide just a few days after her arrest. At the time of her arrest, Bland was pulled over on a Texas road for failure to use her turn signal. Video from the police dashcam shows verbal exchanges between the officer and Bland, which eventually escalate to the White male officer pulling Bland facedown to the ground (Sanchez 2015). While some insinuate, based upon the video, that Bland's "attitude", or willingness to engage verbally with the officer, at times to verbal aggression, was the impetus for her subsequent arrest, statistically, Blacks are disproportionality stopped, questioned, and arrested more often than Whites, yet percentage wise, Whites are more likely to have committed violent crimes as compared to Blacks (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] 2013). Although all Black bodies are associated with the disproportionate outcomes of fear related to implicit bias, the Black male body is, by-in-large, the most significantly impacted.

Suspicion Heuristic and (Over)reaction to The Black Male Body

As coined by Richardson and Goff "suspicion heuristic" was developed to explain "the predictable errors in perception, decision making, and action that can occur when individuals make judgments of criminality" (2012, 296). In other words, suspicion heuristic theorizes that if we believe/perceive someone as being bad (enter implicit bias), then we act/react based on those preconceptions (i.e. institutional racism). Utilizing Richardson and Goff's theory, it makes sense then that the perceptions of fear and reasonableness are both underlying principles used to rationalize the decision-making process and actions of individuals in making judgment calls in perceived criminal behaviors (Richardson and Goff 2012) "Suspicion heuristic" can be used when examining stop-and-frisk incidents and the use of self-defense claims in the shooting deaths of unarmed people of color, especially Black men. For instance, a self-defense claim is used to protect a person who uses deadly force from prosecution by implying that the force was justified because there was a reasonable fear of the person's life (Walker, Spohn, and Delone 2012).

According to the law, the belief in the need to use deadly force must be honest and reasonable (reasonableness requirement); this often allows an individual who harms, or in the worst case kills someone, to evade arrest or prosecution (Richardson and Goff 2012) This leads to the notion of "shooter bias", another concept that is used to provide context to fear and subsequent overreaction of the Black male body. According to Lee, "Shooter bias" occurs when individuals are quicker to identify weapons and slower to recognize harmless objects, like tools, in the hands of Black persons than in the hands of White persons" (2013, 27). Several studies reveal that people are more likely to see weapons in the hands of unarmed Black men than unarmed White men, and to more quickly shoot them as a result (Amodio et al. 2004; Richardson and Goff 2012).

Implicit racial bias is influential to all aspects of Black lives. Beginning with the racial caste system and slavery, negative stereotypes about Black people were formed. This resulted in the development of Black codes and Jim Crow laws that led to state sanctioned discrimination. Implicit bias is problematic in that it automatically associates Black men with suspicious or criminal behavior. This automatic assumption has been most recently noted in the more prominent police-shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and, as mentioned above, Freddie Gray.

Framing of Black Lives Matter and the Black Body

Institutional racism and implicit bias perpetuate a cycle of criminality of Black men in our society. More Black Americans are under the control of the criminal justice system today than were enslaved in 1850 (Alexander 2012). They are either in prison, jail or under community supervision (i.e. probation or parole). In the state of California, since 1980, 22 prisons have been built, compared to only one university (Gilmore 2006). Currently, it is estimated that at of the end of 2014, Black males accounted for 516,900 of the state and federal prison population. Thus, accounting for 37% of the male prison population (Carson 2015).

The recent rash of fatal shootings of unarmed Black teenagers by law enforcement (or a person who has taken on the role of law enforcement) has sparked civil unrest and protests calling for the ending of police brutality and increasing the value of Black lives. "Black Lives Matter" protests focus largely on seeking justice and awareness of institutional racism and policing in our culture. In the more notable cases that lead to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, implicit bias, institutional racism, and fear of the Black body were clear and inextricably linked. Take for instance Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old unarmed Black male from Sanford, Florida. Trayvon was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a Sanford resident and a volunteer member of the neighborhood watch (Lee 2013; Yankah 2013)

The Florida judge in the George Zimmerman trial instructed the jury to focus *only* on the moment when George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin interacted in order to determine if Zimmerman was justified in use of deadly force (i.e. stand your ground) (State of Florida v. Zimmerman 2013). Some suggest that such a directive allowed jury members to rely on their conscious and subconscious perceptions of a young, Black male body that is often presented in media images as a big, scary Black man who is capable of, and often does, perpetuate violent crime; this, conversely, turns the "neighborhood watchman" into the potential victim instead of the adult male who admittedly stalked the teen through the neighborhood with a loaded gun in anticipation of a crime that was never committed (Lawson 2012; Lee 2013).

Further, consider the criminalization of Michael Brown, the 18-year-old unarmed Black male from Ferguson, Missouri who was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a White male police officer. As Michael's body lay lifeless in the street for four hours, he was left uncovered and without the aid of emergency services. In the weeks and months that followed, Michael's character was assassinated; he was portrayed as an unstoppable beast-like creature that deserved to die (Keene 2015). During Officer Wilson's grand jury testimony, he stated that at the time of the encounter, he "felt like a five-year-old, holding onto Hulk-Hogan" (McCoy 2014, 12) and he described Michael as having an intense aggressive face that made him look like a demon (McCoy, 2014). After Michael's death, the Ferguson Police Department proceeded to rationalize the killing of Michael Brown by highlighting his appearance and his past engagement in criminal behavior (Keene 2015), thus perpetuating and supporting the image of the Black male body as something to be feared in anticipation. In this regard, the Black male body is never innocent until proven guilty; instead, it has become a symbol of violence and aggression and the barometer against which we now must measure social (in)justice injustice as now the question has become, when will Black Lives Matter? Because until then, we cannot, as a society, authentically state that #AllLivesMatter.

Perceptions to Protests: Moving toward the Black Lives Matter Movement

Darren Wilson's remarks regarding Michael Brown's "feel" and presentation as a "Hulk" "aggressive" and "demon" are, unfortunately, scientifically documented as common ideas among the US population. For instance, as recently as 2015, a study was published by the UCLA Center for Behavior, Evolution and Culture regarding the correlation of Black-sounding names on adult perceptions of danger (Holbrook, Fessler, and Navarrete 2015). Using a sample of over 1,500 mostly White participants, the researchers found that when presented with a Black-sounding name, participants identified characters in a story as a large, aggressive, lower class, and lower educated, and when that same story used a character with a White-sounding name, participants perceived the character as much less aggressive, and thoughts of lower education or economic status were not considered (Holbrook, Fessler, and Navarrete 2015). The authors note that the results of the study reveal a sad but simple truth about society's implicit bias: boiled down, when society merely hears a Black-sounding name, it connotes thoughts of danger and feelings of fear – period (Howard 2015). Hence, the impact that the Black face and/or Black body is even more likely to yield visceral responses that result in abject and violent discriminatory behavior (e.g., shoot first, ask questions later). What is more, because of the implicit nature of the bias that weaves its way into the institutional policies and laws that govern society, there is a silent but real permissiveness of such behavior.

It is this consistent and persistent permissiveness of institutionalized racism, the false yet perpetuated negative impression of the Black male body, and the silent and seemingly daily injustices against the full Black body that have resulted in fatigue, anguish and anger among the Black community. This fatigue manifests in a variety of ways, including the visible up swell of people in form of verbal and physical protests. Examples can be seen from the historic 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, DC, to the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri and to the current social media moniker of #BlackLivesMatter.

Next Steps: Moving Toward Justice

What is #BlackLivesMatter? #BlackLivesMatter is a movement that was created in 2012, after the homicide of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman with the goal of reframing Black lives and broadening the conversation around institutional racism, implicit bias and police violence (Black Lives Matter n.d.). The #BlackLivesMatter movement considers all of the ways Black people are intentionally and unintentionally deprived of basic human rights and dignity. According to their website, #BlackLivesMatter is "a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society" (Black Lives Matter n.d.). This is different from the media portrayal that #BlackLivesMatter is a passing fad, a "hate group" or a group that advocates violence against the police.

In 2015, #BlackLivesMatter serves for the country what upheld closed Black fist symbolized in the 1960s and 70s. With more than 50 years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there continues to be a huge divide between the lives of Black and White Americans. Along a variety of quality of life indicators, Blacks are disproportionately impacted with respect to community development, educational attainment, the criminal justice system, and health outcomes. The cumulative effects of social, economic, environmental, and political disadvantage as experienced by Black Americans have contributed to the rapidly escalating social unrest that was seen in places like Ferguson,

Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland. If the U.S. looks to retain its competitive edge, it is critical to create systems that promote equality of opportunity.

Consequently, we argue the identification of implicit bias and, more specifically, institutional racism as a critical first step towards reducing risks and improving outcomes. Further, it is necessary to move beyond fear, to become willing, as a society, to acknowledge the historic, consistent, and perpetual discriminatory practices that have resulted in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. It is necessary to recognize that by giving support to this movement does not negate the value of all lives, but instead, recognizes the power and strength of the collective to dismantle social injustice and move toward a true place of justice for all.

Implications for Further Research and Policy Changes

Addressing implicit bias and fear of the Black body must be a foremost issue of concern, however, the elephant in the room is long standing institutional racism first experienced by indigenous people and then resulting from the slave system that continues to have hold on the national consciousness. Deconstructing racism must finally include an understanding that Blacks are human beings and as such deserve the same rights and privileges as other racial groups in America. This requires changes to current laws and policies pertaining to education, employment, healthcare, housing, the criminal justice system and the environment and reviewing all the ways that Blacks are disproportionately disadvantaged in society.

In summary, the challenges that lay ahead include a balanced dialogue about the long held perceptions of Blacks, especially Black young in the United States. The immediate concerns should be to address the multiple levels of implicit bias deeply entrenched in our society. The structure of institutional racism must be deconstructed and centuries long practices treating Blacks as objects cease to exist. The suspicion heuristic and fearful reaction to the Black body must be exposed and addressed in all areas of our society.

Authors' Biographies

Dr. Chapple is an assistant professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Central Florida. Dr. Chapple received her BSW, MSW and PhD in Justice Studies from Arizona State University. Her dissertation was titled: Being a Deaf Woman in College is Hard. Being Black Just Adds: Understanding the Complexities of Intersectionality. She has worked as a social worker in the areas of mental health, crisis intervention, education and disabilities. Her areas of teaching and scholarship include critical race feminism and social justice, d/Deafness, disability studies and cultural competent social work practice. Dr. Chapple serves on the CSWE Council on Disability and Persons with Disabilities.

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