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Advocating for Mental Health Equity: Reflections on the Multi-Layered Pandemic Experiences of Black College Students

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Abstract

The hydra of racism was ever-present in 2020. Historical inequities, which have long plagued major pillars of our society such as health, justice, and education, were exacerbated by COVID-19—which, when conjoined with the manifestations of institutionalized white supremacy and colonialism, served to disproportionately affect Black lives. However, there remains deeper consideration of the combined impact these intersecting, nationwide emergencies of COVID-19 and racial injustice have on Black college student mental health. This is particularly concerning given that college students are a vulnerable population for experiencing increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Black college students deserve to express an authentic sense of self in route to actualizing their success, and the intentional consideration of their mental health and well-being is vital to achieving this. Our reflection synthesizes the interrelation of these national topics to further contextualize the importance of valuing the psychological and emotional dimensions of Black college students' lived experiences as we aim towards broader progress regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. We discuss implications for institutional leadership, such as considerations for improving mental health service utilization and the use of interdisciplinary research avenues tying together tenets of education and mindfulness approaches.

Keywords: mental health, education, pandemic, racial injustice, anti-racism, HBCUs

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Writers such as Danielle Legros Georges (2020) have likened the racism in our country to a multi-headed hydra due to the ubiquitous nature of its presence on all our pillars of society, whether they be our healthcare, criminal justice, or educational systems. Historically, the serpent-like hydra is described as engaging in a broad offensive, attacking from multiple angles with various heads, giving it a formidable reach in the damage it creates. Additionally, this monster of Greek mythology has been used to describe how counterintuitive strategies to overcome one issue can inevitably serve to worsen the situation, much like Hercules had found out when chopping off one head, only to find out two more had taken its place. The spread of the novel 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19), and counterintuitive leadership decisions taken in response to this spread, evoked the imagery of the hydra via underscoring the insidious prevalence of racism in influencing healthcare access and risk factors for Black Americans—symptoms of the deeply rooted causal mechanisms of prejudice that have become embedded in as well as have structured society for centuries. However, despite the national discourse of health equity following COVID-19, less attention is given to the effect of these intersecting systemic issues on Black college students' mental health and well-being. This is particularly troubling as current trends in the mental health of Black college students remain largely unexplored despite so many of the nationwide emergencies that disproportionately affect Black families and communities. These include the continued acts of police brutality and civil rights violations against Black Americans, as well as the more recent inequities in vaccine distributions across the United States (Samuels, 2021).

Moreover, recent diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts implemented at colleges and universities around the country have aimed to resolve several key issues within higher education. However, an unwavering commitment to how students can thrive on campus after their acceptance and enrollment is essential, as progressive efforts towards institutional reform remain mere platitudes and may become indicative of the counterintuitive strategies noted above that may multiply the many heads of the hydra of racism. To make this commitment sustainable, we must ensure we are taking an intentional investment in mental health services and the access thereof so that Black students have the resources they need to rise above and persist through a multi-layered national crisis.

To begin, a global pandemic is not the only major phenomenon that has influenced mental health. As a result, this year is not one in which the events that occurred (and their overlapping inter-relationships) can be easily unpacked, nor can the consequences of these events on the shared and lived experiences of all Black lives. For example, and as of this writing, we are approximately a year from the initial onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, yet it was not long before early findings dispelled the myth of coronavirus as the "the great equalizer" that posed an equal threat to anyone from every walk of life (Liu & Modir, 2020; Zakaria, 2020). In other words, the long-standing inequity stemming from structural racism in medicine (e.g., limited access to healthcare, disproportionate employment in at-risk jobs, greater vulnerability due to pre-existing conditions) is a concerning yet ultimately an unsurprising feature of the United States medical healthcare infrastructure. These are, in part, primary mechanisms that contributed largely to why coronavirus has disproportionately affected Black communities (Duque, 2020). However, these

racialized and systemic issues in healthcare unraveled against a backdrop of racial injustice that gripped national discourse and underscored the concerted impact of a viral pandemic hitting alongside a separate and ongoing social pandemic (Laurencin & Walker, 2020).

That is, within this same year, we have witnessed the continued trend of unjust murders of Black Americans, such as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, by white law enforcement, which further galvanized #BlackLivesMatter globally and continues to impact the sociopolitical landscape of the country and beyond as the largest movement in United States history (Buchanan et al., 2020). Furthermore, advocates and allies attending protests against racial injustice and racist policy across the country have represented the voices of a younger generation of Americans (Barroso & Minkin, 2020) who are inspired by the original grassroots organizing efforts led by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opel Tometi in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer (Garza, 2014).[1] Since its inception, The Black Lives Matter Global Network has become a primary outlet and inspiration for college students to engage in sociopolitical advocacy (Hope et al., 2016) and empowered community leadership and mobilization on university campuses (White, 2016).

Additionally, these dual pandemics unfolded simultaneously to a historic United States election that marked an end of an administration that enabled divisiveness and aimed to casually normalize the individual, cultural, and structural racism that served to ultimately reinforce the health disparities observed for Black Americans following the spread of COVID-19 (Rutledge, 2020; Alltucker, 2021). At the intersection of these major events in modern American history is the importance of health equity, particularly within the domain of mental health and well-being for Black communities. Our personal reflection aims to join the growing number of voices that champion and support efforts to promote positive mental health in the Black community (Mushonga, 2020; Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020), and we do so by discussing the ramifications of this topic within education.

Higher Education and the Black College Student Experience

We begin with the topic of one's identity and its expression within a given campus environment. This is because a complex relationship exists between how individuals of diverse identities interact with one another to either encourage or inhibit a welcoming culture and climate, particularly for those that are historically marginalized. The norms, practices, and beliefs of the individuals at each college and university are the very foundation that determines the warmth of the institution's unique campus environment. Ideally, every student would be able to express an authentic self within educational spaces and across their academic journey, unburdened by the legitimate fear that their existence alone is offensive to others and can lead to potentially life-threatening situations as a result. However, this is unfortunately not the case. The discriminatory practices and processes which exert their power over the personal agency and well-being of Black students occur early (i.e., during K-12) and persist through the entire spectrum of the educational system (Harvey, 1984; Patterson, 2019).

Moreover, many white students are afforded the privilege not to have society impose upon them the need to reflect so

intensely, nor consistently, on their racial identity (if at all). Over time, divergence in educational experiences not only leads to educational inequities but inequities in one's opportunity to embrace and express authenticity within their lived experiences. For example, Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019, p. 412) explored the dichotomy present in academic spaces between being "authentically me" or the "unchosen me," the latter a competing identity determined by the projections cast from and decided by others. The interpretation of the latter speaks to the damage done when an institution is entrenched within its own structural racism and how norms, beliefs, and practices held by those who attend the institutions can yield a relentless demand on Black students to conform to white standards, narratives, expectations, and experiences (Corces-Zimmerman, 2018; Patterson, 2019). These patterns are observed in various departments as well, with attention given to the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields whereby consistent experiences with overt and covert racism and microaggressions may lead to feelings of racial battle fatigue (McGee & Bentley, 2017).

Black students have the right to bring their full, unapologetic selves to the classroom just as their white counterparts have done for centuries, free of the fear of prejudice and consequence. The fact that this is not the case can be attributed to how educational systems represent yet another racialized feedback loop of American society (i.e., another head of the hydra of racism). This feedback loop is characterized by the initial conditions which founded the system (embedded in and thus representing the history of American racism) and its self-reinforcing effect on maintaining racialized outcomes that disproportionately affect the academic experiences of Black students, which contributes to further psychological distress (Harvey, 1984; Masko, 2014). Educators and administrators have a responsibility to improve tolerance and combat the racism that can infiltrate the climate of schools (Masko, 2014). If not addressed, Black students in openly oppressive educational environments are undoubtedly at risk of the deleterious effects on their well-being (Harvey, 1984; Masko, 2014). For example, opposition in response to renaming a study hall not to include reference to an American slaveowner sends a disheartening message to Black students about what values are being prioritized by others who also attend their institution (Patterson, 2019). Examples such as this highlight the importance of increased scrutiny of educational systems where complicit relationships with the prevailing power structures are more covert. The wave of condemnations of racial injustice and police brutality from universities and organizations came swiftly following the murder of George Floyd, but not all condemnations carry equal weight. For some, simply recapitulating how "violence is bad" and "diversity is good" was sufficient to serve as a sympathetic appeal. However, without intentional commitment to these statements, an institution could be viewed as more concerned with "reputation management" rather than any dedicated efforts toward racial justice (Gibson et al., 2020, p. 3). The intentionality behind these dedications and commitments within higher education, on- and off-campus, are necessary requirements if institutions are to stand with and support all Black lives. Furthermore, students, faculty, staff, and administrators need to hold each other accountable for these causes by asking each other, "What does this look like?" That is, what may it look like to stand with marginalized groups, reassess strategies, and highlight issues surrounding diversity?

These are critical reflections in helping to improve educational experiences for Black students and consequently the development of their positive well-being.

Considering the importance of culture, climate, and support systems on Black college student success before 2020, understanding and researching the impact of the dual pandemic on the mental health and well-being of this population is imperative. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) provide an excellent opportunity for access to this population. Additionally, HBCUs are the cornerstone for many Black communities and play a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining the Black middle class in the United States (Stewart et al., 2008). When considering access to healthcare and advanced medical education of Black Americans, several undergraduate-focused HBCUs and graduate-level institutions, such as Morehouse School of Medicine and Howard University College of Medicine, have played a central role in cultivating positive perceptions of healthcare and conversations about mental health in the Black community. Most importantly, when considering the topic of this section, the level of racism, discrimination, and lack of support that exists on predominately white institutions (PWIs), for example, is greatly reduced, if not non-existent, on HBCU campuses (Williams & Palmer, 2019). These findings are attributed to HBCUs, traditionally and fundamentally, being educational environments that include greater student contact, communication, and assistance. These factors attribute to HBCU's historical success in producing a significant percentage of Black graduates, especially within certain academic areas such as STEM (Toldson, 2018). The high-touch student support and a sense of belonging displayed at HBCUs through faculty and peer mentoring, a myriad of supplemental programming (e.g., workshops, social clubs, student-focused organizations), and special events lead to a heightened sense of community for students, faculty, and staff (Brown et al., 2005; Gasman & Nguyen, 2016; Mfume, 2015). However, even with the increased support and inclusive environments, Black students' mental health and well-being on HBCU campuses have been impacted by the dual pandemic just as Black students on non-HBCUs campuses (Charles & Dobson, 2020; Galvin, 2020).

To better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted HBCU campuses, our recent research within STEM education has served as a major impetus in how we have processed the connections between these combined social forces and their influence on mental health and well-being. As part of a National Science Foundation (NSF) RAPID grant, data collection is in its final stages. It includes survey responses investigating how COVID-19 has impacted HBCU STEM students, faculty, and staff's success and persistence referred to as HBCU stakeholders. With limited contact to students, funding, and resources, COVID-19 has introduced a new set of challenges and crises for HBCU stakeholders, especially decision-making processes for administrators and those majoring in or working closely to STEM academic areas, who have higher requirements linked to labs, hardware (i.e., laptops), software, and internet access. Preliminary findings suggest that the transition to virtual learning and remote work increased overall stress and anxiety levels for faculty and students. In fact, 59% of faculty (n = 73) and 86% of students (n = 170) reported that the change to learning outside of the classroom increased their levels of stress and anxiety in their personal lives. These data only provide a cursory glance of the totality of factors and

experiences potentially underlying these trends, so in the next section below, we aim to unpack the relationships we believe require further consideration.

Dual Pandemic: Impact of Mental Health for Black College Students

> The way in which Black bodies live in the United States is the direct result of colonialism's construction of policies and practices that create structural determinants of health, and by consequence, health inequities. (Barlow, 2018, p. 896)

As of August 31st, 2020, *CBS News* (2020) had reported that 164 Black men and women had been killed by law enforcement, with at least one Black man or woman killed each week. By early December 2020, nearly 48,000 Black Americans had died of COVID-19 with 116 deaths per 100,000 people, the highest rate among any racial/ethnic group (The Atlantic Monthly Group, n.d.). These are truly intersecting national issues (Jean, 2020) unequivocally tied together because racism is undoubtedly a determinant of mental health (Paradies et al., 2015). Furthermore, we should focus on how the multi-layered, complex relationship between these dual pandemics compounds the negative determinants of mental health for Black students and faculty on college campuses.

First, we will take a broader view of the events that have shaped 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of Color overall, and it has collided with the long-term and embedded manifestations of American racism towards the Black community. The policies and practices referenced by Barlow (2018) above further reinforce these inequities in health. These inequities were exacerbated when the Trump administration minimized the severity of the virus and did little to increase the availability of testing in communities of need (Rutledge, 2020). Further, Rutledge (2020) cited occasions when the Trump administration discounted the expertise of public health officials, which led to misinformation and confusion about the spread and prevention of the virus. The lack of testing and misinformation contributed to the disproportionate spread of COVID-19 among communities of Color, which experience vulnerability based on various intersecting factors, including financial constraints, housing discrimination, denser inner cities, food deserts, and overall environmental racism (Duque, 2020).

Furthermore, barriers to seeking healthcare include the affordability of required healthcare services, as well as stigma and the cultural insensitivity experienced in healthcare spaces (Waite & Nardi, 2020). The latter is tied to a long-standing mistrust of certain aspects of healthcare rooted in a "history of mistreatment, unethical experimentation, and criminal neglect towards Black Americans" (Egede & Walker, 2020, p. e77[3]). Moreover, trends in mental health symptoms demonstrate that Black Americans are disproportionately "vulnerable to negative mental health consequences during large-scale national crises" (Novacek et al., 2020, p. 449). This is consistent with Czeisler et al.'s (2020) recent findings in which 44% of Black respondents in their COVID-19 study reported experiencing at least one adverse mental or behavioral health symptom. Approximately 30% said that COVID-19 prompted symptoms of a trauma- and stressor-related disorder. Additionally, about 15% reported experiencing suicidal ideation in the 30 days before participating in this

study during the Summer of 2020 (Czeisler et al., 2020). Similarly, Fisher et al. (2020) found that the intersecting risk factors between COVID-19 and structural racism are significant and lead to negative mental health consequences for Black young adults, primarily through eliminating the protective factor of employment, which has historically served as a source of resilience within this population.

While we have emerging information on how COVID-19 and societal inequities have affected mental health outcomes for young adults, the implications of these findings on Black college students are largely unknown. This is particularly alarming, given that college students have been widely recognized as a group at elevated risk of suicide and depression. Before COVID-19, Black students faced the troubling experiences of minority status stress due to pervasive and systematic factors, and disproportionately more than other minority student groups (McClain et al., 2016). These experiences include discrimination, micro-aggressions, stereotype threat, as well as a diminished sense of belonging, and they all have major negative implications for students' mental health. Furthermore, Busby et al. (2019) reported that of the Black college students that were considered at elevated risk for suicide, approximately 66% were not receiving any form of mental health counseling or services. Suggested barriers that impaired access to receiving needed services included challenges recognizing ongoing problems, limited time, as well as fear and stigma (Busby et al., 2019). Moreover, we still do not know the extent to which mental health services have become even less accessible because of the rapid and unexpected transformation to higher education in response to COVID-19.

Mental health services utilization has been considered low among Black college students (Henderson, 2007). The underlying causes are tied to similar issues of mistrust and stigma that characterize overall health inequity. De-stigmatization via narrative shifts in recognizing personal challenges (i.e., not as admissions of weakness, but instead an important step towards finding personal growth, healing, and strength) and encouraging constructive conversation around these challenges to unpack their influence is vital. However, one such problem is that access to communication does not always lead to appropriate pathways to support, even if a student is aware and open to the available mental health services provided on their campus. This is because one of, if not the most important, factors in determining the success of counseling is the connection between therapist and client. Issues of retention are not isolated to education alone. When clients do not feel seen or heard with authentic recognition and understanding given to their lived experiences, drop-out from mental health services is understandably likely to follow. Prioritizing greater access to Black mental health professionals is a critical and intentional step towards addressing Black college student mental health. This can allow students to enter a vulnerable space with someone who may share similar experiences, thus providing the nuanced insight necessary to unpack and heal those experiences. Additionally, like the programmatic training endorsed for white faculty to aid them in demonstrating cultural awareness and consideration (Simmons & Lord, 2019), white healthcare professionals should receive training to mitigate the potential influences of bias and ignorance in support of their Black clients. This can serve as a possible avenue in matching students with therapists that can demonstrate cultural competencies due to their training and productive work with diverse student

populations.

Outside of one-on-one counseling practices are social support circles that help provide a safe and welcoming environment for students to explore and discuss the daily impact of racial injustice. The evidence-based Emotional Emancipation Circles (EECs) from The Community Healing Network is a fantastic example. Barlow (2018) details her experiences leading a retreat available to Black college students at a Maryland institution, wherein *Emotional Emancipation Circles* are described as "spaces in which Black people work together to overcome, heal from, and overturn the lies of white superiority and Black inferiority: the root causes of the devaluing of Black lives" (The Community Healing Network, as cited in Barlow, 2018, p. 901). The author further mentions that these support circles are "necessary spaces for Black liberation, mental health, and well-being" (p. 901). At this leadership retreat, organized and implemented by students, Barlow (2018) facilitated a social support space that incorporated learning modules designed to engage participants in areas of "African culture, history and movements, and imperatives and ethics;" as well as a healing space for students to share their personal narratives in a practice ultimately targeted at the "liberation of young Black minds by addressing their humanity" (pp. 900–901). In allowing students an opportunity to dismantle the lie of Black inferiority through the lens of their personal stories, EECs can facilitate the reversal of intergenerational trauma and restore an optimal sense of mental health and well-being (Barlow, 2018). Universities and colleges looking to demonstrate their commitment and solidarity with Black college students should work with experienced facilitators and Black (and trained ally) medical health care professionals to bring these opportunities for personal healing and social support to their campuses.

Improving mental health service utilization and Black mental health professional representation on campus, in addition to implementing best practices, such as EECs, are points outlined in this section that are particularly relevant for PWIs. Black students may experience increased levels of judgment, hostility, discrimination, and microaggressions at PWIs, potentially resulting from the prejudice and stereotypes about minorities commonly present in white space (Blosser, 2020). This may be compounded further for Black STEM students, as the respective STEM departments can operate as smaller-scale environments, which exacerbate atmospheres of exclusion. This is noteworthy for Black female STEM students, particularly in engineering, in which experiences with alienation (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018), racial stigmatization (Leath & Chavous, 2018), hypervisibility (Blosser, 2020), and stereotype threat (McKoy et al., 2020) are documented in the literature. All of which reflect barriers to experiencing positive well-being and authenticity on campus. Additionally, the prejudice and discrimination driving these classroom and campus experiences also contribute to the continued under-representation of Black women in engineering and STEM more broadly (Fletcher et al., 2021). The following section reflects the intersection of different frameworks and approaches to provide education researchers and leaders insight into championing mental health equity and academic success for Black college students amidst dual pandemics.

Moving Forward

Emerging tenets of education and mental health research align well with one another and may benefit from a formal union in future work exploring mental health among Black college students. For example, recent research has increasingly highlighted the importance of taking an asset-based approach to investigating inequities in STEM education for Black women, allowing their underrepresentation in these disciplines to persist (Fletcher et al., 2017; Morton, 2020; Ong et al., 2020). An asset-based approach shifts the narrative away from perceived deficits in an individual or group of students to fix their disadvantaged situations and instead places the onus of responsibility onto institutions in dismantling the barriers that stymie student success. Thus, this philosophy in framing research is crucial in challenging and further revealing biased systems. Similarly, Mushonga (2020) has recently espoused taking a strength-based approach to evaluating the mental health of Black college students, shifting the narrative towards the healthy and protective aspects of coping that allow one to flourish (i.e., exhibit positive mental health; Keyes, 2002).

Additionally, Mushonga and Henneberger (2020) built upon the strength-based approach in evaluating positive mental health among Black college students. The authors' findings revealed that protective factors such as aspects of racial identity, self-esteem, and spirituality contribute significantly to the degree to which students can flourish. This is in line with previous research demonstrating the positive and protective impact of racial (and gender identity) in allowing STEM students to persist and engage with their academic experiences (Morton & Parsons, 2018), as well as overcome identity pressures and discrimination via self-definition and self-valuing (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Similarly, Novacek et al. (2020) underscored the role that "Africultural coping tenets and spiritual and collective coping" have in promoting effective coping models (p. 450). This encouragement is borne out of the research conducted by Utsey et al. (2007), who demonstrated the role spirituality plays in improving quality of life outcomes for African Americans by mediating the effectiveness of culture-specific coping strategies in response to adversity. Taking together, reflecting on how racial identity and spirituality contribute to Black college students' positive well-being may help critically sharpen cultural competencies among campus counseling professionals.

Furthermore, Mushonga and Henneberger (2020) demonstrated that Black college students do not represent a monolith regarding well-being and that protective factors vary between traditional and nontraditional Black students. Identifying such protective factors provides a promising path towards improving the existing services provided and mapping mental health's negative and positive dimensions (Mushonga, 2020; Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020). These studies represent a powerful step towards incorporating a robust approach to mental health into research on education that may inspire readers. However, while the benefit of focusing on ones' strengths and fortitude in combating poor mental health and illness are known (Seligman, 2008), we want to caution balance in emphasizing positive qualities. Such as resilience and persistence among Black students, not dismiss the very biased and real structural and systemic issues within society that necessitate these coping traits. It is important not to evoke potential stereotypes, such as the "Strong Black Woman,"—which perpetuate narratives that may adversely affect well-being and self-

esteem (Carter & Rossi, 2020; Stanton et al., 2017; Watson & Hunter, 2016). A positive example of such balance can be found in the work of McGee and Bentley. They tactfully note the resilience of the Black STEM graduate students interviewed in their study that acknowledged the sheer perseverance in the face of their challenging circumstances. The authors respectfully highlighted this resilience not to ignore or deflect the systemic factors that: (a) imposed those challenges in these students' lives to begin with and (b) still require continued reform so that equity may be achieved for the students interviewed (2017).

Further Reflections

Within the United States and beyond, it is imperative that we continue to research, learn, accept, and intentionally address issues facing Black college students, especially when it comes to overall mental health and well-being. Jenée Johnson (2020), a leader at the forefront of the mindfulness movement, has stated that "you can't heal what you don't reveal." This is not only true within the scope and spaces of seeking self-actualization but also a sobering reflection on the continued need to root out racism and prejudice. This way, we can continue to identify and name the many heads of the hydra of racism, thus dismantling their combined insidious influences from the shadows of our institutions. These sentiments align with Cross' (2020) recent call to action within engineering education. The author eloquently synthesizes the principal effects of institutionalized white supremacy, which allows for the emergence of racism as the manifestation of the United States' founding initial conditions. Cross (2020) asserts that anti-racism is a solution to dismantling inherently racist processes. However, as Johnson suggests above, anti-racism can serve as a necessary step towards healing this country and considering the impacts on mental health that have disproportionate relevance within Black communities.

A stellar resource in dismantling racist power is Dr. Ibram X. Kendi's 2019 bestseller *How to Be an Antiracist*, which is an empowering read in developing one's commitment to, and identity as an anti-racist. At the heart of Kendi's work is an unpacking of a very simple feedback loop that flawlessly ties together explanations of how racist power operates at various levels of organization. Furthermore, this loop is characterized by how racist power is driven out of self-interest. Thus, requiring that racist policy be implemented at the societal level to maintain power dynamics within a constructed racialized hierarchy. However, this would require that racist ideas be crafted, refined, and marketed throughout history by individuals and among individuals to justify the institutionalized racist policies that keep racist powers in place (Kendi, 2019). This relationship between maintaining and sharing racist ideas and their link to the manifestation of racist policies and power structures is explored through Kendi's juxtaposition of personal stories from his lived experiences with historical explanations and origins of racist issues across a broad spectrum of societal institutions.

A perspective central to this work is the consistent encouragement by the author that the opposite processes may hold true as well. That is, anti-racism—as a collection of powerful anti-racist policies—can restructure society in a way that provides equity to all persons, including within the intersecting areas of criminal justice, health, and education. One relevant example is Kendi's (2019) discussion of standardized testing as a reflection of the effective and

long-standing racist policy that ultimately "degrades Black minds and legally excludes Black bodies" with consideration to how statistical instruments, such as test scores, are used to support "achievement gap" rhetoric and the racist belief some may hold that "disparities in academic achievement accurately reflect disparities in intelligence among racial groups" (p. 101). In this example, the author explores systemic inequity in education to pivot to a fully realized anti-racist reinterpretation of this racial issue. He does this by reorienting the readers to reflect on the "opportunity gaps" perpetuated by racist policies, such as systemic underfunding of predominately Black districts and the schools found therein (p. 103).

While Kendi (2019) exercises vulnerability in taking a critical approach to his self-examination and self-reflection, DiAngelo (2012) provides a thorough account of why white people may resist such vulnerability and accountability and continue to stay silent about racism. DiAngelo challenges these notions to compel readers to no longer remain complicit. This and other readings (see DiAngelo's 2018 book entitled *White Fragility*) may also prove most useful in taking a confident anti-racist position within society. These practices in self-reflection are necessary for whites and non-Black Persons of Color (POC), as co-conspirators, to provide constructive support for Black communities in combating racial injustice. The self-awareness component underscores the need for introspection and a deeper reflection of one's behavior. This is simply because condemning others for their prejudice while maintaining the denial of biased influences in one's actions, thoughts, and beliefs are not a fruitful avenue to pursue (Samuels, 2017; Music, 2020). In other words, we must reveal what requires healing not just at the higher levels of organization, such as universities, but within ourselves (Samuels, 2017). Such exploration of one's humanity—coupled with the rejection of one's potential personal biases and the denial that fuels them—can be a useful exercise in narrowing any empathy deficits and developing one's sense of anti-racist identity (Denevi & Pastan, 2006), as well as strive towards a more equitable society that honors and celebrates all Black lives.

Thus, the education of non-Black co-conspirators is a key component towards rooting out and rejecting institutionalized white supremacy (Jean, 2020). There is no room for neutrality in combating racial injustice. Like the characters in John Carpenter's 1988 cult classic, "They Live," we are faced with taking a clear position: to advocate for change through the dismantling of structural biases and their manifestations or collude with the hegemonic powers that seek to oppress those who resist it. In the film, an anonymous and malicious alien hegemony has directed the development and perpetuation of capitalist exploitation by manipulating consumer behavior and leveraging an already existing oppressive economic system. All the while, the citizens of this fictional society remain oblivious (or are intimately involved in the conspiracy). However, through an inexplicably mysterious pair of sunglasses, the protagonist gains full awareness of how society has been affected by, yet purposely perpetuates, the hidden and predatory practices of capitalist marketing.

Additionally, the identities of these alien infiltrators are only revealed through this special lens. If only a stylish pair of sunglasses could provide readers with a clear and unfiltered lens through which they may peel back the layers and see the totality

of how race, as a construct, has been used for centuries to consolidate power. Furthermore, readers would be able to see how in modern society, racism still represents a "powerful collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas" (Kendi, 2019, p. 20). However, while the two main protagonists were armed with knowledge, awareness, and a cool pair of shades in dismantling the oppressive powers within the film, such insight gained from adopting an anti-racist position is not so easily achieved and requires a great deal of "persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination" (p. 23). In doing so, one may see an entirely different reality from what they may be accustomed to, revealing previously hidden inequities that have always existed but maybe now approached more intentionally through a broad coalition of co-conspirators. While largely stemming from economic inequity and commercialization, this film analogy hopefully contextualizes part of what makes anti-racism a verb. That is, being anti-racist requires a critical act of self-awareness disavowing instantiations of racism, witnessed or otherwise, in one's life. In doing so, readers may collectively band together to destroy the hydra of racism, eliminating each head with freedom of the fear of replication.

Conclusion

Our society is a complex system, requiring truly interdisciplinary solutions within the scope of its challenges. This necessitates taking a dynamic approach to further unraveling what biases, with intended and unintended consequences, remain hidden and lurking within our major institutions and ourselves. To this end, it is recommended that we continue to combine the lessons of mindfulness, counseling practices, and many of the various branches of the psychological discipline concerned with mental health to unpack the deleterious impact of national inequity trends on student outcomes and well-being.

Specific focus should be given to Black students as they navigate the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and grapple with the social justice issues that persist throughout the United States. While the landscape of Black student mental health remains largely unexplored, there is an urgent need to gain insight and provide support systems for students' mental health and well-being. As Black students continue to face uncomfortable situations due to their racial identity inside and outside the classroom, allies at all levels (e.g., non-Black school leaders, instructors) need to commit to equity and inclusion while combating racism. This piece intends to motivate and encourage prioritizing mental health and well-being as a principal component of increasing efforts dedicated to DEI in all higher education. Additionally, this aim is particularly relevant within the STEM disciplines. Leadership is committed to improving enrollment, retention, and persistence of Black students both within these fields and at their institutions. In doing so, strategic approaches to dynamically combating racism across a multiplicity of educational spaces may prove effective rather than unintentionally exacerbating issues of discrimination and bias by neglecting how national-level events shape the lived experiences and well-being of Black students on campus.

We also realize that to reach the student, we can start with their community (e.g., physical location, groups of people they identify with) and push for a change in the cultural climate. In communities and organizations that house, support, employ,

and educate Black people, equitable access to holistic mental health and intentional increased inclusion of well-being practices are needed, if not available. Also, we should ensure that existing programs and initiatives are adequately resourced and prioritized, when present. When considering higher education institutions, whether PWIs, HBCUs, or other minority-serving institutions (MSIs), there is an immense opportunity to showcase an institutional commitment to DEI. These institutions should focus on increasing Black college students' acceptance and well-being related to their persistence. Additionally, higher education institutions can serve as safe havens to ensure that their Black students know that they belong, can bring their authentic selves to the institutions, and be included. As some of the oldest standing bodies within communities, higher education institutions have an opportunity to expand their work through the communities they serve. Hopefully, then, we will see the change we wish to see in the world.

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Footnote

[1] For a history of the #BlackLivesMatter movement go to https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/