

PRELIMINARY REPORT

**When Black Death Goes Viral: The Relationship Between Social Media Exposure to  
Vicarious Racism and Black Americans' Race-Based Traumatic Stress**

Kaylen Vine and Simon Howard, Ph.D.

Department of Psychology, Marquette University

**When Black Death Goes Viral: The Relationship Between Social Media Exposure to  
Vicarious Racism and Black Americans' Race-Based Traumatic Stress**

“I can’t breathe.”

– Eric Garner (July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014), Christopher Lowe (July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018), Anton Black (September 2018), Javier Ambler (March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019), Derrick Scott (May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019) Simeon Francis (July 2019), Elijah McClain (August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019), Byron Williams (September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019), Manuel Ellis (March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020), George Floyd (May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

"When you see someone on a video being shot and brutalized by police, you think to yourself, ‘That could be me’. Or if not that, that it could be someone you love. So, you feel it very deeply because it’s happening to a member of your community, someone who looks like you.”

– Clinical Psychologist, Monnica Williams, Ph.D.

On July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Eric Garner was approached by New York City police officers (NYPD) on suspicion of selling untaxed loose cigarettes (Carrega, 2019) and what should have been an attempt at arrest became an egregious homicide. Documented video footage of the incident showed Garner grappled down to the sidewalk with a banned chokehold by NYPD officer, Daniel Pantaleo (ABC News, 2014). Garner yelled out “I can’t breathe” 11 times as he was pinned down by multiple officers, subdued until unconscious. He died an hour later. The cause of death was ruled a homicide by compression of the neck and chest from physical restraint of the police (Pearson et al., 2014). Video of Garner’s final moments went viral, his dying words becoming a wide-spread phrase employed by the Black Lives Matter (BLM)<sup>1</sup> movement, drawing attention to racialized police brutality and lack of police accountability. Garner’s case is just one of several filmed viral instances where a Black person was killed by the police.

---

<sup>1</sup> Black Lives Matter is a decentralized network that largely protests against state-sanctioned and interpersonal acts of violence against Black communities, as well as advocates for congruent policy changes (Black Lives Matter, n.d.a).

Black social media users are often second-handedly and repeatedly exposed to graphic recordings of racism through social media platforms, which can negatively impact the mental health of Black viewers. Thus, the aims of the current research was threefold: firstly, to assess how videos of racialized police violence, as indicators of indirectly experienced racism, psychologically affect Black viewers; secondly, to examine how Black racial identification may be a moderator in this observed relationship; and thirdly, to evaluate social media as a conduit for trauma inducing content. By fulfilling these aims, via correlational and experimental approaches, the current research will contribute to the scant literature connecting vicarious racism and race-based traumatic stress. Additionally, these studies will be utilized to understand the psychological impacts of racism that can lead to significant trauma in targets of interpersonal and structural racism. Furthermore, the studies will examine social media as, yet another avenue racism can exert its effects on Black people's health. This work will be the first to our knowledge to experimentally investigate the intersection of social media, vicarious racism, and race-based traumatic stress on Black Americans, important given the rising attention to racialized police violence and the historical complications with identifying and diagnosing race-based trauma.

### **Police Killings and the Impact on Black Americans' Mental Health**

In comparison to White Americans, Black Americans are 3 times more likely to be killed by the police, 1.3 times more likely to be unarmed, and constitute 28% of police-related deaths despite representing only 13% of the U.S. population (Sinyangwe & McKesson, 2020). In fact, based on estimates of lifetime risk of death by police use-of-force, it can be expected that around 1 in every 1,000 Black males will be killed by the

police in their lifetime with the greatest likeliness around their early-20s to mid-30s (Edwards et al., 2019). Police violence is, evidentially, a racialized public health issue that disproportionately affects Black Americans (Cooper & Fullilove, 2016). As a result, fatal police encounters have an ascribed formidable significance for Black Americans, signaling not only to biased killings of unarmed Black men and emotional suffering for their loved ones, but also collateral injury to the mental health of the Black community.

### **Current Studies**

Across two current studies we examined the relationship between exposure to vicarious racism, via social media, and race-based traumatic stress responses in Black Americans.

#### **Study 1**

In Study 1, the relationship between vicarious racism and RBTS was examined, as well as the role of racial centrality in this relationship. Study 1's hypotheses were as followed:

#### **Hypothesis 1**

Participants with more daily social media use, and thus more exposure to videos of racialized police violence, will exhibit more race-based traumatic stress symptoms.

#### **Hypothesis 2**

Racial centrality will moderate the relationship between vicarious racism and RBTS. However, given the mixed literature on racial centrality and its role as a buffer or exacerbator of negative mental health outcomes, there is not a directional hypothesis.

In the study 1, we found that the more social media Black people used daily, thus allowing for more encounters with racialized police violence, the more race-based

traumatic stress (RBTS) they experienced. Additionally, and in support of previous literature suggesting racial centrality is positively associated with psychological distress and perceived discrimination for Black individuals (Sellers & Shelton, 2003), we found the relationship between daily social media use and RBTS to be stronger for Black people moderate to high, but not low, on racial centrality. That is, Black individuals who consider race to be central to their identity at moderate to high levels experience more severe RBTS as it relates to daily social media use.

### **Study 2**

In Study 2, the *causal* relationship between vicarious racism and race-based traumatic stress was examined. Study 2 employs a 2 (Race of target: Black v. White) x 2 (Traumatic event: police killing v. non-fatal incident) between-subjects experimental design to assess if racialized police violence, an instance of vicarious racism, leads to RBTS. Study 2's hypotheses are as followed:

#### **Hypothesis 1**

There will be a significant interaction between race of target and traumatic event, specifically it was hypothesized that Black individuals who watch a video of a racialized police killing of another Black individual will report more race-based traumatic stress than those who watch a video of police killing a White individual or a video of a non-police, non-fatal incident, regardless of the victim's race.

In Study 2, the hypothesis was not supported. We found that Black viewers experienced higher RBTS regardless of the race of the victim (i.e., Black or White) in a traumatic police killing incident compared to viewers who viewed Black or White individuals in a non-traumatic situation.

### **Conclusion**

Black Americans are not only susceptible to the harm caused by experiencing racism firsthand, but also by the harm of racism experienced by others that look like them. Watching videos of racist acts on social media is just one of the many ways Black individuals can experience racism directly and indirectly. Although the findings of the current studies failed to support the hypothesis that Black participants who watched a video of a racialized police killing would have more race-based traumatic stress than participants who watched a video of police killing a White individual or a video of a non-fatal incident, the findings point to an institutional-level issue that goes beyond the interpersonal implications of racism of police-civilian interactions and future research will be necessary to examine the specificity of racialized police violence as source of vicarious racial trauma. Additionally, the current findings highlight racial identity factors that can influence who is more likely to be susceptible to the adverse mental health outcomes of racism. The current studies have contributed meaningfully to the larger body of literature on vicarious racism by furthering our understanding of it and being the first to date to experimentally investigate the psychological impact of vicarious racism for Black individuals.