

## **“I BELIEVE IN THAT MOVEMENT AND I BELIEVE IN THAT CHANT”: THE INFLUENCE OF BLACK LIVES MATTER ON RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT**

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*Over the past few years, systemic racism has been increasingly in the news via the work of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. While the negative psychological effects of racial discrimination are well documented, less is known about how young people resist or change racism, and how social movements such as BLM may influence these individual processes. To address this gap, the current study used the Transconceptual Model of Empowerment and Resilience (TMER; Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013) to explore how BLM operates to support, promote, and maintain resilience and empowerment processes among young Black men as they face racism. Semi-structured interviews with 14 young Black men were analyzed using an issue-focused analysis approach. The findings suggest that participants experienced a diverse range of racism. The BLM movement appeared to influence resilience and empowerment by: 1) providing awareness about racial injustice, 2) reinforcing racial pride, 3) offering resources, and 4) opening a window of opportunity for participants to enact change within their local context.*

**Keywords:** Racism, Empowerment, Resilience, Black Lives Matter

### **1. Introduction**

Historically, Black communities in the United States have lived under conditions of profound risk. Young Black men, in particular, experience inequities with respect to the juvenile and criminal justice and educational systems, and are more likely to experience racial profiling and discrimination compared to White individuals (Ghandnoosh, 2015; Mauer & King, 2007). From an early age, Black boys may be unfairly stereotyped or identified as an offender without cause, due to their intersecting gender and racial identities (Biggs & Andrews, 2015; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Dancy, 2014; Ferguson, 2000). Research also suggests that members of the Black community face more implicit forms of racism, termed microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007; Pierce, 1995). Sue et al. (2007) defined racial microaggressions as “commonplace verbal or

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behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults” (p.278).

Individuals and institutions, at multiple levels, maintain racial hierarchies and attitudes (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The macrosystem, which includes policies and ideologies, plays a role through governing what is normative and acceptable in society. These policies and ideologies can have indirect and direct influences on racial attitudes of individuals and institutions at lower ecological levels (Lin et al., 2016). For example, stop-and-frisk policies may both create and reinforce racially biased policing strategies, which then has direct impact on individuals. Simultaneously, individuals and institutions impact the macrosystem, as they create policies and promote ideologies based on personal belief systems that may include unconscious and conscious negative stereotypes of Black men.

At the individual level, these experiences can have long-lasting negative impacts. Racial discrimination and microaggressions, for example, have been associated with negative physical, psychological, and social health outcomes (Choi et al., 2017; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Davidoff, & Davis, 2017;). While these negative effects are important to examine, Clay (2012) argued that a focus on this alone might contribute to and reinforce stereotypes by categorizing Black young men as “powerless, social problems, and both victims and perpetrators of noncritical understanding of violence” (p. 55).

These issues have been made more salient in the past few years by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. In 2014, the BLM movement emerged as a social and political force aimed at addressing systemic and institutional racism. Founded by three Black women – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – BLM was sparked by the death of 17 year-old Trayvon Martin, and aimed at connecting those who were interested in fighting against anti-Black racism (Garza, 2014). As described by the BLM founders, the issues highlighted by the movement reach beyond young Black men; the movement is a call to action in support of Black women, bi, gay, lesbian, queer or trans, differently-abled, and Black immigrants (Garza, 2014). With the increased use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in social media, organized protests across the U.S., and greater movement visibility in the media and mainstream television, the BLM movement gained national and worldwide attention.

Given the relative newness of the BLM movement, there is limited empirical research on its influence at the individual level. One empirical article (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016) revealed that factors such as political efficacy and previous participation in activism related to student participation in BLM. In a study by Brooms & Perry (2016), participants described how the killings of Black men impacted them, but it was unclear whether they were asked about BLM. Other studies have examined the use of BLM hashtags as a representation of collective identities (Ray, Brown, Fraistat, & Summers, 2017) and explored how online communities influence the framing of the social movement (Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2017).

Social movements are central to community psychology in multiple ways. First, the social movements of the 1960’s, including the civil rights movement and women’s movement influenced the development of community psychology. At that time, psychologists began to recognize the relationship between citizen engagement in social action and psychological well-being. Second, as described further below, with guiding values such as empowerment, citizen participation, and individual and community wellness, understanding how individuals participate in, respond to, and are impacted by social justice oriented social movements such as BLM, is well aligned with larger goals of the field. Finally, community psychology has long been concerned about issues of equity and oppression, and has recognized that social movements can

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be a mechanism for social change. The current study is aimed at contributing to a need for more studies of how these social forces are created by and impact individuals and communities, so that the field can continue to develop models for systems change.

## **2. Transconceptual Model of Empowerment and Resilience (TMER)**

The terms “empowerment” and “resilience” are widely employed in community psychology. Empowerment is one of community psychology’s seven core values. It emphasizes the use of community strengths and bottom-up approaches to gain power and control (Rappaport, 1981). The study of power, and thus empowerment, is fundamental to community psychology, because power dynamics are present in individual relationships, organizations, and communities, and imbalances in power can influence individual and community well-being (Kloos et al., 2012). In contrast, while not often listed as a core community psychology value, resilience is directly tied to the field’s values of individual and community wellness. Although resilience may trace its roots to developmental psychology, it has long been studied in community psychology as a positive outcome that reflects psychological wellness (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013; Kloos et al., 2012).

Although both terms have been widely studied, there is a lack of consensus in the conceptualization of empowerment and resilience. Brodsky and Cattaneo (2013) argue that the widespread, multidisciplinary, and inconsistent use of these terms has “led to muddled definitions and operationalizations of each concept” (p. 334). They suggest that further clarification and refinement of these concepts is needed in community psychology. Indeed, empowerment and resilience are often treated as synonyms in the social sciences literature, leading to confusion about their theoretical differences. Despite its widespread use, Brodsky and Cattaneo (2013) found no work directly aimed at exploring the theoretical differences between the two concepts.

After exploring areas of convergence and divergence between both concepts, Brodsky and Cattaneo (2013) developed the Transconceptual Model of Empowerment and Resilience (TMER). In TMER, empowerment and resilience are conceptualized as iterative and interactive processes that can occur on multiple ecological levels (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013). TMER posits that both are processes where individuals or communities identify a stressor, and develop an intention and goal to change the stressful state. While both processes involve goal development, the primary difference centers on the type of goal. Resilience focuses on internal change goals aimed at withstanding, adapting, or resisting issues through intrapersonal action. Empowerment involves external goals directed towards changing relationships, power dynamics, communities, or society.

TMER identifies resilience as often the primary and most appropriate process when the risks are too high, the individual or community lacks the intrapersonal or extrapersonal resources necessary for empowerment, or when the size of change needed to move from baseline to their goal is too large (termed, “magnitude of change” by Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013).

### 3. Resilience and Empowerment

Past research has shown the range of ways Black communities have resisted racial discrimination and how protective factors have supported these processes. The literature on resilience in the Black community shows that institutions such as church, mediums such as language and music, and individual-level factors such as sociopolitical control, social support, positive relationships, and racial socialization, have provided protection against persistent racism, risky neighborhoods, and economic deprivation (Brodsky, 1999; Brown, 2008; Brown & Tylka, 2011; Payne, 2011; Teti et al., 2012; Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, & Maton, 1999). However, less research has examined resilience *processes*. Teti et al. (2012) found that Black men's strategies and processes to maintain their well-being in the face of racism, included: 1) a focus on perseverance, 2) a commitment to learning from their life experiences and hardship, 3) taking time to reflect and refocus, 4) crafting a supportive environment, and 5) using religion/spirituality as a guide to navigate stressors.

In addition to engagement in resilience, research has shown how young Black men and women respond to racism through educating others and social action. During the Civil Rights Movement, youth contributed to the general public's awareness of inequality, especially in the South (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012; McAdam, 1990). The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer is one prominent example of youth-led organizing during this period (Etienne, 2013; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012; McAdam, 1990). SNCC, led primarily by Black college students, mobilized and politicized young people, and drew mass attention to racial discrimination in the South (Biggs & Andrews, 2015; Etienne, 2013; McAdam, 1990). Youth of color throughout the 1990's and 2000's also participated in social action to address national and international educational, immigration, and economic issues (Clay, 2012; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005).

To date, however, there is little psychological research examining how these macro-level factors, such as social movements, influence individual processes to resist (resilience) or change (empowerment) experiences of racism. This is the first study, to our knowledge, that examines how BLM has personal impact on the ways young Black men respond to racism. To fill this gap, the current study applies the Transconceptual Model of Empowerment and Resilience (TMER; Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013) to explore how BLM supports resilience and empowerment processes among young Black men facing racism.

### 4. Methods

#### 4.1. Participants

Fourteen participants met the criteria of being between the ages of 18-29 years of age, and identifying as Black/African American men<sup>1</sup>. The average age of participants was 20 years ( $M = 20.36$ ,  $SD = 3.03$ ). All participants had some level of college education. Five participants identified as either a second-generation ( $n=3$ ) or 1.5-generation immigrant ( $n=2$ ). Five

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<sup>1</sup> Participants identified as "Black and/or "African American." For the purposes of the article, the terms are used interchangeably to reference individuals of African descent throughout the diaspora.

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participants were members of a Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) scholars' program. A summary of parental educational attainment can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1. Parent Educational Attainment**

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	Number of Participants
Both parents graduate or professional degree	5
One parent graduate or professional degree, one parent 4-year college degree	3
Both parents 4-year college degree	1
One parent 4-year college degree (participant only reported educational attainment for one parent)	1
One parent 4-year college degree, one parent some college	1
One parent some college, one parent high school graduate	3

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#### **4.2. Procedure**

The study employed qualitative methods to examine the ways in which the BLM movement influenced individual resilience and empowerment processes. The findings presented in this article are from a study, which examined: 1) resilience and empowerment goals in the face of racism, 2) awareness of racism, including awareness of BLM, as a pathway to resilience and empowerment processes, 3) the contextual risk and protective factors, including BLM, that supported or hindered individual processes, and 4) TMER's explanatory value for understanding the experiences of young Black men. The study was designed to explore these processes within the larger sociopolitical and racial climate, with a focus on the impact and influence of BLM in participant's day to day lives as they navigated negative race related experiences.

Qualitative methods were best suited to the exploratory nature of the research questions, and allowed for a deeper understanding of these processes. Participants were recruited from fliers posted in university and public settings, through a psychology department recruitment system, as well as through snowballing sampling and word-of-mouth. Efforts were made to recruit young Black men with a range of perspectives, experiences, and interactions with the BLM movement, including outreach to youth run organizations with a political or advocacy focus, student groups and organizations with little to no political focus, and students from a range of academic backgrounds.

A semi-structured interview guide asked about racial and gender identity, personal definition of racism, experiences of racism, internal or external change goals to respond to racism, and awareness of racism, including how participants learned about racism, BLM, and other social movements. The guide was pilot tested by two people who fit the eligibility criteria, and was edited based on the feedback. The lead author administered the revised protocol.

Participants received written and oral informed consent. Interviews were recorded between February 2016 and April 2016 in private locations convenient to participants. Interviewees were compensated \$15 for their participation, and two participants also received class credit through the psychology recruitment system for their participation. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the lead author and trained undergraduate student, and checked for accuracy. Participants were given pseudonyms and any identifying information was removed during transcription.

### 4.3. *Analysis*

A start list of codes was generated from previous literature, as well as ideas generated during data collection. Transcripts were imported into a qualitative data analysis software package, Atlas TI, for coding. An issue-focused analysis was employed to gain a holistic picture of the topic of investigation by logically connecting distinct concepts or issues (such as resilience and empowerment), which included four steps: (1) coding, (2) sorting, (3) local integration and (4) inclusive integration (Weiss, 1994). In the first step, the coding framework was applied to all interview transcripts. Sorting involved organizing coded excerpts into broader categories. Analysis was conducted within participants' narratives and across codes to generate "local" integration, which extracts meaning from the organized coded excerpts by identifying the "main line of the material" and "variants" for each individual (Weiss, 1994, p.158). Thematic understanding both within each interview and across participants brought together in the process of "inclusive" integration to form one cohesive story.

### 4.4. *Trustworthiness*

The quality or trustworthiness of the analyses was assessed via credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To strengthen the trustworthiness of the data and findings, multiple strategies were employed: a) the interview guide was *pre-tested* for clarity by two individuals who fit the demographic criteria, b) responses between participants were cross-checked (*triangulation*) during data collection, c) participants provided feedback on the themes (*member checks*), and d) the second author reviewed the data and interpretations to assure accuracy (*peer review*). Throughout the research process, the lead author kept a reflexive journal detailing personal reflections about all aspects of the research process, as well as analytical notes. This journal helped the lead author – a South Asian American woman - examine the ways in which her personal history, emotions, and positionality may have influenced the research.

## 5. **Results**

Participants varied in the extent and form they experienced racism. On one end of the spectrum, two participants reported that they never experienced racism. For example, Lawrence said race was unimportant to him. On the other end, most participants reported many racialized incidents and descriptions of how individual, institutional, and systemic racism impacted them. Owen said that he experienced racism in a "*lot of ways*" and described how anti-Black attitudes and beliefs are a constant source of risk:

Like I said before, having to work twice as hard for like half of what some folk have ... it's [individuals and institutions are] like "Oh, I don't wanna hire" or I'll get paid less or I'm more likely to get shot by the police...for walking down the street...Black men are an endangered species...there's so many things like they just stereotype us and it's all negative... It's just nobody has respect for African Americans.

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Participants cited both negative and positive stereotypes that had impacted them, including being labeled a “gangster”, “drug-dealer”, “athletic”, “strong”, “loud”, “failure”, and “angry”. Participants viewed these stereotypes as on-going threats they face as Black men in the United States.

The most frequently cited experiences of racism participants faced were microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). The men described their experiences as often covert and ambiguous, which made them difficult to appraise. As Malik said, “*I’m not sure what the term is, it’s like a soft, like not implicit but you can’t really see... it’s like misty, like people say things and they don’t know it.*” Darius described the long-term consequences: “*those microaggressions do build up over time, like the stress and your mental health.*”

### **5.1. Perspectives of Black Lives Matter**

At the time of the interviews, the BLM movement had a significant presence in mainstream media where it was aiming to enhance public consciousness about racism. The participants had diverse perspectives of the BLM movement: four participants described negative perceptions of the movement, three participants reported not knowing much about the movement, and seven participants appeared to have more positive perceptions of the movement. These opinions influenced whether participants viewed BLM as a trusted source of information, and also determined if and in what ways they engaged with the movement.

The four participants who had negative perceptions had different reasoning for their feelings. Lawrence explicitly disliked the efforts of BLM because he believed consciousness raising may increase the chances that individuals misidentify experiences as racist, “*Somebody could wake up, and have no negative thoughts...[then] you say ‘Black Lives Matter’ and they start thinking about things that are happening...all of a sudden you’re paranoid about what might not even be as serious as they think.*” Three additional participants believed that BLM had the right intent, but the wrong strategies and approaches. They suggested that the movement’s tactics alienated members of other racial or ethnic groups, making it counterproductive for the larger mission of BLM. Tyler explained, “*It’s the right intent and the right mindset, but the execution...is totally wrong....in my personal view, it doesn’t really get at anything at addressing the issue... saying Black Lives Matter doesn’t change anything....[it is] giving more fuel to the fire.*” Thomas added:

The Black Lives Matter...cause is just. It is definitely something that you should be able to get behind, just like feminism. But just like feminism there are extremes that make the entire movement seem bad...Like the people in the Black Lives Matter movement that just go up and interrupt Presidential speeches ... Black Lives Matter can carry a negative connotation, because, especially with Baltimore riots, people would graffiti places with Black Lives Matter. And it’s just like, yeah awareness is nice, but it’s not how you spread awareness. And it kind of turns people off to their cause, just like with some feminist movements, it’s just like, well yes, some feminists are like, “All men suck,” or like the come at something just in the wrong way. It just makes feminism also look bad.

Although Chad favored the Black Lives Matter movement, he recognized the controversial nature of it saying, “*how can three words with a hashtag in front of it cause this much—visceral reaction?*”

Three participants reported not knowing much about BLM, but appeared to have favorable perspectives about the goals of BLM. James noted, “*I don’t really know much about it ...somebody’s trying to make a change. There are definitely a lot of people out here who are trying to speak their opinion and...trying to fix those problems.*”

The other half of the participants appeared to have positive perceptions of the movement; they agreed with the goals, messages, and approach of the BLM movement. Chad remarked, “*I believe in that movement [Black Lives Matter] and I believe in that chant...*” Darren added:

The Black Lives Matter movement is about highlighting the importance of what it means to be human, in terms of what it means to respect someone else's humanity—race being part of someone's humanity and African-American being part of someone's humanity and not degrading them or treating them differently or—segregating them in the way that really disenfranchises them in a way that makes them separate—and really bringing that to light. And I think that it's really more of a consciousness raising movement that I think is happening slowly.

## **5.2. Black Lives Matter, Resilience, and Empowerment**

Among the seven participants who had positive perspectives, the movement appeared to have influenced their individual processes. Consistent with TMER (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013), BLM acted as a resource that led to internal, resilience goals for some: 1) maintain a sense of control, 2) maintain and perform a positive racial identity, 3) work towards academic and professional success and external, empowerment goals for others: 1) increasing other’s awareness of racism, and 2) working towards institutional and systemic change. As suggested by research gaps, stated above, that exist between social forces such as BLM, and the process of change, the results below will focus on the processes that seemed to lead to these two sets of outcome goals.

### *5.2.1. Resilience*

The results suggest that BLM influenced resilience goals by 1) providing awareness about racial injustice and 2) reinforcing racial pride. For a few of these men, learning about issues of police brutality through the BLM movement was an opportunity to critically analyze issues of racism. This awareness appeared to provoke interest in racial injustice and helped them to reflect on its meaning in their own experiences. In other words, upon learning about BLM, these participants asked themselves internally focused questions: 1) What does BLM mean for *me*? And 2) How do I change *me*, in order to make these issues better for *myself*? Darius, for example, explained his initial reaction to BLM after the death of Michael Brown, saying “*I think the hype around him dying, it kind of spurred me to like learn more, but then it also, I had to take the time to figure out what it meant to me.*”

Exploring how BLM was meaningful for their own lives, in turn, helped them to maintain internal resilience goals to resist racism. For example, Taye described what he learned from BLM, what it meant for his own life, and how BLM stoked his motivation to stay aware and make the intrapersonal changes necessary to resist racism:

The first time I heard the term Black Lives Matter.... was probably the Trayvon Martin case... I was really surprised...‘cause...that was high school for me...I thought [he was an]



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innocent young boy, still [someone] thought about his race first...and he lost his life because of it. Also, because I was basically that age, it kind of made me worry that because this is basically something that could happen to me...It was more of a question of what I was willing to do about it... just talking about it to other people and try to get their opinions to be aware of what's going on... If it [BLM] comes up amongst family, it's just once again my parents and aunts and uncles reminding me of the lessons they taught me before going to college of being respectful and not showing aggression just so that I don't become another name on the news.

At the time of the interviews, in addition to being a grassroots activist movement, BLM's message was spreading through the voices of well-known musicians. While not intentionally developed for BLM, Kendrick Lamar's album *To Pimp a Butterfly* was a critique of systemic racism, and songs like "Alright" had been adopted as a BLM anthem during protests (Billet, 2015). Other popular musicians, including D'Angelo, Killer Mike, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, J.Cole, Talib Kweli, Pharrell Williams, and Janelle Monae were active supporters of the BLM movement through their music, money, and presence at demonstrations (Billet, 2015). Through this venue, BLM messages appeared to have an indirect influence on resilience goals by not only providing awareness about racial injustice, but also reinforcing messages of racial pride.

David discussed how listening to rapper Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* highlighted "*how Black people are treated, how they have been treated, and how they're going to keep being treated unless something like change happens*" which made him reflect on his own life:

When he changed up his beats...it made me really notice what was happening, and it made me...put more of a magnifying glass towards my life to see like, hmmm...so like is this happening to me? Is there anything I'm missing that is happening but I'm just like too desensitized to notice...Now, I don't just blow things off as if they aren't happening.

A few participants added that when they heard prominent artists repeat BLM messages on racial injustice it fostered racial pride, and they heard it as a further call for Black communities to join together to resist racism. Darius explained,

The conversation as far as racism goes has been [about] how surprised people are that it's coming into the mainstream... to see it start to show up in music in the form of Kendrick Lamar, or Beyoncé... [is] inspiring or motivating...you can hear [Lamar's music] in two ways. He was talking about the struggles...and he goes on to talk about you know "my hair is nappy, my nose is wide"...he's saying "we're going to be okay, we're going to get through this"... Next thing you know Beyoncé's talking about her mommy from Creole and her daddy from Alabama...[and] "Formation"... it's actually really subliminal...J. Cole opened up the door, Kendrick stating you know we gon be alright and Beyoncé's like "okay let's get in formation"

Similarly, Owen added that the entrance of these messages into the mainstream make him feel "*unapologetically Black*." He added:

After "Formation" [and] the Grammy's everybody seems to talk about [racism]. Everything is built on not wanting to be Black...and that's what makes Europeans held at a higher standard... If you're held here [gestures upward] then African Americans who have none of that are held down here [gestures downward]. The more you start to like yourself, the more their [White] businesses are taken away. The relaxers are no longer in place and the more afros you'll see and the more baby hair attention will be paid ...I feel more empowered now then ever before. I feel like we've gotten to a time where like Black people are more like in

tune with their history, and their more empowered by themselves instead of feeling weak by just by being Black.

### 5.2.2. Empowerment

For those participants who had preexisting awareness about issues such as police brutality, the BLM movement was seen as a continued effort towards consciousness-raising. The results suggest that BLM influenced empowerment goals by 1) providing resources and 2) opening a window of opportunity for participants to enact change within their local context. Contrasting those who formed internally focused resilience goals in response to their awareness of BLM, those formed empowerment goals asked themselves externally focused questions: 1) What does BLM mean for *us*? And 2) How do I change *others, institutions, or the system*, in order to make these issues better for *us*?

BLM relevant materials (via social media, blog posts, scholarship) provided tangible resources for participants to educate other individuals about racism and police brutality. A couple of participants noted that the facts and arguments spread within the movement had been useful tools to increase others' awareness. Both Chad and Owen discussed a Reddit post (GeekAesthete, 2015) that provided an analogy to BLM. Chad explained how these types of resources supported his goal to educate a White peer about why BLM was important:

I think the Black Lives Matter movement...[is] a continuation of raising the awareness of the inequality of among race and economic lines... when I first started to interact with it—I believe a Professor .... created a whole catalog of materials for it. So it's like ' alright, if you want to teach this, here are books.... [and] on Twitter, you hit the hashtag, you got all these resources. Then it became a chant for protests and marches, peaceful and non-peaceful —it became—a catch all for microaggressions, small, big, medium, whatever.... So I came across this article...The writer says, ok, this is what the Black Lives Matter movement is about. Pretend you're at dinner, and your dad is serving everyone. But your dad doesn't serve you. Right? And you say "hey, I should get food, too." And your dad says, "you're right" but then doesn't serve you the food.... It's not saying, "hey, we're more important than.... our Hispanic brothers and sisters,"... it's like "hey we matter, too"... so I posted it [on social media] and I wrote "hey, on point summary," and a young lady that I went to school with...she posted [laughs], "if only the chant said 'too', people wouldn't get angry and you wouldn't need a five paragraph explanation." So I responded back... I was trying very hard not to say anything that would just make her defensive. So I was like, "hey, I hear that. Can you explain that? What do you mean by that?"...Have you ever heard of the term redlining? Like look this up"...And she looked it up... And we...kept going back and forth and I was being very patient with her and asking her opinions and she was doing the defensive, "well I'm not racist... let's not talk about racism." So it's this constant trying to educate and not exacerbate.... I think [about] my role in racism right now....my role is not to exacerbate the situation...And like try to educate.

For a few participants, the presence BLM in the mainstream opened up a window of opportunity to enact external change in their local context. Darren, a public school teacher, explained that he saw himself informally joining with the BLM movement to address these issues, by helping his students to critically examine their circumstances:

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I haven't been—I guess formally in the [Black Lives Matter] movement in terms of like going out to protest or things like that. But I definitely make an attempt to challenge my students—in terms of things they say to me. Cause I know—I have a few students now—who will say...“Oh he doesn't care because he's Black,” or “I'm Black, so you don't care about me.” And just...not taking their side, but also not saying that they're wrong. Just kind of—having conversation, discussing what that really means to them. And just kind of going above that... surface level.

In reflecting on his impact, he said, “*when we interact, me and that student, we're having a different type of conversation. It's definitely.... more critical —not surface level. They definitely ask me a lot more questions about 'where does this come from,' 'what does this mean?'*” As such, the conversation BLM started opened up a window of opportunity for Darren to have more critical discussions with his students.

At the time of the interviews, three participants who were students at the same Mid-Atlantic University described a blackface incident on their campus that had recently occurred. These participants, who were members of a student group, described how they participated in grassroots organizing within their organization to address the blackface incident. At the same time, BLM student protests broke out across the country, seeking to address perceived racial tensions on campus and demand increased infrastructure and financial support for faculty, staff, and students of color. A few participants explained how the BLM student protests gave them the opportunity to pivot their advocacy from being about anti-blackface to being about equitable treatment and resources at the institutional level. Darius first explained his reaction to BLM:

I first heard about it [Black Lives Matter] shortly after Michael Brown died, not died – was killed...at least that's the point in time in which it reached me... that's the point where I started interacting with these kind of like issues that I hadn't really interacted with before. And I think that's when like, you know, topics of like structural racism, institutional racism started to creep more into the main stream, at least for me...social media has a way of like, kind of like channeling emotion into like a very concentrated, powerful form.... so it's kind of strange that my emotion about it came a little bit from myself, but also it was promoted by what I saw on social media. Once that happened, like yeah, I wanted to learn about what happened to him specifically, but also trying to figure out what I could do...like education or activist wise.

Darius went on to explain how the BLM protests across the country gave their student organization the opportunity to change the conversation. He reported, “*[BLM was an] opportunity to bring this type of thing to light and then also to push administration and like other groups to do something about it...[to] transition from it being about blackface to it being about improving the experience of Black students on campus.... figuring out how we can improve the Black experience in concrete ways.*”

In reflecting on his engagement with BLM, and his experiences with his student organizing work, Owen said:

[The Black Lives Matter movement] is legendary...I feel like this is something that I will be able to tell my kids and they'll be able to say “my grandad was there [organizing] during the Black Lives Matter movement.” And... you know [how] grandparents now are saying “we did this [Civil Rights] because we didn't want our kids to go through it”...now I have to say,...“I don't want my kids to go through this”.... I feel very historic.

## 6. Discussion

The current study was guided by the emic, insider perspective of participants who, in qualitative interviews, defined what racism meant to them, how it manifested in their lives, and how they navigated these experiences. Consistent with previous literature, the findings suggest that subtle and overt racial discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or skin color occurred in a wide range of settings that participants interacted with everyday, such as the street, schools, community spaces, government, and other public and private places (Kubiliene, Yan, Kumsa, & Burman, 2015; Mills, 2015).

The findings further showed how the TMER (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013) model could help to explain how participants' resilience or empowerment focused responses to these experience were impacted by their perspectives on the BLM movement. Within TMER, BLM is a macrosystemic factor that influences resilience and empowerment processes. However, the data suggest that the movement was only influential in cases where BLM was viewed in a favorable light. Half of the participants viewed BLM positively, with some identifying it as the modern day Civil Rights movement. These participants believed that the movement had important goals and was having a positive impact on the public consciousness, which made it influential for their own processes. This finding is supported by previous research that suggests that favorable and sympathetic attitudes toward movement ideologies are one critical component that predicts eventual engagement in social movements (Scott & Artis, 2005).

In addition, three participants had generally favorable views of the movement, but did not know enough about it to have a personal impact. Among the group of participants who disliked or had neutral perspectives of the movement, it, not surprisingly, was less impactful for their resilience and empowerment processes.

For a few participants, the BLM movement alerted them to the fact that they would be treated differently because they were Black men, jumpstarting their critical understanding of racism in the United States. Reflecting on this awareness appeared to be an important step, for them, towards their resilience processes. Neville & Cross (2017) refers to this as a process of "racial awakening" which is characterized by an experience or moment that prompted personal exploration about issues of racism and Black identity. Consistent with the current study findings, participants in their study who identified a "racial awakening" described positive changes as a result, including a sense of racial pride (internal, resilience, processes within TMER) or actively working to make changes in their community or society by fighting against racism (external, empowerment processes).

As such, BLM appeared to function for some as a tool for an emerging critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). As originally termed by Freire (1970) in his writing on education, critical consciousness, *concientizacao*, refers to an iterative process in which oppressed individuals gaining awareness of their sociopolitical and sociocultural realities and history, leading to the eventual critical analyses of these realities, which then leads to action. In line with TMER (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013) which postulates awareness as a crucial beginning, the findings suggest that the initial analyses of how these oppressive realities operate and impacts one's own life may be an important first step toward eventual empowerment processes aimed at changing the oppressive structure. For example, Darius – who identified BLM as a resource that helped his student organization take action within their local context – added that he first reflected on what BLM meant for his own life before seeing it as a resource toward external change processes.

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In addition to providing awareness, musicians who stood for the mission of BLM also appeared to have influence on participants' sense of feeling "*unapologetically Black*." These artists used their platform to raise public consciousness about BLM, and provide positive and more resonant depictions of Black men and women. For participants, this appeared to strengthen their racial pride, counteracting the negative messages of racial inferiority that have been found to negatively impact self-concept and self-worth (Cross, 1998; Helms, 1990; Priest et al., 2014). Watts and colleagues (2003) described this process in their work on sociopolitical development (SPD), saying "in a struggle against racial oppression, African Americans benefit from a strong sense of self that incorporates both the cultural and sociopolitical aspects of their African heritage. This confluence results in the emergence of a racialized cultural identity" (p. 187).

Toward external change, empowerment goals, the BLM movement appeared to offer tangible resources that were useful for participant goals to educate others about racism. While not extensively studied, using factual information on race-related issues as a method to respond to racism has been documented in previous research (Andrews, 2012; Fleming et al., 2012; Mills, 2015; Suyemoto et al., 2015). In the current study, resources provided through the broader discourse associated with BLM were beneficial as participants explained the problem to others.

BLM was also a resource to open a window of opportunity for participants to enact change within their local context. Darren viewed the social context as a teachable moment for the students in his classroom, using it as an opportunity to critically analyze and discuss issues of race. Other participants who were members of a student organization described how they used BLM's national attention to steer their advocacy from the local to towards the broader issues of racism at their University. This aligns with the notion of the "policy window" in public policy (Kingdon & Thurber, 1984; Maton, 2016), which identifies specific moments in which social problems can be acted upon because of a convergence of factors, including the salience of that particular problem in the broader public.

Lastly, the few participants who identified as contributing to the BLM movement located themselves in a larger historical struggle against racism. For example, Owen said, "*I feel very historic*." By placing importance in their role to work towards social change, these participants demonstrated an attitude resonant of an activist identity. Previous research has conceptualized an activist identity as a behavioral identity, where an individual sees himself or herself as an activist who engages in a specific type of action toward social change (Fielding, McDonald, Louis, 2008; Louis, Amiot, Thomas, Blackwood, 2016). While the current study did not set out to explore this concept, the findings suggest that BLM may help to foster aspects of a racial justice activist identity. Future research should consider examining the activist identity in the context of the racial justice movement as BLM continues to evolve.

## **7. Limitations**

Although there were strengths in the design of the current study, as always, there are also limitations. The backdrop of the BLM movement provided an important opportunity to explore these processes, however, it was a unique sociopolitical context, which may limit generalizability beyond that already inherent in qualitative research. The small sample size may also be seen as a limitation to generalizability, although as possible within the confines of this short article, descriptive data was provided such that readers may consider if and how the findings may be applicable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To the best of our knowledge, no published

study to date has concurrently examined resilience, empowerment, and BLM. While saturation is necessary for the purposes of theory building, the aim of the current study was to fill a gap in the literature by providing initial evidence on the relation between these concepts and processes that might be at work. In cases where a paucity of research exists, or where a diversity of categories or themes may emerge, saturation may not be an appropriate criterion or may be unrealistic (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013; Saunders et al., 2017). Future studies should be done to achieve theoretical saturation, however these findings provide important knowledge about the range of lived experiences young Black men have vis-à-vis the BLM movement.

Furthermore, the sample was limited because all participants had some level of college education and relative economic and social privilege. Consequently, responses to racial injustice, awareness, and perspectives of BLM might be different than those who do not have college experience. However, it was clear that college education did not insulate participants from being recipients of racism.

The retrospective design may pose some limitations, as retrospective accounts may be inaccurate to some degree. While underreporting is always a concern over time, given the context of this study, experiences may have been over-reported because participants were sensitized to the topics of racism either by the times or by knowing the research study was related to these very experiences.

Finally, the lead author's positionality as a graduate student, non-Baltimore native, and a South Asian woman may have influenced individuals' responses during the interviews. Participants may have altered their responses because of social desirability. However, steps were taken to build rapport, and previous training and experiences in qualitative- and community-based research, as well as shared experience as a person of color, was utilized to enhance the lead author's effectiveness.

## **8. Conclusion**

The political and social context, including the rise of the BLM movement, provided an important backdrop to explore the impact of an emerging social movement on internal change (resilience) and external change (empowerment) processes. Both processes are important to and widely studied in community psychology, and the use of TMER (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013) as a framework helped to distinguish the ways in which BLM operated as a resource for each process. The findings indicate that BLM provided awareness about racial injustice and reinforced racial pride, which supported internal, personal goals to withstand and resist racism. These participants reflected on this knowledge, exploring how racial injustice has impacted their own lives, jump-starting their critical reflection with respect to race. For those who were so inclined, the movement also provided tangible resources for participants to educate others and opened up a window of opportunity for some participants to enact change within their local context – goals that are reflective of external, empowerment goals within the TMER (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013).

Uncovering the tipping point between resilience and empowering responses to movements such as BLM is an important next step. For now, however, the evidence suggests that practitioners and educators should consider looking to macrosystemic influences, such as social movements, as a resource to support resilience or empowerment processes. Indeed, although BLM may be viewed as too distal to impact individual experiences of racism, the findings show

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the opposite. BLM, and the resources, messages, awareness provided by the movement, may aid many at the individual level in moving towards both personal and collective well-being in the face of racism.

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