

Beyond “Heartfelt Condolences”: A Critical Take on Mainstream Psychology’s Responses to Anti-Black Police Brutality

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Anti-Black police brutality in the United States is not a new problem, but at least a 400-year old one. Mainstream psychology has responded to this critical racial and social justice issue by conceptualizing it primarily as an outcome of police officers’ social cognition (e.g., threat perceptions) or implicit racial biases. Such individualistic and cognitive perspectives, however, ignore the fundamental role of anti-Black structural racism in facilitating the ability of law enforcement to terrorize, brutalize, and kill Black people with impunity. As with the media and public attention, mainstream psychology has also tended to frame acts of anti-Black police brutality as outliers, or occasional lethal and spectacular events, rather than as a broad spectrum of routine acts that structure policing and police brutality as a world for Black people in the United States. Informed by critical psychology, and the critical theoretical frameworks of critical race theory, intersectionality, and Afro-Pessimism, the goal of this article is to *critically* engage with the topic of anti-Black police brutality. By critically engage, we mean expose and challenge the economic, social, and material power relations that disproportionately expose Black people to police brutality; and conceptualize police brutality not as a series of aberrant incidents, but as a structure that in essence constructs and reifies Blackness and Whiteness. We also introduce the Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum, a conceptual framework of police brutality as a broad spectrum of routine manifestations of anti-Black structural racism, and criticize mainstream psychology’s deferral of a critical and transformative response to anti-Black police brutality.

Public Significance Statement

Police brutality in U.S. Black communities is one of the most critical social justice issues of our time. Although mainstream psychology has long been in the vanguard of advancing empirical knowledge about the effects of racist stereotypes, implicit racial bias, and other individual-level factors on police brutality, it has largely ignored the role of structural racism. This article challenges mainstream psychology to critically engage with the topic of anti-Black police brutality. The article also introduces the Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum, a conceptual framework developed to increase knowledge about the non-lethal and lethal spectrum of anti-Black police brutality, and its deleterious physical and mental health implications for U.S. Black communities.

Keywords: police brutality, Black people, mental health, critical psychology, structural racism

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It is not hyperbole to call the fear, threat or experience of a lethal or nonlethal adverse encounter with police or other law enforcement officers, a defining feature of what it means to be Black in the United States. In this regard, the years 2020 and 2021 have been brutal. May 2020 brought yet another viral video of a police officer killing yet another Black man. This time, that man was George Floyd, a 40-year old handcuffed man in Minneapolis, MN, killed by a White police officer who knelt on his neck for 8 min, 46 s despite Floyd's protests that he could not breathe. A June 2020 *New York Times* investigation revealed that over the past decade, at least 70 people—more than half of them Black—have uttered the same sentence, “I cannot breathe,” before dying in police custody (Baker et al., 2020). And although April 2021 brought the conviction of the police officer who killed Floyd, since Floyd's death, police officers have killed at least 229 Black people, most of them cisgender boys or men (Mapping Police Violence, 2021).

Police shootings are a leading cause of death for Black cisgender boys and men, who are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than their White counterparts (Edwards et al., 2019). Consequently, police brutality against Black boys and men is typically the focus of the media, entire books (Butler, 2017; Davis, 2017), research (e.g., Bowleg, del Río-González, et al., 2020; English et al., 2017; Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019), and recognition by professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association (APA). The APA's 2014 *Public Information Statement in Response to the Shooting Death of Michael Brown*, “express[es its] heartfelt condolences to the Brown family,” informs our article's title.

Police also kill Black cisgender girls and women, transgender, and other gender minority people disproportionately.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading critical race and intersectionality scholar has observed: “When most people think about anti-Black violence, like lynchings or police killings, they think about men. Women rarely come to mind first” (Crenshaw, 2019). But they should. News of the fatal police shooting of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year old Black EMT in Louisville, KY also made national headlines in May 2020. Media and research attention to Black transgender and other gender minority people's police brutality experiences is rarer still. A case in point: police shot and killed Tony McDade, a 38-year old Black transgender man in Tallahassee, FL in May 2020. News of his death was shared primarily by non-mainstream news outlets. Disability is another important, but often invisible intersection in media coverage of anti-Black police brutality. In 2016 for example, police in Louisville, KY killed Darnell T. Wicker, a Black deaf veteran who communicated by speech reading after he failed to respond to the officers' verbal commands; commands that he likely could not have heard. It was Wicker's race, not its intersection with his deafness however that dominated news and activism about the killing (The Harriet Tubman Collective, 2017).

Police killings of Black people (cisgender boys and men typically), particularly those that are video-recorded and go viral, justifiably summon massive media attention and public outrage. Beyond the “spectacular events” (Martinot & Sexton, 2003, p. 173) that go viral, however, is a broader spectrum of police brutality that Black people in the United States routinely experience. *Police brutality* is an expansive term that “encompasses physical, psychological and legal police abuse of authority” [and] “. . . more accurately captures the [continuum of] wrenching experiences many people have with the police” (Freeman, 1995, p. 686) compared with terms such as police violence.

Conventional perspectives on police brutality from mainstream psychology—“the psychology that universities most often teach and that clinicians, researchers, and consultants most often practice” (Fox et al., 2009, p. 3), the psychology published in peer-reviewed psychology journals, and the psychology articulated in the APA's communications (e.g., press releases, Congressional testimony, and magazines)—typically frame police brutality primarily as aberrant, or individually-based (e.g., implicit bias, “rogue” officers), rather than structural. In stark contrast, critical race theorists (e.g., Carbado & Richardson, 2018; Martinot & Sexton, 2003) conceptualize the issue of anti-Black police brutality primarily in terms of structure and anti-Black structural racism. As applied social psychologists who identify as critical psychologists, so do we.

Structural racism describes the systemic “totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination throughout mutually reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, earnings, benefit, credit, media, health care and criminal justice” (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 1453). But whereas structural perspectives on racism and health have flourished in disciplines such as public health and medicine (Bailey et al., 2017; Boyd, 2018), their numbers in mainstream psychology pale in



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comparison with the plethora of literature focused on interpersonal racism and racial discrimination. Indeed, despite mainstream psychology's longstanding interest in the topic of racial discrimination and racism in general (e.g., Allport, 1954; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021), and against Black/African American people in particular (e.g., Mays et al., 2007), individualistic perspectives on discrimination prevail in the discipline. Numerous mainstream psychological studies have examined "perceived discrimination" [sic] (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009), a White epistemic frame that conceptualizes racism as a subjective cognition in the eye of the beholder, rather than a structured system of White supremacy that in turn reinforces individual-level "... discriminatory beliefs, values and distribution of resources" (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 1453).

As for police brutality in Black communities, mainstream psychology—social psychology, particularly—has been in the vanguard of advancing empirical knowledge about the effects of racist stereotypes and implicit racial bias on police officers' visual processing or judgements about Black men's physical size; perceptions about threat or decisions to shoot Black suspects (e.g., Eberhardt et al., 2004; Wilson et al., 2017); how public perceptions and attributions about racist police bias shape judgements or attitudes about police brutality against Black people or policing reforms (e.g., Hayward et al., 2017; Johnson & Lecci, 2019); and the role of situational factors such as discretion, inexperience, salience of the link between Blackness and crime, cognitive demands, and identity threats (Pryor et al., 2020; Swencionis & Goff, 2017; Trinkner et al., 2019).

And yet, despite longstanding evidence from the field of social psychology that situational factors, not individual inclinations such as implicit or explicit bias, are stronger

predictors of racialized inequities in behavior, and that "racially disparate policing practices are unlikely to arise solely (or even mainly) from police officers' individual biases" (Pryor et al., 2020, p. 344), most research published in mainstream psychology journals, and communications from the APA (e.g., Abrams, 2020; APA, 2014) attribute police brutality in Black communities to implicit bias and other individual-level factors almost exclusively. This narrow view is decidedly out of step with the growing emphasis on structural racism and police brutality that has burgeoned in other social and behavioral science disciplines such as public health (Alang et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2004), social work (W. Sewell et al., 2016), and sociology (A. A. Sewell & Jefferson, 2016; A. A. Sewell et al., 2016).

Informed by critical psychology, and the critical theoretical frameworks of critical race theory, intersectionality, and Afro-Pessimism, the goal of this article is to critically engage with the topic of anti-Black police brutality in U.S. Black communities. By critically engage, we mean: (a) expose and challenge the economic, social, and material power relations—anti-Black structural racism, specifically—that disproportionately expose Black people to police brutality; (b) center Black people's frequent experiences with the broad spectrum of police brutality, within the historical context of anti-Black structural racism, White supremacy, and interlocking social-structural inequality; (c) conceptualize police brutality not as a series of aberrant incidents, but as structure that in essence constructs and reifies Blackness and Whiteness; (d) introduce the Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum, a conceptual framework of police brutality as a broad spectrum of routine manifestations of anti-Black structural racism; and (e) critique and criticize mainstream psychology's deferral of a critical and transformative social justice response. Throughout the article, to humanize and highlight the mundanity of anti-Black police brutality, we present real-world experiences and highlight relevant current events. References to these experiences and events are provided in [online supplemental materials](#) in order of presentation.

Police Brutality in U.S. Black Communities: Evidence and Gaps in Knowledge

Because police brutality in Black communities is so frequent, ordinary, and routine, one might reasonably expect to find reliable and comprehensive national data and empirical evidence about it. Alas, this is not the case. The reason: the federal government does not mandate such data collection and police departments and unions have assiduously resisted it (Krieger et al., 2015). Moreover, many of the federal data systems that record violent deaths have been incomplete in their reporting of homicides by police or have undercounted them (Conner et al., 2019; McDowall, 2019). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Violent Death Reporting System has been validated as one



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of the best available sources of federal data on police homicide, albeit without full reporting by all states (Conner et al., 2019). In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) launched a voluntary National Use-of-Force Data Collection project to collect data about police-involved fatalities, serious bodily injury, or discharge of firearms toward people (Jackman, 2020). To date, only 40% of police departments have shared their data. In light of these gaps, much of the data on this topic comes from open-source repositories such as the *Mapping Police Violence* (2021) database and those by media organizations such as *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian* (Conner et al., 2019).

Data about nonlethal acts of police brutality are rarer still. Much of the knowledge about these experiences is anecdotal, or stems from a few small polls, nationally representative surveys, or databases of private organizations such as the *Center for Policing Equity's* (2020) National Justice Database. The latter is the first nationwide database to collect data on crime, police behaviors, and demographics to assess racial inequities in policing and inform evidence-based reforms. The *Discrimination in America* series, a nationally representative survey of Black Americans found that 50% of respondents felt that police had discriminated against them because of their race (National Public Radio, 2017). Because the survey presented data by single-axis (i.e., race only), critical gaps exist about police discrimination at other intersections such as sex, and sexual and gender minority identity. Underscoring the necessity of examining police brutality intersectionally, the #SayHerName project's *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women* report (Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015), and book, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against*

Black Women and Women of Color (Ritchie, 2017) document numerous cases of Black cisgender and transgender girls and women unjustly killed by police.

A May 2020 report of Washington, DC residents documented that 53% of Black residents (and 57% of Latino residents) reported that they feared police, compared with just 13% of White residents (Bader, 2020); 28% of Black residents endorsed the highest response (“a lot”) to describe this daily fear. Black people (67%) were more likely than residents from other racial/ethnic groups to report that police abused their power. And whereas a majority of people in all racial/ethnic groups (69%) perceived that police treated White people better than Black people, 83% of Black people endorsed this belief. The report’s finding that Latino residents reported more fear of police than Black people spotlights a critical need for more attention to police brutality against Latinos. Latinos are twice as likely to be killed by police than White people, but because they are often categorized as Black or White—rather than intersectionally (i.e., race *and* ethnicity)—there is a sizable data void about police brutality against Latinos, and Latinos are often invisible in media coverage, public consciousness, and activism against police brutality (Foster-Frau, 2021).

The Pew Research Center’s June 2020 compilation of data from its nationally representative surveys on police violence over the years yielded similar findings. Results from a 2019 survey showed that 84% of Black adults reported that police and the criminal justice system treated Black people less fairly than White people. Black respondents were almost five times more likely than White respondents (44% vs. 9%) to state that police had unfairly stopped them because of their race. More Black men (59%) than Black women (31%) reported that they had been unfairly stopped by the police (Pew Research Center, 2020b). Fifty-nine percent of Black Americans in a June–July 2020 Gallup Poll reported “overall positive experiences” with police in the last year, a percentage comparatively lower than the national average (75%) and White (79%) and Latino adults (68%; Lloyd, 2020).

Underscoring the centrality of anti-Blackness in police brutality, a 2019 Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2019) survey documented that Latinos with darker skin (64%) reported more discrimination than their counterparts with lighter skin (50%) and were more likely to report being unfairly stopped by police. Compared with 19% of all Latinos who reported the experience, respondents with darker skin (24%) were more than twice as likely to report it than those with lighter skin (11%). Colorism, “a system of practices and ideologies that privileges lighter skinned Black [and other people of color] with facial features typically associated with Europeans, over their darker skinned counterparts with more African-associated facial features,” (Reece, 2018, p. 5) factors prominently in police stops and arrests, and subsequent criminal justice system interactions.



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For example, there is empirical evidence that Black and Latino people with darker skin were more likely than their lighter skinned counterparts to be stopped and arrested by police (Monk, 2019; White, 2015), and that when delinquency alone was controlled, Black people had an 18% increase in the odds of being arrested as skin tone darkened (White, 2015). Other research documents that colorism exists throughout the criminal justice system (Dixon & Telles, 2017), such as perceptions of criminality (Eberhardt et al., 2004), likelihood of being incarcerated (King & Johnson, 2016), length of time sentenced and time served (Vigliano et al., 2011), and even the odds of receiving the death penalty (Eberhardt et al., 2006).

Anti-Black police brutality against people with disabilities is also understudied. People with mental and physical disabilities account for roughly one-third to one-half of people killed by law enforcement, but are rarely the focus of media coverage about police violence (Perry & Carter-Long, 2016). Consequently, there is a substantial dearth of data to document anti-Black police brutality at the intersection of race and disability status. This intersectional invisibility even extends within Black civil rights activism. To wit, *The Harriet Tubman Collective* (2017), a group of Black Deaf and Disabled activists has lambasted the ableism and audism within the Movement for Black Lives, noting, “That a movement whose primary focus is ending police brutality ignored the violence experienced by Black Disabled and Deaf people is problematic considering that half of those killed by police have disabilities” (p. 70).

There is also a dearth of data on anti-Black police brutality at the intersection of sexual minority status. Evidence

from recent research documents that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) adults reported more contact with police over a 1-year period compared with their heterosexual counterparts; LGBQ people were six times more likely to have police stop them in public (6% vs. 1%), and almost seven times more likely to be stopped by police for reasons unrelated to driving (22% vs. 11%; Luhur et al., 2021). The study found no differences by sex and race, however.

Collectively, these studies spotlight sizable data gaps about anti-Black police brutality across diverse intersections of marginalization and oppression. This void underscores a critical need for more accurate and reliable data to serve as an antidote to the *no data, no problem* (Krieger, 1992) conundrum, despite the intrinsic and profound challenges of using racialized categories to document racial inequities (Krieger, 2021). Intersectional anti-Black police brutality data are essential to inform advocacy and structural interventions to reduce police brutality.

Critical Perspectives on Anti-Black Police Brutality

Critical theories challenge and expose underlying assumptions about power and privilege that function to conceal power relations, define or justify knowledge, and maintain the racialized and economic status quo. Critical psychology, a subfield of community psychology, “aims to identify and reveal ideological messages and relative practices that direct our attention away from sources of elite power and privilege” (Fox et al., 2009, p. 10). Our perspective that mainstream psychology has mostly failed to critically engage with the topic of anti-Black police brutality is grounded in critical psychology’s assertion that “something is fundamentally wrong with a discipline that not only fails to challenge unjust societal practices but actually reinforces them, and something is foundationally wrong with social systems that exclude, alienate, and oppress masses of people” (Fox et al., 2009, p. 14).

This noted, we echo Roberts et al. (2020) in their review of racial inequities in psychological science that our indictment about the lack of critical engagement with anti-Black police brutality is not with individual psychologists, but rather with the discipline of mainstream psychology. Many psychologists are actively engaged in using their training in psychology to reduce anti-Black police brutality in diverse settings such as schools, nonprofit, and community-based agencies. Counseling psychologists have been at the forefront of those working with the Black Lives Matter movement, writing op-eds about police brutality, and developing Black-centered healing circles (Hargons et al., 2017). Moreover, police brutality has been a focus of psychology journals such as *Journal of Black Psychology* (e.g., Harris & Amutah-Onukagha, 2019; Thomas & Blackmon, 2015), and the December 2017 special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* (Journal of Social Issues, 2017). Last, but not least, the Center for Policing Equity, cofounded by social



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psychologist Phillip Atiba Goff, is an innovative and visionary model of the use of psychological research to reduce racist policing practices.

Although a few critical theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality (Cole, 2009; Rosenthal, 2016) and critical race theory (Volpe et al., 2019) have made inroads within mainstream psychology, in general they are peripheral. This absence is illuminating; it highlights mainstream psychology's alignment with hegemonic structures and systems of power. Accordingly, mainstream psychology's response to police brutality in Black communities has been mostly ameliorative, not transformative. Critical psychology has long faulted mainstream psychology for its almost exclusive ameliorative bent (Fox et al., 2009). Ameliorative practices seek to improve an existing system (e.g., providing therapy to police brutality victims, implicit bias training for police) without questioning or challenging the assumptions, ideologies, resources, or power (Fox et al., 2009), such as anti-Black structural racism, that undergird police brutality and other interlocking structural inequities in Black communities (e.g., incarceration, unemployment, the wealth gap, health inequities such as coronavirus disease 2019 [COVID-19], and HIV/AIDS). Transformative practices (e.g., redirecting funds from police departments to social services) by contrast, seek to address structural root causes and emphasize major reform to systems that facilitate oppression. In line with our critical stance, we support defunding the police, by which we mean reducing the budgets of police departments to shift more resources toward initiatives such as mental health and substance use treatment, health care, community development, and crime prevention

programs. Notably, support for defunding the police is decidedly racialized. Whereas, 70% of Black Americans “strongly or somewhat” supported defunding the police in a July 2020 Gallup Poll, just 49% and 41% of Latino and White Americans, respectively, did so (Crabtree, 2020). Critical frameworks offer indispensable insights to mainstream psychology about how the discipline could critically engage with the issue of anti-Black police brutality beyond simply expressing heartfelt condolences, prioritizing ameliorative reforms, or documenting the mental health impact of police brutality. Three critical theoretical perspectives—critical race theory, intersectionality, and Afro-Pessimism—inform this article, and our development of the Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum.

Critical Race Theory

The central posit of critical race theory, a framework from critical legal studies, is that racism is not anomalous or aberrant, but instead a routine, ordinary, and seemingly fixed fact of everyday life for Black and other people of color in the United States (Bell, 1980). From a critical race theory perspective, the routine adverse encounters that Black people have with police and other law enforcement officers are archetypes of structural racism and what it means to be Black in the United States. Critical race theory highlights that ordinariness and interest convergence bolster White supremacy. Ordinariness refers to the commonness of racism such that police brutality against Black people has to be lethal, videotaped, and go viral to spur media or public attention, research, political remedy, and/or intervention.

Interest convergence asserts that White people are motivated to support initiatives that would improve Black people's well-being and interests only to the extent that they benefit White people. This tenet is affirmed by the fact that before the ghastly video of George Floyd's murder and ensuing protests, many White people in the United States could blithely ignore, deny, or dismiss structural racism and police brutality as Black people's problems, or be assuaged by perceptions that because they themselves did not espouse racist beliefs or actively discriminate against Black people, they were not racist (Bonam et al., 2018; Neville et al., 2013; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021). It may also explain White people's fleeting support of the Black Lives Matter Movement. In June 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, 60% of White adults said that they strongly or somewhat supported this movement; 3 months later, support had decreased to 45% (Pew Research Center, 2020a). Black adults were the only racial/ethnic group for whom support increased (from 86% to 87%). Since then, support for Black Lives Matter has declined among all groups, but most dramatically among White people who in early 2021 were less supportive of Black Lives Matter than they were on January 1, 2020 (Chudy & Jefferson, 2021).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a critical theoretical framework that asserts that power and privilege are differentially structured for groups based on their multiple and intersecting demographic positions (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, *and* class; Crenshaw, 1989), also offers an insightful lens for understanding anti-Black police brutality. Intersectionality shares with critical race theory an emphasis on centering the “specific and particular concerns” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 166) of groups historically marginalized by structural inequality such as those who are Black *and* women, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, poor, have disabilities, and/or are immigrants. Intersectionality forefronts the role of interlocking power and privilege, or lack thereof: namely, how a seemingly individual-level interaction is rarely an isolated event, but rather indicative of interlocking structural oppression. Take for example, the case of Shagasyia Diamond, a 37-year Black transgender woman in New York who police subjected to repeated misgendering, transphobic slurs, and a strip search by a male officer despite a patrol guide’s directive to treat transgender people respectfully. Diamond’s case was not isolated, but rather indicative of interlocking structural racism and cisgenderism/transphobia

Afro-Pessimism

Rooted in Black/African American studies, Afro-Pessimism offers a searing indictment of pervasive anti-Black structural racism and White supremacy in the United States. It asserts that the United States, like most of the Western and White world, is one in which Black is equivalent to slave. Blackness constitutes “a specific structural position within civil society and its socioeconomic, as well as its cultural and psychic systems” (Weier, 2014, p. 420). Anti-Black police brutality, particularly the gratuitous, noncontingent, banality of it, is especially illustrative of the slave codes that govern life for Black people in the United States (Martinot & Sexton, 2003; Wilderson, 2016). Blackness denotes an ontological position in which Black people’s disproportionate risk for police brutality, including being killed by police, is not contingent on any transgressions against civil (i.e., White) society. To wit, police routinely terrorize and kill Black people with impunity. It does not matter whether Black people are at home asleep as in Breonna Taylor’s case; out for a jog, as in the case of Ahmaud Arbery, the 25-year old Black man killed by a retired police officer and his son; eating ice cream on the sofa while watching TV in his own apartment, as was Botham Jean, a 26-year old Black man killed by a police officer who claimed that she mistook his apartment for her own; or preparing for bed, as was Anjanette Young, the 50-year old Black woman who police handcuffed for 40-min while she was naked, as they searched her home for weapons while

ignoring her terrified pleas that they had raided the wrong apartment.

Whiteness, by contrast denotes a paradoxically different contingency: a “common sense” ontological Whiteness that is always deserving of dignity, protection, and the benefit of the doubt (Martinot & Sexton, 2003; Wilderson, 2016); a “White immunity” in which innocence is always presumed (Cabrera, 2018). This would explain why when police arrived to find Arbery dying as a result of his gunshot wounds, they offered no immediate assistance and accepted without question the accounts of the White men who killed him, that Arbery looked like a home burglary suspect. It could also explain why no arrests were made in the case for months until media attention, release of a video of the shooting, and outrage from the public and activists. And, it likely explains the propensity for police to find White people who have committed crimes, including those in which they have killed people, and arrest them without incident. Among the most egregious examples of this is the case of police freeing the White shooter who murdered nine Black people at a Black church in Charleston, SC in 2015 from his handcuffs after his arrest, and treating him to a fast-food hamburger.

Policing, Police Brutality, Racialization, and Racism: The Construction of Whiteness and Blackness

Videos of police killings of Black people and the media attention and courtroom battles that follow, are “spectacular events” (Martinot & Sexton, 2003, p. 174). Aided by the ubiquity of smartphones, police body-worn, dashboard and security cameras, and web and social media platforms capable of disseminating videos of the events expeditiously, these videos go viral quickly, and garner substantial media and public attention. As with their historical antecedents (e.g., lynching photographs), the widespread sharing of these videos is also perverse. In the absence of justice, the repeated sharing of these videos inflicts vicarious racial trauma on Black people who get to observe their “linked fate” with the victim (Gregory, 2019). The spectacular event is also insidious. It obscures the banality and gratuitousness of anti-Black structural racism and police brutality as “standard operating procedure” (Martinot & Sexton, 2003, p. 174). It also “camouflages the operation of police law as contempt, as terror, its occupation of neighbourhoods; the secret of police law is the fact that there is no recourse to the disruption of people’s lives by these activities” (p. 173).

Spectacular events also occlude the markedly divergent structural and racialized worlds of policing for Black and White people in the United States such that the impunity of racist police brutality is “imminently ignorable” (Martinot & Sexton, 2003, p. 172) to White people, and imminently unignorable to Black people. They also obscure how

policing constructs Whiteness and Blackness: “those who are not racially profiled or tortured when arrested, who are not tried and sentenced with the presumption of guilt, who are not shot reaching for their identification” (Martinot & Sexton, 2003, p. 173) and those “bodies that do not magnetize bullets and those bodies that do” (Wilderson, 2003, p. 20).

“Slave Patrols,” Policing, and the Construction of Whiteness and Blackness

Police brutality in Black communities is not a new problem; it is a more than 400-year old one. Some historians consider “slave patrols”—state-sanctioned, organized blocks of [White] civilians active across several southern U.S. cities during the 18th and 19th centuries to control the “dangerous class” of enslaved people (Reichel, 1988, p. 54)—to be precursors to modern day U.S. police forces (Forman, 2017; Reichel, 1988). “Slave patrols” were developed primarily to thwart enslaved people from gathering firearms or planning revolts to gain their freedom, not to prevent crime.

In deputizing White people as police, “slave patrols” also implicitly constructed Whiteness. Wilderson’s (2016) review of H.M. Henry’s 1914 dissertation, titled *The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina*, recounts Henry’s observation that colonial legislation in 1686 assigned to White people the right to “apprehend, properly chastise, and send home [sic] any slave who might be found off his [or her] master’s plantation without a ticket.” This voluntary assignation proved ineffective, and so by 1690 White people who failed to perform this police duty were subject to a fine of 40 shillings. In essence, to be White, was to be the police. This racialization repeated itself for many European immigrants to the United States who were stereotyped as criminals or people in need of law and order. In response, Boston established the first official police force in 1838; by the 1880s, virtually every major U.S. city had a police force (Waxman, 2017). Many European immigrants faced xenophobia during integration into the police force. And then they became White (Ignatiev, 1995), a racialization that decoupled them from prior xenophobic and criminality stereotypes and further fused the Whiteness and policing equivalency.

Reconstruction (1863–1877) and the Civil Rights Act of 1870 ushered in the right for Black men to vote but, underscoring the importance of an intersectional lens, not necessarily Black women. Many states responded to the Civil Rights Act of 1870 by passing Jim Crow era laws that limited Black people’s ability to vote. Consequently, Black women were not granted the right to vote until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965; some 45 years after White women won their suffrage in 1920 (Waxman, 2020). Reconstruction also allowed Black men to hold office and join the southern police forces, but alas, not without

formidable racist pushback (Forman, 2017). Historical accounts of the period document White people rioting against Black officers in Mississippi, newspaper headlines in North Carolina warning, “The Mongrel Regime!! Negro Police!!” and the unimaginable perspective that Black officers would imply domination over White people (Forman, 2017). In the 1940s, Black police officers were segregated to inferior facilities, and cementing the link between Whiteness and policing, Black officers in cities such as Atlanta were prohibited from policing White people and were relegated to patrolling Black neighborhoods only.

Policing While Black and Blue: On Structure and “Borrowed Institutionalality”

Media accounts of police brutality typically highlight the officer’s race, particularly when the officer is White and the victim Black. Given the historical legacy of anti-Black structural racism and White supremacy in the United States, this practice is meaningful. But it is also problematic because it implicitly links police brutality to the White officer’s race or implicit biases, a diversion from the institution of policing and the anti-Black structural racism that undergird it, regardless of the officer’s race.

In an insightful article about the complexities and nuances of Black policing, critical race scholars Carbado and Richardson (2018) assert that Black police officers are implicated within the same structure that governs White officers. They cite five reasons: (1) all officers operate within the same “legal backdrop” of protections that allows officers to search Black people with impunity; (2) Black officers also have “same-race and intraracial biases”; (3) Black officers may experience racialized and/or masculinity threats that prompt them to target Black people violently; (4) structural factors of policing such as those that link performance evaluations, raises and promotions to the number of citations, stop and frisks, and arrests, incentivize all officers to target Black people; and (5) that “to fit into and become a part of the law enforcement community of ‘blue,’ Black police officers may have to marginalize the concerns of and dissociate themselves from the community of ‘Black’” (Carbado & Richardson, 2018, p. 1991). In this regard, Black police officers who engage in police brutality evince a type of “‘borrowed institutionalality’ (Wilderson, 2016) in which the police uniform . . . produc[es] the reracialisation” (Martinot & Sexton, 2003, p. 174) . . . “of Whiteness as the intensification of anti-Blackness” (p. 176).

Policing as a World for Black People: “The Talk” and Respectability Politics

Underscoring the mundanity of police brutality in Black communities is “The Talk,” discussions that many Black parents have with their children—sons, typically—that teach them that because they are Black, they are at

increased risk of being targeted by police (Harris & Amutah-Onukagha, 2019; Thomas & Blackmon, 2015). “The Talk” typically includes lessons about how best to minimize injury or prevent death in the event of a police encounter, such as keeping both hands visible on the steering wheel if pulled over while driving (Thomas & Blackmon, 2015).

Designed to keep children safe from police brutality, “The Talk” is also arguably a tacit form of respectability politics, the notion that Black people should adapt the ways they walk, talk and dress to avoid racism and racist stereotypes. Because Blackness is noncontingent, however, the notion that Black people could avoid police brutality simply by acting “respectably” is merely another racist canard. Black people are at risk of becoming the victims of police brutality regardless of how they behave. Moreover, Black people killed by police are also routinely blamed for their deaths. A review of media coverage by mainstream newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *Baltimore Sun* affirms the use of racist stereotypes about criminality in the reviews of the criminal records of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Alton Sterling, Black men fatally shot by police (Dukes & Gaither, 2017).

The Toll of Policing and Police Brutality in Black Communities: Mental Health, Social, and Economic

Police brutality is one of the most critical social justice issues of our time. It is also a significant mental health issue. Results from a nationally representative sample of African Americans found significant associations between “being unfairly stopped, searched questioned, physically threatened or abused by the police” and 12-month mood, psychiatric disorders such as anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and increased odds of reporting lifetime suicidal ideation plans and attempts (Oh et al., 2017). Our own research with Black men found that for those with an incarceration history, depressive symptoms were indirectly mediated by more adverse police experiences (Bowleg, del Río-González, et al., 2020), and that the Police and Law Enforcement (PLE) Scale, a measure of police-perpetrated discrimination was positively associated with depressive symptoms (English et al., 2017).

Police brutality is also a formidable source of vicarious trauma, one that affects entire Black communities not just the individuals who directly experience it. Police brutality-related vicarious trauma is the focus of an infinitesimally small theoretical (Aymer, 2016; Bryant-Davis et al., 2017) and empirical literature (Bor et al., 2018; Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020) base, however. A 2018 study found that Black respondents who lived in states where a Black person had been killed by police during the prior 3 months reported poorer mental health compared with White people. These symptoms persisted up to 2

months after news of the death, and each police killing was linked to more reported “not good” mental health days (Bor et al., 2018). Findings from qualitative research conducted with young Black men, ages 18 to 24 in Baltimore, MD in 2019, documented that police violence spanned participants’ lives from childhood through emerging adulthood. The study also found that most participants met *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Fifth Edition (DSM–5)* criteria for exposure to trauma as a consequence of their own experiences or having lost loved ones to police killings—a trauma that six of the 40 participants had experienced—and reflected the embodiment of conceptualized racial trauma (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019). Finally, the 2020 Household Pulse Survey, an emergency weekly survey of COVID-19 effects in U.S. households, documented that Black people reported a 5% spike (36% to 41%) in clinically significant signs of anxiety and depression in the week after the video of George Floyd’s death surfaced, the highest of any racial/ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Beyond the mental health burden, is a host of understudied social and economic tolls that illustrate the linkages between anti-Black police brutality and interlocking social-structural inequity. Consider, for example, the additional “Black tax” that Black people pay as a consequence of racist policing practices. The Black motorist or pedestrian pulled over by police and issued a ticket as a result of a Driving While Black encounter faces the price of the ticket, the prospect of taking time off from work to contest it, or if they are unable to pay the ticket, the risk that the ticket price will double, or that their car could be impounded and their driver’s license suspended. An August 2020 Tax Policy Center (Tax Policy Center, 2020) report documented that aggressive ticketing practices in predominantly Black and Latino communities accounted for roughly 4% of own-source revenue in cities such as Chicago and New Orleans.

The Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum

Informed by critical race theory’s assertion that racism is a routine affair for Black people, Afro-Pessimism’s reflections on the gratuitous and noncontingent nature of anti-Black police brutality, intersectionality’s insights about groups rendered intersectionally invisible in discourses about anti-Black police brutality (e.g., cisgender girls and women, transgender people, people with disabilities, and Latinos), and our research with Black men (Bowleg, del Río-González, et al., 2020; Bowleg, Teti, et al., 2020), we developed the Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum. The Continuum is a conceptual framework designed to advance knowledge about anti-Black police brutality as a broad spectrum of quotidian manifestations of anti-Black structural racism, beyond just the lethal or spectacular events

that go viral. Although police actions are the primary focus of the Continuum, Whiteness is also implicated within its purview. This is because when White people call the police on Black people engaged in the most mundane activities, as we describe in the section on Living While Black that follows, they “. . . are, ipso facto, deputized [as police] in the face of Black people, whether they know it (consciously) or not” . . . In short, White people are not simply ‘protected’ by the police, they *are* — in their very corporeality — the police” (Wilderson, 2003, p. 20).

The Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum also builds on empirical evidence about the harmful mental health consequences of anti-Black police interactions and brutality reviewed previously. Pursuant to psychological theoretical frameworks about the biopsychosocial effects of racism as a stressor (Clark et al., 1999), we posit that each category on the Continuum likely has distinct implications for negative mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, and trauma) for individuals and Black communities that may escalate based on frequency, intrusiveness and/or severity, and accumulate over time.

As Figure 1 highlights, the Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum includes four categories, from least to most extreme: (1) verbal abuse; (2) violations of constitutionally, federally, and/or state protected rights, with two subcategories: less-intrusive and intrusive; (3) unlawful or discretionary arrests and unwarranted detentions; and (4) sexual and physical abuse, with two subcategories: potentially lethal and lethal. The categories are not singular, mutually exclusive, uni-directional, or sequential. We describe each category, highlight evidence or gaps in knowledge about it, and include a nonexhaustive list of examples beneath each category.

Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse, the first category on the Continuum, includes interactions in which police officers speak disrespectfully, ridicule or use discriminatory language (e.g., racist, sexist, heterosexist, cisgenderist/transphobic, and ableist). Research on police officers’ verbal abuse is relatively rare. A notable exception is a systematic analysis of videos from police body cameras in Oakland, CA that showed that police officers, regardless of their race, were significantly less respectful when they spoke to Black drivers compared with White drivers (Voigt et al., 2017). The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey provides yet another example. Whereas 49% of overall respondents reported that police officers had intentionally misgendered them, more Black transgender (51%) respondents reported it (James et al., 2017).

Violations of Constitutionally, Federally, and/or State-Protected Rights

Actions by police officers to socially control Black people’s behaviors and movements, or to violate their constitutionally, federally, and/or state-protected rights, often seed police brutality in Black communities. We highlight three examples: responses to Living While Black calls, neighborhood social control, and differential policing of protests. *Living While Black* describes the phenomenon by which White people casually summon police officers to control the actions of Black people engaged in the most mundane of activities (e.g., barbecuing in a park, requesting to use the restroom in a Starbucks), what social psychologist Phillip Atiba Goff has termed “racism concierge calls” (as cited in Thebault & Brice-Saddler, 2019) and law professor Paul

Figure 1
The Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum

Verbal Abuse	Violations of Constitutionally, Federally and/or State-Protected Rights		Unwarranted Arrests, Detainments	Sexual and Physical Abuse	
	Less-Intrusive	Intrusive		Potentially Lethal	Lethal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disrespectful speech Ridicule Slurs (racist, misogynist, anti-LGBT, ableist, etc.) Intentional misgendering of transgender people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aggressive responses to “Living While Black” calls Aggressive dispersal of social or peacefully assembled groups, protesters “Driving While Black” stops Suspiciously monitoring Black people (e.g., following shoppers) Hyper-policing Black neighborhoods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stop-and-frisk Vehicular stops and searches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planting drugs or weapons Arrests for violations of Covid-19 social distancing rules Arresting Black 911 callers who are seeking assistance Illegal warrants, or illegally executed warrants Illegal or unreasonable searches and seizures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excessive physical force (e.g., assault with or without a weapon) Sexual abuse (e.g., rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment) Restraints, submission holds (e.g., chokeholds and other neck restraints) Sonic devices and chemicals (e.g., tear gas, medical sedation) Conducted energy devices (e.g., Tasers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Firearms Extended restraints or submission holds

Note. The categories on the Anti-Black Police Brutality Continuum are informed by Freeman’s (1995) definition of police brutality as an expansive term that “encompasses physical, psychological and legal police abuse of authority” (p. 686).

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Butler has described as “the use of police power to enforce the racial order” (as cited in [Sacchetti et al., 2020](#)). Among the most high-profile of these is a cellphone-recorded May 2020 incident in which a White woman called the police on a Black man who was birdwatching in Central Park after he requested that she leash her dog per the park’s rules. In response, the woman said that she would call the police and inform them “. . . there’s an African American man threatening my life,” and then did so.

As for neighborhood social control, a recurrent theme in our own qualitative research with U.S. Black men is that the police are a constant threat to their mobility and ability to comfortably enjoy their neighborhoods ([Bowleg, Teti, et al., 2020](#); [Holt et al., 2020](#)). Participants report that police routinely stop and harass them or demand identification when police encounter them on their neighborhood streets, or while standing outside with two or more Black people, particularly in gentrified neighborhoods.

Finally, there is evidence that demonstrations comprised of protestors who are predominantly Black, or that promote pro-Black social justice causes (e.g., Black Lives Matter) are policed in ways that differ starkly from those with predominantly White protestors. Take the flagrant example of White privilege and supremacy on full display at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. There for all to witness was the inequitable treatment that law enforcement officers doled out to the predominantly White male insurrectionist pro-Trump mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol, replete with Confederate flags, anti-Semitic symbols, weapons, and zip ties. The insurrection resulted in widespread vandalism and the death of five people, including a Capitol Police officer, and just 41 arrests that day. In stark contrast, peaceful protestors at the June 1, 2020 Black Lives Matter protest in Washington, DC were greeted by a phalanx of heavily armed law enforcement officers and brutalized (e.g., beaten, tear gassed); 289 of them were arrested on that day alone ([Washington DC Metropolitan Police Department, 2020](#)). As precursors to the U.S. Capitol putsch, April and May 2020 saw the antilockdown COVID-19 protests at the state capitol in Lansing, MI in which groups of predominantly White protestors—many brandishing assault weapons and not wearing masks in violation of public health guidelines—belligerently confronted masked police officers who withstood the verbal abuse stoically. Similar behavior by armed Black protestors without violent police reprisal is simply unfathomable.

Less Intrusive Encounters

The less-intrusive category of Legal Abuse includes examples such as incidents in which Black people are profiled or surveilled (e.g., followed as shoplifting suspects in stores; *Driving While Black*), and at the community-level includes hyper-policing, an aggressive form of policing in which residents in predominantly Black poor and urban

neighborhoods are subject to intensive surveillance, “noticing” of crime, and are implicitly designated as potential or actual criminals ([Blankenship et al., 2019](#)).

Rooted in anti-Black structural racism and so pervasive that it has its own name, *Driving While Black* describes the propensity for police officers and state troopers to disproportionately surveil and stop Black drivers for minor or nonexistent infractions ([Warren et al., 2006](#)). Highlighting its ubiquity, evidence showed that police had stopped Philando Castile, a 32-year old Black man in Minnesota, more than 49 times during the course of 13 years—an average of once every 3 months—for minor driving infractions such as turning without signaling, before fatally shooting him during another traffic stop in 2016. In addition to paying with his life, Castile likely paid a hefty “Black tax” for the price of those tickets before he was killed.

A *Driving While Black* encounter can escalate in severity over time, as in the Castile case, or rapidly as in the case of Sandra Bland, the 28-year old Black woman pulled over by a state trooper in Texas in 2015 for failing to signal a lane-change. Video footage of the interaction documented the trooper’s aggressive escalation after Bland refused the trooper’s request to extinguish her cigarette. He threatened to forcibly remove her from the car and “light her up” with his Taser, before ordering Bland out of her car and arresting her for assault. She died in custody 3 days later by suicide, a cause of death disputed by her family. Bland’s death is yet another tragic illustration of the “Black tax”: she died while awaiting her family’s attempt to collect the \$500 needed for her bail.

Intrusive Encounters

Stop-and-frisk—the practice by which police can stop a person for whom they have a “reasonable suspicion” of engaging in criminal activity and physically search them for a weapon (i.e., “frisk”)—is one of the most intrusive and ubiquitous types of police brutality. Further illustrating the starkly different contingencies of Blackness and Whiteness, Black people are disproportionately stopped and frisked compared with their White counterparts, even though White people are significantly more likely to be found with weapons ([Rudovsky & Harris, 2018](#)). As with data on police brutality in general, most stop-and-frisk data focuses on cisgender boys and men. An exception is a secondary data analysis that found that 53.4% of Black cisgender women reported being stopped by police in New York City in 2013; compared with 13.4% of White and 27.5% of Latina cisgender women, respectively ([Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015](#)). Substantial data gaps also exist for transgender women and men and other gender minority people, and because data are rarely presented at the intersection of race and ethnicity, diverse Black ethnic groups (e.g., African American, Afro-Latinos, African, and Caribbean).

Unlawful or Discretionary Arrests and Unwarranted Detainments

Unlawful or discretionary arrests—charges for low-level and nonviolent offenses that are legally recognized as noncriminal—and unwarranted detainments, the third category on the Continuum, describe instances in which police unjustly or without cause arrest or temporarily detain people; experiences that are disproportionately higher for Black people than White people in the United States (Bustamante et al., 2019). Analyses of city and county police arrest data voluntarily reported to the FBI showed that in 800 jurisdictions, Black people were five times more likely to be arrested than White people, after controlling for the demographics of the cities and counties served; in 250 jurisdictions, Black people were 10 times more likely to be arrested than White people (Thomas et al., 2020). We also include in this category arrests based on stop-and-frisk, racialized inequities in police enforcement, and arrests for violating COVID-19 era social distancing rules (Emmer et al., 2020). For example, data showed that of the 40 people arrested in Brooklyn for violations of New York City's social-distancing rules from March 17 through May 4, 2020; 35 were Black, four were Latino, and only one was White. By contrast, reports surfaced of police officers amiably disseminating masks to White people in parks, many of whom were not social distancing; yet another illustration of Whiteness as noncontingent.

Underscoring the mundanity of racist profiling and discretionary arrests are two August 2020 reports of Black women accompanied by children, being unjustly handcuffed and detained due to officers mistakenly suspecting that their cars were stolen. In the first case, two Black women had parked their car and were preparing to take their babies to the National Mall in Washington, DC, when Secret Service police with guns drawn approached and handcuffed them citing reports of a stolen car driven by two Black men. In the second instance, a viral video showed police officers responding to a report of a stolen vehicle in Aurora, CO. In the video, police officers hover with their guns drawn over a Black family, handcuffing the adult woman and her nieces with their hands behind their backs, and then ordering all to lie face down on the ground.

Sexual and Physical Abuse

Sexual and physical abuse, the last category at the most extreme end of the Continuum, describes physical (e.g., excessive force such as police shootings, chokeholds, strangulations, and kneeling neck restraints) and sexual abuse by a police officer (Freeman, 1995). This category has two subcategories: potentially lethal (e.g., acts of excessive force that may not necessarily result in death, such as use of tasers, chokeholds, and kneeling restraints), and lethal acts (e.g., fatal police shootings). Sexual violence by police is rarely the focus of media or research attention on police

brutality. It should be. "Police sexual misconduct," the official term, describes a range of abusive behaviors such as consensual sexual activity while on-duty, sexual intimidation and harassment, forcible fondling, rape or sodomy, and child molestation (Stinson et al., 2016). Police sexual misconduct is rarely reported, rendering it a "hidden crime" for which no national reliable data exists (Stinson et al., 2016). It is also not limited to cisgender girls and women. Black transgender (6%) respondents in the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey were significantly more likely than the general (3%) and White (2%) respondents to report sexual assault by police (James et al., 2017). And as the 1997 case of Abner Louima, a Haitian American man whom New York City police brutalized and sexually assaulted after his arrest showed, cisgender men are not immune from sexual police brutality.

Acts of lethal police brutality are included at the most extreme end of the continuum. In the absence of reliable national data, much of the evidence about the prevalence of lethal police brutality comes from the Mapping Police Violence database and those that media organizations such as *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian* have compiled based on media accounts, social media posts, and police reports (Conner et al., 2019; Krieger et al., 2015). *The Washington Post* (2021) has documented more than 5,000 fatal police shootings in the United States since 2015; almost 1,000 fatal shootings a year. Data from both media sources document that Black people are killed by police at twice the rate of White people and that the number of fatal police shootings is double that of the FBI's estimates. For Black women, a group typically intersectionally invisible in accounts of anti-Black police brutality, the lifetime risk of being killed by police was 1.4 times greater than White women (Edwards et al., 2019).

Collectively, the reviewed critical theoretical frameworks, our conceptualization of anti-Black police brutality not just as aberrant or occasional events, but rather as a structured world for Black communities, and the Anti-Black Police Continuum, provide insights and opportunities for mainstream psychology to engage more critically and transformatively with this issue. In the sections that follow, we review and criticize how mainstream psychology—the APA in particular—has responded thus far.

The APA Responds to Anti-Black Police Brutality: Insights and Critiques

The APA's statements on police brutality over the last two decades offer important insights into the discipline's priorities, values, and ideologies. Moreover, because these statements tacitly, and sometimes explicitly (see for e.g., APA, 2001) direct research and advocacy, they offer a gauge for assessing psychological scholarship on the topic. In 2001, APA's Council of Representatives passed a

resolution that called upon the APA to “advocate for and encourage research” to investigate racial/ethnic bias, profiling in law enforcement and security, and the relative effects on “individuals, communities of color and law and security enforcement and agencies.” The resolution additionally encouraged programs to boost local, state, and federal government awareness of the issue, “strong community-policing relationships,” and establish programs to help law enforcement “recognize and overcome” profiling. Albeit commendable, the resolution’s equating of the interests of individuals and communities, the victims of the profiling, with that of law enforcement agencies is notable. It prompts the question: why did the APA perceive the needs of Black communities and police as equivalent, given the disproportionate harm that racist profiling inflicts in Black communities?

In 2014, APA issued its statement in response to the fatal shooting of Michael Brown. The statement’s first paragraph expressed its condolences to the Brown family and then highlighted the role of psychological research in advancing knowledge about the effects of racial stereotypes on police officers’ perceptions of threat. The statement’s deference to police and lack of attention to how police brutality is rooted in anti-Black structural racism is noteworthy. The statement’s second paragraph cited the “growing body of psychological research that helps explain the difficult dynamics between police and members of minority groups in many communities,” an elision of the historical legacy of anti-Black structural racism and policing in the United States and the vast power imbalance between police and the disproportionately Black and poor communities where they work.

The statement’s third paragraph noted that “police officers are charged with protecting the communities in which they work and have a challenging and often dangerous job.” The challenge and dangers of policing are certainly real, but the statement’s emphasis on the police’s role in protection is a decidedly racialized one: White people feel and are protected by police, whereas Black people feel and are targeted by police. Indeed, a recent national survey showed that Black people’s worry about police brutality was five times higher than White people’s, prompting the researchers to label it a “hidden [emotional] injury of persistent worry and fear” (Graham et al., 2020, p. 562). The view of police protecting communities is also one diametrically opposed to the views of residents in many predominantly Black poor urban neighborhoods for whom the police have historically represented an occupying force (Forman, 2017; *The Kerner Report*, 1968), and numerous denunciations by Black residents and activists about the hyper-policing and police militarization that characterizes life in many poor Black urban neighborhoods (Mummolo, 2021). The statement raises another obvious question: why is the APA prioritizing resources on structures such as the police over the Black communities that the police have harmed historically?

In June 2020, in the midst of national and international outrage and protests over the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the APA publicized the testimony of its Chief Executive Officer and Executive Vice President, Arthur C. Evans, Jr. to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary’s Oversight Health in on Policing Practices and Law Enforcement Accountability (*Oversight Hearing*, 2020). This statement invoked decidedly bolder language than that found in earlier statements. For example, Evans acknowledged that the United States was “in the midst of a racism pandemic” and notably, explicitly cited structural racism as the source of racialized structural inequities in criminal justice, schools, employment, health care, and physical and mental health outcomes. In line with the hearing’s focus on policing practices, Evans’ testimony and recommendations focused primarily on police-centered initiatives such as community policing initiatives, banning chokeholds, and strangleholds, and “discouraging police management policies and practices that can trigger implicit and explicit biases.” Thereafter, an APA website update titled “We must unmute,” highlighted Evans’ testimony and noted APA’s stance against racism and hate, its “stand with all affected in addressing the trauma that racism and brutality inflicts on the victims, their families, and their communities.” The statement also highlighted APA’s intention to use “the power of psychology to address the racism pandemic, both in the short and long term” (APA, 2020).

Evans’ testimony and the subsequent website update signal a marked tonal change from the mostly individualistic and lack of attention to structure and power relations that have historically characterized most of mainstream psychology’s responses to anti-Black police brutality. The extent to which the APA will embrace a more critical and transformative stance on the issue of anti-Black (structural) racism, police brutality and interlocking social-structural inequities, and more importantly, take tangible and actionable steps to “addressing the racism pandemic” remains to be seen, however. History conveys reason for skepticism and pessimism.

Mainstream psychology’s history from the 1960s onward is replete with Black psychologists exhorting the APA to address the needs of Black communities, use APA’s resources to help Black communities overcome the effects of White racism, and eradicate White racism within the APA and White communities (Williams, 1974). Given the intersections between anti-Black police brutality and other social-structural inequities (e.g., poverty, unemployment, incarceration, inequitable housing, education, and health), advocates within and beyond the discipline have long encouraged APA to more critically engage with the topic of police brutality and other social injustices in Black communities. Take for example, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who in his 1967 address to the APA derided police brutality, summoned psychologists to engage with the Civil Rights Movement, and lambasted

“White America[’s] . . . appalling lack of knowledge concerning the reality of Negro life” (King, 2018, p. 215).

In 1968, a group of Black psychologists fed up with the APA’s inattention to “the reality of Negro life,” left the APA to form the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi; Williams, 1974). Underscoring anti-Black police brutality as a structural world for Black people then as now, the first item on ABPsi’s petition to APA in 1968 issued an urgent call to the APA to officially endorse the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders Report (commonly referred to as The Kerner Commission Report). The APA demurred, despite the involvement of APA leadership in identifying members for the Commission, and the fact that Dr. Kenneth B. Clark, APA’s first Black president, was one of the first experts to testify before the Commission (Holliday, 2009). Established by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967 to investigate the causes of riots in Black neighborhoods from the mid- to late-1960s, the Kerner Report cited White racism, poverty, and pervasive structural discrimination and segregation in education, housing, and employment as primary causes. It also offered a scathing critique of police practices.

Over the ensuing years, many psychologists have implored the APA to adapt a social justice agenda, to little avail. For example, two decades ago on the heels of the APA’s embrace of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity and multiculturalism, psychologist Vickie Mays (2000) in an article published in *American Psychologist*, summoned mainstream psychology to transcend its individualistic focus and adopt a social justice agenda. Mays admonished: “Psychology must not focus itself solely on the mental health of individuals when the nation is trying to understand the senseless torture and death of people hated because of their gender, race, religious beliefs, or sexual orientation” (p. 326). More recent calls encourage the APA to expand its ethical code to include social justice specifically (Hailes et al., 2021). Collectively, this ongoing advocacy prompts the question: why does mainstream psychology persist in deferring equity and social justice with regard to topics such as anti-Black police brutality and structural racism? We propose three possible explanations.

As in the U.S., Anti-Black Structural Racism Is Pervasive Within Mainstream Psychology

Anti-Black racism and White supremacy are so deeply rooted and embedded within the United States (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021; Salter et al., 2018) that it is hardly surprising that they would also be pervasive throughout APA’s structure, processes, and ranks. In *Even the Rat Was White: A Historical View of Psychology*, Guthrie (1998/2004) details psychology’s historic investment in mental testing from the late to mid-19th century to bolster the “mulatto hypothesis” that intelligence was hereditary and increased based on the

proportion of White blood. The hypothesis sought to scientifically support the racist belief that Black people were mentally inferior to White people and justify relegating Black people to second class status (e.g., preventing racial integration in public schools). Since then, the historical record documents numerous instances in which mainstream psychology has been dragged kicking and screaming to recognize, respond to, and equitably address the needs of people in Black communities (Holliday, 2009; King, 2018; Williams, 1974).

Thus, psychologists should not be surprised by how entrenched racism is within every aspect of the discipline. Consider the state of racial inequities in psychological research (Roberts et al., 2020). A recent review of more than 26,000 empirical articles published in top-tier cognitive, development, and social psychology journals in the last 50 years demonstrated that despite slight increases, the topic of race was rare in social and development journals, and “virtually nonexistent” in cognitive psychology journals. The review also found that the majority of journal editors and authors of articles on race were White, and that particularly in social psychology journals, participants of color compared with White participants, accounted for smaller proportions of the samples in publications that highlighted race (Roberts et al., 2020).

Mainstream Psychology Has Close Ties to Military and Defense Interests

Mainstream psychology has close ties with military and defense interests, commitments that are inimical to many of the transformative changes that activists such as the Black Lives Matter Movement are championing with their advocacy to defund or redirect funds from police departments to other social or mental health services, as a more effective strategy of reducing police brutality. As evidence of mainstream psychology’s coziness with the military industrial complex, in 2011, critics lambasted the mandatory “Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) Program,” a \$125 million collaboration between the APA and the U.S. Army to provide resilience training to Army soldiers, family members and civilian employees about how to cope and thrive. Critics derided not only APA’s involvement in the program, but also the decision of the *American Psychologist* to devote its entire January 2011 issue to the CSF with no consideration of the CSF’s ethics or scientific integrity, or opportunities for criticism. The move impelled a group of psychologists to query: “why is the world’s largest organization of psychologists so aggressively promoting a new, massive, and untested military program?” (Eidelson et al., 2011).

Fast forward to the 2015 “Hoffman Report” (Hoffman et al., 2015), an independent review of the APA that documented that the organization had relaxed its ethical standards to facilitate psychologists’ participation in torture

investigations, one of the APA's most recent and egregious ethical lapses. The report concluded that:

keeping the [antitorture limits on psychologists] loose and high-level was intentional, and was done to align APA and curry favor with the Defense Department, to create a good PR response, and to keep the growth of psychology unrestrained in this area. (p. 70)

And what might the APA's coziness with the Defense Department signal about its commitments to police or its official position regarding police reforms? The answer might lie in the Law Enforcement Support Office (LESO) 1033 Program, a federal program that provides for the military to give its surplus equipment to law enforcement agencies, prioritizing those involved in antidrug and antiterrorism. Critics have soundly castigated the role of police militarization as a "combination of equipment, tactics and culture developed for theatres of war" (Mummolo, 2021) routinely deployed in Black communities and against Black Lives Matter protestors. Based on the Hoffman Report's findings, it is not a far stretch to imagine that the APA's interests in "currying favor" with the military could explain its reluctance to attend to the interconnectedness between militarization and anti-Black police brutality.

Keeping the Focus on Implicit Bias, Not Structure, and Anti-Black Structural Racism Is Profitable

Finally, it is likely that APA's involvement in implicit bias trainings and other collaborations with police garner highly profitable revenue, despite evidence of their limited efficacy for reducing anti-Black police brutality. In "100 Years of Racism in Policing," a series of video shorts on this topic, the [American Civil Liberties Union \(2020\)](#) concluded that there is little reason to believe that most of the individualistic police reforms will be effective. As evidence, the ACLU noted that the Minneapolis Police Department, before its involvement in George Floyd's murder, had implemented trainings featuring many of the same solutions that APA champions: implicit bias trainings, crisis intervention trainings, and police-community dialogues. Structural interventions such as those that would abolish the doctrine of qualified immunity for police, strip police unions of the power to protect officers who brutalize and kill, disclose the personnel records of abusive police, and more transformative approaches such as those that would defund or redirect funds from police departments to other social or mental health services (Vitale, 2020) likely offer more promising options to reduce and ultimately end anti-Black police brutality. Despite this, the APA's ([Oversight Hearing, 2020](#)) list of recommendations for police reforms includes just one structural-level recommendation: banning chokeholds and strangleholds.

Mainstream Psychology and the Case for Pessimism: Conclusion

We are not the first group of psychologists to declaim mainstream psychology's failure to critically engage with anti-Black structural racism and police brutality in U.S. Black communities. Nor will we be the last. Although the APA's (2020) recent testimony and press releases about the racism pandemic and structural racism certainly signal a tonal change on the issue, we find little cause for optimism. There is far more cause for pessimism in an era in which we have observed the highest levels of the U.S. government and sizable numbers of White Americans embrace White supremacy with gusto. Add to this, the delayed and tepid law enforcement response to the flagrant and fatal breach of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, by a pro-Trump mob, many armed and wielding Confederate flags and anti-Semitic symbols. Compounding the foreboding is mounting evidence that among the many factors contributing to the epic failure to defend the Capitol, is the complicity of several federal and state police officers who either abetted or sympathized with the insurrection. In the context of a September 2020 hearing by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform's Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Subcommittee about the infiltration of White supremacists within law enforcement, a source of FBI concern since at least 2006 (Speri, 2020), the January 6th assault on the Capitol spotlights the flaw of mainstream psychology's failure to forefront structure and anti-Black structural racism. Bolstering our own pessimism, Martinot and Sexton (2003) offer a searing admonishment: "...theories that overlook [anti-Black police brutality as wholly banal] in favor of extant extravagance, spectacle, or the 'deep psychology' of rogue elements' ... become complicit in perpetuating White supremacy" (p. 173).

From our vantage point, there is scant evidence to suggest that mainstream psychology, or the nation for that matter, has the will or courage to meet the urgent racial and social justice demands of this moment. From mainstream psychology, we would welcome demonstrable action plans, steps, and outcomes, not just words, that substantiate its commitment to directing resources toward research; structural and multilevel interventions; and diversity, equity and inclusion practices that challenge and dismantle anti-Black structural racism throughout and beyond the discipline. If past is prologue, however, mainstream psychology will demur, delay, and defer, all the while championing implicit bias trainings, prioritizing police over Black communities, and expressing platitudes of "heartfelt condolences" when police terrorize, brutalize, and kill Black people with impunity.

Amid our pessimism, we find glimmers of radical hope. One glimmer is the transformative power of grassroots activism. A recent study found that municipalities with Black Lives Matter protests showed a 15% to 20% decline in

police killings between 2014 and 2019, a decline that was especially prominent when the protests were large and frequent (Campbell, 2021). Another glimmer is the burgeoning attention to structural racism within mainstream disciplines such as psychology (e.g., Roberts & Rizzo, 2021), and even the biomedical sciences (e.g., Bailey et al., 2021, 2017). Even the APA's April 20, 2021, *Reaction to Chauvin Verdict* illustrates the potential for transformative growth:

Black people experience collective and vicarious trauma that escalates with every murder of an unarmed Black person at the hands of police. These unconscionable acts take away an important sense of safety and normalcy and have long-lasting effects on mental and physical health. Injustice affects everyone. That is why we need to address systemic and structural factors, such as policies in law enforcement and criminal justice. . . . This guilty verdict will not bring back George Floyd, or erase the systemic and interpersonal racism that contributed to his death, or change the fact that we as a nation have much work to do. But it leaves us with hope that this can be a turning point.

We share the sentiment. We too hope that mainstream psychology will transition toward more critical and transformative responses to anti-Black police brutality.

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