

Institute for Clinical Social Work

Through Their Lens: The Effects of Police Fatalities on African American Men

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By

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of eight African American men who viewed recordings of other African American men who died by the actions of law enforcement. The study uses semi-structured interviews to explore the psychological impact of witnessing death, focusing on how African American men mourn, establish meaning, and develop coping strategies within a psychodynamic theoretical framework. The findings illustrate complex emotional responses, including sadness, anger, and despair, and highlight the influence of social media in collective mourning as a shared space for acknowledgment and memorialization. Applying the concept of linked fate, the participants formed an identification with the men who died and utilized coping strategies, like avoidance, humor, and interpersonal connections in response to witnessing these deaths. The participants also identified systemic racism and injustice as factors contributing to incidents of African American men dying by the actions of law enforcement. Implications for clinical practice and future research include addressing the psychological effects of systemic violence on African American men, recognizing the value of shared experiences, and advocating for systemic accountability to mitigate racialized trauma.

Chapter I

Introduction

General Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the psychological impact of African American men who witness the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement. This study will examine the emotional and cognitive effect of African American men who view recorded images of African American men who die by the actions of law enforcement as displayed through social and mainstream media. At this stage in the research, the psychological impact will include recognition of mourning, meaning-making, and coping responses through which African American men process viewing images of death facilitated by state-sanctioned systemic violence.

Significance of the study for clinical social work

The influences of social and cultural systems on the psychological development of African Americans remain unexamined within contemporary clinical and theoretical frameworks. Therapeutic treatment modalities have been limited in addressing how one's mental and emotional processes are influenced by their experiences in the social world (Layton, 2020). The lack of acknowledgment has further created limitations to clinical social workers' ability to

recognize how African Americans internalize what they deem to be unjust and racially destructive social norms.

Psychoanalytic theory has long recognized the influences of the external world on internal development. A central theme in object relations theory recognizes the individual (infant) does not exist alone, but rather within a relational and social connection with the mother. The infant's identity is formed within the context of the relationship with the mother which also symbolizes a relationship to the external society (Hopper, 1996). Because individuals are significantly influenced by their social and cultural environments, any constraints experienced by the external environment are unconsciously experienced throughout the individual's life span (Hopper, 1996). However, there is limited focus on the relationship between how the individual experiences socio-cultural influenced systemic constraints and the capacity to process intense emotional responses when encountering these systems.

Clinicians with insight into how a social, cultural, and historical context influences African American psychological processing are more likely to create a therapeutic environment that encourages self-reflection for the African American patient. Clinical social workers can facilitate this insight by helping African American patients conceptualize and examine the impacts of the external environment on daily life and functioning (Hopper, 1996). The internalization of cultural and social structures associated with race, class, and gender becomes repositioned in the therapeutic relationship (White, 2016). The clinicians' awareness of when these constraints unconsciously get recreated within the therapeutic environment will further help African American patients understand the impacts of cultural trauma on internal processing while also working to decolonize the therapeutic process. Additionally, if African Americans gain a more fulfilling treatment experience, where they can establish mutuality and

intersubjectivity within the co-constructed therapeutic relationship with the therapist, it might positively influence utilization rates and willingness to access mental health treatment.

A core ethical principle of the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) focuses on social justice and highlights the responsibility for social workers to “promote[e] social justice and challenge[e] social injustice” on behalf of those populations most vulnerable and oppressed by society (National Association of Social Workers, 2021, Principle II, Section III). Also, in alignment with core social work principles that emphasize the person-in-environment framework, this study will enhance social work theory and practice by recognizing how the external world for African American men, influenced by racial oppression, and reinforced by state-sponsored systemic violence, shapes their internal psychic world experience. This study aims to examine how African American men mourn and cognitively assign meaning to viewing recorded images capturing the deaths of other African Americans generated by the actions of law enforcement. The study is also interested in exploring the coping mechanisms African American men adopt in an attempt to integrate death into their lived experience.

Statement of the problem

Incidents of excessive policing practices used against African Americans are embedded throughout the socio-cultural history of the United States of America. In the antebellum South during the early 1700s, the Slave Patrols served as a private and organized unit coordinated to monitor the behaviors of enslaved Africans and assuage the fears of white landowners against slave rebellions and destruction of property. These Slave Patrols were responsible for capturing and, in many cases, punishing runaway slaves per the Fugitive Slave Laws (Root, 2015; Hansen, 2019). From serving as the enforcement arm for the institution of slavery to having responsibility for enforcing segregation laws during the Jim Crow era, law enforcement officials' use of

excessive policing against African Americans is integrated within the construction of the American criminal legal system (Root, 2015; Devylder, Fedina & Link, 2020). Consequently, a culture emerged within the policing system where certain beliefs and attitudes were negatively attributed to racially and economically marginalized communities (Root, 2015). A more detailed explanation of excessive force will be included further in this chapter, but this study includes law enforcement's use of physical force during the act of policing that when directly experienced by individuals or witnessed by marginalized communities can be deemed a form of violence. Policies that support the use of excessive force and encourage targeted policing strategies by law enforcement further assert power and authority over communities that have historically lacked social and political power. Racialized biases became integrated into policing practices, affecting African American, Latinx, poor, and immigrant communities while conversely serving to uphold laws that protect the white majority (Root, 2015).

Prevalence of Excessive Policing with African Americans

Statistical data illustrate the prevalence of civilian death by the actions of law enforcement. A 2016 study conducted by the Center for Policing Equity found police officers' use of excessive force was on average 3.6 times higher for African Americans than whites (Rhodes, Robinson, Archibald & Van Sluytman 2019). The Statista Research Department (2020) generated a report in 2018 highlighting fatal shootings by police officers across racial groups. The study found that, per million residents, there were 31 fatal shootings of African Americans compared to 24 fatal shootings for Latinos and 13 fatal shootings for whites. According to the United States Census (2017), African Americans represented 35% of unarmed civilians who died by police action and a *Police Violence* report (2017) illustrated that unarmed African Americans were five times more likely to die by police action than whites (Campbell & Valera, 2020).

Additionally, Amnesty International (2020) reports that in the United States, there are nine states without laws or policies regulating the use of lethal force by police officers. For many African Americans, the prevalence of targeted police violence, combined with a perceived lack of justice and accountability contributes to African Americans experiencing police encounters as a cultural trauma (Vaughans & Harris, 2016).

The disproportionate rates of excessive policing against historically marginalized communities further reinforce racial hierarchies and the socio-cultural devaluing of these communities (Devylder, et al., 2020). Communities comprised of predominantly African American, Latinx, and low-income populations, these communities experience a military style of community policing resulting in increased interactions with law enforcement aimed at crime prevention. The combination of greater law enforcement presence, the implementation of random security measures like "stop and frisk" type policies and the increased incidences of the police shooting of unarmed civilians contribute to higher rates of psychological distress for historically marginalized communities (Devylder, et al., 2020). The authority granted institutions to legitimize systemic violence and the limited legal options accessible to those most affected, excessive policing by law enforcement exacerbates the psychological consequences for racially and economically marginalized communities.

Publicized Images Excessive Policing

Documents detailing the prevalence of aggressive policing practices have been available for public exhibition and discussion throughout history. Photographs depicting large crowds of people gathering to witness police-facilitated lynchings of African American bodies hanging from trees for public display in southern states since the late 1800s (Williams, Holloway & Ross, 2019). In Birmingham during a civil rights protest in 1963, photographer Charles Moore captured

images of police officers attacking predominantly African American protesters with dogs and fire hoses that were documented by the BBC and published in *Life* magazine (May 1963). In 1991, the videotaped beating of unarmed motorist Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers was regularly featured on television news programs around the world. The public's exposure to law enforcement's use of excessive force has not been solely limited to visual images. For example, the 1997 beating and sodomization of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima by New York City police officers was documented in print news media but conjured up descriptive mental images capturing the harsh brutalities of modern policing practices. Repeated media coverage emphasizing acts of violence and mortality is experienced as a secondary trauma by those exposed to it. For example, a study by Ahern, Galea, Resnick, and Vlahov (2004) found participants exposed to the ongoing media coverage of the events documenting September 11, 2001, was two times more likely to endorse symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Current images documenting policing practices that include civilian fatalities continue to permeate all forms of media. Media coverage is now inclusive of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram which permit the public with 24-hour access to on-the-ground documentation from a variety of sources that get shared and discussed globally. Social media has been an influential digital space for community connection and shaping public perception. It has also created a platform for larger-level societal discussions around the misuse and abuse of power by law enforcement (Campbell & Valera, 2020). For marginalized communities, social media has become a shared space for collective witnessing and the construction of a central narrative centered around both individual and shared experiences (Williams, et al., 2019). Through mainstream and social media exposure, the public viewed images documenting the

deaths of civilians Laquan McDonald (2014) in Chicago; Eric Garner (2014) in New York City; Walter Scott (2015) in North Charleston; Alton Sterling (2016) in Baton Rouge; Philando Castile (2016) in Minneapolis; George Floyd (2020) in Minnesota and Tyre Nichols (2023) in Memphis by police officers. Explicit images of law enforcement actively engaged in acts of excessive policing practices, specifically when used against historically marginalized communities, create a collective experience of witnessing, and promotes a shared experience through which to establish a common narrative around the psychological effects of this form of systemic violence (Williams, et al., 2019). The Black Lives Matter movement increased awareness of the pervasiveness of systemic racism and prejudice in policing creating more instances where lethal actions by law enforcement were documented and disseminated throughout social media (Campbell & Valera, 2020). Through the accessibility of modern media, there is more exposure to visual images depicting incidents in which police actions contributed to physical injury, and on occasion, death of civilians. These visuals accompany ongoing public dialogues occurring in a digital space that illustrates the challenges of co-existing within a system of misconduct and abuses of authority.

The Unique Impact of Law Enforcement's Use of Excessive Force

The psychological impact of excessive policing practices varies by degree of intensity and the manner of exposure to the act. Devylder, et al. (2020) found individuals exposed to law enforcement use of physical force were 4 to 11 times more likely to attempt suicide. While the psychological consequences of being exposed to forceful police actions might align with a more subtle external affective presentation, the mental disruption is perceived as more intrusive given the systemic origins causing greater significance to the broader community (Devylder, et al., 2020). Racially and economically marginalized communities have a higher-than-average law

enforcement presence increasing the likelihood of law enforcement interaction whether welcomed or not (Devylder, et al., 2020; Isom 2016). Predominantly African American communities are more likely to have involuntary interactions with law enforcement and have more encounters where physical force was enforced. Consequently, when compared to other forms of interpersonal or community violence, these communities have greater challenges avoiding the emotional triggers contributing to psychological distress.

Another factor that contributes to the psychological impact of systemic violence is the authority and institutional power granted to officers operating within the legal system. The power and authority granted to police officers as officials of the legal system impose a power imbalance in the relationship with civilians. Law enforcement officials have access to weapons, including firearms and batons, to use as tools to further exert power and intimidation with limited consequences (Adedoyin, Moore, Robison, Clayton, Boamah & Harmon, 2019). The use of excessive force, even when fatal, is considered legitimate and systemically sanctioned to maintain social order and protect the dominant majority (Devylder, et al., 2020; Root, 2015).

While members of Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American communities encounter societal injustices, African Americans are more likely to also experience systemic racism and discrimination (Comas-Diaz, Hall & Neville, 2019). As a result, African Americans face unique psychological harm while navigating frequent and often involuntary interactions with a pervasive system authorized to use physical and psychological force in policing practices. Because of these interactions, a stress response is activated among community members who seek ways to avoid encounters with officials representing this system (Devylder, et al., 2020). These psychological stressors can impact an individual's sense of self and purpose (Devylder, et al., 2020).

Psychological Impact

Racial and social marginalization racialize the intrapsychic processes for African Americans (Dalal, 2002). According to Holmes (2006) race and class-based attitudes and behaviors impact internal processing and formation of the self for racially marginalized groups. The therapeutic space created for African American patients requires clinicians to acknowledge how internalized mental processes operate as a form of trauma that adversely affects self-actualization and the ability to navigate the external environment (Alleyne, 2007). Therapeutic treatment needs to recognize how external factors, directly or indirectly centered around race and racism, inform the internal experience of African Americans to understand how to facilitate healing and recovery. Powell (2018) writes of cultural and racial ‘blind spots’ that prohibit clinicians from addressing race within the therapy room. Layton (2020) also cautions that clinicians can unknowingly reinforce unconscious processes that align with perspectives regarded as socially acceptable by mainstream society. Clinicians are encouraged to utilize and be curious about racialized enactments. New clinical insight will challenge the traditional psychodynamic perspective of viewing the patient from the "inside-out" and instead recognize how the individual psychological experience is based on more than internal conflicts but also acknowledges the role of the external environment (Dalal, 2002). This study presumes there are unique psychological effects for African American men who witness death by the actions of law enforcement (DBLE) when it occurs to other African American men. This study specifically seeks to explore the psychological processes of mourning, meaning-making, and coping for African American men upon viewing recorded images of these deaths through social and mainstream media.

Process of Mourning

Wolfelt (2008) describes grief as an internal process containing a collection of thoughts, images, and feelings associated with death and loss. Grief is a cognitive process that assigns meaning to a loss or death. Mourning is an internal expression of grief that needs to be integrated into daily functioning (Wolfelt, 2008). Grief is transformed into mourning when a conscious decision is made to either accept or suppress the difficult emotions associated with the loss. Throughout the process of mourning, there is an unconscious response to avoid the difficult emotions most in need of being expressed. An inability to mourn reflects attempts to manage fear and anxiety related to the expression of those difficult emotions (Wolfelt, 2008). Mourning situates the loss within the realm of conscious awareness (Amir, 2017). Mourning activates an unconscious internal response reflecting the internal dialogue centered around the loss and recognizes the loss of the internal object (Amir, 2017). Failure to recognize one's inner representation of the loss is considered a traumatic miss and generates an annihilation anxiety reflecting the loss of the object (Amir, 2017). A relationship exists between unacknowledged traumatic experiences and the ability to engage in authentic mourning (Amir, 2017).

Culture influences affective expression and impacts mourning. Some cultural values lean toward being in control of one's emotions and view emotional expressions as an inconvenience or being self-involved (Amir, 2017). Authentic mourning recognizes the individual and cultural challenges to feeling safe expressing overwhelming emotions. However, it also requires making a conscious decision to mourn by acknowledging difficult feelings and engaging in the necessary steps to attempt to repair (Wolfelt, 2008). A goal of mourning is to reconcile the internal conflict between holding a cognitive perception of the loss while also attempting to manage and integrate meaning and expression into daily life and functioning (Amir, 2017).

Social networking sites extend the cultural space and context within which mourning occurs. Traditionally recognized as occurring in private and isolation, social networking sites incorporate the public and socio-cultural realm that significantly influences the mourning process (Moore, Magee, Gareklidze & Kowaleski, 2019). Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013) conducted a qualitative study to examine a new way to understand public mourning. The researchers utilized online resources to understand how individuals experience and mourn death within a social and communal realm. Brubaker, et al., (2013) sought to recognize social networking sites as another environment through which individuals acknowledge death and integrate mourning into daily life. The sixteen participants, ranging in age from 24 to 57 years old, shared how they utilize Facebook to participate in death-related activities, including acknowledging and memorializing death, online. Brubaker, et al. (2013) concluded social networking sites expanded the public spaces where death is acknowledged and explored. A specific finding from Brubaker, et al. (2013) highlights “unexpected encounters” which recognize how individuals are informed of the death through social networking sites. For instance, participants indicated viewing status updates on Facebook was a primary method of learning about deaths. Participants considered unexpected encounters to be a consequence of online mourning due to the frequency of automatic updates containing death-related content. The participants reported feelings of shock and discomfort from the regular viewing of some death-related content (Brubaker, et al., 2013). Social networking sites are an additional forum through which death is acknowledged and expressed socio-culturally. It also becomes a part of the social and cultural environment through which death is integrated and expressed through daily communications.

A grounded theory study explains the social media mourning model (SMM) as a process for how individuals acknowledge, share, discuss, and mourn death within the context of social networking sites (Moore, et al., 2019). SMM describes a community approach that serves to empower and provide a sense of collective mourning in a social forum whereby individuals gain a sense of connection and support (Moore, et al., 2019). Moore, et al. (2019) interviewed 24 participants between the ages of 22-60 who experienced the death of a personal contact and who utilized social networking sites to acknowledge the death. Moore, et al. (2019) found participants used social networking sites as a means of communicating with a community by sharing information and gaining support surrounding the death. The participants reported the community nature of social networking provided a way to cognitively process the death by seeking meaning and identifying ways for expressing grief. Moore, et al. (2019), concluded social networking sites provide an additional pathway for mourning death beyond the traditional behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and physical domains. This study builds upon the concepts of current research that illustrate how social networking sites, in conjunction with mainstream media, are influential in how African Americans witness, and ultimately mourn, the recorded images of publicized deaths.

Cognitive Process of Meaning-Making

The process of transforming grief into mourning relies on how one acknowledges and assigns meaning to a loss and how that meaning becomes integrated into daily life. Making meaning of death allows the individual to frame understanding about the life of the deceased, the cause of death, and its aftermath. Meaning-making functions as both a conscious and unconscious mental process impacting how one thinks, behaves, and responds emotionally (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005). Although described as a mostly internal process, meaning-making

is also influenced by external factors. The process of meaning-making accounts for individual beliefs and values, but also incorporates elements from social dialogue. The process involves integrating external socio-cultural influences with the individual's internal perception (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005). Meaning-making is a necessary cognitive process in the aftermath of a distressing life event. The process of assigning meaning occurs immediately following a distressful event but is also subject to ongoing re-evaluation as internal perceptions and external influences shift (Park, 2010; Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005).

Park (2010) describes the meaning-making model as one approach that recognizes the internal conflicts one experiences attempting to align individual meaning with global perceptions of an event. The individual assessment during the meaning-making process is rooted in personal experiences and is an ongoing effort to assess the magnitude of the stressor and one's perception of having control (Park, 2010). Throughout this process, the individual also seeks to understand the reasons behind the distressing event and the potential consequences in the future. Global meaning stems from social and cultural beliefs, expectations, and the collective emotional response to a stressor (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005). Perceptions of justice, accountability, and a sense of predictability are examples of perceptions attributed to the global significance required to comprehend distressing events (Park, 2010).

Meaning-making is a cognitive process intended to resolve the internal conflict of integrating the individual meaning into the global meaning (Park, 2010). The internal conflict highlights discrepancies between the individual's perceived meaning and meaning globally assigned to a stressor. The process begins with the individual's assessment of a disturbing event with active attempts to determine how the assigned meaning fits within the perceived meaning from a global context (Park, 2010). The internal conflict activates distressing emotional

experiences and a goal for recovery becomes the need to reconcile the internal and external discrepancies of the assigned meaning (Park, 2010). The cognitive process involved with attempts to reconcile individual and global meaning can occur consciously or unconsciously to avoid disturbing thoughts and feelings associated with the event. Conscious meaning-making processes help cope with the emotional turmoil activated by the distressing event (Park, 2010).

Meaning-making is designed to integrate one's experiences with an event into one's sense of self (Park, 2010). It is both a social and cultural process that occurs intrapsychically and interpersonally. An integrated model conceptualizes meaning-making from within cultural and systemic constructs that rely on social and cultural perspectives to affirm one's assigned meaning. Meaning-making is essential for African Americans as it enables recognition of racism and discrimination in one's perception often associated with a sense of survival (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005). As it relates to mourning, the individual forms a narrative that assigns meaning to how the deceased lived. For the BIPOC community, this process also recognizes how racism offers an additional context for framing the significance of death, often viewed as a continuation of living within an oppressive societal structure (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005). The individual assessment process is influenced by social and cultural factors that recognize the external environment's role as a potential contributor to death (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2010). Further research is needed to explore how meaning-making influences one's self-narrative and shapes identity formation (Park, 2010). A goal of this study is to explore how meaning is constructed from the self-narrative African Americans generate from viewing an event as distressing as death.

Coping Responses

Coping is a functional response to manage an overwhelming stressor. Understanding coping responses involves recognizing the complexity of factors that inform how one copes. Coping is activated in an attempt to manage or avoid the effects of a stressor (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989). Coping styles can either be fixed and applied to specific kinds of stressors or generalizable and adjusted based on the nature of the stressor (Carver, et al., 1989). Cognitive-focused coping methods reframe intrusive or negative thoughts into more adaptive frameworks. Alternatively, emotion-focused coping responses are influenced by personal narratives and one's assigned meaning. It is an attempt to avoid the stressor and manage the overwhelming emotional response (Matthieu & Ivanoff, 2006). There are also cognitive and emotional strategies used to avoid dealing with an overwhelming stressor. Suppression and denial are examples of defense strategies aimed at avoiding the emotional effects of a stressor (Carver, et al., 1989). Mental disengagement, like distraction and daydreaming, is a cognitive attempt to deny the extent of intrusive thoughts (Carver, et al., 1989).

Distressing events negatively impact one's psychological well-being and activate an internal response to manage the stressor (Matthieu & Ivanoff, 2006). The internal response functions cognitively and emotionally to acknowledge one's subjective interpretation of the stressor and generate a stress response (Matthieu and Ivanoff, 2006). The process of activating a coping strategy involves assessing a perceived threat to self, exploring a potential response to the threat, and moving towards implementation. Smith, Stewart, Myers, and Latu (2008) studied coping responses to psychological distress generated by acts of racism. Smith, et al., (2008) examined participants' experiences with racism and the coping responses to psychological distress. The researchers found it necessary to assess both implicit and explicit ways of coping, recognizing some of the limitations surrounding self-reporting on coping responses. Smith, et al.,

(2008) recognized participant responses might be limited to what is deemed socially acceptable or may be adversely impacted by inaccuracies in memory and resistance to self-reflection. Assessment of implicit ways of coping was considered more useful in measuring involuntary responses to racism that were less susceptible to social acceptability (Smith, et al., 2008). The participant interviews collected for this study will attempt to recognize both the implicit and explicit ways African American men cope with the psychological distress of viewing recorded images of death.

The African American community is marginalized by racial disparities, social isolation, and lack of access to needed resources (Comas-Diaz, Hall & Neville, 2019; Williams, Ching, Printz-Pereira & Wetterneck, 2018). Consequently, they are also uniquely positioned to internalize anxieties, fears, and frustrations generated by the daily struggle of trying to survive within racially oppressive social systems (White, 2016). For African Americans, the constraints of the external world correlate with limited social power and the ability to control the larger cultural environment creating an internal world that lacks a sense of safety and security (White, 2016). Rosenbaum, Schuck, Costello, Hawkins & King (2005) studied the attitudes of law enforcement officials across different racial communities and found that African Americans held more negative attitudes toward law enforcement than Latinx and white participants. The study also found African Americans attributed dissatisfaction with law enforcement to direct experiences with the use of excessive force in policing. Rosenbaum, et al. (2005) concluded that for African Americans, high rates of police distrust were related to direct exposure with law enforcement. However, the researchers acknowledge limited research exists examining the psychological influence of secondary witnessing police use of physical force, resulting in physical injury or death, on African Americans.

African American males undergo separate and unique legal socialization as a part of their developmental socialization that occurs at a younger age than any other racial group (Stoute, 2019). Stoute (2019) describes legal socialization as being aware of a standard of conduct necessary for individuals of a racial or cultural group when encountering the legal system or its officials. The societal factors necessitating legal socialization and a group's negative experience, direct or indirect, with law enforcement, create a hyperawareness of the vulnerabilities of identity and group membership. When members of marginalized groups encounter a cultural trauma it not only affects mentalization and affect management, but also reinforces vulnerabilities to identity and strengthens the range of emotional responses including pride, shame, and fear that influence individual identity development (Greene, 2009).

Specific Objectives to Be Achieved

This study seeks to understand the lived experiences of African American men with objectives:

- Explore the subjective experiences of African American men who viewed recorded images of other African American men who died by the actions of law enforcement (DBLE).
- Understand the psychological impact for African American men as it relates to mourning the death, assigning meaning to the death, and the coping responses developed from viewing recorded images of DBLE shared on mainstream and social media.
- Apply a psychodynamic interpretation to witnessing that can come from direct exposure to an event and serves as a “mental container” experienced from viewing recorded images of death.

- Apply the concept of linked fate to presume participants will convey some type of psychological response from viewing images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement.
- Apply the concept of systemic violence to examples of law enforcement officers using physical injury or lethal means during the act of policing and operating on behalf of the legal system.
- Explore the complex psychological experiences of African American men exposed to examples of systemic violence.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the primary question: What are the subjective psychological experiences of African American men who view recorded video images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law?

Additionally, this study aims to identify:

1. How do African American men experience mourning as a result of viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement?
2. How do African American men assign meaning to viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men?
3. What are the approaches African American men use to cope with viewing recorded images depicting death by the actions of law enforcement?

Theoretical and Operational Definitions of Major Concepts

- Social media: Social networking sites are not just a source for sharing news, but also where communities join to share public opinions, promote a cause, and establish

networks (Vis, 2012). Considered a form of digital communication media, social media functions as online communities created to connect with others around a shared interest and a space to form and maintain social relationships (Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2009; Brown, Dustman & Barthelemy, 2020). For this study, social media will include, but are not limited to the use of Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Tumblr, and Snapchat.

- **Mourning:** Mourning reflects a psychological representation of a distressing event situated within conscious awareness to become integrated into daily cognitive processing (Amir, 2017). The literature review will include a more in-depth examination of mourning from a psychodynamic perspective.
- **Meaning Making:** Meaning-making is a cognitive symbol of potential relationships between things and events (Baumeister, 1991 as cited in Park, 2010; Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005). As a process, meaning-making comes from attempts to resolve the internal conflict between the assessed individual meaning and the perceived global meaning of a stressor.
- **Witnessing:** Witnessing from a psychodynamic perspective is a reparative function whereby the clinician recognizes an associated or previously denied reality for the client (Ullman, 2011). In the therapeutic milieu, clinicians witness by serving as containers for clients who may have experienced psychic disruptions and may have dissociated from the event. Witnessing operates as a social process whereby meaning is assigned by the one who witnesses (Ullman, 2011). Witnessing ensures the participant is not shielded from the realities of tragedy and serves as a part of the collective memory when engaged with a group most impacted by the tragedy (Ullman, 2011). Witnessing is not considered an

isolated or single event, but rather an ongoing process of bearing witness. This study will apply a psychodynamic interpretation of witnessing as a “mental container” that can result from viewing images depicting death.

- **African American Male:** The concepts of race and gender are socially constructed and identification with a racial group acknowledges the individual significance of race and ethnicity and the influence of shared socio-cultural experiences (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, Chavous & 1998). The historical and current collective experience of discrimination and racial oppression also influences racial group identity. Sellers, et al. (1998) write "The relative importance of race [has] important implications for the qualitative meaning that a person ascribes to being African American". This study will quantify African American males based on self-report and self-identification of individuals who ascribe to being African American and cisgender male.
- **Law Enforcement:** The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2021) indicates law enforcement officials, representing local, state, and federal agencies, are responsible for apprehending, detaining, and investigating suspected criminal offenses and law violations. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) outlines the role of law enforcement officials to include, patrol, emergency response, traffic citations, and respond to criminal activity. For this study, law enforcement will refer to those officials, whether on-duty or off-duty, who operate in the capacity of the legal system to enforce local, state, and federal law. Police officers and law enforcement officials are both referenced in this study to represent agents of the legal system.
- **Legal system:** The legal system represents a network of laws, regulations, and institutions operating at state, federal, and local levels. The legal system is responsible for

establishing and maintaining law and order. For this study, the legal system includes the judicial system, detention and incarceration systems, and law enforcement agents.

- **Systemic Violence:** Saltermarsh, Robinson & Davies (2012, as cited in Hammaren, 2022) writes that systemic violence is any “institutionalized policy, practice or procedure that negatively impacts or discriminates against [marginalized] individuals or groups”. The inequality embedded in institutional policies and practices generates negative psychological, mental, or physical consequences and harms those individuals or groups marginalized (Hammaren, 2022). The impact of systems constructed on the ideals of white supremacy and racial oppression is the creation of a systemic environment with a capacity to abuse and misuse power and authority. A “climate of violence,” although at times undetected, is integrated into policies and practices (Epps and Watkins, 1997 as cited in Duncan, 2000). This study recognizes systemic violence as a concept exemplified by the actions of law enforcement officers who, operating on behalf of the legal system, contribute to the physical injury or fatality of African American men.
- **Excessive Force:** There is not a universally accepted definition of what constitutes police violence or brutality (Root, 2015). Policing practices using threatening verbal commands and physical force are advocated as legitimate policing practice by law enforcement advocates (Root, 2015). Law enforcement advocates argue that the use of excessive force during the act of policing is considered a necessary form of "street justice" which acts as informal retribution for violation of community norms or infringement upon personal or property rights (Root, 2015). This study will frame excessive policing practices by the use of excessive force to include verbal threats, physical force that results in injury, or the use of lethal means during the act of community policing.

Statement of assumptions

- The enduring impact of cultural, systemic, and interpersonal racism has an adverse psychological impact on African Americans.
- The legal system, which includes community policing, is constructed on the ideals of white supremacy and racial oppression. The system is comprised of policies and practices that reinforce power imbalances, discrimination, and bias toward racially marginalized populations. The consequences of systemic racism and the systemic violence enabled through the legal system hold significant implications for African Americans.
- This study discusses racialized policing and the negative consequences for African Americans. However, it recognizes the African American community is not a monolith. African Americans reflect a broad and diverse representation distinguished by a variety of demographic factors that may influence experiences with systemic racism and police encounters. African Americans who live in low-income or inner-city communities are especially vulnerable to the implications of targeted police encounters and often perceive excessive police force as a form of violence.
- The occurrences of civilians dying by the actions of law enforcement and a perceived lack of formal accountability create a sense of powerlessness for many African Americans. The psychological distress associated with systemic injustices contributes to many African Americans perceiving encounters with law enforcement officials as cultural trauma.

Epistemological Foundation of Project

This study will utilize an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in a qualitative research design to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological processes of African

Americans. IPA embraces identifying new themes or findings that contribute greater insight into existing research (Taylor, 2014). The tenets of IPA research are centered around uncovering the latent meaning participants attribute to their lived experiences combined with the subjective interpretation of the researcher of the data. The paradigm of inquiry is selected based on the interpretative nature of the research data collection and analysis methods. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe constructivism as an attempt to examine how individuals interact and make sense of their external world within the context of historical and social perspectives. A constructivist approach believes one's culture at birth has a significant influence on how the individual assigns meaning to their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition to recognizing the context within which the lived experience is understood, constructivism acknowledges the role of another who can interpret the meaning of an individual's experience through a lens of their subjectivity. Constructivism believes interpretation and meaning are filtered through an interpersonal and social context that exists within a community (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The subjective experience is associated with certain objects in one's external world that hold a particular value to the individual. A hermeneutic phenomenology is a form of IPA that believes that what appears on the surface is generally attached to a deeper meaning (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). As a result, IPA-guided research designs strive to explore deeper meanings in the data which may not be overtly expressed by participants but could be interpreted by the researcher in data collection and analysis (Taylor, 2014).

IPA explores how the individual assigns meaning to his world. While IPA recognizes there are multiple realities, it believes the individual's reality is the result of internalizing the meaning he assigns to his external world (Aliyu, Singh, Adamu & Abubakar, 2015). The constructivist perspective emphasizes the significance of the subjective experience and the

cultural context within which it is lived and defines cultural values (Gergen, 1999). Gergen (1999) recognizes that no single or objective point of view of the world exists. The external world is influential in shaping the meaning of the lived experience. Constructivism acknowledges the influence of historical truth on developing one's subjective experience and shared values. The historical truth is based on the individual's perception and interpretation of facts. Additionally, Gergen (1999) reiterates the role of framing meaning from within the context of interpersonal relationships. Hill (1984) contends that an axiological approach views values as an inherent aspect of social science and informs the objectives and perspective of the research. An axiological approach is forthcoming to the influence of values as expressed through the participants' reflection and the researcher's interpretation. The researcher aims to balance the distinction between values expressed by the participant during data collection with the researcher's subjective interpretation during data analysis (Hill, 1984). Axiological assumptions can be clarified by bracketing which captures the self-reflective process of the researcher, and member checking, which invites a shared group dialogue between the research and participants, on the data generated (Creswell, 2007).

This study will incorporate a constructivist phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experience of African American men. The study will utilize interpretative elements from IPA to a phenomenological design utilizing qualitative data collection and analysis procedures to answer the primary research question: “What are the subjective psychological experiences of African American men who view recorded video images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law” and the secondary questions of 1) How do African American men experience mourning as a result of viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement?, 2) How do African

American men assign meaning to viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men? and 3) What are the approaches African American men use to cope with viewing recorded images depicting death by the actions of law enforcement? The researcher will analyze the data by applying interpretative strategies for coding and reporting the data from semi-structured and open-ended participant interviews. The researcher will also use bracketing and member checking to account for the interpretative nature of the data analysis. IPA-centered research designs suggest data analysis be completed one participant at a time to identify themes and variations among the qualitative data set. The researcher will collect data from open-ended participant interviews which will be analyzed by applying IPA approaches to interpretative qualitative data.

Foregrounding

The construction of this study is based on my professional and personal interests in the intrapsychic development of African Americans. As an African American researcher and clinician, I recognize that African Americans demonstrate a reluctance to engage in therapy treatment and are less likely to access mental health treatment. My personal experiences, as both a patient and therapist, inform my assumptions that resistance to treatment for African Americans is related to a historical distrust of mainstream systems. I also believe African Americans experience a fear of showing vulnerability due to living in a racialized society which poses daily risks and threats to personal safety. The relational nature of psychodynamic treatment relies on the co-constructed therapeutic space between the patient and therapist where past trauma can be re-experienced and provided with a language to process the experience. I believe regular iterations of systemic bias and exposure to images of death create lasting effects on the

internal object experience for African Americans which impacts the ability to establish mutuality which is necessary for the intersubjective space created within the therapeutic alliance.

This research study is organized around my belief that there are inherent psychological consequences, both conscious and unconscious, to African Americans witnessing death facilitated by a historically oppressive policing system. My work as a clinician allows me the opportunity to witness African American patients struggle to manage their emotional responses to not having internal pain or conflicts around race acknowledged. I believe this study may reveal that African Americans experience unique internal conflicts, albeit indirectly, connected to race-based cultural trauma and institutional oppression. I believe the idea of race and racism is always present in the therapeutic milieu. Whether it is addressed consciously or not, I am aware of how race factors into my relationship with patients. I recognize how a history of oppression, domination, and racialized hierarchies informs my ability to form an authentic connection with a white patient. As mentioned earlier, the relational aspect of psychodynamic theory suggests that the therapist and patient are engaged in a process that is co-constructed and relies on being authentically present and self-reflective of internal processes. This study seeks to examine the complex psychological experiences of African Americans who are regularly exposed to systemic racism and violence.

Chapter II

Literature Review

This study aims to explore the intrapsychic process of African American men who view recorded images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement. The study recognizes the accessibility of social media, operating in tandem with mainstream media, provides an opportunity for an immediate witnessing of examples of systemic violence with recorded video documented by bystanders and publicly disseminated through various media forms. This literature review will outline how the legacies of racial oppression and white supremacy are instrumental in constructing the current legal system and inform its practices of community policing practices which reinforces the marginalization of African Americans. This study focuses on psychological processing to include understanding how African American men mourn and assign meaning to casually viewing the frequent depiction of deaths. The study is also interested in exploring the coping mechanisms African American men adapt in response to viewing these deaths recognizing that African American men are highly susceptible to frequent and involuntary encounters with law enforcement.

Historical Perspective of the Problem

Systemic Racism

The construction of the current American legal system is established upon a legacy of racial oppression and hierarchy where African Americans are systemically regarded with limited social value or equal protection under the law. Racial stereotypes and biases, whether implicit or explicit, influence the legal policies rooted in white supremacy and reinforce a narrative that criminalizes African American men. Law enforcement officers are emblematic of a system with significant authoritative power facilitating the mass detainment and incarceration of African American men.

In 1968, President Johnson established the Kerner Commission to address the civil and racial unrest occurring throughout the United States (Adedoyin, Moore, Robinson, Clayton, Boamah & Harmon, 2019). The commission's final report highlighted the reality of a separate and unequal Black and white America necessitating a political urgency to develop systems and policies to address these disparities (Adedoyin et al., 2019). Political figures promoted a racialized narrative criminalizing urban and low-income communities and justified prioritizing law and order and punishment for criminal behavior (Hosein, 2018). Low-income and urban communities, which are disproportionately comprised of African Americans and Latinx members, symbolize higher rates of criminal activity and are perceived as a threat to mainstream society (Carney, 2016).

Racial Profiling and Stop and Frisk Policies

Due in part to social pressure, law enforcement officials were expected to implement strict policing practices. Tough sentencing guidelines were developed in response to community concerns about the increase in criminal activity associated with the crack cocaine epidemic (Adedoyin, et al., 2019). The community tensions following the 1994 Rodney King verdict and the subsequent Los Angeles riots prompted President Clinton to pass anti-crime legislation

including a “3 strikes” rule mandating prison sentences, without parole, after three drug trafficking convictions (Adedoyin, et al., 2019). In 2002, New York City adopted what is known as "stop and frisk policies" in another attempt to reduce crime, but which also had negative consequences for marginalized racial and ethnic communities. "Stop and Frisk" type policies not only reiterate racial stereotypes and biases but also intensify the vulnerability to personal safety African American and Latinx communities report when interacting with law enforcement (Waldron, 2020).

Between 2006-2012, data on the impact of New York City's "stop and frisk" policies indicated African Americans comprised 54% of all police stops compared to 10% of whites and 32% of Latinos (Legewie, 2016). The police use of excessive force was reported in 22% of the cases for African Americans whereas the rate was 23% for Latinos and 16.5% for whites (Legewie, 2016). The data also captured variations in the race and age of the detainee. African American males, with an average age of 28 years old, represented 93% of all drivers stopped by law enforcement (Legewie, 2016). Although the data on "stop and frisk" policies did not find excessive force was routinely used during these police stops, the data highlights a racialized bias in police encounters mostly targeted towards African American men.

Racial profiling is an enforcement strategy where personal searches are conducted on individuals based on race or ethnicity rather than suspected criminal behavior involving a particular crime (Hosein, 2018). An example of racial profiling is when African American drivers are stopped for a minor traffic violation, but police officers are permitted to conduct a personal search based on suspected illegal activity. According to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics (2007), African American drivers consisted of almost 10% of traffic stops that resulted in a personal search when compared to 3.6% of White drivers (Hosein, 2018). Racial profiling

and "stop and frisk" type policies foster tension and highlight an imbalanced power dynamic between the African American community and law enforcement officials (Hosein, 2018).

Relationship Between Law Enforcement and African Americans

Alexander (1994) describes African Americans as having a "counter-citizen" relationship with law enforcement. The mainstream sanctioning and lack of accountability for racialized policing strategies frame the antagonistic and distrusting relationship African Americans report with law enforcement (Legewie, 2016). African Americans hold perceptions of a legal system that de-prioritizes their interests at the expense of the dominant mainstream society and impedes the desirability of engaging with and relying on that system (Hosein, 2018). The systemic power granted to law enforcement through the legal system contributes to the devaluing and sense of powerlessness African Americans report from regular interactions with law enforcement (Hosein, 2018). The vulnerabilities from a lack of systemic security and political inferiority fracture a sense of self and agency.

Police officers operate as the enforcement agents of the legal system. They are responsible for ensuring compliance with the law, maintaining social order, and apprehending potential violators. As such, law enforcement officials symbolize a system that reinforces social inequalities and divisive ideologies against racial and ethnic groups. Legewie (2016) discusses an implicit alliance established between mainstream society and law enforcement further strengthened when violent and aggressive policing practices generate public attention. A public narrative is created where certain criminalized communities pose a threat to the safety of law enforcement. As agents of the legal system, law enforcement officials' use of excessive force is justified by mainstream society as a necessary response to the perceived aggressive behaviors toward police officers (Crawford & Burns, 1998; Legewie, 2016). Despite the increased public

awareness of excessive policing practices, the informal alliance between mainstream society and the police comes at the expense of criminalizing and over-policing African American men.

Excessive Force on a Continuum

Excessive force falls on a continuum of policing tactics ranging from lethal and non-lethal procedures to include verbal commands, physical restraints, and the use of chemical sprays (Legewie, 2016). A 1998 study of law enforcement officials in Phoenix, AZ identified racial identity as one factor predicting when excessive force was used in community policing (Crawford & Burns, 1998). Racial and ethnic groups with frequent law enforcement encounters also increase the likelihood that excessive force will be used as an enforcement strategy (Crawford & Burns, 1998). According to the National Survey of American Life (Oh, DeVlyder & Hunt, 2017), 27% of African Americans reported a direct experience of mistreatment or abuse by law enforcement at some point during their lifetime. Additionally, African Americans were more than twice as likely than any other racial or ethnic group to identify experiences with excessive force they deemed violent and potentially fatal (Crawford & Burns, 1998). The research illustrates the potential for physical injury and even fatalities when African Americans interact with law enforcement.

Death While in Police Custody

The psychological tensions underlying African Americans' interaction with law enforcement activate hypervigilance and susceptibility to personal safety while under police custody. In 1995, the United States Supreme Court authorized the perception of a threat to be a justifiable explanation for using deadly force in policing tactics (Gabrielson, Sagara & Grochowski-Jones, 2014). A Mapping Police Violence (2018) report classified police fatalities as any action by law enforcement consisting of being chased, arrested, restrained, or physically

injured that results in death regardless of intentionality and status of the officers (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019).

African Americans are three times more likely than whites to die while in police custody and represent more than 40% of fatalities by law enforcement (Bor, Venkataramani, Williams & Tsai, 2018). The Supplementary Homicide Report contains FBI data from police departments throughout the United States on self-reported homicides by law enforcement between 1980-2012. The report shows between 2005-2009, the perception of a threat was used to justify 62% of fatalities involving law enforcement (Gabrielson, et al., 2014). Age and race were common factors found in the police fatality data. Between 2010-2012, African American adolescents were estimated to be at ten times greater risk, and African American men were at twenty-one times greater risk of dying by the actions of police officers (Gabrielson, et al., 2014). The cause of death was listed as “undetermined” in 77% of these fatalities (Gabrielson, et al., 2014). While the data was reported by both white and African American officers, for the deaths of citizens of color, African American police officers were involved in over 10% of the fatalities and white police officers were responsible for 46% of fatalities (Gabrielson, et al., 2014). The race of the police officer is not an indicator of the risk posed to African Americans. The roots of white supremacy, domination, and the disproportionate use of physical force are embedded within a legal system through which law enforcement officials fulfill a significant.

Impact of System-Facilitated Death

The state-facilitated violence of the legal system produces a psychological disruption to the communities most impacted by frequent policing (Grinage, 2019). Communities shared experience with systemic injustice helps shape a collective narrative influencing how the individual perceives self and status in society (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). Individuals develop

psychological processes to self-protect from psychological threats stemming from the socio-cultural environment. The lack of systemic security and vulnerability to societal threats influence how individuals assign meaning to social status and capacity for cultural integration (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). The need for security encourages individuals to establish their own meaning to the loss from systemic inequality and social rejection.

The socio-political climate in the U.S. in the aftermath of the Trump presidency ushered in a cultural comfort enabling white supremacy and domination and further disenfranchising low-income and urban communities. Society is at a crucial point where social media has become influential as a social and communication medium. The digital space reflects a modern social milieu where contemporary topics discussed are recognized as aspects of a cultural phenomenon. The nature and accessibility of modern media create an opportunity for real-time exposure to visual representations of police encounters. Recorded video footage has documented the deaths of Eric Garner (2014), LaQuan McDonald (2014), Walter Scott (2015), Jeremy McDole (2015), Philando Castile (2016), George Floyd (2020) and Tyre Nichols (2023) all from interactions with law enforcement. These videos have been widely disseminated across multiple media platforms leading to widespread recurrence and saturation of visual images depicting the deaths of African Americans in casual and informal contexts.

Establishing the Importance of the Topic

Excessive Community Policing as a Public Health Issue

The prevalence of African Americans dying by the actions of law enforcement not only has a direct impact on the individual but also has public health implications for the larger society. A public health perspective recognizes the long-term socio-cultural effects of the persistent threat of excessive force used in community policing (Waldron, 2020). The public health approach also

supports the need for further exploration into the policy implications of how implicit and explicit racial bias influences the use of excessive physical force during policing activities (Oh, et al., 2017; Waldron, 2020). The American Public Health Association (2019, cited in Oh, et al., 2017)) recognizes the over-policing, punishment, and threats of physical and psychological injury targeting African Americans as a critical public health concern with distinct long-term mental health implications for African American men.

Psychological Impact of Negative Police Encounters

The emotional response system marginalized communities develop to manage the effect of systemic racism can be attributed to the intergenerational impact of racial oppression. Racial and ethnic identity predisposes the activation of unconscious internal processes to cope with racial stressors (Franklin & Franklin, 2000; Williams, Ching, Printz-Pereira & Wetterneck, 2018). The collective social power held by the dominant mainstream society sanctions and normalizes systemic violence while also seeking to invalidate the traumatic reality for those racially marginalized (Williams, et al., 2018). The lack of societal validation creates a psychic disruption that impedes individuals from being able to hold distressing events, like systemic violence, in conscious memory (Vaughans & Harris, 2016). To maintain the internal psychic world, the individual needs to feel supported, accepted, and secure in expressing the distress derived from the external world. The limited opportunities to access positive self-images and the introjection of socially driven negative self-images produce a social melancholy (Vaughans & Harris, 2016). The communities facing the greatest impact experience psychological consequences that inhibit the ability for self-reflection and to effectively address the lack of security formed by the social sanctioning of systemic violence facilitated by law enforcement officers.

The high incidence of police fatalities involving African Americans combined with the absence of institutional accountability significantly influences the social, emotional, and developmental health within the African American community by those both directly and indirectly impacted (Brown, Dustman & Barthelemy, 2020; Onwuachi-Willig, 2016; Williams, et al., 2018). The loss of identity, obstructions to free and creative thought, and the inability to establish mutuality in relationships are some of the psychological effects of systemic racism (White, 2016). The societal narratives that rationalize the excessive use of police force not only generate justifications emblematic of tolerance for police-involved fatalities of African Americans but also cultivate environments that are un-empathic to the psychological realities of the African American community. The exposure to police fatalities and the repeated negative encounters with law enforcement creates a psychological injury for African Americans which can be experienced as a trauma (Waldron, 2020).

Current research suggests therapeutic treatment often fails to acknowledge the long-term effects of direct and indirect exposure to racial trauma (Comas-Diaz, Hall & Neville, 2019; Evans Holmes, 2016). In a clinical context, it is important to acknowledge both the overt and covert manifestations of African American traumatic distress which emerges as a result of navigating the challenges of existing under current policing practices of the legal system. There is a need to broaden clinical understanding of how internal responses are shaped by the shared experience of systemic violence and racism for African Americans. A study explored the impact of negative interactions with law enforcement on mental health outcomes. Chicago residents were surveyed between 2015-2016 and identified as having some direct exposure to aggressive policing at some point in their lifetime (Hirschtick, Homan, Rauscher, Rubin, Johnson, Peterson & Persky, 2018). Aggressive exposure was quantified by the participants' self-report of police

officers using verbal threats or excessive physical force during the most recent police encounter (Hirschtick, et al., 2018). Participants expressed mental health symptoms related to depression and traumatic stress in association with these interactions (Hirschtick, et al., 2018). African American male participants reported a higher incidence of aggressive police interactions during routine traffic stops compared with men from other racial or ethnic groups with fewer encounters. Additionally, African American men were three times more likely to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Hirschtick, et al., 2018).

The institutional authority granted the legal system, permitting a range of overly aggressive policing tactics including those that result in fatalities, reinforce racial disparities, and deepen the emotional wounds African Americans encounter in attempts to manage the effects of systemic racism (Bor, et al., 2018; Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019). Symptoms including depression, anxiety, and suicidality are associated with African American negative interactions with law enforcement (Oh, et al., 2017). One study analyzed public data between 2013-2015 on the mental health effects of being exposed to the death of unarmed civilians by law enforcement (Bor, et al., 2018). African American participants were more likely to identify some type of exposure to police fatalities as recent as three months preceding data collection. Additionally, African Americans' responses reflected having a greater psychological impact than white participants. These findings suggest the effects of DBLE have a greater significance on the mental health of African Americans. It is important to recognize that exposure to police fatalities extends beyond the individual direct experience, but also includes vicarious experience from indirect or secondary exposure. Additionally, the community impact illustrates the significance of public acknowledgment in fostering a cultural environment necessary for collective mourning

(Bor, et al., 2018). Within the current socio-cultural milieu, there are limited psychologically safe and secure spaces for African Americans to effectively acknowledge and mourn DBLE.

Linked Fate

The cultural ideals of mainstream American society emphasize individualism over the collective, whereas African Americans gain from racial and ethnic group affiliation that recognizes the shared experience. Linked fate is a concept that describes the perspective that whatever impacts the collective racial or ethnic group will also affect the individual members who identify with that group (Monk, 2020; Simien, 2005). Identifying with a racial group vulnerable to social injustices and acknowledging the realities of racial oppression are necessary factors to establish a linked fate (Monk, 2020; Simien, 2005). Linked fate is shaped by shared ideologies and social solidarity. Monk (2020) believes this shared consciousness stems from a mutual understanding of social and political inferiority. Linked fate recognizes the shared threat of racial oppression, which is not only a collective fate but is also relevant to the individual experience (Shelby, 2005, as cited in Monk, 2020).

The emotional aftermath of systemic inferiority and injustice is further exacerbated by linked fate. It explains African Americans' emotional disavowal from the painful reality of limitations to their collective and individual agency (Monk, 2020). The concept of linked fate recognizes how African Americans activate psychological mechanisms to protect from vicarious exposure to acts of racism and systemic violence as what is experienced at the community level also impacts the individual level. As Monk (2020) summarizes "Linked fate may capture, at least in part, the feeling that, when seeing or hearing about acts of racial terrorism and violence, 'that could have been me' or 'that could have been my mother, my father, my daughter, my son, etc.'"

Linked fate recognizes that despite the unfamiliarity of the individuals depicted in the recorded video footage, the collective exposure to systemic violence within one's racial or ethnic community personalizes the emotional repercussions of how African Americans individually process and navigate these deaths. This study accepts race as a social construction and believes the process of identification with a racial group can be active and intentional. As such, the selection criteria for this study will include participants who self-identify as African American because, as explained by linked fate, identification with a racial community necessitates acknowledging the shared realities of racial oppression and social injustice.

Exposure to tragic events

Exposure to tragic events creates varying degrees of emotional distress despite the experience being either direct or vicarious. Specifically, tragic events that result in violence or death have a profound psychological impact when it happens to members within the same racial or ethnic group (Moore, Magee, Gareklidze, Kowaleski, 2019). The communal trauma generated from vicarious exposure to systemic violence ending in death activates familiar emotional responses associated with prior encounters with social and racial injustice (Curtis, Washburn, Lee, Smith, Kim, Martz, Kramer & Chase, 2021). Violent racial events are also more likely to generate more attention from mainstream and social media which further contributes to the psychological distress of the group's members (Curtis, et al., 2021). These events, though experienced through vicarious exposure, still activate a psychological response that is influenced by familiarity with the socio-political consequences of race and class oppression. Bor, et al. (2018) position vicarious exposure on a continuum ranging from hearing or learning about an event through a third party, like via a news broadcast media, word of mouth, or by viewing material in print, on television, or through social media sites. For this study, exposure to video

images of African Americans dying by the actions of police will include viewing recorded images through mainstream media broadcasts or websites and social networking sites.

Witnessing

The act of witnessing assumes distinct qualities based on the context of the event encountered. Witnessing is described by what is seen and what is heard (Alexander, 1994). Peters (2009) explains witnessing as a sensory experience of active, passive, or unintentional, observation. The act of witnessing can consist of being present in a time, but not space like viewing live images but through recorded means. It could also occur by being present in space, but not time like seeing images of historical events through various documented methods (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2009). Witnessing is also a subjective experience that varies across individuals who may view the same event but derive different interpretations (Peters, 2009). Regardless of the context, witnessing involves the viewing audience serving as spectators rather than eyewitnesses to publicized events (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2009). Spectators may be distanced from directly experiencing the event but can still engage in subjective reflection based merely on observation (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2009). Through collective observation, witnessing acts of violence that generate public attention creates a shared psychological response with an impact on the individual (Leach, 2009).

White (2016) examined the psychological effects of adolescents who witnessed the terrorist attacks that occurred on September. 11, 2001 (9/11). A theme White (2016) noted was the sense of emotional indifference reflected in the participants' responses when discussing the events of 9/11. White (2016) attributes the emotionally neutral tone conveyed by the adolescent participants to their reporting prior direct experience with multiple traumas they perceived to be as psychologically disturbing as what they witnessed during the events of 9/11. The participants'

emotional response to witnessing a distressing event like 9/11 suggests an unconscious shift to activate internal coping mechanisms to self-protect from further psychic injury (White, 2016). White (2016) illustrates the potential for disconnecting from the distressing psychological aspects of witnessing violence. Emotional disassociation can also be observed in instances like the events of 9/11, where witnessing death can result in additional detachment. The participants' responses also demonstrate the emotional numbness that occurs from exposure to repeated exposure to direct trauma, which also aligns with the experiences of encountering distressing events observed collectively. A core belief of this research study acknowledges secondary or vicarious observation also generates psychological distress that activates protective mechanisms to help manage the psychic realities of exposure to images depicting death events.

Witnessing on Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNS) are internet-based communication forums to create public personal profiles to connect online with other individuals and communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007 as cited in Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2009; Vis 2012). While SNS is primarily a tool for communication, it is also an avenue for connection, socialization, and receiving information (Boyd & Ellison, 2007 as cited in Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2009; Vis 2012). According to Carney (2016) SNS, also referred to as social media, is influential in shaping collective conversations through an accessible digital space. A study by Brandtzaeg and Heim (2009) concluded SNS were primarily used to maintain existing or establish new social relationships through a virtual space around mutual interests. SNS also served as a method to connect with community members of shared racial or ethnic identities (Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2009).

The accessibility of social media has also introduced a new avenue to witness events occur in real-time. As a primary platform for the dissemination of news and information, SNS

are increasingly emerging as a relevant medium through which individuals enhance their cultural awareness of global current events. It has also become a platform where images depicting violent acts and even death are casually viewed through headlines and shared posts. Brown, et al., (2020) studied the role of the SNS Twitter thirty days following the death of Alton Sterling. In July 2016, the death of 37-year-old Alton Sterling, an African American man who died by the actions of the Baton Rouge police department, was video recorded and shared on mainstream and social media. As an SNS, Twitter, now called X, is a considerable source for publicly communicating and disseminating current events and news stories (Vis, 2012, as cited in Brown, et al., 2020). Brown, et al. (2020) conducted a content analysis of the number of tweets generated by the hashtag *#AltonSterling*. The researchers identified themes across all the tweets, noting any variances related to the emotional tone of the tweets. The data indicated 23% of the tweets acknowledged feelings of fear and concern about police violence against unarmed civilians (Brown, et al., 2020). A theme identified in the study was the number of tweets reflecting being re-traumatized by the number of times the video was viewed through shared posts, pictures, and headlines. The tweets also referenced having a strong emotional reaction to viewing the video facilitated by the strong emotional reactions expressed by other social media commenters (Brown, et al., 2020).

Brown, et al., (2020) illustrate the influence of the shared social media space in eliciting emotional responses to witnessing death through passive observation and vicarious exposure. Through SNS like Twitter, the death of Alton Sterling generated global attention and provided a forum for collective witnessing and community cohesion necessary for emotional healing. Carney (2016) conducted another content analysis of Twitter discussions following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner applying Critical Race Theory to identify how youth of color

participated in online discussions. In the summer of 2014, the public became aware of the deaths of 43-year-old Eric Garner in New York and 18-year-old Michael Brown in St. Louis who died by the actions of law enforcement. These deaths were video recorded by bystanders and publicized through mainstream and social media. Carney (2016) identified predominant themes through hashtags *#AllLivesMatter* and *#BlackLivesMatter* and found collective anxiety expressed in waiting for police officer accountability in association with these deaths. Social media is a relevant source through which the world gains exposure to police fatalities. When race operates as a motivator for systemic violence leading to death, the images shared on various SNS have an emotional impact on those who are exposed (Campbell & Valera, 2020). Brown, et al., (2020) suggest additional research is needed to understand how social media reinforces the collective trauma that emerges from extensive exposure to abuses of systemic power and racism.

Media Images of Black Death

Violence inflicted upon the African American body has been publicly accessible and displayed throughout the history of the United States (Alexander, 1994). For African Americans, these images depicting violence and mistreatment against other African Americans serve as visual cues that evoke historical and current realities of racism and state-sanctioned violence. African Americans have been denied opportunities to openly reflect on the emotional impact of frequent and casual exposure to images of documenting incidents of violence and destruction against other African Americans. Additionally, there has been a lack of recognition of the psychological impact of witnessing acts of violence and destruction against other African Americans particularly when those incidents are widely accessible for public consumption (Alexander, 1994). As a result, African Americans are often denied opportunities to construct their own narratives around the lived experience of casual and regular exposure to images

depicting physical harm or destruction inflicted upon the bodies of members within a shared racial group. The lack of reflective opportunities can imply a societal devaluation of African American lives.

According to Erigha (2019, as cited in Braxton, 2021), visual images depicting African American deaths are publicized more frequently, and yet are more often rationalized, compared to other racial or ethnic groups. The painful psychological legacy of racism is reflected in the seemingly casual response by mainstream society to being exposed, through various forms of media, to the ubiquitous and gratuitous images of violence against African Americans (Braxton, 2021). The internal psychological pain derived from feeling powerless against systemic injustices generates further psychic injury when African Americans are exposed to the subjugation of African American bodies (Vaughans & Harris, 2016). The repeated exposure to gratuitous images depicting African American violence and death is personally experienced as a manifestation of racial trauma. The exposure also activates heightened psychological distress from the casual representation of racial and systemic oppression (Braxton & Phillips, 2021).

The current social and political landscape, correlating with the election of Donald Trump as president and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, recognizes how the ideals of white supremacy are embedded in current policing practices and pose a significant risk to African Americans (Braxton & Phillips, 2021). Although African Americans are familiar with the injustices of systemic racism, mainstream society is now given more access to the ongoing reminder of racism through graphic images of violence covered by mainstream and social media (Neal, 2021 as cited in Braxton & Phillips, 2021).

A theory of cultural trauma understands how past traumatic events affect the current experience and makes distinctions from routine incidents of harm. Cultural trauma theory

acknowledges the communal nature of witnessing trauma and recognizes the influence public attention has on how meaning gets assigned to the collective experience (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). The theory also supposes cultural trauma arises from harm caused by routine interactions with oppressive systems and most often occurs in groups with limited social power. The meaning assigned from collectively witnessing distressing events gets framed by mainstream society yet becomes integrated into the unconscious and conscious behaviors of the individual (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016).

Onwuachi-Willig (2016) applied cultural trauma theory to examine the response of the African American community following the death of Emmett Till. The researcher wanted to explore the collective and individual trauma from the acquittal of the two white men accused of Emmett Till's death. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old African American male from Chicago who was violently murdered in Mississippi while visiting family in 1955. Before Emmett Till's death, African Americans living in racially segregated Mississippi had regular encounters with racism and discrimination, however, the disruption to the routine harm of racial injustice came with the acquittal of the two white men accused of mutilating the body of Till. The visual images depicting the violence inflicted upon Till's body were publicized and carried by print and news media. Onwuachi-Willig (2016) noticed a difference in how the African American and white citizens of Mississippi responded to the acquittal of the two white defendants. The white citizens became defensive of their portrayal by the mainstream media and socially isolated. African Americans expressed disappointment with the acquittal yet had to resume life as usual but with the psychological impact reiterated by the perceived failure of the legal system and devaluing of African American life.

The death of Emmett Till offers a historical context of the long-term impact of visual images used to symbolize the social injustices of the time. Mamie Till-Mobley, Emmett's mother, hoped the visual image of her son's mutilated body would bring attention to the racial and systemic injustice that led to her son's death and, ultimately, the acquittal of the two white men who were charged (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). Mamie Till-Mobley also permitted her son's open-casket funeral to be available for public viewing and photographs of his body to be shared in magazines, newspapers, and television news broadcasts throughout the world (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). Till's mother was committed to sharing the images of her son's body to confront the realities of how racial violence can result in the mutilation and death of African American bodies. The power of visual images brought national attention to Emmett Till's death, which was acknowledged and made relevant by the collective witnessing by mainstream society.

Social networking sites provide a virtual space to nationally publicize societal injustices and galvanize attention around a specific event or issue. The fiancée of 32-year-old Philando Castile live-streamed his 2016 shooting death by Minnesota police officers during a traffic stop. Castile's fiancée intended for video recording to expose the risks unarmed African American men encounter during routine traffic stops with law enforcement. Similarly, in 1955 Emmett Till's mother utilized print and broadcast media to enable her son's death to symbolize the start of the Civil Rights Movement. The images reflecting Till's death in 1955 and Castile's in 2016 symbolize the realities of systemic racism and violence and provide opportunities to communicate, through visual means, the broader social and racial justice crisis affecting African American men. Social media is no longer considered a platform solely for community connection and socialization but is also considered a relevant source through which exposure to historical and current events becomes an integrated aspect of daily life (Peters, 2009).

Because of the increased accessibility to personal recording devices, the public nature of Emmett Till's death bears similarities to current examples of African American deaths recorded and witnessed through social and mainstream media. The collective psychological distress African Americans expressed after viewing the images of Emmett Till's body mirrors the emotional response of African Americans exposed to video recordings of the death of other African Americans (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). Per cultural trauma theory, disruptions to routine harm interfere with feelings of safety and stability. Emotional security relies on a belief that cultural and social expectations are attainable. The collective narrative following a distressing cultural event is influenced by the extent mainstream society acknowledges harm occurred (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). The harm associated with systemic oppression and the normalization by mainstream society contributes to security vulnerabilities in marginalized communities. When systemic bias results in violence or even death a message conveyed to the communities most at risk is the unreliability, unpredictability, and inconsistency of systems (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). A long history of racial distress suggests African American's encounters with individual acts of racism may be perceived as a routine harm. However, systemic racism generates a feeling of exclusion and hopelessness in both the collective and individual experience. Members from marginalized racial and ethnic communities compensate for this perceived failure by assigning their own meaning to what the loss of security means for the group and individual (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). To cope with this level of psychological harm, marginalized groups develop internal mechanisms to emotionally distance themselves from their external reality. Consequently, this amplifies the psychological distress leading to eventual unconscious internalization of the trauma.

Impact of Public Witnessing

Curtis, et al. (2021) explored how publicized incidents of racialized violence impact mental health outcomes. The study defined anti-Black violence by internet and social media data reflecting hate crime murders, African American DBLE, and whether the event was adjudicated in the legal system. Between 2013-2017, forty-nine incidents of anti-Black violence were identified from internet searches. Curtis, et al., (2021) measured psychological distress by Google data trends and by using the Behavioral Factor Surveillance System to capture an average report of mental health symptoms. The study suggests an additional pressure exists from the collective conversations accompanying one of these publicized events correlated with higher rates of negative mental health outcomes. Additionally, African American participants identified a higher number of poor mental health days per week than white participants (Curtis, et al., 2021). A limitation of the study was the sole use of aggregated data which excluded a qualitative examination into more subjective considerations and restricted exploration of a range of cognitive and behavioral processes (Curtis, et al., 2021).

Psychological Invisibility

The internal psychic world of African Americans is shaped by the legacies of racial oppression and reinforces a sense of “othering.” (Franklin & Franklin, 2000). As a protective function, the mind dissociates the “self” from a “me-ness” to a more psychologically accommodating relational space of “not me” (Franklin & Franklin, 2000). The psychodynamic explanation of "the other" is conceptualized as something different and perceived as a threat (Frosh, 2002). Although there is limited application of how "othering" is applied to social issues like racial oppression, a correlation could be made that "the other" is experienced intersubjectively, interpersonally, and socially where the undesirable parts of the self are held externally until mature enough to be able to integrate the historic and current implications of

racial dominance and oppression (Frosh, 2002). Psychological invisibility describes the high-risk mental and physical health consequences rooted in experiences with societal and systemic racism that uniquely impact African American men (Franklin & Franklin, 2000). Psychological invisibility enhances nihilistic attitudes and influences how meaning is assigned to achievement and social inequities (Franklin & Franklin, 2000). An invisibility syndrome recognizes variations in the coping mechanisms African American men adopt to cope with societal isolation and invalidation (Franklin & Franklin, 2000). This researcher believes that African American male participants can relate to the shared experience of psychological invisibility that might result from witnessing the prominent display of fatalities of other African American men in mainstream and social media.

The Significance for African American Men

The individual and social pressures of African American men reflect the challenges of intersecting identities related to race and gender expression. For African American men, the concept of masculinity creates an internal conflict of gender role expression attempting to both contradict and reject the traditional gender roles assigned by society (Pleck, 1995 as cited in Franklin & Franklin, 2000). The internal conflict is rooted in cultural norms and stereotypes dictating socially acceptable forms gender expression. African American men are challenged with navigating the struggle between resisting and conforming to societal expectations while also attempting to reject perceptions of failure (Pleck, 1995 in Franklin & Franklin, 2000). African American men construct an internal response system aimed to avoid internalizing the negative assumptions and stereotypes held by mainstream society. A hypervigilant response is necessary to identify, interrupt, and interpret racial bias and injustice (Franklin & Franklin, 2000). Racial injustices that end in violence or death activate a range of protective responses and lead to

individual behaviors being diminished to neutral any perceived threat of power (Franklin and Franklin, 2000).

The traditional social norms that define masculinity limit and, at times, discourage the freedom to identify and express overwhelming emotional responses. The social norms informing how masculinity is constructed promote individuality in response to stressful situations. These norms also suggest it is more socially acceptable to demonstrate restricted affective expression (Hammond, 2012). The inability to acknowledge the psychological disruption caused by exposure to systemic racism and violence can inhibit African American men from seeking therapeutic treatment. Recognizing that stress from racial discrimination influences African American expression of masculinity, Hammond (2012) studied the relationship between pressure to conform to expectations of masculinity and attempts to psychologically manage racism in mood and affective expression. There were variations across age cohorts associated with how African American men described approaches to coping with racism. Participants between 18-29 years old and over 40 years old expressed using more independent-oriented approaches to deal with racism and reported fewer symptoms associated with depressed mood (Hammond, 2012). African American men between 30 – 40 years old reported feeling less comfortable with emotional expression which contributed to a more restricted affect presentation and endorsed more symptoms of depression (Hammond, 2012). These findings suggest older African American men responded with more emotional and affective restriction when trying to manage racism and microaggressions. According to Hammond (2012), the participants indicated a restricted affective expression helped maintain the overwhelming emotional reality of frequent encounters with racism. Additionally, the study illustrates for African American men under 30

years old there is an acute awareness of the social expectations promoting self-sufficiency while also minimizing emotional expression during stressful situations (Hammond, 2012).

The public attention generated from the recorded images depicting DBLE elucidated the nuances of how white supremacy and racial domination are embedded in the legal system and its policing strategies. The greater social awareness also highlights how the intersecting identities of race and gender are uniquely vulnerable to systemic violence. This research study aims to explore how race and gender influence the meaning assigned to witnessing death facilitated by systemic actions. The study will explore whether there are variations across the age cohort for the African American male participants who will describe their process for acknowledging and coping with the psychological impact of viewing images of DBLE. One study recognized a variance across age cohorts in examining how identity shapes the lived experience and informs the perception of marginalization. Hagai, Annechino, Young, and Antin (2020) explored how the intersecting identities of race, sexual identity, and age influenced perceptions of social oppression. Queer youth of color, Baby Boomers, and Millennials were the focus of the study due to their proximity to the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s (Hagai, Annechino, Young & Antin, 2020). Baby Boomers, classified as being born between 1946 and 1965, came of age during the 1980's HIV/AIDS pandemic while Millennials were born between 1981 and 1996 and grew up when LGBT identity was more socially accepted (Hagai, et al., 2020). The older participants expressed having more personal consequences (e.g., being estranged from family and accounts of personal violence) to coming out during the early 1970s to 1980s when there were more personal accounts of social marginalization. However, the younger participants recounted having access to more formal support like programs and mental health providers to support their coming out (Hagai, et al., 2020).

The constructed identities for African American men, formed at the intersections of race and gender, are based on the social ideals influencing the expectations of appropriate role expression. These ideals further reinforce marginalization and invalidate the emotional reality of African American men. Mourning is interrupted by disavowing the psychological impact of exposure to traumatic distress and the lack of acknowledgment from the external world (Jean-Marie Pabon & Basile, 2021). The limited studies on the psychological processes of African American men tend to focus on adolescents, college-age students, or older men with minimal exploration of the psychological processing across a range of African American men (Ward, Wiltshire, Detry & Brown, 2013).

African American men over 25 years old began to exhibit symptoms that aligned with mood disorders and show high rates of depression (Ward, et al., 2013). Recognizing the onset of mood disorders and addressing some of the gaps in the current research, this study will target African American men between 25 and 50 years old to expand clinical understanding of African American internal processes and coping mechanisms. The researcher believes gender is a social construction influenced by the interactions and social perceptions shaping the behaviors from the external world.

Research Concepts

Racial identification is a socially influenced developmental process established in early life (Eng & Han, 2000). According to Clark (1963, as cited in Stoute, 2019), racial symbolism is formed during early childhood and shapes the perception of self and others. During pre-adolescence, when identity is influenced by group affiliation, the increased awareness of societal racial attitudes enacts defense mechanisms, like projection, to protect from the realities of the external world (Clark, 1963, as cited in Stoute, 2019). The adolescent is better able to recognize

racial differences and societal perceptions which become a part of internalized conscious and unconscious psychological processes (Clark, 1963, as cited in Stoute, 2019). Socialization through group membership influences how the individual learns to manage the conflicts of the external environment (Moore, Jones-Eversley, Tolliver, Wilson & Harmon, 2022). It is also through group affiliation that the individual receives cues from the external environment that activates a distress response based on prior exposure to racial stress (Williams, Holloway & Ross, 2019).

Defense Mechanisms and Psychological Injury

African Americans living in a post colonized Euro-centric America replicate intergenerational emotional responses similar to the psychological injury experienced by enslaved Africans. The power of white supremacy and domination disrupts the individual's opportunity to establish a core self based on self-motivated interests and impedes the reconciliation of internal conflicts to racial identity (Azibo, 2015). Systemic bias and racial violence reinforce the perception of social marginalization for African Americans often accompanied by psychological pain and suffering. However, efforts to protect from emotional distress while maintaining a cohesive self activate coping responses to minimize the impact on overall well-being. The emotional and psychological coping mechanisms include minimizing the emotional and psychological suffering and becoming hyperaware of the behaviors and motivations of the dominant society to insulate the self from the power of racism (Comas-Diaz, et al., 2019). Defense mechanisms are mental configurations of the ego to unconsciously protect from overwhelming and unpleasant emotional experiences (Azibo, 2015; Hoffer, 1967). Defense mechanisms provide the mind with a sense of integrity and cohesion (Azibo, 2015) necessary to deal with the stressful realities of the external world. African Americans activate defensive

processes to cope with and protect against the psychological injury associated with racial bias and inequality (Azibo, 2015).

An Object Relations Perspective of the External World

The reoccurring witnessing of death, either through direct or vicarious exposure, activates internal fear and anxiety. According to Kleinian theory, as the infant develops meaning is assigned to his internal world and relies on experiences to disapprove of the anxieties generated by the external world (Klein, 1940). Repeated encounters with distressing external events confirm internalized prosecutorial and death anxieties established in early life (Klein, 1940). The external world reinforces fears of external instability and unpredictability and whether others can be trusted (Klein, 1940). Klein (1940) asserts that psychological distress likely develops in later life when the internal psychic structure fails to make meaning of internal representations, reinforced by real-life situations, derived from the external environment.

Cultural Environment: Klein and Winnicott

Object Relations theorists like Klein and Winnicott offer some application of how culture and the external world serve as objects necessary for internal psychological development. A Kleinian perspective recognizes culture as influential in providing the emotional validation necessary to challenge self-destructive impulses from societal exclusion and rejection (Klein, 1940). Cultural experiences for marginalized communities operate as a love object as it fosters supportive, affirming, and, at times, punishing experiences to facilitate how the collective constructs its identity and the individual gains a stronger sense of self (Klein, 1940). Winnicott (1967) also considers cultural experiences important to psychological development and helps safely integrate one's internal response to external experiences. For Winnicott (1967), a primary

role of cultural group affiliation is to regulate the meaning assigned to life experiences for those communities whose external environments are comprised of racist beliefs and behaviors.

Establishing a sense of safety and providing alternative experiences through racial group identification and affiliation are valuable in countering the intrapersonal and interpersonal anxiety activated by perceived external threats that disrupt one's internal psychological world. An object relations view of the omnipotent self emphasizes the progression of the infant's initial sense of omnipotent control which eventually extends to a more realistic view of the self in relation to the external world. The formation of a cohesive self and the capacity for relationship is considered necessary for optimal psychological development. While object relations theory would apply to African American psychological development, Moglen (2005) believed individuals from marginalized communities might react with anger and frustration when confronted with the limitations of their perceived omnipotence. African Americans who frequently encounter the systemic injustices of the legal system recognize the responsibility to establish and maintain a secure relationship with representatives from this system exists outside of their control (Waldron, 2020). As a result, being consistently and involuntarily engaged in systemic relationships framed from distrust and unreliability contributes to long-term internal emotional conflicts. Individuals within marginalized communities experience fear and anxiety due to frequent unfavorable interactions with state-sanctioned systems, contributing to a collective defensive response introjected by mainstream society, and that reinforces the power imbalance between the dominant and marginalized societies (Waldron, 2020). The exposure to recorded symbols of systemic violence, such as the display of African American fatalities by the actions of law enforcement, activates a psychological response that recalls prior negative encounters with the legal system. When combined with the collective narrative formed around

these fatalities through social and mainstream media, the emotional response becomes heightened at an individual level. This study suggests witnessing systemic violence, perceived to be racially facilitated, symbolized by the deaths of African American men affects how African American men mourn and construct meaning individually and as a part of a shared community.

Psychodynamic Explanation of Mourning and Social Injury

Authentic mourning is an intentional process of recognizing the difficult and overwhelming emotions of loss and seeking ways to repair (Wolfelt, 2018). Freud considered mourning to be a psychological process that brings resolution to the loss of a person or the symbolic representation of an object (Freud, 1917 as cited in Eng & Han, 2000). Freud described mourning as a gradual process of letting go of one lost object until there is an attachment to a new object (Freud, 1917 as cited in Eng & Han, 2000). Freud believed that an emotional response to dealing with loss could be so overwhelming it impedes attachment to the external world. According to Freud, mourning is achieved when one can hold the lost object in memory while also being able to acknowledge the overwhelming emotions that come from remembering (Freud, 1917 as cited in Moglen, 2005). An expansion to Freud's concept of mourning acknowledges the influence of the sociocultural environment on managing loss and recognizes cultural loss symbolizes the loss of ideals and attachment to the object (Freud, 1917 as cited in Moglen, 2005). The inability to mourn stems from resistance to acknowledging the overwhelming emotions associated with loss and trying to find conscious and unconscious ways to control affective expression (Wolfelt, 2018). Failure to acknowledge how the external world contributes to how psychological injuries are tolerated and managed further disrupts the relationship with the lost object and exacerbates the emotional response to loss creating long-term psychological harm (Moglen, 2005).

Recognizing the limited adaptation of psychodynamic thinking beyond the individual realm, Moglen (2005) applies Freud's concept of mourning to how marginalized communities manage psychological injury fueled by racially oppressive acts. The loss of social ideals is associated with resigning that living in a secure and just society is attainable. Freud believed a loss of social ideals facilitates an internal emotional response similar to what is activated in personal loss (Moglen, 2005). Moglen (2005) applies the concept of a specific type of mourning to examine the emotional effects of social isolation due to marginalization and oppression. Melancholic mourning is a more intense form of mourning that generates additional psychological injury which negatively impacts the sense of self (Moglen, 2005). Melancholic mourning is also associated with managing the loss connected to devastating social events (Moglen, 2005). In mourning the loss of social ideals associated with racial oppression, the psychological self develops internal processes to help manage nihilism and reduce psychological strain (Moglen, 2005; Wolfelt, 2018).

Additionally, a narcissistic injury develops from the lack of a self-reflective narrative where meaning can be assigned to the loss. A repetition compulsion also gets enacted from the internalization of the external narrative constructed of the traumatic social event (Moglen, 2005). Mourning occurs when one can express the intense feelings that stem from external world stressors instead of internalizing and directing them toward self (Moglen, 2005). According to Klein (1940) when persecutory anxieties get reinforced mourning becomes more complicated and relationships become framed through feelings of distrust and disconnection. Once grief is shared and acknowledged, the fear and stress of one's internal world lessen (Klein, 1940).

Moglen (2005) suggests further exploration is needed into how marginalized populations become consciously aware of mourning the possible loss of social ideals. This study recognizes

the importance of establishing meaning surrounding loss, whether from personal or communal relationships and believes a failure to establish one's own meaning and narrative will create more opportunities for internalizing the narrative provided by the external environment. This study seeks to examine the emotional and cognitive mechanisms African American men adopt to manage the task of processing and making sense of recorded visuals depicting the deaths of other African Americans. These images are associated with a larger system, and by extension its representatives, with undeniable authority and have historically represented unsafe and unpredictable interactions. The inability to assign meaning to the death being witnessed is believed to shape the internalization of racial oppression and influence one's perception of self.

African American Experiences of Mourning

Mourning loss associated with system-facilitated death has a unique impact on African Americans who are also attempting to manage the ongoing stress of race and class oppression (Zakarian, McDevitt-Murphy, Bellet, Neimeyer & Burke, 2018). Acknowledging the limited research on the interpersonal effects of African American grief, Laurie & Neimeyer (2008) examined the mental health effects of mourning death from homicide and whether the loss creates disruptions to one's sense of self (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). African American participants expressed having a greater number of personal experiences with homicidal death compared to the white participants. However, they also reported being less likely to openly acknowledge and mourn these losses (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Additionally, African American participants reported utilizing more internal resources to respond to the loss and demonstrated emotional responses that align with more complicated disenfranchised grief (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). The psychological disruption associated with a distressing event may not be expressed emotionally in the immediate aftermath of the event. Konrad (2009) writes

the individual needs some assurance of the social acceptability to openly mourn otherwise the affective experience is restricted and unacknowledged. Disenfranchised grief is a type of complicated grief that occurs when a loss is unacknowledged, invalidated, and denied the opportunity to be mourned (Jean-Marie Pabon & Basile, 2021).

Managing Multiple Loss

The complications of disenfranchised grief can also occur when attempting to manage multiple complex losses. Enduring new losses without adequately acknowledging previous losses creates additional psychological consequences. In response to limitations in the current research, Jean-Marie Pabon and Basile (2021) explored how African American men responded to the loss of a peer by homicide. The study expanded the clinical understanding of how African American men mourned death. One identified theme is the influence of social beliefs and practices on the mourning process. The participants expressed beliefs in the societal limitations to adequately acknowledge the loss, which prompted more self-isolating management strategies (Jean-Marie Pabon & Basile, 2021). The disparity between internal emotional processing and external societal expectations results in a disavowal of the affective experience. The disconnect is centered around tensions managing societal expectations of how mourning should occur and the intrapsychic reality of how the loss is actually managed (Jean-Marie Pabon & Basile, 2021). The emotions disavowed with disenfranchised grief can mirror an authentic affective experience. Jean-Marie Pabon and Basile (2021) suggest disenfranchised grief stems from a lack of affirming and empathic emotional responses from the external world and ignores the emotional reality of how African Americans respond to death.

The nature of violent death adds an additional level of complexity to the mourning process and can lead to internalized traumatic stress. Traumatic stress disrupts the internal

processing of the loss and minimizes access to language or mental symbolism necessary to hold the loss in conscious memory (Currier, Holland & Neimeyer, 2006). Violent death activates internal anxieties and threatens one's sense of vulnerability by impeding the development of a process to formulate a coherent self-concept (Currier, et al., 2006). The objective experience of violent death can lead to a subjective traumatic response to the event. Thus, assigning meaning to violent death is critical to ultimately facilitate mourning (Currier, Holland & Neimeyer, 2006).

System-Facilitated Loss

The process of mourning can be prompted by losses influenced or facilitated by systems, particularly in the context of systemic racism within established institutions such as the education and legal system. Recognizing the psychological impact of systemic racism, Dumas (2014, as cited in Grinage, 2019) wondered whether mourning can occur within the same system that reinforces racism and white supremacist ideologies. Grinage (2019) conducted an ethnographic study examining how African American adolescent men navigate the continuous mourning from interactions with multiple social systems and explored whether this mourning can occur within a similar system that also inflicts harm. The researchers were also interested in how African American youth managed homicidal death while simultaneously having to navigate the systemic injustice and racial disparities encountered within the education system. The study followed five African American 12th-grade males exposed to publicized deaths of African American men by police action. Grinage (2019) wondered whether the education system provided an adequate environment for African American male adolescents to mourn death when facilitated by the officers of the legal system. Grinage (2019) focused on the education system because, similar to the legal system, it is a state-sanctioned system established on the ideals of white supremacy and comprised of policies and practices that further disenfranchise low-income

students of color. The findings suggest racialized systemic violence has negative psychological consequences and complicated mourning death for African American youth participants (Grinage, 2019). Additionally, the participants illustrated that whether the death was witnessed directly or vicariously, there was ongoing processing of taking in new data about the death due to the publicized nature of the events (Grinage, 2019). For example, the participants referenced Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, young African American men whose deaths received significant public attention. Through vicarious exposure to these events, the participants experienced similar emotional responses aroused when witnessing the death of a friend or family member (Grinage, 2019). The participants also expressed the challenges of managing multiple losses, including deaths publicized due to law enforcement actions, while simultaneously coping with prior personal experiences with death. Grinage's (2019) study illustrates the challenge of trying to manage multiple system-facilitated losses and the psychological consequences that come from failure to formally acknowledge the loss. Additionally, Grinage (2019) recognized how social protest served as an outlet for collective mourning to deal with the despair of witnessing and managing multiple images of death (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice).

According to Grinage (2019), African American youth encounter more instances of homicide and violent death yet are also confronted with inadequate support from the education system to help cope with the loss. Repeated and involuntary encounters with systems that reinforce ideologies of white supremacy and racial oppression complicate mourning and can contribute to unresolved grief. While Grinage (2019) focused on the education system as an influencing factor in the mourning process for African Americans, this study believes the legal

system operates in a similar capacity whereby DBLE is significant to how African American men mourn.

Socio-cultural expectations are influential in loosely defining how loss is either acknowledged or ignored (Konrad, 2009). A qualitative study by Piazza-Bonin, Neimeyer, Burke, McDevitt-Murphy and Young (2015) examined how systems fail to acknowledge or validate African Americans' psychological response to loss. The study focused on how African American mothers mourned the death of their sons to homicide. The participants reported a lack of support from mainstream society as impeding their perception of having adequate opportunity to openly express their emotional responses to the losses (Piazza-Bonin, et al., 2015). The participants cited a significant barrier to mourning the homicide of their sons was the lack of validation by mainstream society (Piazza-Bonin, et al., 2015). The findings highlight the significance of social validation and empathic understanding as necessary components of the mourning process. Piazza-Bonin, et al. (2015) reiterate the lack of societal validation creates disenfranchised grief and generates feelings of isolation, guilt, and shame.

Shared Cultural Experiences with Death

American chattel slavery offers a historic example of societal disavowal from the emotional and psychological loss African Americans have endured over time (Moore, et al., 2022). The legacy of American slavery produced intergenerational psychic pain with long-term emotional consequences for a collective cultural community. One approach to recognizing how African Americans respond to loss is by acknowledging the unresolved psychological trauma derived from historic cultural events (Moore, et al., 2022). Psychological distress experienced within the community necessitates that healing and repair also occur within a community (Moore, et al., 2022). Moore, et al. (2022) also illustrate the sociocultural influence on internal processing and external affective expression for how African Americans cope with the loss

associated with a violent death. Culture provides structure and tradition, but also serves as a collective emotional co-regulator and helps with constructing a shared meaning of events impacting the group members (Neimeyer, Prigerson & Davies, 2002).

African Americans hold distinct attitudes around death (Kalish & Reynolds, 1981, as cited in Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). With higher rates of direct exposure, African Americans are more likely to be challenged with mourning losses associated with violent death than other marginalized groups (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). African American cultural traditions suggest family support, inclusive of a broad concept of family, is considered primary support when managing death (Kalish & Reynolds, 1981 as cited in Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). African Americans are also more likely to implement internal coping mechanisms, including connecting to spiritual beliefs, instead of seeking out professional support (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008).

Piazza-Bonin, et al. (2015) suggest there are cultural expectations related to an acceptable time frame within which African Americans can openly emit affective expression for a loss. The informal expectation of time conveys there is an acceptable duration to openly mourn at which time internal coping mechanisms are expected to be activated (Jean-Marie Pabon & Basile, 2021; Piazza-Bonin, et al., 2015). Laurie and Neimeyer (2008) also illustrate the informal cultural grieving rule that supports minimal affective presentation and embraces a display of internal resolve while mourning. The cultural expectation for how African Americans experience grief reinforces the stereotype of African Americans being immune to psychological pain and poses rigid expectations for grieving beyond the socially acceptable time allotted to mourn. Rigid cultural expectations further internalize the mourning process and pose a greater risk of having complex disenfranchised grief (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). These informal expectations and

traditions form a kind of cultural “grieving rule” to guide personal beliefs, emotional responses, and behaviors of members following death.

Cognitive Process - Meaning Making

Grief is considered a typical reaction to loss designated by a core of predictable symptoms and progressive phases (Neimeyer, et al., 2002). Intrusive thoughts and intense feelings of fear and emptiness are common experiences associated with grief (Park, 2010). Complicated grief is a type of bereavement characterized by persistent psychological distress that interrupts functioning and recovery from loss (Currier, et al., 2006; Zakarian, et al., 2018). Neimeyer, et al., (2002) described complicated grief as the "inability to reconstruct a meaningful personal reality". The capacity to manage loss is influenced by the ability to form a subjective interpretation of death. Complicated grief is influenced by the capacity to engage in a cognitive process where meaning is assigned to death and loss (Currier, et al., 2006; Zakarian, et al. 2018; Currier, et al., 2006). Meaning-making is an essential factor in integrating traumatic events into existing cognitive schemes. Establishing meaning after loss facilitates hope and helps reconcile the internal tension of needing to present a strong external presentation and instead acknowledge suffering (Konrad, 2009).

Meaning-making is a paradigm of one's personal beliefs that shapes the development of the internal self and the self concerning the external psychosocial environment (Currier, et al., 2006; Milman, Neimeyer, Fitzpatrick, MacKinnon, Muis & Cohen, 2018). Constructing meaning from death is an adaptive process to reduce the pathology associated with how grief is managed (Zakaria, et al., 2018). Recognizing one's subjective experience with loss is a necessary factor in assigning meaning and integrating grief into daily processes (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Konrad, 2009).

Defining Meaning Making

Meaning-making is an active and ongoing cognitive process to manage the psychological impacts of loss (Moore, Magee, Gareklidze & Kowaleski, 2019; Currier, Holland & Neimeyer, 2006; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Konrad, 2009). As a cognitive process, meaning-making involves attempts to find purpose and assess and reconstruct a sense of self throughout the various phases of mourning death (Baumeister, 1991 as cited in Park, 2010). Attempts to avoid overwhelming and uncomfortable emotional experiences stimulate intrusive thoughts and memories based on one's perception of the external world. Engaging in the cognitive process to assign meaning to an overwhelming emotional experience increases the capacity to tolerate psychic pain (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Intrapsychic conflict develops with the inability to make sense of a loss and integrate that meaning into current cognitive functioning (Currier, Holland & Neimeyer, 2006). Psychological distress develops with attempts to reconcile the value and worthiness of life with how the traumatic event is perceived (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Cognitive theory suggests the loss generated from traumatic events challenges the cognitive structure that forms one's perception of the internal and external world. The impact of traumatic events threatens internal security and informs how one tries to make sense of the external world (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). A constructivist theory of meaning-making recognizes how self-concept is guided by integrating internal insights and beliefs with external world experiences (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). The constructivist theory of meaning-making highlights an active process individuals engage in to receive information and make sense of their reality. Meaning-making provides the opportunity to rationalize and, as necessary, modify the meaning constructed following death which is necessary to facilitate mourning. In therapeutic

treatment, clinicians can help facilitate a process to construct and reconstruct meaning for patients having to manage loss associated with death (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

The meaning-making process can occur immediately following a death and proceed throughout the grieving process (Currier, et al., 2006). Assigning meaning permits affirming or disavowing one's core beliefs connected to a distressing event that may threaten those core beliefs (Zakarian, et al. 2018). Constructing meaning following a loss involves deciding to either maintain or reconstruct the cognitive processes to align with the complex subjective experience associated with the loss (Milman, et al., 2018). Processing the loss associated with homicidal death inflicts a moral psychological injury that not only threatens a presumed sense of safety within society but also activates emotional responses arising from the conflict of reconciling cultural ideals. Consequently, this heightens psychological distress (Zakarian, et al., 2018). The sociocultural environment is influential in establishing the societal expectations for mourning which become integrated into the process of making meaning in instances of death (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

One study applied the constructivist theory of meaning-making to explore the process of assigning meaning to a violent death in an attempt to reconcile complicated grief. The study consisted of college students, ranging in age between 18-53 years old, who reported a personal experience with a violent death within the two years preceding the study (Currier, et al., 2006). The participants were surveyed using a tool to measure the extent of meaning the participants associated with the death. Currier, et al., (2006) concluded that making meaning is an influential factor in mourning and the lack of an assigned meaning impedes and further complicates the grieving process (Currier, et al., 2006).

Zakarian, et al. (2018) acknowledged the gaps in the literature on the role of meaning-making in mitigating long-term post-traumatic stress and complicated grief following a violent homicidal death. To address the research gaps, Zakarian, et al., (2018) conducted a quantitative study to identify whether a correlation exists between the degree of traumatic stress and complicated grief experienced with the likelihood that meaning was assigned following a homicidal death. Among the stressors, the participants associated with the death included concerns about possibly having to engage with the legal system and the potential for re-experiencing the death when reported through various media streams. Based on ratings from the Emptiness and Meaningless survey, Zakaria, et al., (2018) identified a relationship between symptoms of traumatic stress and adapting avoidant coping strategies. The findings suggest that avoidant coping styles disrupt the meaning-making process and increase the likelihood of activating avoidant emotional responses and behaviors (Zakarian, et al., 2018). Zakarian, et al., (2018) acknowledge further research is needed to increase insight into how meaning is assigned following death. The researchers suggest a qualitative study might yield different data than quantitative questionnaires that may inadvertently contain prompts that activate a broader scope of psychological distress (Zakarian, et al., 2018).

Milman, et al. (2018) conducted a study to identify themes associated with meaning-making in violent death and symptoms of prolonged grief. The study reported that participants who experienced violent death and acknowledged fewer attempts at meaning-making had a higher presentation of PTSD symptoms. Additionally, the more disturbing the associations with violent death, including the type of death and the participant's proximity to being directly victimized the greater the impairment to meaning-making as a tool to alleviate distress from the loss (Milman, et al., 2018). Building on these insights, a study by Currier, et al. (2006) examined

the necessity of assigning meaning following a violent death. The study concluded that efforts to understand the intentions of the perpetrator and attempts to reconcile the value of life and the pursuit of justice with underlying injustices create additional challenges to assigning meaning to violent death. The more complicated the process of assigning meaning to a loss the higher the negative outcomes of mourning (Currier, et al., 2006). The study's findings imply that failure to assign meaning in the aftermath of a violent death may be considered to have more psychological consequences than the actual death itself (Currier, et al., 2006). As the Currier, et al. (2006) study focused on college-age women, the researchers identify limited exploration into whether men have different experiences with loss related to death. The study also suggests a qualitative exploration could expand recognition into various forms of meaning-making (e.g., spirituality) (Currier, et al., 2006).

Additionally, the lack of societal acknowledgment deepens psychological distress when trying to manage the emotional responses to death. Psychological stress interferes with the capacity to process sensory information and behaviors associated with experiencing a traumatic event. Mental processes attempt to avoid managing difficult and overwhelming emotional experiences. The more an event is experienced as traumatic, the more impaired the mental processing and disavowal of the disturbing event (Fernando, 2018). The mental capacity to manage distressing events depends on the extent to which the event is consciously acknowledged. During normal processing mental images become consciously stored and integrated into mind functions, however when an event is experienced as a trauma it is not stored in long-term memory, but instead in the perceiving and acting functions of the mind (Fernando, 2018). Zero-processed memories are those mental images suspended in time and removed from primary processes. Zero-processed memories are unable to distinguish between past traumatic

stress and current reality (Fernando, 2018). Dissociation is a primary defense mechanism used with zero processed memories where there is a failure to integrate aspects of the trauma into existing primary processing and mentally separated from daily experiences (Fernando, 2018). In mourning, zero processing protects mental imagery by enacting defense mechanisms like suppression, dissociation, and avoidance to form a barrier between memories of traumatic events and daily mind functioning (Fernando, 2018). Attempts to manage the psychological effects of traumatic events can manifest in adverse consequences to immediate and long-term coping mechanisms.

Approaches to Coping

Coping mechanisms and strategies are influential in shaping individuals' responses to stressors, Coping mechanisms are characterized by automatic and unconscious reactions, while coping strategies involve conscious and goal-oriented actions. These distinct coping approaches can have significant implications on how individuals manage and navigate stress (Cramer, 1998; Abuelhiza, Mazzola, Tiersky, Freer, Eyzerovich, Pievsky and Persaud, 2016). Coping mechanisms are activated unconsciously and can include both adaptive and maladaptive responses to handling stressful situations. Conversely, coping strategies represent a more purposeful and intentional approach to responding to distress to promote mental and emotional well-being. Consequently, defense mechanisms also operate as an unconscious introspective process activated by an internal conflict and although representing different processes, defense mechanisms are typically activated before coping strategies are developed (Abuelhiza, et al., 2016). Grebot, Paty and Dephanix (2006, as cited in Abuelhiza, et al., 2016), suggest developing more mature defense mechanisms correlates with more adaptive approaches to coping. Greater insight into the range of coping methods African Americans utilize to protect mental functioning

will provide clinicians with the tools to recognize how these ways of coping align with societal norms (Hudson, Eaton, Lewis, Grant, Sewell & Gilbert, 2016). Understanding will also help clinicians recognize how defense mechanisms influence whether a more conscious or more unconscious coping approach is utilized.

African Americans tend to minimize the psychological distress stemming from racist and discriminatory acts because individual interpretations of these acts can be highly subjective (Clark, et al., 2002, as cited in Hudson, et al., 2016). Hudson, et al. (2016) studied the coping methods of African American men in the aftermath of the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown, an African American man who died from being shot by police officers in Ferguson, MO in 2014. Participants cited law enforcement actions as a primary source of psychological stress, attributing Michael Brown's death to racial motives (Hudson, et al., 2016). The participants also reported feeling unfairly surveilled and being hypervigilant during their own interactions with law enforcement (Hudson, et al., 2016). The study concluded the participants implemented a range of coping methods, both adaptive and maladaptive, including exercise, seeking social support, and self-medication with substances (Hudson, et al., 2016). There are limitations in the current literature explaining the context within which coping methods are employed to handle the emotional consequences of environmental stress and distressing events (Ellis, Griffith, Ober Allen, Thorpe & Bruce, 2015).

The subjective nature of racism leads to variations in how African Americans manage and respond to racist acts. Brown, Phillips, Abdullah, Vinson and Robertson (2011) explored how the coping approaches of African Americans varied depending on the external stressor experienced. Brown, et al., (2011) distinguished the coping methods African Americans utilize for daily stressors from acts of racism and considered the influence of gender and acculturation

on their coping responses. The study consisted of college-age participants from Kentucky and Washington DC who identified racism as a chronic stressor in daily life. The participants reported using different coping methods based on the type of stress encountered and identified that African Americans utilize a range of coping methods to deal with race-facilitated stress (Brown, et al, 2011). The researchers also noted gender differences in coping among African Americans with African American men more likely to adopt more avoidance-based strategies (Brown, et al., 2011). The variations across gender in the participants' responses suggest that cultural socialization influences how racism is experienced and managed (Brown et al., 2011).

Ellis, et al., (2015) conducted a phenomenological study on the impact of stress on the physical, emotional, and social well-being of African American men aged 30 and older. The study included focus groups with 150 African American men who described changes in physical activity and nutrition, use of spirituality, self-reliance, and substance use as coping methods to manage societal stress. The participant identified internalizing stress as a method exemplified by statements such as "boys don't talk about things" and an expectation to "be tough" (Ellis, et al., 2015). The researchers also acknowledged the influence of the racial, gender, and sociocultural environment on how African American men develop and utilize various coping methods (Ellis, et al., 2015). This study seeks to understand how African American men utilize a range of coping approaches, including both unconscious activation of coping mechanisms via defense mechanisms (such as avoidance, denial, and projection) and more conscious coping strategies like accessing social support and emotional regulation in response to viewing recorded images of death.

Conclusion

Gaps in the Literature

The limited research on African American mourning mostly centers on the loss of a personal contact (e.g., family or friend) within the primary social network. However, there are gaps in the literature to examine how vicariously witnessing the death of a member of the same racial group affects mourning. There has been limited consideration of the potential psychological impact of additional factors that exacerbate mourning particularly when activated by systemic sources such as the legal system as depicted in recordings of African American DBLE disseminated and discussed through mainstream and social media platforms. This study will use a qualitative research design to collect and analyze data to explore the psychological impact of witnessing the visual depictions where African American men have died by the actions of law enforcement.

Recent qualitative studies on African American mourning typically rely on data collected within 24 months following the occurrence of the death (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Curtis, et al. (2021) question how the duration of time following a violent death might influence the emotional responses specifically for events exposed to public attention. Curtis, et al. (2021) suggest the waning of public attention surrounding violent events over time might impede psychological processing and the lingering emotional responses that might perceive the event as a social stressor. This study will cover an unspecified timeframe between when participants viewed recorded images of death and the time of the interviews conducted for this research. This researcher recognizes this range of time is broader than current studies and might impact how internal psychological processes are acknowledged and managed.

Smith Lee & Robinson (2019) conducted a similar qualitative study applying critical race theory and coping theory to recognize the mental health consequences of excessive policing practices on African American males between 18-24 years old. The study aimed to identify

various levels of exposure to excessive police force, examine the process of meaning-making following such events, and assess the mental health impact on African American adolescent males. The grounded theory study was conducted nearly 2 years preceding the 2015 death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man who died in Baltimore while in police custody. The 40 African American male adolescent participants lived in Baltimore and 90% identified as having some direct exposure to police use of excessive force (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019). Many of the participants recalled early exposure to excessive policing practices as early as childhood. The participants also identified a spectrum of exposure ranging from vicarious experiences through personal contacts such as friends, family, or community members to direct exposure involving interactions that resulted in some type of physical injury (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019).

Early exposure to excessive policing practices influenced the participants' negative perceptions of law enforcement, attributed racism to the encounters, and reinforced tensions during interactions with law enforcement (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019). According to Smith Lee and Robinson (2019), the participants identified feelings of frustration, anger, fear, and shame when reflecting on the exposure to police use of excessive force and endorsed symptoms associated with traumatic stress. While the adolescent participants expressed attempts to mourn death experienced in personal relationships, Smith Lee & Robinson (2019) noticed an emotional disconnection in how the participants spoke of exposure to law enforcement's use of excessive force. The researchers theorize that emotional detachment operates as a protective coping mechanism to shield from the emotional vulnerability and hypervigilance necessary to maintain psychological injury from perceived threats to personal and psychological safety (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019). The restrained emotional reaction could also reflect protection from the

perceived lack of empathic understanding and accountability from the larger society (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019). Smith Lee and Robinson (2019) suggest further research is needed to explore the complexities of how intersecting identities mitigate the traumatic effects of police fatalities.

Lipscomb, Emeka, Bracy, Stevenson, Lira, Gomez and Riggins (2019) conducted a related qualitative study on the personal impact and response of African American men exposed to the 2018 death of Stephon Clark. Stephon Clark was a 22-year-old African American man who was shot to death by Sacramento police officers. The researchers also wanted to examine African Americans' anxiety regarding police fatalities, conducting the study within three weeks of Clark's death to gain insights into the participants' recent indirect exposure to such incidents. Lipscomb, et al., (2019) provided 62 African American men between 18-65 years old, and with 90% living in California, with semi-structured interview surveys completed online. The findings highlight themes of hypervigilance, patterns of avoidance, and emotional dissociation. Ninety-five percent of the participants expressed fear for their safety, with 72% reported concerns about the potential for physical injury from personal encounters with law enforcement. Additionally, 95% believed the injury inflicted upon the Black body was an intentional act of violence (Lipscomb, et al., 2019). The researchers acknowledge the need to expand on the existing literature on the psychological impact of police fatalities on African American men. Lipscomb, et al., (2019) highlight a limitation of their study was the focus on young African American men and recommend including the perspectives of African American men in "late adulthood" and reflect diversity across socio-economic status.

Similar to the study by Smith Lee and Robinson (2019), this research study recognizes how the intersectionality of race and gender influences how death is psychologically

acknowledged, understood, and managed. Smith Lee and Robinson (2019) and Lipscomb, et al., (2019) focused on the perspectives of younger African Americans men while Lipscomb, et al., (2019) cite a need for future research to include the perspectives of African American men in "late adulthood". Lastly, both Smith Lee and Robinson (2019) and Lipscomb, et al., (2019) acknowledge limitations in the specificity of the population's sample and suggest future research consider a broader representation across socioeconomic, age, and marital status in the sample.

This research study will similarly quantify exposure as Smith Lee and Robinson (2019) and Lipscomb, et al., (2019) to include direct and vicarious viewing of the recorded videos where African American men have died by the actions of law enforcement. Additionally, this study expands on the research of Smith Lee and Robinson (2019) to focus on viewing recordings of DBLE. This vicarious form of witnessing involves watching recordings of deaths shared and discussed across mainstream and social media platforms.

Smith Lee and Robinson (2019) also recognized the need to examine socialization factors of socialization and the role of community response in addressing the emotional impact activated by negative police encounters. The extent of social acknowledgment influences whether complicated grief is experienced. This study recognizes that the collective community conversation that minimizes and invalidates the experiences of African American men dying by the actions of law enforcement may impact mourning, meaning-making, and coping responses for African American men. To address the primary research question: "What are the subjective psychological experiences of African American men who view recorded video images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law"? and the additional sub-questions: 1) "How do African American men experience mourning as a result of viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law

enforcement?”, 2) “How do African American men assign meaning to viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men?” and 3) “What are the approaches African American men use to cope with viewing recorded images depicting death by the actions of law enforcement?”. This researcher will target African American men who live in the United States between 25-50 years old in recruitment. Participants will be identified based on self-report as African American cisgender males who were born and raised in the United States. The study will focus on participants who acknowledge viewing recorded images depicting the death of African American men by the actions of law enforcement as documented and shared on mainstream or social media.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the psychological impact on African American men who viewed recordings depicting images of the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement. The study examines the psychological processes of mourning, assigning meaning, and the coping responses generated from witnessing recordings of death. The clinical and theoretical foundation applies a psychodynamic understanding to the concept of witnessing as both an emotional container and a direct act that occurs from vicarious and secondary exposure. This study addresses the primary research question: “What are the subjective psychological experiences of African American men who view recorded video images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law”? Additionally, this study aims to explore the additional research questions: 1) How do African American men experience mourning as a result of viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement? 2) How do African American men assign meaning to viewing recorded images of the death of other African

American men?, 3) What are the approaches African American men use to cope with viewing recorded images depicting death by the actions of law enforcement?

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is most applicable to research designs focused on enhancing insight into participants' perceptions or understanding of an issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative designs enable the researcher to induce meaning from the participants' own words to interpret and analyze data that may have a complexity of meaning. This proposal relies on axiological assumptions about the research design that recognizes the role of the interpretation of values in the research study (Creswell, 2007). A constructivist approach serves as the epistemological foundation for this phenomenological study. A constructivist epistemological approach recognizes the meanings one constructs of the external world and acknowledges the value of the subjective experience to interpret meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the researcher analyzes data through subjective interpretations and identifies themes generated from participant interviews to explore the lived experiences of African American men who have witnessed recorded images of death caused by the actions of law enforcement.

Rationale for Specific Methodology

Phenomenological research designs utilize multiple data sources derived from a small sample size to gain meaning into how individuals conceptualize a specific phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Phenomenological studies also reflect an interpretative nature of the research design and capture what the participants experienced and how they experienced it. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) examines and seeks to interpret a unique meaning, within a specific context, people have of a shared experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA focuses on understanding the perceptions of a phenomenon as it is identified

as meaningful to the participant and the researcher. According to Smith et al., (2019), “IPA is concerned about the detailed examination of human lived experience and aims to conduct this examination in a way which as far as possible enables the experience to be expressed in its own terms rather than according to predefined categories” (p. 45 and 46). IPA explores the detailed account of one’s lived experience and involves the integration of the researcher's knowledge, experience, and subjectivity to ascribe meaning to another's lived experience (Smith, et al., 2019). The contribution IPA research adds to the human services field is to provide a pathway to better comprehend the complexities across the human experience.

The researcher explores the lived experiences of African American men within a specific racial and cultural context. The study focuses on examining the psychological impact of viewing on African American men who die by the actions of law enforcement. The data consists of participants’ responses gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. The semi-structured interview questions reflect the participants’ experiences viewing the recorded images of death, including their initial and current reactions, meaning assigned to the deaths, and ways of coping. The data from the interviews is coded by identifying themes and is interpreted to support or expand on existing empirical literature. The chapter outlines the sample population’s inclusion and exclusion criteria and explains interpretive strategies for coding and reporting for data analysis. The researcher explains measures to ensure trustworthiness and reduce researcher bias, using bracketing and member checking for interpretative and collaborative data analysis, while maintaining validity and reliability in coding and reporting.

Research Sample

Interpretative phenomenological analysis explores how humans hold meaning of a shared experience within a particular context (Smith, et al., 2009). IPA is focused on the individual

experience, so the emphasis of the research design is on the quality of the data over the number of participants who participate. IPA recognizes that a large sample size could overwhelm and impact the quality of the data. Purposive sampling is the suggested approach for a sampling method because it recognizes participants are selected based on specific characteristics applicable to the research question (Smith, et al., 2009). A small purposive sample is most applicable to IPA research designs as it aims to understand the unique perspectives of a particular group of people within a specific context (Smith, et al., 2019). Maximum variation is another important consideration when establishing a purposive sample. According to Patton (1990), maximum variation involves intentionally selecting a diverse representation of participants with ranging interests to illustrate the uniqueness that can be captured in data collection and analysis. Obtaining maximum variation in sampling also strengthens the capacity to identify patterns of similarity and variation among the research participants (Patton, 1990).

Smith, et al. (2019) suggests an average number of participants ranging from 3-6 as an adequate purposive sampling size. This phenomenological research design utilizes data from semi-structured interviews with eight men who identified as African American and who self-reported viewing at least one recorded image capturing the death of other African American men accessed through social or mainstream media. The researcher uses interpretative coding strategies, acknowledging the data's subjectivity and its impact on overall interpretation.

The participants were recruited using an electronic flier (Appendix A) shared with approximately 20 professional contacts and social media forums geared towards African American men. The flier recruited African American men to participate in a conversation on hearing "your experience viewing the video recordings, via either mainstream or social media, of other Black men who died by the actions of law enforcement." The study's outreach was targeted

to participants between 25-50 years old who self-identified as African American and cisgender males and reported viewing at least one recording of a police fatality involving another African American man. Over 150 individuals expressed interest in the study and the researcher randomly selected eight participants to conduct a Pre-Screen to determine eligibility. Eight participants completed a total of 17 semi-structured interviews, lasting between 60-90 minutes each, followed by 30-60 minute follow up interviews. The inclusion criteria included participants who a) self-identified as African American, b) cisgender male, c) born and raised in the United States and, d) were between 25-50 years old. Women, trans men, non-binary individuals, immigrants and bi/multi-racial individuals were excluded from the study. The study also excludes any current or former employees of the legal system or law enforcement officials or participants with immediate family members who are law enforcement officials. The decision to exclude these participants is supported by empirical literature that suggests differences in socio-cultural experiences based on gender, gender expression, age, and naturalization status. Additionally, personal affiliation with the legal system or law enforcement officials may influence perceptions and psychological processing of police fatalities that may bias the data due to the unique nature of the sample size.

Research Design

Smith, et al., (2019) recommend research conducted at the doctoral level prioritize the number of interviews conducted over the number of participants interviewed from which the data will be generated. The number of interviews suggested for adequate data collection ranges between 4-10 interviews preferably conducted with each participant more than once (Smith, Larson & Flowers, 2019). For this study, the researcher conducted a total of 17 semi-structured interviews, ranging between 60-90 minutes, using interview questions geared towards

understanding the participants' experience viewing video recordings of African American men's death by the actions of law enforcement. The interviews were designed to be conversational and relied on engagement between the researcher and participants. The length of the interviews varied depending on the participants' response pace, the depth of their responses and whether the researcher observed repetition in their responses without the addition of new insights or information. The interviews occurred virtually via Zoom as a confidential and protected telecommunication program. The use of tele-communication methods allowed access to remote participants and created the opportunity for the interviews to occur within their natural environments. The researcher audio and video-recorded each interview and used Transcription Puppy, a paid confidential transcription service, for initial transcriptions of the interviews. The participants reviewed their transcribed interviews, and the researcher reviewed and edited the transcribed interviews to ensure accuracy. The decision to review the transcribed data supports empirical literature that suggests the more the researcher is familiar with the data the better opportunity to enhance subjective understanding of the participant interviews (Smith, et al., 2019). The participants also completed a follow-up interview, lasting between 30-60 minutes, with each participant as a form of member checking to ensure more credibility in data collection and interpretation.

Recruitment

The researcher conducted outreach to approximately 20 personal and professional contacts to recruit African American men to participate in the study. The recruitment strategy utilized purposive sampling of African American men across the United States to enhance the diversity and range of perspectives represented in the study. The researcher utilized viral recruitment strategies to target and communicate with potential participants, including sending

out a recruitment email (Appendix B) and flier. Nearly 150 individuals expressed interest in participating in the study and the researcher randomly contacted eight participants to complete a pre-screening questionnaire (Appendix C). All eight of the participants selected for the pre-screen met the eligibility criteria and agreed to voluntarily participate in the study. The researcher scheduled the participants for viral interviews that were tracked using an interview schedule. Participants were emailed a consent form (Appendix D), signed electronically through DocuSign, and reviewed by the researcher before the initial interview. The researcher also captured demographic information using a demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) at the beginning of the first interviews.

Screening and Interview

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide (Appendix F) developed by the researcher. The interview questions were based on literature about viewing recordings of death, their acknowledgement and mourning, the meaning assigned and coping responses. The researcher piloted the interview guide with two African American men meeting the sample criteria and revised the questions for clarity and to enhance self-reflection and disclosure. After mutually establishing a date and time, the researcher sent each participant a link to meet via Zoom and audio and video recorded the interviews for later review. The researcher sent the interviews to be transcribed by Transcription Puppy for an initial transcription and also reviewed them for accuracy before sending to the participants for their review. The researcher emailed each participant their transcription ahead of scheduling the follow-up interviews, held approximately two weeks after the initial interview. The follow up interviews ensured data saturation by incorporating participant feedback on transcripts and clarifying insights or additional information from the interviews.

Data Collection

Empirical literature is an important resource to help researchers develop the interview guide in qualitative research designs (McCracken, 1988). The purpose of the literature review is to facilitate the curiosity of the researcher to facilitate the construction of interview questions, while also noting any perceived biases and subjective perspectives (McCracken, 1988). The interview guide does not serve as a script that precisely constructs the interview between the researcher and participant but rather serves as a road map to allow for fluidity of conversation and maximize engagement (McCracken, 1998). It should contain biographical questions to help explain the demographic composition of the sample and several main questions related to the research question (McCracken, 1988). Follow-up questions serve as prompts for the main questions to generate dialogue and encourage the participant to expound on responses. The prompts are developed to help shape the themes of the interview which is further explored in the researcher's analysis and discussion of the data (McCracken, 1988).

The researcher began each interview explaining to each participant the overall purpose of the research study, potential risks and benefits, and efforts to maintain confidentiality. The researcher also reminded the participant's participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. The researcher notified each participant of the option to receive a copy of the final research study upon completion. The researcher scheduled interviews and sent out a link to connect to the interviews via Zoom and used both audio and video recordings of the initial interviews and follow ups. The participants were emailed a copy of their transcribed interview approximately two-weeks following the initial interview and the researcher scheduled follow up interviews. This allowed the researcher the opportunity to follow up and clarify any outstanding issues following the initial participant

interviews. Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, the researcher requested to meet with each participant without the presence of other individuals to minimize extraneous distractions and potential interruptions. The participants received a ten-dollar gift card, either to Target or Amazon, upon completion of each interview for their voluntary participation in the study. The confidential interview data was transcribed using a confidential professional transcription service, Transcription Puppy. The researcher also reviewed the transcriptions of each interview, comparing the transcription with the interview recordings for accuracy. The researcher maintains sole responsibility for data and field notes, storing them using password-protected computer files. Bracketing was used to address personal biases on racial and systemic violence and perceptions of law enforcement. Field notes documented observations during interviews, transcription, and theme analysis.

Plan for data analysis

Unlike quantitative research designs, qualitative research recognizes a more subjective process to interpret and analyze the data. Qualitative research acknowledges how the subjective experience of the researcher gets integrated into the data analysis process (Medico, Santiago-Delefosse, 2014). IPA research designs reflect the merger between a scientific process and the subjective use of the researcher. In these qualitative research designs, the researcher is the primary tool through which the data is analyzed and transmuted through the researcher's artistic and creative experience and perspectives (Chenail, 2012). Qualitative data analysis can be explained as the systematic process of determining "this-ness" from "that-ness" in the abstraction of the data (Chenail, 2012). Data analysis is considered a recursive process since concrete meaning cannot be derived from the data, but rather the unit of analysis is the process of identifying and categorizing themes from the data (Chenail, 2012). The analysis of qualitative

data could be considered a metaphoric process defined as a “way of seeing” an object within the context of seeing something else that brings the “this-ness” out of the “that-ness” (Chenail, 2012). A metaphoric approach supposes that meaning is generated from the relationship between the “this” to the “that” which contends that different subjects can be compared and connected. It also suggests that subjects can be different enough from each other to elucidate their connections while highlighting the meaningful variations in perspectives (Chenail, 2012). Additionally, Smith, et al. (2019) believe IPA research designs illustrate the similarities and differences across a shared experience. Data analysis for IPA designs consists of a detailed account of the data to identify both similarities and differences and organize them into categories of meaning.

Data analysis for this study included multiple reviews of the transcribed interviews and field notes. Corden and Sainsbury (2006) recommend organizing data analysis around a thematic framework through which analysis can be compared in a cross-case analysis around a certain theme. The researcher summarized and organized the data around categories of themes identifying differences and similarities in a cross-case analysis. The research findings are reported using a chart and direct quotes to highlight and report the data in the participants’ words. According to Corden and Sainsbury (2006), the use of direct participant quotes is considered the standard practice in current qualitative research. Direct quotes can be used to provide evidence of the data, illustrate, explain, and deepen understanding of the data (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). Direct quotes support the findings used to write policy or outline best practices in the field because it serves as an effective method for emphasizing the conclusion or recommendations. Direct quotations also create an opportunity for the participants’ voices to be reflected and help ensure trustworthiness (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). The results incorporated direct quotes from the participant interviews to reflect the participants’ own words.

Coding

Coding for qualitative data analysis provides a perspective of the participants' lived experience which should be inclusive of any variations that may emerge in the cross-case analysis (Chenail, 2012). The researcher should include the process of self-reflection to account for and manage preconceived beliefs and biases that may influence data analysis (Chenail, 2012). Medico and Santiago-Delefosse (2014) also recognize the non-neutrality of the researcher and suggest engaging in a self-reflective process to manage biases that may influence coding. The reflective position, as described by Medico and Santiago-Delefosse (2014), establishes transparency around the subjective role of the researcher in qualitative research. Resonance is a concept developed by Mony Elakaim in 1989 as a tool to ensure reflexivity in coding adapted from Elakaim's application to therapeutic processes (Medico & Santiago-Delefosse, 2014). Resonance is designed to provide clarity and transparency around the subjective use of the researcher in the data analysis and interpretation process. Resonance explains the merger between the subjective and intersubjective process of qualitative data analysis (Medico & Santiago-Delefosse, 2014). It describes the connection between what was heard in the data and how the researcher received it when analyzing the data.

The interviews were coded and categorized into themes related to the psychological experiences of African American men. The researcher tracked recurring themes across interviews, noting variations and similarities in participant responses. Six themes emerged from the coded data: Interpretation of the Death, Response and Impact, Recognizing the Loss, Seeking Interpersonal Connections, Means to Cope and "It Could Be Me" which acknowledges the personal vulnerability and impact to witnessing incidents of DBLE.

Ethical considerations

The researcher obtained informed consent from each participant using an electronic consent form outlining the nature of the research study, highlighting the risks and benefits, and reiterating voluntary participation in this study. Participants agreed to participate in this research study with no foreseeable direct benefits associated with their participation. The interview guide included questions that could evoke distressing memories of deaths, posing potential risks to participants. Participants were provided a list of culturally sensitive mental health resources to mitigate potential psychological distress. Participant identities were kept confidential, excluding non-identifiable demographic details, with the researcher solely responsible for maintaining and storing the data. The participants were compensated with a ten-dollar gift card for participating in the interview, but there are no incentives for participation that may pose an ethical risk to the research design. The research study was approved through an IRB review process and the researcher implemented data collection and analysis per the procedures outlined in the IRB application. The research proposal also adheres to the standards and research protocols identified by the Institute for Clinical Social Work.

Issues of trustworthiness

The process for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research recognizes the self-reflective and subjective significance of the researcher in data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Medico & Santiago-Delefosse, 2014). The researcher should be intentional in discussing plans to identify and manage biases when developing the research design (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019). Smith, et al., (2009) write that measuring validity in qualitative research involves assuming a "pluralistic stance" to acknowledge the subtle nuances present in studying a psychological phenomenon. The researcher used journaling to document field notes and any

subjective responses and observations that emerged during the process. The researcher will also include a detailed account of observations from the interview setting and the process of engagement with the participant.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) acknowledge that because there are diverse perspectives that define the human experience the research findings might prove to be different than the researcher's expectation. As a result, the researcher must include variations and adverse findings in the discussion to add credibility and enhance the dependability of the study. The researcher's use of field notes, memos, and journaling to document biases and the researcher's subjective observations is an attempt to maintain confirmability and ensure that the findings are generated from the data and not solely based on the researcher's perception (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Efforts to monitor transferability are to ensure the data is applicable across broader populations within a similar context. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) suggest the researcher provide a detailed description of the interview setting and identify ways to provide a clear context for how the data is interpreted.

Member checking and use of triangulation are methods used to measure credibility while an independent audit serves as an effective approach to measuring validity in IPA research (Smith, et al, 2009). The independent audit is the process of explicitly detailing the data collection, analysis, and interpreting process such that it could be replicated by someone other than the researcher (Smith, et al., 2009). Member checking involves a review of the interview data by the participants after transcription to avoid researcher bias (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019). Triangulation involves collecting multiple sources of data to collaborate with the researcher's findings. Theoretical triangulation incorporates various theoretical and conceptual concepts to

provide the context within which to frame the data to include a review of the existing literature (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019).

This proposal incorporated the suggested research approaches to establish trustworthiness. The researcher utilized member checking during the interview process by asking the participants to review transcriptions from their interviews for clarity and accuracy. There were no changes of clarifications in the feedback from participants, but the researcher revised transcriptions from the transcription service based on reviews of the audio recordings of the interviews. Additionally, thorough documentation of the interview process is provided in this chapter to allow for replicability.

Limitations and Delimitations

One limitation of this research study is the assumption that African American men will have specific reactions to meaningful experiences of racism or racialized socialization that produce enough impact to influence intrapsychic development. The research design assumes there is a shared experience among African American men and that there will identifiable reactions to viewing recorded images capturing the death of other African American men. Another limitation is the generalization of affective responses to viewing death facilitated by law enforcement, as individual experiences, cultural identification and personal factors may vary and impact the universality of the research findings. Finally, the research design does not accommodate gathering data from multiple sources. The participant interviews, though conducted multiple times, are the sole source of the research data from the participant's perspective. However, the interviews were conducted more than once to ensure data saturation and the findings incorporated direct quotes to accurately reflect the participants' words.

The role and background of the researcher

This research design is influenced by the researchers' professional and personal interest in exploring the psychological responses of African American men. As an African American, the researcher is aware of personal attitudes and beliefs around racial oppression, systemic racism and violence, and the targeting of African American men. The researcher acknowledges personal perceptions of the relationship between police officers, the legal system, and the African American community. This study is framed by the researcher's awareness of socio-cultural normalization and minimization of African American death for public consumption and the resulting psychological trauma.

The researcher is also a practicing psychotherapist who has witnessed African American patients identify emotional responses related to powerlessness and invisibility when it comes to interactions with law enforcement. The researcher has worked directly with populations impacted by the socio-emotional consequences of racism, poverty, and systemic injustices including members of the BIPOC or LGBTQIA community. This study presumes research data highlights similar feelings of anger and vulnerability with limited personal agency to protect against systemic racism. Additionally, the researcher suggests that exposure, direct or vicarious, to systemic violence and racism within the cultural milieu has psychological consequences, whether consciously acknowledged or not. The researcher has completed graduate-level research and completed a master-level quantitative research proposal. The researcher has received class instruction for nearly three years on conducting a qualitative research design that includes understanding techniques, methodology, and processes for qualitative analysis through class discussions and assignments.

Chapter IV

Results

Introduction

This chapter will illustrate the study's findings using a phenomenological approach to answer the primary research questions: What are the subjective psychological experiences of African American men who view recorded video images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law? And address the sub-questions: 1). How do African American men experience mourning as a result of viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement? 2). How do African American men assign meaning to viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men? and 3). What are the approaches African American men use to cope with viewing recorded images depicting death by the actions of law enforcement?

Purposive sampling was conducted to gain deeper insight into how African American men psychologically experience viewing recorded images of death by the actions of law enforcement (DBLE). The eight participants who participated in the study met all the criteria based on self-identification as African American cisgender males between 25-50 years old and born in the United States. The participants also met the study criteria by reporting that neither they nor any immediate family members were employed within the legal system or identified as law enforcement officers. The eight participants also met the final criterion by confirming they

viewed at least one video recording depicting the death of another African American man by law enforcement.

There were over 150 respondents who responded to the electronic recruitment flier posted on social media and expressed interest in participating in the study. The researcher randomly selected eight participants to complete a Pre-Screen to determine eligibility. Six participants requested to complete the pre-screening over the phone, while four participants preferred to conduct the pre-screening via Zoom. To maintain confidentiality and protect participants' identities, all eight participants were asked to provide an alias which was used during the interviews and will be referenced in the publication of the findings. The eight African American men who participated in this study were Damonte, George, Alex, John, T-Bone, Phillip, Black, and Max.

Demographics of the Sample

The participants ranged in age between 26-39 years old with the median age being 32 years old. Two of the eight participants indicated living in Los Angeles, CA, four of the eight participants reported living within the greater Chicagoland area, while one participant identified living in Miami, FL, and another participant in Dallas, TX. All eight participants indicated being born in the United States. Additionally, all eight participants graduated from high school and five out of the eight reported having attended at least some college. All eight of the participants identified their marital status as single and two out of the eight participants reported being fathers. Table 1 includes the demographic data of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic data of research sample

Alias	Age	City of Residence	Education Level	Occupation	Marital Status	Number of Children
Damonte	35	Chicago	Some College	Unemployed	Single	0
George	31	Miami	Undergraduate	Computer Science	Single	1
Alex	35	Tinley Park	High School	Specialist	Single	0
John	26	Los Angeles	Undergraduate	Economist	Single	0
T-Bone	39	Chicago	High School	Self-Employed	Single	1
Phillip	30	Los Angeles	High School	Student	Single	0
Black	33	Chicago	Undergraduate	Unemployed/Student	Single	0
Max	27	Dallas	Undergraduate	Business Analyst	Single	0

Description of the Sample

- Damonte is a 35-year-old African American man who was born and currently resides in Chicago, IL. He attended some college and is currently unemployed. Damonte is single and has no children. Damonte was deeply engaged and reflective on his experience watching the recordings of DBLE. Damonte seemed careful in finding his words and expressing his emotional reactions during the interview. He reported experiencing anger after the last interview, while also recognizing held back tears during several parts of the discussion. The researcher specifically noted Damonte's inclusive use of "we" and "us" throughout his reflections in the interview. An example is illustrated as he reflected on the community response following the release of the George Floyd video: "In our neighborhood, we have a mural of those that did pass on. Every time I see it, I'm like "Oh wow. Every time when I see it, I say "OK, another mom loses a child...it's somebody's son or daughter. Just why is it us?"
- George is a 31-year-old African American man who was born in Los Angeles, CA, and currently lives in Miami, FL. George has an undergraduate degree and currently works in Computer Science. He identified as being single and the father of one child. George presented as soft-spoken and expressed his initial discomfort in interviewing with the

Zoom camera. While his responses were brief and clear, the interview followed a more question-and-answer format and was less conversational in nature. The researcher noted George's introspection about the intrapersonal impact of viewing recorded images of DBLE. He shared, "I really try my best to balance everything together. I knew all that I was about to see would've changed me a lot...I think I kind of lost my beliefs".

- Alex is a 35-year-old African American man who was born in Chicago, IL but currently lives in Tinley Park, IL. Alex is a single high school graduate with no children. He works as a Specialist. Alex initially noted he lacked specific memories to detail the incidents of DBLE, although he acknowledged having seen several recorded images over the years. As the first interview progressed Alex began to speak more specifically about incidents of DBLE. The researcher also observed his deliberate approach to expressing himself throughout the discussion, particularly in how he articulated the shifts in his awareness of DBLE, "I'm not really on social media. I don't really engage in that stuff, probably a verbal conversation for sure. Especially with a few friends. But it was just... "Wow". Like I said, it's very shocking that that happened. It kind of made you feel on edge even more with law enforcement. Even if I personally haven't had any issues with them."
- John is a 27-year-old Economist both born and currently living in Los Angeles, CA. John has an undergraduate degree and is single with no children. John also initially expressed discomfort with the Zoom camera. His affective presentation was stoic and unemotional throughout the interviews. John offered brief and concise responses during the interview but was willing to elaborate on his insights when prompted by the researcher. He provides some insight into his thoughtful responses, "A lot of people have ideologies

towards the way they approach [DBLE] incidents that occur. I really take my time, and I think about stuff. I really spend my time thinking about the way things are going.”

- T-Bone is a 39-year-old high school graduate who is self-employed. He was born and currently lives in Chicago, IL. He is single and the father of one child. T-Bone also shared during his interview that he served in the military. T-Bone spoke in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner and his responses generated a curious and engaged dialogue with the researcher. His conversational interview covered a range of insights that highlighted the emotional and socio-cultural aspects of his lived experience. T-Bone began the first interview by providing context of how his perceptions of DBLE occurrences have been shaped, "I honestly, I can't remember a death. The most recent was George Floyd, of course. But I could say this, since the age of 6 I've been seeing police brutality on video when it comes to Black men."
- Phillip is a 30-year-old unemployed student both born and currently residing in Los Angeles, CA. He is a high school graduate and is single with no children. Phillip shared that he looked forward to the opportunity to self-reflect on DBLE. He differed from the other participants as he expressed having positive interactions and associations with law enforcement, "My personal experiences in terms of law enforcement actually it's good to have rules and regulations that guide behavior. That alone will eliminate the behavior of some people. The way they will act. The way they would think. The way they would do things, and the place that they can step in, or they cannot step in."
- Black is a 33-year-old student who was born and currently lives in Chicago, IL. Black has an undergraduate degree and is single with no children. He responded to interview questions decisively, and with firm confidence. He also freely elaborated on his responses

sometimes without being prompted by the researcher. Black expressed his sensitivity to the impact of DBLE incidents on the African American community by stating, “For every case that goes viral, I feel like sometimes it's necessary to address the issue. But I feel like for an individual in the Black community going viral it should be something groundbreaking contributing to the society in one great way or the other. So, I feel like seeing these issues go viral they give me a sense of like joy that I see these issues being addressed. Sometimes. But, then at the same time, I feel like, going viral because you are being abused...your rights are neglected. Often those things that I don't want to see on mainstream media about the Black community.”

- Max is a 27-year-old Business Analyst who was born in NYC and currently lives in Dallas, TX. He has an undergraduate degree and is single with no children. Max spoke softly but provided brief and concise responses to the interview questions. He conveyed empathy and reflected positively on participating in the study, "I feel this is great. It's the greatest moment where I can actually talk to somebody about how I feel about police brutality on Black people. And also, to share, talk, and give opinions”.

Prescreen and Interviews

Before conducting the first interview, the researcher emailed the eight participants Informed Consent forms to sign electronically via DocuSign. The researcher verified that all participants signed the consent form before the scheduled initial interview. A total of 17 interviews were conducted between the eight participants who all met with the researcher at least two times. All eight participants met face-to-face with the researcher via Zoom. The first interview lasted between 60-90 minutes and the follow-up second interview lasted between 30-60 minutes. The follow-up interview provided the participants the opportunity to elaborate or

provide clarification to their responses or address any unresolved questions from the first interview. There was only one participant who met with the researcher three times as additional time was necessary to ensure full completion of the interview and follow-up questions. The participants were emailed a transcribed copy of their first and follow-up interviews as a method of member checking and providing the opportunity to make edits or changes. Additionally, participants were emailed transcripts from the second follow-up interview and asked to provide the researcher with any edits or comments via email. All eight participants verbalized reviewing a copy of the transcripts, but none provided any edits or feedback.

Themes and Sub-Themes

The main objective of this study was to explore the subjective experiences of African American men who viewed recorded images of other African American men who died by the actions of law enforcement. The primary research question is “What are the subjective psychological experiences of African American men who view recorded video images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law?” And identify through the sub-questions: 1). How do African American men experience mourning as a result of viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement? 2). How do African American men assign meaning to viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men? and 3). What are the approaches African American men use to cope with viewing recorded images depicting death by the actions of law enforcement? The results are organized around 6 themes and corresponding sub-themes generated from coding and categorizing the interview responses. The themes were identified by categorizing and comparing similarities and variances across the participant's responses. The responses highlight the participants' subjective experiences as reflected in how they recall and

interpret viewing the recorded images of other African American men who have died by the actions of law enforcement.

Theme I: Interpretation of the Death

The first finding from the participant interviews highlights how the participants interpreted the recorded images of death they observed. This section explores how participants understood what they were observing from viewing these recorded images of death.

Sub-theme: Recalling the details

Participants were asked to describe and discuss their observations from the recorded videos. All eight participants recalled viewing the video of George Floyd's death from May 2020, however, the extent of detail remembered varied among them. Six participants specifically identified George Floyd by name when discussing his death, while two participants did not initially recall his name but referred to the event by mentioning distinct details that correspond to the George Floyd video. Regarding the viewing of other video recordings of African American men during encounters with law enforcement, Phillip's quote summarizes a sentiment also shared by two other participants about why specific details of these incidents had become unclear over time:

Phillip: "I've watched so many videos and I've seen so many videos, but I can't really recall [specific details]. I think it was... I can't remember, I think it was also a traffic issue" However, three participants referenced the deaths of Tyree Nichols in January 2023, one participant mentioned the death of Michael Brown in August 2014 and one participant discussed the death of LaQuan McDonald in October 2014. Additionally, one participant referenced the deaths of other African Americans whose deaths gained public attention, such as Trayvon Martin or Breonna Taylor, though these cases did not involve the specific African American men who

are the primary focus of this study. T-Bone also noted other highly publicized events from the early 1990s and 2000s as context for how he currently views video recordings of DBLE:

T-Bone: “Sean Bell in New York. I think I was in high school at the time. So that was the late 90s, early 2000s. There was an African brother named... they shot him. Remember just stories growing up about Jim Crow in the South. So, you'll get *the Rosewoods* and things like that. I would read up and hear stories like that. But what took place that year too was Rodney King. Even as a child. What stood out the most as a child? It looked similar to the civil rights videos. I was watching them simultaneously at the same time I was learning. They just didn't know Rodney King's footage was being recorded. And them guys still got off”.

How the recordings were viewed

All eight participants reported viewing the recorded images on a personal cell phone, indicating where they initially encountered the video recordings, three participants reported first seeing them through a news broadcast, while five recalled viewing them on social media platforms. The participants indicated subsequent viewings of the video recordings primarily occurred on social media: three participants reported seeing recordings on Facebook, two saw recordings on YouTube, and one on Twitter. Max and T-Bone explained their decision to view the recordings on social media was to get an unedited version of the incidents:

Max: “I wanted a better coverage of it. I wanted to see whether there may be lengthy and more detailed videos of the whole incident. That's why I went to YouTube to look for it”.

T-Bone: "Saw it on social media. Telephone. I didn't want to watch on the news because I knew the news only shows so much. I knew the raw footage is on social media. As far as the raw footage on the news show, they could only show so much. They'll cut it off”

Motivation to Watch the Video

Explaining their intentions to view the recordings, three participants indicated the video recordings appeared on their social media timelines or feeds. Two participants stated their viewing of the recordings was unintentional as they had not initially intended to watch the videos before encountering them. T-Bone further explains his intentions to view the video recordings:

T-Bone: “Actually when it first came out, I tried not to watch it. Because I seen all my lifespan - I seen so many videos. So, when I did watch it, what sticks out was how he sat on him, and how long. And the people that were watching and how he just stayed there. But he didn't care. That's what sticks out”.

In contrast, Alex expressed his viewing of the video recording involuntarily:

Alex: “Um, wasn't probably by choice. The news coverage was so heavy it was front and center. So, you really didn't have much of a choice. If you were watching the news or something it would just come on”

The need to know more and being curious about what would be on the video recordings was the motivation for two participants, including Damonte who discussed his motivation:

Damonte: “I was curious to know what happened at that time. What caused it and things of that nature. (sigh and pause) at that moment it was one of those like heartfelt... like... my first thing was okay, let me read. I need to know more. Are they going to say more? But, as a curious person, I will always want to know what's behind it. I even went to try to go onto YouTube and tried to find the video so I could see in depth what caused it. What led up to where it got where it did. That's what sparked the curiosity to make me research a little bit. But then once I did do it, it made me also think it might be a little bit much to take in and realize that someone lost their life due to police brutality”.

The public nature of the deaths and the larger conversations that were happening around the incidents of DBLE were motivations for two participants, including John who noted the public attention prompted him to view the recording:

John: “I watched it a couple of times because it brought up discussions around the neighborhood and it was really trending at that time. So, while we have people talking about it, I just go back, and I watch them and try to gain an insight on more of what really happened”.

Frequency of viewing the recordings

All eight participants acknowledged seeing video recordings of DBLE more than once. Three participants estimated seeing the video recordings between 0-5 times. The quotes from T-Bone, Alex and Black describe the unavoidable nature of seeing the recorded images:

T-Bone: “It was just a hot topic. And the way that we receive news now is right in your face. It's within arm's reach. So just indulging and just getting that flooded information, that's the way that we receive information now”.

Alex: “At least 10 times if not more. Probably like 20. They played it a lot. Probably more than that. probably over the course of, you know, a 2–3-week span”.

Black: “I would say, a lot because at that time the issue was everywhere on Twitter. So, I couldn't place how many times I saw that video. I would say a lot. Yeah, that's how Twitter works. A trending topic and you go online, you see the video more than once at a time. In a scroll, you could see the video like, twice, three times, depending on how much the issue is going viral. I would say, more than once or twice at a time”.

How did you prepare yourself for watching the video?

Seven participants engaged in some type of preparation before viewing the video recordings. Four of these participants identified using internal motivation, including prayer or

having self-motivating talks to prepare to empathize with the men who died. Max and T-Bone addressed how they approached preparing to watch the video recordings of death:

Max: “When it was explained to me before I watched it, I kind of found it interesting to look into. Until I watched it and I started experiencing it, you know. I tried to put myself in his shoes and feel what he was feeling. It was really sad that he had to go through that whole thing on his own. Actually, what I saw wasn't what I was expecting. I was expecting to see maybe the man and the police fighting or something. Or there was an exchange of blows or something. That's what made me rush to see the video. But the fact that he was completely overpowered and didn't...wasn't allowed to do anything it really gave me the shivers”.

T-Bone: “I view death different from serving in a military. Being deployed, losing friends and civilians. And in the military as far as like a violent death goes, I just view it different. So, I don't want to say that I'm cold, but I could be a little numb sometimes”.

While Alex offered a contrast to thoughts of preparing to watch the videos:

Alex: “I don't think there's any way you can mentally or emotionally prepare yourself to view things like that”.

What stood out/captured your attention

There were variations across the participants on what was most noticeable and remembered from viewing these video recordings. Six of the participants provided details describing the actual deaths. Max and John describe what they remembered about George Floyd's death:

Max: “They tried to control him. To constrain him, but he was trying to struggle to breathe according to what he was saying. He was saying he can't breathe. They kept on

putting pressure on him. I'm sure this was still to constrain him. People were actually videoing, and I think he stayed in that position for about 10 to 12 minutes, which later on, there was no movement, right? There was no movement seen coming from him. Even after that, the policemen refused to give him assistance. It was really disturbing given the fact that I'm also Black”.

John: “I remember he was lying on his face while the officer used his knee to press upon his back and neck which caused just George Floyd to be short of air. He couldn't breathe and then he died from lack of air”.

Four other participants specifically noted that George Floyd's pleas for help were ignored by bystanders and law enforcement officials.

Sub-Theme: Understanding the Deaths

Why do you think it occurred?

The participants shared their perspectives on why they believe these African American men died by the actions of law enforcement. Four participants personalized the meaning of the deaths by imagining what it would be like if it happened to them. One participant believed the deaths were due to a violation of their rights. Alex's quote reflects the view expressed by another participant that George Floyd's death occurred without cause:

Alex: “(pause) You really couldn't make sense of it. It was just totally sense-less. I couldn't really make sense of any of it. Everything that transpired just didn't make any sense. I don't know. Just... eerie...(pause) Wow. Man, barely even did anything and loss his life. Like I said, it's really sense-less”. It's just sad, like, why? What makes people do stuff like that? Like, it just makes no sense”.

Another theme that emerged was the participants' need to seek justification or assign responsibility for law enforcement, aiming to understand the circumstances leading to the deaths. This quote from Black was similarly expressed by four other participants on the need for law enforcement officials be held accountable:

Black: "Before the police enforce the law, you are the law. Because without you, there is no law. Then when it comes to dealing with you, the law is forgotten. You pave the way for the law and it's now you who abuse those laws that are made. After thinking about that video and the whole George Floyd issue I felt like the whole kneeling thing was something that basically they were taught to do. Because for every time you see a cop harassing someone ... the kneel is always something that you see that's used often".

Participants also consistently expressed the need to take time to develop their own understanding of the incidents that lead to the deaths. Quotes by Damonte, Alex and Phillip describe their process for making sense of why the deaths occurred:

Damonte: "I really couldn't until I had time to process it. It took me like maybe 3 times to go back, read comments and then kind of like dissect it a little bit. It took a moment to be like okay, he was minding his business and you thought that he was a suspect".

Alex: "(long pause) I guess I just take time think about it. Maybe think it out. Think about what actions on either side could have prevented stuff from happening. Kind of look past my own personal life. And as I say, be mindful and aware. See what happened in those scenarios and say, "Don't do those things". (laugh) To put yourself in that kind of situation to have that as a possibility to even happen".

Phillip: “I might not really fully understand because, as I said earlier, people think differently. There might be so many reasons that could prompt such an incident. Maybe the hatred of Blacks. You have to give it time and investigate”.

Max was the only participant who conveyed not being able to assign any meaning or understanding of why the deaths occurred:

Max: “Sorry. I do not know how to answer that. I think normally he would... I don't know. He should have... I don't know why he died so quickly. (pause) I don't know if that was what also led to his demise, I don't know. I don't know where they got their motive from. It's really sad that they had to come down at him in such a way”.

Sub-theme: Factors Contributing to the Deaths

Participants discussed what they believed led to the deaths of the men in the video recordings. Four participants noted a disregard for the lives of African American men as a factor in the deaths, while three participants described the incidents as murder or forms of police brutality. Race and racism were identified as a motivating factor to the deaths by three of the participants. A quote from Black reflects his belief that African American men are more vulnerable in interactions with law enforcement:

Black: “As a Black man, it makes me wonder if that's the fate of every Black man because most of the time, we often are tagged as criminals just for looking the way we are. What happens next? How will this end? Would I be next?”

T-Bone references the historical relationship between African Americans and law enforcement as context for how incidents of DBLE occur:

T-Bone: “So that makes me enraged. You didn't have to call the police. Because if you know the history of Black men and police... Black men and police in this country, it is a

chance is not going to be good. So that made me upset because it's no compassion for a Black man. If you knew a Black man been traumatized since the conception of police in this country, how is your first mind to call the police on a Black man? So that makes me upset about it. Because that could have been prevented. That could have changed like I said, the rules of engagement, the way they handled him could have changed. It could have been prevented.”

Additionally, two participants concluded the responsibility for the deaths of African American men lies with law enforcement, attributing these deaths to an abuse of power.

Theme II: Response and Impact

Participants were asked to share their experiences of viewing the video recordings. This section explores their reactions to witnessing the deaths captured on video, providing a more in-depth exploration of their emotional responses, the interpersonal effects and their insights of the social and cultural impact.

Sub-Theme: Emotional Response to Viewing the Recordings

Participants shared their emotional responses to viewing the deaths of African American men during interactions with law enforcement. The participants described a range in their emotional responses related to viewing the video recordings, including feelings of sadness, anger, being overwhelmed or weakened, being afraid, or pain. T-Bone further discussed his emotional response to viewing the video of George Floyd's death:

T-Bone: “It took a while for it to register. It took a while for me to feel emotional about it, but ultimately though, it was just a sad situation that that could have been prevented from jump. In the grand scheme of things, a \$20 bill that a store is missing is so minute. But the fact of the matter, when it comes down to that, a man is dead behind it. And no

matter what it was, it shouldn't result in death. Especially if he wasn't aggressive to the cops. And that's why I think cops don't understand that we do get defensive. That's just a human thing. And they'll look at us wrong for being defensive. Stop dehumanizing me or try to make me seem like a monster. Because I have feelings like humans”.

This quote from Phillip, which was also reflected by four other participants who identified feeling bad or sad:

Phillip: “I feel bad, I was weakened. I wanted to cry. I wasn't happy. I don't even know how to explain what...I feel extremely bad. I feel extremely bad because that's not how they should have done the issue”.

Anger was commonly expressed across the participant responses as illustrated in these quotes by John, Damonte and T-Bone:

John: “I was really angry. The first time I saw the videos two times in a row, I had to lock my phone up and I got really angry. I just had to lie down for a little while. The first time I saw the video, I actually watched it up to two times in a row. So, I was really angry and then had to turn off my phone and lie down for a couple of minutes”.

Damonte: “It angers me more than anything because you didn't even give me a chance to respond and the next thing you know you're drawing a weapon. “Ughh. I go backwards mentally and go into that anger feeling. Of how I felt when it all started”.

T-Bone: “This is a person who is part of the people. So that's when I started to get a little riled up because I'm not law enforcement. Never been, but I did serve in the military, so I do understand rules of engagement and things like that. When it comes to him urinating, if you know the human body, that's one of the things you learn about when death is coming. That their body relaxes himself. And you could see, this man is peeing on

himself. Do something else. Sit him up, something. And you still had no compassion.

And that's when the anger starts to come in. And unfortunately, that's when color starts to come in”.

Max and Black described feeling overwhelmed when describing the death of George Floyd:

Max: “First of all, I felt pain from the point where he was pushed in and the way he was fit into the vehicle, he couldn't breathe. It wasn't a really, really pleasant experience. After watching the video, I was really in shock and I felt like, “wow this is really happening”.

Black: “Considering that was someone like me, considering the racial background. Firstly, I was pissed. Secondly, I would say I was scared, considering that could be me anytime, any day. And thirdly, I felt what would become of his family, considering one man decided to take the laws into his hands up and take the life of George Floyd. So, I would say I was pissed and scared at the same time”.

Additionally, George and John described feelings that are associated with mental health symptoms:

George: “Seeing the feed [of the video] on your timeline it was really painful. It gave me kind of... lots of anxiety, depression. It was a lot to me because that was someone of the same race. So, it was really kind of hard for me”.

John: “I felt sad and depressed because he was Black like me. If it was any other Black person like myself, I would have actually been in the same shoes he was in. So, that means I would have actually gone through what he did and ended up the way he did”.

Sub-Theme: Interpersonal Impact

Impact of Direct Witnessing

The participants reflected on the personal impact of witnessing these videos depicting the deaths of African American men. They shared how viewing these videos affected them

individually and addressed the emotional and psychological consequences of witnessing such events. Alex shared the impact of repeated viewing of these video recordings:

Alex: “(pause) I will say it was a lot ...to have to see that over and over and over. Maybe one time is okay, but after that, it's like alright. How much do you want to view that? It just plants an energy that you don't want to remember. When you see it so often...it's over and over it's...(pause) it's just mind blowing. You know, somebody getting murdered...that's rough. On your mental and emotional state. You're just kind of sad. So, um...(pause) I felt... kind of just sad...like, man...just kind of questioned. I thought wow, this is a little bit overwhelming. Not something I want to discuss and talk about all the time. So, I was definitely overwhelmed with the amount of coverage and stuff. But, I get it they want to highlight it and it was a tragic event”.

This quote by George not only addresses his process preparing to watch these video recordings, but also reveals the direct impact he believes they have on him:

George: “I would have done maybe a self-talk or maybe talk to someone about it first so that I knew what's coming beforehand. Giving myself some motivations because I knew that all what I was about to see would have changed me a lot...(pause) I think I kind of lost my beliefs”.

John describes how watching the videos shaped how he perceives and experiences his external world:

John: “The effects of seeing those videos is that most of the time there's a difference between hearing information and seeing information. So, whenever I hear about them, the incidents just go back in my memory. So, it's kind of tough for me a couple of times when I go through them. I feel threatened by that, and I think I don't feel safe. So, I've

just got to be careful the way I walk, the way I speak, and the way I stare at the authorities. It always gives me a mindset of being careful. Security pressures. Trying to be low key wherever I go”.

Another theme that emerged across multiple participants and will be explored in a later section, is the personalization of the experience with thinking “it could be me”. Here are quotes from Black and Damonte who share some variations of personalizing what they viewed:

Black: “Do I have rights? Because looking at the scenario at that point, a whole lot of his rights were violated, and as a citizen of the United States, you have rights”.

Damonte: “I’m almost getting teary eyed thinking about it. If was in her shoes, I would want justice for a child. If I had a child I would want just for my child. Someone to rally with me when it came to that officer. And I put myself in their shoes if that had happened to me. How will my mom feel? Or my family take it and they did this to me? And they would want justice for my safety. Or justice in general for me. To keep my name alive and going. So, we don’t forget about those who lost their lives to police brutality”.

Additionally, Alex acknowledged uncertainty about the full extent of the impact viewing those has on him:

Alex: “Maybe I’m not too aware of it, but I’m sure it did. Just an immediate feeling like I don’t know what type of impact it had on me, but I’m sure it-- Yeah, it’ll probably manifest itself down the road”.

Impact as an African American man

To further understand the personal impact, participants were asked to reflect on the significance of viewing the videos as African American men. Seven participants associated the current impact of DBLE on African Americans with the historical tension between African

American men and law enforcement. Four participants expressed feelings of vulnerability regarding their safety and a lack of security with law enforcement. Damonte's quote reflects a belief, also expressed by Black, that African Americans are targeted:

Damonte: "From my understanding we get targeted for just, if you look close to the person you are suspected. You could be an innocent bystander. And now we're losing our lives for something we didn't do. As a Black man speaking for other Black men this is totally unfair".

Quotes by Damonte, Max and T-Bone highlight how watching the video recordings of other African American men dying influenced their perceptions of law enforcement:

Damonte: "I'm always cautious when seeing law enforcement. I try to stay calm when I see them, more so than being...nervous. So, I try to say calm when I see them". Most situations can't be calm if the officer is having a bad day. They just really can't. That's why I'm trying to laugh and keep myself from crying. It's your response at that moment. You have to watch your response and just act accordingly to what they're asking. Just so you don't lose your life to police brutality".

T-Bone: "That just let me know. It made me feel like they don't care. It made me feel like I got to overly protect myself. I got to be guarded. In the hood, they be like, 'Man, it's too hot out here'. We equate just police presence as being hot. 'Go inside because it is just too hot man'".

Max: "It actually exposed me to what is going on. Even though I have heard of racists long before now. I haven't actually been able to witness such kind of brutality. And it has made me understand the whole thing in a different way".

Sub-Theme: Social and Cultural Impact

Need for System Accountability

Participants connected the experience of viewing the video recordings to the broader context of being members of a cultural community and a part of the larger society. The need for systemic accountability and justice was a belief expressed by several participants. Quotes by Damonte and T-Bone highlight their belief about the systemic vulnerability of African American men:

Damonte: “Y’all need to be doing more on the law enforcement side to protect us more. So instead of filling the Academy. I feel like they are not standing up for our Black men. Or just our lives in general. And that’s the reason we’re always screaming “Black Lives Matter”.

T-Bone: “Because our interaction with police is a lot more different. We are in survival mode when we interact with them instead of feeling safe. Instead of having that safety blanket that other people feel they could have with them, we don’t, so it becomes like a protective measure for ourselves along with them”.

Additionally, expectations of systemic accountability is again discussed and four participants expressed seeking or expecting some kind of accountability for the law enforcement officials involved. Quotes by Max, T-Bone and Phillip illustrate variations in how participants perceive accountability:

Max: “Both agencies, the law enforcement agencies and the people, because it may not only be police doing that to a citizen. It can be the other way around. Generally, even outside this context of racism, we all need that emotional support from time to time in order to make sure our mindset is in check. To make sure they are up to the standards of dealing with day-to-day activities (of law enforcement).”

T-Bone: “Legal action. I want to see real legal justice. I don't like that about the United States legal system. If I would've done that to him, in uniform or out of uniform, I would've got the book slammed on me. I would've got excessive force and all this other stuff. I would've been looked at as a criminal. It was annoying when they were calling the ‘George Floyd trial’ until people start saying, no, George Floyd is not on trial. They still were trying to humanize him as a cop. I just want justice. I don't feel justice was served. He got a release date”.

Phillip: “I would've called those policemen and maybe given them a suspension within a period of time. I would've suspended them for a while and cease their salary for a little period of time. But let them just know that their actions weren't funny”.

Two participants expressed a lack of hope for any justice or accountability. Black's quote further highlights this belief:

Black: “And I feel like no matter how long we try to talk about it, it keeps on happening. When it happens, I feel like...the cops who you know carry out ... probably gets a suspension. Probably some minimal punishment and he's back with a badge and all of that. And I feel like the punishment for this stuff is not real complete ones. That's why a lot of times they keep happening. Keeps reoccurring. So, I feel like the whole thing is just a circle. And until it's properly addressed that circle keeps... going around, around and you just hope it does not get to you”.

Confront the reality of the relationship between African Americans and law enforcement

Participants discussed the significance of having access to the video recordings in the manner they were able to view them. Four participants believed the video highlights a disregard for African American lives and the injustices, powerlessness, and vulnerability that African

American men experience in their interactions with law enforcement. Alex's quote provides an example of this belief:

Alex: (in response to asking if he viewed the deaths as murder) Absolutely. (long pause)

You said what did it mean? (long pause) I guess... (long pause) Maybe African American lives are not valued the same as others. Even other minorities”.

T-Bone and Black think the implications of having access to these recorded images brings greater awareness to the issues impacting African American men when encountering law enforcement:

T-Bone: “It was such, such a hot topic no matter what timeline as far as social media goes. It was coming up (on your timeline) and then it got a harder topic because Facebook and Instagram started to take it down or put things on there, like, ‘oh, this is false news’. Twitter gives it to you raw. And it's still a hot topic, but then it's on the news across the country as a hot topic. It's state to state. It's no longer local amongst me and my friends. It's an east to west type of thing. It was just such a big thing that cops just can't be trusted. They're above the law, we just Black. If I hear about police brutality in New York, in Chicago here, we all Black. Other Americans tell us we ain't American enough”.

Black: “It does a lot of damage to the Black community because I feel like every time something like that happens...the types of issues that get to the news are the ones that become very viral. A lot of stuff going on out there of the police brutalizing African American, Black men in general, that you don't see big in the media because they have not gone viral. A lot of times I feel that what happens to the cases of those individuals who did not go viral and had no one to fight for their issues of justice...are silenced”.

John describes the impact of viewing recorded images of death versus just hearing about it:

John: “Seeing something does not give you the mindset of how it's played out. The only thing my mind has to do is create and imagine images. But then seeing it with the eyes, it creates a visual playlist and audio in memory. It plays back. Seeing such a scene and recalling constantly. I think seeing more of this laid out right now in society is kind of really scary”.

How does it impact you as a member of society?

The lack of support or acknowledgment by mainstream society was addressed by four participants. Black and T-Bone described how they perceive the increase of incidents of DBLE going viral impacting the larger socio-cultural community:

Black: “I feel it was necessary for the outcry that it had. The issues struck up protests among the Black community. Even celebrities had to come forward and say the case (George Floyd’s death) had to be investigated. Because the more it continues to happen, it instills fear in you and people who have the same knowledge and who share the same idea about things like that. It's not something that should be happening at all”.

T-Bone: “I don't like the violence, but I like it coming out. I like that it can be in your face because they could hide it. They could hide it before... so we know it's still going on. So, at this point what are y'all going to do to change it? Hold conversations of laws being passed to help the people? Because the laws that's in place is not always helping the people. So, it shows holes in the judicial system, and it shows that you can't pull the wool over our eyes and hide it anymore. And when it comes out, everybody could see it with the simple push of a button. A repost button. So, I like that, but I don't like the brutality. It's good that the videos have been put out, but it is hard to say who should control how it's put out. And people could register it the right way. We don't trust them.

But if we get raw footage, everybody might not be emotionally mature or ready for that. So, it's kind of like, ah, I don't know what's the better way”.

The shared vulnerabilities with other cultural groups confronting systemic injustices were acknowledged by several participants. Alex’s quote indicates a belief that other cultural groups share a similar vulnerability as African Americans:

Alex: “I think it's maybe a little bit more ...maybe a little bit more highlighted in our community or the Black community maybe. I think everybody should be on edge.

What if was a black or African American officer that encountered a white individual? A reverse racism type thing? I think everybody should be a little bit on edge or a little bit more sensitive to being vulnerable and not just the Black community”

Phillip also addresses the implications of a shared cultural experience:

Phillip: “We feel bad as a community, as people, we feel bad. As a Black man, seeing those videos, I know racism is real. And it will continue to be, unless the government really wants to step in and take proper actions in order to eliminate racism. So, to me, we as Blacks, we are not happy to see those things because even blacks cannot treat white men like that. We cannot because we have human sympathy. We take everyone as equal. We love each other, we love ourselves and we love external bodies. So, we feel bad as a community, as people, we feel bad”.

Theme III: Recognizing the Loss – Acknowledging and Memorializing the loss of life

The video recording of George Floyd’s death in 2020 stood out among all eight participants. Although participants integrated the deaths of Tyree Nichols and Michael Brown into their responses throughout the interviews, this section focuses on how they remembered and memorialized the death of George Floyd.

Sub-Theme: Evolving Perspectives and Emotional Responses

The participants reflected on how they initially felt after watching the video of George Floyd's death and shared how they feel about it now. The perspectives and emotional responses shifted for some participants with time. George and Black expressed the feelings diminished in intensity over time:

George: "I got better, but the memory still sticks with me. After a while, I got better. But I still got the memories but am better. Lasted for about 2 months. It took me a really long time to deal with the emotions but after a month and everything started dying down. I think about him (George Floyd) most times when I walk on the streets. Seeing other Black people. Or maybe most times when watching the video. When I hear some people talking about it, I just kind of remember this because I knew nothing about it if not for the video. So, he sticks with me the most when I hear other people talking about it. I instantly recall the incident".

Black: "So, I would say it was not as high as it used to be, but then I thought, it's something that's always been there. When you look around and observe that these situations continue to happen and not a lot is done about the whole situation. The whole thing, the whole reminder kicks in and that fear comes in all at once and holds us".

Damonte compared his initial and current emotional responses:

Damonte: "It's still fresh. It doesn't feel like he's (George Floyd) been gone that long for me. It still feels fresh in your mind after you talk about it. And then seeing it. I have to put my mind back in that angry space of where I felt 3 years ago when it happened. I was like, "Oh she wants me to go back to that angry spot of when I first heard it..." Oh my god. I'm mad. Like why why why why why. Go backward mentally. Go into that anger

feeling of how I felt when it all started. I was fighting back tears. I wanted to go there...I wanted to. I'll say my feelings on it today is not how I felt when we initially talked. I'll say that. I was more hurt when it all happened. I was really hurt. Confused. And besides wanting to know why...understanding both sides of the spectrum. Now, it's more understanding...insight. I gained wisdom about it. When we first talked about it, I was more in my feelings about it. It was more hurt feelings on...it triggered something to make me think about myself. If I was in that situation. Now, gaining the wisdom and knowledge from our conversation just made me think of things totally different. Way, way different now".

And John indicates his emotional response remained consistent over time:

John: "Most times I still feel bitter talking about him (George Floyd) or maybe someone bringing up to talk about what happened to him. So, I think I still feel bitterness up to now about the incidents that happened. The way that Blacks are not given the opportunity to talk. The way he was jumped on with force. We just feel the sadness from what is happening around us. The neglect and the separation of white and Black people. I still feel pain and depression and fear for my community".

Three participants used words like, depression and anxiety, while T-Bone described it as a trauma and discussed the difficulties with remembering George Floyd's death:

T-Bone: "I understand it differently now. It was just a pot boiling or it exploded. The same as with the riots with George Floyd. Or just history repeating itself. I don't know if I could stomach to watch it today because that part of that trauma is something that once again, I end up burying. So, I don't know if I want to even relive it by watching

it today. Watch it and try to keep a clear mind and clear heart before I feel an emotion to react to it.”

Sub-Theme: Memorializing the dead and reflecting on surviving family

Remembering the men who died

Participants shared how often they think about the men who died by the actions of law enforcement. Max was the only participant who expressed not having current thoughts about the men who died. John and Damonte noted their thoughts about the men upon being prompted:

John: “I think about them a lot because mostly when I’m with other Black folks, we talk about things that happened in the society. Most of the time we talk about racism. So, yeah, they come into our discussions a couple of times. Frequently. I would say some months because of having a lot of conversations, as you know, with Black folks, my friends, and my acquaintances. Sometimes we have discussions about him. Or when we’re talking about our safety and how this must be one of the major problems. Yeah, so we most times refer to his death”.

Damonte: “In our neighborhood we have a mural of those that did pass on. They made a billboard up here in South Shore. Actually, every time I see it, I’m like “oh wow” Every time when I see it, I say “OK”. Another mom loses a child. Just why is it us?”

Alex and Black acknowledged the impact both the media and public discussion has on how they thought about the men who died:

Alex: “Not that often. When it first happened [I thought about him] a lot but like now everything just kind of died down. But probably if I get pulled over or something for a traffic stop, I definitely do. But other than that, not that often. I only have if something on social media comes up or something on TV like come up. But me just thinking about it

out of nowhere like, no, I really haven't. There's just been so much other media things going on for like, it's kind of hard to keep all that stuff fresh in your brain”.

Black: “Even up until this point it's something that you still get to see on social media. And for every other video out there that you watch, even if the individual is not famous, it drives your mind back to one permanent event that you have seen or that’s been a huge topic of discussion. Every time I see a topic or a video being visualized, my mind is driven back to that George Floyd incident because that has been one of the most prominent cases of police brutality that I have seen”.

Thoughts about the family

A theme that emerged among several participants was thinking about the families of the men who died. Black and Phillip’s provided more context on the value they place on the family system:

Black: “As someone who cares about family. And for every situation I get involved in or see people getting involved in, often at times where my mind drives to is my family. What happens if this kind of stuff happens to me? How would my family feel? What happens? How would this individual's family feel? Because, for me, family is everything. And in that sense and in that light, I feel like that's how I should feel about everybody, that family is essential to them. If I could remember vividly when the whole situation was going on, where he (George Floyd) was begging for his life, I could remember, if I'm not wrong, he cried out for his mom. Seeing that, most of the time when you feel afraid and have no option, I feel like the family is where you will have to turn to”.

Phillip: “Let me say, you know, we are all human beings, we have plans, we have family. The most painful part of it is that, when someone dies like that, they leave the family.

You might not know if the person was the breadwinner for the family, taking care of the family, providing for the family. If he died like that, how do they expect the family to survive? That's one of the emotional aspects of it. The family might be stranded, the family might feel so bad. So that is the major part of it that makes me want to cry”.

Two other participants thought about the impact of the men's death on their families. And Max and Damonte specifically wondered about the families getting some kind of resolution:

Max: “But for the family, I do not think they would still be satisfied”.

Damonte: “As far as my heart goes, it went out to the mother, father or just siblings. My heart went out first and family. For me...it's always...it's the mother. I always go straight to the family. Ya'll lost someone. I put myself in your shoes and think about my mother”.

Theme IV: Seeking Interpersonal Connections

Participants sought interpersonal connections in different ways after watching these video recordings, including engaging with friends, family, or their community. This theme examines how participants explored the dynamics of engagement and communication with others about viewing the recordings.

Sub-Theme: Engaged in Discussion with Others

The range of engagement interpersonal engagement varied from having conversations with friends or family to participating in online discussions. Seven participants reported discussing the video recordings with either family, friends or colleagues. Max discussed viewing the videos with others:

Max: “It's not like I really went back to watch it on my own. I was watching it with people, and we all shared our opinion on the issue”.

Phillip acknowledged having both conversations with others and joining online discussions related to the deaths:

Phillip: “I also commented. Most people that commented on the video did not really support the action of those policemen. I countered the action of the police because to me we are all human beings. I also discussed that with others”.

Damonte and John indicated reading, but not contributing to online comments:

Damonte: “I was reading more comments than commenting on them. I was reading more like, ‘justice for so and so’”.

John: “I read that they said George Floyd wasn't given the right chance. He was killed without sympathy, and that he was killed unlawfully and there was nothing the government did about it”.

Both Max and Phillip expressed considering sharing the videos with others or inviting others to watch the videos:

Max: “It's not like I really went back to watch it on my own. I thought about sharing it, but I don't think I did share it. I only thought about it. I wanted to show it to my friends at gatherings”.

Phillip: “I shared the experience, the actions and most of them also wanted to watch the video”.

Sub-Theme: Influences of the Shared Experience

Thoughts or Feelings Influenced by others

Participants considered the extent their reactions to the video recordings were shaped by the influence of others. Two participants believed their thoughts and emotional reactions were not influenced by others. However, John and T-Bone discuss how others were influential in their thoughts and responses:

John: “Speaking with family and friends about the incident brings a lot of ideologies. So, it brings up lots of emotions adding on to everything that has happened. It's kind of really sad that such discussions always come up”.

T-Bone: “I start to adopt some of the energy from the person that's explained it to me because I'm getting their energy from it”.

Participate and Engage in Community Response

The response of the community and the activity around the Black Lives Matter movement was also addressed by participants during the interviews. There were variations across the degree of observing and participating in a community action. T-Bone shared his process for deciding how to participate in a community action:

T-Bone: “The marches, we can say that because people literally was saying they marched for justice for George Floyd. I participated in one. I didn't want to. I said I'm more of a ‘Malcolm X’ than ‘Martin Luther King’. And Malcolm didn't march. I thought it was just important to do it. And watch the generation from my mom to me to her all still marching. So, I just did one”.

George described what he remembered of the actions against the community protestors:

George: “I remember one that happened while they were protesting. Two Black Americans were blind instantly because of the tear gas that was thrown on them”.

Additionally, Max explored his ideas about how to contribute to the community in the wake of incidents regarding DBLE:

Max: “And we talked about having some community support programs that can provide emotional assistance to the people generally. That can reduce racial tensions amongst us, especially with the law enforcement agents. Maybe put in some listening sessions

where there could be a session like this. That could be some focus groups. Where the systems and the enforcement agencies are able to talk and maybe share views. Positive views about how interrelationships and have respect for each other”.

Theme V: Means to Cope

Participants identified various coping strategies to manage the impact of viewing recorded images of death. They discussed coping mechanisms that involved both automatic and unconscious processes and intentional, goal-oriented approaches.

Sub-Theme: Coping Mechanisms

Participants expressed different ways of adapting automatic and unconscious responses to cope with the aftereffects of watching these videos. Six participants described deliberately avoiding or pushing away thoughts of the video recordings. Alex and Phillip described their process of attempting to cope:

Alex:” I mean, I guess you really don't have much of a choice unless you want to be a hermit or something (laughs) You gotta go out into the world with the things that you see and learn you have to adjust accordingly to the world that we live in. I guess the answer - How do you cope? You just be aware and keep those things in the back of your mind. Live your life according to how things are going on the world and try to avoid certain things that prevent things from happening to you. So, as far as it's coping, just being mindful.”

Phillip: “I'll try to discuss something else just to forget the situation. You let it go because you cannot do anything about it. It absolutely happened”.

T-Bone shared how he attempts to manage “the chamber” which is how he describes his mind:

T-Bone: (in response to how he manages the “chamber”) “That’s a good question. I don’t know. I just feel it’s there and it is kind of like a safe space to keep me emotionally sound from the traumas”.

Damonte and T-Bone also mentioned using humor as a means to cope:

Damonte: “I gotta laugh about it to keep myself from going back to being angry. I tend not to seek out those types of things because I know how it could possibly hit home. It could possibly hit hard if a predicament or a situation was to ever occur.”

T-Bone: “Maybe because I was a child and didn’t understand, but it was just mostly jokes with Rodney King. It end up becoming just a joke... You would get beaten like Rodney King or ‘Can we all just get along’ this and that”.

Sub-Theme: Coping Strategies

In addition to identifying unconscious attempts to cope, there were also some goal-directed approaches participants identified implementing after watching the video recordings.

Phillip identified both direct and indirect approaches to coping:

Phillip: I also try to take myself to maybe a playground. Maybe, sometimes I try to just have comedies or some kind of songs. Sometimes I’ll want to hang around with friends that can bring out vibes”.

John identified some direct and intentional approaches to coping:

John: “I talked to my brothers or mostly talked to my friend about it. We kind of over-talk and then motivate ourselves. It helped because my brother was a motivation for me. He’s a motivation for me. My close friends were a motivation for me. Sharing your experience and feelings so that people can help your mental stability and mind. That’s how I was able to cope”.

T-Bone and George also explored seeking out mental health treatment to help with coping:

T-Bone: “Therapy. I'm still in therapy about it because I didn't know it was there. I thought I was good”.

George: “I was really in an attack position. So, I tried to take some notes on some actions to stay...just to think about myself and how I could move forward. I almost went for therapy. I took off from work and I started getting better with my mental health. I nearly went to therapy. I was really scared of...from the depression”.

Theme VI: “It Could Be Me”

The final theme highlighted participants' perceptions and reflections on their own vulnerabilities and the fragile sense of self-protection that emerged from witnessing incidents involving the deaths of African American men by the actions of law enforcement. The idea of "it could be me" was consistently conveyed across multiple participant interviews when discussing the personal and systemic impact.

Sub-Theme: Personal Impact

What would I have done?

Six participants conveyed the thought "It could be me" as they considered the personal impact of witnessing these deaths. Black, Damonte, Alex and Max illustrated how thoughts about themselves were integral to their cognitive and emotional process to viewing the video recordings:

Black: “Most of the time when I see stuff like that, I have to think, ‘Imagine if this was me’. I wonder what if in this particular situation would this happen to me. Like, with George (Floyd), you feel like you could be this because of your skin color. Could be that because of your race. This could happen to any of us at any time, on any day”.

Damonte: “It made me think about my own sanity. Like, if I were to get pulled over by the police or anything, I'm not the type that's gonna resist arrest. I'm just gonna simply be kind of cool”.

Alex: “I saw that and thought about how it might apply to my life”.

Max: “I put myself in his shoes and I thought to myself ‘What if this was me?’ What would I have done”?

Damonte, Max and Alex discussed how they considered their actions if confronted with law enforcement:

Damonte: “How would I feel? I'm an innocent bystander minding my business, and you automatically assume I'm saying something. And you didn't even ask me my name”.

Max: “We imagined if that was happening to us. How would we be able to free ourselves? I don't really know. We all talked about it. We don't know what we would have done”.

Alex: “I guess taking those situations and apply it to my own life. What to avoid or try to avoid to not even put myself in that situation”.

Subtheme: Personal Interactions with Law Enforcement

Participants shared their personal interactions with law enforcement and their perceptions through the lens of “it could be me”. Four participants reported having personal encounters with law enforcement while three participants described experiencing feelings of fear and nervousness when considering interactions with law enforcement. T-Bone discussed his lack of trust with law enforcement:

T-Bone: “Police came up and they searched us. Searched us for drugs. We're kids. We're 17 years old. We're trying to make it back to the house for curfew. When do I go from a

kid, in my mind I'm still a kid, to you view me as a criminal? So yeah, I don't trust cops.

My whole, like I said, from [ages] 6 to 39 is them being untrustworthy”.

Max and Phillip expressed either positive or neutral perceptions of law enforcement:

Max: “Apart from being pulled over, I do not think I have had any experience with law enforcement”.

Phillip: “My personal experiences in terms of law enforcement, you know actually it's good. Yes, it's very good”.

Additional Insights

Impact of the pandemic

There were two participants, Alex and Damonte, who referenced the COVID-19 pandemic and the required social isolation as impacting the socio-cultural environment when the George Floyd video was released in 2020. Alex noted that during the pandemic, social isolation and fewer external distractions made it more likely for individuals to focus on news stories. Damonte also suggested that African American men were more likely to be targeted by law enforcement if perceived to be violating social distancing protocols.

Overall Reflections

Participants shared their experiences discussing their insights and observations about viewing these recorded deaths of African American men. Four participants indicated feeling better after being able to talk about and share their experiences. However, Alex's response illustrates the emotional complexities of discussing this topic:

Alex: “A little uncomfortable. A little uncomfortable. It’s kind of the stuff you don't wanna feel. You just kind of want to kind of bury it, you know. It's like talking about ghosts. A little bit uncomfortable. Especially as, you know, as a Black man sharing

how you feel. It's kind of getting numb to this stuff sometimes... It's just like you don't know what you're supposed to feel or how do you say, how do you even convey it”.

John, Black and T-Bone believed the opportunity to talk about it provided them with a voice:

John: “I'm happy to discuss the experiences of Black men to better society”

Black: “This was an opportunity for me to express my opinion about how I feel about this issue. I felt like, you know, you give me a sense of ...confidence to speak to you because I feel like you probably understand me and you know seeing things for my point view. To want to express my views about this whole thing...you understand where I'm coming from as a person of the same community with me”.

T-Bone: “I feel like I got a story that needed to be heard. It's my chance for my story to be heard and speak up for the people that can't tell a story anymore. That people still hear and feel some way about. To tell the story of the emotions from my peers, family and colleagues that experienced similar things and they express it to me”.

Finally, Damonte explains being surprised by his experience participating:

Damonte: “It put a lot in perspective. Looking at the harsh realities. It made me face a whole harsh reality. I promise you, a few times you seen me almost cry a little bit. But I had to hold it back. To keep a strong, straight face. And it's real. This in-depth deep conversation made me really do that”.

Summary of the findings

The findings of this study highlight layered themes related to the participants' experiences when viewing recorded deaths of African American men by DBLE and how they process the impact. Participants shared how they interpreted the deaths, recalling specific details, and their attempts to understand factors contributing to the deaths, like race and systemic misuse of power.

They also discussed their emotional responses ranging from expressions of empathy, sadness, and anger and the impact of witnessing incidents of DBLE on perceptions of law enforcement and increased social and cultural awareness. Additionally, participants discussed how they acknowledge the loss by remembering and memorializing those who died and sought interpersonal connections by discussing these experiences with others and the extent the interactions were influential to emotional and cognitive processing. Finally, participants identified adopting both coping strategies and coping mechanisms to help manage the impact of viewing these recordings of death.

Chapter V

Findings and Implications

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of African American men who have viewed recordings of other African American men dying by the actions of law enforcement. The objectives of the study were to examine the psychological impact on African American men of viewing these recordings to understand the influence of linked fate, or the impact of a shared identity, and systemic violence framed within a psychodynamic theoretical framework. A total of eight African American men reflected on their experiences viewing the recorded images of death through a semi-structured interview focused on understanding how the men mourned the deaths, assigned meaning to the deaths, and established coping responses as a result of viewing these recorded images. This chapter discusses the findings and key themes that emerged from the interviews applying a theoretical framework and situating within the existing empirical literature. Additionally, the limitations of the study and implications for future research will also be discussed.

Findings: Addressing the Research Questions

The study addresses the primary research question: How do African American men experience mourning as a result of viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement? Secondary research questions sought to understand: How do African American men assign meaning to viewing recorded images depicting the death of other African American men? and What are the approaches African

American men use to cope with viewing recorded images depicting death by the actions of law enforcement?

Experiences of Mourning

Emotional Responses

Davis, Wortman, Lehman, and Silver (2000) wrote of the influence of emotional responses on mourning and establishing meaning following death. Anger and confusion are common emotional responses in the aftermath of death (Davis, et al., 2000). As highlighted in Theme II: Response and Impact, participants initially responded to viewing George Floyd's death with anger, sadness, weakness, and a sense of being overwhelmed. Of the eight participants, four reported experiencing sadness, while three acknowledged feelings of anger. Additionally, participants described pain, anger, despair, and a sense of hopelessness as their current emotional response to viewing George Floyd's death at the time of the interview. Participants' reflection on their evolving emotional responses demonstrates their willingness to acknowledge the complex emotional impact of viewing death and engage in the process of mourning. The findings also highlight factors influencing the participants' mourning experiences, such as their ways of remembering and memorializing the men who died in the recordings.

Memorializing and Remembering

Racial melancholia recognizes a specific aspect of mourning tied to race and racism, emphasizing the value of extended social support networks grounded in shared historical experiences. The collective recognition not only validates the individual experience but also fosters a sense of belonging necessary for group survival (Moore, et al., 2022). The shared experience was an integral part of how the participants experienced the deaths of the African American men. The participant's lack of societal validation and feelings of vulnerability as

African American men, especially with law enforcement, motivates the desire for shared experiences during the process of mourning, meaning, and coping. Seven of the eight participants reported discussing the video of George Floyd's death with others. The focus on shared experiences in mourning aligns with ongoing discussions about how collective spaces, such as social media and digital platforms, facilitate mourning and memorialization.

Engaging with online comments and discussions on social media platforms allows one to collectively express emotional responses, assign meaning, and develop shared bonds (Harju, 2015). Participants in this study used social media platforms as a way to memorialize the men who died. The levels of participation ranged from passively observing social media comments to actively contributing to online discussions or sharing video recordings with others online. Harju (2015) examined how social media platforms influence mourning and collective memorializing, noting that digital spaces support disenfranchised grief by providing a space for shared acknowledgment. Harju (2015) further asserts that participating in online rituals, such as repeatedly viewing shared videos or contributing to discussion boards, illustrates a type of mourning ritual that allows individuals to affirm their identity within a community and honor the value of the deceased's life. The study's findings reflect how shared experiences, expressed through social media platforms, were important to the participants and served to collectively remember and memorialize those who died. Consequently, Harju (2015) recognizes social media as a newly formed and non-traditional space of community that offers individuals anonymity and brief focused interactions that facilitate collective mourning and remembrance.

Since the mid-2000s, social media platforms served as digital spaces where the deaths of African American men are repeatedly witnessed and collectively acknowledged. However, as incidents of DBLE increased and became more visible, there was a noticeable shift in how these

deaths were collectively experienced with social media communities emerging as a key source of support and emotional protection. For example, in January 2023 before the release of the video of Tyre Nichols' death, social media discussions advised African Americans on managing the emotional impact, including offering suggestions to avoid involuntary exposure and supportive messages to cope. Social media played a significant role in how the participants mourned the deaths of African American men. Direct or passive participation in online communities provided a way for African American men to gain validation and acknowledgment of their emotional pain. These communities support the mourning process by providing emotional containment as African American men repeatedly re-experience systemic violence. The results illustrate how African American men utilize social media platforms to establish formal and informal support networks and engage in a process of collective or shared mourning.

In Theme I: Interpretation of the Death, there were some variations in how the participants remembered instances of African American men DBLE. While six participants specifically identified George Floyd by name and three mentioned the death of Tyre Nichols, other participants either could not recall the names of the men who died or misremembered details of the deaths depicted in the videos they viewed. However, the lack of precise memory does not negate the occurrence of mourning. Witnessing these disturbing images served as a means of remembering and memorializing, connecting memory with the lived experience of loss. The lack of memory processing may explain variations in how participants recalled the details of the deaths, as noted in Theme I: Interpretation of the Death.

The findings support Fernando's (2018) concept of zero processing during mourning, whereby memories of distressing events influence one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. As traumatic stress impedes higher-level executive functioning, unprocessed memories function as

present-day experiences and that can be indistinguishable from past events. Consequently, the disturbance is not stored in long-term memory, but instead mentally experienced as a perceived reality or action that becomes reactivated when re-experienced, resulting in memories that have not been fully processed and remain in a state of zero processing (Fernando, 2018).

Additionally, fragmented memory from witnessing disturbing events impacts both neurological and psychological functioning. The cognitive functions necessary to accurately encode and organize information are temporarily halted while processing disturbing events and can also lead to incomplete or disorganized recall (Crespo & Fernandez-Lansac, 2016). Events that are remembered during times of high anxiety and stress are likely to be encoded and recalled in fragments. The release of the video depicting George Floyd in May 2020 coincided with the unprecedented national crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed to the death of nearly 390,000 people in the United States by the end of that year (Statista, 2024). The traumatic stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic intensified collective stress and anxiety, as individuals had to confront both systemic racial violence and mass death and vulnerability stemming from the pandemic.

Participants discussed viewing the video of George Floyd during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of social distancing and shelter-in-place mandates. They discussed how the pandemic restrictions not only reduced opportunities for interpersonal interactions but also increased the amount of time they spent on social media. This quote by T-Bone reflects the increase in policing that accompanied community protests of George Floyd's death:

T-Bone: "I remember walking out the house and seeing so many police cars, and I'm like, 'What is going on?' I had lived across the street from a mall at the time, and they started

rioting and looting here. police literally was at the mall, like a whole precinct of cars and that. And so, like I said, it was just a hot topic everywhere”.

Racial disparities and systemic racism brought on by the pandemic created additional vulnerabilities for African Americans (Liu & Modir, 2020). There are documented incidents of African American men being racially profiled by law enforcement officials because they were wearing protective face masks and following public health guidelines (Liu and Modir, 2020). The racial profiling occurring during a public health crisis reflects the history of African American men being overly surveilled and the vulnerabilities of self-protection and freedom from fear of violence or discrimination.

Van Giezen, Arensman, Spinhoven, and Wolters (2005) note that memories of emotionally disturbing events are flexible, changing as new information and emotional responses develop. Proximity to the event also influences memory consistency, as events witnessed indirectly, like how the participants viewed these recordings of death, tend to be less consistent than those experienced directly. Finally, frequent recall can improve memory consistency but may also distort it as new information or emotional responses reshape the original memory (Van Giezen, et al., 2005). Participants describe involuntarily encountering videos of men who share their racial identity dying while they casually use social media. The frequent and unexpected viewing of these deaths was found to be disturbing, and memory-altering and shaped their experience of direct witnessing reinforcing personal vulnerability.

Assigning Meaning and Making Sense of DBLE

Theme I: Interpretation of the Death explores the participants' insights from observing the deaths and their efforts to make sense of the events depicted in the video recordings. The researcher observed the participant's non-verbal communication as they conveyed their

understanding and interpretation of the loss. The researcher observed participants taking prolonged pauses before responding or briefly chuckling and shaking their heads as they processed their thoughts. Additionally, three participants reported needing to take time to make sense of what happened so their initial thoughts after viewing the video changed since discussing it during the interview. These non-verbal cues demonstrated the participant's engagement in a deliberate and active process to understand and assign meaning to what they witnessed in those video recordings. Their efforts to process and interpret these events provide a foundation for how they understood the emotional and psychological impacts of what they witnessed.

Making Sense of What Happened

In Theme I: Interpretation of the Death, participants identified racism, systemic misuse of power, or a lack of any reasonable explanation as reasons for the deaths depicted in the videos. The lack of a clear explanation or attributing the deaths to systemic and racial injustices influenced how participants made sense of these events. Racism, often described as an “invisible trauma”, impedes opportunities for African Americans to form secure attachments to the external world, fostering insecurity and emotional ambiguity (Davis, 2007). Secure attachments to the external world reflect a belief in fairness and predictability necessary to challenge assumptions and biases and facilitate a desire to seek meaning (Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000). The lack of systemic justice or remorse affects the ability to make sense of the loss. Four of the eight participants acknowledged personal insecurity and vulnerability in interactions with law enforcement or expressed fear of future encounters as a result of viewing recordings of DBLE. Additionally, five of the eight participants emphasized the need for systemic accountability for the deaths of African American men, while two participants expressed skepticism about the possibility of achieving accountability.

Davis, et al. (2000) analyzed assumptions associated with finding meaning after emotionally difficult losses. They believed the ability to derive meaning following a violent death is disrupted when the death is perceived as intentional or senseless. While the duration of grief varies among individuals, the search for meaning and understanding often correlates with the intensity of emotional distress. Davis, et al. (2000) found that 14% of participants did not find meaning after a sudden death and less than half reported establishing meaning more than a year following the death. They concluded that meaning-making does not always resolve grief or provide closure. Historical experiences with social injustices and the feeling of personal insecurity influence how individuals process loss, contribute to complex mourning, and activate avoidant coping strategies to distance from the loss (Davis, et al., 2000). Participants in this study attributed the deaths of African American men to systemic racism, lack of regard for African American life, and violation of human and civil rights. While they expressed high expectations for systemic accountability, they also expressed doubt about the system's ability to restore trust and security.

Approaches to Cope

The findings in Theme 5: Means to Cope examine the coping strategies and mechanisms participants identified implementing to manage the impact of viewing these recordings. Coping mechanisms involve the use of unconscious adaptive approaches, whereas coping strategies involve more deliberate, goal-oriented actions. The participants in this study demonstrated both overt and subtle methods of managing the psychological impact of witnessing death. Six participants acknowledged efforts to avoid thinking about the events, employing a combination of active and passive coping tools to “put it out of my mind”, a recurring sentiment expressed throughout the interviews.

Coping Mechanisms

Grieving responses perceived as too emotional or overwhelming may be internalized as a threat, potentially prolonging grieving and fostering the development of avoidant coping behaviors (Boelen & van den Hout, 2008). Avoidant behaviors refer to the actions or cognitive strategies aimed to detach from the reality of a loss, which can exacerbate disenfranchised and complicated grieving experiences. Ruminative avoidance is a specific type of avoidance that includes thinking about the factors contributing to the loss, but through thought suppression attempts to distance from active thoughts and feelings related to the loss (Boelen & van den Hout, 2008). The study highlights how participants considered the attributing factors behind the deaths of African American men at the hands of law enforcement, acknowledging systemic and socio-cultural influences. However, they also emphasized the necessity to “keep going”, often to avoid regularly confronting their realities of feeling exposed and unprotected in interactions with law enforcement.

Dissociative coping is a psychological mechanism to emotionally detach from suffering through a process of splitting off the core “self” to interrupt overwhelming thoughts, memories, and emotional responses which contributes to a fragmented sense of self-identity (Davis, 2007). The use of humor as a coping response to manage the emotional intensity of viewing recordings of DBLE was either explicitly noted by participants or observed by the researcher during the interviews. Some of the participants recognized using humor as a way to alleviate the emotional weight of the videos or to avoid expressing emotions such as crying or sustained anger about the situation. Avoiding thoughts related to overwhelming and disturbing events can be a way to manage cognitive processing, however, avoidance can further complicate unresolved mourning and contribute to feelings associated with depression and unresolved emotional grief responses (Boelen & van den Hout, 2008). The participants used dissociative coping strategies, “putting it

out of my mind” and humor were active and passive ways they managed the impacts of DBLE. The researcher also observed that participants’ laughter or smiling while recounting aspects of their witnessing experience, suggesting discomfort with the thoughts and emotions evoked by revisiting these events. This study illustrates how humor or indifference served as a dissociative coping mechanism, either intentionally or unintentionally, to avoid re-experiencing the distress associated with DBLE.

Theoretical Framework

A constructivist approach: Symbolic Interactionism

The value of interpersonal or community connection during the process of mourning, meaning-making making, and coping was reflected in the results of Theme IV: Seeking Interpersonal Connections. The participants discussed the levels of engagement and communication with others as it related to seeing the recordings of DBLE. Seven participants reported discussing George Floyd’s death with friends, families, or colleagues following their initial viewing. As previously noted, some participants engaged in online discussions, either actively or passively, as a way to process their experiences, seek collective validation and affirmation, and as a means of emotional expression. The attempts to seek out these interactions demonstrate the role of shared communication in meaning-making.

Symbolic Interactionism is an approach of social constructivism to explain how meaning and knowledge are formed through social interactions. Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical frame that explains how individuals construct meanings based on social interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Symbolic interactionism examines how the socio-cultural world is developed and sustained through interpersonal relationships, with meaning, identity, and experiences co-created within social groups (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Symbolic interactionism highlights how meaning is

shaped through relational experiences, enabling individuals to create shared understanding from repeated and meaningful social interactions. The intention to seek either online communities, share the video recordings with others, or discuss with others indicates the influence of the relational experience on the participant's process of managing and trying to understand what they witnessed in those video recordings. Participants also acknowledged the influence of others in their decision to watch the videos and in shaping their thoughts and emotional reactions.

Symbolic interactionism can also be applied to better understand the development of the self, specifically as it relates to identity, emotions, and collective behavior. According to Brooks (1969, as cited in Carter & Fuller, 2015), identity is shaped within social and political contexts, with self-perception and emotional regulation influenced by social interactions and responses. Altman (2007) suggests the use of relational psychoanalytic concepts, including understanding dissociation, to explore how social processes like racism integrate into intrapsychic experiences. As such, object usage represents an essential developmental milestone in infancy, where the child begins to distinguish between self and the external world, recognizing that caregivers, as objects, endure and not retaliate against the infant's internal aggressive impulses (Winnicott, 1969).

Object Relations Perspective: Object usage and systemic racism

Altman (2007) applies Winnicott's concept of object usage to explain how systemic racism denies African American men an opportunity to express their full range of emotions without fear of social or systemic retaliation. Altman (2007) suggests that racially charged events, combined with societal intolerance for their anger expressions, threaten African American men's sense of omnipotence and resilience. Racial profiling and excessive policing function as aggressive and rejecting systems for African American men reflecting the dominant

society's failure to tolerate individual acts of aggression (Altman, 2007). As a result, this impacts how African American men choose to express themselves and how society acknowledges their anger and frustration over systemic racial injustice.

Five of the eight participants expressed feeling either anger, pain, or sadness when asked to discuss their emotional responses to viewing the death of George Floyd. Participants also questioned the complicity and sanctioning by mainstream society when discussing expectations for systemic accountability. Alex's quote summarizes the vulnerabilities conveyed when participants reflected on their lived experience from within a socio-cultural context:

Alex: "It kind of meant to me just...we're not ... as African Americans...just people.

Society. Are we really safe? Are the streets - not even our community - but this overall society are we really safe out here from the people that's supposed to be good?"

Mainstream society's failure to empathize with African American men's responses to social injustice often pathologizes or criminalizes their legitimate expressions of anger, framing them as a social critique (Altman, 2007). The external world's response not only reinforces racial stereotypes but also implies that African American men are inherently dangerous or destructive, mirroring the failures described in Winnicott's concept of object usage. Thus, instead of facilitating relationships that acknowledge and navigate racial differences, societal structures reinforce racialized aggression for African American men.

Intersubjectivity Theory: Identification and Self-Representation

An objective of this study is to explore the concept of linked fate to understand the psychological impact on participants when viewing images depicting DBLE. The concept of linked fate believes individuals perceive their well-being as tied to the shared outcomes of the group in which they identify. The findings in Theme VI: "It Could Be Me" highlight the

participants' sense of vulnerability and emotional fragility related to DBLE. During the interviews, the researcher observed the participants' frequent use of "we" when reflecting on their experience viewing the recordings and thinking about the men who died. The use of language like, "we" and "us", symbolizes a personalization of their viewing experience and recognizing participants' inclusion and identification with the men who died. The witnessing experience was also influenced by the repeated exposure to images of death involving men with a shared identity. Participants internalized the experience of viewing these recordings, expressing concerns about their interactions with law enforcement and recognizing that the men who died could have been them.

Intersubjectivity theory can further explain linked fate by emphasizing the impact of relationships on the psychological experience. By shifting from an individualistic focus in psychodynamic theory, it highlights how psychological phenomena are shaped through interactions between individuals' subjective worlds, demonstrating the central role of relationships in emotional and psychological experiences (Stolorow and Atwood, 1996). Intersubjectivity theory explains how psychological development occurs within relational systems, particularly through the intersubjective relationship between an infant and caregiver, which shapes the experience of future affective relationships (Stolorow & Atwood, 1996). Intrapsychic conflicts and defense mechanisms develop from miss-attunement and a lack of effective integration in that early relationship.

The internalization of identity recognizes introjection and internalization as necessary defenses for ego development and the formation of self-representation. Milrod (2022) examines the development of the "self", representing the individual, and self-representation, an internalized image of self, through a psychodynamic lens. According to Milrod (2022), self-

representation is a structured internal construct that develops from identification and influences self-perception and behaviors. Introjection, necessary for ego development, is an unconscious internalizing of the attributes, qualities, and characteristics of others into the individual psyche, facilitating identity formation and self-image. Internalization involves absorbing aspects of external objects and integrating them into self-representation (Milrod, 2022). The ego's development is tied to introjection, which functions defensively to help the ego cope with perceived threats and anxiety. Introjection is represented in the participant's repeated viewing of violent images depicting the deaths of African American men, potentially leading to an internalized critical object representation and resulting in self-criticism and depressive states. The recurrence of the sentiment "It Could Be Me" was reiterated across participant interviews illuminating the impact of shared identity and the process of internalization and introjection on the participant's perception of self and self-representation.

Collective Identification and Group Membership

Social membership and group affiliation not only influence self-perception and representation but also shape cognitive patterns and social behaviors. Brewer and Gardner (1996) conducted an empirical study on how group membership influences self-perception, distinguishing the personal "self", based on individual traits, the relational "self", rooted in relationships, and the collective "self" influenced by group identity through social bonds and cultural affiliation. The study concluded that prompts emphasizing "we", activate collective identity, enhancing self-representation in large groups and demonstrating its flexibility in shaping self-perception and cognitive processes (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). As demonstrated in the findings from both Theme IV: Seeking Interpersonal Connections and Theme VI: "It Could Be Me", interpersonal connections and group affiliation framed how the participants remembered and mourned the men who died, sought out others to help understand and cope with

the video recordings and affirm a personal and collective identity based on a shared experience. Witnessing the deaths of African American men by law enforcement activates a collective identity, expressed through “we” and a shared sense of systemic vulnerability, conveyed in thoughts of “It Could Be Me”, shifting the impact from an individual to a collective group experience.

Empathy

Finally, in Theme III: Recognizing the Loss, participants discussed how they acknowledged and memorialized these deaths by expressing empathy for both the men who died and their surviving families. Empathy, as an expression of mourning, involves mirroring another’s subjective experiences through a shared understanding of those experiences (Marsh, 2022). Empathy replicates others’ mental states to represent their thoughts and feelings and is shaped by cognitive processes and within social contexts (Marsh, 2022). As a result, individuals with shared group membership are more likely to empathize with others within that group, a finding reflected in this study through participants' empathy for the men and their families.

Limitations of the study

Qualitative research designs measure validity based on credibility, dependability, and transferability. Credibility reflects participants’ lived experience through accuracy and transparency (Golafshani, 2015). The researcher conducted a pilot interview with two African American men who met the study’s participant criteria to ensure the interview guide’s clarity and accuracy. Additionally, the participants reviewed the interview transcripts for accuracy as a form of member checking. The researcher demonstrates transparency by acknowledging the impact of a shared racial identity and experience with systemic vulnerability which may influence subjective interpretation of the data. The researcher maintained a reflective journal documenting not only observations of nuances in verbal and non-verbal communication but also recognizing

the shared socio-cultural experiences within a shared socio-cultural context. Dependability ensures data reliability and can be achieved through conducting an audit trail (Golafshani, 2015). For this study, an audit trail consisted of providing a detailed description of the coding process, including how themes and categories of meaning were developed, and consulting the study's chair for review. An interview guide was also used to ensure consistency and replicability of the semi-structured interviews, and the findings were reported using direct quotes of the participants' own words. Triangulation in qualitative research improves validity and reliability by using multiple data sources to deepen understanding and reduce researcher bias (Golafshani, 2015). Triangulation also measures confirmability by recognizing the subjectivity of data interpretation. While participant interviews were the primary data source, multiple interviews allowed for clarification and follow-up questions. The researcher maintained a reflective journal to document observations and biases and included the demographic details and participant profiles in the results further providing context to enrich data interpretation. One limitation of the study is in the transferability which refers to how the findings can be generalized or applied to other groups and settings (Golafshani, 2015) The study highlights the lived experiences of African American men and may not be generalizable beyond the research sample.

Implications for Clinical Practice

African American men encounter more incidents of both direct and indirect exposure to violence and are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Motley & Banks, 2018). The reluctance to seek mental health treatment, and the tendency to minimize its necessity, stems from feelings of vulnerability to implicit bias and microaggressions by treatment providers and an overall distrust of institutional systems (Motley & Banks, 2018). African American men are subjected to unique cultural pressures to conform to socially accepted

standards of masculinity, often resulting in internal conflicts between projecting strength and resilience while suppressing vulnerability and insecurity (Motley & Banks, 2018). Social stigma, marginalization and internal pressures to conform contribute to misunderstandings of African American men's psychological experiences and stress symptoms. The lack of clinical acknowledgment of the psychological impact of systemic violence hinders effective clinical treatment for African American men. Clinical treatment that neglects to recognize the emotional realities of African American men who repeatedly re-experience incidents of systemic violence can further exacerbate psychological distress. Understanding how African American men process their emotional responses to DBLE holds significant therapeutic value. Without this understanding, their ability to cope with social invisibility, fear, and the search for meaning is further impeded, perpetuating a cycle of unresolved trauma and emotional isolation. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing culturally informed and effective treatment approaches.

The historic nature of publicly consuming violence against African American bodies, now more prevalently distributed through mainstream and social media, perpetuates racialized trauma through repeated exposure to this imagery. Briseno (2024) applies a racial lens similar to the "male gaze" in feminist theory to explore how African American pain is consumed publicly. The "white gaze" objectifies African American bodies and perceives them as lacking agency and humanity, while the "Black gaze" illustrates how African Americans' self-perceptions are often silenced or misinterpreted by mainstream society. Briseno (2024) believes African American suffering, displayed through various media platforms, is perceived casually by mainstream society and objectifies rather than operates as a symbol to facilitate cultural and systemic change. Briseno (2024) acknowledges a cultural history of witnessing racialized violence, citing cases like Emmett Till, Rodney King, Michael Brown, and George Floyd, which normalizes racism

and desensitizes society to systemic injustices. The illumination of African American suffering without a solution-oriented perspective reinforces historical racialized trauma that disavows African Americans' subjective and psychological experiences. The following quote by Black reflects the fear and consequences for African American men having repeated exposure to deaths caused by officials representing an unavoidable and powerful system:

Black: "I feel it was necessary for the outcry that it had. Because the more it continues to happen, it instills fear in you. And for every case like this that goes viral, I feel like sometimes it's necessary to address the issue. I feel like for an individual in the Black community going viral it should be something groundbreaking contributing to the society in one great way or the other. I feel like seeing these issues go viral gives me a sense of joy that I see these issues being addressed. Sometimes. But, then at the same time, I feel like, going viral because you are being abused, your rights are neglected often those things that I don't want to see on mainstream media about the black community".

Black's quote recognizes that while viral incidents of DBLE against African Americans increase awareness of systemic injustices, they also activate emotional vulnerabilities for African Americans who have to re-experience through witnessing. These viral incidents often fail to facilitate systemic change, and instead reinforce the "white gaze" of dominant society that is indifferent to African American psychological pain. Briseno (2024) proposes re-examining how African American trauma is narrated and consumed. Therefore, clinical interventions need to intentionally create opportunities for African American men to construct their narratives about their lived experience while macro-level social work practice works towards actively facilitating systemic change.

Systemic racism activates protective mechanisms rooted in social structures and reinforced by racial biases. Dennis (2022) applies Klein's binaries of "good" and "bad" objects on the collective psyche to manage historical trauma and systemic oppression. The legacies of white supremacy and racial discrimination create a symbolic split in cultural consciousness perpetuating systemic privilege and disenfranchisement (Dennis, 2022). At a macro-level, the binary split symbolizes structural racism, privileging the dominant white society while marginalizing other racial groups. Laws and policies reflect systemic defense mechanisms that protect the dominant culture and "others" African Americans, representing a paranoid-schizoid framework that sustains racial hierarchies (Dennis, 2022). Dennis (2022) suggests that the ingrained defense mechanisms supporting racial segregation, both individually and systemically, need to be addressed, acknowledged, and integrated into individual psychological processes to move toward a depressive position. The integration of this binary split would provide for greater emotional processing and reconciliation for African American men in therapeutic treatment.

Aymer (2016) conducted a case study on a 16-year-old African American male who experienced psychological distress, including hypervigilance and intrusive thoughts, after an encounter with law enforcement. Aymer (2016) suggests therapeutic interventions help African American men develop a "critical consciousness" to recognize the impact of systemic oppression, de-personalize racial bias, and gain insight into how systemic racism affects their mental health. Therapeutic approaches that support African American men in constructing their own narratives can reduce internalized racial oppression and promote a more cohesive self.

Implications for Future Research

Ongoing research into the psychological experiences of African American men is critical to understanding the unique systemic and cultural challenges confronted by this population, including economic disparities, racial discrimination, and inadequate culturally responsive

mental health treatment. Future research should continue to recognize the impact of systemic injustices on the psychological health and emotional well-being of African American men. Utilizing multidimensional both qualitative and quantitative research designs, is important to explore how African American men navigate racism and systemic biases through formal and informal coping strategies.

Briseno (2024) acknowledges the psychological implications of daily exposure to news predominantly focused on violence and destruction. While this study focused on incidents involving African American men who died at the hands of law enforcement, the frequency of DBLE also extends to African American women. For example, Ta’Kiya Young, a 21-year-old pregnant woman died by OH law enforcement, and Sonya Massey, a 36-year-old, who died by IL law enforcement in July 2024. Videos capturing both deaths were also released and shared on mainstream and social media. Future research is also needed to explore not only the broader impact of such exposure on the general population but more specifically examine the psychological impact on African American women who encounter similar social and systemic biases as African American men.

Finally, future research should explore the influence of shared experiences on the individual lived experiences of marginalized racial groups. This study highlights the importance of interpersonal connections and group membership in shaping the experiences of racial group members. Utilizing focus groups as a research method could offer valuable insights, as group dynamics may impact emotional expression and the process of constructing meaning. The interactive nature of focus groups could yield different responses, offering a deeper understanding of how group identification influences grief expression and the meaning-making process.

Appendix A
Electronic Flier



Research Participants Needed

AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN

Interested in YOUR Experience

Are you:

- ✓ African American Male
- ✓ Between 25-50 years old
- ✓ Seen Videos of Black Men who died by police action?

Compensation: \$25 Gift Card upon completion of the interviews

About Me:

I am an African American doctoral student who wants to understand the experiences of Black men who've seen the videos of other Black men dying by the actions of the police.

If you match the criteria, you are needed for this study.

If interested or for more information, contact me:

Nadeja Wesley, Principal Investigator

Email: nwesley@icsw.edu

Voice Mail: (502) 791-6136

Appendix B
Recruitment Email Script

Email Script

My name is Nadeja Wesley, and I am a doctoral student at the Institute of Clinical Social Work in Chicago, IL. I am conducting a research study to complete my dissertation to gain better insight into the psychological experiences of African American men who have viewed recordings documenting the deaths of other African American men by law enforcement.

Participants will be asked to conduct 2 virtual interviews, approximately 90 minutes each and a 30-minute follow-up, related to their personal experiences. Participants will receive a \$10 gift card as compensation after each interview (total of 3) for voluntarily participating in the study.

I am seeking:

- cisgender African American men
- born in the U.S.
- between 25-50 years old
- acknowledge viewing video recordings, either through mainstream or social media, of other Black men who died by the actions of law enforcement.

I also seek participants who have not been employed by the legal system or have served (or had family serve) as law enforcement officers.

If you are interested or know someone who would be interested and meet the criteria, please contact me via email at nwesley@icsw.edu or via voice mail (502) 495-3229.

Appendix C

Pre-Screening Questionnaire

Pre-Screening Questionnaire

I am a doctoral social work student completing research for a dissertation to understand the psychological experiences of African American men who have viewed recordings depicting the deaths of other African American men by the actions of law enforcement.

This screening determines if you are eligible to voluntarily participate in this study. Participants will be asked to conduct 2 virtual interviews, approximately 90 minutes each, on questions related to your experience viewing the video recordings of African American men who died by the actions of law enforcement. Participants will also be asked to complete a 30-minute follow-up interview. Compensation of a \$10 gift card will be provided to each participant after completing each interview. All information will remain confidential.

Participants must identify as an African American cisgender male between 25-50 years old born and raised in the United States.

Date of Screening:

Name	
Race	
Gender	
Current State of Residence	

- ☐ Are you between 25-50 years old?
- ☐ Were you born in the United States?

Have you or any of your immediate family members ever been employed by the legal system or served as a law enforcement officer?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Have you ever viewed a video recording depicting the death of another African American man by the actions of law enforcement?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ Viewed on Social Media (e.g., Twitter/X, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram)
 - ☐ Viewed through Mainstream Media

Interview Scheduled: Yes or No, why:

Preferred Teleconference Platform: Skype Zoom Teams

Notes:

Leave box empty - For office use only

**DO
NOT
DELETE BOX**

Appendix D

Consent Form

Institute for Clinical Social Work
Research Information and Consent for Participation in Social Behavioral Research

Through Their Lens: The Effects of Police Fatalities on African American Men

I, _____, acting for myself, agree to take part in the research entitled Through Their Lens: The Effects of Police Fatalities on African American Men

This work will be carried out by Nadeja Wesley, LCSW under the supervision of Dr. Jacquelyn Vincson.

This work is being conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Clinical Social Work; At St. Augustine College, 1345 W. Argyle St., Chicago, IL 60640; (773) 935-6500.

Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore the psychological impact of African American men who witness death, through mainstream and social media, of other African American men caused by the actions of law enforcement. The findings from this research will inform how clinical social work understands and responds to the psychological needs of African American men. Specifically, this study will increase recognition for how African American men recognizes, makes sense of, and integrate experiences of witnessing death into daily life.

Procedures used in the study and duration

Participants will be asked to participate in two virtual interviews with the researcher. The interviews will be conducted via a virtually and the first interview will last approximately 90 minutes and a follow-up interview for approximately 30 minutes. Each interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and all audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription. Data from these interviews will be maintained electronically and secured via password protection and any documents will be stored in a locked file cabinet. Participants will receive a \$10 gift card, provided progressively at the end of each interview, for their voluntary participation in the study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. The research will make contributions to the field of clinical social work practice and aid social workers with understanding the personal insights and lived experiences of African American men.

Costs

The cost to participate in this study is approximately 120 minutes for the initial and follow-up interviews.

Possible Risks and/or Side Effects

The possibility of psychological discomfort and negative emotional responses reflecting on experiences viewing images of death might be potential risks being involved with this research. The emotional responses can include feeling anger or anxiety during and after participating in the interviews. The researcher will make every effort to establish a safe and comfortable setting, but at any time, you have the right to: a) refuse to answer any question for any reason and b) withdraw your participation in this research project at any time. Although the risks are minimal, if you experience any emotional discomfort during the interview process or thereafter, please be contact the following:

- National Mental Health Lifeline: Call or Text 988
- Black Men Heal - A national website with resources on mental health treatment and education for men of color: www.blackmenheal.org

Privacy and Confidentiality

Any identifying information, including names, gender, geographic location and interview content will be protected and kept confidential. An alias will be assigned to each participant and all identifying information will be disguised in any written publication of the interviews. Each interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The interviews will only be shared with the research consultant(s). All files will be password protected and kept on password protected computers. Any physical documents, including the researcher's handwritten notes, will be stored in a locked cabinet only accessed by the researcher. After 5 years, the data from this research will be destroyed by shredding the documents and deleting electronic files from the computer. Sections of your interview may be compiled and included in the data but disguised to not reveal any identifying information.

Subject Assurances

By clicking "accept" at the bottom of this consent form, you agree to take part in this study. You have not given up any of your rights or released this institution from responsibility for carelessness.

You may cancel my consent and refuse to continue in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. Your relationship with the staff of ICSW will not be affected in any way, now or in the future, if you refuse to take part, or if you begin the study and then withdraw.

If you have any questions about the research methods, you can contact Nadeja Wesley at (502) 495-3229 and via email at nwesley@icsw.edu or Dr. Jacquelyn Vincson at jvincson@icsw.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Dr. John Ridings, Chair of Institutional Review Board; the Institute for Clinical Social Work; At St. Augustine College, 1345 W. Argyle St., Chicago, IL 60640; (773)935-6500.; irbchair@icsw.edu.

Signatures

For the Participant

I hereby consent to participating in this research project as described in this consent form. I have all my questions answered about this research project. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records. I understand that a copy of the online consent form may be printed prior to clicking the "I agree" button. If I am unable to print a copy of the consent form, I may obtain a copy by contacting Nadeja Wesley. I understand that by clicking the "Accept" button, I will be giving my consent to participate in this study.

If you consent to be in this study, click "Accept". If you do not consent to be in this study, click "Reject."

☐

Accept

☐

Reject

Signature of Participant

Date

Would you like a summary of the results of this study?

Yes: ____

No: ____

For the Primary Researcher

I certify that I have explained the research to _____ and believe that they understand and that they have agreed to participate freely. I agree to answer any additional questions when they arise during the research or afterward.

Researcher Name (please print): _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

Researcher to each participant: Before we begin, I want to ask you a few questions to make sure you understand the study:

- Would you describe in your own words the purpose of this study?
- Is there anything more you would like to know about this study?
- Would you explain the possible benefits to your participation in this study? Please explain the possible risks to your participating in this study.

Date:

Name	
Age	
City/State Currently Live	
Birthplace	
Highest Education Completed	
Occupation	
Relational/Marital Status	
Children	NO YES, Number:
Preferred Method of Contact	
Phone Number	
Email Address	

Notes

Appendix F

Interview Guide

Interview Questions

I am a doctoral social work student completing research for a dissertation to understand the psychological experiences of African American men who have viewed recordings of the deaths of other African American men caused by the actions of law enforcement.

I hope to gain insight into your experience throughout this interview. If at any point during our time, you have questions or need to stop for any reason, please let me know. I want to remind you that our conversation is confidential and will be recorded and reviewed by me for data collection.

Viewing Recorded Videos

I want to learn more about the videos you viewed:

1. Which video deaths did you see?
2. How did you see it (e.g., social or mainstream media platforms)?
 - a. What kind of device were you on when you saw the video? (e.g. personal devices like a smartphone or tablet)
3. What do you remember about viewing the videos showing the death of other African American men by the actions of police?
4. How did you participate in any of the current digital discussions about the deaths? (e.g.: online chats, text messages, or social media)
5. How often do you think you viewed the video showing these deaths?
 - a. Did you view it in one sitting? Did you see it across multiple sittings?
 - b. Why do you think you viewed any of the recordings more than once?
6. Have you seen any other videos showing the deaths of other African American men?
 - a. (If viewed more than one video) why do you think you viewed the other video(s)?

Cognitive Process

1. How did you respond to viewing the videos?
 - a. What did you think about what you were seeing?
 - b. How did you feel?
2. What thoughts came up for you about what viewed?
 - a. What did it mean to be viewing these videos?

- b. What did it mean to be viewing the video the way you did?
- 3. How do you make sense of the death?
 - a. Why do you think it occurred?
 - b. You viewed a video showing the death of another African American man, what, if anything, does that mean to you?
- 4. If you knew ahead of time that you were going to see these videos of death, how did you prepare yourself for viewing it?
- 5. What does it mean to you personally to see these videos of death?
 - a. What does it mean to you as an African American man?
 - b. What does it mean as a part of a racial or cultural group?

Mourning

I want to get a sense of the timeline for when you viewed the videos to better understand how you are thinking about and responding to them.

- 1. What was the first video death you remember seeing?
- 2. How many times do you think you viewed it?
- 3. About how long was it before you saw another video showing the death of an African American man by the actions of law enforcement?
- 4. What are your thoughts and/or feelings about the men who died in these recordings?
 - a. How often do you think about them?
- 5. How do you feel about viewing the videos now?

Coping Strategies

- 1. How do you think viewing those recordings affected you?
 - a. How did it impact you personally?
 - b. How did it impact you in your community?
 - c. How did it impact you as a member of society?
- 2. How do you think you deal with the effects of viewing these videos?
- 3. What has been your personal experience of law enforcement?

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