

Race and Social Justice in Baltimore: The Youth Perspective

Anthony T. Estreet, Anita M. Wells, M. Taqi Tirmazi, Michael Sinclair, and Von E. Nebbit

Abstract: This paper reflects on the social work process that we undertook to provide youth with a voice following the ongoing social unrest against police brutality seen nationally with cases such as Michael Brown, Eric Gardner, Tamir Rice and more recently Freddie Gray in Baltimore. While the larger context of race and social justice in America continues to be discussed by many main stream and social media outlets, experts, and other adults, this paper is unique in that it provides a voice to black youth who were directly involved in the social justice responses of both peaceful and civil unrest within Baltimore City following the death of Mr. Freddie Gray. Using a phenomenological approach, we held focus groups with youth offering them an avenue to open up and discuss candidly their understanding of the Baltimore riot and social justice within the context of their city. Additionally, this paper provides the context for and importance of including the voice of black youth within the larger research arena.

Keywords: Urban Social Work; Social Justice; Race; Advocacy; Mental Health; Human Needs

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“Instead of feeling protected by police, many African Americans are intimidated and live in daily fear that their children will face abuse, arrest and death at the hands of police officers who may be acting on implicit biases or institutional policies based on stereotypes and assumptions of black criminality.”

(Quote from SocforJustice)

Introduction

Given the current context of race and social justice in America, as researchers and educators at an Historically Black College and University (HBCU), we thought it was imperative to ensure that the voices of black youth were heard. All over the country, young protesters have been leading the charge to fight for social justice against police brutality, more specifically, the injustices directed towards Michael Brown, Eric Gardner, and Tamir Rice. While these injustices took place in specific areas of the country, the entire nation was following these cases and many others like it not because they were big name celebrities, but because they all were black men who were killed by police officers. This trend of police brutality toward black people has been gaining more national media attention due to major news outlets and social media. More recently, another name was added to that list which directly affected our youth in Baltimore City. That name is Freddie Gray. Mr. Gray was a 25-year-old man who

suffered a spinal cord injury following his arrest by Baltimore City Police on April 12, 2015. According to multiple reports from both mainstream and social media, Mr. Gray was arrested without incident and was alive when placed in the transportation van headed towards central booking. Shortly after his placement in the transportation van, medical assistance was called due to Mr. Gray being unresponsive. Mr. Gray died a week later in a hospital. What makes this case different from the others mentioned above, is that Mr. Gray wasn't fatally shot or choked by a police officer; Mr. Gray was arrested alive and then sustained injuries while in police custody, which resulted in his death. The police officers could not use the excuse that he was resisting arrest or that he was shot in self-defense. This case has resulted in very difficult questions being asked and continuing to be answered about police brutality and race in America, more specifically Baltimore City.

The tension between Baltimore City's Police and economically impoverished and oppressed minority groups has been evident throughout Baltimore's history. African American and Latino men are disproportionately impacted by high rates of racial profiling and police brutality. Although racial profiling of and police brutality against blacks in America has a long-standing history in the United States, increased access to various forms of media has magnified police victimization of black males. It is well noted in the literature, for example, that Blacks in America are at greater risk of experiencing police brutality and are more likely to be stopped by police while driving (Dottolo & Stewart, 2008; Elicker, 2008; Kane & White, 2009; Smith & Holmes, 2003). A

“shoot-to-kill” trend began during the Progressive Era of law enforcement in the United States (Adler, 2007), and black males consistently have been disproportionate victims (Binder & Fridell, 1984).

Baltimore City has a long history of police brutality against African American men. For example, on February 7, 1942, Baltimore police officer Edward Bender unlawfully shot and killed Thomas Broadus, an unarmed African American soldier. This shooting sparked civil rights advocates to march on Annapolis in April of that same year. A few years later in May of 1946, Baltimore police officer Walter Weber shot and killed Wilbur Hunley, who also was African American and unarmed. Subsequent similar incidents involving Baltimore police officers and African American men included the 1964 fatal beating of Louis C. Petty by officers Glen Russell and Joseph Mulling, and the 1964 fatal shooting of Veron Leopold by officer William Ray in front of a litany of witnesses.

The case of Mr. Freddie Gray appears to be a continuation of harsh realities Black men are facing across the nation. As a result, a little less than two weeks following the death of Freddie Gray, the tension between the Baltimore City Police Department and protesters finally reached its tipping point and a clash between police and city residents, many of whom were youth, took place. The media coverage of local stores being looted and fires burning in concert with commentary from public officials began to create and control the narrative, largely negative, which shaped the way the nation and the world perceived the events in motion. Within the creation of this negative narrative, there were National and State politicians such as President Obama, Governor Lawrence Hogan and Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake who characterized those participating in the tumult as “thugs” and “criminals.” As we reflected back on the events of Monday April 27th 2015, it dawned on us that while everyone was discussing the protests and riot that took place and making assumptions as to why they occurred, no one seemed to be asking the youth their thoughts and opinions. We decided to ask some of the youth using a narrative approach. As we discussed the best way to elicit meaningful discussions from youth, we decided on the focus groups approach for the following reasons:

- Given the sensitivity of the topic, it would be important that youth understand that they are not alone in their feelings.
- Youth would be able to relate and respond more openly within their peer group.
- Focus groups provide youth with opportunities to “chime in” regarding their thoughts around social justice and race.
- Focus groups would allow for more youth to participate as compared to individual interviews.
- Research involving black urban adolescents often lacks authentic participation in the research process and this process would provide a genuine opportunity for participants to own the narratives.

It is imperative that youth residing in public housing within Baltimore City are given the opportunity to own their narrative. We used a community based participatory approach to engage the youth. The thoughts and feelings expressed during the focus groups provide insight from youth in Baltimore City who were involved in the protest and witnessed the “social unrest” first hand.

Why the Urban Black Youth Voice Is Important

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, almost 86 % of all African American families reside in urban communities with 40 % living below the poverty line (Macartney, 2011). While African Americans make up 14 % of the U.S. population, they represent over 45 % of the families in public housing developments nationally (Macartney, 2011; Nebbitt, Williams, Lombe, McCoy, & Stephens, 2014). In select urban areas (e.g., Washington D.C., Chicago, IL; Baltimore, MD) African Americans represent upwards of 90 % of the families living in public housing developments (Nebbitt et al., 2014).

Scholars suggest low-income urban youth, especially those in public housing communities, are at heightened risk for stressful life experiences that impact their overall health and well-being (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994; Bennett & Miller, 2006; Nebbitt & Lombe, 2008; Nebbitt et al., 2014; Turner & Avison, 2003). These stressful life events include exposure to drugs, violence, gangs, and police brutality. Additionally, urban public housing developments are often marked by social, environmental, and economic stressors

(Davies, 2006; Macartney, 2011; Morales & Guerra, 2006; Nebbitt et al., 2014; Wells, Mance, & Tirmazi, 2010; Youngstrom, Weist, & Albus, 2003) which can lead to internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Despite the precarious circumstances with which many African American youth living in public housing are faced, most proceed to live productive lives and are able to thrive, engage in successful behaviors, and develop adaptive skills (Nebbitt et al., 2014).

For black youth living in urban public housing communities, there is often a negative social stigma and youth are often stereotyped as outsiders to the larger society. In addition, these biases, stereotypes, and stigmas often ignore important variability and strengths that exist within these residents (Leviton, Snell, & McGinnis, 2000; Wells et al., 2010).

Within the larger context of research on violence and socioeconomic inequality, Black youth have been minimally engaged around discussions related to current social issues such as police brutality, social unrest, and politics (Fine et al., 2003). More to the point, previous research has highlighted that black youth perspectives often have been dismissed due to the belief that these youth may be too immature, or unable to grasp the topics or to express their beliefs in a concise manner (Brunson, 2007). This marginalization has created a climate ripe for black youth feeling as if their thoughts and opinions are not important within the larger social context (Brunson & Miller, 2006). There have been a few studies which support the notion that the voices of black youth are important to the larger context of social and economic inequalities among urban youth (Cabrera et al., 2013; Ginwright, 2007; Green, Burke, & McKenna, 2013; Haddix, Everson, & Hodge, 2015). Research has shown that when youth feel marginalized or unheard negative behaviors and acting out as a means of communication can result (Fine et al., 2003; Stewart, Baumer, Brunson, & Simons, 2009). On the other hand, when Black youth are invited and allowed to express their thoughts and opinions around these topics the results can be informative within the larger context and empowering for the youth (Ginwright, 2007).

Methodology

The narratives presented evolved from a larger

quasi-community based participatory research (CBPR) mixed methods collaboration with African American adolescents and emerging adults. The larger study assessed the impact of sociocultural factors on the psychological functioning and behavioral health of urban African American adolescents and emerging adults. In our initial work, we noticed the unnerving social emotional distress among participants that was caused by the unfortunate death of Freddie Gray and subsequent events in Baltimore City. During our informal conversations with many participants, we began to notice the tremendous need for them to voice their concerns and own their narratives. Therefore, we conducted two focus groups with 16 participants aged 15-19 years. All participants resided in areas that were directly impacted by the social unrest that occurred in Baltimore City. We felt it would be best to employ a qualitative approach using focus groups. Given the sensitive nature of the questions and probes, we understood that developing trust and rapport were paramount in attaining genuine responses.

In conducting this research, understanding the unpredictable nature of this topic, we realized the importance of being culturally responsive and the need for the researchers to be reflective of the population. Thus all group facilitators were Black or people of color and under the age of 40. Research has suggested that utilizing a culturally responsive approach may result in an increased naturalistic response or connection to the identified population (Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman, & Geist, 2011). We also decided not to tape the focus groups as we wanted the participants to be their genuine selves and to engage in authentic dialogue that would not be impacted by the data collection techniques. A semi-structured questionnaire with probes was used to guide the two focus groups which lasted approximately 95 minutes and 110 minutes, respectively. An inter-rater was used to record notes and observe non-verbal behaviors. In addition, participants were provided an opportunity to submit written responses as focus groups are not always conducive and sensitive to all participants' responses. Below are a few preliminary themes that emerged.

The Catalyst: Narratives from Black Youth

While discussing the social unrest that occurred in Baltimore City on Monday April, 27 2015, the youth that we talked to had a very specific story about how

the initial unrest got started. We asked a simple question: What happened?

“It was a setup from the beginning. When we got out of school, there was nowhere for us to go! They (the police) had shut down the buses. It was crazy and I was mad that I couldn’t get home. The police wanted something to happen and were antagonizing us. It felt like we had no choice but to fight”

“I don’t know what happened, it was crazy. One minute we are getting out of school the next minute, everyone is going crazy. I just wanted to get home but I couldn’t because the buses weren’t running and I live on the other side of town. The police had every way blocked off so I had to go with the flow.”

“The police wanted to arrest us. They shut down the buses and left us stranded. My mom was calling me to come home but I couldn’t get there. She couldn’t get to me without walking and I didn’t want her out here. I was worried about me and her. I was stranded.”

“What I don’t get is why they would shut the buses down! They know that’s how we get home. This wasn’t a new situation; we have been using that bus stop forever and now all of a sudden, they want to shut it down because they thought something was going to jump off. I think them shutting the buses down made it all jump off. What were we supposed to do? They were telling us to leave the area but some of us live in other parts of town. It was a setup.”

The youth described a very chaotic scene that they had to endure following the funeral of Mr. Gray. The area where the buses were shut down is one of many main bus stops for the city of Baltimore. The Mondawmin Mall bus stop provides transportation services to a significant number of schools and students in the area and is also a transfer point. What the youth described was a situation where they were dismissed from school and met with a very large police presence in that area. Such a large police presence in this area was abnormal as one youth pointed out: “I mean there are usually a few police around, but this was like an army.” So why the need for such a large police presence? One youth

reported:

“So there was a flier that went viral on social media about the “purge” taking place after the funeral. I knew about it and heard a bunch of other people talking about it. I guess the police didn’t want anything to happen at the mall so they showed up early, but all that for a flier? I thought it was a joke.”

As we continued the discussion, we wanted to know more about their thoughts about the social unrest and social justice. So we asked more probing questions which we hoped would elicit ongoing discussion from the youth. The following section will describe the questions, overall themes, and provide direct responses from the youth.

What was your initial response to the social unrest in Baltimore city?

Themes: **Sadness, despair, and disbelief**

“I couldn’t believe it was happening. I mean I saw it in Ferguson on the news but never thought it would happen here. I was sad for my city. We already didn’t have much in our neighborhood and I felt like now we would have less. I thought it would never end and I was scared.”

“I thought it was crazy and sad but I also understood that people were upset about how police treat black people in the city. I mean I have had a few police run up on me for no reason, it just what they do.”

“I wanted them to stop; they were messing up the block. All I kept thinking, was we still have to live here. I was scared that they would start to burn down houses and stuff. I was scared for my family and city.”

“Scared. I was really scared. I couldn’t get home and my mom was worried about me. I just wanted to be out of that area but couldn’t find a way out. I didn’t want to get mistaken for a rioter. The police were just targeting anyone at one point.”

How did you feel about the media depictions of Baltimore during the unrest and the days following?

Themes: **Anger, Pride, and Hope**

“I didn’t like what they were saying about our city or about us. Even though I wasn’t involved with the riot, they described us as thugs and criminals. I know many of the people that were out there and they are far from thugs and criminals. They are going to school and trying to stay on the right track. Yes they made a bad decision but who doesn’t?”

“Well honestly, I didn’t like them showing my city being destroyed and on fire. That made me mad because Baltimore is more than that and the media didn’t even show up until something bad happened. When everyone was coming together and cleaning up the city, that is what the media should have shown more of. My city was coming together as they should like a family to rebuild.”

“They tried to show us as thugs and criminals but my city wouldn’t allow that. The city was stronger following that craziness. I felt like that was the awakening we needed to come together as black people and take care of our own. The media won’t show that because it is a threat to some.”

“I don’t really watch the news but that night, I couldn’t stop watching. I couldn’t believe that was my city. All I kept thinking was “this isn’t real” but it was. My city was being destroyed. I felt that things would only get worse. I was surprised that it only lasted one night because the Ferguson riots went on for a while. I was happy that my city stood up and said it’s not going down like that. They took back the streets and cleaned them up. I didn’t see much of that on the news. They kept showing the riot and not the city rebuilding. I love my city; there is no place like Baltimore”

Where you involved in any way in the social unrest - demonstrations? If so, how?

Themes: **Activists, Support, Frustration**

“I wasn’t involved in the rioting part, but I did go to a lot of the protest. I felt that it gave me a voice and a way to be a part of something that has been happening in my city for too long. I am

tired of being harassed by the police and I felt that this movement is going to help shine a light on it. The police need to follow the law just like they want us to.”

“I went to the protest and marched with my family. My mother got me involved and said that we have to continue to fight for equality and for what is right. All across the country, police officers are killing black men and getting away from it. It is important to me so that this doesn’t happen to me one day. I could have easily been Freddie Gray.”

“I didn’t have a choice but to participate. The incident with Freddie Gray happened in my neighborhood. I would see him often around the way so for this to happen so close to home was scary for me. Marching and protesting with people made me feel that people really were listening to what we had to say. The police harass us all the time and nothing ever happens to them. I hope that something will happen to them this time and that it will be different from the other cities where the cops beat the charges.”

“I was involved in the riots. I felt like I didn’t have a choice. I was angry and frustrated that I was stranded there and it felt like the police were trying to get at us for all the protesting that was going on. Now that I think back about it, I probably shouldn’t have been out. I also attended a few protests. This stuff has to stop. Police can’t keep killing us and getting away with it. If they get away with killing black people, imagine the stuff they are getting away with that is never reported. They are the reason why we don’t like the police.”

What were the feelings of your friends and peers about the demonstrations?

Themes: **Confusion, Anger, Pride**

“A lot of my friends were upset about the whole situation. They were mad at the police for killing another black man and they were mad that people destroyed the city. They were also proud to see so many people standing up for Baltimore and black people.”

“My friends were scared. They were waiting to see how this would all go. We all thought the police

would retaliate some way because of the riot and that cop that was injured. They were also mad about the curfew and all the guards in the city. It seemed like we were in jail.”

“I mean, my friends already knew what it was. This was gonna happen because they keep on messing with us. We not gonna stand around and take this anymore. My friends all thought that this was needed. They didn’t like people destroying the city but they also said that it helped to shine the light on police that break the law and them harassing black people.”

“My friends were mad that people rioted through the city. They said things like “why would they destroy the city?” or “we go to Mondawmin every day, now we can’t.” They also talked about how people came together to help the city clean up. Despite all the attention we got and the guards being in the city, everyone coming together helped to make it feel like Baltimore again.”

What did you see in your community following the unrest? Was it similar or different than what the media portrayed?

Themes: **Unity, Love, Support**

“All I saw was BALTIMORE! My city showed mad love and helped one another out. You had everybody getting along. Different hoods were coming together to help clean up. Baltimore is STRONG and will always be that way despite how they tried to show on the news. Facebook showed love though. All I saw on my timeline was people helping people. It was all love.”

“What I saw was totally different than was the media was showing. They kept trying to make it about race and us destroying our city but it was all love in my neighborhood. I saw people coming together, cleaning up the city, and just being nice. It was a different feeling overall. I wasn’t scared anymore.”

“There was a lot of community support. Everyone was helping everyone. There were even people from other areas that came through to help. I thought that was really nice. It showed the

love that everyone has for Baltimore. I wish the media would have shown more of this and less of the riot. I feel like the world has this bad image of Baltimore and the riots didn’t help. The unity and love that was shown after the riot....now that is Baltimore.”

“It’s like this: the media shows what it wants to show. They didn’t care about the unity or love shown by everyone. All they wanted to show was the hurt and pain of my city. We not about that here, we have pride in our city despite what the news says. I know we have some issues to work through but Baltimore will make it through. The people came together to make a change not the news.”

Who were the leaders of the movement (formal and informal)?

Themes: **Youth, Family, Clergy, Politicians**

“My pastor was out there with all the protesters. It was him and other pastors that were trying to get everyone to march peacefully. We were all chanting and marching together. Some of us even linked arms as we marched through the city.”

“I think we (youth) were leaders. We were all out there trying to make a difference. We wanted to show everyone that we are more than just a few kids who wanted to destroy our city. I think the church people and the mayor were there to help, but we made the movement.”

“I think there were a lot of leaders out there. We had pastors, youth, the councilman and mayor, and a lot of families. For me, my leader was my father and grandfather. They told me that this was our duty to march and protest for the rights of equality and fair treatment. They talked to me about the other riot that happened in Baltimore years ago. I didn’t know about that one but we talked about our history and how black people have to always fight for equality. For my family, this was about more than police brutality; it was about protecting black families.”

“I agree. There were a lot of leaders out there. Some of them stood out more than others but overall the leaders were a bunch of people. Pastors,

family, men, and neighbors. I had conversations with many people while protesting and each one had their own reason for joining the cause. I think people are just really tired of police brutality and the way they treats black people.”

How did the presence of the National Guard affect you?

Themes: **Scared, Protected, Confusion**

“It was like a real-life history story. I remember seeing pictures of the guards protecting black people back in the day of Martin Luther King, Jr. This was kind of like that. I honestly didn’t know what to think about it. It was weird.”

“I didn’t like that they were in the city with machine guns. It made me feel like we were trapped in the city and everywhere we went, they were watching us. It was like a movie or something. I was scared but felt like the rioting would stop.”

“I thought it was too much. I mean what was their purpose? By the time they got here, everything had pretty much calmed down. I just thought they were being extra. I understand it was to protect the city but I don’t think they were sent here to protect black people. They were an army that was on the police side.”

“I was scared. I didn’t know what it meant or why they had to send so many guards. After talking with my grandfather I felt a little better and safer. I was able to talk to my grandfather a lot about black history. It was cool. I felt better knowing that my family was safer and that the riots had calmed down. I did not like the curfew. Whenever my dad would leave out for work at night, I was scared they would try and mess with him.”

If given the chance to talk to the news, how would you describe Baltimore city?

Theme: **Pride**

“I would tell the news that Baltimore is my city and there are a bunch of good things about the city. More than what you care to report about.”

“I would tell them to report the good news in addition to the bad. Give both sides of the story and not just the negative stuff.”

“Tell the news straight! Yes we have some issues but Baltimore is more than the riot, drugs, or murder rates. We are more than the Orioles and the Ravens; they are a part of Baltimore.”

“I would let them see Baltimore through my eyes. It is the greatest city on earth and I love being from Baltimore. I know there are some bad things that happen in the city but name one city where it doesn’t happen.”

What does injustice look like in Baltimore City?

Themes: **Poverty, Employment, Drugs**

“I think that injustice in Baltimore is all of the boarded up houses. They need to tear those down and clean the city up. It’s hard to have pride in your neighborhood when the houses are falling apart and people don’t want to live there anymore. I also think that we need to do something about all the drugs. There are a lot of dope fiends and crack heads in the city and they need help. I don’t think the city pays attention to them.”

“We need more jobs. My mom has been out of work for a long time now and she keeps saying that people aren’t hiring. We have been on food stamps for a while but that’s not enough to feed us. I sometimes limit the food so that my brothers and sisters have enough to eat. They don’t care if we are starving or not.”

“I think injustice is not being able to provide for your family. There are a lot of poor people who can’t afford everyday things. To be honest, I started selling so that I can help my family out. I know it’s not okay but I feel like it’s either doin’ this or watch my family starve and get put on the street and that’s just not going to happen.”

“I think a lot of people have this image of Baltimore as being the “murder capital” or the “drug capital.” Yes we have our issues but they come from bigger issues. People are frustrated with not being able to get a good paying job or being

able to pay rent all the time. Have you ever had to live with the lights off? I can tell you this, it's not fun and it's embarrassing. I think people need to look at all of the poor people in Baltimore and ask why there are so many poor people. I think if they create jobs that pay good money that will help the city out a lot."

How do we give youth a voice in social justice issues?

Themes: **Inclusion**

"I think that doing exactly what you all are doing gives us a voice and including us in the conversation. I would like to see a town hall meeting where we can all gather and have a serious discussion about the issues facing the city. I have heard that the schools were doing something after the riot but other than that, there wasn't much available for youth to do other than march. We also use Facebook, twitter, and Instagram to talk about issues."

"I think that adults and the mayor need to listen to what we have to say. The riot was our way of saying that enough is enough and while I know it was wrong, there are a lot of my friends that still don't think there was anything wrong with it. They think that it got everyone's attention. We really need a place to discuss the things that bother us and are important to us."

"I can respect y'all for taking time out of your day to come and speak to us. This doesn't happen often. We never really get a chance to say what's on our mind or talk about what is going on in the city. We love Baltimore and we get overlooked about a lot of issues. I still want them to tell us why the schools don't care about us or what happens to us. Why don't a lot of people graduate? I know some people chose to drop out but I know people in the 10th and 11th grade that can barely read. Now tell me that's not wrong."

"It as simple as everyone said, just ask us what we think. I know everyone can't be asked about their thoughts about every issue but I think the important issues that affect us we should be asked about. I have a lot of thoughts about how the schools kind of set us up on the day of the

riot. How they knew about everything that was going on but still let us out of school as if it was a regular day. I think the issues that need to be discussed people are scared to talk about."

Implications

The social justice implications of the protests surrounding the ongoing unpunished deaths of Black males around the country and the fraught relationships between urban communities and police are many. We reflect here on three implications that relate specifically to urban youth as intimidated by the youth with whom we spoke: (1) the need for a paradigm shift in how urban youth and protest are understood and depicted; (2) the inclusion of youth in dialogue and policy-making regarding the cities and communities in which they live; and (3) the opportunity for greater adult commitment to addressing systemic inequality. It is important to note here that movement towards social justice, indeed restorative justice, requires recognition that the current social order by nature is unjust and action that changes the reality and the perceived reality of the social order is required (Klein, 2012).

First, there is a need to challenge and change the discourse around how we characterize people of color who are regular, direct and unwilling recipients of injustice, and their motivations and actions when they protest such injustice. In order to change the discourse in any meaningful way, the change process must be an inclusive one that enables equal voice and vote for all involved. As with the protests that occurred between the July 2014 death of Eric Garner and the April 2015 death of Freddie Gray, those who participated in the protests and riot after the death of Mr. Gray were among those who regularly follow the established rules of law. A riot is a fire that requires "the spark of a proximate cause" (Klein, 2012, p. 21) to light it; it is not the result of spontaneous combustion or general lawlessness and disregard for property or human life. In addition, there must be an underlying sense of ongoing injustice and a precipitant that registers above and beyond the underlying (Klein, 2012). The riot segment of the protests in Baltimore endured while it did in part because of the sanctioned public discourse, experienced as disrespectful, dismissive, and trapping by young people living in the targeted communities. Black youth in Baltimore told us what they think of when they think of themselves: engaged, in love with their city, leaders, caring, frustrated, smart, fed up with

being treated as outsiders and portrayed as criminals, strong, influenced by history, proud, scared of violence and extreme aggression, responsible, and people who have something to say and contribute to their communities. The discourse must change and it must begin with a paradigm shift away from urban youth as problem and toward urban youth as agents of change.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described riots as “the language of the unheard” (King, 1967, p. 7). The youth with whom we spoke described the value of talking with parents and clergy and each other, of communicating with one another via social media to tell the true story of what was happening in their city, and of the need for settings in which to talk with and be listened to by policy makers. Ginwright, Cammarota, and Noguera (2005) stated that the actions of youth of color in response to “coercive policies, ineffective institutional practices, and bleak economic conditions in their communities have gone unnoticed” (p. 24). The youth who shared their thoughts with us communicated concerns about these very types of issues – aggressive policing, ineffective education, joblessness and poverty. Black youth need and have a right to public venues to participate in dialogue and genuine decision-making with leaders in their communities and city regarding their communities and city. Ginwright et al. (2005) note that “public policy would better serve young people and ultimately their larger communities by promoting opportunities for them to work for social justice...” (p.26).

Listening to those most often dismissed and unheard is key and promises forward motion rather than the stagnant repetition of aggressive attempts at control of one group by another. The success of such attempts at communication will rely largely on the social value of legitimacy (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Institutions and entities with authority and decision-making powers are perceived as legitimate when they demonstrate and embody fairness, morality, and egalitarian respect. Individuals and communities are intrinsically motivated by legitimacy to work in cooperation with such entities and institutions when they are legitimate (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). With this in mind, we recommend that mayors in cities such as Baltimore meet with leadership from youth, clergy, police, community organizers, educators, and city council together via

the services of trained mediators as facilitators.

Finally, we address here the social justice implications for greater adult commitment to addressing systemic inequities that most directly affect urban youth. As social workers and psychologists, we have adopted a commitment to multicultural awareness and the tenets that form the foundation of that commitment including greater self-awareness and knowledge of models of minority identity development, among others. Counselors in clinical practice generally see clients once they already have been traumatized or are experiencing depression or anxiety. It is not uncommon for counselors to see people of color who are psychologically and emotionally distressed due to repeated and/or traumatic experiences of discrimination and oppression. Vera and Speight (2003) advocate an additional layer to multicultural competency that requires counselors not only to address the underlying causes of the emotional distress with clients, as appropriate, but also to utilize our skills in research, evaluation, facilitation, advocacy, research and writing to promote social justice as a partner, rather than expert, with communities from which our clients come and in which we live. We recommend this approach not only for social workers and psychologists who work as counselors, but for all adults. We recommend the examination and transfer of one’s skills and talents – some used daily in one’s work-for-pay – to advocate with and for urban youth of color and to combat the concerns that threaten their health, well-being and promise.

Conclusion

Given the current ongoing political issues with race and social justice in America, it is imperative that we do not overlook the youth who also are impacted directly and indirectly by mainstream and social media around such polarizing issues. The youth have a need to be heard. They want politicians, clergy, and the world to understand that they are not blind to what is going on within the nation. Additionally, when youth are directly exposed to social unrest such as what took place in Ferguson, New York, Akron, and Baltimore as a result of social injustices, they must be provided with a means to express their thoughts and concerns in a constructive and positive manner. Providing youth with the platform and opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings is informative for those who choose to listen and cathartic and empowering for the

youth. These were the goals of this helping process as we continued to develop and discuss how we could reach the youth during this critical period. Our concern as practitioners, educators, and researchers at an HBCU was that we could be doing more to help our youth prevent self-destructive behavior and cope effectively with the tense climate in Baltimore city. If the larger society of politicians and adults find it difficult to have the much needed discussions around race and social justice, imagine how difficult it must be for our black youth. As practitioners, educators, and researchers, we will continue this work with youth and provide them with prosocial outlets to deal with the ongoing realities of social injustice and to take effective action toward social justice.

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About the Authors: Anthony T. Estreet, Ph.D., LCSW-C, LCADC, Morgan State University School of Social Work, (anthony.estreet@morgan.edu); M. Taqi Tirmazi, Ph.D., MSW, Morgan State University School of Social Work

(taqi.tirmazi@morgan.edu); Michael Sinclair, Ph.D., MSW, Morgan State University School of Social Work (michael.sinclair@morgan.edu); Anita M. Wells, Ph.D. Morgan State University, Department of Psychology (anita.wells@morgan.edu); Von E.

Nebbitt, Ph.D., MSW, University of Chicago, Illinois, School of Social Work (vnebbitt@uic.edu).