# A Reflection on Supporting Students with Racial Trauma as I Endure Racial Re-Traumatization

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**Abstract:** This narrative focuses on the events of May 25, 2020, with the murder of George Floyd and the days following. The experience is explored by applying Race-Based Traumatic Stress theory and Empowerment theory. As a female social work educator of color, I explore my journey through my personal adverse experiences with law enforcement and racial trauma while seeking to help students process this current event, find their advocacy voice, and advocate for racial justice. This narrative is about resilience. A social worker who is skilled in mobilizing people felt like she was losing her voice amid a horrible event—only to have her resilience activated and change initiated.

***Keywords*:** safe spaces, reflection, resilience, empowerment

## Is This Really Happening?

"Get your knee off our neck" permeated the airways for hours. I watched the news in horror and fear as the murder of George Floyd was replayed over the airways. I was flooded with a barrage of emotions ranging from fear to anger. I could not believe that after all the strides we have made as a country with regards to race, one act could derail us as a country and me as a person. It is hard being black in America, but May 25, 2020, made it seem almost impossible.

## May 25, 2020

I am old enough to remember the Rodney King beating of the '90s and Detective Mark Furman from the OJ Simpson trial. I can vividly recall countless incidents involving African Americans and law enforcement. As an African American, my parents had "The Talk" with me about how to engage with law enforcement if I was stopped. As the mother of an African American, I have had "The Talk" with my daughter. "'The Talk' refers to a specific type of racial socialization message that many Black parents have with their children about how to safely conduct themselves when interacting with police officers and other individuals in positions of power" (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 475).

I am a macro social worker who has extensive knowledge about the tumultuous relationship between law enforcement and African Americans. I have taught students about the initial premise of policing, which was to corral escaped slaves and return them to their slave owners (Spruill, 2016). Despite all this "knowledge," I thought with the election of Barack Obama that overt acts of racism were a thing of the past. However, the events of May 25th triggered my memory of past racial events that occurred in the summer of 1995.

In the summer of 1995, I was on my way back to Harrisburg, PA, after spending the day with my parents in Coatesville, PA. It was nearly 10 pm. My mother discouraged me from traveling so late at night alone, but as a 21-year-old, I felt invincible. As I traveled Route 283 through

Lancaster County, with my radio blasting, I noticed the flashing red and blue lights. I pulled over in compliance but instantly became annoyed. The police officer shined his flashlight into my car for no apparent reason. He asked me to step out of the car and proceeded to search my laundry. He called for backup, interrogated me, and berated me. It was late, it was dark, I was alone, and I was afraid. I never felt so helpless. I was at the mercy of this officer, who had an issue with me. I had never been stopped by the police before, and my disdain for law enforcement was at an all-time high. I had convinced myself that law enforcement was anti-black and that they were all polluted with detectives like Mark Furman. I think that happens when your friends and family share with you their negative experiences with law enforcement. As I recount that evening, I can't help but wonder what spared my life. I could have easily been a hashtag like Philando Castel, Sandra Bland, and now George Floyd.

As I sat in the living room watching the coverage on CNN, I felt an overwhelming feeling of guilt, a guilt that mirrored survivor's guilt. As a social worker, I know that survivor guilt is "a concept associated with the interpersonal process of 'surviving' harm while others do not" (Hutson et al., 2015, p. 20). I didn't realize how much I suppressed the trauma of that night in Lancaster until I found myself sobbing while sitting in the living room, in the dark, watching the relentless news coverage.

**May 26, 2020**

The next day and amid our country's civil unrest, my husband had to move his daughter, my stepdaughter, to Ft. Collins, CO. She flew out days prior, so he was making the cross-country trip alone. My husband is a 6'1", fairly dark-complected, Hispanic male. I was anxious, I was scared, I was unsettled. I wanted him to delay the trip, or ship the items, do something anything other than drive across the country. I desperately wanted him to stay at home, but I knew he needed to go. I found myself calling him every two hours to check in. As his trip progressed, my anxiety started to dissipate. He made it to Colorado and was then preparing to make the long ride back home. Everything seemed to be going well until he called. As he was on his way home, he called and told me he had been stopped by the police in Indiana. I instantly jumped into fixer mode. I tried to coach him by saying "Stay calm" and "Do whatever they say." He appeared calm, but uneasy at the same time. He told me everything was fine and that he would be home shortly, but we have all witnessed how a routine traffic stop can quickly turn into something tragic. When he got home, I could tell instantly that he was agitated and unsettled.

He told me how the officer accused him of transporting drugs, made racially charged statements against him, and forced him to sit in the back of his police car while he called backup. I could hear in his voice hints of anger, hurt, embarrassment, and disbelief. As he shared his experience, he reflected on another painful memory. One summer he and his family went to a swimming pool at an exclusive country club in town. He told me how he was so excited to go to this pool because he usually had to swim at the local YMCA. He explained that as his family walked up to the pool entrance, they were met at the gate by the manager, who explained the pool was full and no longer taking guests. As his eyes welled up with water, he said he could see that the pool was not at capacity and the tone of the manager was very condescending. His father grew angry, police were called, and pool attendees mocked and laughed at him and his family as they were

forced to leave the club. He expressed how hurt he felt for his father, who simply wanted to take his family on an outing. As I listened to him recount his experiences, I instantly thought of George Floyd laying on the ground, under Derek Chauvin's knee. I was so thankful my husband survived his encounter with Indiana State Troopers, but I was enraged that this was his/our reality, simply because we are People of Color (POC).

My husband as a Hispanic male has encountered racially traumatic situations. I as an African American woman have encountered racially traumatic situations. But we often suppress the experiences, so we don't get bogged down with resentment and anger. I think we suppress our emotions when faced with racism because we don't want to get stuck in the struggle; but moreover, we want to transcend the struggle. As I watched Chauvin's knee on the neck of George Floyd, I realized that this situation was a trigger for my racial trauma. Race-based traumatic stress theory suggests that racial discrimination experienced by minorities can invoke a response that mirrors posttraumatic stress disorder (Carter, 2007; Polanco-Roman et al., 2016). Racial trauma, or race-based traumatic stress (RBTS), refers to the mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination, racism, and hate crimes (Helms et al., 2010). Any individual that has experienced an emotionally painful, sudden, and uncontrollable racist encounter such as witnessing an unarmed African American man murdered at the hands of law enforcement is at an elevated risk of suffering from a race-based traumatic stress injury (Carter et al., 2013).

**May 27, 2020**

In the hours and days after the murder, there were outpourings of expression in the streets. Some people saw mobs, looting, and civil unrest, but I saw fear, frustration, and hurt. As I struggled with my feelings of anger and weariness, I was flooded with calls from friends who identified as allies. I knew that they wanted to support me, but I found the conversations to be physically and emotionally exhausting. I did not want to continue to talk about the daily trauma I experience being black in America. I was drained by the questions related to "What can we do as Allies to support you?" Honestly, these conversations felt retraumatizing. I have often found myself in situations, both personal and professional, where I am the only POC. By default, I find myself being asked to speak for all POC on a variety of topics ranging from policing to politics. I usually just take it in stride, but this time it was different. I did not have the mental or physical strength to entertain the questions. I could not be the resident spokesperson to describe how black people felt about the death of George Floyd. I felt anxious and nauseous simultaneously. My temperament fluctuated between anger and despair. I was having night terrors and breaking out into cold sweats. I could not erase the image of Derek Chauvin's knee pinned against George Floyd's neck from my mind. As a social worker with a passion for macro work, I pride myself on being solution-focused, but I could not seem to come up with a solution to address what I was feeling and that made me even more anxious.

Despite my struggles, I could not help but think about my students. I am the Faculty Advisor for the Association of Black Social Workers (ABSW). I have helped them launch social media campaigns to address racism and social injustices that paled in comparison to George Floyd. I am very protective of them, and I felt an urgent need to reach out to them. Many of them reside

in Philadelphia, and this was ground zero for protest. My husband and my parents encouraged me to take time for myself. We were on summer break, and being a new faculty member, I find the semesters to be grueling and welcome the breaks. I just could not fight the need to reach out to my students. I sort of felt like a mother hen that needed to check on her chicks. Maybe reaching out to them was more for me than for them. At times when I have felt insecure about my abilities, I have found solace in being in their presence.

I wondered if they were scared. I wondered if they were being asked to speak for all black people on the topic of George Floyd. I wondered how they were channeling their energy. I wondered if they needed me, the way I felt I needed them. Being a trained macro social worker who specializes in community organizing, I did what comes naturally to me: I started organizing.

I sent out an email to all ABSW members inviting them to participate in a virtual check-in. Participation was voluntary and students were encouraged to join and talk freely about their experiences. I wanted to create a virtual space where students felt supported, safe, and comfortable to be vulnerable and authentic. Supportive environments are largely acknowledged as contributing to healthy psychological well-being, especially concerning depression (Taylor & Conger, 2017). Safe spaces for students of color likely benefit their mental health and well-being by eliciting positive interactions, assistance, and affirmation that lead to feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, and positive affect (Lee & Wong, 2019). ABSW has worked hard to create a sense of family and connect around similar challenges related to being students of color at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). As in a family, I wanted and needed to share this experience with them. In organizing this check-in, I was reminded of a quote from Diane Kalen-Sukra (2019):

> Offering sanctuary is a revolutionary act; it expresses love when others offer scorn or hate. It recognizes humanity when others deny it and seeks to debase it. Sanctuary says 'we' rather than 'I'. It is belonging—the building block of community. (p. 65)

**June 1, 2020**

My university is a PWI, and it was very important to me that these check-ins not be an elite white space, where students of color had to adjust to fit in. I wanted this space to be their space, to be my space, to be an authentic space, and to be a space free of fear. My email was well-received and welcomed. Students were excited and that made me excited. As I prepared for the meeting, I wanted to come up with a way to discuss the elephant in the room, the death of George Floyd. As students started to log in, they began to share their reality in a raw and authentic way. Some students talked about being actively engaged in protests, while others talked about donating water and resources to support protestors. Students quickly identified based upon feedback from their peers that activism is an individual experience. Activism takes on varied forms and does not look the same for everyone and that is alright.

We started the meeting with an 8 minute and 46 second moment of silence for George Floyd; afterwards, I asked students to tell me how they felt. Many students expressed feelings of guilt,

fear, confusion, and anger. Many could not pinpoint their fear. They were afraid of the civil unrest, they were afraid of the police, they were afraid of being black, they were afraid of our then Commander in Chief, they were just afraid. Some expressed feelings of helplessness and shared how they felt invisible. Many asked, "Is it worth going to college to be better if all we will ever be seen as is black?" As we cried, it felt like we grew stronger. Our tears were not a sign of our weakness, but a sign of our strength. As the tears were flowing, I could also see the wheels of activism churning. Students were not succumbing to fear, they were not getting stuck in the struggle. They were allowing their fear to guide their solutions. After an hour the conversation quickly turned to "What can we do?" and "How can we get our power back?" One student acknowledged that the check-in was good for him, but that he felt so many other students could benefit from this safe space. I asked, "What do you propose we do?" It was at that moment ABSW's virtual check-in series, *Brotha's How Yawl Doing, Sistah's Yawl Alright?*, was born. Students were passionate about creating a platform and space for students, with a particular focus on students of color. Students wanted to embrace the social work principle of being solution-focused. They wanted a space to create plausible solutions to combat racial injustice and they wanted to do it with fellow students. As macro practitioners, students tapped into their community organizing skill sets. Community organizing, according to Saul Alinsky (1987/1946), teaches us that bringing the community together across differences helps the fight for bettering the community. We spent the final hour strategizing, planning, and assigning tasks. We got our marching orders, and we were ready to work.

**June 5, 2020**

Our flyers were circulated and students and faculty RSVPed. *Brotha's How Yawl Doing, Sistah's Yawl Alright?* was happening. ABSW members were finding their voice during one of the most challenging times in our country. I was so proud of them, inspired by them, and just in awe of their resilience and perseverance. As participants started to sign into our virtual environment and the mini squares started to fill my screen, I felt an overwhelming warmth in the depths of my soul, reaffirming that God has placed me here, for a moment such as this. ABSW members requested that the meeting honor George Floyd with an 8 minute and 46 second moment of silence. There were students and faculty from a variety of ethnicities, races, and socio-economic backgrounds in attendance united by a need to heal.

Some faculty shared their feelings, but many stayed in the background in solidarity and to offer individual students support if needed. This check-in was student-led and facilitated. Students provided counseling resources for each other. Students provided students with information on housing, food, and COVID-19 supports. Students comforted each other and validated each other's experiences. Students shared their realities as students of color, as allies, and as students who just want to see things change. We conducted routine check-ins with participants where they used a number to indicate their mood—1 being poor and 9 being great—so that we could monitor the overall emotional climate. This meeting allowed students to hear varied perspectives. They heard from a black male student who was scared to go outside or even go to work, for fear of retaliation. They heard from an Asian student who had been out protesting for three days straight. Sharing stories let students know that they were not alone and fostered a sense of community. The check-in went on for two hours, but it could have easily gone two

more. Like the first ABSW check-in, towards the end of the meeting students were proposing solutions to lower the racial temperature and help our communities heal. Students organized water collections for protesters. Students and faculty arranged to protest together and organized check-ins via cell phone to ensure safety. Students found this student-crafted safe space to be so empowering they decided to host a second check-in one week later.

## Lessons Learned

My mother has taught me that every situation is either a lesson or a blessing. I see this situation as a bit of both. I pride myself on being a good social worker. I am an effortless social worker. The ability to advocate and organize comes instinctively to me. I come from a long line of social workers. Both my mother and my father are social workers; it is as if social work is in my family DNA. As effortless as it is for me to execute social work, I find that transition from doing social work to teaching social work to be unnerving. When I am actively engaged in social work, I know how to apply concepts and theory and I know how to do it well. Although I love teaching, I am not always sure that I am adequately transferring my skills. I found myself constantly questioning my ability until this moment. It was at this moment that I realized that I am exactly where I am supposed to be and that I am doing exactly what I am supposed to be doing. As much as my students learn from me, I learn from them.

I have learned that it is not easy being a student of color or an educator of color at a PWI. Either by design or by default, you find yourself continuously explaining the ills and complexities of racism to your fellow counterparts. Racism is traumatic but being designated as the resident expert on racism is retraumatizing. This experience has taught me that it is vital to the student of color learning experience that they feel empowered and supported. It is not and cannot be the role of students of color to explain racism to other students. As social work educators, it is incumbent upon us to take that weight and responsibility off their shoulders and place it where it rightfully belongs: in our curriculum.

My university has two campuses: one located in West Chester, and one located in Philadelphia. Although the distance in miles is less than 60, the campuses are worlds apart. The main campus is suburban, predominantly white, and comprised of more traditional students, while the Philly campus is urban, ethnically diverse, and comprised of non-traditional, older, working students. The difference in the needs of these student populations is vast, and the university has struggled to bridge the campuses together. As a macro social work practitioner, I have learned that Zoom is an excellent community organizing tool. The pandemic was difficult and presented its share of challenges, but Zoom helped the university do something it has struggled with for years: bridge the campus divide. Our check-ins were comprised of a variety of different students. We had traditional and non-traditional students, young and older students, working and non-working students, parent scholars, and scholars without children. The murder of George Floyd united us, but Zoom connected us.

As I reflect on this experience, I am reminded of a quote from the American novelist and activist James Baldwin who said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed until it is faced” (1962, p. BR11). Students leaned into their discomfort, strategized,

and activated their activism. They embraced the concept of "Power of One" (Vazquez, 2018) and exercised their power to initiate social change. They faced the challenge and worked collectively to create a world they want for themselves and their fellow students; as an educator, what greater blessing could I receive?

When asked about activism, Nobel Prize recipient Bishop Desmond Tutu gave his now highly quoted statement, "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world." This process reacquainted me with what drew me to the social work profession initially. I pursued a degree in social work because I have an unyielding desire to do good, help others, and activate social change. As I reflect over this experience, I am reminded that social work is not easy work, but it is always necessary work.

## Postscript

The formal check-in series *Brotha's How Yawl Doing, Sistha's Yawl Alright?* has discontinued, but the mission of ABSW remains unchanged. ABSW club meetings continue to serve as a safe space for students to process a variety of issues. Members meet monthly to discuss current events and assess how they can be of service to our university community.

Members identified that many students were food insecure, so they hosted a food drive to help launch a campus food pantry. Members acknowledged that many of our students were being adversely impacted by increased gun violence. Similarly to how they created the check-in series, they hosted a "Stop the Violence/Gun Violence Reduction" panel discussion in April 2022. This discussion was geared toward identifying plausible solutions that students can execute to reduce gun violence. Members of ABSW are following the guidance of Bishop Desmond Tutu as they work with due diligence to do a little good where they are in an effort to overwhelm the world.

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