The Experiences of African American Mothers Raising Sons in the Context of #BlackLivesMatter

J. Richelle Joe, M. Ann Shillingford-Butler, Seungbin Oh

In this phenomenological study, the authors explored the lived experiences of 19 African American mothers raising boys and young men to understand how media exposure to community and state violence connects to the physical and mental health of these mothers. Analysis of semi-structured individual interviews revealed six themes: psychological distress, physical manifestations of stress, parenting behaviors, empathic isolation, coping strategies, and strengths. The analysis of the data revealed that these themes were connected such that community and state violence were forces weighing on these mothers, resulting in emotional responses, changes to parenting approaches, physical responses, and empathic isolation, while the mothers' coping strategies and strengths served as forces to uplift. The authors present the lived experiences of the participants through a discussion of these themes and their implications for counseling African American mothers within the current social–political context.

Keywords: African American mothers, #BlackLivesMatter, community and state violence, media exposure, mental health

During the 2016 Democratic National Convention, seven African American women took the stage in solidarity to shine a light on community and state violence and the need for criminal justice reform (Drabold, 2016; Sebastian, 2016). These women, collectively referred to as the "Mothers of the Movement," included Lesley McSpadden, Gwen Carr, and Lucy McBath, the mothers of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Jordan Davis, respectively—young African American males whose deaths were widely publicized as examples of gun violence (community violence) or police use of force (state violence). Sybrina Fulton also was in attendance. The death of her son, Trayvon Martin, in 2012 sparked a modern conversation about violence against African Americans and led to the creation of the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). During their address to the convention, the "Mothers of the Movement" shared their grief publicly and spoke on behalf of their children, with Fulton emphatically stating: "This isn't about being politically correct. This is about saving our children" (Drabold, 2016).

Sixty-one years earlier, Mamie Till had similarly allowed the world to see her grief as she wept over the open casket of her 14-year-old son, Emmett, who had been brutally murdered for being a young Black man in the Deep South (CBS News, 2016). Like the death of Trayvon Martin, Emmett Till's death galvanized the African American community and motivated activists—including Rosa Parks—to participate in the modern civil rights movement (CBS News, 2016). By sharing the intense pain experienced by a mother's loss of a child to violence, Mamie Till and the "Mothers of the Movement" allowed others to share in their grief.

As written by Sybrina Fulton (2014, para 9) in a letter to Lesley McSpadden, "If they refuse to hear us, we will make them feel us . . . feeling us means feeling our pain; imagining our plight as parents of slain

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children." The pain experienced by these mothers was felt. Mothers of Black children extended sympathy and support to these mothers who had lost their children to community or state violence (Stewart, 2017).

One such letter, penned by university professor Melissa Harris-Perry, illustrates the emotional connection felt among women who saw their own children reflected in the faces of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice. According to Harris-Perry (2014, para 8), many Black mothers "felt your anguish through the screen, felt it penetrate our core and break our hearts as we bore witness to your shock and torment." Statements such as this indicate that the public and violent losses experienced by African American mothers, both past and present, resonate within the African American community and particularly affect other African American mothers, even those who have not experienced such a loss. How African American mothers are affected by bearing witness to the public deaths of African Americans as a result of community and state violence is not fully known. Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of African American mothers who have been exposed to state and community violence while raising their sons to understand how this exposure connects to their physical and mental health.

The experiences communicated by the women mentioned above suggest that parenting for these women is in some way unique and shaped by the social and racial contexts in which they live. Research on parenting in general, and parenting stress specifically, has indicated that experiences and context affect the lives of parents in particular ways. Cumulative exposures to life stressors, such as those associated with limited availability of resources, can exacerbate parenting stress, mental strain, or tension related to the role of being a parent (Berry & Jones, 1995; Raphael, Zhang, Liu, & Giardino, 2010). For example, lack of financial resources aggravates parenting stress by draining parents' emotional resources to respond empathetically to their children. Under high economic strain, parents are more likely to become preoccupied with managing finances (e.g., an overdue bill or loan default) and emotionally less available for their children, which negatively influences child development (Berk, 2013; Conger & Donnellan, 2007). Additionally, parents' experiences with other daily stressors (e.g., work-related frustrations and burden) influence parenting behaviors and attitudes, which may create stressful home environments for children (Matjasko & Feldman, 2006).

African American mothers in low-income families have reported high rates of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, and their PTSD can predict parental distress (Cross et al., 2018). Such parental stress has been inversely related to positive parenting behaviors (Chang et al., 2004), which can result in negative outcomes for children. Stress among African American mothers exists regardless of family structure. Cain and Combs-Orme (2005) found co-caregiving with a spouse, partner, or other family member did not affect maternal stress or parenting behaviors. This research indicates that parental stress is prevalent among African American mothers whether they are single parents or co-parenting.

A contextual factor that may shed light on the experiences of parenting stress among African American mothers is race-based stress (Carter, 2007). According to Greer (2011), the negative, race-related experiences of African Americans are associated with negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety and depression. African American women in particular experience racism within the workplace, health care system, and educational settings (Greer, 2011). Racist microaggressions play a key role in the psychological distress of African American women and significantly contribute to increased levels of stress and anxiety (Szymanski & Owens, 2009). Affective costs of racism among this disenfranchised group include depression, anxiety, and somatization (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012). Pieterse et al. (2012) reported trauma-like symptoms similar to PTSD among African Americans after prolonged episodes of racism.

Exposure to community and state violence exists as a particular type of race-based stress that strains the psyche of African Americans. Galovski et al. (2016) found that among community members in Ferguson, Missouri, following the killing of Michael Brown by a law enforcement officer, post-traumatic stress and depression were higher among African Americans than their White counterparts. Additionally, direct exposure to violence was not associated with distress, suggesting that media exposure or secondary exposure provided the sufficient context for mental health concerns to exist. Similarly, Bor, Venkataramani, Williams, and Tsai (2018) reported that African American residents in a state where police killings of unarmed African Americans occurred experience worse mental health following each incident. These effects were not evident for White residents in the same state, nor was there a similar effect for unarmed White residents or armed African American residents killed by police. According to Umberson (2017), exposure to violent death within the community is particularly difficult when the loss is that of a loved one. Such a loss within the African American community "launches a lifelong cascade of psychological, social, behavioral, and biological consequences that undermine other relationships, as well as health, over the life course" (Umberson, 2017, p. 407). The continued losses of young African American men to community and state violence present a collective threat and result in a sense of vulnerability within the African American community, as well as potentially contribute to an increase in health disparities among this population because of race-related stress.

African American mothers experience parenting stress as well as race-based stress, yet the extent to which race-based parenting stress exists for them is unknown. Research on African American mothers has explored their levels of stress and the relationship that parental stress has with their parenting behaviors and children's outcomes (e.g., Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; Chang et al., 2004; Cross et al., 2018; Kennedy, Bybee, & Greeson, 2014). However, often the research focus is on "at-risk" African American mothers such as adolescent mothers, single mothers, mothers experiencing intimate partner violence, and mothers in low-income households. Additionally, despite the abundance of research with samples of African American mothers, the exploration of their lived experiences as mothers who may be exposed to race-based stress vis-à-vis state and community violence is absent from the literature. Violence resonates through relationships and can be conceptualized as a reproductive health and social justice issue for African American women (Premkumar, Nseyo, & Jackson, 2017). Hence, this study sought to illuminate the experiences of African American women raising sons, allowing them the platform to speak their lived experiences as mothers in the current social and racial context.

Method

The following research question was examined: What are the lived experiences of African American mothers who have been exposed to community and state violence while raising their sons? The research team chose a qualitative approach, specifically phenomenological methodology. As a constructivist approach, phenomenology acknowledges the existence of multiple realities and allows for an understanding of the lived experiences of participants through their own voices. This methodology is congruent with the profession of counseling (Hays & Wood, 2011), and the researchers felt using phenomenology was particularly important given the focus on African American women who experience multiple layers of marginalization at the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989).

Participants

Prior to participant recruitment, the Institutional Review Board at the authors' university approved the study. The participants were recruited via purposive, criterion sampling to gain a sample of African American mothers with at least one son age 25 or younger at the time of the study.

Recruitment materials were shared with African American women using direct electronic mail as well as social media. Participants also referred potential participants to the research team for inclusion in the study (snowball sampling). Research team members contacted all participants via direct electronic mail to provide them with details about the study, review the informed consent document, collect demographic information, and schedule the individual interview. Sample size recommendations for qualitative research such as the present study range from six to 12 participants (Creswell, 2013; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Hence, the research team sought to recruit 20 participants to account for the possibility of attrition.

In response to recruitment efforts, 22 individuals expressed interest in the study and were initially contacted by the researchers. Two of those individuals were unable to complete an individual interview, and another individual was eliminated because of poor audio recording quality. Hence, data from 19 participants were analyzed for this study. Further recruitment was deemed unnecessary as the sample size exceeded the recommended size and the data analysis reached saturation with data from these 19 participants.

The participants ranged in age from 31 to 61, with a mean age of 44.8. Their sons ranged in age from 2 to 35, though all had at least one son under age 25. All participants were high school graduates, and most had an advanced degree (52.6%). Additionally, most participants lived in two-parent households (52.6%) at the time of the study, earned an annual household income of more than $100,000 (42.1%), and lived in a suburban setting (57.9%). Participant profiles are provided in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers conducted semi-structured individual interviews with the 19 participants, each lasting 20 to 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted over the phone, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol consisted of the following questions: (a) What have your experiences been like being a mother of an African American boy or young man? (b) There have been several violent incidents reported by the media involving African American young men. How do you feel about these incidents? (c) Was there any particular incident that affected you the most? (d) How would you describe your overall mental and physical health? and (e) What would you say are your strengths as a mother? The interviewers provided follow-up questions and clarifying statements to participants when they were deemed necessary or when participants asked for clarification.

Once the interviews were transcribed, the research team analyzed the data in accordance with methods outlined by Moustakas (1994). First, the team immersed themselves in the data by reviewing each transcript individually. They divided the 19 transcripts between the two of them and read through them to become familiar with the data. For each transcript, they identified relevant statements that reflected the participants' lived experiences (horizontalization) as African American mothers raising boys and young men within the contexts of structural racism and community and state violence. After going through this process individually, the research team met multiple times to review all transcripts and confer about these textural descriptions. The research team identified relevant codes and then synthesized the textural descriptions into themes by examining them for commonalities to distill the meaning expressed by the participants. Verbatim examples were extracted from the transcripts and used to generate a thematic and visual description of the phenomenon being examined. Once the initial data analysis was completed, the researchers conducted member checking by sending each participant their individual transcript as well as the written results section. Participants were asked to comment on the accuracy of their transcripts as well as the alignment of the

results with their lived experiences. None of the participants reported any errors or additions to the transcripts, and none provided any additions or corrections to the themes provided in the results.

Table 1. *Participant Demographic Information*

Participant	Age	Number of Male Children in Home	Age(s) of Male Children	Household Composition	Education
1	31	1	2	Multi-generational	Bachelor's Degree
2	45	3	15, 20, 27	Two-parent	Master's Degree
3	50	1	19	Two-parent	Master's Degree
4	42	1	15	Two-parent	Doctoral Degree
5	48	1	23	Two-parent	Master's Degree
6	43	2	2, 16, 19	Two-parent	Master's Degree
7	46	1	16	One-parent	Doctoral Degree
8	61	1	20	One-parent	Some College
9	40	2	2.5, 5	Two-parent	Bachelor's Degree
10	56	0	19	One-parent	Master's Degree
11	47	1	18, 26	Two-parent	Bachelor's Degree
12	43	1	10	Two-parent	Doctoral Degree
13	43	1	18	One-parent	Bachelor's Degree
14	36	2	2, 7	Two-parent	Bachelor's Degree
15	41	1	17, 21, 26	One-parent	Doctoral Degree
16	45	1	16	One-parent	Master's Degree
17	42	1	12	Multi-generational	Bachelor's Degree
18	35	1	9	One-parent	Some College
19	57	1	22, 35	Two-parent	Bachelor's Degree

Trustworthiness and the Research Team

Qualitative research requires credibility, a key element of trustworthiness, such that the research findings accurately reflect the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity, wherein researchers critically examine their procedures with respect to power, privilege, and oppression, is a critical element of maintaining research credibility (Hunting, 2014). To safeguard against researcher bias, the researchers worked collaboratively to establish credibility throughout data collection and analysis. The research team consisted of two African American female faculty members at a large Southeastern university. Both were core faculty in the same counselor education program and have experience working as professional school counselors. To address researcher bias, the researchers engaged in bracketing to address the ways in which their experiences influence their approach to research and expectations of the outcomes of the study. Prior to the data collection, they discussed their experiences as African American women who have experienced systemic racism and are aware of state and community violence affecting the African American community. They identified their personal experiences and acknowledged their biases, attempting to put them aside as they conducted the interviews.

Throughout the data collection and analysis, they engaged in personal reflection and maintained analytic memos chronicling their reactions and initial thoughts about the data being collected.

Prior to beginning data analysis, the research team met to confirm the analysis procedures to ensure consistency. They analyzed data individually and as a team and determined codes and themes jointly to reduce bias. They also consulted throughout the data analysis process to address questions or concerns regarding the data. They consulted with an outside researcher experienced in qualitative research to get critical feedback on the data analysis process and the research findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This peer review was used as an external check of the research methodology and theoretical interpretation of the data.

Results

Six themes emerged from the data to illustrate the lived experiences of African American mothers who have been exposed to community and state violence while raising their sons: (a) psychological distress, (b) physical manifestations of stress, (c) parenting behaviors, (d) empathic isolation, (e) coping strategies, and (f) strengths. The analysis of the data revealed that these themes were connected such that community and state violence were forces weighing on these mothers, resulting in emotional responses, changes to parenting approaches, physical responses, and empathic isolation, while the mothers' coping strategies and strengths served as forces to uplift. Below is a discussion of each theme using exemplars from the data to present the experiences of these mothers in their own words.

Psychological Distress

The participants in this study described the emotions they felt regarding community and state violence, with all of them expressing various levels of fear, anger, heartbrokenness, and exhaustion. Fear or anxiety was most prominent for these mothers, many of whom thought of their own sons when they heard stories about young African American men killed by gun violence at the hands of other citizens or by law enforcement officers. Some felt fear of the unknown, as in Participant 9 who stated, "Like, what will the world do to you?" Many expressed that the fear was persistent, as they seemed to ruminate over such shootings. In Participant 10's words, "I see the pictures of those young men daily in my mind." The fear that these mothers described relates directly to their sons in that they have a baseline fear that their son also will become a victim of state violence. Participant 2 described living with "an underpinning of terror," adding that "my fear is that . . . one of my sons is going to be murdered by a police officer." In addition to fear, the participants reported feelings of anger and outrage. Participant 5 stated that she considered purchasing a gun, although she did not articulate what she would do with it. For many of the mothers, their anger was closely associated with their experience of motherhood: "Before I had kids, I didn't realize how angry I already was about the injustice . . . it just (caused) more anger and frustration" (Participant 9).

Feelings of being heartbroken, helpless, and psychologically exhausted emerged clearly from the data. Participants expressed disbelief upon hearing about police shootings of unarmed African American men and a lack of control about what Participant 7 referred to as "a cancer on society." Participant 1 described the experience of feeling like she had been "hit with a rubber bullet, like, you know there's no penetration, but it hurts all the same." A particularly poignant statement from Participant 10 indicated that participants feel helpless and almost hopeless about the possibility that a change is possible: "I don't even know what our children have to do to convince the world that they are children . . . or even that they are human." Additionally, the mothers are mentally exhausted

by reports of community and state violence against African American young men. Participant 1 described feeling burned out, tired, and "just one tipping point message away from a breakdown."

Part of this exhaustion seemed to stem from a sense of proximity to the events in the news because of social media and 24-hour news cycles. Participants reported that they felt like the shootings were happening right in front of them, making them more aware of the existence of community and state violence. Some reported feeling numb to the media reports and others stopped watching the news or engaging with social media sites in an attempt to try to disconnect from reports they found overwhelming.

Physical Manifestations of Stress

The mothers in this study described the ways in which the exposure to community and state violence affected them physically. Some reported reactions that sounded like responses to trauma or some anxiety-provoking experience that were manifested in their physical bodies. Participant 1 felt "sick to my stomach . . . heart, you know like adrenaline pumping . . . like a tightness in my chest." Participant 5 stated that after hearing about a recent police shooting and out of concern for the safety of her son, she "would be physically sick." Additionally, participants reported a loss of sleep and difficulty relaxing. A response by Participant 14 illustrates the connection that the physical effects have to the psychological effects of community and state violence for these mothers: "I cried as though this was my child that had been killed . . . I was sick to my stomach . . . I had a pit in my stomach . . . and I also . . . became overly concerned about my son." They were psychologically affected by incidents of state and community violence and those effects manifested physically as well as in their hypervigilance regarding their sons.

Parenting Behaviors

The participants described how their mothering has been shaped by their exposure to community and state violence. They reported being hypervigilant and overprotective in their parenting behaviors in an effort to protect their sons. These parenting behaviors included hovering over their sons, micromanaging their sons' lives, and attempting to limit their sons' movements. Participant 5 stated that she wanted to put a camera in her son's car so that she could have an eye on him when he was driving. Participants described their efforts to keep their sons insulated, such as Participant 13's statement that "I just try to keep my son as far away from it as I possibly can." Participant 10 expounded on this behavior in great detail, stating "If I could have, I would have locked him in my house and just kept him there." The mothers seemed to have a keen awareness that their parenting had become overly protective, and they experienced some ambiguity about it. One mother acknowledged that she parents her son and daughter differently and lamented that she may be limiting his cognitive development. Similarly, Participant 4 expressed concern that being overprotective might affect her son's social life, yet her concern for his safety outweighed that concern, as evidenced by her statement that, "I don't want that for him, but at the same time I need him to be alive."

The participants also stated that they regularly have conversations with their sons about how to behave and present themselves to others. They reported increasing these conversations following incidents of community and state violence in the news. The conversations they have include how to carry themselves in a respectable way in public and how to make wise decisions when outside the home. Specifically, they have talked with their sons about what to do if stopped by the police. The participants described the conversations as ones that go beyond the typical lessons that parents teach their children in that these are conversations shaped by their experiences as African American mothers of African American sons. As Participant 5 stated "we've had to say things to them that their White friends don't have to say."

Empathic Isolation

In their description of the effects community and state violence have had on their emotions, physical bodies, and parenting, the participants also described an experience that the researchers have called *empathic isolation*. Participants described receiving little to no empathy from others outside of the home as well as a self-imposed masking of emotions within the home in an effort to protect their sons. The lack of empathy outside of the home seemed to be connected with the perceived White privilege of coworkers and community members. Participant 5 stated of such individuals: "I want you to feel my frustration and my anger"—yet those individuals did not. Participant 3 added that the responses that she heard from others after publicized incidents of community or state violence upset her because they reflected a lack of empathy and understanding. During the trial of George Zimmerman, Participant 10 was hopeful because the jury largely consisted of women. However, she was disappointed by the outcome of the trial and felt that the women on the jury saw Trayvon Martin as a Black male adult rather than a 16-year-old boy. She wondered how and when Black children would be seen as children rather than threats. As a result of this lack of empathy, many of the mothers reported masking their emotions in public spaces. Participant 19 stated, "I have to put on my face in the morning when I go into the workplace that has every ethnicity and just be me, not be that concerned mother."

Similarly, at home the mothers reported holding their emotions close in an attempt to protect their sons. They expressed concern about their emotions affecting their sons, so they mask their emotions. Participant 18 described having to "put on" for her son, meaning that despite her sadness or concern, she had to "put on that face that everything is okay." A single mother participant expressed how it is particularly difficult for her to allow herself to fully experience her emotions. She described feeling as though she had no choice but to be strong even in moments in which she feels weak. Both inside and outside of the home, these mothers feel a multitude of emotions, yet they do not feel fully free to express them and receive empathy, either because of the empathic failures of others or because they want to shield their sons and keep pushing forward.

Coping Strategies

Despite the stress they feel as mothers raising African American boys and young men, participants identified multiple ways in which they cope or care for themselves in the face of adversity. Some coping strategies were internal or individual, such as maintaining a positive outlook, engaging in self-care, journaling, and prayer or meditation. Reliance on faith was evident for many participants and for at least one participant was a means to fight oppression and liberate her son (Participant 10). Participants also discussed other ways of coping that had more of an external focus, such as connecting with other African American mothers and looking to their existent social network of family and friends for support. Several participants discussed either current involvement or a desire for future involvement in community activism to address systemic racism. These participants described a type of self-care motivated by a desire to see change and manifested in action to address the systemic racism that affected their lives and the lives of their sons.

Few of the participants (*n* = 4) reported seeking out and utilizing professional mental health services as a coping strategy. Participants gave multiple reasons for not seeking mental health services, including pragmatic ones, such as not having time or not being able to afford services. Participants also made statements such as "I just deal with it" (Participant 7) and "I feel like I can control it" (Participant 15), which seem to relate to the experience of wearing the mask discussed above with the theme of empathic isolation. Other statements by participants indicated that they have little confidence that counseling would help. Participant 14 stated plainly that there is no use in her seeking counseling if the systems that affect her son are still in existence. Participant 10 focused on

what the experience in a counseling session would be like if she were to share her experiences and feelings as an African American mother raising a son. She described the potential exhaustion she would feel as a client, stating, "In terms of talking about the anxiety around racism and concern for my children, I just did not have the energy to seek any kind of help for that."

Strengths

In response to the question about their strengths as mothers, participants identified several internal strengths that shape their parenting as well as the outward behaviors that characterize their motherhood. Among their internal strengths were responsibility, morality, unconditional love and acceptance, integrity, thinking big, being open and honest in communication, being informed and educated, having the ability to see purpose and strengths in their children, flexibility, resourcefulness, and resilience. Participant 10 gave a particularly powerful characterization of her strengths, stating, "I think . . . as African American women to go ahead and be mothers in the world that we live in, it's a combination of crazy and brave." With these internal strengths, the mothers reported being active on behalf of their children by giving them as many opportunities as possible, advocating for them when necessary, teaching them skills, building a social support network, and keeping their children as a priority.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of African American mothers who have been exposed to state and community violence while raising their sons to understand how this exposure connects to their physical and mental health. Six themes emerged from the data: psychological distress, physical manifestations of stress, parenting behaviors, empathic isolation, coping strategies, and strengths. From the perspectives of these participants, state and community violence weigh down on them as African American mothers, negatively impacting their psychological and physical health and altering their parenting behaviors. Additionally, the interplay between their psychological distress and the change in their parenting facilitates an experience of empathic isolation, in which these mothers mask their emotions inside their homes so as not to adversely affect their sons, and mask their emotions outside of the home (e.g., in the workplace) as they interact with others who are either incapable or unwilling to provide empathic responses to their experiences. Further, participants identified clear personal strengths and coping strategies, such as devotion to their children and involvement in community activism, which were used to uplift themselves. Interestingly, the coping strategies for most of these women did not include seeking help from a mental health professional, even when they were aware of the psychological distress associated with exposure to community and state violence.

These results are both enlightening and disheartening. African American mothers live with daily fear for their sons of all ages. This fear exists despite most of the participants reporting that their sons had not been directly involved in or exposed to violence. These mothers constantly relive psychological trauma because of media exposure of incidents of community and state violence involving African American boys and young men. The results support sentiments of Galovski et al. (2016) that African American mothers are not concerned with just a few random incidents of violence, but rather are affected by greater, continuous, and systemic experiences of psychological trauma spanning decades. These continued distressing experiences of direct and indirect violence appear to negatively impact the psychological (e.g., anger, fear, outrage) and physiological (e.g., tightness in the chest) well-being of African American mothers and likely exacerbate existing health disparities for this population. Findings support previous research regarding the experience of ongoing race-related PTSD among African American mothers (Pieterse et al., 2012). Still, despite threats to their mental and physical health, African American mothers continue to press through with the hopes of protecting and empowering

their sons using a cloak of resilience and buoyancy. Additionally, African American mothers wear a mask of courage and strength to educate their children about racism, resilience, and resistance without revealing their true emotions. DePouw and Matias (2016) highlighted the concept of critical race parenting, whereby parents of color work to educate, advocate, and protect their children from cultural racism. Based on the findings of this study, African American mothers continue to fight for access to safety and equality for their children, while simultaneously attempting to shield their sons from the psychological and physical health effects that community and state violence have on them as mothers.

Implications for Counselors

The results of this study provide insight into the experiences of African American mothers raising sons in the context of #BlackLivesMatter and can inform the work of mental health professionals regarding this population. Given that many African American mothers live with fear or anxiety regarding the safety of their sons, which affects their mental and physical health and parenting behaviors, practitioners might consider culturally sensitive and responsive methods to attract and retain these mothers as clients. An ideal start would be to seek to understand the social and historical context of the experiences of African Americans and the connection with current events of violence and racism. This exploration should be done not within the confines of counseling, but in preparation for building therapeutic rapport. Participants in this study reported possessing little faith that White counselors would understand or believe their experiences. This finding underscores the need for greater cultural competence among White mental health professionals and an increase in the number of available African American counselors to serve African American women. Additionally, work with African American mothers must be strengths-based, building upon the internal and external strengths and resources that exist within the lives of these women. Specifically, the sense of determination encapsulated in the phrase "crazy and brave," used by one of the participants to describe herself, highlights the resourcefulness of African American mothers to provide for and protect their families. Counselors are encouraged to recognize and enhance such personal assets by highlighting the positive energy that these mothers bring to the therapeutic setting through their stories. Relational cultural theory (RCT) might be an appropriate framework to use in counseling clients like the women in this study. RCT centers the cultural experiences of clients and considers how systems of oppression and marginalization affect individuals and their relationships (Comstock, et al., 2008). The mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, and authenticity that are foundational in RCT can provide a therapeutic environment in which African American mothers can explore their experiences of disconnection, such as the empathic isolation that they described in this study.

Finally, mental health professionals need to consider the importance of social justice advocacy to address the community and state violence that negatively impacts the African American community at large and African American mothers of sons specifically. This, in fact, is an ethical obligation of professional counselors who advocate on multiple levels "to address potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and/or the growth and development of clients" (American Counseling Association, 2014, p. 5). The results of this study clearly indicate that community and state violence can be a barrier to optimal physical and mental health of African American mothers. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has created resources for individuals seeking to engage in advocacy and encourage open dialogue around issues of community and state violence (https://blacklivesmatter.com/resources). Specifically, mental health professionals can access and utilize the #BlackLivesMatter toolkits focused on healing justice and action, as well as the toolkit titled *#TalkAboutTrayvon*. Such resources can be a starting place to gain knowledge and develop a strategy for advocacy.

Limitations and Future Research

This study, although rich in details of the experiences of African American mothers, is not without limitations. Although attempts were made to secure African American mothers from varying sub-groups, the resulting sample yielded mainly educated women from mostly two-parent middle-class families, most of whom were from the Southern region of the United States. A more economically and educationally diverse sample of African American mothers might have yielded differences in experiences. For instance, given that poor communities of color are often over-policed (Alexander, 2010), African American mothers in lower socioeconomic brackets might have discussed direct contact with law enforcement and increased incidents of both community and state violence. Additionally, although many of the participants were married or partnered, the researchers did not explore how their spouses or partners played a role in their experience as African American mothers. Some participants mentioned the fathers of their sons and their perspectives; however, this relational aspect needs further inquiry to fully understand its essence. It was beyond the scope of this study to examine the experiences of African American fathers raising sons in the context of #BlackLivesMatter, yet this is certainly a worthy line of research that would augment the findings of this study.

Despite the lack of heterogeneity in this sample with regards to education and income, and focus on mothers to the exclusion of their spouses, partners, or co-parents, the design of the study provided rich and in-depth data regarding a relatively unexplored yet salient topic among a unique sample. Future research can extend the knowledge base regarding African American mothers by exploring the experiences of mothers who are raising daughters in the current context in which exposure to community and state violence occurs regularly through social media. Often, conversations regarding community and state violence, particularly when police use of excessive force is involved, focus on the experiences of African American boys and men. However, Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectionality as well as the #SayHerName movement (2015) reminds us that African American girls and women also are victims of community and state violence. Including mothers raising daughters into this line of research will help uncover the ways in which gender influences motherhood among African Americans when #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName intersect. Additionally, future research should include both homogenous and heterogenous focus groups of mothers to explore, compare, and contrast the experiences of mothers of color and White mothers in terms of parental stress, mental health, and physical health. Finally, future research should focus on identifying social determinants of health that counselors, physicians, and other helpers can use to address health disparities that may be exacerbated by ongoing psychological trauma.

Conclusion

The results of this qualitative study highlight the experiences of African American mothers—"crazy and brave" women—determined to protect and provide for their sons while also contending with a lingering fear for their safety within the current social context. State and community violence, now widely broadcasted in media, affect the psychological and physical well-being of these mothers and contribute to hypervigilance in their parenting. As mental health professionals that value the enhancement of human development and the promotion of social justice, counselors have a duty to provide culturally sensitive services to support this population so that they can take off their masks and experience the empathy that is lacking in many aspects of their lives. Additionally, this duty extends beyond the counseling room as counselors serve as social justice advocates in order to address the systemic barriers to mental health and wellness for members of the African American community.

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