



## COMMENTARY

# George Floyd's death affected Black and White families differently

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On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd bought a package of cigarettes from a convenience store with a counterfeit \$20 bill. Less than an hour later, he showed no signs of life after being pinned to the ground by three police officers, one of whom had his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for over 8 min despite Mr. Floyd crying out that he could not breathe. The murder of Mr. Floyd, indirectly witnessed by innumerable people through cell phone footage, sparked a great deal of public discourse and activity around racial justice. Within a month, people around the world had begun what would become the largest mass protests in support of African Americans since the Civil Rights Movement. Corporations, academic institutions, and yard signs proclaimed solidarity with the aims of the Black Lives Matter movement. Books describing systemic racism and advocating racial dialogue became best sellers. Media raptly characterized responses to the murder of Mr. Floyd as a widespread "racial reckoning" for the people of the United States. In contrast to these public displays, the findings of Sullivan et al. (1) afford insight into how these events shaped the everyday lives of Black and White families.

The researchers asked two samples of White and Black parents about their conversations with their children about race, racial inequality, and racial identity, one sample 6 wk before and the other 3 wk after Mr. Floyd's death. The authors show that everyday family discourse pertaining to racial justice was shaped very differently by the murder of Mr. Floyd, depending on the families' racial backgrounds. Their findings map the impact of societal movements in the daily lives of families, illustrating both the burden borne by Black families and the challenge of impacting racial discourse in White families.

## Conversations in Black Families

Black parents' conversations with their children mirrored the increased interest in racial justice publicly visible through national protests and proclamations. After

the events surrounding the murder of Mr. Floyd, the proportion of Black parents who discussed inequality increased, as did the frequency of parents' conversations about race, inequality, and what it means to be Black. The more frequent conversations may have been driven by Black parents' concerns regarding their children's vulnerability to discrimination. After the murder of Mr. Floyd, Black parents' accounts of a recent conversation with their children about these topics reflected increased efforts to prepare their children to experience bias. Black parents also expressed increased worry that their children would be targets of bias after this event.

Such conversations are consistent with documented socialization practices of Black families in which caregivers teach their children about discrimination and inequality to prepare them for eventually experiencing such things in their own lives (2). Indeed, a substantially greater percentage of Black parents (compared with White parents) in Sullivan et al. (1) reported preparing their children to experience bias even before the murder and mass protests (i.e., 43 vs. 1%). Thus, the death of Mr. Floyd seemed to serve as a vivid reminder of the dangers associated with racial inequality, eliciting even greater attempts on the part of Black parents to engage in conversations intended to protect their children.

The increased worry about bias and the increased vigilance against it accord with other recent research demonstrating the psychological consequences of this event for Black Americans in general. Numerous studies find that feeling subjected to discrimination or wary of future discrimination corresponds with worse mental and physical health (3). Thus, the findings of Sullivan et al. (1) dovetail with those from a recent nationally representative survey showing that Black respondents exhibited a large increase in depression in the week following the murder of Mr. Floyd compared with 5 wk prior (4). White respondents experienced a much smaller increase in depression over this

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period. More generally, researchers have found that police killings of unarmed Black people in a given county are associated with an 11% increase in emergency room visits related to depression among Black people in the general populace, both in the concurrent month and 3 mo later (5).

### Conversations in White Families

In contrast to the consequences for Black families and exhortations about a racial reckoning that enlightened people from all walks of life, White families' conversations about racial justice after the murder of Mr. Floyd were largely unchanged compared with before; in fact, they in some ways became less conducive to fostering social justice. Sullivan et al. (1) found that the frequency with which White parents discussed race, inequality, and what it means to be White was unaffected. Interestingly, although the frequency with which the latter topic was discussed among those who had such conversations was unchanged, the proportion of White parents who talked about it all actually decreased. Mr. Floyd's murder also did not trigger changes in White parents' concern that their children would be targets of bias and efforts to prepare their children for this possibility. Sullivan et al. (1) describe only one element of White parents' conversations about race that increased as a function of these events. White parents' accounts of a recent conversation with their children about these topics reflected an increased emphasis on colorblindness after Mr. Floyd's murder compared with before. This is problematic because colorblindness is associated with greater expressions of prejudice and failure to detect racial discrimination where it is objectively occurring (6). People cannot dismantle systems of racial inequality without taking the first step of acknowledging the importance of race in shaping individuals' life outcomes.

Although the evidence supporting the role of parent-child socialization in the perpetuation or amelioration of bias is mixed, there is great faith in this connection in the popular press (7). As such, one wonders why White parents in the throes of a racial reckoning did not feel compelled to discuss relevant topics with their children more fully. An answer discussed in Sullivan et al. (1) is that White parents may have felt that they did not know how to effectively broach the topic. After all, scientific research has not yet produced definitive strategies to reduce prejudice in the long term (8), including thoroughly validated guidance for parents talking to their children about such topics (7). However, when considering this explanation, one must also note that the Black parents in Sullivan et al. (1) were more worried than their White peers that their children would be biased, both before and after the events surrounding Mr. Floyd's death. This suggests that White parents were less apt to recognize the potential relevance of these events to their own children.

Extant research suggests that coping with group-based threats stemming from the murder of Mr. Floyd may also have hampered the motivation of White parents to navigate these difficult conversations. Although acknowledging racial inequality is a necessary first step in encouraging Whites to dismantle forces that uphold it, such acknowledgment also threatens White Americans by confronting them with the specter of unearned privilege that comes with being a member of a high-status racial group. Extant research shows that Whites manage this threat by denying their privilege or distancing themselves from their racial group when they can (9). The findings of Sullivan et al. (1) of fewer White parents discussing White identity while more frequently discussing colorblindness after Mr. Floyd's death are consistent with denial and distancing responses. In

general, denial and distancing are thought to be more psychologically palatable than the collective guilt and shame that inspire redemptive actions.

**In sum, Sullivan et al.'s findings provide a glimpse into the implications of Mr. Floyd's murder on the everyday conversations of White and Black families. The graphic video, proliferating protests, and ample media coverage undoubtedly affected families throughout the United States and beyond. However, Sullivan et al. show that these effects differed by race.**

The fact that the calls for justice were heavily moralistic following the murder of Mr. Floyd may also have been threatening to White parents, limiting their motivation to tackle difficult familial discussions. Recent approaches connecting social groups and morality posit that morality is a central dimension on which groups are evaluated, and moral intuitions arise primarily to maintain relationships within a group (rather than universally) (10). The central importance of viewing one's groups as morally virtuous and the limited applicability of moral norms to interactions with outgroup members can lead individuals to respond to the immoral acts of ingroup members toward outgroup members by psychologically disengaging through processes such as reconstruing the immoral behavior as moral or minimizing the consequences of immoral acts. Disengagement from the implications of the murder of Mr. Floyd could account for the relatively unchanged nature of White parents' conversations about racial justice. Although the events were in the news, perhaps they were not deemed important enough to warrant engaging in potentially upsetting conversations.

### Conclusion

Black parents, likely responding to reminders of the threats their children face, talked to them about racial justice, at once seeking to protect them and passing on the burden of being vigilant for discrimination in their own lives. In contrast, White families, likely responding to threats to their group standing or simply not thinking that these events were relevant to their children, largely continued with the kinds of racial socialization conversations they had before Mr. Floyd's murder and even increasingly advanced ideologies that stand to hinder rather than improve racial inequality. This disjuncture illustrates the shortcomings of relying on spontaneous reactions to instances of injustice to encourage social change.

Although Sullivan et al. (1) find no immediate effect of the events surrounding Mr. Floyd's murder on how White parents discuss race with their children, there remains promise for change. Each of the above challenges to motivating White Americans to respond to such moments comes with potential solutions, including various types of affirmation and moral reframing techniques. Although future work is needed to explore the efficacy of these strategies for shaping private, interpersonal behavior, it is clear that many important institutions are already responding to this moment. These institutions have tremendous influence over the social norms affecting people's public behavior that may in time come to change the attitudes and actions people exhibit at home.

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