

An Existential– Humanistic Perspective on Black Lives Matter and Contemporary Protest Movements

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Abstract

Contemporary protests movements, which are distinguished from historic movements by relying on decentralized leadership and utilizing social media and technology, have a central role in addressing social justice issues. Black Lives Matter represents one of the most influential and controversial of the contemporary protests movements. Much of the controversy is connected to misunderstanding, distorted portrayals, and attempts to discredit the movement. Through an examination of the history of Black Lives Matter, and consideration of issues such as privilege and polarization, it can be recognized that the Black Lives Matter movement is providing a healthy cultural critique and creative use of pain, anger, and suffering to advocate for human dignity and positive cultural change. Furthermore, the principles of existential–humanistic psychology can be used to deepen the understanding of Black Lives Matter and other protest movements, while also offering important guidance on how to avoid various potential risks to the movement’s success.

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In this article, we explore an existential–humanistic perspective on social justice issues and contemporary protest movements, with particular consideration of Black Lives Matter as an important illustration of these movements. Humanistic psychology, including existential–humanistic psychology, has been disturbingly quiet on multicultural and social justice issues historically (Grogan, 2013; Hoffman, 2016; Hoffman, Cleare-Hoffman, & Jackson, 2014). However, we believe that needs to be corrected and that existential–humanistic psychology, with its foundational commitments to human dignity, empathy, and compassion, can and should make important contributions to understanding social justice issues and the protest movements.

Social justice issues often arise when groups, on a collective level, are forced to confront aspects of the givens of existence due to social structures or impositions. These can include threats to one’s self or existence, being cut off from sources of meaning or relationship, or limitations being imposed on one’s political freedom, which necessarily has implications for one’s existential freedom. When the existential nature of social justice issues and the protest movements are better understood, the understanding of these movements deepen while concurrently demonstrating that within existential–humanistic psychology, we should be committed to engaging these issues.

What Does Black Lives Matter Mean?

On February 26, 2012, 17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, in Sanford, Florida. With his father, Martin was visiting his father’s fiancée. That evening he went to a convenience store, purchased a snack, and began returning from the store. Zimmerman spotted him wearing a “hoodie” in a neighborhood that experienced several recent robberies and called the police reporting suspicious behavior. An altercation between Martin and Zimmerman followed resulting in Martin being shot in the chest. Zimmerman was not charged at the time of the shooting based on his self-defense claim and Florida’s stand your ground law. Later, after outcry over Martin’s death and related protests, Zimmerman was charged. Nevertheless, the jury rendered a not guilty verdict in July, 2013.

Following the not guilty verdict, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi provided the inspiration for the start of the Black Lives Matter

movement (Day, 2015; Rickford, 2015). Garza, after reading about the verdict on Facebook, wrote her own Facebook post that was called “a love note to Black people.” Her friend, Cullors, posted it on Twitter with the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter.” With Tometi adding her support, the seeds of the movement were planted.

The Black Lives Matter movement is difficult to define for a variety of reasons. Rickford (2015) notes, “The variety of local campaigns associated with Black Lives Matter confounds attempts to portray the movement in fine detail” (p. 34). There are chapters in many locations, but these often function somewhat independently. Furthermore, while Black Lives Matters has evolved into a more formal movement with a website (www.blacklivesmatter.com) and organizational structure, many draw on the inspiration of Black Lives Matter, the hashtag, and the slogan without connection to the structure that has developed. Likely the biggest challenge to understanding the Black Lives Matter movement is the misportrayals of it in the media and by others seeking to discredit the movement. Rickford (2015) notes as follows:

Protesters in Ferguson, Baltimore, and elsewhere have been labeled as “looters” and “thugs.” (The latter term appears to be the racial code word of the moment.) Conditioned to accept the premise of black criminality, a large portion of white America instinctively reads black demands as cases of cynical, special pleading. Many Americans continue to practice the art of evasion, embracing expressions such as “All Lives Matter,” “Police Lives Matter,” and most bizarrely, “Southern Lives Matter” (a response to criticism of the display of Confederate flags). (p. 39)

These distortions of the Black Lives Matter movement come in many forms ranging from naivety to fear-based reactions sometimes intending to discredit the movement. These are similar to reactions the civil rights movement experienced.

While the Black Lives Matter movement cannot be clearly defined, important aspects of the movement can be identified. First, it is important to clarify what ought to be obvious: *saying “Black Lives Matter” never intended to suggest that other lives do not matter*. Rather, the implicit message in stating, “Black Lives Matter” is “All lives matter, but our society acts as if Black lives do not matter; therefore, we need to be explicit that Black lives also matter in order for all lives to matter.” Second, that Black Lives Matter intentionally distinguished itself from the political establishment by seeking to dialogue with political leaders instead of joining with them (Rickford, 2015). Third, while drawing from previous movements, such as the civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter has distinguished itself from established

leaders and seeks to draw on the unique opportunities of the times, such as social media and technology, to bolster the movement. Finally, although it ought not need to be said, Black Lives Matter is *not* antipolice, antigovernment, or anti-White people, and it is *not* a group that promotes or intends to incite violence of any kind. While some individuals who may use the phrase “Black Lives Matter” have been violent, this should not be confused with the intentions of the movement anymore than White supremacist groups claiming to be Christian should be attributed to all of Christianity.

Black Lives Matter and Other Oppressed Groups

Any examination of the meaning and significance of the Black Lives Matter and other similar protest movements in the United States requires consideration of history. A phenomenological inquiry relative to the value of the Black life has remained paramount for Black people in the United States since the first Africans landed in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 and were forced into slavery (Zinn, 1980/2015). For Black people, this was the beginning of the search for meaning in a White world. One hundred and fifty-seven years before the United States became a free, independent nation at the signing of the Declaration on Independence in 1776, Blacks already procured a place in American history as something of a smaller extent, amount, or degree than Whites. Throughout most of the uphill battle toward freedom and equality, the arbitrary given that Whites were somehow superior to Blacks remained and continues today in various ways, including the prison industrial complex and the New Jim Crow (M. Alexander, 2010).

In the United States, the message seems clear: Black lives do *not* matter equally to White lives. Systemic racism with the barrage of racial microaggressions remind Blacks daily of their unimportance and reinforce White privilege. Whenever the negative behaviors such as the police killings of unarmed Black men are challenged with the cry “Black Lives Matter,” it is quickly repudiated by the message “All Lives Matter,” as if the former is antagonistic of the latter. The Black Lives Matter movement is relatively new, and for some, the concept is new, but the need for the movement is rooted in almost 400 years of history.

It is not uncommon in contemporary society to hear people deny that racism is very prevalent today. However, it is not that racism has ended, but rather it now presents in a much different form. Systemic racism and microaggressions remain prevalent in the lives of many people of color. Racial microaggressions are subtle and often unintentional forms of racism that communicate denigrating messages to people of color and other marginalized groups (Constantine, 2007; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Sue, 2010; Sue et al.,

2007). Examples of racial microaggressions include remarks such as “I don’t think of *you* [a Black person] as Black” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 61), “I grew up poor and didn’t have any privilege either,” poor service in restaurants and stores, “driving while Black” traffic stops, and increased surveillance of Black people while they shop (Feagin & Sikes, 1994).

Sue’s (2010) research related to the psychology of microaggressions indicates that White individuals typically attribute microaggressions to alternative causes or misunderstandings. When microaggressions are discounted or minimized, which is a further microaggression or microinvalidation, it is difficult for many to recognize the cumulative experience of the frequent experience of microaggressions (Sue, 2010). Yet this affects how members of marginalized groups see and experience the world through what bell hooks (2003) refers to “indoctrination” and “mental colonialization.”

When the perpetual experiential reality is one of degradation and oppression, the natural humanistic response is one of protest. As Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, “riot is the language of the unheard” (as cited in E. Alexander, 2005, p. 100). Martin Luther King, Jr.’s (1967) comments at Stanford following the Watts Riots of the 1960s are as salient today as the time of the original speech:

I think America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation’s summers of riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention.

Cleare-Hoffman (2009), in her existential analysis of Junkanoo, a Bahamian cultural festival, is illustrative here. Junkanoo was an attempt by Bahamians slaves to preserve some of their West African culture; however, it was also a celebration of freedom in the context of oppression and an assertion of meaning. Junkanoo was seen as threatening by many of the slave owners who tried to control it (Sands, 2008). Despite this, the Bahamian slaves continued the tradition for many years, often in partial hiding. According to Sands (2008), even in modern times, Junkanoo continued “to be a dynamic force for positive, progressive and peaceful change in Bahamian society” (p. 67). What the

origins and history of Junkanoo represent is the natural, humanistic assertion of meaning, and quest for freedom in the face of oppression.

Much like Junkanoo, Black Lives Matter and other protest movements are a natural, humanistic assertion of meaning and a quest for equality and freedom in the face of oppressive forces. As people who are frightened of the movement have tried to misrepresent it as a criminal or “thug mentality,” the Black Lives Matter movement has continued to assert itself as a positive, proactive, peaceful movement that is not only seeking to promote change but also to find meaning in the mid of suffering and oppression.

Privilege, Power, Polarization, and Protest Movements

Black Lives Matter and the protest movements have often received polarized responses. According to Schneider (2013), polarization “is the fixation on one point of view to the utter exclusion of competing points of view” (p. v). However, as Schneider further discusses, polarization is different than extremism and passion. There are times when extremism and passion are needed to promote positive change; however, these become dangerous when they are unwilling to consider alternative viewpoints.

The repeated attempts to castigate the Black Lives Matter movement as encouraging violence against police, divisive and anti-White people, and engaging in vandalism and violence (Rickford, 2015) illustrate the polarized responses to the movement. Despite repeated attempts to clarify and a lack of evidence to support these claims, these misconceptions are still widely believed. These deceptions have also created fear and anger directed toward the activists, which reinforce the need for these protest movements while concurrently contributing to polarized. The manufactured fear and anger at the protest movement contributes to increased tension and the possibility of peaceful protests being responded to forcefully or violently, which has occurred several times already. This cyclic process is illustrated in a poem by Granger (2015) excerpted here:

Are you so afraid
Of my skin so brown
You use all possible means
To keep me down . . .
I'm not afraid of you
Let me make that clear

Your baseless fear of me
Is what I fear. (p. 75)

Many people who have privilege are critical of the protest movements for causing disruption and engaging in civil disobedience. A frequent assertion is that it would be better to utilize the usual channels to advocate for change through the political system. However, the political system has not only failed African Americans, it has contributed to the problem. For instance, Michelle Alexander (2010), in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, demonstrated that the legal system and mass incarceration greatly contributed to many of the severe problems faced by the African American community. Political responses to bias in the legal system have failed as African Americans continue to be disproportionately targeted by police, prosecuted, and imprisoned. It is important to be clear that this is a systemic issue; therefore, we do not intend to state that all police officers or other participants in the legal system are corrupt or intentionally contributing to the problem. Rather, there are systemic pressures and unjust laws that form the basis for these problems and influence many people who are part of the system.

As an illustration of the systemic issues in the legal system, M. Alexander (2010) notes that the illegal drugs that frequently are the drugs of choice for African Americans, although often no more dangerous than those that tend to be drugs of choice for White people, carry heavier sentences. Furthermore, although research suggests that there is little difference in drug usage between African Americans and White people, African Americans are much more frequently arrested, prosecuted, and receive more severe sentences compared with White people. This issue has not improved, but worsened in recent times despite the increased attention to the issue following the publication of Alexander's influential book.

In reality, the Black community has no reason to trust that people representing them in elected office and the political system will work to rectify the problems at the heart of the Black Lives Matter movement. For those who have privilege, it is easy to rely on the system, which has tended to work for them and protected them. For those who the system has not worked, alternatives are needed.

To advocate for change when you come from a position lacking privilege and power, it is necessary to find alternative ways to bring attention to the issues. According to Gandhi (1964), "The first principle of non-violent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating" (p. 42). Nonviolence if practiced out of the view of society is destined to be impotent. Without disruption, there will be no change. Disruption was a very common theme in

the writing and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., who intently studied the teachings of Gandhi. He was not only aware of the risks of disruption but also recognized the consequences of avoiding disruption due to fear or pressure to follow the channels of change that were not accessible to marginalized groups. He did not idealize disruption, but recognized that it was a necessary part of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience. Moreover, he recognized that, at times, disruption was necessary for the existence of a fair democratic process.

While some cry out that the protests are undemocratic and uncivilized, this position is one that is rational for those blinded by their comfortable privileged positions. In reality, protest is deep engagement in the democratic process when the democratic process is failing to represent marginalized groups who have become invisible to those in power.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT) is an existential approach originating in social psychology that is based on the writing of Ernest Becker (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). TMT is an important resource for understanding the social and cultural context that inform personal reactions. Additionally, TMT has served as an important influence on Schneider's (2013) work on polarization.

Schneider (2013) notes that polarization "has appeared as bigotry, bullying, tyranny, vengefulness, and arrogance; and it has also manifested as narrowness, rigidity, pedantry, and obsession" (p. 19). He attributes the polarized mind as arising as a defense to one's existential place in the world and a feeling of "cosmic insignificance" that becomes heightened in times of individual or collective trauma. The individual with a polarized mind may feel an especially strong need to cling to his or her perspectives, ideologies, and psychological constructs in order to avoid feeling helpless, powerless, or small.

As discussed earlier, polarization has been a common reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement. Indeed, one only need to peruse the comments section on an Internet article about Black Lives Matter to see how quickly the discussion devolves into aggression, victimizing, blaming, shaming, and often bullying. This may be due to the person feeling thrust into a state of existential panic from which point they feel they must batten down and fortify their position. The Black Lives Matter movement represents much more than a simple move toward justice—it is a threat to the ideologies of power that many have held for centuries. The loss of those constructs is not just a threat to the present power structure; it is a threat to the very ways in which many have protected themselves against feelings of powerlessness.

TMT postulates that humans have an instinct for self-preservation and in the face of threats to mortality, respond with a variety of experiences “ranging from hopelessness, to denial, to seeking symbolic immortality” (Niemiec et al., 2010, p. 344). According to Jones and Fritsche (2013), these methods of managing terror can result in “standing by the in-group, defending cultural worldviews, and bolstering self-esteem” as a means to “assure people of a symbolic collective existence” (p. 543). As Jones and Fritsche (2013) further note, “self-categorization as an in-group member leads people to distance themselves from out-groups” (p. 544) and “hostile stereotypes of adversary groups may be sustained or even become stronger, which may contribute to the maintenance or escalation of the conflict” (p. 545).

These two theories, individually or combined, provide a salient perspective on the strong reactions to the Black Lives Matter movement, specifically in addressing how the assault on Black lives threatens a cultural worldview, thus inflicting existential injury. The beliefs that the United States is free, that it is a land of opportunity, and that everyone is treated fairly are significant cultural worldviews. The uprising of the Black Lives Matter social movement challenges those worldviews; it offers a different perspective that many in the United States believe to exist despite its reality not extending to everyone (i.e., Black people). The threat to existence that spurred the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the increased threat evident in the extreme responses to the movement, could influence people involved to cling to the worldview and in-group represented by Black Lives Matter. Additionally, it could create a temptation to villainize those outside the movement. Similarly, individuals who see their power and privilege threatened by the Black Lives Movement may react through being protective of their in-group alliances while being more critical of those external to their in-group, particularly those representing the threat to their comfort and security (i.e., Black Lives Matter protestors and sympathizers). While we would be cautious about reducing the tensions and conflicts to what could be identified through a TMT analysis, this provides insight into contributions to the challenges being faced. It suggests that a threat to one’s ontological security, potentially symbolized in various comforts, systems, and protections, may influence one’s reactions. Given this, it stands to reason that challenging one’s own privilege may be the first experiential engagement in understanding a single aspect of daily oppression for Black people. Tillich (2000) shared, “The dangers connected with the change, the unknown character of the things to come, the darkness of the future make the average man a fanatical defender of the established order” (p. 66). Therefore, recognizing and attending to these fears, then, is an important aspect of responding in an empathetic manner.

Cultural Empathy

Since Obama became a serious contender as a presidential candidate, the prevalence of more overt, explicit, and public racism has been on the rise in the United States. While Obama's presidency has been interpreted as representing a "postracial society," it is evident that the United States is still far from attaining this. At most, Obama's presidency may reflect that a majority of people in the United States espouse the ideal of racial equality. The progress reflected in electing a Black president allowed many to believe the people of the United States had "arrived" and now could relax in the achievement; however, the cumulative impact of the killing of Trayvon Martin and subsequent Zimmerman Trial, the events at Ferguson, Eric Gardner's death, the Baltimore protests, and the controversy regarding presidential candidate Donald Trump's statements demonstrate otherwise. These have fueled intensifying racial tensions, making dialogue across cultures difficult.

The breakdowns in communication are evidenced in the reactions to Black Lives Matter, which includes many fear-based and defensive reactions by White people. The simple phrase Black Lives Matter, intended to be an assertion of the value of life, has been twisted by many who claim it is antipolice, divisive, or promoting violence. In reality, the phrase is intended to assert the value of life, critique our culture of violence that often disregards the value of the lives of certain people, and advocate for change that will increase the safety of everyone, including police officers.

It is evident that dialogues and debates about race and multiculturalism are having minimal success in bringing forth change. It is our contention that what is needed is a change in the type of conversation that occurs. In 1954, Gordon Allport advocated that interpersonal contact under the right conditions and right interpersonal context would decrease intergroup prejudice. Although not the first to speculate this idea, his advocacy was instrumental in promoting the idea, leading to a large body of research examining this assertion (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Pettigrew and Tropp, in an extensive meta-analysis of over 500 studies, found strong support for the hypothesis. Given the disparities of what is occurring in contemporary society and the strong support of the research, it appears important to give greater consideration to the context and variables that seem to differentiate effective multicultural dialogue that may increase understanding and decrease fear and prejudice.

It is not always possible to bring people together in a manner that allows for the development of relationship that will decrease prejudice; therefore, it is important to consider aspects of these relationships that may be effective in decreasing prejudice and increasing understanding. In the development of the book *Stay Awhile: Poetic Narratives on Multiculturalism and Diversity*,

Hoffman and Granger (2015) advocated that narratives and storytelling are approaches to understanding that can help shift the dialogue from debate to hearing each other's stories. In their book, they focused on the use of poetry, which often provides narratives on experience as well as other symbolic explorations of a topic.

In the context of cultural tensions, empathy is most powerful when it is mutual. As the TMT model suggests, people resistant to the Black Lives Matter movement may have some of their own fears, and symbolically they may feel a threat to their ontological security. If the Black Lives Matter movement recognizes these fears, it may help them engage in dialogue in a more sensitive manner that may allay some of the fears influencing the resistances. If people in the United States can grieve together the losses and fears with sensitivity to each other, then it may be possible to create something better on the other side. However, if we cannot empathetically acknowledge the pain in the history of Black people and other marginalized groups in the United States, and empathetically recognize the deep and often ontological fears associated with the loss of privilege, then the same cycles of polarization and violence will likely continue.

It is risky to talk about empathy to what could be considered the oppressor; however, we encourage caution in using the label of oppressor as not all resisters to the Black Lives Matter movement fit this label. There are some who advocate for "All Lives Matter" with the good intentions of inclusivity without knowledge of the history of Black Lives Matter. If these individuals are assumed to be resistant or opposed to the message of Black Lives Matter it increases the possibility of polarization in a situation where information or education may be an effective change agent. Empathy is more powerful when it is mutual, and empathy often begets empathy.

It is evident in contemporary society that there is a lack of empathy for the experience and lives Black people that rises to the level of being a cultural crisis necessitating a strong response. Empathy is not something that can be demanded for forced, it is something that is invited and cultivated. We need greater engagement in the stories, narratives, poetics, and relationships of people across cultures to develop empathy, concern, and compassion that can help the Black Lives Matter movement be one important part of a broader cultural change.

Risks of the Protest Movements

We do not intend to idealize the protest movements in this article. There are dangers associated with these movements that are important to consider as well. First, there is the danger of polarization. The protest movements by

nature tend to be extremist. As noted by Schneider (2013), extreme views and passion are not necessarily bad. Extreme views, when they become polarized (i.e., disregard other viewpoints), become dangerous. In our observance of the Black Lives Matter movement, it has, for the most part, avoided this pitfall. It has sought engagement and dialogue while passionately advocating for its viewpoint. Yet, it is critical that the movement stay vigilant to avoid the temptation of polarization.

Second, there is the danger of developing a rigid ideology and requiring others to ascribe to this view. It is important that protest movements seek to find a balance that includes having enough of a foundation to have a strong, articulate platform while avoiding the rigidity that would exclude allies and others sympathetic with the movement. In our estimation, Black Lives Matter has, for the most part, been successful in avoiding this pitfall as well.

Third, it is important to avoid power struggles that can cause movements to self-destruct. Rickford (2015) noted that the Black Lives Matter movement has remained decentralized, and avoided being centered on single charismatic leaders. This is admirable and allows for greater inclusion. However, it also brings the risk of people trying to seek out power or notoriety in the movement. It is important that Black Lives Matter remains vigilant in avoiding this. To some degree, power struggles are almost inevitable. Remaining vigilant to this risk and focused on the cause can help manage these threats when they arise.

Fourth, similar to polarization, protest movements run the risk of being divisive. One of the strengths of the Black Lives Matter movement is that it has been inclusive of many other cultural allies, including White allies and allies from other marginalized groups (Rickford, 2015). This is critically important for the movement to retain its momentum and maintain a voice powerful enough that the political leaders must listen. If this becomes just a Black movement, it will likely fail to actualize its potential. While Black Lives Matter has been successful in remaining inclusive by embracing allies within the movement, it will be important for Black Lives Matter to strive to also support other movements, such as Native Lives Matter. While this has occurred, it still could be improved. Yet it is hard to be too critical of a movement so new for not adequately reaching out to support similar movements.

Fifth, it is important to channel the powerful emotions toward change instead of destruction. Rollo May (1969) advocated an approach to understanding emotions, including anger, that sees them as *natural functions* with the potential of becoming destructive, as illustrated in his concept of the daimonic. According to May (1969), the daimonic is "any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person" (p. 65). Emotions could be conceived as one function that could be part of the daimonic. The daimonic, when

avoid, denied, or repressed grows in its potential for destruction (Hoffman, Warner, Gregory, & Fehl, 2011). However, May (1969) notes that the daimonic is also a source of creativity and can be used toward positive ends. The Black Lives Matter movement is a beautiful illustration of the creative use of the daimonic through its utilization of pain, loss, and anger for good. Yet it is important not to forget May's heeding of the negative potential of the daimonic, including what Diamond (1996) refers to as *daimonic possession*, or being overtaken by the daimonic. Anger, which is currently being used constructively, holds the potential to overtake the movement in negative ways. It is important that the Black Lives Matter movement remain aware of the potential for the constructive uses of anger to become destructive.

While in our appraisal Black Lives Matter has been effective in avoiding the potential pitfalls outlined, this will likely become more difficult to avoid as the movement continues. It is critical to remain vigilant and aware of these risks. One of the most important prevention strategies is engaging in regular self-critique and analysis within the movement. This is different than the critique external to the movement. Yet self-critique itself serves as a risk in that identifying potential problems can lead to internal conflicts and power struggles. These must be done with compassion and grace. In the end, the most important factor protecting movements such as Black Lives Matter is staying focused on the cause. When distracted from this, the risks quickly multiply.

Conclusion

Those who agree that racial inequality must be removed and yet do nothing to fight the evil are impotent. I cannot have anything to say to such people. (Gandhi, 1964, p. 72)

If existential–humanistic psychology proclaims itself to be rooted in compassion and an advocate for social dignity, yet remains silent on the pressing racial issues of our times, then it deserves the fate of gradually withering into irrelevance that will likely follow. This is not to say that everyone claiming to be part of the existential–humanistic psychology must join with Black Lives Matter or agree with its approaches. However, for existential–humanistic psychology to remain silent on the contemporary racial injustices is to be convicted by its own principles.

Critical psychology (Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997) has noted that psychology too often has reinforced the status quo. With regard to racism and other forms of prejudice, psychology too often has encouraged people to become comfortable in their role of being oppressed and marginalized instead of empowering people to stand up to injustice. Certainly, existential–humanistic psychology

fits with this criticism. Prilleltensky and Fox (1997) continue to state, "Encouraging women, people of color, the poor, and the working class to define their problems as individual ensures that they work to change themselves rather than society" (p. 12). If existential–humanistic psychologists only battle these injustices inside the therapy room, then they will continue to fail to actualize the fullest potential of existential–humanistic principles in the world. It is time to say, "No more will we be silent!" If humanistic and existential–humanistic psychology truly value human dignity, compassion, and empathy, and practices the art of listening and valuing the experience of others, including the marginalized and oppressed, then there is no authentic option but to speak.

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Author Biographies



Louis Hoffman, PhD, is a faculty member and director of the existential, humanistic, and transpersonal psychology specialization at Saybrook University. He is a fellow of the American Psychological Association, and fellow/past president of the Society for Humanistic Psychology. He is an avid writer with seven books to his credit, including *Stay Awhile: Poetic Narratives on Multiculturalism and Diversity* and *Existential Psychology East-West*. In addition to his academic work, he retains a private practice in

beautiful Colorado Springs, Colorado. He serves on the board of the Humanitarian Alliance and is a cofounder of the Zhi Mian International Institute for Existential–Humanistic Psychology. As a passionate supporter for social justice, he is active in advocating on multiculturalism and diversity, homelessness, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues.



Dr. Nathaniel Granger, Jr., is a graduate of the University of the Rockies (formerly Colorado School of Professional Psychology) where he received a doctorate degree in clinical psychology with a specialization in forensics. His master's degree in counseling and human services is from University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. He has received several awards and scholarships for demonstrated scholarly excellence and dedication to the field of psychology. Reverend Granger is originally a product of the inner

city, where gross poverty and dropping out of high school facilitated in succumbing to life on the streets of Chicago, where he received Life's proverbial degree in "hard-knocks." However, through perseverance and determination, by enlisting in the U.S. Army and beginning his formal educational pursuits at the community college level, he has served in many capacities in the arena of human services to include but not

limited to founder and pastor/psychotherapist of Be REAL Ministries, Inc. in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He tirelessly devotes time in working with homeless populations, and is the current secretary of American Psychological Association Society of Humanistic Psychology. Additionally, Dr. G, as his students affectionately know him, is an adjunct psychology professor at Pikes Peaks Community College in Colorado Springs, Colorado and Saybrook University in Oakland, California. He is a published author and his embodiment of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and reenactment of the “*I have a dream*” speech, along with his oratory gifts that gives life to any topic, has rendered him a desired and sought after speaker.



Lisa Vallejos, PhD, LPC, is a licensed professional counselor and holds a master of arts from Regis University and a PhD in psychology with a specialization in existential, humanistic, and transpersonal psychology from Saybrook University. She received a certificate in the foundations of existential–humanistic psychotherapy from the Existential–

Humanistic Institute that she completed in 2013. She has served on the board of directors of the Society for Humanistic Psychology as a student representative, serves as a peer reviewer for the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, and is active in many initiatives and task forces. She is an adjunct professor, consultant, and writer who has been seen on Fox, CNN, elephant journal, and many other popular sites. She is a published writer, poet, and artist and is the founder of Gabriel’s Gift, a 501c3 that supports families with a child who has a congenital heart defect.



Dr. Michael Moats is first and foremost a father, a husband, and a friend, and he understands the value of relationship in life and in the therapy room. His passion lies in working with clients learning to redefine their lives and create new meaning, especially those dealing with grief and loss in its many forms. He was raised in a rural area in which family and community were an important part of his cultural heritage. However, racism was also a part of this community. Struggle, challenge, curiosity, and death were all experiences set him on a path that had not yet been understood,

until later in his life. Time and time again, it has been relationship that has proven to be the most valuable and useful cornerstone in providing his life-changing encounters. It is only through these relationships that he has found his greatest accomplishments, including seeing the person beyond the class, color, belief, or whatever other domain that society tends to use to create separation versus flavor. Along with having taught cultural diversity at the college level, his research interests includes a qualitative, cross-cultural study (China and the United States) investigating meaning making and the lessons learned through loss, as well as continuing to dialogue internationally to contribute to a more rounded perspective within the global, psychological community. Additionally, he is a cofounder of the Zhi Mian International Institute of Existential–Humanistic Psychology and a published poet, author of *Capturing Shadows*, and author of various book chapters and articles.