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Friends or Foes? U.S. Women’s Perceptions of Racial Justice and the Black Lives Matter Protests during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on the first waves of the Black Lives Matter protests (2013–2014) has emerged in recent years but little is yet known about women’s responses to the cycle of Black Lives Matter/George Floyd protests that occurred in the Summer of 2020. This study analyzed semi-structured interviews with a racially diverse community sample of 20 women and two nonbinary individuals who mostly identified as feminists (mean age = 34.05, SD = 13.11). To address the salience of BLM framing practices during an ongoing protest, this study explored an awareness of structural racism and reactions to the presumed goals and tactics of this antiracism social movement. We identified six themes in how this racially diverse sample responded to these protests against racism and police brutality: 1) Caricatures of BLM protestors as criminals; 2) Protests were too extreme; 3) Concern about the COVID risks and social context of COVID; 4) More education needed about race relations; 5) Protests were long overdue; and 6) Protests were effective and necessary. Implications for better understanding the rhetoric of white liberalism, solidarity within racial justice movements, and fragmentation or unity among women were explored.

KEYWORDS

Racial justice; Black Lives Matter; women; protest; activism; allyship; attitudes

While the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement began as a Twitter hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) in 2013 as a radical call for justice after the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, it became a full-fledged social movement during the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri revolts against police brutality (Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin 2019; Rickford 2016). Following the Ferguson protest cycle, the BLM movement promoted challenges to police brutality throughout the country and became a part of the massive anti-Trump protests broadly called “The Resistance” (Meyer and Tarrow 2018). Then, after the public and painful murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020 BLM has surged in visibility, popularity, and has enlisted support from new allies throughout the world.

The Crowd Counting Consortium identified at least 5,000 anti-racism and anti-police-brutality protests nationwide in late May and June of 2020 (Putnam, Pressman, and Chenoweth 2020) and a PEW American Trends survey noted that 67% of adult Americans said they supported Black Lives Matter, while another 6% participated in BLM protests (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020). By reinvigorating such a massive collective force, the BLM has returned as a formidable opponent of white supremacy and racial injustice throughout the world. In its mission statement, the BLM movement called for a radical intersectional vision for racial justice: “We are intentional about amplifying the particular experience of state and gendered violence that Black queer, trans, gender nonconforming, women and intersex people face. There can be no liberation for all Black people if we do not center and fight for those who have been marginalized” (Black Lives Matter 2016). Since then, it has brought together diverse coalitions of activists dedicated to a variety of causes, most

specifically a radical realignment of policing and racial justice, more awareness of economic justice, and a queer/feminist/trans-affirmative approach to lessening violence (Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin 2019).

Research on anti-racist activism has received some scholarly attention (Holt and Sweitzer 2020; Selvanathan et al. 2018), particularly around the motivations of BLM activism (Banks, White, and McKenzie 2019; Corral 2020; Lake, Alston, and Kahn 2021; Merseeth 2018) and how participation in BLM enhances the emotional and physical well-being of Black Americans (Watson-Singleton et al. 2021). Less is known about women's attitudes about the BLM/George Floyd protests that occurred in June 2020. Some early indicators from broad surveys suggest that there might be a minor gender gap in anti-racist attitudes, as 42% of women and 35% of men strongly supported the BLM movement in June 2020 (CIVIS 2020). Moreover, the tendency of women to support BLM might be even stronger among intersectional feminists who recognized and detested the ways that racist and sexist practices harm women of color (Bonilla and Tillery 2020; Einwohner et al. 2021; Ferree 2009; Hordge-Freeman and Loblack 2021; Simien and Clawson 2004). The emergence of "Afro-Latinx feminisms" reflects the urgency to explore how embodied experiences of race and racialization shape political consciousness, self-identity, and the possibilities of transnational racial solidarity, especially for women (Clealand 2019; Rivera 2006; Valle 2019; Hordge-Freeman and Angelica 2020). However, opinion polls like this only superficially address general attitudes, while qualitative studies can explore in depth the ambivalence, ambiguities, subtleties, and conditionality in which women view (and potentially participate in) BLM (Linder 2015).

The June 2020 waves of BLM emerged during a time of heightened social stress, both within the US and globally. The Trump presidency had exacerbated racial tensions and heteropatriarchal rhetoric, particularly as he praised white supremacists movements at the University of Virginia and elsewhere (McVeigh and Estep 2019). The protests also coincided with the height of COVID-19 transmission and deaths, record rates of unemployment and joblessness (Craig 2020), fears about COVID infection and spread (Fitzpatrick, Harris, and Drawve 2020), and record-setting rates of Americans reporting social isolation, depression and anxiety (Collins 2020). With all of this strife and racialized pain in the country, questions about racial solidarity between white and BIPOC progressives were shrouded in doubt and paranoia. Thus, this study used semi-structured interviews to address our research questions around how women perceive BLM protests. By understanding the stories being told and imagined around the 2020 BLM protests, this analysis provides insights into "micromobilization" processes and shows how women and self-identified feminists can build political alliances with racial justice movements.

The origins and significance of Black Lives Matter

Founded by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, Black Lives Matter has been called by Garza a "love note" to Black communities, designed with the intention of bringing together the struggles for racial justice with the struggles of feminist, LGBTQ, and working-class/poor communities (Milkman 2017; Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin 2019; Rickford 2016). At its inception, BLM identified as "unapologetically Black," "transgender affirming," "queer affirming," and "women centered" (Clark, Dantzler, and Nickels 2018; Oliver 2020). As such, the tactics of BLM often focus on direct action, occupation of public spaces (e.g., highways, stores, police stations, municipal buildings), and public performance stunts such as "die-ins," marches, and re-enactments of aggression against people of color. BLM has become known for slogans like "Hands up, don't shoot!" and "Shut it down!" and have largely refused the more mainstream/within-system channels of social change in favor of street-based protest and impactful political theater (Rickford 2016). Notably, BLM has largely resisted the "respectability politics" avenue for social change (e.g., maintaining decorum in the hope of gaining white approval), instead advocating for more confrontational direct action politics that can force concessions from white elites (Oliver 2020; Rickford 2016).

BLM has worked toward both small and achievable goals (e.g., body cameras on police officers) and, more often, broader transformative goals that fuse together symbolic and concrete forms of racial justice. For example, BLM has centered those on the margins, particularly women, LGBTQ people, and the poor and working-class, while also calling for cultural memory and recognition of those injured or killed by police violence (Oliver 2020). Notably, BLM protests sprang up in places where more Black people have been killed by the police (Williamson, Trump, and Einstein 2018), suggesting that BLM as a social movement is rooted in the material, concrete reality of Black death at the hands of police. The murder of George Floyd by then-police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020 was significant not only because of the outrageous violence of the murder – Chauvin kneeled on Floyd’s neck for over eight minutes despite Floyd’s pleas for help and his calling out in agony for his mother – but also because it was *filmed* and made widely available on social media. Some 1.5 million people viewed the video that showed Floyd’s death in the three weeks following his murder (Blake 2020), and many cited this as a turning point in their own consciousness (Harmon and Tavernise 2020).

Attitudes toward Black Lives Matter

Public reactions to Black Lives Matter have mostly been measured through quantitative studies conducted during the Obama presidency. Older studies suggest that around 43% of Americans supported BLM and 22% opposed it before the arrival of the Trump presidency and COVID-19 (Horowitz and Livingston 2016). Public opinion polls suggest that a massive number of Americans shifted their allegiance to BLM by June of 2020. During the peak of the George Floyd protests, over 60% of Americans said they backed Black Lives Matter (CIVIS 2020), with some polls claiming that 38% of their participants strongly supported and 29% somewhat supported Black Lives Matter (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020).

Quantitative studies have created a profile of people who have generally admired and disdained earlier waves of BLM (Milkman 2017). When exploring the racial identities of individuals, white Americans had a significantly lower assessment of BLM than did African Americans (Holt and Sweitzer 2020; Milkman 2017; Swank 2019), and white people had more negative views of the 2017 National Football League (NFL) protests of the national anthem (“taking a knee”) than did African-Americans (Intravia, Piquero, and Piquero 2018).

Social psychological theories have offered some models about the sorts of worldviews that motivate BLM adherents. For our purposes, collective identity reflects an individual’s group identification, more specifically, their psychological feelings of belonging or attachment to a particular group (Polletta and James 2001). Thus, collective identity denotes a mutual sense of “we-ness” and “collective agency,” among social movement participants (Snow and McAdam 2000). Because research demonstrates that stronger and more salient collective identities facilitate greater movement participation and mobilization (Polletta and James 2001; Klandermans and de Weerd 2000), we theoretically ground our analysis in research related to collective identity and group consciousness, relative to the identity-to-politics linkages.

BLM has successfully convinced many political bystanders that activism is one possible avenue toward social justice goals (Chaney and Robertson 2015). Studies of white individuals found that people were willing to join BLM when they had empathy toward Black people, anger toward racial injustice, rejected white dominance over Black communities, and admired BLM activists (Holt and Sweitzer 2020; Selvanathan et al. 2018; Yoo et al. 2021). Feeling angry about racism increased Black people’s willingness to donate to Black organizations and to join in protest, and that anger was the strongest predictor of anti-racist activism among white people (Banks, White, and McKenzie 2019). Finally, the factors that drove white support for BLM also applied to Latinx and Asian Americans, except that a perception of shared racial oppression was more salient to people of color than to white Americans when assessing support for BLM (Corral 2020; Hordge-Freeman and Loblack 2021; Merseth 2018).

Gendering police brutality and anti-racist ally activism

People decide to participate in a social movement “because doing so accords with who they are” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 284). Snow and McAdam (2000) theorized the process whereby movement adherents experience this “identity correspondence” between their personal identities and the movement’s collective identity. They argued that there are two main ways this occurs: through “identity convergence” and “identity construction.” In identity convergence, an individual’s personal identity is already aligned with a movement’s collective identity such that the movement “provides an avenue for the individual to act in accordance with his or her personal identity” (Snow and McAdam 2000, 47).

With regard to anti-racist activism, gender has had an impact on the tendency to support, join, and form alliances with BLM. Women were more supportive of BLM than men across different races (Arora and Stout 2019; Hope, Keels, and Durkee 2016), while older, Republican, and conservative men more often opposed BLM than younger, more liberal women (Updegrove et al. 2020). A study on anti-racist allies found that people of color did not identify gender as relevant when labeling white allies, suggesting that race had more salience than gender (Ostrove and Brown 2018). Notably, however, women were not more likely to support the NFL kneeling protests compared to men (Sevi et al. 2021).

White women’s participation in anti-racist activism has also recently received some attention, particularly as it relates to feminist perspectives of intersecting oppressions (Harnois 2015). A sizable percentage of feminists think that anti-racist activism is central to women’s liberation and that racial solidarity is a key component of feminist activism (Carroll and Ratner 1996; Greenwood 2008; Hordge-Freeman and Loblack 2021; Kelly and Gauchat 2016; Linder 2015; Simien and Clawson 2004). Moreover, the integration of anti-racist work into feminist consciousness may have increased in recent years, as supporting racial justice was the sixth most common reason to join the Women’s March of 2016 and 7% of protesters said that Black Lives Matter inspired their commitment to feminist activism (Fisher, Jasny, and Dow 2018). A later study found that roughly 80% of people in the 2018 Women’s March thought that the empowerment of women of color and queer women should be a priority of the feminist movement (Heaney 2021).

Allyship has gained new salience as the BLM movement has broadened to include many non-Black participants, activists, and allies. The work of anti-racist allies often draws on emotional ties, personal relationships, and solidarity. For example, a study of white anti-racist allies found that white women participated in protests for racial justice when they had positive contact and closeness to people targeted by prejudice (Tropp and Uluğ 2019), suggesting that white women’s protest behavior in BLM may be dependent on whether they have close relationships with people of color who are targeted by police brutality. Among protestors at the 2017 Women’s March, those who prioritized intersectional concerns tended to be more left-leaning and more queer-identified compared to other protestors (Heaney 2021). Another study of participants at the 2017 Women’s March found that individuals’ motivation to protest reflected an intersectional set of issues that spanned race, gender, class, and sexuality, and that coalitions have emerged from the 2017 Women’s March across racial groups, including increased feminist support of BLM (Fisher, Dow, and Ray 2017).

The desire of white feminists to engage in anti-racist activism is not without complications (Linder 2015). At a basic level, activists must forgo a “white racial frame” that characterizes whiteness as normal and positive and Blackness as negative, deviant, and inadequate (Feagin 2010). To dismantle racism, people must go further than accepting an anti-racist label or attending a BLM rally and instead understand how their assumptions and day-to-day actions resist or perpetuate racism (Edwards 2006). Anti-racist allyship requires humility, continual reflections on privileges, and perseverance, as white allies must be attuned to power imbalances and prioritize the needs of people of color rather than their own (Sumerau et al. 2021). Anti-racist white allies often claim that they are distinct from other white people, as white allies claimed to consciously value social justice and consider themselves good and moral people who stand against overt forms of racism (Edwards 2006). As such, white allies sometimes awkwardly handled issues of “white guilt” and often sought assurances that they are “good” white people (Edwards 2006; Linder 2015).

White activists also sometimes downplay the value of the “radical flank” in Black liberation (Robnett, Glasser, and Trammell 2015). Many white people who claim that they oppose racism warn that anti-racist activism should be done solely through voting for liberal candidates or joining calm vigils (Hsiao and Radnitz 2021; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Wang and Piazza 2016). Moreover, white support of anti-racist activists often waivers or evaporates when the activists are seen as being “militant” (Muñoz and Anduiza 2019), “unruly and disrespectful to authorities” (Gutting 2020), or are chanting about fighting the police (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018).

Research questions

Given the complicated ways that people understand, talk about, and imagine protests, and given the changing contexts in which BLM has expanded in scope and visibility throughout the world, this study began with several research questions to guide its analysis: First, what do women say about racial justice, protest, and activism, particularly if asked during the middle of heightened social stress and highly visible political activism? Second, how do women’s attitudes portray solidarity between, or fractures among, women along racial lines? Third, how sympathetic or rejecting are women toward the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly given their personal investment in rebelling against some gender norms of the body?

Method

This study draws from narratives gathered during the peak of the BLM/George Floyd mobilization in June of 2020. We utilized qualitative data from a sample of 22 adults, including 19 cis women, 2 nonbinary individuals, and 1 transwoman (mean age = 34.05, SD = 13.11).¹ Semi-structured interviews were conducted because these conversations capture the categories, meanings, and narratives of participants (Charmaz 2006) and grant access to the ways people talk and understand racial hierarchies and the goals/tactics of social movements (Blee and Taylor 2002). Participants over 18-years-old were recruited from the volunteers section of Craigslist and advertisements were posted to numerous cities and towns throughout the US, ranging from big metropolitan areas like New York City and San Francisco, California, to smaller/mid-sized cities like Santa Fe, New Mexico and Asheville, North Carolina. All of these cities were selected because they represent hubs of feminist activism around gender and embodiment, and they allowed for a wide cross-section of urban, rural, and suburban participants to join the study. Participants were recruited initially for a larger study about body norms, body hair, and political activism that asked for women who grew out their body hair to join the study. This means that the sample focused on women who were “body hair rebels” and often were self-identified feminists. Because we wanted to speak to women from many different social backgrounds and statuses, we used a purposive sampling technique to select women and nonbinary people from a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds, sexual identities, and ages. The advertisement noted that women over age 35, trans and nonbinary people, lesbian and bisexual women, and people of color were particularly encouraged to apply. Participants were paid 20.00 USD for doing the IRB approved study, and interest in the study was sizable and enthusiastic, making it easy to recruit participants from diverse backgrounds. Identifying data were removed and each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. The researchers had no previous contact with the participants.

The people in the sample came from a wide range of identities and demographic backgrounds, including substantial racial diversity: 11 (50%) white and 11 (50%) people of color: six Asian Americans, two Mexican Americans, one African American, and two biracial women – one with half Native American ancestry and one with half Moroccan ancestry. The sample also spanned a range of sexual orientations: nine people (41%) identified as heterosexual, seven (32%) identified as bisexual, four (18%) identified as lesbian, and two (9%) identified as queer. The age range spanned 21 to 63, with twelve people (55%) 21–34 years-old and ten (45%) 35–63 years old. Geographical location also varied, with six participants from the San Francisco bay area, three from New York City, one from Los Angeles,

California, one from Portland, Oregon, five from small towns in Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Texas, and North Carolina, two from suburban cities in Colorado and Illinois, one from a large college town in Wisconsin, and one from Santa Fe, New Mexico. Class diversity was also well represented, as were parental and relationship statuses and, surprisingly, political identification. Political party identification varied but skewed to the left, as three participants identified as moderately conservative, three as moderate, nine as moderately liberal/progressive, and seven as very liberal/progressive. For feminist identity, sixteen identified as feminists, five did not identify as feminists, and one was not sure whether she identified as a feminist. For educational attainment, four participants had an advanced degree, twelve had a bachelor's degree, four had some college, one had a high school diploma, and one did not finish high school. For income, the mean was 51,410 USD per year, and the standard deviation was 48,990 USD, suggesting a wide range of incomes.

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 60–70 minutes (participants were interviewed once during data collection). The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted by the first author, Breanne Fahs, as video conferenced interviews on Zoom. During the entire interview, participants were asked a range of questions about their bodies and body hair practices alongside questions about their political activism and ideologies. Participants spoke about their participation in electoral activism, protests, and their attitudes about feminism. One open-ended question, asked in the context of a series of questions about protests and other ways they rebelled using their bodies, inquired specifically about the George Floyd protests: “How do you feel about the Black Lives Matter/George Floyd protests that are going on right now?” This was followed by a free-flowing follow-up questions and probes that were conversational and intended to clarify their perspectives and comments (e.g., “Why do you support the BLM movement?” “What bothers you about the protests?”). Participants typically discussed the BLM protests using at least 500 words each, suggesting that it was a stimulating question for them.

For data analysis, responses were analyzed qualitatively through a “constructivist grounded theory” form of thematic analysis (Charmaz 2006). When focusing on participant expressions, this type of analysis allowed for groupings of common and typical responses based on participants’ responses to the question about the Black Lives Matter protests (e.g., going too far, long overdue). To conduct the analysis, we worked as a team of three people (two professors and one student) where we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly and identifying patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. To address our background, we are experienced qualitative researchers – a practicing psychologist and a trained sociologist – who have published over 70 articles on gender, race, and political activism. In emphasizing the perspectives offered by the interviewees, we reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in participants’ ways of describing the BLM protests (Charmaz 2006). We selected and generated themes through the process of identifying shared perspectives, logical links and verbal overlaps between participant statements. After creating these themes, we compared them to previous themes expressed by other participants in order to identify similarities, differences, and possible sub-themes. Once each of us had read the transcripts thoroughly and identified possible themes, we met together twice more, where we refined and reworked the themes until we arrived at a mutually agreed upon list of six themes that reflected women’s narratives about the BLM protests. There were two instances where we disagreed so this discrepancy was resolved through discussion between the coders. Once these themes were generated, we reread the transcripts to see if each person coded the same passages in the same way (drawing from the recommendations of Campbell et al. 2013). Finally, we connected these themes to social movement “sensitizing concepts” and showed how these themes fit into previous analyses of BLM and antiracist activism.

Results

All of these participants expressed some form of tepid, conditional, or enthusiastic support for BLM as a symbol of collective challenge to institutionalized racism. The vast majority thought racism was a serious problem and supported efforts to end police brutality and racialized legal systems. These

BLM supporters deemed BLM as relevant and potentially worthwhile but the extent of BLM approval varied dramatically. Some women expressed enthusiastic and unequivocal support for BLM but many expressed forms of hesitant, tepid, or conditional support of this protest movement. Accordingly, the way that women spoke about BLM differed greatly, particularly how they framed the tactics and morality of BLM protestors. Results in the analysis revealed six themes that illuminated the spectrum of opposition/support for these BLM protests and protestors: 1) Caricatures of BLM protestors as criminals; 2) Protests were too extreme; 3) Concern about the COVID risks and social context of COVID; 4) More education needed about race relations; 5) Protests were long overdue; and 6) Protests were effective and necessary. As evident in the descriptions below, these themes were not always mutually exclusive, as some participants' comments sometimes fit into multiple themes.

Theme 1: caricatures of BLM protestors as criminals

Though relatively uncommon, three participants expressed ambivalence and uncertainty about racial inequalities before they castigated BLM protestors as menacing deviants who failed to respect property rights and/or engaged in criminality. They also encoded this as a "thug" cliché with racial undertones about Black people that portray Blackness (and, at times, Floyd himself) in a negative light. For example, Eve (38/White/Lesbian) felt upset about the destruction of property and imagined that protestors were paid actors: "I feel like all lives should matter, and so I feel like what has happened because of it, like the destruction of businesses and lives and destroying people's property, I think that is very wrong, and it takes away from the importance of the Black Lives Matter. A lot of the protestors that did it were getting paid money to do it, and I wonder how much they really care about the situation or whether it's because they were paid." Ruby (58/White/Heterosexual) expressed anger about the looting and the cancellation of televised police shows that had stopped filming years before: "They're looting! Colored people are looting colored people, so if it's a racial thing wouldn't they just loot white people's businesses? Or if it was a cop thing wouldn't they be burning down police departments? I heard that they canceled the show *Cops*, and *NYPD* probably isn't coming back on, so where do you draw the line? It's really gotten out of hand." (Notably, none of the self-identified feminists offered such impressions.)

Racial tensions between Asian Americans and Black people were mentioned by one participant, revealing resentment and an inclination to characterize Black people as manipulative. Ula (22/Chinese American/Bisexual) leapt from describing Floyd as a criminal to narrating her personal experience with an African American couple mistreating her in a movie theater: "It's gone too far. The Black community is praising George Floyd as a great person, as this martyr, when I saw a lot of articles saying that he did not live like a good, upstanding citizen kind of life, and also I have personal experience with that going on." After giving an elaborate story about her asking an African American woman to turn off her phone in a movie and subsequently getting punched by her and then lying to a movie theater security guard, she went on to say, "I was a victim in that situation. I think the Black community just blindly defend the Black person who is part of their community and they just praise them. They just blindly do that without knowing whether or not they were right in the first place."

Theme 2: protests were too extreme

Many participants offered support for BLM if it strived for more moderate and incrementalist demands, noting that the recent protests "went too far" or had excessively radical goals in how protestors sought to address racial injustice. While most women (19 of the 22) expressed at least some mild and tentative support for the *idea* of racial equality, six participants expressed that the actions of the protestors were distasteful, excessive, scary, or counterproductive to them.

Five women expressed that they disliked rioting and looting and that these actions undermined the moral high-ground of the BLM movement. Heather (40/White/Bisexual) described the protests as destructive and going too far, coupled with feeling that the protestors disrupted social order and the

rights of business owners: “I feel like they started out okay but they just got way out of control and the destruction and the looting and things that went on in major cities, they basically shut them down and didn’t allow the police to do their jobs. They hurt small business owners. I just think it got out of control and it wasn’t fair for the everyday people.” She went on, “There’s a cause and effect for everything so sometimes things are warranted and sometimes they’re not and the destruction and the looting is a great example of ‘Why was that okay for African Americans to do to the city when they want to be treated the same?’ They need to act the same as everyone else.” Similarly, Ainsley (23/White/Heterosexual) talked about the protests in a racially-divided way, suggesting that Black protestors were scaring white people and acting in self-defeating ways: “I like the peaceful ones. The riots and the shoplifting, that’s really scary. I’m also thinking that those poor people that have those businesses, the ones who put their whole life savings into these small businesses, that’s scary and upsetting. I’m all for peaceful protesting, but I don’t agree with all the graffiti, like destroying your cities. I don’t think they should be setting fires and burning things down.” Casey (26/White/Heterosexual) described the BLM/Floyd protests as bothersome and annoying and not worth the disruption to their daily routines: “I’m indifferent, but it impedes on my sleep. There are a lot of fireworks where I live and they keep going off at random times in the night and they’re just kind of loud. It’s kind of frustrating.”

Theme 3: concern about the COVID risks and social context of COVID

Social movement allies sometimes refrain from activism due to issues of fear, risk, and danger, particularly in the form of police brutality or ostracism from social circles. Interestingly, none of our participants discussed the social costs to supporting BLM. Instead, given the social context of when these interviews took place – during early to mid-June of 2020, in the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic – three women brought up their concerns about COVID-19 transmission. Jasmine (28/Taiwanese American/Heterosexual) mentioned her worries about protestors contracting COVID-19 during the protests and the especially deleterious impacts on the Black community of increasing transmission: “It feels like it’s gonna lead to more people dying because of all the injury being done at the protest and also, because COVID supposedly affects African Americans more and if you’re at a rally protesting for Black lives, you’re likely not social distancing or wearing masks, and even if you are wearing masks you’re probably not social distancing and that could lead to COVID being spread more. If it disproportionately affects Black people more, then that feels like it’s almost ironic. You’re protesting for Black lives to not be killed anymore but then if COVID happens that might affect the Black people more anyway.”

Conflicts about how COVID-19 and the BLM protests overlapped also appeared in women’s narratives. Lin (34/Vietnamese American/Heterosexual) worried about COVID exposure for protestors: “I’m not going to stay silent if somebody really does something that’s kind of off, but I also use reason. With the protests with Floyd, with COVID-19 it’s kind of a little bit like the virus is happening but then they’re protesting and they’re not social distancing so I’m kind of on the fence because I want to speak about racism but I worry about my health.” Martina (50/Mexican American/Bisexual) worried that the coronavirus had pushed people to blow off steam and that feeling cooped up led to protesting more than support for BLM: “A lot of people are really angry about what’s going on with the coronavirus. I think they’re acting out in addition to the George Floyd thing and it has sort of taken over the media. People are looking for a different kind of vent.”

Theme 4: more education needed about race relations

Participants also sometimes felt that protest alone would not create social change. Three participants also identified the need for more informal education about race relations and racial justice as important, citing that as the message about the BLM protests. Dana (36/White/Queer) talked about the need for communication and education in their family and community: “I wish we can live in

a world where we can just not have any discrimination or fear of being part of hate crimes or violence or even death, but unfortunately, this world isn't like that yet so we need to at least educate people that don't understand. Mostly I've been talking to my family members because I feel like at least I can make an impact in my own community, because some of them don't even understand 'defund the police.' So I feel like it's important to at least communicate especially if not to the world and strangers and people in our cities, at least to our families because we can do that." Vera (30/Chinese American/Heterosexual) talked about how the necessity of more education about BLM and race relations: "At first I was kind of surprised, like when it was first mentioned on the news I was like, 'Okay, this has happened before.' Then I was trying to understand why it became such a big deal and I had questions about the tag line, Black Lives Matter, like what about other people? And so, like, I was educating myself more, trying to look through the history. My company has had many talks and conversations about it and I was like, 'I get it now. This is like systemic since slavery times and it has a long history, which my people weren't even here in this country before.' There are so many layers to it, so I'm more empathetic and I want to help." These comments did not directly critique BLM, but pivoted to a general need for more education about race in general. These participants did not mention the classroom or formal schools as the best place for this education, but instead focused on the value of reading on their own and having conversations with others about racial practices.

Theme 5: protests were long overdue

Six women championed the urgency of the moment and mentioned that the BLM protests have been a "long time coming" and that the racial unrest happening now reflects shameful neglect, abuse, and mistreatment of African Americans that has happened since slavery times. Olive (63/White/Heterosexual) felt that the BLM protests showed that people had their consciousness recently raised and could no longer exist in denial of poor race relations: "I've been feeling good about it. I feel like there are conversations happening that needed to have happened a long time ago, and that some people have kind of just opened their eyes. I think a lot of us, for whom it is possible to ignore the situation, have been guilty of that, and now we can't be. You can't just ignore it. I don't know that this will solve it, but I think this is moving us in the right direction." Natasha (28/White/Bisexual) said that the treatment of Floyd was morally unacceptable and that these injuries have accumulated for years: "It's against the morality to arrest people like that because even if you just stole something or if you just forge something, they have to be polite with you. The police have to treat you as a person. This has happened for so long. It's just sad. All people are equal." Frances (47/Mexican American/Lesbian) said, plainly, "It's been a long time coming. There's so much water under that bridge, so much pain. I've been wondering when it would all blow up and now it has."

For women who engaged in Black Lives Matter protests and activism, they felt especially strongly that this moment was the culmination of years of struggle. Quinn (21/White and Native American/Lesbian), who attended some of the BLM protests in Portland, described this political moment as an inevitability given how widespread blatant and violent forms of racism had become and how poorly people of color were treated: "It's been a long time coming and I definitely think right now this might have been one of the many straws that broke the camel's back. I'm really proud of everybody for trying to change the system because, I mean, police violence against people of color is a huge issue, especially Black people. It's Juneteenth today and a lot of people are having celebrations on the east side. I think that this has been coming for years and this work is all coming to light right now." Kalani (21/Sri Lankan American/Heterosexual), who has done BLM activism in the form of letter writing and calling representatives to advocate for people of color, described the protests as the boiling point of COVID-19 colliding with racial injustice: "I think it was only a matter of time. I think coronavirus seriously affected people. They are at home, unemployed, upset, angry, have more time on their hands, no job to risk if they're going to protest all day tomorrow, so I think it was only a matter of time and I think his death was tragic and absolutely unacceptable. I think the progress that we're making is slow but good."

Theme 6: protests were effective and necessary

Eight women were excited about the power of ongoing BLM protests and cited them as a crucial instigator of racial justice. Zara (22/White and Moroccan/Queer), who attended several BLM protests recently, described the protests as forceful, effective, and important: “They’re necessary. I’m pretty impressed with how much they’ve been able to get changed quickly, but there’s still more to be done, obviously, and I’m afraid for people who are going because of the tear gas and rubber bullets and all that.” Similarly, Bijou (22/African American/Heterosexual) expressed approval of the movement and for the work of the protestors: “I support the Black Lives Matter movement, and I think that protests work. I have just not been part of any, but I do support the movement. They’re advocating for police reform because Black people are being disproportionately affected by police brutality and I agree with that.” Sequoia (23/White/Bisexual) expressed support for the BLM protests as raising awareness about other issues that disproportionately impact people of color: “It’s a really bad thing that’s happened. Our government and system has been corrupt since the day they wrote the Declaration of Independence. It has to stop. Innocent lives shouldn’t be taken. I don’t really believe in death row because I definitely think everyone deserves to be heard.” Gloria (56/White/Heterosexual) felt galvanized after watching the protests and seeing the fast and massive rebirth of BLM: “It’s not just George. It’s many, many, many, many, many people. They’ve seen that and they’ve been around enough to know. I think it’s always been happening but now it’s on video. How can you not believe what you see? You can’t make the film disappear now like you used to, so I’m glad it’s happening. I’m glad people are showing it and filming it and saying, ‘No more of this!’ I love it.” This wholehearted endorsement of BLM revealed an overwhelming belief that the goals and tactics of BLM were necessary, just, and efficacious.

Two women – both non-Black – also expressed that they were willing to endure hardships when supporting the BLM movement and its recent protests. Tori (26/Asian American/Bisexual) talked about aligning with protestors even when her workplace got shut down for having its windows smashed in: “I definitely agree with everything that’s been going on in terms of the protests and whatnot. The rioting has been tough for the restaurant – the windows were smashed in so we had to close for a week or so, so that was tough – but I’m definitely happy with what’s going on with the protests. It’s been nice to see so many people coming together for one cause that is extremely important. I definitely understand where they’re coming from. I want to say, ‘I hear what you’re saying and I’m standing with you.’” Finally, Indigo (35/White/Bisexual), who used her body as a physical shield for protestors at the BLM protests and at Standing Rock, talked about the necessity of racial unity between white women and women of color: “I’ve been going out to a lot of Black Lives Matter protests right now and so what that looks like is standing by my Black friends as a body shield. I’ve risked arrest for different causes. I went to Standing Rock and was on the front lines there participating in different actions and also doing the whole ‘body shield’ thing . . . We pulled a racist statue down that had been up for over a hundred years. I think that’s the most proud thing I’ve done in San Francisco is getting that statue down.” She went on to say, “I’ve also been at different events where some of my Native friends get death threats for their activist work and I put my white body in between or I go and talk to other white people who are being disrespectful and try to either talk to them or find some common ground, just trying to get them not to disrespect or hurt more people or more brown or Black people. It’s important.”

Discussion

This study explored women’s reactions to an ongoing racial justice movement. This study was grounded in research questions about how BLM was viewed during the peak of the second protest cycle by a group of women who rebelled against conventional definitions of women’s beauty norms. Our study focused the on the narratives around the perceived causes for, and morality of, social problems as well as possible solutions to these problems (Snow and McAdam 2000; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). These narratives addressed issues of perceived racism, social movement

tactics, and the appeal of BLM frames when exploring why some women were willing to support or join this social movement. Our analysis offered some unique insights and methodological advantages. Interviewing women during the peak of BLM/Floyd protest cycle granted access to people's immediate impressions of the movement rather than retrospective studies that offer reflections of past political events. This immediacy is valuable because the impressions of social movements often adjust over a person's life-course (Giugni and Grasso 2016) and may be a reaction to changes in elite unity, news coverage of protests, or the fear of social disruption (Meyer and Tarrow 2018; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019). Moreover, there is some evidence that BLM support has wavered some over time as support of BLM fell from a high of about 67% in June of 2020 to 55% in September 2021 (Horowitz 2021). Finally, this study offered unique narratives from a sample of women from all over the US, something that qualitative studies rarely do. This study also offered insights into the ways that feminists and body hair rebels reject and support anti-racist activism.

Broadly speaking, though not all women in this study identified as feminist, this study affirmed stigma-based solidarity theories that gender rebels were broadly supportive of racial justice movements (Bonilla and Tillery 2020; Fisher, Dow, and Ray 2017; Harnois 2015). However, the links between feminist identities, racial consciousness, and perceptions of BLM reflected a complex and multilayered phenomenon (Yoo et al. 2021). This group of body hair rebels were not a homogenous group of left-leaning, reliably progressive intersectional activists; on the contrary, the sample included five women who identified as political moderates, and three women who identified as solidly conservative, along with three who voted for Trump in the 2016 election.

We were somewhat surprised that in a sample of women who engaged in non-normative body hair behavior, we found a relatively large number of responses that argued that protests went "too far" or that argued that anything other than peaceful protests were distasteful. Even among women who "break the rules," they still at times affirmed anti-protest and anti-BLM sentiments, suggesting that these attitudes are entrenched across populations and demographics in the US. Many anti-racist scholars have repeatedly argued about the dangers of white paternalism with regard to protest and activism (Edwards 2006), particularly as white people judge and evaluate activist tactics initiated by people of color (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018; Wasow 2020). This study supports the line of empirical studies that found that white people often assume that Black Lives Matter protests are violent (Peay and Camarillo 2021) and public support of protestors is often lukewarm, conditional, and predicated on protestors not being too disruptive, damaging property, or violent (Muñoz and Anduiza 2019). The narratives present an obstacle to movement recruitment and antiracist mobilizations, especially in how it undermines political solidarity and pits them against other women who are vying for human rights and social justice. This moderate stance also ignores some social scientific literature that asserts that racial justice movements often need a "radical flank" and threats of violence to end the racist laws, policies, and practices of elites and large institutions (Fording 1997; Haines 1984; Oliver 2008; Rojas 2006; Santoro and Fitzpatrick 2015).

A small section of this sample expressed ambivalent or even hostile attitudes toward BLM. Three of our 22 participants condemned BLM activists as troublemakers, hooligans, and criminals. Another three women complained that the BLM protests were annoying (Casey), went too far (Ainsley), or led to the cancellation of a favorite TV show (Ruby), indicating how indifferent, callous, and disconnected white women can be from the struggles of people of color. These expressions represent the classic "implementation gap," or the scenario in which white people offer faint and abstract support for racial equality as long as any changes minimally affect the people in power (Tuch and Hughes 2011). These participants also missed the interactive nature of violence and state repression, given that police officers are prone to initiate violence when groups are protesting police violence (Reynolds-Stenson 2018). In line with previous studies, we also found a polarizing or curvilinear relationship to BLM goals and tactics. Some women wanted to curb the radical impulses of Black Lives Matter (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018) and did not consider riots a legitimate form of protest (Bobo et al. 1994), but we also found that the use of confrontational and disruptive tactics made some women *more* resolute in their commitment to BLM (Wasow 2020).

The question of how women of color viewed the BLM struggle also presented a curious set of results. Ula's anger that African Americans defend other African Americans at her expense as a Chinese American presented a notable, and all-too-familiar, thread of conflict between people of color (Meleady and Vermue 2019; Swank 2019). This particular narrative aligns with studies of how Asian Americans might not see their fate aligned with the fate of African Americans, and some even resent Black protestors who broke into Korean or Vietnamese stores in the past (Merseth 2018). Similarly, the incrementalist and tepid narratives about needing "more education" in Theme 4 suggest that women of color at times had conflicted reactions to the BLM protests even if they eventually learned, or worked to educate others about, racial justice.

That said, theories of "politicized collective identities" were confirmed in the ways in which women of color imagined that the BLM protests were long overdue, worthy of doing, and important for social justice for all people of color, including those not identified as Black (Simon and Klandermans 2001). After all, "It's been a long time coming (a change is going to come)" is an important anthem from the civil rights movement from Sam Cooke. The clear sense that racial justice issues had reached a boiling point, and that people should protest in solidarity with each other (across racial lines), stood out as a common thread in these narratives, especially for themes 5 and 6. With social movements being a goal directed action, research has suggested that potential activists need to combine their perceptions of racial injustice with a high level of collective efficacy before joining BLM (Hope, Keels, and Durkee 2016). Moreover, their faith in BLM protests as a potential vehicle for social change have historical grounding, as civil rights protests helped to usher in the passage of affirmative action, voter rights protection laws, and school desegregation efforts (Biggs and Andrews 2015; King 2011; Olzak and Ryo 2007).

Notably, the women who actively protested for BLM were mostly women of color, more progressive ("somewhat liberal" or "very liberal") and saw racial justice as a *necessity* for social change and progress. These women (Zara, Gloria, Tori, Indigo) talked vividly about the ways that they wrote themselves into the story of the BLM/Floyd protests and that they did so both in solidarity with African Americans and with all oppressed people. The BLM protests also saw extensive power in collective protests, a quality that has predicted support of BLM in other studies (Corral 2020; Merseth 2018; Selvanathan et al. 2018).

The collision of the BLM/Floyd protests and COVID-19 also appeared in notable and compelling ways in these narratives, as several women described the protests as a *reaction to* the conditions of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Some women saw the protests as an expression of pent-up feelings of claustrophobia, while others gave a more sociological analysis related to joblessness, anger, and the failures of the U.S. government. Still more, some women expressed health concerns about the potential exposure to COVID-19 that protesting for BLM/Floyd might open up, and the conflicts and ironies of people of color – who themselves had higher rates of contracting and dying from COVID-19 – potentially exposing themselves to the virus in order to protect Black lives. All of these complexities speak to the importance of studying phenomenon *while they are happening*, and accounting for the various social contexts in which people are developing attitudes about protests. Asking about protests long after they happen, for example, may yield notably different results than asking about them while they are currently happening (Blee and Taylor 2002; Fisher, Jasny, and Dow 2018). This is both a methodological claim and also one about the uniqueness of the BLM/Floyd protests in particular.

Limitations and future directions

Certain research decisions may have affected this study's results, as the choice for wording the interview questions may have captured some, but certainly not all, of the facets of how women felt about the BLM/Floyd protests during June 2020. For example, because the narratives were collected as part of a larger study about body hair, body norms, and activism for women and nonbinary people, the sample definitely skewed toward people more inclined to engage in non-normative behavior, especially social and personal rebellions. Future studies could include a wider

variety of women, especially women who are more compliant with existing gender norms and who identify even more widely across the political spectrum. Other future studies could examine, using quantitative methods, differences between women protestors and women non-protestors, feminists and non-feminists, and racists and anti-racists. This could lead to fruitful comparisons between groups, something not available to a relatively small number of narratives collected in a qualitative study.

Having a different prompt could have generated different responses. Other studies have asked direct questions to women about their social identities and BLM organizing. Researchers in one study (Hordge-Freeman and Loblack 2021) asked Afro-Latinxs: “Should Afro-Latinos participate in the #BlackLivesMatter Movement? Why or why not?” and this was perhaps a better phrasing than we used. Future research could also specifically recruit larger numbers of African American women to get a far better read on how they perceived and experienced the BLM movement and the death of George Floyd, particularly because the Floyd protests included repeated (possibly traumatic) viewings, on major networks and across social media, of Floyd’s brutal and violent murder, along with subsequent videos of Rayshard Brooks’ murder and social media coverage of Breonna Taylor’s murder. Studies of how these videos impacted social and public perceptions of racial justice could also prove compelling (Arora, Phoenix, and Delshad 2019; Kilgo and Mourão 2019), as the difference between hearing about, and actually *viewing*, these videos seemed to be pivotal to how the public responded to Floyd’s murder. Studies might also match the race of the interviewer and interviewee intentionally, as people often spoke more frankly with researchers of the same race (Krysan and Couper 2003). Longitudinal studies could see if attitudes toward BLM is time and context specific or if increased support for BLM can sustain itself in the upcoming months and years. Finally, more research about solidarity between women, across racial lines, between women of color, and between seeming disparate groups (e.g., recent immigrants versus immigrants who have been in the US for a long time) could provide new insights about the formation and maintenance of racial solidarity in the fight for racial justice.

Ultimately, this study reveals that attitudes about protests and protestors matter greatly when assessing the credibility of social movements (Gutting 2020; Holt and Sweitzer 2020), and that public attitudes congeal around different nodes that run along racial and political party lines (Intravia, Piquero, and Piquero 2018). The framing of protestors as “getting paid to be there” or the framing of BLM protestors as engaged in righteous work that benefits everyone has drastically different impacts on how people might perceive these events (Arora, Phoenix, and Delshad 2019; Kilgo and Mourão 2019). Public sentiments about BLM may continue to evolve, largely driven by the framing tools women inherit from the mainstream media and from their informal social networks, suggesting that better understanding these cues is key to tracking the future of BLM and the movement as a whole. Further, understanding how women can continue the fight for solidarity and justice, particularly by undermining the historical and contemporary manifestations of white supremacy and misogyny, is crucial to the ongoing project of feminist consciousness-raising, evidence-based policy change, radical self-care, and far-reaching and long-lasting social justice work.

Note

1. We use the term “women” throughout this paper to refer to the 22 participants interviewed for this study. The two non-binary participants said that they prefer they/them pronouns and that, as AFAB (assigned-female-at-birth) people, they do not object to being included in an aggregate group called “women.” This use is done consciously and with permission of participants.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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