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Supporting Black Interns through Vicarious Racial Trauma: Policy Recommendations for Employers and Postsecondary Institutions

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In the wake of the civil protests demanding justice for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and equality for marginalized communities, Black undergraduates have continued to pursue and complete internships around the country. As initiatives mobilized by college students' activism, these protests, and the evident ethnviolence that has followed them, motivates this question that is being overlooked in media accounts of internships during the tumultuous summer of 2020: "What are host organizations doing to support and protect Black student interns?"

Across the higher education landscape, college students are pursuing internships because research shows that internships lead to higher rates of employment after graduation (Silva et al., 2018), higher wages and job satisfaction (Jung & Lee, 2017), and better grades as compared to students who do not complete an internship (Binder et al., 2015). Black students in particular are being urged to pursue internships through initiatives at many Historically Black Colleges and Universities in an effort to enhance career prospects of their graduates.

Unfortunately, the research literature on internships and much of the advocacy for these potentially transformative experiences almost universally ignores the issue of race, and how the structural inequities in American society (and labor markets) may impact Black student interns. While issues such as discriminatory hiring practices and workplace harassment, both of which continue to plague the American workplace, should be part of the national conversation, in this policy brief we highlight the more subtle yet no less damaging psychological impacts that may be affecting Black college student interns.

Although the long history of systemic racism within America is gaining widespread attention due to the recent civil unrest and growing movement for policing reform, the reality is that racism is a continued and undeniable part of the everyday Black experience. In the U.S., Black individuals have the highest mortality rates from police brutality across races, dying from police brutality roughly 2.5 times more than the White majority population (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito, 2019). The accumulative impacts of this long history of systemic racism has been compounded by a rise in hate crimes in recent years (Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, 2018). As such, Black student interns may find themselves psychologically taxed from coping with vicarious racial trauma.

[Vicarious trauma](#), also known as secondary trauma, refers to the process by which racial injuries resulting from witnessing globalized police brutality and hate crimes can be internalized (Jenkins & Baird, 2002). Vicarious racial trauma has a number of documented detrimental outcomes, including burnout (Newell & McNeil, 2010) and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2010). Racial trauma and the cumulative impacts of everyday experiences of racism corresponds to Black students' increased susceptibility to mental and physical health concerns that can impair daily functioning (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012). For example, research shows that experiences with racism within Black populations are linked to acute stress (Brondolo et al., 2009; Clark et al. 1999), non-clinical paranoia (Combs et al., 2006), and symptoms of depression and anxiety (Paradies et al., 2015). Over time, these stressors compound and contribute to the development of chronic physical illnesses, including hypertension and cardiovascular disease, which disproportionately impact the Black community (Brewer & Cooper, 2013; Spruill, 2010).

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In the midst of coping with distress and managing fears of becoming a victim themselves, Black student interns may find themselves at their emotional threshold. This cumulative stress may impact their ability to focus on work tasks. Given the long history of systemic racism in the United States, the recent civil protests are unlikely to be the last time students are forced to cope and heal while maintaining their academic and internship commitments. As such, our goal is to (1) increase awareness of issues facing Black student interns, and (2) provide specific actions that internship sites can take to support Black student interns.

Five Steps Organizations can take to Support Black Student Interns

1. Enhance Supervisor Support

Supervisor support plays a critical role in employee morale and self-efficacy (Griffin, Patterson, & West, 2001). As such, support from supervisors (including internship site supervisors and campus-based academic and career advisors) represents a key mechanism of social support that can benefit Black interns as they simultaneously navigate organizational integration, task completion, coping with racial trauma, engaging in community organizing, and completing academic requirements.

Supervisors are often recognized as representatives of an organization's culture and values. Research indicates that supervisor support directly leverages employees' observations of overall organizational support (DeConinck, 2010). Perceptions of low supervisor support has been demonstrated to contribute to lower organizational commitment and increased turnover (Maertz, Griffeth, Campbell, & Allen, 2007) whereas perceptions of high supervisor support has been linked to reduced job demand stress (Steinhardt, Dolbier, Gottlieb, & McCallister, 2003) and increased job satisfaction (Babin & Boles, 1996). Supervisor support also has been shown to be beneficial in minimizing burnout for employees within work contexts with heightened risks of vicarious trauma, such as mental health treatment (Gibson, Grey, & Hastings, 2009) and nursing (Weigl et al., 2016).

To provide support to their Black interns, supervisors are encouraged to:

- Communicate support to interns directly and regularly, which can be communicated via phone and/or email, and reinforced during meetings and check-ins.
- Acknowledge and validate the distress that civil unrest, documented cases of police brutality and hate crimes, and political policies may cause to your student interns. Brief interns on vicarious trauma, indicate it to be a natural response, and normalize discussions around the effects it can have on one's mental and physical health and work performance. Supervisor support and affirmation can aid in processing trauma and inhibit detrimental consequences of role insecurities on self-efficacy beliefs (Bell, Kulkarni, & Dalton, 2003).
- Educate interns on support that is available through the organization, including campus-based mental health treatment and programs offered through the organization's department of human resources or employee development.
- Convey the most effective process for interns to voice concerns (e.g. contacting supervisors or human resources).
- Acknowledge that supervisors, especially supervisors of color, may find themselves stretched thin or distressed themselves. As such, encouraging [strong team support](#) may buffer interns' role autonomy, work-efficiency, and job satisfaction where individual supervisor support may not be immediately accessible (Griffin, Patterson, & West, 2001).

2. Maintain Engagement

Though expressing organizational support is important, Black interns may initially struggle with openly conveying a need for support. Notable factors that can impede Black interns from reaching out include, but are not limited to: levels of [organizational trust](#) given that they are new to the organization and their role, prior life experiences, and the nature in which racism may affect them personally.

According to the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1968), trusting relationships are grounded by consistent interaction. Active discourse and communication provide opportunities for each party to comprehend each other's behavioral integrity (i.e., one practicing what they preach; Simons, 1999). Developing a relationship based upon mutuality is needed in order to build trust (DeConinck, 2010; Homans, 1958). Dynamics of power, however, challenge the ability for trust to develop (Nunkoo & Ramkinsoon, 2012). In other words, individuals in lower status positions may interpret higher social costs associated with trusting others, especially when they or their peers have experienced past manipulation or harassment.

There is a long history of employment discrimination and workplace harassment experienced by Blacks within the United States and glaring racial disparities exist when considering Black representation within management (i.e., despite making up 13.4% of the U.S. population, [Black individuals fulfill roughly 7% of Management Occupations](#); Toossi & Joyner, 2018). As a result, Black interns may have justifiable cautiousness when developing trust in management.

To enhance trust, organizations are encouraged to:

- Recognize that the personal effects of racial trauma are commonly delayed and implications surface as experiences accumulate over time (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2010). Given that Black interns are simultaneously adjusting to their role while making meaning of the current racial climate, it is important for supervisors to acknowledge that interns may not recognize their performance or mental health to be affected.
- Acknowledge that racism is an unfortunate everyday reality of the Black experience (Essed, 1991) and that Black student interns may have differential reactions and needs. Though direct racial discrimination may not be experienced each day for all individuals, the systemic nature of historical oppression marginalizes and stigmatizes Blackness, thereby forcing Black students to alternate and code-switch in order to safely navigate work and school spaces (Carter, 2003; Steele, 2011). Indeed, most Black interns have already had to acquire personal strategies to cope with racism over time and may rely on grit, resilience, and community for support. As such, Black student interns may not feel it immediately necessary to resource organizational support within the organization.
- Inform interns about actions the organization is taking to support macrolevel change. Conveying clear organizational and supervisor support can be an invaluable step toward assisting Black interns and expressing aligned values.
- Promote proactive managerial engagement over time that reinforces empathy, affirmation, and reciprocal values. Accommodative managerial engagement has been shown to improve trust and perceived in-groupness (Willemyns, Gallois, & Callan, 2003). As applied to supporting Black student interns, this may include: maintaining a non-domineering relationship (i.e., address interns as equals instead of inferiors), avoiding coercive management, conveying an openness to listening to opinions and concerns, practicing active listening when consulted, engaging in small talk and offering self-disclosures that presents oneself as relatable and human (e.g., as a parent, as a hobbyist, as a former intern), offering praise to interns on

successful performance, and affirming their value to the organization and team. Collectively, these efforts can minimize detrimental impacts of power differentials and improve Black student interns' trust and perceived belongingness (Willemyns, Gallois, & Callan, 2003; DeConinck, 2010) as they gauge their need for organizational support and continue to adapt to internal and external circumstances.

3. Offer Flexibility

[Flexible work arrangements](#) have been found to increase employee job satisfaction and reduce turnover (McNall, Musuda, & Nicklin, 2009). Flexibility offers perceived autonomy in managing a healthy work and family balance (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), which is especially valuable for Black student interns who seek to practice activism or are concerned the current racial climate may increase their susceptibility to ethnoviolence. Justifying such fears, there have been increased global concerns of policing, racial violence, and the criminalization of Black Lives Matters. Intentions to suppress protests with early mandated curfews resulted in unlawful police violence towards protestors and Black bystanders. Anti-protestor sentiments and violence against protestors has incited fears of further hate crimes surfacing across our nation. In addition, the U.S. remains in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is disproportionately affecting the Black community.

Flexibility, therefore, is a work context that can improve Black interns morale and wellness, protect Black interns' physical safety, and provide Black interns with heightened access to resources that can benefit them and their family emotionally and financially.

In practical terms, host organizations are encouraged to:

- Offer flexibility in work schedules for Black interns who are unable to safely work in person because doing so requires them to commute at times that comply with city curfews or forces them to contend with hostile environments as they navigate their commute or physical office spaces.
- Adjust work schedules and deadlines to provide flexibility to Black interns as they navigate the complexities wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest. For example, supervisors are encouraged to allow Black interns who are engaged in activism to be able to attend critical community organizing events. In addition, Black student interns who are experiencing psychological distress or coping with grief from the loss of lives within their families and communities may benefit from extending deadlines for work products.

4. Avoid Making Assumptions about Black Student Interns and Avoid Workplace Discrimination

Talking about race and racism in the U.S. has become increasingly commonplace in everyday conversations due to a combination of attention to the disproportionately high rates of unemployment and infection from the COVID-19 pandemic among Black individuals, documented instances of police brutality and racism, and a politically divisive presidential election cycle. These conversations about race and politicism are often carried into the workplace. As such, racial [microaggressions](#), which are covert and often unintentional racist notions, (Sue et al., 2007) are inevitable experiences for Black interns that may impact their experience, perceived belonging, and ability to cope with racial duress.

Racial microaggressions can occur in three forms. **Microassaults** are explicit verbal or symbolic racist assaults or threats (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). An example of a microassault is the intentional use of a racially derogatory term or phrase or the act of sending or giving someone a racially driven symbol (e.g., [placement](#)

[of a noose at an employees' desk](#) or [jokingly gifting a Black employee a watermelon](#)). Microassaults are acts of racism that most people agree perpetuates overt racism and therefore are more likely to be reprimanded. **Microinsults** are sentiments or expressions that connote insultingly racist ideals (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). They are typically proposed as a compliment and unintentionally reinforce racist assumptions. An example of a microinsult often experienced by Black people is being told that they are “well-spoken,” have good hair “for a black person,” or that they are not viewed as “a typical Black person” because of their “professionalism” or “attractiveness.” Being subtle, microinsults can have delayed implications as they may not immediately be recognized by the receiver as racist. **Microinvalidations**, like microinsults, are covert racist expressions that invalidate the experiences of racism by Black people (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). These are often used by individuals to denounce themselves as racist or to express allyship. An example of a widely expressed microinvalidation is “[I do not see color](#),” which invalidates the value of racial identity and the history of harm that has been inflicted on Black individuals because of their skin color. Another prominent microinvalidation echoed since the murder of Trayvon Martin, is “All Lives Matter.” Though it is true that all lives matter, this microinvalidation is tone-deaf and denies the reality that Black lives have been undervalued due to historical and systemic racism.

To avoid making assumptions about, and discriminating against Black interns, supervisors and organizations are encouraged to:

- Avoid singling Black interns out to provide insights regarding the current climate, to identify allyship, or to ask them for insight on how to be anti-racist or a better ally. Despite harmless intent, these notions can reinforce racist assumptions and make Black interns feel targeted, attacked, and uncomfortable.
- Remember that not all Black interns share the same reactions to current events. For example, some Black interns may be enthusiastically engaged in community activism. Some may be feeling particularly distressed by the current racial and political climate and want to talk about it openly with supervisors. And some may actively and intentionally choose not to engage in conversations about these topics at internship given the inherent power dynamics at play in the organizational setting and the precarity of their employment.
- Commit to doing your own work to combat anti-Black racism and to take action to move toward [Non-Optical Allyship](#). Complete a [Racial Equity Building Challenge](#) to deepen your own understanding and awareness, and consider ways to [adapt the challenge](#) to address the needs of your organization.
- Avoid relying upon Black interns to fix your organization’s diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. Not all Black interns may identify themselves to be knowledgeable on how allies and organizations can be of best support. For those who do hold this knowledge, it is draining to act as a cultural broker when the interns themselves are distressed. Remember that Black interns are not being compensated to provide such consultation and expecting them to engage in this unpaid labor for your benefit perpetuates abuse of power, which is likely to further alienate Black student interns.

5. Encourage Self-Care and Resilience

Though widely discussed, self-care is an elusive and nuanced practice within the Black community (Quaye et al., 2019). Consequences of systemic racism, like being of lower positionality and lower socioeconomic status, impede Black individuals’ access to and outcomes from health and wellness resources (Blendon, Aiken, Freeman, & Corey, 1989; Obasi & Leong, 2009; Kennedy, Mathis & Woods, 2007). Moreover, internalized guilt, stigma, and or impostor feelings fostered from racially bounded narratives (e.g., “I must work harder to

prove I am not only here because of affirmative action or White guilt”) can increase distress (Peteet, Brown, Lige, & Lanaway, 2015) while simultaneously limiting Black interns aptness to practice self-care. Supporting Black interns to thrive in the face of everyday discrimination may include increasing critical consciousness, collectively resisting oppression and other barriers to wellness, and encouraging connections through community (French et al., 2020; Watts, 2004; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011).

In Quaye and colleagues’ (2019) analysis of “Racial Battle Fatigue” (i.e., exhaustion from coping and battling with persistent racism) among Black educators, five common practices were identified as helpful to support the process of recharging and healing. These included: disconnecting from emotionally draining peers and environments, accessing safe spaces, drawing upon community, caring for one’s body, and attending counseling. Considering that not all Black interns may have access to each of these resources, host organizations are encouraged to systematically develop and provide resources for Black student interns. This represents an important action to assist Black interns while subsequently destigmatizing needs for support and healing that may be commonly experienced but otherwise unspoken among Black interns.

Some recommended resources to assist in jumpstarting your list to educate yourselves and share with Black interns include:

- [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention \(AFSP\)](#) (Provides a Helpline in crisis)
- [Black Emotional and Mental Health \(BEAM\)](#)
- [Black Lives Matter Healing in Action Toolkit](#)
- [Dive in Well](#)
- [Ethels Club](#)
- [Family-Care, Community-Care and Self-Care Tool Kit: Healing in the Face of Cultural Trauma](#)
- [Girl Trek](#)
- [Liberate Meditation: Meditation App for the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color](#)
- [National Allegiance of Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#) (Provides a Helpline in crisis)
- [National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network](#)
- [Sista Afya](#)
- [Therapy for Black Girls](#)

Conclusion

As once stated by the late great Maya Angelou, “Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future and renders the present inaccessible.” Racial trauma, as an unwarranted yet contingent reality of the Black experience, has detrimental implications for the daily functioning of Black undergraduate student interns. This includes but is not limited to their accessibility to support and prosperity as future leaders. Acknowledging that systemic racism requires an aggregated and incessant effort to deconstruct, this policy brief sought to describe racism Black student interns may be susceptible to and provide insight on efforts that can be immediately adopted within organizations to bolster Black student intern’s resilience and fortify an anti-racist work setting. This brief also seeks to stimulate further conversation and analysis of racial disparities within internship programs and areas where internships may fall short in supporting the development of Black student interns.

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