

# A death in the family: a metaphor about race and police brutality

A death in the family

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This essay was written in response to the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Rayshard Brooks by police in 2020 and the surge of social justice protests they helped to reignite.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This essay uses a metaphor that nearly everyone can understand to help build common understanding around the unique impact of police killings of Black people on other Black people.

**Findings** – This essay uses social psychological theory and our experiences as Black Americans and diversity scholars to illustrate why interracial conversations about police killings of Black people may not proceed as intended.

**Originality/value** – In the wake of growing social justice protests aimed at combating systemic racism in the US, many individuals and organizations are wrestling with determining how people can talk about race. This is uncharted territory for many, as sociological research shows that racioethnic integration has stalled or even regressed in schools, workplaces and social networks in the US. This essay seeks to help readers move toward a common understanding to facilitate more empathetic interracial interactions involving Black people in the aftermath of these traumatic experiences.

**Keywords** Black people, African Americans, Police brutality

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Imagine learning that your 45-year-old cousin died from a heart attack. Though coronary heart disease runs in the family, the death was unexpected. Anyone who has ever experienced the pain of losing a loved one knows it is one of the most stressful life events. In fact, it can be so upsetting that it may even lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (Benjet *et al.*, 2016). You are heartbroken. However, in the process of grieving – life calls and you return to work the next day. Upon hearing about your cousin, one of your colleagues takes an interest and strikes up a conversation during which he begins to ask for details. “Isn’t this the heavy-set cousin that visited you last year?” he inquired. “He could have changed his diet or just exercised more often. Why didn’t he just lose some weight?” Another coworker chimes in, “Man, that’s crazy. My uncle had a heart attack last year, and he made a full recovery. To Paul’s point, my uncle stays in great shape.”

For many readers, the coworkers’ role in the preceding interaction seems unthinkable. Who would say such things you may wonder? Suggesting that the cousin is somehow responsible for his own untimely demise is unhelpful at best. Surely there is nothing positive to be gained from it. Worse yet, the questions seem to be blaming the victim. The timing could not be worse. Hurt feelings seem inevitable and interpersonal conflict is likely.

Now imagine a more compassionate, yet not particularly close colleague asking you to divulge every detail about your cousin’s death and also asking you to describe how it feels to lose a family member because they have never experienced it and they are curious.

Finally, imagine a fourth colleague comes up to you and says, “Man, I’m sorry. I know exactly how you feel. My 98-year old grandmother died in hospice after battling pancreatic



cancer when I was a kid. I was so sad. Now I'm sad that you're upset that your cousin died. I just have such a hard time dealing with people grieving. It just tears at my heart."

Though this may seem like an abstract story with little connection to police brutality and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, let us take a closer look at this metaphor. In doing so, we believe it may serve three purposes. First, it may help those who are not Black to better understand why police killings of Black Americans are so uniquely disturbing to their Black colleagues. Second, it can shed some light on why many workplace watercooler conversations about race and racism are so polarized. Third, it may help identify a path forward toward more constructive dialogue about these important issues. To better understand this metaphor, we rely on the basic social psychological principles of social identification and belief in a just world.

### **The bounds of racial Kinship**

Watching the execution of George Floyd by four members of the Minneapolis Police Department was disturbing for many Americans irrespective of identity. It was a blatant travesty of justice that violated common principles of justice and due process. The actions of the officers were morally reprehensible, leading most viewers to feel empathy for Mr. Floyd and his family. The depth of this affective reaction is evidenced by the swift firings of the officers involved and subsequent weeks of public protest and calls for police reform.

For us, the authors and many other Black viewers (particularly those higher in ethnic identity), however, this killing and others like it are more personal in nature. It is not merely an affront to the general sense of justice because this killing was not a random act of violence. No, Mr. Floyd was treated in this way, or perhaps was not treated in a more humane manner, for a reason - because he is Black. Social identity theory (Hogg, 2016) explains that people often personalize the experiences of other members of their identity groups. Because fellow in-group members are like us in an important and personally salient way; we perceive a shared fate with them. Consequently, what happens to them vicariously happens to us. In Mr. Floyd (and others who have died in a similar fashion), we and many Black Americans see our fathers, uncles, brothers, sons and cousins. In Breonna Taylor, a Black woman killed in her bed during a botched police raid, we as Black Americans, see our mothers, aunts, sisters and daughters. These victims are not random Black women and men in those moments; they are members of the family. As such, their experiences and memories are deserving of respect.

### **How "keeping it real" goes wrong**

Comedian Dave Chappelle famously coined the phrase "when keeping it real goes wrong" on his sketch-based *Chappelle's Show*. The initial sketch became a series depicting a number of ways by which desires to be authentic, or keep it real, can prove disadvantageous. We believe the same basic principle often applies when Black and White people exchange their perspectives on racial incidents. It goes a little something like this.

People are social creatures. When things are happening around us or to us, we are inclined to talk about them. Sometimes, these conversations take place at work and involve participants of differing races (Foldy and Buckley, 2014). In such dyadic interactions, opinions may diverge due to any number of factors, including deep philosophical differences, differences in point of views or even differences in understanding. Regardless of the source of the divergence, one of the most frequent responses to evidence that contradicts our worldviews is denial. Rather than accept the new evidence at face value, instead we seek alternative explanations that may allow us to hold on to our existing beliefs (e.g., belief in a just world) while reconciling the cognitive dissonance we feel as a result of exposure to the conflicting information.

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Belief in a just world is a system justifying ideology, capturing the extent to which one believes that people largely deserve their lot in life (Furnham, 2003). Believers feel that good things tend to happen to good people and bad things tend to happen to bad people. In many respects, this viewpoint conceptually resembles that of meritocracy, the American ideal that success is a function of merit or deservingness. One natural consequence of deep belief in a just world is an inherent skepticism of instances, wherein bad things happen to people who did not deserve them. This just world belief fueled skepticism can promote what amounts to victim blaming (van den bos and Maas, 2009).

In addition to the differences in the social identity-based perspectives of Black and White observers of recorded police brutality, there are racial differences in just world beliefs, as White Americans endorse this viewpoint more strongly than do Black Americans (e.g., Hunt, 2000). Thus, conversations between Black and White counterparts about police brutality are highly susceptible to conflict because the former are often psychologically invested in the fate of the victim (what's real to them), whereas the latter tend to be psychologically invested in maintaining their worldview that is equally real to them. This reality for some White Americans may be rooted in beliefs about deservingness of fate for the victim; however, they are often upheld because it is difficult to face the alternative of what it would mean if the death was not justified. In essence, it is difficult for many White Americans to accept that the more humane treatment of White people by police in general is not because they act demonstrably different with police than do Black Americans, but rather due to unearned privilege afforded to them by his whiteness. Thus, we see responses such as that of the first two colleagues as attempts to justify why the victim (your fictitious cousin who died of a heart attack) may have contributed to his untimely death. In the metaphor used above, the justification hinges on something the victim may have done poorly or differently than their own family members without considering other contributing factors. When discussing the fatality of Black Americans at the hands of police, the justifications used by White Americans often hinge on a lack of acknowledgment of one's own unearned White privilege. This type of response, which seeks to legitimize the racial inequality in policing, may serve as a protection mechanism because thinking about unearned privilege can be a threat to one's social identity (Branscombe *et al.*, 2007). This explains how water cooler conversations about incidents like the killing of George Floyd could end up paralleling the first two responses in the death in the family metaphor used to open this essay. Under such circumstances, it is easy to see how these interactions could devolve into an incivility spiral (Andersson and Pearson, 1999).

Some responses by White Americans to Black Americans during conversations about police brutality may not rest on attempts to make the situation seem justified, but nevertheless, still be harmful to the Black conversant. Take the third and fourth coworker responses in our opening metaphor. On the surface, the coworker is attempting to serve as an outlet for their grieving acquaintance. However, the response does not express the empathy needed to provide true comfort to many. Empathy is an other-focused psychological process that can manifest as either a cognitive or affective state (Batson and Ahmad, 2009). It has been shown to improve intergroup interactions (for example see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). Instead of empathy, the coworkers in responses three and four place the grieving party in a position to comfort or attend to the needs of the coworker. When discussing police brutality and racism, these conversations often take the form of White people asking Black people to describe Black suffering in order to help themselves (i.e., White people), or White people detailing to Black people their own suffering and pain that has resulted from a police killing of a Black American. The latter often comes with a request on how to quell such pain.

While these responses are less egregious than the first two, and in some situations they may be appropriate, by and large they are exhausting for many Black Americans. Laying bare our suffering to people who have often demonstrated little interest in or concern about our lives or thoughts prior to a national spark like George Floyd's killing is exhausting.

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Listening to White people who did not mention (and perhaps did not know) the names of Tamir Rice in 2014, Freddie Gray in 2015, Philando Castille or Alton Sterling in 2016, Stephon Clark in 2018 or countless other Black Americans murdered by the police, explain that they “know exactly how we feel” or request comfort during our grieving is exhausting. Do not get us wrong. The intention is not to shoo away White allies, whose help we desperately need for this movement to succeed; rather, it is to bring attention to some ways that conversations around racism can do more harm than good to the Black person you are intending to help.

### **A different path**

The preceding discussion seems to suggest that interracial discussions of racism are necessarily bound to devolve into conflicts of identity politics. Again, we return to the opening metaphor. What if the opening salvo to a colleague who is dealing with loss is one of compassion, listening and following the lead of the grieving Black colleague? Rather than focusing on what the victim might have done differently to avoid their fate, how they might have somehow actually deserved the outcome, or what the loss means to one’s self, why not focus on the impact of the victim’s loss on your colleague? Why not recognize that validating their experience is meaningful to them while costing you only the time and attention required to actively listen to them? What if this conversation is viewed as an opportunity to learn about the Black experience beyond the pain of a singular event as opposed to a chance to convince Black people that the world is as fair as you believe it to be?

Ah, but conversations are a two-way street. What if the grieving party were to extend the benefit of the doubt when making attributions? Could not they interpret a somehow less-than-perfect consolation attempt as well intentioned instead of purposefully callous or outright insensitive? Should not some degree of grace be extended to those who find themselves in a situation for which life offers little preparation? Who among us always says the right thing when we realize that someone else has just experienced a traumatic loss?

Please understand what we are saying here and, by extension, what we are not saying. Black people have every right to be “in our feelings” when another Black person is treated unjustly simply because they are Black. Moreover, there is no reason to expect White people to understand how that feels, which makes it difficult for them to empathize because when is the last time you heard of someone being killed because they were White (seriously, we’ll wait)? Rather, our point in this essay is to highlight that the first step toward effective interracial dialogue about such a complex issue is for the participants on each side to recognize this reality about the other. Make no mistake – this is by no means an easy proposition. When you have been aggrieved (and there is an extensive history of Black people being aggrieved), it is difficult to want to extend grace when you are offended in such conversations (especially if it feels like the offender should have known better). People react differently during periods of grief and trauma. The efficacy of a comment to a Black colleague about the death of a Black American at the hands of the police may vary depending on the recipient, just as people respond differently to comfort during other times of grieving. Even the best articulated forms of comfort may sometimes be met with an exhausted response. True allies recognize this, seek to learn better ways of communication for the interaction partner and extend grace in the moment of grief.

Moreover, many people have become virtually addicted to being right to the point where it is difficult to admit being wrong about relatively meaningless things and nearly impossible to do so about things of actual significance (Schulz, 2011). Unfortunately, the compulsion to be right can lead to selective perception (e.g., only hearing confirming evidence and ignoring anything to the contrary), escalation of commitment (e.g., doubling down when wrong) and an inability to see other people’s point of view. Further, if the goal is truly to provide support and be an ally, then one should work to do this in a way that is actually helpful. If the goal is

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simply to spark up conversation or get your point across, please remain silent. After all, you likely would not attend someone's funeral simply to tell their loved one that they deserved to die.

The sad truth about these experiences is that they are like deaths in the family in another important way. Namely, they keep happening. For those looking for something "new" or "insightful" to learn about racism due to the recent killings of George Floyd and others, we say this—racism and the death of Black people from police brutality are not new. Rather these are very old, well-documented experiences that plague Black Americans. What can be new, however, are our responses moving forward. When the next opportunity presents itself, perhaps you'll think back on this essay, approach it a little differently and create some meaningful moments that help us inch closer toward a society wherein no one gets killed because of their skin color.

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