




## The collective challenges of color, Covid-19, and their convergence

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There are numerous challenges many of us must confront, including Covid-19 and expansive, global anti-Blackness, that often results in far-reaching consequences for Black individuals worldwide (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019). As a parent of two young Black boys, I worry about these issues influencing my children's emotional health and physical safety. I value my role as a parent, and as a Black person, partner, researcher, teacher, and activist, these identities cannot be compartmentalized. I pursue grants, conduct research, and teach amid continued trauma. Yet, how does one concentrate on scholarship and protect their children from the pandemic, racial resentment, and the potential of media's representation of both, which may create concern among young audiences? I offer my narrative as a Black media scholar, adopting the feminist intellectual traditions of standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983), acknowledging the struggle to be seen, heard, and represented in a society that historically erases the hardships Black folks often face.

To offer an illustration of those circumstances, on day two of my six and eight-year-old heading back to elementary school, after seven weeks of at-home virtual learning, my son said, "Daddy, I don't think the coronavirus is real." Hearing my son say this broke my heart; I believe in science and work alongside multiple organizations to research the virus and its impact on Black communities. My family has numerous friends and family members, all Black, who have contracted the virus, and some have died. At that moment in the car, I turned off the *Frozen* soundtrack to discuss his statement. My son shared that he overheard that the coronavirus was fake while listening to news programs, confusing him. I know my children are tired of isolation, and now they see their friends and teachers in person and question why they had to spend months indoors. At that moment, I realized that the media contributed to my child questioning the existence of Covid-19. Sadly, my children did not know their father recently overcame the virus. To protect them, I mentioned that I was exhausted and needed to rest in solitude. I work extremely hard to safeguard my children from the structural inequalities Black people face due to their racial identity. Currently, Covid-19 highlights those disparities, and we are dying at alarming rates (Center for Disease Control, 2020). It pains me that often news programs encourage a narrative of seemingly impartial storytelling, framing the pandemic and the deniers of its reality as "newsworthy." Likewise, scholars note news media's role in uneven

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coverage of racial issues, which characteristically encourage collective action, yet news programs often highlight property destruction, thus vilifying attempts to address racial inequality (Stamps & Mastro, 2020).

In March, our world was turned upside down. Like many, I was home with my partner and children, teaching classes virtually and attempting to keep my children calm, occupied, and with some sense of normalcy. I was also worried about my mental and physical health and jogged through my subdivision as a coping mechanism. During this time, I learned that on February 23, Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed 25-year-old Black male jogging in Brunswick, Georgia, was pursued and murdered by three white men. Not only was Arbery hunted and lynched, but audiences learned that the state did not initially indict the individuals that murdered Arbery, illustrating that in case after case, Black lives often do not merit protection in society (Fausset, 2020). A resounding and repetitive narrative of Black bodies as disposable and devalued surfaced in the news. The likelihood of dying from Covid-19 or at the hands of white supremacy became a glaring reality. I have not jogged outdoors since.

I wish these examples were the only situations that I confront, yet the racial resentment and implicit (and often explicit) violence targeting Black people has not slowed amid the pandemic. I welcome requests from schools, churches, consultant groups, and companies in several countries to discuss race and inclusion. Each request demonstrates that individuals were previously unaware of prejudice directed at Black people. Each group wants to discuss the devastation of the pandemic's impact on Black communities and the evident racial unrest driven by white resentment. During my meetings, my kids overhear these discussions and witness me wrestle with data that overwhelmingly illustrates how the pandemic and anti-Blackness hurts our community. In each workshop, panel, and presentation, I attempt to educate my non-Black counterparts, encouraging them to view Black people as full citizens. My children hear my voice crack as I answer questions from well-meaning individuals, and my boys see the heaviness resonate in my body when I emerge from my home office after each talk. My goal is to position my kids for success by reminding them, and others, of Black individuals' value as human beings and emphasizing the cruelty of racial prejudice. Yet, this feels like an uphill battle as systems, such as news media, often frame Black people as deviant or victims in need of a handout (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019).

My discussion of these collective challenges is situated within two central tenets of standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983). First, understanding another individual's reality is difficult as people often see the world and apply their understanding based on personal experiences. Standpoint theory allows me to shape the dialogue around *my* existence, share stories, and actively avoid generalizability, which often appeases dominant groups. Second, standpoint theory posits that subordinate groups often struggle for their vision to be seen as accurate and appropriate, particularly when those narratives counter "traditional" viewpoints. Accordingly, this theory acknowledges my view of the world and my navigation of society, even if others consider these experiences as negligible. Often in the academy and other societal structures, my existence *is* resistance. I unwaveringly believe that #BlackLivesMatter, and as a parent and scholar coping amid Covid-19 and racial unrest, I aim to challenge claims that negate Black adeptness and see these distinct circumstances as unintelligible and irrelevant.

I study identity, media, and their collective influence on society. More importantly, I am a parent of two precious Black boys. Statistics identify that Black people makeup 13% of the U.S. population yet account for 30% of positive Covid-19 cases and are 2.4 times likely

to die from the pandemic than their White counterparts (Center for Disease Control, 2020). Moreover, data shows that Black people are more likely to experience verbal and physical abuse and are three and a half times more likely to be killed by police or those acting as vigilantes (Fryer, 2019). Parenting during a pandemic is difficult. Worrying about violence by the state or the increased chance of mortality due to systemic racism amid Covid-19 raises difficulties in an insurmountable way. I have anxiety about being murdered because my Black skin is seen as threatening. Likewise, I fear dying from Covid-19 as being Black and having asthma places me in a high-risk category.

I worry about the influence that media has on my children's perception of themselves and how the world may see them. My son overhears mainstream news simulate balanced reporting, comparing lies, racism, and xenophobia to individuals attempting to promote equity and inclusion. My impressionable eight-year-old assumes that news media is informative and fair, and this assumption led him to believe that maybe the coronavirus is not real. I am alarmed that my kid, or other kids, may think that unarmed Black people are to blame when hunted and murdered, particularly when the state justifies these actions. These feelings intensify when political leaders put forth the effort to eliminate diversity and inclusion and encourage white grievances by supporting white domestic terrorists and negating individuals that fight for equality (Hooker, 2017).

I watch my children adjust to uncertainty as they attempt to learn and build community in virtual spaces. Zoom playdates are peculiar, and "drive-by" birthday parties lack the same enthusiasm as the excitement of hitting a piñata full of candy. I worry about my children's well-being, but it is alarming that a pandemic that necessitates social distancing has not slowed the targeted attacks on Black bodies. Now, I safeguard my children from news media; we watch a lot of Disney+. My standpoint means that as a parent and researcher, I use data and my privilege as a scholar to encourage decision-makers to make informed choices that support racial equality. The work of justice requires a keen focus from Black and non-Black folks. The Covid-19 crisis and how it impacts our lives is important. Likewise, the ongoing concerns related to race, and recognizing those affected by racism, deserve our attention as well.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*David L. Stamps* (Ph.D., University of California, Santa Barbara) is an Assistant Professor in the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. His research aims to understand the psychological and behavioral effects of identity-focused interpersonal interactions and audiences' exposure to and engagement with mass media, including news and entertainment media. Inherent in his work is recognizing that race, class, gender, geographic location, and sexuality meaningfully impact these relationships.

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