

Thoughts on the Black Lives Matter Movement

by Angela Provitera McGlynn



In a recent New York Times article, the headline read, *Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History* (July 3, 2020). Participants in demonstrations triggered by the murder of George Floyd and others in recent weeks are estimated at 15 to 26 million people in the United States, and these protesters were joined by demonstrators throughout the world. The numbers and the lengthy time span of this geographically widespread movement attests to it being the biggest in U.S. history.

It may also be the most consequential. To cite some of the achievements so far:

In Minneapolis, the epicenter of the protests over George Floyd's death, the City Council is dismantling the police department. New York State repealed a law that kept police disciplinary records secret. Across the U.S., cities and states passed new laws banning chokeholds. Mississippi retired their state flag which prominently included a Confederate battle emblem. Sports teams are being renamed and monuments of slave advocates are being removed. Madison, the capital city of Wisconsin, the state with the highest racial disparities in the country, removed police and school resource officers from their schools.

The movement began in 2013 with the use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who fatally shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. The movement gained momentum following the death of Michael

Brown in Ferguson, whom the police left to fester in the hot summer sun for four and a half hours after killing him. They also kept his parents away from their son at gun point and with dogs. The death of Eric Garner, the first to say the words, "I can't breathe" on videotape while in a chokehold during physical restraint by New York City police, was yet another impetus.

Black Lives Matter is not merely a moment in time; it is a movement with the potential to be transformative.

Before and after Zimmerman's acquittal, there have been many other unjust killings of Black people and many more protests but what happened following George Floyd's death took the **Black Lives Matter** movement to new heights. It seems that the videos of police brutality brought a coalition of people of all races/ethnicities, genders, and even ideologies together in a new way, and to top it off, it occurred during a global pandemic the likes of which we haven't seen since the Spanish Flu of 1918.

Black Lives Matter is not merely a moment in time; it is a movement with the potential to be transformative. The systemic racism that spurred people to protest is built into the very fabric of all our institutions through policies, practices, and laws. This time, the focus was mostly on police brutality and the criminal justice system but back in the early 1970s, James Jones, in his book *Prejudice*

and Racism, discussed the pervasiveness of institutional racism in our society. Jones says that racism is the foundation upon which this society was built. He says, “The major conclusion is that racism exists in practically all institutions (economics, education, the legal and criminal justice systems, media, etc.) by design or by effect, by intention or by ignorance.”

Personal Reflection

The insidiousness of racism was most clearly demonstrated to me at a week-long experiential symposium I attended with the Vice President of the community college where I taught psychology for 35 years. The diversity training sessions took place at Princeton University but the leaders were brought in from Massachusetts. The symposium took place in the 1980s when there was a surge of racial hate crimes on college campuses. The week we spent together was designed to help us, faculty and administrators, enhance racial harmony on our college campuses. What I remember vividly was an exercise the leaders had us do on the first day.

We were supposed to select a societal institution such as education, the legal system, criminal justice, the economic system, and so on. We then formed small groups to brainstorm together and wrote our results on easels with newsprint. The task was to create an institution that would be as racist as we could imagine. I remember questioning the task in my own mind — thinking, how will this help us become more anti-racist?

I selected education since that was where I

was most invested. I worked with my group on creating a racist educational system. When the large group reconvened, what I discovered was that each group had created an institution that was in fact a description of what existed in America at that time. And I am sad to say, not much has changed. When I told that story in my social psychology classes every time I discussed systemic racism, I always got goosebumps reliving how I felt when we processed all our results in the large group. I have them now as I write this.

Moving Forward

My hope is that this **Black Lives Matter** movement can propel real systemic change so that the United States can become a just society in a way it has never been. It will take much more than “reform” to eradicate the hundreds of years of oppression and unequal opportunity. It will take big structural changes, reparations, and dismantling and rebuilding. What we need most right now is the political will to make it happen.

Angela Provitera McGlynn is Professor Emeritus from Mercer Community College. She is the author of:

[Teaching Today's College Students](#)
[Envisioning Equity](#)
[Successful Beginnings for College Teaching](#)

Angela is also a frequent facilitator of professional development workshops and proficient at virtual presentations:
<https://sites.google.com/site/angelamcglynn/biography>