

## **BLACK LIVES (AND STORIES) MATTER: RACE NARRATIVE THERAPY IN BLACK HAIR CARE SPACES**

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*Black Lives Matter has politically and visually framed the stories of Black people suffering unjustly from police violence and race-related trauma, but limited mental health research addresses how telling stories about racism may play a critical role in how Black people cope in community-based spaces. This article formulates the collaboration between Black hair care spaces and mental health professionals to deconstruct racial experiences through the PsychoHairapy technique of Race Narrative Therapy.*

**Keywords:** *Black Lives Matter, PsychoHairapy, race narratives, narrative therapy, racism, beauty salon, barbershop*

### **1. Introduction**

*“Even for those Blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways... the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of White co-workers or White friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or beauty shop...”*

President Barack Obama (2008), 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States

The human mind is storied and telling stories to a validating listener delivers therapeutic value (White & Epston, 1990). Thinking about race and telling stories about racism are no different (Winston, Rice, Bradshaw, Lloyd, Harris, Burford, Clodimir, Kizzie, Carothers, McClair, & Burrell, 2004; Mangum, 2010). There are scarce community-based mental health practices that allow for therapeutic storytelling to cope with the psychological impact of modern

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racism, such as police violence and mass incarceration faced by Black<sup>1</sup> people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Scholars and activists have issued ardent calls for public health interventions that are congruent with the lived experiences of Black people facing race and racism in the United States (Garcia & Sharif, 2015). To heal from racial trauma, Black people must have safe spaces to voice their stories about racism and express their outrage (Mangum, 2010).

Social media has offered space for Black people to tell their emotional stories about racism and organize grassroots resistance. Conceived in 2013 as a social media hashtag to visually frame stories of racial inequalities, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has matured into a social justice collective to disrupt political passivity involving police brutality of Black people in the United States (Rickford, 2015). The hashtag of #BlackLivesMatter was created by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi to elicit racism-related stories following the high-profile murder of teenage Trayvon Martin committed by George Zimmerman in Florida in 2012. The critical need for anti-Black racist activism was further pronounced when Zimmerman was tried for murder through a Florida-based trial, but received an acquittal. Deepening its social justice agenda, BLM emerged at the forefront during the Ferguson, Missouri uprising against police brutality in 2014 after police officer Darren Wilson murdered unarmed teenager Mike Brown. BLM differs from other social justice groups in that it gained millions of followers through social media during the age of Obama, when Black elders' deference to concepts of progress were center stage with the first Black president (see Rickford, 2015; Shor, 2015). Assessment of the online presence suggests that social media was a fast-paced venue used for organizing protests, documenting stories, building community, and expressing personal meaning about high-profile cases (Votaw, 2015). Members of the BLM cooperative have developed techniques and campaigns through social media aimed at disrupting racialized police brutality, mass incarceration, flawed judicial systems, and overall racial injustice by holding "die ins" in malls, sporting events, campaign rallies, police stations, and highways (Rickford, 2015). This movement has sparked national controversy by being accused of reverse racism and identified by some as a hate group (Suen, 2015; Hoilman, 2016). BLM has been met with consistent resistance from the media and governmental organizations; it is clear that racism is embedded into the fabric of America that devalues Black lives (Horowitz & Livingstone, 2016).

Healing and storytelling are central tenets of the BLM movement. Mental health professionals have been slow to match therapeutic techniques with this internationally recognized and community-based social movement that illuminates the levels of distress of African Americans. According to the Black Lives Matter official website:

In many ways, at its essence BLM is a response to the persistent and historical trauma Black people have endured at the hands of the State. This trauma and pain, unresolved and unhealed lives on in our bodies, in our relationships and in what we create together. Since the inception of BLM, organizers and healers have taken this understanding of historical and generational trauma and made it the foundation of our healing circles, of creative and liberatory space held amidst actions, of our attempts to resolve conflict and division in ways that don't replicate harm or rely on carceral ways of being with one another. It's not an easy road; healing individual and community trauma while organizing to make real change in Black lives, but it's what we know has to be done (Black Lives Matter, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> Black and African American will be used interchangeably.

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In their statements, the themes of trauma at the individual and community level are highlighted. It is the aim of BLM to terminate the cycles of trauma. With this agenda, healing justice is their proposed approach to systems of trauma. The BLM official website further states:

We see healing justice as necessary in a society that criminalizes Blackness, and structurally ensures trauma for Black people while creating no space, time resource for healing. In this context how we treat ourselves, how we treat each other, and how we move through conflict become deeply political explorations in liberation. Healing justice also informs our organizing and causes us to hold accountable those institutions like the medical industrial complex, including mental health apparatus, that promise healing and care, but harm, traumatize and pathologize our people. Healing justice requires that we listen beyond the understandings we've been given of spirit and ancestors, and asks us to both recover and create self-determined and effective rituals, processes for the kind of healing we need. Healing justice, then, makes room for the role of healer, for the practice of community care, in our work to get free (Black Lives Matter, 2018).

Here, BLM acknowledges the lack of quality care offered to Black people for race-based trauma by mental health professionals. There is often a racial and cultural mismatch between Westernized forms of healing of meeting with a stranger for an hour a week in an unfamiliar space, and Black social systems based on relationships and relative time (Parham, 2002). Trusted healers, within the community, have been elected by BLM to lead rituals and create new opportunities to improve on how we treat ourselves.

Informal mental health support has emerged in several spaces in Black communities alongside the timeline and goals of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Black hair care settings have become sites for community interventions related to processing racial injustices. Specifically, PsychoHairapy is a healing framework to reshape mental health discourse through utilizing hair care environments and professionals (Mangum & Woods, 2011; Mbilishaka, 2018). Thereby, this article proposes a treatment modality that aligns with the Black Lives Matter healing justice agenda and provides space-specific context for confronting systems of White supremacy by externalizing the emotional wounds of being Black in America. To expand community dialogue across age-groups, and embrace the value of Black lives, this article will: 1) underscore the organic political activism of the Black hair care setting, 2) explain the framework of PsychoHairapy as a racially-relevant therapeutic intervention, and 3) summarize narrative therapy strategies for group process within Black barbershops and beauty salons.

## **2. Black Care Spaces as Settings for Political Activism**

Black hair care spaces have been hubs for political activism from enslavement to instances of modern race-based terrorism (Gill, 2010). The hair care environment offers Black people a safe haven from racism and a place to strategize against oppression (Gill, 2010). These physical spaces gave birth to resistance movements and continued political sovereignty. During African enslavement in America, Black men specialized in hair grooming and built wealth by servicing

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the hair needs of White clients; many were able to buy their own freedom and the freedom of their families through their barbering services (Byrd & Tharps, 2014; Gill, 2010). Women soon joined the professional service industry during Reconstruction periods and built beauty culture industries that resulted in the first Black millionaires in the early 1900s (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). The Black hair care industry has proven to be financially stable and has funded racially-motivated community organizing agendas, such as historical movements of the Pullman Porters Black labor unions, Universal Negro Improvement Association, and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Gill, 2010). Even Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. strongly connected with the Black hair care space to organize his boycotts and marches (Gill, 2010).

Today, Black hair care spaces continue to serve as significant meeting locations for the African American community (Gill, 2010; Willett, 2000). First, Black hair care spaces tend to have a more amenable design for group conversations in comparison to White hair care spaces (Solomon et al., 2004). The floor plans are open and have limited wall partitions. Second, these hair care spaces allow for the purchase of meals. Patrons stay in Black hair care spaces longer than other racial groups because of the time needed to create hairstyles, which can often take over 4 hours (Solomon et al., 2004). Vendors travel to Black hair care settings to sell their snacks or dinners to customers in Black salons (Solomon et al., 2004). Sharing food and eating together reinforces African traditions of bonding and building community; people tend to relax and talk more under these food-based circumstances (Terry, 2014). Third, media consumption is the norm in the Black hair care space. Customers have been observed to read magazines, watch television, and listen to the radio (Solomon et al., 2004). In addition, observational research in Black hair care settings reveals that non-customers also visit. These visitors include relatives and associates of both the staff and clients that come by to have conversations and get life updates unrelated to hair grooming (Solomon et al., 2004). Storytelling with customers, visitors, and professionals occurs organically in the hair care setting, where “cross talk” involves conversations across space and between large groups of individuals in the salon and barbershop environment (Solomon et al., 2004).

The most powerful resource in the Black hair care environment is the hair care professional. In particular, barbers and hairstylists shape the conversations and perpetuate the oral tradition as a way to care for their clients. Customers engage in intimate conversations with their stylist or barber during their hair care process (Linnan & Ferguson 2007). Hair combing interaction can further guide levels of intimacy (Lewis, 1999). As argued by Ashley and Brown (2015), “hair care can provide a context and vehicle for attachment, nurturing, and positive self-worth” (p. 1). Barbers and stylists are professionals that often serve in a caretaker role and address the needs of distressed clients (see Ashley & Brown, 2015). Most hair care professionals are interested in providing support for their clients and are interested in trainings to increase their emotional labor skillset (Wiesenfeld & Weis, 1979; Anderson, Cimbal, & Maile, 2010). The professional-client relationship is understudied in the context of its therapeutic value, specifically with regard to race-related trauma.

### **3. PsychoHairapy as a Race-Relevant Therapy Practice**

The Black Lives Matter movement encourages interdisciplinary approaches to healing from individual and community trauma in safe spaces. The hair salon and barbershop have been

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underutilized for mental health interventions, despite the centrality of these spaces for diverse communities. “PsychoHairapy” is an innovative community mental health model that connects mental health professionals with hair care settings (Mangum & Woods, 2011; Mbilishaka, 2018). Within this framework, the hair care environment serves as a site for mental health prevention and intervention programming. Hair care professionals and community members provide support and make interventions on health-related topics, as both peer and expert. PsychoHairapy includes a) mental health professionals offering a series of structured training sessions to hair care professionals in micro-counseling skills, b) mental health professionals facilitating individual therapy and group therapy in the hair care setting, and c) mental health professionals hosting educational workshops in the hair care setting (see Mbilishaka, 2018). A primary outcome of this framework would be to increase hair care professionals’ ability to actively and functionally support their clients in roles akin to mental health paraprofessionals. To align with the Black Lives Matter agenda focused on the analysis of trauma and resistance, PsychoHairapy is an innovative way to strengthen the relationship between natural helpers and community members by offering evidence-based skills for coping with trauma.

As a Black psychologist, I have committed myself to the mental health and wellness of Black people. This led to the creation of PsychoHairapy in 2001, while I was a college student making a choice pursuing a doctorate in Clinical Psychology or a certificate in cosmetology. Through the advice and support of my family, I recognized that I could integrate my passions for hair care and mental health. I have created spaces in Black hair care venues to examine our psychological triggers and what parts of our being need healing. I have studied traditional African health rituals in the United States with scholars from the Association of Black Psychologists and on the continent of Africa under traditional healers. Based on my experiences and trainings, the power of the word has emerged as a central theme in culturally-aligned healing modalities. Narrative therapy, using stories as a tool of healing, is core to integrating mental health interventions with hair care of groups ranging from 2 to 40 people (depending on the size of the hair care setting).

The Guided Race Autobiography can be used as a detox tool, to consciously trigger Black people to narrate and relive experiences – at the individual, ancestral, or community level -- that may be unhealed, while in a safe space. Group process, facilitated together by both hair care professionals and mental health professionals, can examine what was triggered and what needs immediate care. In addition to sharing stories, PsychoHairapy includes learning new stories – historical stories – that counteract the dehumanizing content of miseducation that Black people have endured at the will of American governing bodies. In the following subsections, these healing techniques are further elaborated in the hopes that this healing model can be a tool kit for hair care professionals and mental health professionals.

### ***3.1. Guided Race Autobiography Technique***

There are challenges to elicit racial stories in a society that deems racism as isolated incidences. Healers and communities should recognize the ubiquitous role of racism in Black health. To facilitate conversations on race and racism, the Guided Race Autobiography should be used with African American people to begin to understand their meaning-making of race in their life story. The Guided Race Autobiography (GRA) is a research instrument developed by Burford and Winston (2005) to elicit autobiographical narratives of race. This semi-structured

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**Table 1. Guided Race Autobiography Episode Description Summary**

Episode	Description
Race Earliest Memory	First identified memory of negotiating the meaning of race
Race Childhood Memory	A childhood memory that stands out about a racial experience
Race Adolescent Memory	An adolescent memory that stands out about a racial experience
Race Peak Memory	A memory about a positive racial experience
Race Nadir Memory	A memory about a negative racial experience
Race Turning Point Memory	A memory about a shift in beliefs related to race
Race Continuity Memory	A recent memory that symbolizes general beliefs about race

*Note.* The Guided Race Autobiography (Burford & Winston, 2005) full instrument can be requested from The Identity and Success Research Lab at Howard University.

thematic instrument is a modified version of McAdams' (1997) Guided Autobiography that elicits significance and meaning that are ascribed to specific experiences across different episodes within a person's life. The GRA includes the following seven episodes that each participant is required to describe: 1) "race earliest memory", 2) "race childhood memory", 3) "race adolescent memory", 4) "race peak memory", 5) "race nadir memory", 6) "race turning point memory", and 7) "race continuity memory"(see Table 1). For example, the prompt for the childhood memory was:

Describe a childhood (age 12 or younger) memory related to your life experiences related to race: 1. That stands out as a particularly prominent or significant personal experience related to race; 2. And for which you are able to identify what happened, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Provide your best guess at your age at the time of the event. The event may be positive or negative, important or seemingly trivial. The point here is that this is a memory that stands out – it is something that you recall clearly and something that, when you think about your past, seems to have a certain prominence. Make sure that this a particular and specific incident and not a general "time" or "period" in your life. Make sure your narrative includes a description of the following: exactly what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why this event is significant, and what this event says about you and your personality.

Below is a race childhood scene collected from a Black college student from a preliminary research study (see Mangum, 2010):

When I was about five or six I remember watching the Rodney King beatings on the news. I remember when my mother first saw it with me she was talking to the people in our building about it and people to people on the phone. All I could remember is wondering why were the police beating that man so bad and why was it such a hot topic with my mother and her friends. So, I asked her why it was so interesting and why it happened and she told me to go and ask my father. I went inside and asked my father about the Rodney King situation, and he told me that people were so upset because he was black and the police that beat him were white. Then he told me about how black people have been fighting for equality, but are always discriminated against. I kept asking questions because I was very curious and

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interested because people were so heated about it and everyone was talking about it. Because my father is a black man I asked if he had ever been beat like Rodney King, and would I get beat. I remember him laughing a little and saying something like "you have a lot to learn about what being black is in this country, but you have time, hopefully things will be better for you when you are my age." At this age and time in my life I understood the concept of race but not really discrimination and racism, but this event was significant because it was my first taste or experience of the negative side of race and racism in America.

This race narrative sample brings a compelling case how racism is discussed. This person reflected on how the news media presented high-profile police violence in the 1990s and the need to process and clarify the experience with other Black people. There are several implications of this race narrative in processing police violence. First, race experiences should be shared because they may be self-defining to the narrative of self. Second, race narratives can be used to help Black people learn lessons and gain insight from their race experiences rather than ruminate on negative aspects of race experiences. Mental health professionals and hair care professionals can code the thematic content and emotional tone of the narratives from a healing justice framework described by BLM. Stories like this are internalized and may unconsciously be triggered in deciding on how to interact with other Black people in daily life. The author's parents played a critical role in her making sense of police violence as she had her first experience of racism.

When working in community spaces with African Americans, community healers – mental health professionals and hair care professionals – should use the Guided Race Autobiography to understand the part of the person that is often ignored in other spaces. Systematically interviewing the community members can provide information about past experiences, present perspectives, goals, and motivations. The groups, based in salons and barbershops, can see common themes and begin the processes of unpacking shared themes that are brought to their attention by their group process facilitator. Further, the Community Healing Networks and the Association of Black Psychologists implemented community-based psychological interventions for the after a race narrative has been shared, through “Emotional Emancipation Circles”:

Emotional Emancipation (EE) Circles are self-help support groups in which we, Black people, work together to overcome, heal from, and overturn the lies of White superiority and Black inferiority: the root causes of the devaluing of Black lives.”  
(Community Health Network 2017, para. 1)

This curriculum-based support group through the Emotional Emancipation Circles, encourages its Black members to practice empathy in hearing highly emotionally charged racial experiences. Similar to the healing justice framework of Black Lives Matter, community members can share and process their emotional experiences in the safe space of the hair care setting.

### **3.2. *Narrative Therapy***

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Narrative therapy is one of the core therapeutic interventions for PsychoHairapy. Mental health clinicians can train barbers and stylists to engage in this process of unpacking their client's narratives on the individual level or group level (see Wiesenfeld & Weis, 1979). Narrative therapy was originally developed for group settings to verbally process stressors in a collaborative format (White & Epston, 1990). Specifically, narrative therapy aims to divorce the presenting problem from the person by identifying systems (e.g., political, cultural, social) that empower the problem. Instead of focusing on the person as having a problem, the therapist co-authors a new narrative that facilitates the solution-focused behavior without clients getting defensive about their own feelings and previous actions (White & Epston, 1990). The person is not the focus of the transformation: rather, the narrative is transformed which impacts how an individual or a group can reframe problem solving (White & Epston, 1990). Ultimately, clients in narrative therapy can gain improved self-knowledge and compassion in confronting painful experiences.

In PsychoHairapy, hair care professionals can be trained in narrative therapy techniques by mental health professionals to assist their client's processing of their stories. It is the position of the hair care professional to illuminate the problem, entrap the problem within a cultural context, and help dispose of personally toxic stories (see Semmler & Williams, 2000). Through a collaborative relationship, the hair care professional and client co-create alternative interpretations of the experiences that are often in direct contradiction to the original story (see Singer, 2005). This is done by the barber or stylist asking questions focused on liberating the implied dimensions and unsaid aspects of the story. Clients then can re-author their story in a format that aligns more authentically to social structures and individual goals (White & Epston, 1990). Ultimately, the client learns to have renewed agency to address future problems from a holistic framework.

Unfortunately, when racism is internalized, Black clients may limit their full emotional and self-expression in traditional narrative therapy (Semmler & Williams, 2000). Therefore, narrative therapy should be extended to explicitly include race narratives. Race Narrative Therapy (RNT) is a newly proposed intervention developed by this author to unpack the emotion and race experiences of African Americans; this is an extension fo PsychoHairapy or can be used outside of this intervention setting as well. By extending the scope of PsychoHairapy to match the needs of Black clients, as articulated and documented through Black Lives Matter healing justice, hair care professionals can offer narrative therapy techniques to process both high-profile cases and personal experiences with police brutality and racial inequality. The hair care professionals can co-author narrative through systematic questioning from multiple points of view from an anti-racist agenda. This approach can invite the client to remove their narratives from the media lies of Black inferiority and encourage comprehensive alternate perspective taking (see Community Healing Network, 2018). The hair care professional can foster the development of alternative stories with an understanding that lives and identity are shaped by meaning-making that can result from living in a racialized society. The client should therefore actively co-construct alternate stories that combat restrictions in understanding the self because of race. The hair care professional may assist the client in externalizing the presenting problem. This approach aims to reduce instances of shame, guilt, and sadness and identify this as an external, systemic problem within American culture.

Hair care professionals can become sources of support and help their clients excavate unique outcomes through identifying specific instances when they were not oppressed by a problem and instead cultivated unique, positive outcomes. The barber or stylist can then ask questions to



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make stories more specific, and the sequence of emotion must be explored. The client can refer to this story when facing other racial experiences. The client can be encouraged to share the stories with relatives, teachers, friends, coworkers, and others with whom he or she has a relationship. These social actors will serve as the external audience in addition to the newly formed internal audience for the narrative.

### **3.3. *Education Through Expert Presentations***

A major staple of anti-racist work includes an educational group component and PsychoHairapy interventions include workshops and presentations from experts on specific cultural and racial topics after hours in the hair care setting. Thereby, narrative therapy extends beyond individual stories, but also involves learning Black history for the purposes of sociopolitical development and community engagement. While the Black Lives Matter movement identifies the systems of oppression for Black people, sociopolitical development (SPD) formulated by Watts and colleagues (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999) connects individual stories to community plans of action. SPD aims to increase racial literacy through deconstruction of systems and through learning about Black liberation and resistance movements (see Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2015). Learning about Black and African history can serve as a psychological buffer to internalized racism (Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2015). Further, the Black Lives Matter Movement demands that its members be both informed and actively engaged in community level work and scholarship. Chapman-Hilliard and Adams-Bass (2015) argue Black people ultimately need to understand the enduring nature of African enslavement in the US, Black success, economic disparities, and that African culture provides strength to the Black community.

The Black barbershop and beauty salons have been ideal settings for professional presentations and workshops. Through collaborations with hair care professionals, community members, and mental health professionals, my existing PsychoHairapy interventions have included inviting paid speakers to present on such topics as microaggressions, the importance of supporting Black business, slavery revolts, stress management, Black suicide prevention, addressing Black depression, abductions of Black children, mass incarceration, respecting Black mothers, the significance of Black fatherhood, improving communication skills in intimate relationships, Black women's roles in the Black power movement, the power of Black boycotts, work-life balance, and Black marriage. Presenters have delivered interactive workshops and presentations that include Powerpoint presentations, handouts, and interactive exercises. Attendees were encouraged to take notes and ask several questions, signifying the critical importance of shared knowledge from an expert in these fields of psychology, medicine, history, social work, law, military science, etc. Participants have even had the opportunity to buy books related to the topic of study within the Black hair care setting.

## **4. Conclusion**

Black hair care spaces have historically been central to political activism and for responding to the psycho-emotional needs of the Black community. Therefore, Black Lives Matter and

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PsychoHairapy can both reinforce the need to include the voices of an oppressed population for community psychology techniques. Applying this intervention will demand skillful training, research on efficacy, and community effort. The alignment of hair care professionals, hair care spaces, and community members is essential for psychologists to be effective in addressing racial traumas. Black Lives Matters has reinvigorated the confrontation of the US government and policies. The Black protest tradition has deep roots in hair care settings and needs to be expanded to address the psychological toll of these movements through processing historical and modern narratives.

Countless psychotherapy techniques have been developed to address diverse psychological needs, and yet with them all, stories and emotions are central to the healing process (Corey, 2012). Narrative therapy is a psychotherapeutic approach that translates clients' feelings from problem saturated stories to purposeful actions (White & Epston, 1990). The PsychoHairapy approach to mental health ventures into the cultural worldview of the client by examining the meaning making process through the stories about race and racism. Not only is the technique important for unpacking racial trauma articulated by Black Lives Matter healing justice approach, but healing is needed in a supportive space to express outrage and receive empathy. This emotional support in the face of race-related stressors is one of the most profound and impactful services that our hair care professionals can provide to the Black community to advance positivity and collective strength.

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