The Struggle Is Real: Employee Reactions to Indirect Trauma from Anti-Black Policing

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Abstract

Despite increased media coverage of police using lethal force against Black civilians, little research aims to understand how such events affect employees, particularly Black employees, at work. We draw on *spillover*—transferring emotions and/ or behaviors from one domain to another—to examine how collective, indirect trauma, or trauma experienced by a large group of people not directly involved in an event, affected employees at work. Across two studies, we investigated Black and White employees' differential cognitive (Study 1), emotional, and interpersonal reactions (Studies 1 & 2) to hearing about police officers' use of lethal force against Black civilians (i.e., collective, indirect racial trauma). Results from a survey with open- and close-ended questions (Study 1) supported our predictions that Black (vs. White) employees would be more upset about police shootings and would think about, talk about, and be more distracted by these incidents while at work. Open-ended responses revealed *social support*, seeking advice and comfort from our social networks, as a strategy Black and White employees may use to cope with collective, indirect racial trauma at work. Importantly, support communicating *mutual understanding*—or shared perspective—was particularly important for Black employees. An experiment (Study 2) further probed the emotional and relational consequences of interactions with coworkers and, counter to predictions, found coworkers who expressed pro-police attitudes (i.e., not communicating mutual understanding) in the aftermath of a racially biased shooting were negatively evaluated by Black and White employees. Our findings provide implications for research on spillover and understanding coworker/team dynamics in organizations.

Keywords Critical race psychology · Employee well-being · Racial trauma · Coping · Coworker support

As media outlets have increasingly focused on lethal police violence against Black civilians, it is important to investigate whether such coverage exacts a negative toll on people—especially Black people in America—when they are at work. Recent research has theorized that traumatic societal events, including police violence against Black people, can lead to psychological, emotional, and relational costs for Black employees (Leigh & Melwani, 2019; McCluney et al., 2017; Ruggs et al., 2020). One model theorizes the negative effects (e.g., rumination and negative emotions) of hearing about police violence against Black civilians may be worse for Black (vs. White) employees because such news threatens racial identity and triggers rumination (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2017). Moreover, even when holding individual (e.g., age, social class, and gender) and neighborhood (e.g., disorder and crime) characteristics constant, White people are more likely than Black people to believe that police treat people fairly and are less racially biased (McNeeley & Grothoff, 2016). Given potential differences in Black and White employees' reactions to police violence toward Black civilians, and because employee well-being and social justice should be a priority for organizations, it is critical to investigate whether Black employees are at heightened risk for experiencing negative consequences when hearing about such incidents.

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The disparity in negative consequences that could emerge between Black and White employees when hearing about police killing Black civilians may be consistent with existing patterns of racial inequality pertaining to employment. For instance, Black (vs. White) people in the U.S. experience bias and discrimination in the job search and selection process (e.g., Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Quillian et al., 2017). Even when hired, Black employees experience racial bias and inequities that negatively affect outcomes such as salary negotiations and upward mobility opportunities (e.g., Hernandez et al., 2019). Black employees also experience disproportionate rates of job insecurity because they are often the first fired during economic downturns (Couch & Fairlie, 2010)—including strain on US labor markets during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kochhar & Bennett, 2021)—and the last hired during rebounds (e.g., Henderson, 2020). Altogether, Black employees face direct, race-based hardships in (and even before entering) the workplace. Racial inequality also exists outside employment contexts and might compound the hardships Black people already experience at work. Thus, it is important to understand how racially traumatic (i.e., race-based events that trigger negative emotional responses) and/or inequitable (i.e., events that lead to disparities in access, treatment, and/or outcomes between groups) events outside the workplace can indirectly affect Black employees.

Although racially traumatic societal events have been theorized to negatively affect employees at work, there is scant empirical evidence illustrating whether and why these negative effects occur. Additionally, much of the extant research fails to examine if there are differences between Black and White employees' reactions to anti-Black racial trauma. To address these gaps, we examined whether anti-Black racism in one aspect of society (i.e., biased policing) negatively affects other facets of society (i.e., work). We draw on the spillover literature to theoretically ground our investigation of whether collective, indirect racial trauma stemming from news of police killing Black civilians *spills over*—or transfers from one domain to another (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000)—to the workplace and negatively affects Black (vs. White) employees. We also examined coworkers' role in contributing to and reducing negative consequences resulting from this trauma. In two studies (one survey and one experiment), we examined differences in cognitive (e.g., work focus; Study 1) and emotional (e.g., negative affect) consequences and coping responses (i.e., social support seeking; Studies 1 & 2) for Black and White employees when hearing about police violence at work.

This work is important because understanding the specific race-related effects of workplace spillover caused from hearing about police killing Black civilians may help call attention to the ways in which racial inequality in society and within organizations influences trauma. This may subsequently spur organizations to create interventions that reduce racial inequality. This research can also help uncover ways that coworker engagement around such issues may be a source of effective, or ineffective, support, which can inform better strategies for allies and organizations looking to provide safe spaces for meaningful discussions around race and racial justice for employees.

Collective, Indirect Racial Trauma

Research demonstrates clear patterns of anti-Black racial bias in policing. Police are more likely to pull over, harass, search, and disproportionately kill—by over three times—Black (vs. White) people (Banks, 2003; DeGue et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2019; Hehman et al., 2018; Hyland et al., 2015; Langton & Durose, 2013; Schwartz & Jahn, 2020). Such trends are not surprising given policing in the U.S. evolved from slave patrols—White men and women who hunted Black slaves who violated the law by fleeing enslavement (Turner et al., 2006).

Even when not experienced directly, police violence against Black civilians can lead to trauma. For instance, people can experience indirect trauma from hearing about violent death and may feel secondary trauma from repeated exposure to details of traumatic events (May & Wisco, 2016). Shared racial identity can make indirect trauma from police violence against Black civilians particularly intense for Black observers because they may also experience racial trauma (i.e., race-based stress) from witnessing racially biased harm (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). When trauma is experienced by a large group, even indirectly, the trauma can be labelled collective (Seery et al., 2008). The overwhelming reactions to police killing Black civilians (e.g., formation of Black Lives Matter Movement; 2014 protests in Ferguson, MO; Colin Kaepernick's 2016 NFL kneeling protest; nationwide protests in response to the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and others in 2020) suggest police violence leads to collective, indirect racial trauma for many Black people (Harrell, 2000).

Collective, indirect racial trauma from police killing Black civilians is supported by empirical evidence. For instance, one study found young, Black men who experienced and witnessed police violence reported trauma-related symptoms including fearing police, grieving those killed by the police, and hypervigilance around police (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019). Another study found, in a sample of almost 39,000 Black Americans, exposure to police killing an unarmed Black person in one's state was associated with reports of poorer mental health for Black, but not White, Americans (Bor et al., 2018). In short, evidence suggests hearing about police killing Black civilians has negative consequences for Black people's psychological well-being.

Moreover, these negative consequences are often experienced collectively through indirect trauma.

Spillover of Police Violence: Experiencing Racial Trauma at Work

The collective, indirect racial trauma Black people experience following highly publicized police killings of Black civilians can affect various aspects of their lives, including work (Leigh & Melwani, 2019; McCluney et al., 2017; Ruggs et al., 2020). One potential consequence of employees thinking about distressing societal-level events, such as police killing Black civilians, is spillover (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Spillover has been examined thoroughly in the context of work and family stressors, with numerous studies illustrating a preponderance of negative home-to-work (and work-to-home) spillover, which occurs when responsibilities, demands, or stressors from home (work) life negatively interferes with work (home) responsibilities or performance (e.g., Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). Much of this work examines the influence of family members and dynamics such as caregiving responsibilities and spousal dynamics as factors that spillover to the workplace (e.g., Payne et al., 2012; Peng et al., 2020); however, spillover can also occur following minor, non-work-related events, such as dissatisfaction with a sport team's performance (see Gkorezis et al., 2016), or substantial, non-work-related events, such as fear of home foreclosure (Ragins et al., 2014).

Police killing Black civilians (a substantial, non-work-related event) can be a potent stressor for Black employees. McCluney et al. (2017) theorized that the effects of hearing about police killing Black civilians may be worse for Black people than White people because it may threaten Black racial identity. Further, Leigh & Melwani's (2019) theoretical work posits *mega-threats*—large-scale traumatic events such as police killing Black civilians—lead to negative emotions and rumination for group members who share a social identity with mega-threat targets/victims. Further, reactions to police violence against Black civilians can be understood through the lens of Critical Race Psychology (CRP). Critical Race Psychology (Salter & Adams, 2013) stems from the broader theoretical foundation of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is an analytic framework that contextualizes how racism structures the experiences of Black people (and people of color) in the USA (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Namely, CRT calls for an acknowledgment and understanding of historical race relations within the USA as a basis for understanding the current dynamics of race relations. Integrating CRT within psychological science, CRP, in part, focuses on the systemic nature of racism embedded in society as opposed to focusing on individual-level racism (e.g., acts of prejudice or stereotyping). Further, CRP stresses the importance of intentionally including people in racially oppressed groups in research because their responses and experiences often provide a counter-narrative to White individuals about everyday racialized experiences in society (Salter & Adams, 2013). Because race has historically informed experiences and perceptions of criminal justice and policing, CRP is a useful framework for understanding why Black and White employees in the U.S. may have different emotional reactions to police force against Black civilians.

Indeed, there is some evidence of such racial differences. For instance, Black people are more likely than White people to express feelings of understanding and positivity toward protests against police violence (Reinka & Leach, 2017). Moreover, one study found Black people reported more anger than White people when viewing images of unarmed Black victims of police violence, whereas White people felt more surprise relative to Black people (Reinka & Leach, 2018). This same work found Black and White participants did not differ in their reported feelings of negative affect (i.e., unpleasantness). This latter finding might be due to the inclusion of surprise, which is a complex emotion that has been shown to reflect neutral or positive affect (Remington et al., 2000). When excluding surprise, however (as we do in the current study), it is likely Black people would report more general negative affect in response to police violence against Black civilians relative to White people.

Based on theoretical and empirical research, we posit that many Black employees feel emotional closeness to incidents of police violence, and thus they may devote more energy to coping with collective, indirect racial trauma at work. Therefore, reallocating cognitive and emotional resources to cope with a major, non-work-related stressor might reduce Black employees' focus on work tasks, which conflicts with their work roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Negative spillover consequences from police shootings may be less pronounced for White compared to Black people because they have different perspectives regarding police. White people are less likely to view police negatively and more likely to believe police treat Black and White civilians equally (Gramlich, 2019; McNeeley & Grothoff, 2016). Specifically, whereas 75% of White Americans believe police use "the right amount of force" and "treat" White and non-White Americans equally, only 33% and 35% of Black Americans, respectively, feel similarly (DeSilver et al., 2020).

Altogether, there is strong reason to expect spillover from police shootings to more negatively affect Black, compared to White, employees' mood, thoughts, and focus at work. As such, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Black employees will report greater *negative affect* (*NA*) following police shootings of Black civilians than White employees.

Hypothesis 2: Black (vs. White) employees will report *thinking about shootings* more while at work (H2a) and report *poorer work focus* (H2b).

Previous research also shows rumination at work is related to decreased productivity (Frone, 2015; Querstret & Cropley, 2012). Negative affect at work is also associated with poor work performance (Kaplan et al., 2009). There are reasons to believe that there may be racial differences in the relationship between thinking about police shootings at work and negative outcomes (i.e., NA and productivity disruption), which can be understood through the lens of CRP. Namely, although we anticipate that Black and White employees both experience NA when thinking about police violence, the content of their negative emotions likely differ. For White people, hearing such news stories more often represents a single instance or a few isolated instances of police violence. Indeed, White people express more surprise by police force against unarmed Black civilians than did Black people (Reinka & Leach, 2018), and they are more likely to deny systemic racism (Rucker & Richeson, 2021). However, Black people are more likely to consider the historical connections of such violence and associate it with systemic racism that directly and indirectly affects their lives (Bonam et al., 2019). Because we expect police shootings to produce higher levels of rumination (i.e., pervasive thoughts about police shootings when they should be thinking about work tasks) and NA in Black (vs. White) employees, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: *Thinking about shootings at* work and *NA* from hearing about shootings positively relates to *poor work focus* resulting from hearing about shootings.

Hypothesis 4: Race moderates the relationships between (a) *thinking about shootings* at work and *poor work focus* resulting from hearing about shootings and (b) *NA* and *poor work focus* resulting from hearing about shootings, such that the relationships will be stronger for Black (vs. White) employees.

Coping Through Social Support

One way to reduce the negative effects of spillover on employees' emotional well-being and productivity is for organizational leaders, supervisors, and coworkers to provide social support, which may constitute behaviors or signaling of availability to provide resources, information, or emotional support (Jolly et al., 2021). In dealing with indirect racial trauma-induced spillover, psychosocial or emotional support may be particularly useful. This may be expressed as empathetic conversations with coworkers

about anti-Black police violence. Indeed, a common strategy Black Americans use to cope with racial trauma is talking to someone about it (Brown et al., 2011), which can lead to collective sensemaking about the trauma experienced from mega-threats (Leigh & Melwani, 2019). In this case, Black employees may have strong negative reactions to police shooting Black civilians and thus seek workplace social support to cope with collective, indirect racial trauma.

Black employees may seek support from coworkers who are the same race or those who are a different race. Some research shows that during interracial interactions Black people find discussing race less stressful than other, race-neutral topics (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008). Talking with White coworkers may provide a sense of hope that such conversations will move toward action around addressing racism and bias in one's own company. If White coworkers can empathize or sympathize with Black colleagues experiencing trauma resulting from police killing Black civilians, then conversations may be a welcome sign of social support. Nevertheless, conversations with White coworkers about racist societal-level events may create tense work environments due to differences in perceptions about anti-Black racism in policing and society at large (Chopik & Motyl, 2016). Such conversations may exacerbate Black employees' trauma and vulnerability to racial microaggressions (i.e., verbal and nonverbal slights; Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2008). The race-related nature of police shootings heightens many Black individuals' concern about being the target of prejudice, which has been shown to elevate the perceived threat of engaging in interracial interactions (Sanchez et al., 2022; Trawalter et al., 2009). Furthermore, research suggests that social support is best when it matches the stressor and is provided by similar others (Cutrona, 1990; Thoits, 2011). Prioritizing such conditions could lead Black employees to avoid conversations with White coworkers and seek support from Black coworkers (Marshburn & Campos, 2021).

Given we anticipate Black employees will express stronger negative reactions at work following police shootings than White employees, we believe Black employees will also express greater desire to cope with these reactions. As such, we expect they will be more open to discussing such events with coworkers, particularly Black coworkers (Marshburn & Campos, 2021). Furthermore, given the different experiences (and often understanding) of racism as a system versus an isolated incident, we believe Black people will feel they need more support than White people. As Black people tend to cope with racial trauma through talking with others, report that it is helpful, and seek to be understood in conversations around race (Brown et al., 2011; Sanchez et al., 2022), it is likely that they will feel more supported from such discussions. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 5: Black employees will report more *coworker discussions* about police shootings at work than White employees.

Hypothesis 6: Black employees will prefer *coworker discussions* with Black (vs. White) coworkers.

Hypothesis 7: Black (vs. White) employees will report feeling greater *coworker support* from these discussions of police shootings at work.

Overview of the Current Research

Across two studies, we examined how hearing about police violence against Black civilians affected Black and White employees' cognitions (Study 1), emotions, and interactions with coworkers (Studies 1 & 2) at work. In Study 1, we examined employees' cognitive and affective reactions at work, shortly following the highly publicized shooting of Keith Lamont Scott, a Black man, in September 2016. We also used closed- and open-ended questions to explore how Black and White employees engaged (or wanted to engage) with coworkers following such incidents. We extend our examination of coworker engagement in Study 2 using an experiment to manipulate contextual variables (i.e., the coworker's stance on police violence against Black civilians) to better understand the conditions under which coworker support may be more or less beneficial.

Study 1: Method

Participants

A total of 134 people were recruited through snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria for participation were being at least 18 years old, being employed, and working at least 20 hours per week. Four participants completed less than 80% of the survey and were removed from data analysis. Seven participants were excluded in data analysis because they did not indicate their race, and nine were excluded because they did not racially identify as Black or White. The final sample was $N = 114$. Fifty-four percent of participants identified as Black, 46% identified as White, and ages ranged from 18–68 ($M = 36.96$, $SD = 11.92$). Slightly more than half of respondents identified as women (55%; men = 44%; other = 1%), and most identified as heterosexual (92%; gay = 3%; bisexual = 3%; other = 2%; did not respond = 1%). The sample was highly educated with 85% obtaining an Associate's degree or higher (all participants reported having at least a high school diploma or equivalent). Participants' annual income varied: 13% earned less than $20,000, 24% earned between $20,000–$49,999, 25% between $50,000–$74,999, 12% between $75,000–$100,000, 25% over $100,000, and 1% did not respond. Participants worked in a variety of industries and jobs including education, law, finance, and service.

Procedure

Data collection occurred between November and December 2016, beginning approximately one month after police in Charlotte, NC fatally shot a Black man named Keith Lamont Scott. The story was highly publicized and reported nationally. Participants received an invitation link to an online survey administered via Qualtrics. They completed a questionnaire about their cognitive and affective reactions and their interpersonal experiences at work following hearing news of Black civilians being shot by police. They also provided information about their familiarity with five highly publicized shootings of Black men by the police which resulted in death between 2014–2016. Finally, participants provided demographic information.

Measures

Poor Work Focus from Hearing About Police Shootings

Nine items adapted from an American Psychological Association survey examining reactions to politics at work (American Psychological Association, 2016) were used to examine poor work focus. Each question began with the stem, "When hearing news of Black Americans and their interactions with police that result in the death or serious injury of Black Americans, to what extent…" Example items include: "Does it make you feel distracted at work?" and "Does it make it harder for you to get work done?" Responses were provided on a 5-point rating scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*) and averaged ($\alpha = 0.95$).

Thinking About Shootings

Five items were developed for this study to measure how much participants think about police shootings at work. We used the same prompt from the poor work focus scale and asked to what extent: "Do you think about the situation at work?"; "Do you think about the civilian harmed or killed while at work?"; "Do you think about the family of the civilian harmed or killed while at work?"; "Do you think about the police officers involved while at work?"; and "Do you think about the events that may have occurred in the interaction between the Black American and the police while at work?" Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). Responses were averaged to create a composite *thinking* score ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Negative Affect from Hearing About Police Shootings

Ten items from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule subscale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) were used to measure NA. Using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*), participants rated their emotions when hearing about "Black Americans and their interactions with police that result in the death or serious injury of Black Americans." Summed ratings ranged from 10 to 50 (α = 0.88).

Coworker Discussions and Support

We assessed coworker discussions in three ways. First, using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*), participants responded to a single item: "Regarding Black Americans and their interactions with the police that result in the death or serious injury of Black Americans, to what extent do you discuss it with your coworkers?" To probe differences in the degree to which respondents spoke with Black and White coworkers, we used the same stem (and 5-point scale) as above and separately asked participants "…to what extent do you discuss it with your coworkers who are": (a) Black, (b) White.

Second, we assessed coworker support, which we defined as emotional support based on perceptions of how employees feel when discussing police violence with coworkers. Participants responded to nine items asking, for example, to what extent they felt "supported," "connected," and "comfortable talking about the issue at work" when discussing police shootings with coworkers." Responses on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*) were averaged to create a composite *coworker support* score (α = 0.93). Third, participants responded to an open-ended question: "Explain how you feel when talking to coworkers who are of your same race relative to coworkers of a different race about Black Americans and their interactions with the police that result in the death or serious injury of Black Americans." The open-ended question was used to explore potential variations in feeling supported when having discussions with same- (vs. cross-) race coworkers.

Additional Variables (and Covariates) of Interest

We also measured *familiarity with police shootings* and *attributions of racial bias in policing* because previous research suggests racial differences exist (McNeeley & Grothoff, 2016; Nadal et al., 2017; Reinka & Leach, 2018; Rosenbaum et al., 2005). For instance, previous research found Black Americans are more familiar with cases of police violence against Black civilians (Reinka & Leach, 2018). Moreover, Black Americans are more likely than White Americans to

believe police are racially biased and do not treat people fairly (McNeeley & Grothoff, 2016). Moreover, White people's (positive) perceptions of police are driven by depictions of police on crime shows and news coverage (Rosenberger & Callanan, 2011). Conversely, Black people's perceptions are guided by indirect, and often negative, experiences of police contact, from family, friends, and neighbors (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). Such differences in perceptions might influence Black and White respondents' reactions to news of Black civilians being shot by police.

Familiarity with shootings captured the extent to which respondents were familiar with five highly publicized and controversial police shootings of Black Americans: Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO (August 2014), Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, NC (September 2016), Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, LA (July 2016), Terrence Crutcher in Tulsa, OK (September 2016), and Philando Castile in St. Paul, MN (July 2016). Participants used a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all familiar*; 5 = *very familiar*), and responses were averaged to create a composite score (α = 0.84).

Attributions of racial bias assessed perceptions of racial bias in policing, where respondents answered three items: "Regarding Black Americans and their interactions with the police that result in the death or serious injury of Black Americans, to what extent…" (a) "Do you think it is a result of a racially biased system of policing?"; (b) "Do you think it indicates that ALL police are racially prejudiced/bias?"; and (c) "Do you think it is the result of racially biased individual police officers?" Responses were provided on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). Reliability analysis showed higher reliability with items a and b (α = 0.79) compared to all three (α = 0.65); therefore, only those two items were averaged to create a composite score.

Study 1: Results

Descriptive statistics/correlations and means/standard deviations by respondent race are displayed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we conducted a one-way multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) on *NA*, *thinking about the shootings* while at work, and *poor work focus*. Although not central to our primary research questions, we also included *familiarity with police shootings* and *attributions of racial bias* as dependent variables in our MANOVA to investigate potential differences by race.

Results provided support for H1 and H2. That is, we detected a significant main effect of race, Wilk's λ = 0.62, $F(5, 105) = 12.67$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.38$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.47], whereby Black respondents reported greater *NA* after hearing about police

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations among primary study variables (study 1)

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Respondent race	114			–						
2. Negative affect [a]	114	28.75	9.45	.49***	(.88)					
3. Thinking about shootings	114	2.53	1.17	.51***	.57***	(.93)				
4. Poor work focus	113	1.72	0.93	.38***	.52***	.78***	(.95)			
5. Coworker discussion [b]	112	2.16	1.05	.17	.23*	.23*	.04	–		
6. Discuss w/ Black coworkers [b]	109	2.83	1.57	.65***	.52***	.49***	.42***	.39***	–	
7. Discuss w/ White coworkers [b]	110	2.12	1.23	-.06	.02	.02	-.10	.30**	.09	–
8. Coworker support	110	2.39	0.97	.44***	.45***	.40***	.38***	.33***	.57***	.20*
9. Familiarity with shootings [c]	113	3.41	1.04	.52***	.54***	.55***	.50***	.34***	.47***	.09
10. Attributions of racial bias [c]	113	3.63	1.27	.50***	.78***	.56***	.49***	.33***	.56***	.03
	n	M	SD	8	9	10				
8. Coworker support	–	–	–	(.93)						
9. Familiarity with shootings [c]	–	–	–	.37***	(.84)					
10. Attributions of racial bias [c]	–	–	–	.42***	.50***	(.79)				

Respondent race: 0 = *White*, 1 = *Black*. All variables except respondent race pertain to the specific context of hearing about police shooting Black civilians. Unless noted, variables range from 1 to 5; higher values indicate more. Correlation n's range from 105–114. Reliabilities reported along diagonals in parentheses

[a] Ranges from 10 to 50; higher values indicate more. [b] Measure is a single item; has no reliability coefficient. [c] Exploratory variables

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 2 Means and standard deviations by respondent race (study 1

Variable	Black respondents			White respondents		
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Negative affect [a, b]	61	33.02***	7.26	53	23.80***	9.33
Thinking of shootings [a]	61	3.08***	1.14	53	1.90***	0.84
Poor work focus [a]	60	2.05***	1.08	53	1.34***	0.53
Coworker discussion [c]	61	2.33	1.08	51	1.96	1.00
Discuss w/ Black coworkers [c]	59	3.76 [1]***	1.38	50	1.72***	0.95
Discuss w/ White coworkers [c]	60	2.05 [1]	1.10	50	2.20	1.37
Coworker support [c]	58	2.80***	1.03	52	1.94***	0.66
Familiarity with shootings [a, d]	61	3.91***	0.91	52	2.83***	0.88
Attributions of racial bias [a, d]	60	4.23***	0.81	53	2.96***	1.36

Asterisks indicate differences between races. Means sharing a common subscript in the same column are significantly different at the $p < .001$, as assessed by Bonferroni corrected paired samples t tests. All variables pertain to the specific context of hearing about police shooting Black civilians. Unless noted, variables range from 1 to 5; higher values indicate more

[a] Included in MANOVA model. [b] Ranges from 10 to 50; higher values indicate more. [c] Tested with Bonferroni corrected independent samples t tests. [d] Exploratory variables

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

shootings than White respondents, $F(1, 112) = 34.85$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.24$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.36]. Black respondents also reported *thinking about the shootings* while at work more, $F(1, 112) = 38.60$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.38], and reported *poorer work focus* following such events, $F(1, 111) = 18.71$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.26]. Although not hypothesized, findings also revealed Black respondents reported more *familiarity* with incidents of police shooting Black civilians, $F(1, 111) = 40.72$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.27$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.39] and were more likely to *attribute the shootings to racial bias*, $F(1, 111) = 36.99$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.37], which is consistent with previous research (Nadal et al., 2017; Reinka & Leach, 2018).

Poor Work Focus

To test Hypotheses 3 and 4, we used ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression to regress poor work focus on how much participants thought about police shootings at work, NA from thinking about the shootings, participant race, and the two product-term interactions between race and thinking about police shootings and race and NA from thinking about the shootings. We mean-centered all continuous variables and controlled for *familiarity with police shootings* and *attributions of racially biased policing* because of their associations with poor work focus and mean differences by race detected in our MANOVA model. Results showed that thinking about police shootings was significantly related to poor work focus, $b = 0.33$, $p = 0.003$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.55], $\beta = 0.42$, and was qualified by a significant race by thinking about shootings interaction, $b = 0.32$, $p = 0.016$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.57], $\beta = 0.30$. Bonferroni corrected simple slopes analyses ($\alpha = .025$; .05/2) revealed the slopes for both White, $t(109) = 3.04$, $p = 0.003$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.55], and Black, $t(109) = 8.40$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.50, 0.80], respondents were different from zero, but the slope for Black (vs. White) respondents was steeper (see Fig. 1). NA from thinking about the shootings was not significantly related to poor work focus, $b = 0.02$, *n.s.*, and the race by NA from thinking about the shootings interaction was not significant, $b = -0.02$, *n.s.* Overall, H3 and H4 were partially supported.
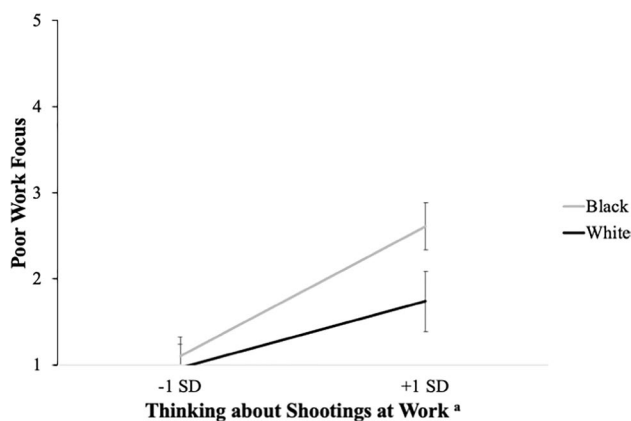
Social Support Seeking

Hypotheses 5 and 6 examined race differences in discussing police shootings with coworkers and Hypothesis 7 investigated race difference in feeling supported by coworkers during these discussions (see Table 2). Bonferroni corrected independent samples *t* tests ($\alpha = .0125$; .05/4) revealed Black and White respondents did not differ in how much they reported discussing these events with coworkers, $t(110) = -1.86$, $p = 0.07$, 95% CI [-0.76, 0.03], $d = 0.35$; although, means trended in the expected direction. When accounting for coworker race, however, Black respondents reported talking with Black coworkers, $t(102.82_{\text{unequal}}) = -9.11$, $p = < 0.001$, 95% CI [-2.49, -1.60] $d = 1.70$, more than did White respondents. Conversely, Black and White employees did not significantly differ in how much they reported talking to White coworkers, $t(108) = 0.64$, $p = 0.53$.

Two separate Bonferroni corrected paired sample *t* tests ($\alpha = .025$; .05/2) examined whether Black and White respondents had racial preferences for talking to Black and White coworkers. As predicted, Black respondents demonstrated a preference for talking to Black coworkers over White coworkers, $t(57) = -7.85$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-2.08, -1.23], $d = 1.03$. White respondents did not demonstrate a racial preference between Black and White coworkers, $t(57) = 2.11$, $p = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.92], $d = 0.30$.

Finally, a fourth Bonferroni corrected independent samples *t* test found Black (vs. White) respondents reported feeling greater coworker support when having discussions about police violence, $t(98.28_{\text{unequal}}) = -5.24$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-1.18, -0.53], $d = 0.98$. Thus, H6 and H7 were supported but H5 was not.

Open-Ended Responses

Sixty-two percent of Black ($n = 38$) and 70% of White ($n = 37$) participants provided responses for how they feel when talking to same- relative to cross-race coworkers about incidents of police killing Black civilians. We used an inductive approach to code the open-ended responses to identify themes (Thomas, 2006). Two of the authors independently read responses to first identify broad categories. After independent reading, the authors met to discuss the categories and refine them into themes. Table 3 contains representative quotes capturing emergent themes for Black and White employees.

Two primary themes emerged for Black employees. The first was *mutual understanding*. Black participants expressed feeling more comfortable having discussions

Fig. 1 Effects of thinking about police shootings on work focus by respondent race. *Note.* Error bars represent ± one standard error. Predicted margins for White participants (0.97) fall outside viewing plane. [a] Model controls for negative affect, familiarity with high-profile shootings, attributions of police racial bias, and the race by negative affect interaction

Table 3 Representative quotes of study 1 themes

Primary themes	Sample quotes
	Black employees
Mutual understanding (or lack thereof)	1."[With] same race [coworkers] I am much more comfortable, there is a shared perspective and often a shared lived experience- this is not the case when talking with colleagues of a different race."
	2."Coworkers of the same race understand and can empathize with the situation. Coworkers of other races are oblivious and it is frustrating to discuss because they usually aren't paying attention since it does not affect them."
	3."It is a touchy subject with those that are not your same race….if you are of black America, sometimes they can not relate or understand because they haven't lived it or have to worry about there [*sic*] children, especially young men growing up in a society that still cannot see pass the pigment of skin."
	4."When speaking to coworkers who are the same race as me, I feel more relaxed. The conversation flows freely. My other coworkers, I feel like I have to be careful and watch for coded language which puts me on edge."
	5."When discussing the issue with a coworker of my own race there is most often a shared understanding of the related negative emotions: fear, bitterness, anger, etc. But when discussing with different races usually the conversation diverts to: why it isn't about race, black on black crime, or how hard it must be being a policeman/woman."
Coping	1."I feel like when I discuss this issue with people of the same race as me I am able to grieve. I feel understood and I feel as though my anger and helplessness is validated. If I were to talk to coworkers of an opposite race I would feel as though I have to explain and justify my feelings when to me the injustice is clear!"
	2."I feel like we are kindred spirits raising our fists in disbelief, anger, and solidarity. Our eyes silently communicate that we vow to watch each other's back…"
Representative Responses of Study 1 Themes	
Coping (continued)	3."I feel as if a discussion with coworkers of the same race is more of a way to cope with the environment…"
	4."When speaking to other black people it can be therapeutic because they tend to validate my emotions. When talking to others of different races, there is sometimes validation if they feel the same about the issue. It is frustrating when debating the situations with people who disagree…"
	White employees
Avoidance/discomfort/inadequate opportunity	1."It's simply not a workplace topic of conversation."
	2."I do not speak to coworkers about it"
	3."As a realtor, I don't want to do anything to make my clients feel uncomfortable. So I tend to always avoid these controversial topics. As far as my interaction with my co-workers, it is very rare that I am in a situation to discuss things like this. Same race or different."
	4."I work with some racist white people. I will not discuss these things with them, because I know how they feel about black people. I work with very few black people, but if they wanted to talk with me about these things, I would, and I would try…"
	5."I don't automatically know if the person of the same race of me (i.e. white) will actually agree with the [Black Lives Matter] movement, so I'm a bit less comfortable. With a black person who is my friend, I pretty much know they support the movement."
	6."I live in Texas. All my coworkers are white. All of them are Republicans and have an open hatred for non-white people. I have engaged with them about race issues before, and they have been and continue to be hostile towards me because of it."
	7."There's almost no non-whites at my work so the opportunity is low."
Awareness/Sympathy/Support	1."I'm much more careful about what I say and how I phrase it when I'm speaking with coworkers of different races because I want them to know that I take the issue very seriously, and that I don't want my privilege to get in the way of being as supportive as I can…"

about police violence with Black (vs. non-Black) coworkers because of greater understanding and shared perspective. Some respondents indicated cross-race coworkers' different lived experiences prevented mutual understanding and empathy. This absence of mutual understanding with cross-race coworkers sometimes also led to stressful or invalidating (e.g., dismissive) conversations. For instance, one respondent said:

Table 3 (continued)

Primary themes	Sample quotes
	Black employees

Representative Responses of Study 1 Themes	
Awareness/Sympathy/Support (continued)	2. "I have to check my white privelage [sic] when talking to people who are not the same race as me."
	3. "Having grown up in the deep south in the 1960s, race relations has always been a sensitive subject for me. There are mixed feelings of outrage, guilt, and shame about my home region's past. I find it difficult and awkward to discuss with Black Americans instances of discrimination and police brutality."
	4. "I feel more sympathy for those of a different race and have more respect for their opinions…"
	Black and White Employees
Colorblind approach	1. "I feel the same way when talking to a person of any race about my viewpoints. Neither my opinion, nor my feelings towards a topic changes depending on whether the person I am talking to is of a different race than me." [Black employee]
	2. "My opinion never sways when speaking to anyone. If I'm passionate about something, it will show through my words and how I express myself…." [Black employee]
	3. "I don't feel any differently when speaking to people of my race or any other. Race shouldn't be the issue….all lives matter!" [White employee]
	4. "I feel no difference talking to one team member over any other." [White employee]
	5. "I am completely comfortable talking to anyone regarding this subject. The key is to wait until a full investigation has been made and let the truth come out." [White employee]

When speaking to coworkers who are the same race as me, I feel more relaxed. The conversation flows freely. My other coworkers, I feel like I have to be careful and watch for coded language which puts me on edge.

The second theme was *coping*. Black participants reported discussions with same-race coworkers were therapeutic and provided opportunities to cope because they felt their conversation partners shared and validated their emotions.

Two themes emerged for White employees. The first was *avoidance/inadequate opportunity* to discuss police shootings at work. Reasons for avoiding these discussions varied. Some noted discomfort, particularly with White coworkers with opposing perspectives; some felt such discussions were inappropriate for work; others simply did not discuss it. Some felt they had inadequate opportunity to talk to Black coworkers given the racial homogeneity within their organization. The second theme was *awareness of White privilege and racism/sympathy and support for Black people*. Specifically, some White participants acknowledged how historical and contemporary racial advantages associated with Whiteness influence their own and their Black coworkers' feelings and perceptions in these discussions. Sometimes, however, this awareness led to discomfort when talking to Black coworkers about police violence, which is illustrated in the following quote:

There are mixed feelings of outrage, guilt, and shame about my home region's past. I find it difficult and

awkward to discuss with Black Americans instances of discrimination and police brutality.

Finally, some White and Black employees expressed a *colorblind approach* to these discussions. That is, coworker race was irrelevant. This theme was most prevalent for White employees who were more likely to mention feeling comfortable with discussion regardless of coworker race. White employees were also more likely to contextualize their colorblind approach by expressing "all lives matter" or that they were "waiting for a full investigation" of the shootings.

Study 1: Discussion

Findings from Study 1 highlight some of the negative cognitive and emotional consequences for people at work, namely Black employees, that can result from hearing about police killing Black civilians. Although these findings are correlational, Black employees reported some level of distraction and difficulty focusing on work following incidents of collective, indirect racial trauma, which might suggest performance decrements following such events. Findings also revealed Black (vs. White) employees experienced more NA from thinking about police shooting Black civilians, which was not associated with poor work focus. This may be because previous research has examined trait NA and we tapped into NA during a specific state (i.e., in response to police shooting Black civilians; Kaplan et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, Black employees reported feeling greater coworker support when talking about the shootings. This support was particularly comforting when talking to Black coworkers because these conversations allowed them to feel safe and understood, which might explain why they reported higher levels of coworker support. Conversely, although some White employees reported reluctance when talking about police shootings, they still reported discussing the shootings as much as Black employees and talked to Black and White coworkers equally. The open-ended responses highlight the difficulty of having race-related conversations, while at the same time, illustrating some positive outcomes for Black and White employees alike.

Taken together, these findings suggest that there may be a cognitive and emotional toll that Black employees feel following collective, indirect racial trauma. We also see that Black employees may welcome discussions about police shootings in the workplace as it may help to spur feelings of support. Thus, the toll from racial trauma may be partially mitigated by workplace social support provided by coworkers who demonstrate mutual understanding.

Although coworker support can be an important resource for Black employees coping with collective, indirect racial trauma, not all discussions among coworkers about anti-Black bias in policing will result in feeling supported, particularly when Black employees talk to non-Black employees who lack mutual understanding or have different perceptions of police. To further probe the emotional and interpersonal consequences of coworker exchanges, we investigated how employees react to and perceive coworkers who do not communicate ideas indicating mutual understanding (i.e., defending racially biased policing) in the context of police shooting Black civilians in Study 2. Thus, we extend beyond Study 1 to explore reactions to both supportive and contentious conversations about police violence.

Study 2

Overall, coworker discussions of police violence, and the outcomes of such discussion, likely vary depending on coworkers' general perceptions of racial bias in policing and the stance they take when approaching the conversation. In Study 2, we extend beyond Study 1 to directly examine the outcomes of such discussions when coworkers approach the conversation in ways that may be seen as sympathetic to victims of police violence versus supportive of police use of force without regard for racial violence. Specifically, we examined how pro-civilian (vs. pro-police or neutral) exchanges at work in response to a news article about police killing a Black civilian affected employees' emotional and interpersonal reactions to coworkers. In Study 1, we relied on measuring participant reactions to highly publicized

police shootings for which participants may have had different levels of exposure. In Study 2, we used an experimental paradigm that provided all participants equal exposure to a single event—a news story of police killing a Black civilian—and directly examined the influence of varying coworker target support (i.e., whether the coworker expressed sympathy for the civilian, the police, or had a neutral stance) on participant's emotions and perceptions of their coworker.

As seen in recent years, and in the open-ended responses in Study 1, discussions about racially biased policing can be contentious because of contrasting perceptions of police. White Americans generally have more favorable perceptions of police compared to Black Americans (DeSilver et al., 2020; Gramlich, 2019; McNeeley & Grothoff, 2016), and racial bias in policing has polarized Americans' support for police along racial and political lines (e.g., All/Blue Lives Matter vs. Black Lives Matter; Cooper, 2020; DeSilver et al., 2020; West et al., 2021). Conversely, Black Americans' awareness of racial bias in policing (Banks, 2003; DeGue et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2019; Hehman et al., 2018; Hyland et al., 2015; Langton & Durose, 2013; Schwartz & Jahn, 2020) likely leads to their negative perceptions of police (DeSilver et al., 2020; Gramlich, 2019; McNeeley & Grothoff, 2016). One reason these disparate perspectives between Black and White Americans may occur is because pronouncements of racial bias in societal systems can lead to group-based identity threat for some White individuals (Solomon & Martin, 2019), whereas Black people are more likely to endorse a system-based conceptualization of racism (see Rucker & Richeson, 2021 for review). To reduce this threat, members of a majority group (i.e., White people) may seek out justifications that remove race and/or racism from the narrative, blame the victim, or portray police officers as the victims in such cases.

For instance, the All Lives Matter movement (ALM), which emerged as a countermovement to the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), is rooted in the argument that race-based social justice movements, like BLM, are divisive and that colorblind movements (like ALM) are inclusive. Despite claims of inclusivity, support for ALM is associated with implicit racial bias against Black people and belief in colorblindness—or that race is an unimportant factor to consider in any situation (West et al., 2021). White people who endorse colorblind perspectives (a) demonstrate less nonverbal friendliness when interacting with Black people and (b) are perceived as more prejudiced by Black observers (Apfelbaum et al., 2008). Moreover, White employees' endorsement of colorblindness is negatively associated with Black employees' psychological engagement with their work organization (Plaut et al., 2009). In the context of police violence against Black civilians, messages supporting police (vs. Black civilians shot by police) might communicate evidence of racial bias and/or subscription to colorblind

ideology. This outcome is particularly more likely for Black people (vs. White people), as they are more likely to contextualize police violence in the historical understanding and current recognition of systemic racism (see Rucker & Richeson, 2021). Given Black employees preference to interact with coworkers who share their perspective (i.e., mutual understanding) about collective, indirect racial trauma (e.g., police violence against Black civilians), pro-police messages in cases of Black civilians being shot by police might take more of an emotional toll on Black relative to White employees and foster negative coworker perceptions.

Because experiencing collective, indirect racial trauma can increase negative affect, as theorized by previous research (Leigh & Melwani, 2019; McCluney et al., 2017; Ruggs et al., 2020) and evidenced by Study 1 findings, encountering coworkers who communicate pro-police (vs. pro-civilian) perspectives, in the aftermath of an officer killing a Black civilian, may heighten Black employees' negative reactions to police violence. Further, encountering differing perceptions of police may cultivate negative evaluations of coworkers who support police in such instances, as divergent political and/or moral perspectives may lead people to view others as less warm and competent (Ditto & Koleva, 2011). People (or groups) who are evaluated as having bad intentions are perceived to be low in warmth, and those thought to be unintelligent are perceived as low in competence (Cuddy et al., 2008). Given that pro-police messages seek to ignore racial bias in policing (i.e., harm; Cooper, 2020) and signal an inability (e.g., incapability) to identify systemic and institutional forms of racial bias (e.g., racially biased policing) that is linked to ignorance of Black history (Bonam et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2013), coworkers who express such messages may be perceived as low in warmth and competence.

We anticipate negative reactions to police support following a shooting from all employees. Further, based on previous research on racial differences in support for police and understanding of racism (see DeSilver et al., 2020; Rucker & Richeson, 2021) and our findings from Study 1, we predicted encountering pro-police attitudes after a police shooting would intensify Black employees' negative reactions more than White employees' reactions. More formally, we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 8: Hearing coworker support for police (vs. support for killed civilians) will result in more negative *emotions (i.e., NA and Anger)* and negative *coworker perceptions* (i.e., *overall perceptions, warmth, and competence*).

Hypothesis 9: Race moderates the relationships between coworker support for police (vs. support for killed civilians) and (a) negative *emotions (i.e., NA and Anger)* and (b) negative *coworker perceptions* (i.e., *overall perceptions, warmth,*

and competence), such that the relationships will be stronger for Black vs White employees.

Study 2: Method

Participants

A total of 246 participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Mturk has been shown to produce data as reliable as traditional methods (Buhrmester et al., 2016). Sixty-two participants were excluded: 41 for failing attention checks (described below), 20 for racially identifying as something other than White or Black, and one for exceeding 300 s to complete a performance recall task that was part of a larger study. The final sample ($N = 184$) was racially balanced with 51% identifying as White and 49% identifying as Black (3% identified as multiracial that included Black). Gender was also balanced (51% men; 49% women), and participants' ages ranged from 18–62 ($M = 34.05$, $SD = 9.72$). The majority of the sample reported having an Associate's degree or higher (60.87%), 24.56% reported some college but no degree, 14.13% had a high school diploma or GED, and one person (0.54%) reported some high school without a diploma or GED. Participants differed in annual income: 23% earned under $20,000, 44% earned between $20,000–$49,999, 21% between $50,000–$74,999, 9% between $75,000–$100,000, and 3% earned over $100,000.

Procedure

Results presented in the current paper are part of a larger study in which participants completed an online experiment where they were instructed to imagine being an employee at an organization piloting a telework model. After completing a memory task, participants received an email from a fictitious White, male coworker (Sam) containing a news article and short message about the article. The news article, ostensibly from the *Associated Press*, was developed by the authors and was about an unarmed Black man standing on his back porch who was shot dead by police for yelling (see Appendix). The article was modeled after news articles about actual police shootings. The coworker's email also included a message, which served as our manipulation, where the coworker either (a) supported the civilian in the article by saying "Yes, he was yelling, but I think those cops could have approached slowly, calmed him, tried to subdue him, anything but kill him. Cops are supposed to protect and serve, not kill people in their own backyard," (b) supported the police by saying "Yes, he was yelling, but I think he should have stopped when the police told him to stop. If he had listened, he'd probably still be alive. Cops

have to make decisions to make sure they get home," or (c) remained neutral by saying "A man was shot by police the other day." Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. After reading the article, participants completed measures of emotion and coworker perceptions in random order.

Measures

NA and Anger

Participants used a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *a great deal*) to report emotions felt in response to the email they received from their coworker using the NA subscale of the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988; $\alpha = 0.91$). They also completed a nine-item anger scale (i.e., pissed, irritated, angry, mad, displeased, resentful, bitter, furious, annoyed; Spencer & Rupp, 2009), which was averaged to create a composite score ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Coworker Perceptions

Participants provided ratings of their perceptions of the coworker (Sam) who sent the article via email using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *a great deal*) to indicate agreement with the following items: "Sam will likely be a good colleague," "Sam presented himself well," "I am looking forward to working with Sam," "I think I would like Sam as a person," "I think it will be challenging to work with Sam" (reversed scored), "I would feel uncomfortable working with Sam" (reversed scored), and "I would voluntarily choose to include Sam in my social interactions at work." The scores were averaged, and higher values indicated more positive perceptions ($\alpha = 0.89$). They also rated their perceptions of Sam's warmth and competence using nine items from the Stereotype Content Model scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *a great deal*; Fiske et al., 2002). Items for warmth and competence were averaged separately ($\alpha = 0.90$ and $\alpha = 0.82$,

respectively). Participants then completed attention checks to ensure they did not misidentify the content of the article received or their coworker's name, race, and gender. In random order, participants were asked, "What was the article that your coworker emailed you about?" and had to select "A police officer shooting a Black man" from a list that included other options such as, "A police officer shooting a dog," "A new housing development," or "I do not remember." Participants were also asked "What was the name of the coworker who emailed you?" and had to correctly select "Sam" from a list that included five distractor names (i.e., "Alex," "Kris," "Tracy," "Taylor," and "'Cory") and "I do not remember." Participants were also asked, "What race was the coworker who emailed you?" and "How would you describe the gender of the coworker who emailed you?" to which participants had to select "White" and "Male" from the list of potential options. Participants who failed any manipulation check or selected "I do not remember" were excluded from analyses. Finally, participants completed demographic information, were debriefed, and compensated.

Study 2: Results

Correlations are reported in Table 4 and means and standard deviations are reported in Table 5. We conducted a 2 (participant race: Black vs. White) × 3 (target support message: civilian support, police support, neutral) MANOVA on NA, anger, perceptions of coworker warmth and competence, and positive coworker perceptions. Results revealed omnibus main effects of race, Wilk's $\lambda = 0.93$, $F(5, 161) = 2.27$, $p = 0.0496$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.12] and target support, Wilk's $\lambda = 0.78$, $F(10, 322) = 4.34$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.07]. The interaction between participant race and target support was not significant, Wilk's $\lambda = 0.96$, $F(10, 322) = 0.62$, $p = 0.80$.

Follow-up ANOVAs for participant race revealed Black (vs. White) participants reported more NA, $F(1,$

Table 4 Correlations among study 2 variables (study 2)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Participant race	–								
2. Civilian support	.12	–							
3. Police support	-.02	-.51***	–						
4. Neutral support	-.10	-.45***	-.54	–					
5. Negative affect	.26***	-.01	.01	-.00	–				
6. Anger	.25**	.01	.08	-.09	.79***	–			
7. Coworker warmth	-.01	.30***	-.40***	.12	.05	-.09	–		
8. Coworker competence	.02	.22**	-.20**	-.01	.20**	.04	.74***	–	
9. Positive coworker perceptions	.02	.24**	-.41***	.19*	.04	-.10	.65***	.47***	–

n's range from 175–184. Participant race: 0 = *White*; 1 = *Black*

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 5 Means and standard deviations for full sample and by condition (study 2)

Variable	Full sample			Black respondents			White respondents		
	N	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Negative affect [a]	182	18.07	8.51	90	20.30[1]	9.43	92	15.89[1]	8.51
Anger	178	2.23	1.21	89	2.53[1]	1.27	89	1.93[1]	1.21
Coworker warmth	183	2.78	1.09	89	2.77	1.16	94	2.79	1.02
Coworker competence	183	2.93	0.89	90	2.95	0.93	93	2.92	0.85
Positive coworker perceptions	181	3.04	0.99	90	3.05	1.05	91	3.02	0.93
	Target support condition [b]								
	Civilian support			Police support			Neutral		
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Negative affect [a]	55	17.98	8.76	68	18.16	7.80	59	18.05	9.19
Anger	54	2.25	1.23	67	2.35	1.21	57	2.07	1.19
Coworker warmth	55	3.27[1]	1.00	69	2.23[1,2]	1.06	59	2.98[2]	0.91
Coworker competence	54	3.23[1]	0.87	69	2.71[1]**	0.84	60	2.93	0.90
Positive coworker perceptions	55	3.40[1]	1.02	68	2.52[1,2]	0.92	58	3.31[2]	0.77

Unless noted, variables range from 1 to 5; higher values indicate more. Means sharing a common subscript in the same row are significantly different at the $p < .001$ level, unless otherwise noted

[a] Ranges from 10 to 50; higher values indicate more. [b] Statistics reported for full sample by target support condition

**$p < .01$

180) $= 13.01$, $p = 0.0004$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.15], and anger, $F(1, 176) = 11.33$, $p = 0.0009$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.14]. Follow-up ANOVAs for target support showed significant differences in perceptions of coworker warmth, $F(2, 180) = 18.45$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.26], competence, $F(2, 180) = 5.56$, $p = 0.0045$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.13], and positive coworker perceptions, $F(2, 178) = 17.78$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.26]. Bonferroni corrected pairwise comparisons for each ANOVA model ($\alpha = .025/ .05/3$; see Table 5) revealed coworkers who supported police were perceived as less warm than those who supported civilians, $t(180) = -5.80$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-1.48, -0.61], or remained neutral, $t(180) = -4.23$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.32, 1.17]. Coworkers who supported police (vs. civilians) were also viewed as less competent, $t(180) = -3.33$, $p = 0.003$, 95% CI [-0.91, -0.15]. Finally, positive coworker perceptions were lower for coworkers who supported police over civilians, $t(178) = 5.31$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-1.27, -0.48], or were neutral, $t(178) = 4.83$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.39, 1.17]. Overall, H8 was partially supported, but H9 was not supported.

Study 2: Discussion

The findings from Study 2 provide further support that Black employees have more intense negative emotional reactions (i.e., greater NA and anger) at work when hearing about police killing Black civilians than White employees. These findings align with Study 1 results and suggest that Black people do indeed respond more strongly to indirect racial trauma stemming from police shootings of Black civilians than White people, and these feelings carry over into workplace contexts.

Contrary to our hypothesis, there were no race differences in coworker evaluations when coworkers expressed pro-police (vs. pro-civilian) attitudes. Both Black and White employees rated coworkers who supported police (vs. civilians) as less warm, competent, and positive. These findings suggest employees who express victim-blaming views regarding incidents of collective, indirect racial trauma may be perceived more negatively than those who do not.

It is important to note the article presented in this study was modeled after several factual news articles covering police killings of Black civilians. The language used in the article was intended to reflect journalistic objectivity, wherein the article was to be an unbiased presentation of facts, as to not reveal the writer's perspective. However, the ostensible witness quoted in the story mentioned regret for the outcome. Consequently, it is possible the witness' comment signaled potential wrongdoing by police, which may explain the absence of a race effect in coworker perceptions. Perhaps a scenario with more ambiguity would have elicited the expected race differences, which is one feature future research should explore.

Nevertheless, our results provide some evidence that Black employees experience more negative emotions after hearing about police killing Black civilians. Moreover, our findings revealed expressing pro-police attitudes in response to instances of police violence against Black civilians,

especially when they are unarmed, may elicit negative perceptions from coworkers. Taken together, these findings reveal that although Black employees might be particularly vulnerable to experiencing negative emotional consequences because of police shootings, Black and White employees might be united in socially sanctioning attitudes that support racially biased policing.

General Discussion

Across two studies, we examined how collective, indirect racial trauma from police shooting Black civilians affected employees when they were at work. Our findings suggest police shootings had negative cognitive and emotional consequences, especially for Black employees. We also found links between increased thoughts of police shootings and distraction at work, which might have implications for work performance. Additionally, in Study 1 we found that although Black and White employees discussed police shootings at similar rates, Black participants avoided discussions about police violence with White coworkers for fear of not feeling supported via mutual understanding. Further, Study 2 showed, again, that Black employees reported more negative emotional reactions to hearing about a Black civilian being killed by police than White employees. Moreover, Black and White employees had negative perceptions of coworkers who expressed pro-police attitudes in response to police shooting a Black civilian. Altogether, these findings demonstrate the potential toll collective, indirect racial trauma, resulting from distal societal issues (i.e., police killing Black civilians), has on Black people may even remain while they are at work. In other words, employees do not simply leave traumatic experiences "at the door" when they go to work; it follows them. In fact, this trauma may follow employees throughout many workdays, especially if they are unable to effectively cope with it while at work.

Our findings—(a) that Black employees experience stronger reactions to collective, indirect racial trauma, and (b) that it is important for them to talk about these incidents with coworkers who can offer mutual understanding—provide evidence aligning with theoretical frameworks that explicate the unique challenges facing Black employees (Leigh & Melwani, 2019; McCluney et al., 2017; Ruggs et al., 2020). Additionally, our findings highlight the importance of incorporating critical race psychology as a theoretical framework in understanding the experiences of Black (and other non-White) employees. This is particularly important for scholars studying racism, racial bias, and other forms of mistreatment at work. We see that differences in lived experiences inform how employees perceive and experience racial trauma, even when it is indirect. As such more targeted

research on the experiences of Black employees will help to provide greater understanding and more effective solutions to dismantling systemic anti-Black racism.

Our findings also align with cultural understandings of "working while Black." Anecdotally, Black people in the U.S. have lamented the cognitive and emotional toll police violence against Black people (and anti-Black racism, in general) take on them, especially when they are still expected to go to work with potentially hostile or insensitive coworkers. For instance, comedian Evelyn from the Internets popularized the term *Calling in Black* from work in reaction to increased coverage of Black civilians being killed by police. Calling in Black is when Black employees choose to stay home instead of going to work because they are not feeling well due to emotional distress precipitated by collective, indirect racial trauma (For Harriet, 2015). Although offered in a comedic context, the intent behind calling in Black was to sincerely and earnestly acknowledge the negative emotional consequences police violence and anti-Black racism have on Black people, collectively and indirectly (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Cooper & Fullilove, 2016), especially in work contexts (McCluney et al., 2017). Further, it is possible that repeated exposure to collective, indirect racial trauma, leads to negative consequences beyond what we saw in the current studies. Such consequences could include withdrawal behaviors, such as *calling in Black*, or reduced productivity resulting from increased distraction.

Overall, by empirically illustrating the negative emotional and cognitive consequences Black employees experience in response to collective, indirect racial trauma, the current research helps elucidate why it is critical for organizations to recognize and acknowledge how the specific forms of trauma Black employees experience outside of work (i.e., collective, indirect racial trauma) may accompany them to their jobs.

Implications, Limitations, & Future Research

Our results offer several implications for research and practice. Our findings contribute to the spillover literature by linking collective, indirect racial trauma to employee well-being. The spillover literature has primarily focused on work-family context, whereby family-related issues negatively affect people at work (e.g., Carlson et al., 2019). Our findings suggest spillover can result from collective, indirect racial trauma induced by anti-Black racism in society. Researchers can extend these findings by examining the duration of spillover induced by collective, indirect racial trauma. For instance, we detected effects in Study 1 despite collecting data approximately one month after a police shooting. Our results suggest the effects of such traumas may linger. It is also possible the effects seen across the current studies were influenced by repeated exposure to collective, indirect racial trauma. That is, hearing about new

incidents of police shooting Black civilians may have generated thoughts of previous instances of police shooting, which may prolong spillover. Future research should further investigate how such factors influence the duration and magnitude of collective, indirect racial trauma induced spillover.

Our research also has implications for understanding how trauma-related spillover may disrupt other processes in organizations (e.g., coworker interactions and team dynamics). We found coworkers can be good sources of support when they exhibit mutual understanding, which is an important quality for effective social support (Reis & Gable, 2015). Therefore, it is important for coworkers offering support to thoughtfully consider what a support seeking coworker may want or need in a support exchange. This is especially important for dissimilar or intergroup (e.g., cross-race) interactions given the increased likelihood of unhelpful assistance or advice (e.g., miscarried support) that can come from providers who are not familiar with the experiences (e.g., racial trauma) that elicited trauma and need for support (Coyne et al., 1988; Cutrona, 1990; Thoits, 2011). As Black participants noted, topics involving racial trauma should be approached with understanding, sympathy, and empathy. Otherwise, support may cause more harm than good (Coyne et al., 1988).

Mutual understanding seems to be a qualifying quality for coworkers to provide support to Black employees, and the lack of this quality in workplace conversations about police shootings may stifle any benefit of having such discussions at work. As noted earlier, some people may attempt to provide alternative explanations that exclude racial bias from conversations about police shooting Black civilians. Such conversations may compound the trauma experience because they are invalidating and threatening. To avoid potentially contentious cross-race conversations, some Black employees may forgo seeking social support, especially when they feel coworkers will not understand their emotional reactions (Coyne et al., 1988; Cutrona, 1990). Alternatively, Black employees may use high effort coping (i.e., increased work engagement) to mitigate the negative effects of collective, indirect racial trauma. Such coping strategies, however, have been shown to have deleterious effects on well-being (Hudson et al., 2015).

Our findings suggest that White and non-Black coworkers have the potential to offer effective support to Black colleagues experiencing collective, indirect racial trauma as long as discussions are approached thoughtfully and with care. However, discussions about race and racism are difficult to approach and navigate for many people because these conversations can be uncomfortable. Providing coworkers, managers, and team leaders with tactical knowledge (e.g., behavioral scripts) when engaging in conversations centered around anti-Black racism is one strategy organizations can use to facilitate supportive coworker discussions (Avery

et al., 2009). Ultimately, cultivating work environments where non-Black employees can better understand anti-Black racism (see Marshburn et al., 2017) and environments that foster positive and supportive coworker (and team and managerial) relationships may be an important safeguard against employees succumbing to the negative cognitive and emotional consequences of collective, indirect racial trauma.

Finally, the current research is not without limitations. One limitation is our data are cross-sectional, and our conclusions are limited to a single time point. Nevertheless, we replicated our findings across two samples, and open-ended responses buttressed conclusions drawn from quantitative analyses. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs to better examine long-term effects of collective, indirect racial trauma (e.g., police shootings) on employee emotions and well-being. Such research would allow researchers and managers to better understand when interventions in response to such events are most critical for employee well-being and likely performance.

Additionally, although findings showed collective, indirect racial trauma was positively related to distraction at work, it is unclear to what extent this influences actual performance. When employees are less focused at work, they are more prone to making errors. This may be more consequential in jobs with high-stakes consequences (e.g., air traffic controllers, surgeons). Future research should examine whether collective, indirect racial trauma causes performance decrements and explore strategies to reduce these consequences.

Although not a limitation, it is important to note that since data were collected for the current research (2016–2017), support for racial justice movements in the U.S. (e.g., Black Lives Matter [BLM]) has seemingly shifted. Support for BLM among White Americans ballooned from 40% in 2016 to 60% in June 2020—shortly following the murder of George Floyd (Horowitz & Livingston, 2016; Parker et al., 2020). However, as early as September 2020, White support for BLM had fallen to 45% (Thomas & Horowitz, 2020), and fell to 35% in August 2021 (Civiqs, 2021). Moreover, White Americans trust of BLM from June 2020 to March 2021 declined from 50 to 42%, and trust of police increased from 65 to 77% (Jackson et al., 2020; Newall et al., 2021). Conversely, Black Americans trust of BLM has remained unchanged at 87% (Jackson et al., 2020; Newall et al., 2021). Considering polls and previous research (e.g., Norton & Sommers, 2011), White nonsupport for racial justice is a stable pattern, and the recent bump in support for racial justice proved fleeting. Additionally, historical trends of increased support from White civilians in the USA (e.g., during the Civil Rights era), have not led to sustained changes in Black and White people's perceptions of police over time (see McGowen & Wylie, 2020). As such, we believe our findings align with and accurately reflect White employee's more stable reactions to racial bias, and that the emergent patterns

reflect true racial differences in employee responses to police killing Black civilians.

Conclusion

The current research provides empirical evidence that spillover from collective, indirect racial trauma negatively affects Black and, to a lesser extent, White employees at work. Our study shows Black and White employees have differential emotional and cognitive reactions to hearing about police shootings, and these reactions affect employees' focus at work. Moreover, Black coworkers are important sources of social support for Black employees, whereas employees who expressed pro-police attitudes after instances of police violence garnered negative evaluations from Black and White employees. These studies demonstrate some of the indirect negative consequences of police violence against Black people in the U.S., specifically, and the consequences of anti-Black racism, generally. The current findings force researchers and employers to recognize that collective, indirect racial trauma is a factor negatively affecting Black employees. These findings highlight that not only is it important for organizations to understand racist societal events can lead to collective, indirect racial trauma affecting employees, but also that it is incumbent upon organizations to foster working conditions and implement policies and practices to mitigate the negative consequences.

Appendix

Police Violence Against Black Civilian Article.

AP ASSOCIATED PRESS

BIG STORY   TOP NEWS   SPECIAL COVERAGE   ARCHIVE   ESPAÑOL   VIDEO   RADIO

A local newspaper reports that police responded to a call on Friday night and shot and killed a man who was yelling in his own backyard.

The event was set in motion at about 10 p.m. after a neighbor heard the man yelling outside and thought something might be wrong.

When police arrived, a 56-year-old African American man was standing on his back porch yelling. A witness said three deputies showed up and ordered the man to lie on the ground. The man continued yelling. The deputies repeated the order. Again, the man continued to yell.

Moments later two deputies from the County Sheriff's Office opened fire. Neighbors say the man was hit between five and six times in the back.

After restraining him, and removing the restraints once they realized he was non-responsive, police attempted to revive him. But it was too late.

As per departmental policy, the deputies were placed on paid administrative leave.

The witness added, "I never would have called the cops if I'd known this was going to happen. They just came in and started shooting right away."

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