



Running while Black: A distinctive safety concern and barrier to exercise in White neighborhoods

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ABSTRACT

While literature has shown that some Black Americans cite safety concerns as a barrier to outdoor activity in their neighborhoods for reasons related to violence, limitations in the built environment (e.g., lack of sidewalks), and even unleashed dogs, recent national events suggest that attention should also be directed toward the safety concerns of Black Americans living in neighborhoods that do not involve the commonly referenced issues above. In this timely commentary, the unique personal perspectives and internal dialogue of Black exercisers while navigating predominantly White neighborhoods, particularly those of higher socioeconomic status are discussed. This piece also includes discussion of how racial profiling incites hypervigilance and often fear in Black Americans attempting to exercise outdoors in White spaces. This is problematic, as it can discourage this incredibly positive health behavior that has been shown to mitigate obesity, cardiometabolic risk, and several other health disparities that continue to afflict Black communities. A collaborative effort inclusive of physical activity, public health/health disparity, and social science researchers is warranted to build a body of current scientific literature that elucidates and explores this particular safety concern in various Black outdoor enthusiasts.

1. Introduction

Given the well-documented health disparities that afflict Black Americans and can be prevented or mitigated by physical activity (National Center for Health Statistics, 2016), any barrier to exercise should be a concern in this population. Recent data show respective disproportionate prevalence in non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White Americans for those meeting neither aerobic nor muscle-strengthening physical activity guidelines (53% vs. 46%), obesity (50% vs. 42%), hypertension (57% vs. 44%), and diabetes (19% vs. 12%) (National Center for Health Statistics, 2016; Health and Survey, 2019a, 2019b). Also related, there is increasing evidence supporting the negative effects of racial discrimination on physical health and health disparities (Williams et al., 2019). As an exercise physiologist who promotes a variety of physical activities in underrepresented populations as a means to reduce cardiometabolic health disparities, recent events in the national news as well as a deeper analysis of my own thoughts and habits during outdoor activity have incited a need to articulate a perspective of physical activity barriers that warrants recognition.

While literature has shown that some Black Americans cite safety concerns as a barrier to outdoor activity in their neighborhoods for

reasons related to violence, limitations in the built environment (e.g., lack of sidewalks), and even unleashed dogs (Joseph et al., 2015), recent incidents suggest that attention should also be directed toward the safety concerns of Black Americans living in neighborhoods that do not involve the commonly referenced issues above. At minimum, the feelings to which I am referring are an inherent hyperawareness of one's Blackness while exercising outdoors in White neighborhoods. However, depending on the circumstances, this hyperawareness may be more accurately described as dread, anxiety, and downright fear (Anderson, 2015). The brutal murder of a 25-year old Black man, Ahmaud Arbery, on February 23, 2020 while out for an afternoon jog in his mostly-White, middle to upper-middle class neighborhood (Ellis, 2020) has prompted public conversation about these feelings as well as the lived experiences that substantiate these feelings. Further, Arbery's senseless assault has justified these feelings of insecurity that Black Americans deal with on a chronic basis both while running and during typical activities of daily living.

In this timely commentary, the personal perspectives and internal dialogue of Black exercisers navigating predominantly White neighborhoods, particularly those of higher socioeconomic status, are reviewed and discussed. In addition, this paper explores the connections

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between this aspect of neighborhood-based outdoor physical activity participation and health in Black Americans.

2. Hypervigilance & recurring internal dialogue

As a Black woman living in a predominantly White, middle to upper-middle class suburban neighborhood in the Southeastern region of the U.S., I have experienced both the constant state of awareness previously described as well as fear while running and walking in my neighborhood. I would describe my awareness as a constant hypervigilance of my surroundings and consciousness of how I might appear to others. This hypervigilance is rooted in experienced microaggressions such as being questioned about whether or not I own my home, yard signs and bumper stickers supporting blatantly racist political figures, confederate flags displayed outside of homes or on vehicle window decals, and neighbors on social media vehemently defending the large yard display of a confederate flag in support of another neighbor's self-designated "Redneck Holiday Party." While these unsettling occurrences have made many of my neighborhood interactions feel phony and uncomfortable, these feelings pale in comparison to unequivocal fear.

One example of this fear occurred while I was walking home from a nearby park with my toddler and a preschooler in tow riding in a double stroller. A truck with several young White men in the cab and bed of the truck drove by flying a confederate flag. Although I was unable to understand what they yelled as they passed, it is difficult to describe the terror I felt when they saw us, then turned into the gas station at the corner, where I thought they were circling back to approach us. I attempted to inconspicuously walk faster and look over my shoulder intermittently, having no idea what might follow. "Are they going to harm my children? Will they throw something at us? Will they get out of the truck? How many of them are there? Do they have guns?" And the darkest thought... "Do they want to kill us?" Thankfully, they did not come our direction that day, which may lead some to brush the incident off as paranoia. Perhaps. However, I would challenge any White reader who holds that view by simply asking if the scenario described would have invoked the same feelings, thought processes, or actions? I suspect it would not. The inherent privilege that comes with being White in the U.S. limits how frequently you have to consider escape routes while navigating your own neighborhood. I make that statement not to express or provoke hostility, but simply to draw attention to how differences in our lived experiences affect our interpretation of the same scenario. In contrast, I speculate that readers of color are able to recall their own version of an experience similar to the one described, or at minimum, they can relate to my thought process and subsequent panic. Ahmaud Arbery's murder legitimized my concerns and initiated a number of discussions related to the fear that is invoked when "running while Black." In several published articles that followed the Arbery killing (Mosley and Raphelson, 2020; Ortiz, 2020; Streeter, 2020; Tesfai, 2020), Black runners consistently discussed similar pre-run mental checklists and perpetual internal dialogues during runs that all came down to one common thread: DO NOT APPEAR THREATENING.

Benyam Tesfai, a digital marketing executive from Dallas, TX, candidly discussed his thoughts while trying to ensure personal safety as a Black man running in his White neighborhood including, "Am I dressed like a runner? Is my rap music too loud? Do I open up my stride now or wait until I get out of the neighborhood and into the open roads so I don't appear to be running away from something or someone? If [I] see a young white woman on [the] same path, cross street immediately and try not to make eye contact twice (Teskai, 2020; Streeter, 2020)." Kurt Streeter, sports writer for the New York Times, recently wrote about his preemptive mental plan to escape a potentially threatening situation: "If I need to get away, which way would I sprint? If I need to turn and fight, would I kick, tackle or punch (Streeter, 2020)?" Other Black runners have discussed being questioned by police about why they are in a certain neighborhood, being scared their cell phone may be mistaken for a gun, and many other thoughts and practices that in aggregate depict an underlying fear of being the

wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time (Streeter, 2020; Ortiz, 2020). These thoughts clearly contradict the proven and often sought-after benefits of exercising for stress reduction, as well as its acute and chronic mental health benefits (e.g., anxiety, depression) (Mikkelsen et al., 2017; Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee, 2018). This highlights another issue in Black America, which is the tremendous difficulty in finding even a temporary escape from the effects of systemic racism. James Ravenell, II, runner and co-founder of Black Runners Connection, succinctly summarized the entire issue by stating, "I can't really remember a time where I was not thinking about myself as a potential threat in the minds of other people (Mosley and Raphelson, 2020)."

3. Racism, physical activity, & health in black communities

So, how can this hypervigilance impact health in Black communities? Exercising outdoors in one's own neighborhood, especially when engaging in low-maintenance modalities like walking and running, can curtail other common exercise barriers such as the need for specialized equipment or skill, the expense of a fitness facility membership, and the additional time needed to travel to and from an exercise venue away from the home. As such, the option to engage in outdoor walking and running can be an attractive option and integral to regular and sustainable physical activity engagement.

Data from the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults (CARDIA) study representing several different geographical areas (Birmingham, AL; Chicago, IL; Minneapolis, MN; Oakland, CA) showed 89% of Black Americans reported experiences of racial discrimination in a variety of contexts (Borrell et al., 2013). This study also showed that discrimination was significantly more common in Black Americans with higher education and income, as well as those living in neighborhoods that were more socioeconomically advantaged and that had a lower percentage of Blacks. Further, those who reported high and moderate levels of discrimination reported more physical activity inclusive of purposeful exercise, sports, domestic maintenance, and occupational activity. Although reasoning was not determined in this study, it was speculated that physical activity may be used to mitigate the stress posed by frequent experiences related to racial discrimination. While this area warrants further study, it underscores the importance and advantages of having convenient options, such as neighborhood-based activity, available and desirable for Black Americans wherever they may reside.

Data from the Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis (MESA) Neighborhood Study support the relevance of both physical and social neighborhood environments for physical activity participation showing that perceptions of safety and higher social cohesion were associated with more regular physical activity for transportation and leisure (Diez Roux et al., 2016). This study also suggested lower incidence of hypertension and diabetes in healthier neighborhood physical activity environments. These findings are relevant to the current topic as they highlight the significance of the neighborhood environment on this modifiable behavior (i.e., physical activity) that has clearly been shown to reduce cardiovascular morbidity and all-cause mortality (Lavie et al., 2019).

It is also notable that recurring hypervigilance and the related habitual efforts to not appear threatening experienced by Black Americans occur in a variety of settings every day. Over time, this chronic source of stress can contribute to physiological dysregulation or physiological "weathering," which has been linked to chronic inflammation that contributes to poor cumulative health outcomes such as hypertension and diabetes (Das, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2019). In summary, this social issue can have negative physical implications both through its potential impact on physical activity participation (i.e., limitations in exercise venue choices, negative experiences while exercising/interference with psychological benefits) and additional factors that can exacerbate health disparities (i.e., chronic stress, chronic low activity participation).

4. Conclusions & future direction

While attempting to overcome any barrier to a health behavior change can be difficult, battling issues related to social inequality and racism is a particularly enormous task. Nonetheless, the recent surge in dialogue surrounding the trepidation that Black runners have quietly endured for years while functioning in White spaces is a critical and timely step toward peace of mind for these individuals who simply yearn for a worry-free workout. This is a fair request. To support and help drive this effort, physical activity, public health/health disparity, and social science researchers should collaborate to build a body of current scientific literature that elucidates and explores this particular flavor of safety concern in various Black outdoor enthusiasts living in White neighborhoods. Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theoretical framework used by scholars to comprehend and challenge racism (Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010, 2018), should be considered and utilized in this work. Since its origins in the legal field, CRT has been adapted for trans-disciplinary use and has been cited as critical in the “anti-racism intellectual movement” (Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2018). In the past decade, scholars have specifically called for the use of CRT in the public health/health disparities arena, suggesting various models (e.g., the Public Health Critical Race Praxis) to assist in the application of CRT for empirical research (Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010, 2018). As such, CRT is a highly appropriate framework for research linking equity and racism to the current topic of racially driven barriers to exercise and physical activity.

If we continue to allow skin color and other social determinants to remain as barriers to neighborhood exercise, it will exacerbate well-established health disparities and continue to present obstacles for sustained physical and mental wellness, quality of life, and longevity in the Black community. An initial step in mitigating these issues should include the development of culturally competent health and exercise professionals who are mindful of situational hypervigilance as well as a more chronic hyperawareness of Blackness in affected patients and clients. In addition to recruiting diverse student cohorts to enhance the learning environment in academic settings, another basic yet critical strategy to support the development of culturally competent professionals should include required coursework dedicated to cultural competency training. Being empathetic to the issues presented in this commentary and being prepared to discuss and prescribe culturally relevant exercise options (e.g., venues and programs with Black instructors/staff, community- and/or faith-based programs, programs that incorporate social support or family members) may assist in achieving sustainable physical activity participation (Whitt-Glover et al., 2014; Conn et al., 2013) which will likely increase long-term health benefits. For runners specifically, the author speculates that outdoor exercise may feel relatively secure in venues designated for running or exercise such as public running tracks and trails. That said, history plus multiple recent, nationally recognized events (in addition to the Ahmaud Arbery tragedy) leave questions about whether Blacks Americans are viewed as non-threatening in any situation. Furthermore, suggesting that someone simply move their run to a different location clearly does not resolve the issue of helping Black Americans feel more secure in their own neighborhoods and it removes the advantages/conveniences of running near one's home. As conveyed by Audre Lorde, the oppressed are not “responsible for altering the psyche of [their] oppressor” (Lorde, 2007). To this end, Black Americans cannot and should not be expected to shoulder the burden of social justice reform. Instead, we must look to White Americans to correct their own actions as well as those of their peers. While the U.S. still has a long way to go before hypervigilance in Black runners is no longer necessary, I remain hopeful of the possibility for change.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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