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# Structural racism and the experience of “tightness” during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT



Research has established the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of colour. Drawing on three waves of in-depth interviews with 36 college students (for a total of 94 interviews), we extend the conceptual metaphor of “tightness” (derived from the sociology of punishment) to understand the experiential dimensions of structural racism in America, especially during periods of crisis. We argue that tightness intensified for Black and Latinx participants as they struggled to cope with the loss of loved ones, fears surrounding their own health, financial challenges, and concerns about police surveillance. We also find that the demonstrations following the killing of George Floyd represented a brief release from the suffocating tightness that Black participants experienced during the pandemic. Using the tightness metaphor to capture the compounding hardships endured by vulnerable populations, we build on existing research that has largely focused on isolated measures of harms associated with the pandemic.

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated racial inequalities in the United States (Baker 2020; Bonilla-Silva 2020; Chowkwanyun and Reed 2020; Oppel et al. 2020; Pirtle 2020; Wrigley-Field 2020). Black and Hispanic Americans are being hospitalized for, and are dying of, COVID-19 at higher rates than white Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020), and they are also suffering from higher rates of unemployment (Couch, Fairlie, and Xu 2020), housing insecurity (Thomas 2020), and food insecurity (Evich 2020) during the pandemic. These hardships are expected to have long-lasting impacts on their physical and mental health as well as on their economic mobility (Glass 2020). As emerging research continues to demonstrate the extent to which communities of colour are shouldering the brunt of

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the harms engendered by the pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020; Chowkwanyun and Reed 2020; Shah, Sachdeva, and Dodiuk-Gad 2020), an examination of their lived experiences during the pandemic is particularly urgent.

In this article, we draw on three waves of in-depth interviews with a racially and socioeconomically diverse sample of college students to explore the experience of structural racism—understood as the hierarchical social system that preferentially allocates resources and benefits to individuals placed in the racial category regarded as superior (Bonilla-Silva 1997)—during the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw on the metaphor of “tightness” (Crewe 2011) to interpret the stark differences between the pandemic experiences of our white participants and those of our Black and Latinx participants. We find that, in addition to facing the challenges that white participants confronted at the beginning of the pandemic, Black and Latinx participants felt an all-encompassing sense of uncertainty and inescapability. With social inequality sharpening and already-limited resources becoming increasingly strained during this crisis, precarity begot precarity for vulnerable populations, and the *tightness* of structural racism intensified.

Crewe (2011, 2020) developed the metaphor of “tightness” to capture the changing ways in which prisoners experience penal power. Historically, penal power “weighed” prisoners down (King and McDermott 1995): Prisoners had very little autonomy, and penal authority was experienced as aggravating and forceful (Crewe 2011, 521). Prisoners’ descriptions today, however, no longer align with this metaphor of “weight,” and Crewe argued that “tightness” is a more useful metaphor for understanding how modern-day penal authority acts like a smothering force that targets prisoners’ physical body as well as their psyche. In tight penal regimes, power is “oppressive, yet somehow light” and it aims to “snag and entangle” prisoners by promoting self-governance rather than mere obedience (Crewe 2011, 522). For example, Crewe described an incarcerated man who said, “you’ve got a choice ... but if you don’t go on [offending behavior programs], you don’t get out” (Crewe 2011, 523). Tight prisons are thus characterized by fear and uncertainty as prisoners struggle to determine how to manage their behaviours to avoid costly sanctions.

Outside the prison setting, the cumulative harms imposed by several interlocking mechanisms of racial oppression—some novel and others centuries-old—make tightness a particularly useful metaphor for understanding the experiential dimensions of structural racism among our Black and Latinx participants. Research has extensively examined the psychological and health impacts of racial discrimination (Howe, Heim, and O’Connor 2014; Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight 2008; Williams, Lawrence, and Davis 2019), and individuals’ coping strategies in the face of racism (Gaylord-Harden and Cunningham 2009; McDermott, Umaña-Taylor, and Zeiders 2019). Although

recent studies have focused on multiple indicators of racial disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic, few have illustrated what it *feels* like to live through this time of compounding hardships (DeSouza et al. 2021).

In this article, we employ the framework of tightness to describe how our participants perceived the multiple challenges that emerged during the early months of the pandemic. As concerns about financial uncertainty, deaths of their loved ones, their own health, and surveillance and law enforcement accumulated over the three waves of data collection, Black and Latinx participants experienced the tightness of structural racism in ways that were strikingly similar to how prisoners experience penal power. Furthermore, for Black participants in particular, the Black Lives Matter protests following the killing of George Floyd represented a brief release from this suffocating tightness. We thus build on existing scholarship on the racialized nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we answer scholars' calls for continued focus on the role of structural racism during the pandemic.

### **Racial disparities and the COVID-19 pandemic**

Pandemics magnify existing social inequities (Gravlee 2020; Parker 2002), and the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be no different from previous epidemics in this regard, with communities of colour suffering the brunt of its social and health-related harms. The COVID-19 death rate among Black Americans is twice as high as the rate among white Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020) and up to 9 times higher when adjusting for age (Bassett, Chen, and Krieger 2020). Additionally, although Hispanic Americans make up only 18% of the overall U.S. population, as of May 2020, they constituted 28.4% of the cumulative COVID-19 cases in which the ethnicity of the patient was known (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). In addition to elevated mortality rates, both Black and Asian Americans are experiencing stigma and heightened racism during the pandemic (Ruiz, Horowitz, and Tamir 2020; Wu, Qian, and Wilkes 2021).

Many scholars have argued that it is not productive to focus on comorbidities (e.g. hypertension, diabetes, obesity) that increase racial minorities' risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (Bonilla-Silva 2020; Devakumar et al. 2020). Such explanations wrongfully suggest biological difference, which individualizes the problem and obscures the structural failures that have disadvantaged Black and Hispanic Americans. Even before COVID-19, researchers exhaustively demonstrated that Black and Hispanic Americans face multiple barriers to equitable health and healthcare, which suggests that racism is a fundamental cause of disease (Phelan and Link 2015; Pirtle 2020; Williams, Lawrence, and Davis 2019). In clinical encounters, for instance, Black and Hispanic Americans are more likely to experience racial bias and discrimination from healthcare providers and lower quality of care (Black, Johnson, and

VanHoose 2015; LaVeist, Rolley, and Diala 2003; Owens and Fett 2019). Literature on cultural health capital—the set of skills, interactional and communication styles, and dispositions that shape healthcare encounters—has further revealed how patients are unfairly burdened with managing practitioners' discrimination and biases (Chang, Dubbin, and Shim 2016; Sacks 2018; Shim 2010).

Even with access to health-promoting opportunities and resources, a lifetime of racial discrimination elicits psychophysiological reactions known to negatively impact long-term health. For instance, discrimination and anticipatory discrimination trigger stress responses that can increase risk of hypertension, heart disease, premature mortality, and accelerated cellular aging (Clark et al. 1999; Epel et al. 2006; Williams and Mohammed 2009). Non-poor Black and Hispanic Americans also report worse health than their white socioeconomic counterparts, indicating that resources alone do not explain racial disparities in health outcomes (Colen et al. 2018). Moreover, at every level of education and income, Black Americans have shorter life expectancy than their white counterparts (Williams 2012; Williams and Sternthal 2010). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the mortality of white Americans has remained lower than the lowest recorded mortality of Black Americans (Wrigley-Field 2020), and it would take 700,000 to one million excess deaths (an increase of 31–46%) for white life expectancy to match Black life expectancy in 2020 (Wrigley-Field 2020).

Persistent social inequalities in housing, employment, and environmental injustice have exacerbated health vulnerabilities during the pandemic. Black Americans are more likely to live in densely-populated neighborhoods where social distancing is difficult, if not impossible (Devakumar et al. 2020; Egede and Walker 2020), and where COVID-19 testing rates are lower (Shah, Sachdeva, and Dodiuk-Gad 2020). In addition, Black and Hispanic Americans represent a major share of low-wage essential workers (e.g. workers in healthcare facilities, farms, factories, grocery stores, and public transportation) before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and fewer Black Americans are able to work from home compared to white Americans (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019; Rogers et al. 2020). Finally, Garcia et al. (2020) argued that older Black and Latinx adults' cumulative exposure to environmental toxins, the discrimination they face in the healthcare system, and other social stressors negatively impact their health and speed up their biological aging compared to white Americans. The high rates of COVID-19 cases and death in communities of colour are thus the embodied evidence of failing systems and disenfranchisement—not individual failure.

In understanding the magnified harm Black Americans are facing, scholars have thus drawn attention to the urgency of treating structural racism as a public health issue (Edwards 2021; Egede and Walker 2020). As multiple discriminatory institutions work in conjunction with one another, the harms

created by one sector are perpetuated by another, creating “interconnected systems that embed inequities in laws and policies” (Egede and Walker 2020, 1). Wakeel and Njoku (2021) proposed a theoretical “weathering” framework to examine the intersecting impact of COVID-19, racism, and stigma on the health outcomes of Black Americans across the life course. Like Wakeel and Njoku (2021), we also seek to understand the cumulative experience of structural racism during the pandemic. Our study, however, is empirically grounded in our participants’ narratives of grief, loss, and uncertainty, which we interpret using the metaphor of “tightness.” We animate quantitative research demonstrating the harm that people of colour are bearing during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we reveal the lived experiences of people of colour during a period of intense economic, social, and political crisis. In the next section, we describe the metaphor of tightness and how it relates to the experience of structural racism.

### **Structural racism as an experience of tightness**

In theorizing about the stressors that accompany incarceration, scholars historically referred to the “depth” (Downes 1993) and “weight” (King and McDermott 1995) of imprisonment to capture how prisoners experienced the oppressive and invasive nature of prison power. Building on these foundational works, Crewe’s (2011) metaphor of tightness emphasizes how contemporary penal power produces feelings of uncertainty when prisoners are subject to responsabilization discourses that compel them to govern their own behaviour (Ugelvik and Damsa 2018). Penal power thus no longer “weighs down” on prisoners; instead, consistent with Foucauldian descriptions of punishment (Foucault 1977), penal power surrounds prisoners, smothers them, and forces them to monitor their own conduct for fear of further punishment. Tightness, then, captures the experience of being subject to the “soft,” more diffuse, and psychological forms of penal power (Crewe 2020, 6; Foucault 1977), and it highlights the fear and uncertainty prisoners experience as they navigate a world in which power is felt like an “invisible harness on the self” (Crewe 2011, 522; Foucault 1977).

The term ‘tightness’ captures ... the sense of not knowing which way to move, for fear of getting things wrong. It conveys the way that power operates both closely and anonymously, working like an invisible harness on the self. It is all-encompassing and invasive, in that it promotes the self-regulation of all aspects of conduct, addressing both the psyche and the body. There are few zones of autonomy, either spatial or psychological, where the reach of power can be escaped. (Crewe 2011, 522)

Crewe (2020) advocated for using conceptual metaphors to understand the texture of imprisonment because they are both expressive (i.e.—they

facilitate understanding of features of imprisonment that participants may find difficult to articulate) and comparative (i.e.—they can be used to compare different experiences). Further, these conceptual metaphors capture the *embodied* dimensions of incarceration, underscoring what being in prison *feels* like. Importantly, metaphors are adaptable enough that they can be applied across different settings (Crewe 2020) and their very nature imbues in them a degree of flexibility derived from abstraction that makes extending them across multiple social contexts possible. Although Crewe limited his discussion of the conceptual range of tightness to the penal setting, we demonstrate that this metaphor can be extended to understand the suffocating effects of oppression beyond prison walls.

During our period of data collection in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, our Black and Latinx participants experienced a racialized tightness that was reflected in a striking arc in their emotional and social well-being. At the beginning of the pandemic, the experience of this tightness was evident in stories of grief, disempowerment, loss, and fear. When George Floyd was killed by a police officer in Minnesota on May 25, 2020, Black participants in particular—already physically, emotionally, and socially worn down by the pandemic—were reenergized by witnessing and participating in the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted nation-wide. These participants, who had been experiencing increased tightness during the pandemic, reached their “breaking point” (Darrell, Black, 23), and stories of grief, fear, and loss were transformed into narratives of empowerment and resistance during the protests.

While incarcerated persons are limited (by the very nature of imprisonment) in their ability to respond to tightness, by exploring how tightness manifests outside prison, we draw attention to the capacity of systematically disadvantaged populations to *resist* tightness. Extending research that has focused on the relationship between race and power structures (Delgado and Stefancic 2017) as well as the consequences of racism (Black, Johnson, and VanHoose 2015; Howe, Heim, and O’Connor 2014), we identify a useful theoretical lens for capturing the *experiential* dimensions of structural inequality.

## Methods

This article emerges from a larger research project on perceptions of risk and experiences with confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The broader study from which we derived the sample for this article included 45 participants for a total of 120 interviews. It is important to avoid conflating the experiences of all racial minorities because Black and Latinx communities have been disproportionately harmed by both COVID-19 and police brutality, and the themes related to tightness thus unsurprisingly did not extend to

non-Black and non-Latinx participants of colour. To isolate the unique experiences of Black and Latinx participants, we excluded from our current analysis 4 participants of colour who identified as Asian and 1 participant who identified as both White and Asian. Our broader sample also included interviews with 4 household members, which we excluded from the current subsample. For this article, we ultimately analyzed 94 interviews with 35 undergraduate students and 1 graduate student<sup>2</sup> (see Table 1 for demographic data), all of whom were white, Black, or Latinx.

### Sampling

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, we recruited participants by widely circulating an email to undergraduate and graduate students of a highly diverse (both socioeconomically<sup>3</sup> and racially<sup>4</sup>) university in the Northeast. The researchers conducted interviews individually between April 1, 2020 (when many states began to issue stay-at-home orders) and July 20, 2020 (when states gradually began to reopen). At the end of the first interview, we requested a follow-up interview with participants two weeks later, and at the end of the second interview, we requested a final interview four weeks later. As anticipated, there was some attrition between the interview waves (Table 2), most likely due to the gradual reopening of the economy and participant exhaustion.

The interviews were semi-structured and contained mostly open-ended questions related to three thematic areas: Risk perceptions; experiences with uncertainty; and experiences with shelter-in-place orders. On average, first-wave interviews lasted 45 min and follow-up interviews (which functioned as “check-ins” to explore changes in our participants’ experiences of

**Table 1.** Demographic data (at first interview).

	Participants % (n)
Gender	
Women	58.3 (21)
Men	38.8 (14)
Other	2.7(1)
Age	
18–24	63.8 (23)
25–39	25.0 (9)
40–59	5.5 (2)
60+	5.5 (2)
Marital Status	
Married	11.1 (4)
Unmarried	88.8 (32)
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	44.4 (16)
Latinx	19.4 (7)
White	36.11(13)



**Table 2.** Interview waves.

	Dates	N=
<i>Wave 1</i>	April 1–May 28, 2020	36
<i>Wave 2</i>	April 17–June 11, 2020	31
<i>Wave 3</i>	May 15–July 20, 2020	27

the pandemic) lasted 30 min. To respect physical distancing requirements, interviews were conducted virtually, using participants' preferred mode of communication. We conducted most interviews on Zoom, a password protectable video conference platform (Gray et al. 2020). We audio recorded all interviews (with participants' consent) and had the recordings transcribed verbatim.

### **Data analysis**

Per the tenets of ground theory (Charmaz 2014), we developed our theoretical findings through an iterative process of data collection and analysis. After conducting preliminary analyses of our early interviews, we continued to collect data to refine emerging themes until we reached the point of saturation. We conducted analyses both manually and with a qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose. We first performed open coding, which involved constant comparison of the data to explore emerging themes. Next, we performed focused coding and wrote analytic memos to create more abstract categories and explore connections between different codes and categories. Finally, we synthesized the data to generate discrete themes, which form the basis of our findings. Throughout the analytic process, the researchers compared coded transcripts and negotiated discrepancies to reach consensus.

### **Findings**

Our data shed light on how compounding disadvantages were experienced and desperately managed by Black and Latinx participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. We present our findings in three sections. First, we document the wide racial disparities in proximity to COVID-19 by describing cases and deaths within our participants' social networks. Next, we highlight the racialized tightness of structural racism during the pandemic by analyzing the social, economic, and emotional harms sustained by Black and Latinx participants especially. Finally, we turn to the nation-wide protests precipitated by the killing of George Floyd, which we frame as a source of temporary release from tightness, as Black communities reached their "breaking point" (Darrell, Black, 23).

### Proximity to COVID-19

We find that at every level of relationship (i.e. immediate family, extended family, friends, and acquaintances), more Black and Latinx participants reported knowing at least one COVID-19 case or death (Table 3), demonstrating that COVID-19 spread more widely through their social circles. Furthermore, Black and Latinx participants reported higher numbers of cases and deaths, indicating that COVID-19 hit their social circles harder (Table 4). Finally, the only two participants who were diagnosed with COVID-19 both identified as Black.

Black and Latinx participants noticed that white people were also aware—and scared—of the disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 in communities of colour. Recounting her sister's discriminatory encounters at a store, Alyssa (Black, 23) described the increase in intangible and subtle racism that people of colour experienced, observing that "if you're a person of colour, I'm pretty sure that you've felt it. It's an unspoken thing to definitely feel it." Gertrude (Black, 68) captured the more overt racism that the COVID-19 pandemic fuelled, recalling one especially disconcerting moment at the grocery store when fellow customers distanced themselves from her even though she was wearing a mask and following the rules. She sadly commented on how Black Americans have been abandoned by U.S. institutions during this time of crisis, remarking that "... we are on our own. We are really on our own."

When I'm in the supermarket line, or in the supermarket, I can't tell you how many times people will go the other way. They will look at me as if, 'Oh, my gosh! Let me move away.' They will literally look at me and say, 'Don't come over here.' But I will see them see a white person next to them and say absolutely nothing. I'm saying, 'Really?' I'm like, 'Are you kidding me?' (Gertrude)

For most of our white participants, on the other hand, COVID-19 disrupted their day-to-day routines, but actual known cases and losses were relatively

**Table 3.** Percent of participants who reported at least one known COVID-19 case and death for each level of relationship.

	Black & Latinx participants % (N)	White participants % (N)
All COVID cases & deaths		
Self	8.6 (2)	0 (0)
Immediate family	13.0 (3)	0 (0)
Extended family	47.8 (11)	30.7 (4)
Friends	34.7 (8)	15.3 (2)
Acquaint. and others	56.5 (13)	46.1 (6)
COVID deaths		
Immediate family	0 (0)	0 (0)
Extended family	13.0 (3)	0 (0)
Friends	13.0 (3)	0 (0)
Acquaint. and others	39.1 (9)	30.7 (4)

**Table 4.** Average reported cases and deaths for Black and Latinx participants and white participants.

	Black & Latinx participants Mean (N)	White participants Mean (N)
All COVID cases & deaths	3.56 (82)	1.2 (16)
<i>Immediate family</i>	0.26 (6)	0.0 (0)
<i>Extended family</i>	1.0 (23)	0.46 (6)
<i>Friends</i>	0.65 (15)	0.15 (2)
<i>Acquaint. and others</i>	1.65 (38)	0.61 (8)
COVID deaths	1.13 (26)	0.38 (5)
<i>Immediate family</i>	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
<i>Extended family</i>	0.34 (8)	0.0 (0)
<i>Friends</i>	0.13 (3)	0.0 (0)
<i>Acquaint. and others</i>	0.65 (15)	0.38 (5)

few and far-removed. In stark contrast to our Black and Latinx participants, none of our white participants were diagnosed with COVID-19 and none had anyone in their immediate family diagnosed. For some, the great fortune of personally knowing so few cases fostered complacency. In his first interview, Cameron (white, 22) reported that he was taking public health recommendations seriously, and he even expressed annoyance with family members who were not taking the same precautions. Several weeks later, however, Cameron realized that neither he nor his friends personally knew of any COVID-19 cases, which made him feel comfortable engaging in riskier behaviours:

I think I asked my friend group recently if them or anyone they knew, or if they knew anyone who knew someone who had Corona, and no. So, the actual disease hasn't really manifested in any way in my life. (...) I mean, one day I just woke up, and was like 'fuck this, I can't deal with this anymore, this is just too much.' I realized that a lot of what I was hearing from my sources was really, really bad, and all that really, really bad stuff wasn't manifesting in my particular area of the world. (Cameron)

White participants reported COVID-19 deaths only among distant acquaintances (including those they did not know personally), such as their "grandmother's friend," "elementary school soccer coach," "friend's grandmother," and "friend's grandfather." These losses were little more than distant and minor reminders of the gravity of COVID-19. For most of our Black and Latinx participants, on the other hand, the harms generated by the pandemic were urgent, unavoidable, and relentless, as we describe next.

### ***Tightness and the racialized harms of the COVID-19 pandemic***

Among Black and Latinx participants, tightness emerged primarily in narratives of uncertainty and the accompanying pressures of self-governance. In tight penal regimes, prisoners are granted a higher degree of autonomy,

but they are simultaneously responsible for making a wide range of decisions. The demand for docility is thus replaced with the responsibilities of self-governance. Alyssa described a similar shift in the experience of structural racism when she traced a direct line between the historical roots of racial disenfranchisement and present-day barriers to individualized styles of disease control, which place the onus of COVID-19 containment on individuals.

I accept that I'm definitely more susceptible of getting the virus or the loved ones getting the virus. Even though it has happened, I understand, and I have acceptance of what factors played into it. The fact that I live in an apartment complex. You cannot probably social distance. (...) It's just frustrating, but once you understand why ... what's the word I'm looking for? How the systematic ways have contributed to that. It's really frustrating because it kind of loops back to an ugly and deeply-rooted history. I don't know. It's just something that we all have to deal with. (Alyssa)

Much like the "softening" of penal power through the rhetoric of self-governance, the "ugly and deeply-rooted" history of racial oppression now emerges as a more diffuse and decentralized (Crewe 2011; Foucault 1977) form of racism as Black Americans are held responsible for managing the spread of COVID-19 while simultaneously bearing the brunt of its harm. Gertrude similarly captured the enduring, but shifting, nature of structural racism when she compared her hospitalization for COVID-19 to early memories of receiving healthcare during the Jim Crow era in the U.S. In a particularly poignant narrative, Gertrude described how her experience of medical racism has evolved from white doctors' explicit invocation of racist ideologies to a much subtler (and in some ways more pernicious) sense of invisibility, as when she sought treatment for COVID-19.

I remember as a child, down south, you didn't really go to doctors because during Jim Crow and all of that, if you went to the hospital down south, not even Alabama, if a white doctor had just got finished dealing with a white patient, well, they weren't coming to touch you. (...) You know what? I remember at seven years old, they left me here not treating me. And now I said, 'Look at this. Here I am a grandmother and I'm not being treated again. I'm being ... ' I said, 'I'm being skipped over again.' (Gertrude)

When Gertrude experienced a relapse in her recovery from COVID-19, she was sent to a hospital that served a predominantly white population, and she described how dramatically superior her experience was compared to her earlier treatment for COVID-19 in a hospital that served a lower-income, racially diverse community. Most tellingly, even at this "impeccable" hospital, Gertrude described the pressure she felt to advocate for herself or risk being treated poorly, stating: "I'm bold enough to tell them, 'I don't care if this is a doctor. I don't want this doctor to come back in my room.' She's rude. She was speaking down to me." Much as prisoners experiencing

tightness must confront difficult questions about how to govern their own behaviour in a system that they do not fully understand and within which mistakes can be extremely costly, the onus of ensuring her wellbeing was on Gertrude alone.

Given the extent to which COVID-19 deaths touched the lives of Black and Latinx participants, it is no surprise that many of these participants mourned the loss of friends and family members. When Madeline's (Latina, 40) close friend passed away, she expressed frustration with the social distancing measures that precluded her from comforting his bereaved wife, stating: "Hispanics, we are so huggable, and we are very close and just to see [his wife] just sobbing and sobbing and we can't say anything. It was horrible." Similarly, Filene's (Black, 30) partner of three years—from whom she had only recently separated—had suddenly died of COVID-19, prompting a downward spiral in Filene's emotional wellbeing as she meditated on the many questions that were left unanswered after his death:

I find myself even talking. Talking to him, like he's right next to me. (...) Just for answers like, 'Why did you have to do it like that? Why didn't you contact me? Why wasn't I your last call? Why didn't you say you were sick?' Because he was sick for two weeks, and I only found out the day he died. That's why I just have so many different questions, and I have no answers to them. (Filene)

Black and Latinx participants also described compounding hardships beyond managing their health and the health of loved ones. Their narratives illustrate how the pandemic represents a period of compressing tightness, as new demands are added to existing stressors with no end in sight. Already in resource-strained circumstances, Black and Latinx participants experienced increased financial pressure. For instance, Fabian (Latino, 23) lost his job and desperately worried about how he would afford his educational and household expenses: "... how am I going to pay my college tuition? (...) I have some money saved up, but I also think about my family buying groceries, paying the bills, rent, little things like that make me think, 'Hey, I need my job.'" Imagining the worst-case scenario, he wondered if his family's financial circumstances might force them to move back to their native country.

Others found themselves in conflicted circumstances in which they were forced to choose between financial instability and risk of exposure to COVID-19. In the prison setting, tightness is connected to the sense of insecurity that is generated by prisoners' fear of making the wrong choice. With insufficient governmental assistance, participants like Filene described a similar sense of dread and anxiety during the pandemic, stemming from the forced choice they were compelled to make between financial harm and exposure to COVID-19: "I don't get paid for being home. (...) I'm thinking, will I be broke? Will I have money to secure myself and my family? Will I be

able to pick up from there? Will I have to maybe look for another job since I am afraid to go back to work? What will my life be after this?" (Filene).

In sharp contrast to these narratives of tightness, the two main challenges identified by white participants were disruptions to their education when the university shifted to an online format in response to the pandemic, and boredom brought on by sheltering-in-place recommendations. With their education, jobs, and social lives disrupted, white participants found themselves struggling to fill their time, and some pursued new hobbies. For instance, Layla (white, 22) reported that she had "been coloring a lot," which has helped her manage her boredom. Similarly, Stan (white, 19) used his extra time to read the entire eight-book *Harry Potter* series, noting that he was "a little sad" that he had finished it.

Few white participants reported financial difficulties, and some even claimed financial gains during the pandemic. As Black and Latinx participants frantically took on essential jobs to make ends meet, Bianca (white, 22) could afford to wait patiently for the bar in which she worked to reopen, noting: "I don't think I would make a lot of money right now. (...) So just for my safety, as well as no real financial gain, I think it's going to be awhile." Similarly, to limit her risk of exposure, Minnie (white, 21) chose not to return to her job at a daycare facility and reported that she was receiving more money from various sources while unemployed than she would if she were to work. Meanwhile, Cameron reported that "a lot of money fell just into [his] hands," so he was using the pandemic as an opportunity to start his own business selling embroidered patches.

Taken together, these findings underscore the extent to which tightness during the COVID-19 pandemic is a racialized experience. As Black and Latinx participants mourned the loss of loved ones to COVID-19 and struggled to confront the multiple harms that they and members of their community sustained during the pandemic, white participants' concerns were far less existential as they wistfully grieved (for instance) the potential loss of summer time festivities:

I'm just hoping that it's over before summer because I feel like that would just be like insane. We've already missed Saint Patrick's Day, Easter. If we miss 4th of July, we're missing Cinco de Mayo, which is like, not really a holiday, but it's like still a time that you could celebrate. So, it's unfortunate that we're missing all these things. (Odelle, white, 24)

Finally, the tightness that Black and Latinx participants experienced during the pandemic manifested prominently in their narratives about law enforcement. Already distrustful of the government, Black and Latinx participants feared that the uncertainties engendered by the pandemic could grant police officers leeway to abuse their power in already-disadvantaged communities. Latif (Black, 24), for example, was less concerned about contracting

COVID-19 than they were about police enforcement of stay-at-home orders, stating “the COVID menace isn’t as much of a threat to me.” Instead, they stated: “The government possibly policing whether or not I can go outside is a threat.” Echoing Latif’s concerns, Valencia (Latina, 29) worried that increased policing will inevitably lead to violent or even fatal encounters:

I just mean, unfortunately, police here can get very aggressive with people. I just feel like in a weird world that we’re in, already tensions are so high, and now forcing people to stay home, it could escalate to the police is going to be scared of a human because they could cough and kill them. It’s like, ‘Are they going to shoot someone that’s coughing or coming near them?’ You don’t even know. (Valencia)

Walter (Black, 22) described having only two goals until the pandemic ended: “To not get got by the police and not get got by Coronavirus.” Walter’s narrative of his deep anxieties about potential confrontations with the police echoed prisoners’ “almost obsessive self-surveillance” (Campbell-Wroe 2015, 66; Crewe and levin 2021) in tight prisons where everything comes to be seen as a test or a threat (Crewe 2020). Despite obeying every possible rule and regulation, Walter expressed fear that even his official proof of essential worker status could not protect him against police brutality during the pandemic. In response to this fear, Walter reported adopting extra measures to ensure his safety (like wearing his employee shirt during his commute) to give the police fewer reasons to bother him. Faced with anxieties about increasing surveillance, Walter modified his own behaviour, and avoiding encounters with police officers thus became his personal responsibility (Foucault 1977). For him, the combination of structural dangers (such as police violence) and biological dangers (such as the risk of exposure to COVID-19)—created a uniquely precarious circumstance.

[the store] gave us this little paper saying you’re an essential worker and that you could be out past whatever time. But what does that note really mean if there’s a gun pointed to me? It’s not like that’s Captain America’s shield or anything. He could read that, rip it up. He could put it in his pocket, anything could happen. (Walter)

Benny (Black, 23), an aspiring police officer, described his complicated attitude toward law enforcement as a young, Black man who is very critical of policing in the U.S. In describing how he would respond if he witnessed police misconduct, Benny emphasized his need to protect himself even while trying to change the system from within, describing these conflicting goals as “a difficult tightrope to walk.”

I feel like me personally, I wouldn’t uphold with [police misconduct], but I don’t feel like I’m the type of person that would want to paint a target on my back. So, I think that I would try to be fully cognizant of my surroundings and what my

impact can be to go ahead and potentially protect this person, but also potentially protect my career as well. (Benny)

Benny's interview was reminiscent of Crewe's (2011) description of the symbolic pain in tight penal systems that stems from prisoners' awareness of the gap between how they see themselves and how the prison system sees them—and by the compulsion they feel to adopt their "penal avatar." Benny worried that he would lose his own identity if he joined the "white supremacist system" of law enforcement, fearing that the "system's going to swallow [him] whole" and force him to "do things [he doesn't] morally agree with." He captured his internal struggle when he wondered with frustration: "... being a Black man, I feel like, am I doing myself a disservice by investing myself so focused within this field, just to then cry out against supremacy to then be silenced by the same supremacy I'm speaking out against?"

### ***The "boiling point": law enforcement, Black Lives Matter, and the release of tightness***

For our Black participants, tightness erupted in a period of resistance and release during the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020. A key difference between our field setting and the prison setting lies in the relative freedom that individuals outside prison—even those who are marginalized—have to *resist* tightness through collective action. Our data revealed a powerful arc in the narratives of Black participants as they responded to the overwhelming tightness of structural racism during the COVID-19 pandemic through collective action. Their resistance was precipitated by the death of George Floyd when a police officer pressed his knee onto Floyd's neck for several minutes until Floyd stopped breathing. The circumstances of Floyd's death were tragically familiar, but this time, in a social environment that was already tense and brittle, it prompted nation-wide protests that persisted for months. These demonstrations were inspiring for many of our Black participants who had been enduring multiple hardships, traumas, and anxieties throughout the pandemic because they offered a temporary release from the tightness of structural racism.

As we described, Black and Latinx participants reported concerns about racism in law enforcement even before the killing of Floyd. Following the killing of Floyd, the focus of our Black participants' interviews notably shifted from narratives of anxiety to narratives of empowerment as they turned their attention to the protests, seizing an opportunity to vocalize their discontent. For a brief period, the structures and institutions that had organized and sustained the tightness of racial oppression became blatantly visible, making space for criticism and resistance.

The extent to which the Black Lives Matter protests represented a release from tightness is evident even in the language of our participants, who



described this moment as a “breaking point” (Darrell) and “boiling point” (Benny). Unlike the protests of previous years, these protests emerged during a uniquely difficult social and political moment for Black participants, and they thus came to represent a pivotal transformation and the hope of overdue social change. In comparing the protests during the pandemic to those of the past, Darrell observed that Black Americans had reached the limits of their tolerance, “Honestly, I think the difference from last year’s protest to now is, I feel like it was the breaking point. I feel like that this last incident was like, ‘Okay, we’re doing it our way,’ type of thing.”

White participants, on the other hand, expressed ambivalence and uncertainty about the protests, fearing that it could contribute to the spread of COVID-19 (which it did not) (Dave et al. 2020). Minnie painted the protests as being “dangerous” and “very crazy,” and Bianca expressed discontent with how “other things are showing up in our media more than the pandemic.” Having just returned from a trip to a different state where she observed locals’ relaxed attitudes toward COVID-19, Bianca was especially concerned that media coverage of the protests might lead the public to believe that the pandemic “doesn’t exist anymore.” Equating the politicization of COVID-19 with the politicization of race, Bianca lamented the country’s “crazy, crazy divide” and its inability to “come together.”

While white participants described the pandemic and protests as separate and competing issues, Black participants saw the two events as being unequivocally interconnected. Coral (23) (who identified as Latina in the first interview, and as Black in the third) noted that the protests provided an outlet for the overwhelming anxiety and stress that had culminated among Black Americans during the pandemic. Echoing this explanation, Tanya (Black, 22) succinctly summarized the views of many of our Black participants: “It definitely makes me nervous, but I feel like it’s necessary. Like, that’s something I’m willing to risk, like going to something like [a protest].” Although the demonstrations did not directly resolve participants’ personal struggles, witnessing and joining the protests offered emotional and psychological relief:

With the global pandemic and what’s going on, you see 40 million people on unemployment, and then you see a graduating class of people not knowing really what to do and where to go now. It’s just a lot of uncertainty and a lot of frustration. That’s also being coupled with being cooped up in the house all day. People are at a boiling point that they’re willing to go ahead and put their life at risk by both exposing themselves to police brutality and potentially contracting COVID, to go ahead and use whatever remaining political voice they have to exact their rights. (Benny)

Similarly, Coral described the killing of Floyd as an igniting “spark.” She sensed that “change is coming” and that she could “almost feel it in the air.” Having attended a few of the protests, Coral’s description of the “great

energy” at the protests stood in stark contrast to Minnie’s description of the “very dangerous” and “chaotic” protests in her town.

I feel like because everyone pretty much had a tough time with COVID-19 and the quarantine and the lockdown, people were able to go out there and feel vibrant energy from others, be surrounded by like-minded people, be surrounded by people who look like them, be surrounded by people who were motivated, eager for change. (Coral)

Black participants framed the pandemic as a discrete event that will inevitably end—unlike the overpowering tightness of structural racism. For instance, Walter was confident that the pandemic will be over one day; it was not “hopeless.” Comparing the deaths caused by COVID-19 to the deaths caused throughout the U.S.’s long history of racial violence, Walter argued that racial injustice was far more deadly: “... I feel like Corona just popped up a couple months ago. Racism been killing people I know and love forever, people who I probably haven’t even met. I will never know where my ancestors truly came from.” (Walter)

Drawing an explicit connection between policing and other social institutions (such as healthcare and education), Coral highlighted how threats posed by the pandemic paled in comparison to harms caused by structural racism:

I think it shows that we are more worried about our lives being taken by the hands of someone who’s supposed to help, than a virus. I feel like while we should be worried about the virus, absolutely, but it’s like Black people are dying every day due to stereotypes, due to being in the hands of a racist police officer or a racist doctor or a nurse who doesn’t believe in the pain that they’re saying they’re having, or a teacher who thinks that a child is uneducated. It’s like we’re dying everyday due to not being held as equal. (Coral)

Ultimately, after experiencing an extended period of isolation, grief, and anxiety, Black participants welcomed the opportunity to engage in collective resistance against racism. Black participants drew attention to the intersecting and disproportionate harms they and their loved ones had endured because of *both* COVID-19 and police brutality. For many of these participants, the Black Lives Matter protests thus represented resistance to the overwhelming tightness of structural racism and to the rhetoric of self-governance that compelled them to regulate their own behaviour during the pandemic at the expense of collective action.

## Conclusion

Critical race theorists have sought to understand and change the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), and existing research has also explored the structural roots of racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997) as

well as its profound consequences. Against this theoretical and empirical backdrop, the metaphor of tightness that we applied in this study offers a novel way to understand how it feels to be subject to the oppressive force of structural racism, especially during periods of multiple, intersecting crises.

In addition to documenting the wide racial disparities in participants' proximity to COVID-19 cases and deaths, we revealed how the tightness of structural racism was felt as a suffocating, all-encompassing, and relentless pressure as Black and Latinx participants confronted several social, economic, and emotional harms generated by the pandemic. Meanwhile, as social inequalities were amplified and already-vulnerable Black and Latinx participants experienced even greater social and economic precarity, white participants experienced disruptions but otherwise remained relatively unscathed by the pandemic. We thus argue that tightness during the pandemic was a racialized phenomenon that Black and Latinx experienced much more sharply than white participants. Finally, we extended the conceptual metaphor of tightness by highlighting how Black participants engaged in a powerful show of collective resistance when tightness reached a "breaking point" with the killing of George Floyd. In addition to providing Black participants with an opportunity to reconnect with one another after months of obsessive self-protection and self-regulation, the Black Lives Matter protests illuminate how the fragmentation of relationships that accompanies tightness (Levinson 2020) can be successfully overcome and resisted. While we have extended the metaphor of tightness outside the prison setting, we believe that it can be applied even beyond the context of a pandemic to understand other experiences of structural racism during times of intensified crisis, as harms accumulate and become inescapable.

In the coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests, journalists frequently described this period of unrest as a time of "racial reckoning" in the U.S. (Eligon and Burch 2020; Elving 2020). This framing, however, centres the narrative of white repentance. For Black participants, this period was certainly not a moment for reconciliation; rather, the protests functioned as a brief release from the tightness of navigating and surviving structural racism. Taken together, the findings we have presented in this article highlight the racialized harms associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, and they also point to the significance of the Black Lives Matter movement in providing a venue for Black participants to resist police brutality—and, perhaps more importantly, to vocalize opposition to the intersecting institutional harms generated by structural racism.

## Notes

1. Elsewhere, we describe findings from our broader sample related to gender and perceptions of risk (Umamaheswar and Tan 2020).

2. We did not find that the graduate student status of this participant notably distinguished their experiences from those of undergraduate students.
3. In the 2019–2020 academic year, 44.2% of undergraduate students at the institution were eligible for Pell Grants, which are available only to students who have exceptional need for financial assistance.
4. Of the 9212 students enrolled in the university in the Spring 2020 semester, the most common (reported) racial groups were White (55%), Black (16.5%), and Hispanic (12%).

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