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Black Lives Really Do Matter: Reflections on Our Work in the Time of Protests

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Please note that this blog was written with reflections and comments from Dr. Tyffani Dent & Dr. Apryl Alexander. Kieran & David..

Professionals in the human services, perhaps especially in forensic arenas, have long known about racial disparities in the criminal justice system and beyond. It's been six months since [our blog post](#) on racial disparities in risk assessment, the bail system, incarceration rates, diversion programs, and other realities of life for people of color. And the above areas are only the beginning; there are good reasons why commentators are referring to racism as the "other pandemic."

Despite our knowledge in these areas, a perusal of social media in several contexts shows how much we all still have to learn. Several themes have been prevalent as we (white people of privilege) have watched – and participated – in dialogs. Because so many professionals in the human services are white, and because so many of our clients are people of color, it's crucial that our field take a long, hard look in the mirror first, and then at the systems in which we work. It may be useful to ask ourselves: Do we want to understand and act on the best interests of our clients and colleagues of color or not?

These are not just idealistic observations. Virtually everyone who reads this blog works with people who have been marginalized; people who have seen how law enforcement and the legal system can behave unjustly. Injustice can come in many forms, from dismissing reports of brutality to disrespect of those who have been abused. Recent dialog has shown a number of shortcomings, including white people trying to position themselves as being free from racism while numerous organizations have issued statements condemning racism. As welcome as the latter is, we're interested in what actions people



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We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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will take in the wake of the recent protests.

Perhaps the first place we need to start is with the nature of the conversation itself. Leaning into one another is bound to produce discomfort as we listen to narratives and emotions that are hard to sit with. The simple fact is that so many of the unspoken rules of engagement for these discussions originated in Eurocentric white culture. This means that many of us only become fully engaged in dialog when it is in the style and tone with which we (white folks) are most familiar. Of course, if we're honest, the emotionally charged debate that we are witnessing would not be so plaintive if society had taken effective action a long time ago. Ultimately, it is simply unfair to ask oppressed people to end their own oppression in a fashion crafted by those who have oppressed them.

Another area of urgency for professionals is to abandon the oft-used response of, "Yes, but don't all lives matter?" Although [this](#) has received [considerable](#) commentary [elsewhere](#), suffice it to say that this statement comes across as uniquely unemphatic and ignorant of the desperate cry behind Black Lives Matter. As many others have observed, until people can clearly align with Black Lives Matter, "all lives matter" is simply a dodge, at best, around the painful truth of racism.

Currently, some media outlets are calling into question whether [structural racism](#) exists. To this end, we believe it's vital for professionals to familiarize themselves with the research that we attempted to outline in our [earlier blog](#). It is simply unconscionable to question the systematized nature of racism when so much information is immediately available.

Finally, at a time when the dialog is understandably at a fever pitch, one person has recommended approaching racism in the same way as COVID-19.

- 1) Assume you have it
- 2) Listen to the experts
- 3) Go to great lengths not to spread it
- 4) Be willing to change your life to end it

While this, too, risks oversimplifying the many issues involved, it could be a place for many white professionals to start. One thing is certain: confronting racism in ourselves is long overdue.