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OPINION

The Black Lives Matter Protests Are Running on Much More Than Anger | Opinion

JOAN COOK

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But a **scuffle** broke out when they tried to handcuff him



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Many people experienced moral outrage—a combination of shock, disgust and anger—as they watched the video of a Minneapolis police officer kneeling on the neck of George Floyd, taking the breath out of his body, and leaving him for dead.

In response, there have been massive protests in big cities and small towns across the U.S., as well as around the world. The Black Lives Matter movement has ascended to a new level, with at least two-thirds of U.S. adults saying they support the movement. Yet this continued reaction isn't just due to outrage. As a psychologist, I see the reverberations of an emotion that isn't widely discussed. Witnessing the multiracial peaceful demonstrations calling for police reform and legislation to address racial inequalities seems to be tapping into moral elevation.

Research has found that humans have responses to witnessing good deeds. These effects can be physiological (a glowing warmth in our heart and feeling of expansion in our chest), psychological (optimism about humanity, hopefulness about the future) or behavioral (attending a march, donating money). Seeing and participating in peaceful marches calling for justice may be having this same effect.

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Some of the earliest research on the effects of moral elevation, published in 2008, was conducted on mothers and their infants. Breastfeeding moms in Charlottesville, Virginia, were randomly assigned to view one of two video conditions. Those in the morally elevating condition watched a video clip from x

condition watched an episode of the comedy *Seinfeld* in which the actors mused about the ironies of supermarkets and dry cleaning. This may sound kind of silly to some, but the experiment had an impact. The women who watched the morally elevating video were more likely to hug and nurse their infants than the women in the humorous condition.

Since then, a number of studies, using both survey and experimental designs, confirm that when individuals are exposed to acts of moral goodness, we rise to our better selves. We have a feeling of wanting to help, and we actually engage in more prosocial behaviors, particularly toward disadvantaged group members. For example, showing white people video clips depicting acts of moral excellence increased their donations to black-oriented aid organizations.

A protester kneels and holds up a fist as he and others demonstrate against police brutality and systemic racism by closing down and blocking traffic on I-395 in Washington, D.C., on June 15.

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To be fair, the effect of watching moral goodness doesn't affect all people the same. People who are already higher in moral identity are more likely to be affected. So when they read about, watch or directly witness good, they report more warm fuzzies, have more positive views of humanity and experience the desire to be a better person. People who are empathic, and who lack malignant narcissism and callousness, are also more likely to be inspired, optimistic and moved to helping others when exposed to morally elevating stimuli.

Some may wonder if the effect of moral elevation is guilt-based. If watching others do good, while we sit back and do nothing, threatens how we see ourselves. It makes us feel inferior, forcing or shaming us to act. That's possible. But it appears more likely that watching acts of goodness is a motivational trigger, pushing us to rise to our higher values.

"The recent demonstrations can be triggering for those who have been suffering alone or without the support of white people—and can signal performative allyship for many. What we're trying to do is redirect this irritability and anger to highlight that there is an opportunity to center the perspective of black people on the good that can happen when white folk and others are willing to stand in solidarity to bear witness and attract attention to the pain black people have endured for centuries. Through this awakening of white brothers and sisters, we hope this will propel them to deconstruct oppressive systems, continue to fight on behalf of those who have been minoritized, and not simply learn but act and stand in the gap for people whose bandwidth, due to decades of historical oppression, has run low."

As protests sparked over the murder of George Floyd [continue](#), and more black lives like [Rayshard Brooks](#) are taken from this earth, both moral outrage and moral elevation can arouse a desire to assist our fellow human beings. Let us not hide from these intense emotions. Let them wash over and continue to move us to heal deep psychic wounds and inspire collective action and growth. May this powerful moment of elevation bring permanent moral transformation.

Joan Cook, Ph.D., is an associate professor of psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine.

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Dr. Jennifer Gomez, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Wayne State University and an expert in the impact of violence on black and other minority youth and young adults, had this to say:

"The tragedies that we're witnessing are neither new nor isolated. And, of note, they haven't stopped, even though videos have made it possible for the world to be watching and condemning the government-sanctioned violence against black people in the U.S. The difference is this moral elevation, this action-oriented hope, that has resulted in so many of us coming together to fight for justice. And, at long last, for some of us to finally listen and bear witness to the anti-black hate and violence that so many of us for so many years have been sharing without being believed."

Gomez explained that as a black feminist trauma psychologist, she sees moral elevation often. "What should be completely depressing engenders action-oriented hope," she said. "When truth of depravity is finally acknowledged, we discover avenues for enacting change on large and small scales. Witnessing those actions in ourselves and others gives us this moral elevation that makes life worthier of living."

My colleague at Yale, Dr. Ayana Jordan, an addiction psychiatrist who works with minority communities to increase access to mental health services, also

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