

Uneven Playing Field—Effective Strategies to Address Health Inequity Through Active Living Research: a Commentary to Accompany the Active Living Research Supplement to *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*

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Published online: 19 January 2013
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As we look at the climate of American society today, we find that history is unfortunately repeating itself. In the midst of the recent healthcare reform debate, the dreadful truths of racism and classism have reared their ugly heads in ways we have not seen since the end of the modern civil rights era. Systemic barriers exist in this country which have marginalized African Americans and other communities of color for centuries. The unfortunate reality of health inequity has been a journey long traveled by Black Americans and many others. In 1899, W. E. B. DuBois wrote in the *Philadelphia Negro, A Social Study*, “One thing of course we must expect to find that is a much higher death rate at present among Negroes than among Whites: this is one measure of the difference in their social advancement [1].” World renowned minister, activist, and “drum major for justice”, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, “...of all the forms of inequality, injustice in healthcare is the most shocking and inhumane [2].” It was as if these great scholars were alive today watching African Americans and other communities of color lose their battle to prevent obesity, diabetes, cancer, and support access to quality and affordable care while promoting healthier lifestyles.

The national NAACP health department argues that in order to effectively address issues like one of our national priorities, childhood obesity, one must identify the key social determinants that have grossly impacted African Americans more than any other racial or ethnic group in the USA. The NAACP health department affirms the socio-

ecological framework which recognizes the interwoven relationship that exists between an individual and their environment. The association believes that an individual’s environment can shape behavior: positively or negatively. Our unique mix of education, outreach programs, advocacy, and direct action allow us to address racism, classism, and YES sexism.

The NAACP officially got involved in the childhood obesity prevention and advocacy battle in 2009 at the Centennial convention celebrating 100 years of civil rights advocacy during our annual resolutions process. Resolutions are national policies that are submitted by the association’s delegates to confirm the NAACP’s commitment to addressing a specific issue affecting the communities we serve. Prior to the release of First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” initiative, the NAACP board of directors ratified a resolution stating that the national office of the NAACP, state conferences, and local units (i.e., adult branch, college chapter, and youth council) to address childhood obesity prevention, with a special emphasis on education and policies for African American communities in the USA. Alarming rates of childhood obesity, particularly in African American female adolescents and the unfortunate increase in chronic diseases among youth served as a catalyst to move the NAACP toward a standing, institutional commitment.

The NAACP successfully advocated for the passage of the Patient Protection & Affordable Care Act to provide access to affordable and quality healthcare in the USA. Over 8 million African Americans will now have access to coverage that they may not have been afforded. The association’s unique blend of local, state, and national advocacy efforts positions us to influence

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legislative leaders and community stakeholders. Our commitment to health equity messaging and “leveling the healthcare and environmental playing field” has propelled the NAACP’s public health voice to a national stage and yielded relevant pieces of legislation with a lasting effect on all Americans.

It is unfortunate that the road toward total wellness for all Americans still depends on the color of your skin, your gender, and quite frankly how much money you earn. One might ask, what is the role of the active living research community in the fight against social “isms” (i.e. racism, classism, and sexism) that directly impact healthy living opportunities? In other words, what are researchers willing to do to secure healthier communities and a healthier future for the next generation? The time is now for members of the active living research community to sound the alarm and fulfill their commitment to academic excellence, equity, diversity, and inclusion of researchers and study participants. Consider expanding your work to various communities of color, participants representing the range of socioeconomic status, and both genders. In addition, consider “humanizing” your research experience and recall the reason research was the field you chose. Was it to collect data and publish multiple articles or was it to make a difference in the lives of the communities that need to be served?

The NAACP health department is charging the Active Living Research community to equip community based and advocacy organizations with evidence supporting the role of policies and programs to help reverse the childhood obesity epidemic particularly in the Black community. In addition, there is a need for linking social determinants of health to the epidemic’s unfortunate rise. This data will help support

organizations like the NAACP to advocate on behalf of local, state, and national policies and educate community leaders on available resources to address these issues. It is imperative that active living researchers consider research and programs that will build skill sets for sustainable, positive behavior, and policy changes particularly in marginalized communities. What is inevitable is that funding and resources will be depleted. Researchers should be intentional and ensure healthy living and healthy environments are sustainable in communities where projects are targeted.

Finally, the ALR movement can have a major impact on how the country moves toward equity and wellness. Maintaining integrity in research and supporting projects that will have meaningful impact on economics and long term behavioral health choices will benefit all Americans. Building evidence on the principles of effective social justice and research collaboration can help save lives for generations to come.

Conflict of Interest The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

References

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2. Luther King, Martin Jr. Presentation at the Second National Convention of the Medical Committee for Human Rights, Chicago: 25 March 1966.