The depth of stories: How Black young adults' disclosure of high arousal negative affect in narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests improved adjustment over the year 2020

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Funding information
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Abstract
The present study investigates whether the way Black young adults constructed their narratives regarding the stressful events of the COVID-19 pandemic and the black lives matter (BLM) protests related to adjustment over time. A two-wave mixed prospective and retrospective longitudinal study was conducted in July and December 2020 and included a total of 90 Black young adults. Narrative reports were collected at baseline to determine the psychological interpretations of the two events and were coded based on affect disclosure. Both time points examined adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests as well as the extent to which the basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence were affected. Our results showed that disclosure of high arousal negative affect in narratives at baseline was associated with better adjustment over time. Additionally, results of process analyses showed that satisfaction of the basic psychological need for autonomy (e.g., feelings of personal agency, choice, and volition) mediated the association between narratives and adjustment. These
results suggest that engaging in disclosure of high arousal negative affect may be associated with heightening adjustment because it enhances individuals’ autonomy, perhaps resulting in a beneficial integration of the events into their broader life narratives. These findings highlight the potential of well-constructed narratives to impact adjustment over time and have implications for clinical practice to support Racialized communities during unprecedented events.

KEYWORDS
adjustment, affect disclosure, narratives, psychological need satisfaction, self-determination theory

1 INTRODUCTION

A series of disruptive and unprecedented events took place during the year 2020, with the emergence of a worldwide pandemic and the largest civil rights movement in half a century. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted social inequity that reflects how systems of society continue to oppress underrepresented populations (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020; Wright & Merritt, 2020). Black communities were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due to existing weaknesses in social organizations, leading to financial and healthcare disparities (Ajlore & Thames, 2020). Recent research has shown that Black young adults reported higher rates of suicidal ideation, psychological distress (K. Smith et al., 2020), and stress surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (Kujawa et al., 2020) compared to white young adults. Although the black lives matter (BLM) movement promotes and maintains resilience and empowerment in Black individuals (Godsay & Brodsky, 2021), activism itself may come with physical and psychological costs (Santos & VanDaalen, 2018). For instance, BLM protesters experienced greater police violence and race-related stress compared to protests for other movements (Green et al., 2021; Hargons et al., 2017). In sum, both the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests may have been traumatic for Black communities (Bassett et al., 2020; Phiri et al., 2021).

Constructing narratives enable individuals to acknowledge the depth of emotional affect resulting from traumatic life events (D. P. McAdams, 2015). Moreover, crafting a coherent life narrative can decrease levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and anger (D. P. McAdams, 2015) and may facilitate the healing process regarding racial trauma faced by Black communities (Chioneso et al., 2020). The present study investigated how Black young adults constructed their narratives across the worst public health crisis in a century and the largest civil rights movement in half a century related to adjustment over time. Specifically, narratives were coded based on affect disclosure and the psychological need for autonomy was enquired upon to discern if it may act as a mechanism to explain the association between affect disclosure and positive adjustment.

1.1 Narratives

Narratives are created based on experiences and expectations about the past, present, and future, which allows individuals to add meaning and harmony to their life (Singer & Bluck, 2001). Individuals’ narratives change as they experience life events, which simultaneously modifies the meaning they attach to their life and personal
experiences (D. P. McAdams, 2015). Interestingly, constructing a narrative about obstructive systems of oppression plays a critical role in coping and provides opportunities for healing in Black communities (Burkett, 2017; Chioneso et al., 2020).

Black individuals face racial trauma, which emerges in response to racism in the form of racial discrimination and microaggressions (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Nadal, 2018). Racial trauma is defined as real and perceived danger, threats, witnessing harm, or humiliating and shaming events to similar ethnoracial individuals (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). Such events are recurring, systemic, and intergenerational (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). Thus, building a narrative about stressful events may be beneficial when confronting racial trauma because it may aid in resisting oppression (Comas-Díaz, 2016), foster healing processes (Burkett, 2017; Chioneso et al., 2020), contributes to restoring cultural identities (Lawson-Te Aho, 2014), and refutes negative stories about ones’ oppressed group (Haaken et al., 2012).

Elaborating on traumatic life experiences through the expression of emotions in narratives has been shown to increase causal thinking and self-reflection, which then results in positive coping and adjustment (Pennebaker, 1993). Indeed, constructing a narrative promotes personal empowerment in Black individuals (Chioneso et al., 2020) and may help individuals understand the source of the racial trauma and how it connects to larger structural and historical issues (Bell, 2016). These findings delineate the link between psychological needs and narratives.

1.2  |  Self-determination theory (SDT)

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) is an empirical and widely researched theory of motivation and human behavior. The theory assumes that individuals are inherently interested in their surroundings, strive to gain mastery, and have a desire to connect with others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT proposes three basic and universal psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) that are vital for cultivating individuals’ healthy adjustment and growth (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy refers to the need to freely endorse and to feel ownership over experiences and actions (deCharms, 1968). Relatedness refers to the need to feel socially connected with others, to care for them, and to feel cared for in return (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Finally, competence refers to the need to operate effectively in ones’ environment or to feel capable of learning the skills necessary to function effectively (Bandura, 1977). In sum, need satisfaction is a crucial mechanism in optimal, positive functioning (Ryan et al., 2019) and has been shown to be associated with the use of effective coping strategies and adjustment when faced with stressful life situations (A. Smith et al., 2007; Patrick et al., 2007).

As mentioned previously, research suggests that the need for autonomy may play a crucial role in young adults’ capacity to overcome stressful life events as it may allow them to feel ownership over their experiences and actions. Autonomy was found to be especially important for Black individuals’ psychological well-being (Kachanoff et al., 2019) and may even help them effectively cope with racism (Johnson & Carter, 2020). As such, the need for autonomy may be fundamental when facing traumatic life events as it allows for self-government actions (Rude & Haner, 2018). Such feelings of empowerment in ones’ life narrative facilitates greater psychological adjustment (Adler, 2012).

Autonomy may also be critical for integrative emotion regulation, which refers to a form of autonomous regulation in which emotions are neither cognitively altered nor suppressed, but rather willingly and openly attended to (Ryan et al., 2016). In being aware and mindful of one’s emotions, the meaning of events can be clarified and, as a result, one’s choices and behaviors often become more adaptable (Roth et al., 2019). Integrative emotion regulation involves a healthy engagement with one’s emotions which results in adaptive coping and low defensiveness (Roth et al., 2018). The importance of emotion-focused coping responses has been demonstrated in health-related outcomes, especially in the face of racial pressures (Griffin & Armstead, 2020). Taken together, there is evidence to suggest that autonomy may act as an important mechanism to explain the association between affect disclosure and positive adjustment.
1.3 | Present investigation

Based on prior literature, it was hypothesized that disclosure of high arousal negative affect in narratives would be related to positive adjustment over time. Moreover, SDT researchers have repeatedly shown that the association between personal and contextual factors and positive adjustment outcomes may be mediated by high levels of autonomy need satisfaction (Koestner et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Therefore, the present study aimed to examine whether the relations between the way Black young adults constructed their narratives to the critical events of 2020 may be associated with improved personal adjustment precisely because it enhances satisfaction of the need for autonomy.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants and procedure

A two-wave mixed retrospective prospective longitudinal study of Black young adults was conducted in July and December 2020 and included an initial sample of 90 Black young adults and a follow-up sample of 86 (retention rate of 95.56%). Participants were recruited through online advertisements and were compensated $30 CAD for completing the entire study, or partial compensation for partial completion. The study was approved by the University Research and Ethics Board and informed consent was obtained for all participants.

All measures were taken through the online smart survey software Qualtrics. Participants completed an initial 25 min questionnaire in July 2020 (T1) and a 15 min follow-up questionnaire in December 2020 (T2).

Narrative reports were collected at T1 to determine the psychological interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests and were coded based on levels of affect disclosure. Participants were given the following instructions designed to elicit narrative accounts:

In the space below, we would like you to write a short story about your experience this spring and summer as a young Black person having to deal with the worst pandemic in 100 years and the largest civil protests in 50 years. Please take about 5 minutes and try to give the story a beginning, middle, and ending. Don’t worry about technical aspects, just about your thoughts and impressions.

At T1 and T2 adjustment regarding the COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in March or the BLM protests that emerged in June was assessed retrospectively and prospectively from July to December. Both time points also examined the extent to which the three basic psychological needs were affected.

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Demographics

In addition to identifying their ethnicity (i.e., Black/African Canadian), participants reported their age (M = 25.74, SD = 4.35), self-reported gender (62% female), employment status (17.8% full-time; 30.7% part-time; 10.9% unemployed; 39.6% student; 1% unknown). Ten % of participants reported having contracted the COVID-19 virus and 36% reported that someone they knew personally had contracted the COVID-19 virus, and another 35% reported that a family member was an essential worker.
2.2.2 | Neuroticism

The personality trait of neuroticism was controlled for to distinguish the impact of disclosure of high arousal negative affect from more stable levels of vulnerability to negative affect. Neuroticism was assessed with the Ten Item Personality Inventory (Gosling et al., 2003), a 10-item measure of the Five-Factor Model. It is a widely used instrument, which has reached adequate levels of convergence with peer reports, test-retest reliability, and patterns of predicted external correlate (Ziegler et al., 2014). Neuroticism was assessed with the items “anxious, easily upset” and “calm, emotionally stable” (reversed coded). The internal reliability for neuroticism was $\alpha = 0.68$.

2.2.3 | Attention check

At the 1/4 mark of the first survey, participants were given an attention check embedded among five satisfaction with life items. The instruction read “For this question answer 5.” Six participants did not indicate “5,” therefore their data were excluded from analyses, leaving a remaining follow-up sample of 90 participants.

2.2.4 | Narrative accounts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests

The narratives (collected at T1) were coded by two raters based on the circumplex model of affect (Remmington et al., 2000) on a scale ranging from 1 to 4: (1) high arousal positive affect, (2) low arousal positive affect, (3) low arousal negative affect, and (4) high arousal negative affect. For example, feelings of enthusiasm and passion were coded as high arousal positive affect, feelings of tranquility and comfort were coded as low arousal positive affect, feelings of fatigue and sadness were coded as low arousal negative affect, and feelings of tension and alertness were coded as high arousal negative affect. These ratings were made separately for the portion of the narrative that concerned the pandemic and the BLM protests. We calculated a mean across the affect ratings for the two events. The raters’ interpretations were reliable, $\alpha = 0.77$.

For example, the following was coded as high arousal positive affect:

> The unity I saw within my community encouraged me to also join the fight, I joined protest, listened to podcast, signed up for any training or education platform I could find on the current situation and challenge my thoughts to reeducate myself in order to become a better advocate for my community on race issues.

As low arousal positive affect:

> I was happy that the BLM movement was revive and ready to make a change. I was also happy that people other than Black people were outraged by the killing and supported the movement. I was hopeful that change would come especially since there were so many events.

As low arousal negative affect:

> But as time went on it seems like the momentum died. This made me feel very sad and confused because I really believed now would be the perfect time to make the social political changes needed to end racism in some way.

And as high arousal negative affect:
The killing of George Floyd really was shocking and made me feel very angry.

2.2.5 | Adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests

At T1 and T2, participants answered 8-items repeated twice on each survey regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic (presented first) and the BLM protests had affected them in eight areas of their life: school/education, employment/finances, social/friendships, romantic relationships, leisure activities/hobbies, mental health/well-being, physical health, and motivation. The scales were aggregated to form separate adjustment subscales for the COVID-19 pandemic, $\alpha = 0.80$, and for the BLM protests, $\alpha = 0.86$.

Specifically, respondents were asked to rate each item on a 7-point scale indicating whether that area of their life got better or worse because of the COVID-19 pandemic (or the BLM protests). The exact ratings ranged from got a lot worse ($-3$), got worse ($-2$), got somewhat worse ($-1$), stayed the same (0), got somewhat better ($+1$), got better ($+2$), and got a lot better ($+3$).

2.2.6 | Psychological need satisfaction

At T1 and T2, the balanced measure of psychological needs scale (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012) was used to assess psychological need satisfaction for the three needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) with a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). For example, the item "I was free to do things my own way" was used to assess autonomy, the item "I felt close and connected with other people who are important to me" was used to assess relatedness, and the item "I experienced some kind of failure or was unable to do well at something" was used to assess competence. The 6-item scales were highly reliable, $\alpha$'s > 0.80.

2.3 | Analytic plan

Data screening found the variables of interest to be normally distributed, making them suitable for parametric analyses. Gender did not moderate any of the relations. Preliminary descriptive analyses were conducted to show the means and correlations for the key variables in the study (affect disclosure, adjustment, and the basic psychological needs). A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine change in adjustment. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to examine the relation of disclosure of high arousal negative affect to change in adjustment over time. Mean changes in adjustment scores were calculated as $T2 - T1$. The personality trait of neuroticism was controlled to distinguish the impact of disclosure of high arousal negative affect from more stable levels of vulnerability to negative affect. Furthermore, to consider the possible role of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, or competence as a mediator between affect disclosure in the narratives and adjustment, the correlations between affect disclosure and the residualized change scores in levels of satisfaction of the three needs were calculated. Mediation analyses were performed on the associations that proved to be significant in the regressions. We used the method outlined by A. F. Hayes (2018) to test these mediation models by estimating 95% confidence intervals (CI) of the indirect effect using bootstrap resampling ($k = 10,000$) procedures. For all analyses, an $\alpha$ value was set at 0.05 to determine significance. Analyses were conducted with the SPSS statistics software (Version 27).
3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Preliminary results

Participants were asked to write a narrative concerning two significant events that happened in the spring of 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests. Only three participants reported disclosure of high arousal positive affect compared to 18 who reported disclosure of high arousal negative affect. The mean across the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM protests ratings was 3.05, indicating that disclosure of high arousal negative affect predominated in the narratives.

3.2 | Main results

Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations for the main variables. One sample t-tests from the July adjustment measures suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significantly negative effect on participants’ functioning, $t(79) = -7.44$, $p < 0.001$, whereas the BLM protests had a marginally positive effect on participants’ functioning, $t(79) = 1.72$, $p = 0.089$.

To examine change from July to December, we conducted a $2 \times 2$ repeated measures ANOVA with event (COVID-19 and BLM protests) x time (July and December) as within subject factors. A significant main effect for event revealed that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, $M = -0.37$, $SD = 1.08$, was rated significantly more negative than the BLM protests, $M = 0.27$, $SD = 0.81$, $F(1, 85) = 63.85$. A main effect for time may suggest that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests was rated significantly more negatively in July, $M = -0.22$, $SD = 0.75$, than in December, $M = 0.12$, $SD = 1.15$, $F(1, 85) = 10.10$. A significant event x time interaction effect, $F(1, 85) = 8.73$, $p = 0.004$, may suggest that attitudes about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic improved significantly more from July to December, $M$ change $= 0.47$, $SD = 1.17$, than did attitudes about the impact of the BLM protests, $M$ change $= 0.19$, $SD = 0.95$.

To examine the relation of disclosure of high arousal negative affect to changes in adjustment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests, separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted in which adjustment in December was regressed on adjustment in July and the personality trait of neuroticism. Neuroticism was controlled to distinguish the impact of disclosure of high arousal negative affect from more stable levels of vulnerability to negative affect.

The regression for adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic in December yielded a significant multiple $R$ of 0.641, $F(3, 76) = 16.47$, $p < 0.001$. Table 2 shows that adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic was moderately stable over time, $b = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$. The personality trait of neuroticism was negatively related to adjustment to the

| TABLE 1 Means and standard deviations among the descriptive variables |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Variables** | **M** | **SD** |
|----------------|-------|--------|
| Affect disclosure in the narratives | 3.05  | 0.74   |
| **Adjustment to COVID-19** | | |
| T1 adjustment | -0.62 | 0.74   |
| T2 adjustment | -0.08 | 1.35   |
| **Adjustment to BLM protests** | | |
| T1 adjustment | 0.09  | 0.48   |
| T2 adjustment | 0.31  | 1.10   |

Abbreviation: BLM, black lives matter.
COVID-19 pandemic, $b = -0.33$, $p < 0.001$. Finally, disclosure of high arousal negative affect in narratives was significantly related to higher adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic in December, $b = 0.23$, $p = 0.014$.

The regression for adjustment to the BLM movement in December yielded a significant multiple $R$ of 0.614, $F(3, 76) = 18.87$, $p < 0.001$. Table 2 shows that adjustment to the BLM movement was moderately stable over time, $b = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$. The personality trait of neuroticism was negatively related to adjustment to the BLM movement, $b = -0.27$, $p < 0.001$. Finally, disclosure of high arousal negative affect in narratives was significantly related to higher adjustment to the BLM movement in December, $b = 0.18$, $p = 0.054$.

Correlations suggest that disclosure of high arousal negative affect was significantly positively related to autonomy need satisfaction, $r = 0.27$, $p = 0.019$, but was not associated with relatedness need satisfaction, $r = 0.08$, $p = 0.509$, or competence need satisfaction, $r = 0.06$, $p = 0.637$.

### 3.3 Mediation results

Mediation analyses were performed to test whether autonomy need satisfaction mediated the relation between disclosure of high arousal negative affect in the narratives and adjustment. We combined the measures of adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM protests to simplify the presentation, $T1 r = 0.362$, $p < 0.001$, and $T2 r = 0.850$, $p < 0.001$. Specifically, we tested the sequential indirect effects of autonomy need satisfaction with the association between disclosure of high arousal negative affect in the narratives and adjustment. The mediation analyses used the residualized change scores from T1 to T2 for autonomy need satisfaction and the adjustment measures.

Results from the mediation analyses (Figure 1) showed that disclosure of high arousal negative affect in the narratives was significantly positively associated with autonomy need satisfaction, $t(73) = 2.40$, $p = 0.019$.

### TABLE 2 Separate hierarchical regression analyses depicting adjustment, neuroticism, and emotional disclosure

| Variables                      | Adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic (T2) | Adjustment to the BLM protests (T2) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|                               | $b$ | $t$ | $p$ | $b$ | $t$ | $p$ |
| Baseline adjustment (T1)      | 0.509 | 5.047 | <0.001 | 0.540 | 5.476 | <0.001 |
| Trait neuroticism             | $-0.330$ | $-3.333$ | 0.001 | $-0.266$ | $-2.406$ | 0.019 |
| Negative affect disclosure    | 0.230 | 2.517 | 0.014 | 0.184 | 1.958 | 0.054 |

Abbreviation: BLM, black lives matter

**Figure 1** Direct and indirect effects of affect disclosure in the narratives on participants’ adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests over time. Boldface denotes significance as the confidence interval, defined as a two-tailed $\alpha < 0.05$, does not straddle zero (A. F. Hayes, 2018). BLM, black lives matter; CI, confidence interval.
Autonomy need satisfaction was positively related to adjustment, $t(72) = 3.66, p < 0.001$. Next, we examined the total, indirect, and direct effects. The total effect of disclosure of high arousal negative affect in the narratives on adjustment was significant at $b = 0.26, SE = 0.12, t(73) = 2.13, p = 0.036, 95\% CI [0.02–0.51]$. The indirect effect of disclosure of high arousal negative affect in the narratives on adjustment through autonomy need satisfaction was estimated to be $b = 0.12, SE = 0.05, 95\% CI [0.04–0.25]$. The direct effect of disclosure of high arousal negative affect in the narratives was no longer significant, $t(73) = 1.23, p = 0.222$, suggesting full mediation.

4 | DISCUSSION

The present study used an SDT framework to investigate whether the way Black young adults constructed their narratives regarding the historic and potentially life-defining events of the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests related to adjustment over time. Narrative reports were collected to determine the psychological interpretations of the two events and were coded based on affect disclosure. We examined the role of the basic psychological need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Precisely, the need for autonomy was found to play a key role in describing the association between disclosure of high arousal negative affect and positive adjustment over time.

4.1 | Narratives

Research shows that "the cumulative psychological wounds resulting from historical traumatic experiences, such as colonization, genocide, slavery, dislocation, and other related trauma" are as damaging as bodily injuries (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; p. 2). These findings are congruent with the narratives found in our study, which featured overwhelming sadness and distress about the continued suffering and marginalization of Black populations from systemic racism and injustices, and the personal fear, frustration, and fatigue felt about the endless repetition of such incidents. Narratives also included alternate feelings of resilience, optimism, and hope.

The disclosure of high arousal negative affect in Black young adults' narratives about these events might have resulted in integrative emotional regulation, which improves the process of encoding and retrieving memories (Pascuzzi & Smorti, 2017), potentially leading to the harmonious integration of the events into their broader life narratives. Importantly, well-crafted narratives influence individuals’ generativity (i.e., contribution to upcoming generations) (D. P. McAdams et al., 1997). As a result of continuous oppression experienced by Black communities, this may be especially critical for Black individuals as racial trauma has been passed from one generation to the next, occurring both within and across Black families (Watson et al., 2020). Since treating intergenerational racial trauma requires connecting the past to the present (Barlow, 2018; Hines, 2019), therapists must carefully listen to Black individuals’ narratives.

4.2 | Adjustment and narratives

Next, the present research investigated how Black young adults constructed their narratives regarding the two influential events of the year 2020 and how they related to positive adjustment over time. Our results suggest that greater disclosure of high arousal negative affect in the narratives was not initially associated with better psychosocial adjustment. However, the follow-up conducted 5 months later found that disclosure of high arousal negative affect in the earlier narratives was positively associated with better adjustment. This is in line with prior research showing that the health benefits of elaborating on traumatic life experiences may not emerge at first, but
rather gradually across time (Pennebaker, 1993), and may speak to the importance of disclosure and the process of constructing one's own narrative, rather than the narrative itself (Suedfeld & Pennebaker, 1997).

Even though the narratives related to better adaptation when the need for autonomy was satisfied, the elicited narratives were not related to improved adjustment in any causal way. Indeed, recent research concluded that young adults are always engaging in reworking their narrative identity (D. P. McAdams, 2019). The current research probably only captured this process and suggest that given the brief timeframe, young adults who were more open to the negative affect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM movements eventually coped better.

Still, these results must be interpreted with caution as research suggest that memories can have differential effects depending on the valence of the event and the connections that are made (Merrill et al., 2016). The participants of this study were asked to discuss their narrative in July, a few weeks after the main BLM events, making it possible that stability has not yet been achieved. Indeed, the way individuals remember is influenced by social circumstances and time periods, and this must be considered when penetrating participants' narratives, especially to avoid contributing to the experience of trauma.

4.3 | The role of autonomy

The way individuals cope with difficult situations varies depending on many contextual and personal factors. Our results suggest that disclosure of high arousal negative affect may be related to positive adjustment because it enhances the psychological need for autonomy. This finding echo prior research showing that constructing a narrative surrounding trauma promotes empowerment in Black individuals (Chioneso et al., 2020). Interestingly, feelings of autonomy also help individuals cope with racism (Johnson & Carter, 2020). Taken together, this may partly explain why autonomy seemed to have acted as a mechanism to explain the association between disclosure of high arousal negative affect in the narratives and positive adjustment.

As hypothesized, our results suggest that autonomy need satisfaction mediated the relationship between disclosure of high arousal negative affect in narratives and adjustment over time. This is not surprising given that the need for autonomy consists of self-volition, self-endorsed choices, and critical thinking (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which are all essential elements when confronted with traumatic life events (Rude & Haner, 2018), which could have the potential to lead to feelings of greater empowerment in Black individuals’ life narrative (Mosley et al., 2021). These findings are consistent with self-determination research that highlights the prominence of the need for autonomy over the psychological needs for relatedness and competence in particular contexts (Ryan et al., 2021).

4.4 | Limitations

There are limitations to consider within the current research. First, the study was entirely based on self-reports and would be strengthened by adding family and peer reports to corroborate the adjustment outcomes. However, given that one's life narrative is from the perspective of oneself, we believe that self-report is critical for constructing narratives. Second, our sample size was low and therefore requires further investigation to confirm findings. Third, although not the focus of the study, it would be informative to compare our findings with the experiences of other demographic communities. This would allow for the investigation of whether the experience of Black young adults was shared by other Racialized groups. Finally, another limitation of this study is that it only enquired upon personal rather than group psychological needs. Recent research suggests that individuals respond to both their own needs and those of their group (Kachanoff et al., 2019) and that a focus on the collective is prominent in Black psychology (Koestner & Holding, 2021).
4.5 | Future directions

Collective identity, which describes one's sense of personal identity and connection to a group, has been found to have a positive impact on Black individuals' adjustment (Johnson & Carter, 2020). We encourage future research to enquire whether collective identity may have influenced Black young adults' narratives and how it related to adjustment. Furthermore, future research should investigate how positive racial socialization (Barr & Neville, 2014), and effective racism-related coping (Forsyth & Carter, 2014) in one's narratives may impact adjustment. Another interesting area for future research would be examining broader life narratives instead of narratives related to specific events. Finally, although there is evidence that the act of expressive writing results in exposure and higher levels of emotional integration, which in turn decreases distress and increases feelings of hope (A. M. Hayes et al., 2005), more research is needed to determine whether engaging in disclosure of high arousal negative affect in narratives is a successful way to cope with stressful life events, particularly for Black young adults.

5 | CONCLUSION

The present study investigated whether the way Black young adults constructed their narratives regarding the events of the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests related to adjustment over time. Our results suggest that disclosure of high arousal negative affect in narratives was associated with better adjustment over time. This may be because engaging in disclosure of high arousal negative affect allowed individuals to unpack their emotions and attach meaning to their experiences, potentially resulting in a beneficial integration of the events into their broader life narratives. Moreover, satisfaction of the psychological need for autonomy mediated the association between narratives and adjustment. In the spring of 2020, Black young adults found themselves facing the most dangerous pandemic in a century and the largest civil rights protests in half a century, both of which disproportionately affected Black communities (Bassett et al., 2020). Acknowledging the emotional impact of these events in the construction of their narratives appears to have allowed them to feel autonomous and persevere and expand our understanding of how psychological factors differentially impact adjustment over the course of tumultuous societal events.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank the Black Community Resource Center of Montreal for helping us develop and carry out this project. The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The preparation of this manuscript was supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada partnership-engagement grant (SSHRC-254-214).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data sets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the fact that they constitute an excerpt of research in progress but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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How to cite this article: Audet, É. C., Thai, H., Holding, A. C., Davids, J., Fang, X., & Koestner, R. (2022). The depth of stories: How Black young adults' disclosure of high arousal negative affect in narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM protests improved adjustment over the year 2020. Journal of Community Psychology, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22929