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Viral Justice

How We Grow the World We Want

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Society / Discrimination

Take-Aways

- Create “viral justice” by unlearning dominant narratives and promoting collective healing.
- Build support networks to weather the stress and physical damage caused by oppressive systems.
- Replace punitive policing with community-centered harm reduction policies.
- Advocate for educational reforms that upend status-quo curricula and disciplinary practices.
- Reimagine work; give all employees access to the social and material conditions they need to thrive.
- Confront the insidious effects of racism in the health care system.
- Pressure medical and scientific institutions to be held accountable for the damage they’ve inflicted.
- Commit to building a better world, one small, creative act at a time.

Recommendation

In the age of COVID-19, you may view viruses as a lingering threat. But as contagions kill, so does sexism, classism, racism, ableism and colonialism, writes award-winning author and Princeton professor Ruha Benjamin. She seeks to inspire you to take individualized, small-scale actions to develop new networks of care and support for those in your community. Benjamin calls on readers to work towards building a more inclusive world in which all people can thrive, not merely survive. You can promote “viral justice” by committing to advance the collective good, creating spaces in which everyone feels safe to flourish.

Summary

Create “viral justice” by unlearning dominant narratives and promoting collective healing.

Forms of systemic oppression, such as sexism, classism, racism, ableism and colonialism, operate much like viruses. In maintaining the “privilege” of the status quo, systems of oppression kill people and rob them of the material and social conditions they need to survive. It’s time to treat these societal “viruses” as signals that something is wrong with the status quo. When you search for opportunities to dismantle oppressive systems and build a more inclusive, caring world, you pursue “viral justice.”

“For family and friends, whose hearts are broken apart, the shattering is not only emotional but physiological; the trauma gets under the skin, into the bloodstream, making collective forms of healing and protest...so vital.”

You may worry that you’re only one person. How can you change seemingly intractable systems? Let viral justice be your rallying cry, inviting others who desire change to join you. The first step of viral justice requires you to unlearn patterns of behavior and thought that reinforce dominant narratives. Reclaim the act of dreaming; imagine the promotion of a collective good rather than perpetuating the oppressive status quo.

Build support networks to weather the stress and physical damage caused by oppressive systems.

“Weathering” is a public health concept, coined by researcher Arline Geronimus in 1992. It refers to how people physically embody the stress of living within oppressive systems. Weathering a racist climate, for example, affects everyone’s health, and contributes to racial health disparities, such as preventable illness and premature death. In the United States, Black teenage boys are more likely to die before the age of 65 than teenage boys in Bangladesh. The health of Latinx immigrants deteriorates each generation after their families arrive in the United States.

“If the struggle to make ends meet is one of the principal causes of weathering, then viral justice is about creating social relations that are vivifying instead of exhausting.”

As hurricanes and storms devastate communities, acute crises on an individual level, such as job loss, eviction or the death of loved ones prove devastating. Many people also weather the damaging health impacts of chronic stress, such as worrying about police brutality or watching the cost-of-living rise.

Experiencing traumatic events ages you prematurely. The cellular age of Black women is typically seven-and-a-half years older than that of their white counterparts, illustrating how trauma can shorten lifespans. All people are forced to weather the racist climate in which they live.

White people must play an active role in dismantling that climate, which affects them too. Protect yourself and others from the negative impacts of weathering: Cultivate supportive relationships, commit to practices of healing and accountability, and build networks of solidarity.

Replace punitive policing with community-centered harm reduction policies.

Sociologist Alyasah Sewell writes in her essay “Collateral Damage,” about how police surveillance negatively affects people other than those who end up behind bars; it affects the health of entire communities. Many Americans feel “hunted” by police, whom they witness engaging in acts of “licensed terror.”

These behaviors range from pepper spraying homeless people’s sleeping bags to shooting unarmed civilians. People who feel targeted by the police experience higher rates of diabetes, asthma and high blood pressure. You can enact viral justice by working to dismantle a punitive policing system that unjustly targets marginalized groups, and nurture communities of care in its place.

“I’m not talking about trust-building projects that seek...police reform, but rather the everyday people and institutions that help us relate to one another in life-affirming ways.”

On an individual level, reflect on your own implicit biases: To whom do you automatically award sympathy and respect? Is there anyone you dismiss or treat as less than human? In today’s society, the constant encouragement to report on those you deem suspicious using apps such as Ghetto Tracker and Nextdoor perpetuates systems of oppression.

There are 240 million calls annually to 911 to report “non-emergencies” – noise complaints and “suspicious” people simply existing in public. Practice viral justice by choosing a more empathetic approach to navigating community problems, and replacing punitive solutions with community-centered harm reduction systems.

Advocate for educational reforms that upend status-quo curricula and disciplinary practices.

Law professor Patricia K. Williams describes the effects of racism on the individual as a “spirit murder,” that robs people of their self-worth and dignity and creates emotional wounds. For example, teachers may fail to recognize Black students as gifted and talented, because their image of successful students is white.

Educators who fail to nurture properly can impede students’ ability to authentically express themselves, inflicting deep wounds. Anthropologist Savannah Shange points out that while schools may embrace

anti-racism on the surface – perhaps decorating hallways with images of Black scholars and artists – they nonetheless often enact racist disciplinary practices.

Researchers Dorothy Hines and Jennifer Wilmot, for example, found that schools punish Black girls more often and severely for minor infractions – such as having “too much attitude” – than they punish their white female counterparts. When schools rely on “zero-tolerance” disciplinary approaches, they damage students’ self-esteem and rob them of education and life opportunities.

“Schools in the United States and throughout much of the world reproduce existing social hierarchies. They are often engines of inequality, not opportunity.”

Embrace viral justice in the educational system by advocating for reforms at the local level.

1. **Replace punitive actions with “restorative practices”** – Educators should aspire to display a calm and loving presence and resolve harms inflicted on students, teachers and parents.
2. **Prioritize recruiting and retaining teachers of color** – When students have teachers of their own race, they prove more likely to excel academically.
3. **Update the curriculum** – K-12 schools must better integrate ethnic studies and Black history into their curriculums and ensure all teachers have the training they need to properly teach these subjects.
4. **Hire counselors** – Schools should invest in counselors to ensure young people’s emotional well-being and address trauma, rather than inviting police to walk the hallways.

Reimagine work; give all employees access to the social and material conditions they need to thrive.

As tech companies disrupt industries, gig-economy ads feature buzzwords like “flexibility,” “autonomy” and “freedom” to attract workers to precarious freelance roles with no guarantees of security. According to the US Bureau of Labor statistics, in 2017, 34% of US workers performed gig work, 1.6 million of whom worked for tech platforms such as GrubHub or TaskRabbit.

Gig workers don’t receive benefits such as health insurance, and companies can terminate them without recourse. People working minimum-wage jobs whose earnings don’t keep pace with the cost of living are also vulnerable. These so-called “essential workers” are frequently people of color.

“Reimagining the place of work in our lives also means understanding that rest, like healthy foods, clean water and fresh air, is essential.”

During the pandemic, one survey found that over half of gig workers lost their jobs, while about a quarter suffered a reduction in hours. Meanwhile, the rich got richer after COVID-19. Fifty million Americans found themselves out of work in 2020, as US billionaires saw their wealth increase by 10%.

Imagine a future in which the rich no longer devalue human labor. This would involve redistributing wealth to ensure everyone has access to “the social and material conditions necessary for living a flourishing life,” urges Kali Akuno, founder of the Mississippi grassroots initiative, Cooperation Jackson, that works to create a “solidarity economy.” Akuno believes that equitable workplaces commit to being more democratic, which requires experimenting with participatory ways of organizing work and allocating funds.

Viral justice requires a perspective shift. Commit to valuing human beings as more than units of labor. This entails the end of fetishizing overwork and treating rest as a right, not a luxury.

Confront the insidious effects of racism in the health care system.

The US health care system has a long history of contributing to the institutionalized denigration of Black lives that continues today. For example, the so-called “father” of gynecology, J. Marion Sims, performed experimental surgeries on enslaved women without anesthetic. Today Black women face poorer health outcomes and face a higher risk of diabetes and obesity than their white counterparts.

Data suggests medical racism is rampant in the United States. For example, George Mason University researchers found that when white physicians care for Black babies, their death rate is three times that of white babies.

“Is it any wonder that the child mortality rate in Cuba is lower despite the fact that per-capita health care spending in the US is the highest in the world?”

On an institutional level, viral justice entails pressuring physicians, medical students and medical centers to meet the needs of people of color. Push medical schools to recruit more diverse student bodies.

On a community level, viral justice means white people must question their biases, and take the health-related experiences of minorities seriously. If you’re a person of color, viral justice may entail confronting your own internalized oppression to overcome fear of external judgment. Remind yourself that you and your children deserve care.

Pressure medical and scientific institutions to be held accountable for the damage they’ve inflicted.

Minority groups struggle to trust dominant institutions, due to the prevalence of racism in scientific and medical communities. Black people have a history of being unwilling participants in clinical trials and medical research. For example, researchers in Tuskegee, Alabama spent 40 years studying the untreated effects of syphilis on African Americans, withholding life-saving medicine – the study ended only in 1972. In the 1990s, Johns Hopkins Kennedy Krieger Institute researchers intentionally exposed over 100 newborn Black babies and children to toxic lead paint to study abatement methods.

“From the time they are born, white babies are also paying the price for anti-Black racism in medicine, albeit not as steeply as Black infants.”

The erosion of Black trust in institutions with histories of racism is understandable, and affects white people as well. Some in the Black community, for example, struggled to trust COVID-19 researchers, leading to vaccine skepticism.

Pressure institutions to be accountable and make reparations to victims and their families. Elevate the legacy of Black scientists and researchers behind world-changing breakthroughs to dispel the myth of the “White Savior” within the scientific and medical communities.

Commit to building a better world, one small, creative act at a time.

Reimagine a better world by following these four steps.

“Dreaming is a luxury. Many people have spent their lives being forced to live inside other people’s dreams.”

- **Reflect on your own biases** – What harmful thought patterns hold you back from creating a world that expands possibilities and opportunities for all?
- **Take micro-actions** – Big, macro-level change occurs when people take small, everyday micro-level actions. For example, if you own a small business, hang an anti-racist sign to inspire change.
- **Demonstrate inclusivity** – Create spaces where everybody knows they’re welcome and safe, and pressure those in power to do the same. Campaign for universal housing, equitable access to education or public transportation.
- **“Live poetically”** – To transform oppressive systems, embrace new ways of thinking and behaving. Open yourself to creativity. Live poetically; find beauty in the ordinary and create space for divergence.

About the Author

Ruha Benjamin is professor of African-American studies at Princeton University and also authored *Race After Technology* and *People’s Science*. She serves as founding director of the Ida B. Wells JUST Data Lab, which seeks to innovate how data is created, produced and disseminated.



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