



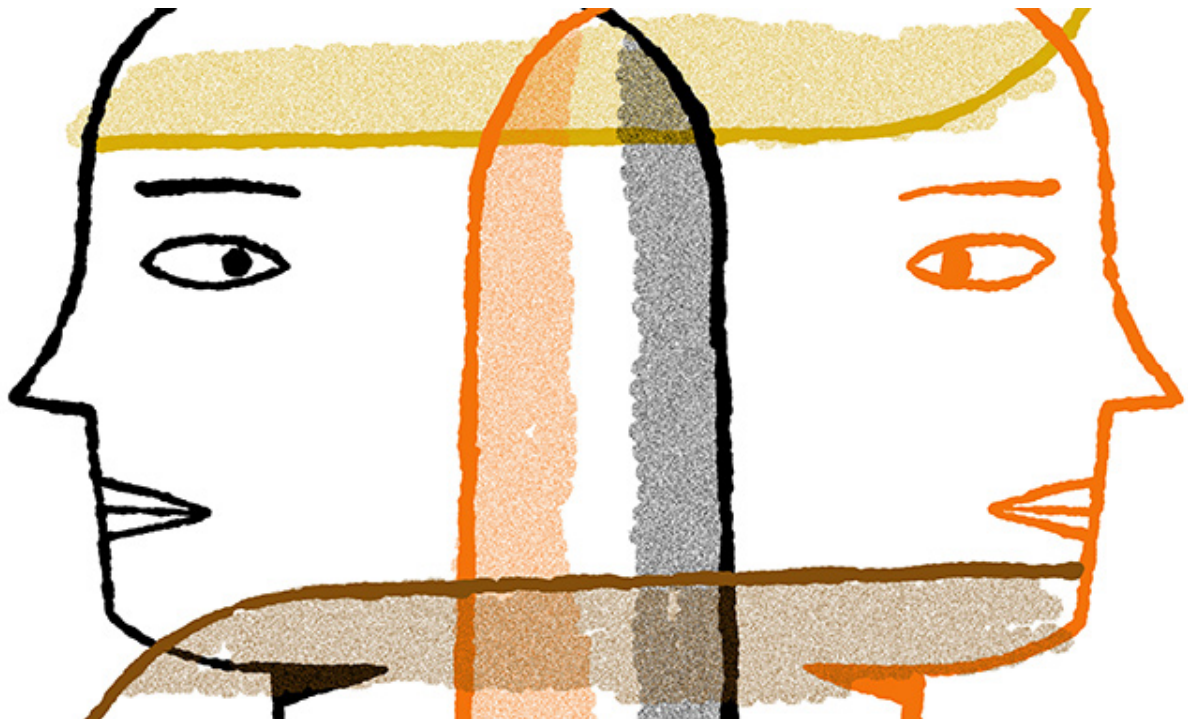
Psychology's urgent need to dismantle racism

In a time of crisis and racial reckoning, what is psychology's opportunity, and responsibility to take action?

By Efua Andoh Date created: April 1, 2021 10 min read

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Psychology has an opportunity to continue evolving and meet the needs of a changing U.S. population—starting by countering the pervasive and damaging effects of racism. Experts contend that anti-racist psychological science is better science because it adapts to the reality of an increasingly diverse America. In short, psychology has two choices—advance or become irrelevant.

Pursuing anti-racism in psychology requires a critical examination of how the discipline structures opportunity in ways that uphold White supremacy. Who or what is getting studied, and who is being served? What is psychology's particular responsibility in responding to racism? Who is in the pipeline to become a psychologist? Who is being recruited, trained, and promoted? Are psychologists doing the uncomfortable self-examination to grow toward anti-racism? Whose research is getting funded, published, and cited? How are psychologists countering racism, challenging research norms, and building bridges as mentors and allies?

Most standardization samples in psychological research are made up of individuals from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies, which can skew the generalizations we make about human behavior (Henrich, J., et al., *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 33, No. 2–3, 2010 (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/behavioral-and-brain-sciences/article/weirdest-people-in-the-world/BF84F7517D56AFF7B7EB58411A554C17>)). Research on Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) is rarer and often requires a White comparison group to get published (Buchanan, N., et al., “Upending Racism in Psychological Science,” under review (<https://psyarxiv.com/6nk4x/>)).

Who does psychology serve?

APA's Center for Workforce Studies projects that the demand for psychologists from non-White populations within the United States will grow by 24% by 2030 (<https://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/supply-demand/demand-racial-groups.pdf>). If the field continues to prioritize White populations, how will it be ready to meet the demands of a changing demographic? Making the field more responsive to the needs of a rapidly diversifying nation is a pressing concern.

Anti-racism within psychological science has never been more critical, according to Mitch Prinstein, PhD, ABPP, APA's new chief science officer. "Science is the pursuit of truth, and until we can embark on scientific practices that are not dominated by White supremacy, we're only going to be getting part of the truth," Prinstein says. "This is urgent. This is mandatory. This is long overdue."

Psychology's responsibility

Psychology's contributions to better understand the multifaceted aspects of racism are vast. As experts on human behavior, psychologists have long studied racism's devastating effects, with much of that research leading to positive change. A compelling example is the societal impact of the Kenneth and Mamie Clark doll studies (<https://www.apa.org/research/action/segregation>), which illuminated the devastating impact of internalized racism on children of color and contributed to the monumental 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision to desegregate American public schools.

Psychologists have also helped develop the world's understanding of how the human brain shapes and processes bias. Psychologists have long documented the "other-race effect," that is, the tendency for human beings to recognize and remember the faces of members of their own race better than those of other races. The advent of fMRI has allowed neuroscientists to pinpoint critical regions of the brain where such facial processing of other races occurs (Eberhardt, J. L., *American Psychologist*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2005 (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2005-01817-004>)). Studies have shown a link between processing of other-race faces and implicit biases about different racial groups. These findings have significant implications for highly consequential situations, such as eyewitness identification in judicial proceedings (Wilson, J. P., et al., *Social Issues and Policy Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2013 (<https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1751-2409.2012.01044.x>)) and the misperception of pain tolerance in medical settings (Mende-Siedlecki, P., et al., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, No. 148, Vol. 5, 2019 (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31070440/>)).

However, psychology has also been used to uphold systems of oppression, as evidenced by the use of psychological research by some psychologists in the eugenics movement (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/written/201806/the-long-shadow-the-eugenics-movement>) and pathological views of BIPOC communities promoted through psychological testing and assessment (<https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/testing-assessment-monograph.pdf>).

"How things are arranged in our social world affects what people come to think about that social world, what they come to expect, and what they come to fear," says James M. Jones, PhD, a professor emeritus of psychological and brain sciences and Africana studies at the University of Delaware. "It is important for psychologists to analyze and understand the social and cognitive structures that maintain racist structures."

The pipeline

Diversity within the psychology workforce remains a challenge. Most recent data (<https://www.apa.org/workforce/data-tools/demographics>) show that non-Whites make up only 16% of the psychology workforce, as follows—Hispanic (6%), Black/African American (4%), Asian (4%), and other (2%). However, the increasing diversity at the psychology graduate level is a welcome sign that the future of the profession is changing. In 2019, 38% of psychology graduate students were from racially and ethnically (<https://www.apa.org/workforce/presentations/convention-symposium.pdf>) diverse groups, with 12% being African American. However, significant work remains to continue to recruit, retain, and train a psychology workforce as diverse as America.

"We are becoming a majority-minority country," says NiCole Buchanan, PhD, a professor of psychology at Michigan State University. "We cannot continue to pretend that these different individuals are not consequential for the field. Our lack of diverse individuals self-selecting into psychology is because we have not demonstrated that it's a place where they matter, where they are welcomed, and where they are reflected."

Kevin O. Cokley, PhD, a professor of educational psychology and African and African diaspora studies at the University of Texas at Austin, saw how introducing psychology courses on the African American experience drew Black undergraduates to the field.

"These were classes that students were hungry for. What we started to see was that they could see themselves reflected in the discipline and were now interested in pursuing psychology as a career. If you want the discipline to be anti-racist, at the most basic level you have to make the discipline more diverse," he says.

Uncomfortable work

The [APA Race and Ethnicity Guidelines](https://www.apa.org/about/policy/guidelines-race-ethnicity.pdf) (https://www.apa.org/about/policy/guidelines-race-ethnicity.pdf) recommend that, as a fundamental step, psychologists "strive for awareness of their own positionality in relation to ethnicity and race." This requires consideration of one's own biases, privileges, and racial socialization. Gaining an understanding of one's place in the racial and sociocultural hierarchy may not be easy for White psychologists. Shedding past obliviousness about systemic racism may elicit feelings of racial anxiety or guilt. Some may feel a sense of complicity in upholding White supremacy and benefiting from a racist system. There may even be feelings of White fragility, grief, and loss as their racial awareness increases.

However, that discomfort may prove useful. Lisa Spanierman, PhD, a professor of counseling psychology at Arizona State University and researcher on White individuals' racial attitudes, says, "Guilt when coupled with true empathy and understanding of the structures of White supremacy and how they operate in society can motivate White people to action."

Psychologists can also work to overcome their biases and blind spots by building their multicultural competence. This requires exploring the psychological science, much conducted by BIPOC scholars, on issues of race and identity and the impact of discrimination on the mental and physical health of communities of color. For psychologist practitioners, this knowledge can be gleaned in part through continuing-education programs, and several state licensing boards specifically require courses in cultural diversity for license renewal.

Confronting racism in research

At the institutional level, Buchanan and colleagues provide a comprehensive set of 25 recommendations for dismantling White supremacy in the conduct, reporting, review, and dissemination of psychological science in their paper "[Upending Racism in Psychological Science](https://psyarxiv.com/6nk4x/)" (https://psyarxiv.com/6nk4x/)."

"While we have to take accountability around our individual actions, that's never going to be enough to dismantle a system of oppression," Buchanan says. "We have to make demands on the system that bridge greater inclusion and create systems that promote equity rather than leaving those things to chance." Their paper includes a diversity accountability index that breaks each recommendation into concrete action steps that authors, educators, and journal editors and reviewers can take to counter racism in psychological science.

Idia Thurston, PhD, one of the paper's coauthors and an associate professor of psychological and brain sciences at Texas A&M University, encourages the use of system-centered language to describe the structural factors that maintain racism.

"We know that those structures exist. We function in a way that highlights those structures, but how can we use our language in a way that shows that structural racism is happening?" she says.

For example, rather than simply stating that Blacks have higher blood pressure on average than Whites, she encourages researchers to describe the experiences and environmental stressors that might contribute to higher blood pressure for Blacks. She

also recommends that researchers and the institutions that support them set benchmarks and enforce accountability for the use of system-centered language.

Disrupting research norms

Monnica Williams, PhD, director of the Laboratory for Culture and Mental Health Disparities at the University of Ottawa, urges journal editors to disrupt Whiteness as the norm in psychological research by mandating that authors describe the ethnic and racial diversity of their samples. In her position as an associate journal editor, she requires submitters to do so or risk rejection of their articles. She says not specifying the sample's diversity creates a twofold problem.

"Number one: If people don't describe the race and ethnicity of the sample, we don't know what it is and can't look at differences in outcomes by race and ethnicity," she says. "Number two: A lot of the research overrepresents White people, and we don't really have a good idea of how big that problem is if people aren't telling us who's in their sample."

Another way to disrupt racist norms in research is to reimagine the peer review process. [Reviewer Zero](https://www.reviewerzero.net/) (<https://urldefense.com/v3/https://www.reviewerzero.net/!!HgxT5Xd5qx1T!A9QfT3jzkRdpgJrMFALtJlZ23Cn6msm66WimgEpD3h-r8qiEgEfcBOSAKc%24>) is a multidisciplinary coalition of scientists working to address systemic inequalities in peer review by organizing and training faculty to provide constructive, culturally aware feedback to minoritized trainees. The group began organically in the summer of 2020 following the death of George Floyd. Reviewer Zero's organizing committee has since recruited more than 1,000 faculty as potential reviewers and surveyed more than 700 early career researchers to gauge their experiences with peer review. They continue to welcome applications from potential [reviewers](https://urldefense.com/v3/https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScPGMnor4ZqAL8-kk9_NctLeHPVcbxXhC4VtOktnKXpgPwtzg/viewform!!HgxT5Xd5qx1T!A9QfT3jzkRdpgJrMFALtJlZ23Cn6msm66WimgEpD3h-r8qiEgEfcBOSAKc%24) (https://urldefense.com/v3/https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScPGMnor4ZqAL8-kk9_NctLeHPVcbxXhC4VtOktnKXpgPwtzg/viewform!!HgxT5Xd5qx1T!A9QfT3jzkRdpgJrMFALtJlZ23Cn6msm66WimgEpD3h-r8qiEgEfcBOSAKc%24).

Mentors and allies

Many BIPOC psychologists have been at the vanguard, pushing the field to better understand systemic racism and its deleterious effects, often in the face of inadequate institutional support or even hostility. Marisol Perez, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at Arizona State University and another coauthor of "Upending Racism," points to the value of BIPOC psychologists mentoring each other.

"We really need to come together and mentor future scholars on how to deal with differential treatment and racism in what we do instead of having to figure it out on our own," says Perez.

White psychologists can ally with their BIPOC colleagues by approaching conversations with humility and believing the stories their colleagues share about their experiences with racism. Too often those experiences are minimized or denied. They can also engage in the process of institutional transformation in solidarity with their professional colleagues of color.

For example, Williams encourages journals to fully embrace diversity rather than resorting to using token scientists of color. "We can look at the composition of our editors, associate editors, and editorial board and ask, 'What kind of diversity do we have there?'" she says. "I want to see that people of color actually have a say in how the journals run, not simply that you have a few dots of color on your masthead."

"The reality is good science requires a diversity of people, methods, ideas, and topics. Staying comfortable in the way we do science now is turning our back on good science. If people don't see that, they need to start seeing that," Buchanan says. "We get to be a field of excellence because we are embracing a diversity of theories, a diversity of people and topics and methods. It's not an either/or; it's a requirement for excellence."

Further reading

[Why clinical science must change or die: Integrating intersectionality and social justice](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02703149.2020.1729470?journalCode=wwat20)

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02703149.2020.1729470?journalCode=wwat20>).

Buchanan, N. T., & Wiklund, L. O., *Women & Therapy*, 2020

[A call to action for an antiracist clinical science](https://psyarxiv.com/xqwr4) (<https://psyarxiv.com/xqwr4>).

Galán, C., et al., under review

[Evaluating and dismantling an intervention aimed at increasing White people's knowledge and understanding of racial justice issues](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2020-54567-001)

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Hochman, A. L., & Suyemoto, K. L., *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 2020

[The psychology of American racism](https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2020-45459-001.html) (<https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2020-45459-001.html>).

Roberts, S. O., & Rizzo, M. T., *American Psychologist*, 2020

[Adverse racial climates in academia: Conceptualization, interventions, and call to action](https://urldefense.com/v3/http://www.monnicawilliams.com/articles/Williams_AdverseAcademic_2019.pdf)

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To learn more: Read about APA's action plan for addressing inequality.

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