Apology for Psychology’s Role in Promoting Racism, Discrimination, and Human Hierarchy

As the United States strengthens its focus on addressing the destructive, longstanding impacts of societal racism, the field of psychology must also grapple with its own role in promoting racism, discrimination and human hierarchy. This resolution focuses on acknowledging psychology’s role in creating, perpetuating, and failing to challenge racism and the harms that have been inflicted on communities of color as a result. In offering an apology for these harms, APA acknowledges that this action signifies only the beginning of a long-term process of reconciliation and repair for past harms and ongoing inequities in the field.

WHEREAS, in February 2021, APA “reaffirm[ed] its denunciation of racism in all forms for its destructive psychological, social, educational, and economic effects on human rights and human welfare throughout the lifespan;” committed to “undertake an analysis of psychology’s history, with the goal of understanding the harms that marginalized racial groups have experienced and the actions necessary to create a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive association, discipline, and society going forward;” and established a standard definition of racism and a framework for understanding the following four levels of racism in designing and implementing antiracist research, education, training, policy, and clinical applications through the lens of intersectionality: structural racism, institutional racism, interpersonal racism, and internalized racism (APA, 2021c);

WHEREAS, this framework for understanding the four levels of racism recognizes that racism is woven into the fabric of the historical origins of the United States (APA, 2021c).

WHEREAS psychologists understand that racial inequities result from laws, systems, policies, practices, and cultural narratives that reflect racial bias and White supremacist ideology, and that psychology has an important role and responsibility to disarm and dismantle racism in all its forms (APA, 2021c; Yearby et al., 2020).

WHEREAS, psychologists know that racism harms all people and infects their beliefs, ways of understanding the world, and interpersonal interactions (C.P. Jones, 2003).

WHEREAS, APA observes that racist behaviors and ideologies are evidenced in the disproportionate health impacts of pandemics and disease on Indigenous people (such as the Anishinabe, Diné, Haudenosaunee, Lakota, and Tsalagi), Black/African American, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, Latina/o and Latinx, and American Arab, Middle Eastern/North African peoples and communities (collectively referred to as communities of color); the tragic killings of Black people at the hands of law enforcement; the surge in hate crimes against Asian-Americans; and the inhumane treatment of Latina/o and Latinx migrants at the U.S. border (APA, 2019; APA, 2020a; APA, 2020b; APA, 2021a; APA 2021b).

WHEREAS, these and so many other events have exposed long-simmering racial inequities and injustices and have prompted a national conversation about systemic racism (APA, 2020a; APA, 2021c).

WHEREAS, APA acknowledges that American Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African individuals have often been excluded from statements regarding the impact of racism and discrimination and makes an affirmative statement regarding their inclusion in this resolution (Awad, Kia-Keating, & Amer, 2019).
WHEREAS, APA recognizes that psychology cannot harness its potential to disarm and dismantle racism without addressing its own history of racism and its involvement in White supremacy (APA, 2021c). Since its origins as a scientific discipline in the mid-19th century, psychology has, through acts of commission and omission, caused great harm to communities of color. These harms are part of a larger problematic culture in psychology, rooted in hegemonic psychological science and practice. This culture, evident from the very beginnings of the field, is inseparable from the social and political landscape of the U.S. at that time. Psychology developed under these conditions, helped to create, express, and sustain them, and continues to bear their indelible imprint (Adams, Kurtiș, Gómez, Molina, & Dobles, 2018).

WHEREAS, to catalogue the long history of harms to communities of color and to inform an apology and a path forward toward healing and reconciliation, APA commissioned historical research by the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron (Cummings Center, 2021). Recognizing that existing historical records and narratives have been centered in Whiteness, it was also imperative to capture oral history and the lived experiences of communities of color through a series of listening sessions and surveys.

WHEREAS psychologists established and participated in scientific models and approaches rooted in scientific racism in place societally when the discipline was first founded (Winston, 2020);

WHEREAS psychologists created, sustained, and promulgated ideas of human hierarchy through the construction, study, and interpretation of racial difference (Guthrie, 2004; Jackson & Weidman, 2004; Richards, 1997);

WHEREAS psychologists promoted eugenics defined as the idea that racial differences are biologically based and fixed (Tucker, 1994; Yakushko, 2019);

WHEREAS psychologists used psychological science and practice to support segregated and subpar education for many children of color (Jackson, 2005; Kazembe, 2021; Richards, 1997);

WHEREAS psychologists created and promoted widespread use of psychological tests and instruments that discriminated against many communities of color (Fass, 1980; Kaestle, 2013; Kevles, 1968); WHEREAS psychologists failed to take concerted action in response to calls for an end to biased testing and psychometric racism (Pickren & Tomes, 2002; Williams & Mitchell, 1978);

WHEREAS psychologists supported the widespread use of educational assessments and interventions that harmed many communities of color (Garcia, 2015; Gonzales, 2013; Kaestle, 2013); WHEREAS psychologists provided ideological support for and failed to speak out against the colonial framework of the government-sponsored industrial (boarding) and day school systems for Indigenous youth (Cross, 1999; Garth, 1927);

WHEREAS psychologists created, sustained, and promoted a view of communities of color as deficient or damaged (Jones, 1991; Richards, 1997; White, 1984);

WHEREAS psychologists embraced and used eugenics to promote applied psychological science and practice to support its aims, including segregation, sterilization, and anti-marriage laws (Jackson, 2005; Yakushko, 2019; Winston, 1998);
WHEREAS psychology has minimized, marginalized, and exploited psychologists from communities of color and their contributions to the field (Guthrie, 2004),

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA sincerely and formally acknowledges, takes responsibility for, and apologizes to communities of color for these actions and inactions;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA reaffirms its rejection of racism and racist ideologies and its commitment to dismantling racism in all forms, including within the discipline itself;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA rejects hegemonic science and will continue to oppose it through equity-focused approaches to training, peer review, and publication.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA reaffirms that race is a social construct with no genetic or biological basis, that physical characteristics are not linked to psychological characteristics, and debunks the notion that different groups can be ranked hierarchically on the basis of psychological qualities.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that, consistent with the 2012 Final Report of the APA Presidential Task Force on Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity, the 2017 APA Multicultural Guidelines, the 2019 Race and Ethnicity Guidelines, and the 2021 Resolution on Human Rights, APA will encourage psychologists and trainees to question the appropriateness of Western-oriented clinical practice for diverse populations, gain awareness of other healing approaches emanating from Indigenous and other non-Western traditions, and continue to learn and update new information on racism in clinical practice and on the pursuit of equity, diversity, and inclusion in health service psychology.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA commits to developing future policy based on a broad definition of research that appropriately includes knowledge by, for, and about communities of color, and reflects this knowledge in policy recommendations.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA will continue to work to identify psychology’s significant potential to dismantle racism in important systems and sectors of American life.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA encourages scientific research that is based on the lived experiences and perspectives of communities of color (and approved by them) in order to develop needed interventions created for diverse populations and delivered by diverse providers.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA will examine, review, and permanently revise the use of derogatory terminology when addressing communities of color (e.g. use of the word "minority") from its journals, correspondence, titles, etc.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA acknowledges that an apology absent ameliorative action is without impact, and thus commits to the following immediate actions of remedy and repair, in addition to long terms actions specified above:

(1) Pursue additional group-specific processes that will result, not later than August 2022, in proposed Council action that will benefit those members of communities of color, including those who are students in psychology programs, psychologists on faculty in academia, health services psychologists, and other psychology professionals and providers.

(2) As developed by these group-specific processes, recommendations for action should focus on improving psychology-related outcomes in communities of color to meet the following
outcomes: (a) mechanisms for mentorship of communities of color; (b) Indigenous territorial acknowledgments at APA conventions and events; (c) improve representation of communities of color throughout APA’s elected and appointed leadership; (d) greater exchanges among leaders of APA and psychologist of color associations including, but not limited to, attendance at each other’s respective conferences and meetings; and (e) mechanisms to increase participation and success rates for psychologists of color in academia, publishing, and governmental licensing.

References


Guthrie, R. V. (2004). *Even the rat was white: A historical view of psychology.* Pearson Education.


