

# Dismantling Racism in the Field of Psychology and Beyond: Introduction to the Special Issue

Germine H. Awad<sup>1</sup>, Kevin O. Cokley<sup>1</sup>, Lillian Comas-Díaz<sup>2</sup>, Gordon C. Nagayama Hall<sup>3</sup>, and Joseph P. Gone<sup>4, 5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Michigan

<sup>2</sup> Transcultural Mental Health Institute, Washington, DC, United States

<sup>3</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Oregon

<sup>4</sup> Department of Anthropology, Harvard University

<sup>5</sup> Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Harvard University

In 2021, the American Psychological Association (APA) passed a series of resolutions that initiated a process of atonement for its participation in promoting, perpetuating, and failing to challenge racism and discrimination toward communities of color (APA, 2021a, 2021b). The purpose of this special issue was to examine the ways in which the field of psychology has perpetuated racial hierarchy and harm toward communities of color. More importantly, the included articles offer guidance on the mechanisms and strategies that will aid in the dismantling of racism in the field of psychology and support efforts of reconciliation, repair, and healing. In this introduction, we present a brief history of racism in the field of psychology and highlight theories and methods that should be considered as efforts to combat systemic racial inequities. Articles in this special issue fall into four specific themes that include bias and scientific racism in research, intergroup collaboration, organizational and clinical implications, and changing the culture of psychology.

### *Public Significance Statement*

This special issue examines the ways in which the field of psychology has perpetuated racial hierarchy and harm toward communities of color. This article introduces the special issue and highlights themes pertaining to dismantling racism in the field of psychology and beyond.

*Keywords:* psychology, antiracism, American Psychological Association, people of color, racism

In 2021, the American Psychological Association (APA) passed a series of resolutions that initiated a process of atonement for its participation in promoting, perpetuating, and failing to challenge racism and discrimination toward

communities of color (APA, 2021a, 2021b). These resolutions are the first step in apologizing and accepting responsibility for the actions and inactions of APA and the discipline of psychology for causing harm to communities of color and contributing to systemic inequities. In accordance with APA's mission of promoting the advancement, communication, and application of psychological science to benefit society and improve lives, the purpose of this special issue was to highlight scholarship that examines the mechanisms underlying systemic racial oppression in the field of psychology and beyond. This special issue also offers strategies for how psychology and psychologists can lead efforts toward reconciliation, repair, and healing. Members of the editorial team for this special issue all served on the APA Task Force on Strategies to Eradicate Racism, Discrimination, and Hate (convened in 2021 by APA President Jennifer Kelly and cochaired by Germine Awad and Joseph P. Gone).

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*Editor's Note.* This is an introduction to the special issue "Dismantling Racism in the Field of Psychology and Beyond." Please see the Table of Contents here: <https://psycnet.apa.org/journals/amp/79/4>.—HC

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Harris Cooper served as action editor.

Germine H. Awad  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3371-2808>

Joseph P. Gone  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0572-1179>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Germine H. Awad, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States. Email: [gawad@umich.edu](mailto:gawad@umich.edu)

The process of article selection for this special issue followed typical processes for the *American Psychologist*. The call for submissions was distributed widely, and approximately 130 abstracts were submitted and reviewed. Every submission was rated by three members of the editorial team. Care was also taken to prevent conflicts of interest in the assigned review of submitted abstracts. Authors of abstracts with the highest ratings were invited to submit a full article. Given the enormity of the topics that would be considered in a special issue on dismantling racism, the editorial team endeavored to include subject areas that would represent diverse subfields of psychology across multiple contexts. There were many compelling abstracts that were not chosen, and the editorial team encouraged several authors to submit their articles directly to the *American Psychologist* through the portal as a stand-alone article. All invited special issue articles underwent peer review through the *American Psychologist* editorial system.

### History of Racism in American Psychology

As a discipline, psychology prides itself for helping people improve their lives. However, the field of psychology has a long history of committing harm against people of color. Using science as a pretext, psychology has contributed extensively to the idea of natural human hierarchy, perhaps more than any other social science (Cummings Center for the History of Psychology, 2021). In his classic book *Even the Rat Was White*, Guthrie (2004) provided the first historical view of psychology's preoccupation with measuring so-called racial differences in physical characteristics and intelligence that contributed to notions of human hierarchy. Guthrie documented how psychology engaged in statistical shenanigans and used dubious scientific practices to confirm and perpetuate racial stereotypes and prejudices of the day. Psychology, along with anthropology, contributed to the racist zeitgeist of the 19th century through its study of so-called "uncivilized" and "backward races." Influenced by anthropology's obsession with identifying, measuring, and contrasting so-called "primitive" people, the early years of psychology focused on comparative research that often compared Black and White people to support beliefs about racial differences and the inferiority of Black people (Guthrie, 2004).

As just one example of such a study, Crane (1923) examined race differences in inhibition. To prove that the presumed immorality of Black people was due to defective inhibition, Crane designed a study that involved a guillotine-like device dropping a block of wood on the hand of a Black male, who was told not to move his hand because the block of wood would stop before hitting him (Guthrie, 2004). Instead of letting the block of wood hit the man, a slight shock was administered to simulate the block of wood. Even though the Black men in the study did not trust the investigator or the equipment, they went along with the study, which prompted

the investigator to conclude that Black men could be persuaded to undertake a dangerous occupation. This was interpreted as Black men having defective inhibition (Guthrie, 2004).

The history of psychology is replete with examples of problematic studies fueled by racist beliefs that led to racist conclusions that were harmful to people of color. Among the most important revelations from Guthrie's book are the details about psychologists' obsession with measuring mental ability to further divide people and determine racial inferiority. Lewis Terman, a pioneer in educational psychology and the study of intelligence, once declared that mental "retardation" was very common among "Spanish-Indians and Mexican families of the Southwest and also among negroes" (Guthrie, 2004, p. 61) and concluded that their low intelligence was a racial characteristic.

It is this historical context of psychology's racist past, combined with the racial health inequities amplified by COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, that led to the historic apology by American Psychological Association (2021a). The opening paragraph of the resolutions reads as follows:

The American Psychological Association failed in its role leading the discipline of psychology, was complicit in contributing to systemic inequities, and hurt many through racism, racial discrimination, and denigration of people of color, thereby falling short on its mission to benefit society and improve lives. APA is profoundly sorry, accepts responsibility for, and owns the actions and inactions of APA itself, the discipline of psychology, and individual psychologists who stood as leaders for the organization and field.

Along with the apology, a historical chronology was produced that examined the role of American psychology in perpetuating inequality for people of color (Cummings Center for the History of Psychology, 2021). The chronology documented how several APA presidents and influential psychologists (e.g., G. Stanley Hall, Edward Thorndike, Lewis Terman, Henry Goddard, James Angell, Raymond Cattell, Henry Garrett, Arthur Jensen) promoted ideas that characterized Indigenous Peoples as childlike and supported the eradication of their culture; founded and led eugenics-based organizations; recommended segregation and sterilization of socially or mentally unfit people who were disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and poor White people; espoused White superiority; declared that Black people should be euthanized for their inferiority; and argued that racial differences in IQ were due to heredity. It should be noted that the historical chronology is limited by the archival materials that were available to analyze, and so the history of racism toward some groups was entirely left out of the chronology (e.g., Arab/Middle Eastern and North African Americans).

### Theories and Methods Needed for Dismantling Racism

Psychology urgently needs theoretical frameworks and methodologies that address racism and promote antiracism.

Scholars have outlined the importance of incorporating theories and methods that address culture, race, and ethnicity in psychological science (e.g., Awad & Cokley, 2010; Cokley & Awad, 2008; Gone, 2011; Hall et al., 2016; Sue, 1999). However, there is a need to expand upon these methods and theories to incorporate ideas and techniques that address social justice, antiracism, and decolonization (e.g., Cokley & Awad, 2013; Comas-Díaz et al., 2024; Gone, 2021a, 2021b). To dismantle racism, we need interventions that can address systemic oppression and legacies of racial and historical trauma (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Gone, 2023; Nagata et al., 2024). Griffith et al. (2007) argued that because racial inequities occur at the intersection of complex systems (e.g., health care and racism), approaches that identify the proximal and distal factors associated with disparities are necessary for system change. Further, antiracist approaches designed to dismantle racism focus on empowering and centering marginalized populations in research and interventions (Goings et al., 2023).

To successfully combat systemic racism, psychology must incorporate theories and methods that actively engage in antiracism strategies. As an example, liberation psychologists focus on addressing oppression among individuals, groups, and communities. Therefore, they are in an optimal position to address racism. Martin-Baró (1994), a Spanish priest and social psychologist working in El Salvador, articulated liberation psychology through the integration of Latin American critical disciplines such as Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed, philosophy of liberation, liberation theology, and decoloniality. He metamorphosed the theology of liberation's preferential *option for the poor* into liberation psychology's preferential *option for the oppressed* majority (Martin-Baró, 1994). Although the beginnings of liberation psychology did not address anti-Black racism, liberation psychology is an anti-oppression and antimarginalization discipline (Torres Rivera, 2020). As such, it has been adopted in the United States as a method to combat racism (Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020), sexism and patriarchy (Lykes & Tavares, 2020), heteronormativity (Singh et al., 2020), xenophobia (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019), and other intersectional oppressions. Indeed, the Black liberation psychology movement (Afuape, 2011; Afuape & Hughes, 2016) embraced Martin-Baró's liberation psychology, as well as Frantz Fanon's psychology of the oppressed (Bulhan, 1985).

As liberation psychology evolves, it transcends mainstream psychology. For instance, liberation psychologists aim to transform not only the oppressed but also the oppressor (Montero & Sonn, 2009). To achieve these objectives, Ignacio Martin-Baró adapted Freire's (1970) concept of *concientización*—the development of a critical consciousness to recognize social-political contexts, leading to a new perception and understanding of people's reality. Liberation psychologists assist the oppressed in engaging in denaturalization. In other words, since oppression is

naturalized, psychologists assist the oppressed in challenging such normalization, by questioning the interests behind the power dynamics.

Euro-American psychology bears colonizing effects (Adams et al., 2015). Moreover, coloniality—the damaging ongoing effects of a history of colonization—affects Black, Indigenous, and people of color, as well as other oppressed groups, by imposing pervasive sociopolitical systems and policies that enforce dominant epistemologies, cultural knowledge, and practices (Duran & Duran, 1995; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Therefore, an essential aspect of the liberation is decoloniality (Comas-Díaz et al., 2024; Said, 1979). The decolonial turn (Grosfoguel, 2007), the urgent need to decolonize, is an attitude and action that questions all kinds of oppressions, including imperialism, racism, patriarchy, misogyny, and socioeconomic class (Mignolo, 2011) among others. Fortunately, psychology has initiated its decolonial turn (Comas-Díaz et al., 2024). Given that colonization and coloniality are based on racism (Grosfoguel & Georas, 2010), imperialism, and capitalism, liberation and decolonial psychologies offer methods to address oppression (e.g., Wendt & Gone, 2012), especially racism and racial trauma (Comas-Díaz, 2016).

### Special Issue Themes

The articles in this special issue fall into four interrelated themes that include bias and scientific racism in research, intergroup collaboration, organizational and clinical implications, and changing the culture of psychology. We summarize the articles that fall under each theme below. In addition, Kelly et al. (2024) describe APA's process that led to the apology and the dismantling of racism resolutions and subsequent reconciliation and repair activities. They address both facilitating factors and obstacles experienced during this process.

### Bias and Scientific Racism in Research

Rogers et al. (2024) critically address the long-standing narrative of “good” science. They trace the roots of the narrative of good science to a postpositivist epistemology and White supremacy in psychology and challenge the idea that there are no other viable epistemologies available to the field. These other epistemologies, however, continue to be marginalized within psychological science. The authors provide examples of how racist research, if done well, will get published and remain in press until public outcry results in their retraction. The idea of “good” psychological science is a master narrative that promotes the idea that science should be free from ideology; should be normative and representative; and should be generalizable and universal. The authors offer three imperatives, rooted in critical, feminist, and antiracist scholarship, toward redefining good science.

In addition, Bird et al. (2024) summarize and critique the alarmingly persistent claims of racial hereditarian researchers within psychology that purportedly draw on evolutionary biology and modern genetics to reinforce racialized explanations for inequalities in society. In this troubling body of pseudoscientific research, racial disparities in cognitive ability, income, and education are naturalized through spurious evidence that evolved genetic differences between racial groups supposedly explain immutable attributes in these populations. Many racial hereditarian researchers who produce this knowledge claim that their investigations need not imply racial inferiority and that their mere description of the facts is under attack from those who would corrupt science for ideological purposes. According to Bird et al. (2024), however, racial hereditarian researchers do not in fact adhere to current ethical and evidentiary standards for studying human variation. They observe that, if psychology actively embraced reigning methodological standards for evolutionary and genetics research, the misleading findings of racial hereditarian researchers would be revealed as racist pseudoscience and recognized as ineligible for publication. If American psychology is to dismantle racism, these authors conclude, then a more robust application of existing and relevant ethical and scientific standards will be necessary in the discipline.

Auelua-Toomey et al. (2024) examine scientific standards as they pertain to the reporting of racial demographic information. They investigate racial bias in journal policies and impacts on reporting racial demographics with doctoral students in the field of psychology in two experimental studies. Given that doctoral students represent the future of psychological research, it is important to understand the extent to which PhD students adhere to the White racial frame. In the first study, authors found that PhD students were more likely to present research findings as neutral when the sample was composed of White participants compared to when studies were conducted with Black participants. Specifically, they assessed the mention of racial demographics in study titles, keywords, and abstracts by the doctoral students and found that the race of the sample was only mentioned when the participants were Black. Their second study provided support for the potential effectiveness of journal policies that require transparency in describing the race and ethnicity demographic characteristics of participant samples.

Opportunistic researchers who are not members of communities of color have taken advantage of health equity resources, such as publications and funding, at the expense of researchers from communities of color. Benuto and Bridges (2024) argue that these opportunists operate outside their areas of expertise, but their conventional expertise is often valued above the expertise of those with relevant health equity experience and commitment. Such opportunism and temporary interest are described as *health*

*equity tourism*. Benuto and Bridges report a reflexive thematic analysis of interviews of health equity experts. The harm of health equity tourism to communities and health equity experts is discussed, as well as recommendations on how the field can value communities and experts of color.

Last, within the theme of bias and scientific racism in research, Settles et al. (2024) theorize *epistemic exclusion* in the evaluation of psychology faculty research as one means by which racism persists in academic settings. Although some forms of epistemic exclusion necessarily feature in the reproduction of academic disciplines, unwarranted epistemic exclusion in the evaluation of faculty research, according to these authors, undermines the prospects for diversification of faculty members in psychology departments. Whether through formal departmental faculty reviews (e.g., tenure, promotion, or annual merit assessments) or informal interpersonal interactions (e.g., everyday activities that involve perceptions and communications about faculty research), high-quality scholarship by ethn racially minoritized psychologists is devalued or dismissed in a biased fashion, leading to failures by departments to retain faculty of color. Settles et al. (2024) provide a typology of epistemic exclusion, whether in formal evaluations (i.e., through criteria, metric, and application exclusion) or in informal interactions (i.e., through legitimacy, contribution, and comprehension exclusion), that require recognition and remedy if the cadre of academic psychologists is ever to reflect the diverse demographic profile of the United States.

### Intergroup Collaboration

Collaboration with other communities of color is highlighted in the following two articles. First, Demanarig et al. (2024) present a framework for cross-racial/ethnic solidarity to combat racism. The authors explore the contemporary and historical contexts of slavery, capitalism, colonialism, orientalism, war, and genocide, as well as how the strategy of pitting racial/ethnic groups against each other (i.e., colonial splitting) has contributed to fractured alliances between ethnic/racial communities. Demanarig et al. (2024) argue that cross-racial/ethnic solidarity work (defined as joining a resistance to oppression with others) is necessary in the current sociopolitical context and requires knowledge of historical context to create a cohesive future for people of color. The authors provide examples of efforts within APA to foster cross-racial/ethnic alliances, as well as examples of how colonial splitting has hindered alliances. The authors also discuss moderators that may hinder or facilitate cross-racial/ethnic solidarity that include personal connection, perceived similarity, internalized racism, zero-sum thinking, and proximity to Whiteness. This multicultural, social justice-informed framework will help researchers, educators, scholars, practitioners, and administrators create and strengthen cross-racial/ethnic solidarity in many contexts.

Second, [Kia-Keating \(2024\)](#) ponders how the United States, as a nation of immigrants, has a dual history of generous and racist policies toward immigrants and refugees. Rooted in the vision that examining our past increases our capacity to transform our future, the author addresses how to dismantle the racism against refugee populations. She offers three guideposts supporting antiracism in psychological research and practice. Individuals are encouraged to examine these guideposts and consider more suggestions to dismantle psychological racism against refugee populations. As readers engage in this work, they might contemplate if they are migrants or refugees or have a family history of immigration or refuge-seeking.

### Organizational and Clinical Implications

The following two articles focus on organizational and clinical implications pertaining to dismantling racism and racial progress. First, [Torrez et al. \(2024\)](#) examine perceptions of racial progress by asking U.S. workers to estimate the success of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts within organizations. The authors hypothesized that workers would overestimate the progress that organizations have made toward increasing racial representation in leadership, expect greater equality in current leadership, and anticipate that organizations will make progress toward DEI goals independent of actual DEI policies in place. [Torrez et al. \(2024\)](#) found that U.S. workers indeed overestimate progress made toward racial equity in terms of representation. They also found that participants overestimated past equity efforts in organizational leadership. Overall, U.S. workers were overly optimistic in terms of DEI progress compared to what actual data trends would suggest.

Second, [Sue et al. \(2024\)](#) address how counseling and psychotherapy have contributed to and reinforced the oppression of people of color. They challenge the ethnocentric concept of professionalism in psychology as being an extension of a White epistemology and argue that psychology mirrors cultural racism and White supremacy. Through the influence of scientific racism, power, and privilege, psychology has played a central role in perpetuating deficit narratives about people of color being inferior. The authors identify the unacknowledged assumptions of professionalism as four legitimizing pillars of counseling and psychotherapy. These legitimizing pillars serve as values that perpetuate racism in counseling and psychotherapy. The authors recommend eight actions that psychologists and mental health professionals can take for dismantling systemic racism against people of color.

### Changing the Culture of Psychology

The last theme in this special issue focuses on changing the culture of psychology to dismantle racist systems. First,

[Anderson and Jones \(2024\)](#) provide an evocative metaphor of psychology as water that has been poisoned with racism. Focusing on anti-Black racism, the authors use historical accounts, interviews with revered African American psychologists, and personal reflections to understand how racism has impacted the field of psychology. Fortunately, the authors offer signs of hope. They conclude that detoxifying psychological waters requires the cultivation of deep pools of inquiry, understanding, and action. As readers engage in this article, they might think about how they can contribute to the detoxification of psychology's racist waters.

Second, [Fish et al. \(2024\)](#) assess the harmful legacy of settler colonialism for Indigenous Peoples in the United States and explore the complicity of American psychology and the APA in perpetuating this legacy. Specifically, these authors note that American psychology has long disrespected Indigenous persistence and presence, dismissed Indigenous knowledges and practices, promoted Eurocentric ideals and norms as universally desirable for Indigenous communities, and promoted culturally biased expertise in the name of "helping" Indigenous communities contend with conditions of coloniality. Although they acknowledge the significance of the recent apology to Indigenous Peoples by APA ([APA Indigenous Apology Work Group, 2023](#)), [Fish et al. \(2024\)](#) advocate for additional reparative actions in the form of transitional justice. This approach prioritizes truth-seeking and truth-telling as the foundation for new forms of relationship aimed at reconciliation in the wake of past harms. They emphasize the moral obligation for American psychology to venture beyond mere apologies by heeding concrete calls to action in the domains of education, research, and practice for Indigenous Americans.

Third, [Salter et al. \(2024\)](#) advocate the importance of incorporating critical histories into the psychological curriculum. By critical histories, they are referring to accounts of the past that explicitly focus on the ways that society is structured by racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other identity-based power asymmetries. Critical histories challenge narratives that racial progress and justice are consistently moving forward. Their contention is that discussing the past is useful for dismantling racism and other identity-based power asymmetries in the future. The authors focus on three potential pathways through which critical histories can be integrated into psychology curricula and research funding support.

In the last article within this theme, [Gaztambide et al. \(2024\)](#) identify critical race theory as an idealistic framework that privileges a neoliberal orientation emphasizing individuality and symbolic acts of racial justice. Alternatively, the authors engage in a decolonial critique proposing other perspectives to dismantle racism as a structural and political force. Some of these alternatives include policies to reduce racial inequalities, as well as envisioning racism as a

sociopolitical force that divides and subjugates—while it enriches White economic elites. As readers engage this article, they might consider asking if they perceive racism as an individual behavior, as a sociopolitical force, or as both.

### Beyond Racism in American Psychology

It is not lost on us that this special issue on dismantling racism in the field of psychology is occurring in the midst of growing anti-DEI legislation across the country, which seeks to eliminate candid discussions and teaching about racism from schools. The APA has taken a courageous moral stand in publicly facing its troubled racist past and present. However, dismantling racism in psychology is not only the morally right thing to do but it is also necessary for the advancement of psychology as a rigorous science that is capable of self-correcting in the face of past pseudoscience. Dismantling racist structures and addressing systemic oppression in the field of psychology will require psychologists to use a diverse set of tools. Given the myriad factors involved in systemic racism, we must continue to uncover the mechanisms of oppression and develop interventions to combat racial and ethnic inequities. It will take a multidisciplinary approach to successfully combat racial inequities, and the field of psychology offers several theories and methods that may be helpful in this endeavor. The articles in this special issue offer a glimpse into the ways that psychological science may provide theories, methods, strategies, and interventions to help dismantle racism in the field of psychology and beyond.

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