Diversity is central to the moral, educational, and civic mission of universities (Hurtado, 2007). Yet the senior ranks of psychological scientists do a poor job of representing the populations that they ought to serve. In 2018, 30% of US psychology graduate students (and the general population) were people of color, but barely 10% of full professors were (Hall, 2019). This is no small problem. Workforce diversity has been found to foster innovation and creativity (Hewlett et al., 2013), and so our current homogeneity can hinder our ability to address complex societal issues. Even more importantly, the failure to diversify psychological science is an issue of justice and fairness.
Change must start at the top. Our leaders, senior academics and administrators whose recruitment responsibilities determine who is hired, selected, and promoted have to do more than just use the language of diversity for branding purposes (Lam, 2018). (Columbia University’s guide to best practices in this area seems to be a good starting point; Office of the Provost, Columbia University, 2016.) Leadership is also required to manage the conflicts that can follow from diversity (Jang, 2018): bringing people with a range of experiences together doesn’t automatically lead to good outcomes. Perhaps ironically, it may be already-disadvantaged groups who are most destabilized and threatened by diversity (Richeson, 2018).

Those of us in other positions of privilege (yes, graduate students have many privileges compared with others) can also contribute to making psychological science more inclusive. We can be mindful about how we work with diverse groups of colleagues and students, such as by attending intercultural awareness workshops, using language that doesn’t discriminate, and taking steps to be explicitly antidiscriminatory (Savage et al., 2016; Thomas & Hirsch, 2016). Many institutions are creating initiatives, training programs, and other resources that can help; my own university, for example, recently introduced a diversity toolbox to help researchers increase their awareness of diversity, reflect on their identity, and contribute positively to sensitive discussions (Utrecht University, 2019).

During a recent workshop I attended on how to communicate research, the presenter discussed seven examples, six of whom were of white men, likely reinforcing presumptions about who fits in psychological science. As teachers, we need to think about why there is a growing movement to “decolonize the curriculum” (Abdi, 2012; Felix & Friedberg, 2019). This means, among other things, recognizing the importance of including the works of nonmale, non-white, non-Western thinkers in our lectures and reading lists, as well as raising students’ awareness of the social and historical contexts that have produced the academic knowledge that we use.

We might also follow the practical steps set out by the American Association of University Professors (Harper & Davis, 2016). These include acknowledging our implicit biases (due in part to cultural stereotypes), integrating diversity into the curriculum, and countering stereotype threat — whereby group stereotypes threaten self-evaluation, which in turn alter identity and performance (Steele
&Aronson, 1995). As educators, we have a duty to our students to cultivate diverse and inclusive learning environments, where students feel comfortable expressing themselves. Such goals are far from simple to implement in reality: There is no easy route to making our classrooms places where people feel safe yet ideas are critically and robustly examined (Weinberg, 2017).

We also have responsibilities in our research. Most psychological scientists are aware by now that the vast majority of what we think we know about human behavior is based on participants in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). And even within such societies, research is much easier to conduct on wealthier, more highly educated majority groups, who are more accessible research subjects. As a result, we develop theories, interventions, and treatments on the basis of trials with the people who (relatively speaking) may not need them the most. Practitioners, service designers, and policymakers are therefore inevitably less able to address the unique challenges experienced by low-income or minority groups.

Furthermore, we publish many findings behind paywalls, meaning only researchers at the wealthiest institutions can read them (Schiltz, 2018). The barriers of academic jargon may be even more impenetrable to the average person. We have a responsibility (especially when we’re publicly funded) to disseminate our research in ways that reach and engage a diverse audience (from children to highly educated adults). It is easy to dismiss some groups as too hard to reach, but this is an excuse for not thinking about the messaging and media outlets that have a broader reach. We must do better.

But it’s not only our research participants and readers who need to be more diverse; our reference lists should be too. A brilliant Argentinian scientist I met at the start of my PhD reminded me of the enormous disadvantages that researchers from low- and middle-income countries face in getting their work recognized. First, they have fewer resources to begin with. Second, major journals aren’t as interested in their work (Smith, 2017). And third, even if researchers find their work, they are probably unlikely to reference it anyway. Take a moment to think about whether you’ve ever failed to read beyond the abstract once you’ve realized the researchers weren’t at a globally recognized institution. Instead, you may have found a similar paper, based on a WEIRD sample, that you guessed your coauthors would more quickly approve of.

Those of us in positions of privilege need to act and not just talk. But we also need to do a lot more listening. And as a white, native-English-speaking cis man, I need to listen to diverse voices more than most. I recently found a great new tool, Transform Your Feed (The Female Lead, 2019), that has introduced several new diverse and positive female role models into my social media feeds. I hope that I’ll find many more inspiring and diverse psychological scientists to follow in the coming years of my PhD program.

Works Cited


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