

Reducing Race and Other Disparities in and Through Psychological Research

August 30, 2021

All of psychological science is a stage, and all the psychological scientists merely players. And by reinforcing this theater's decades-old norms and practices, "we, as actors... will work to reinforce cultural racism," explained developmental psychologist Stephanie Rowley during the [2021 APS Virtual Convention](#). Rowley and three other researchers led a panel discussion on reducing disparities related to race and other factors in and through psychological research. Against the backdrop of global reckonings with systemic racism, they drew from multidisciplinary research exploring the psychological science behind systemic cultural racism and racial disparities and provided recommendations for an anti-racist path forward.

The dinner party

"Cultural racism is the collection of cues and signals, behaviors, norms, and procedures that let us know that one culture is preferred or valued over other cultures," said Rowley, who is known for her work on racial identity. She used the metaphor of a dinner party, with its guest list and menu, to explore how cultural racism is reinforced and perpetuated by the currency of professional societies, including the journals they publish and the awards they bestow.

[Membership costs] often "exclude people from the Global South, from minority-serving institutions, from teaching institutions and so on and so forth, necessarily constraining the cultural expression within."

Stephanie Rowley

The guest list is the people who are invited (and can afford) to join the societies. Rowley, a professor of psychology and education and the Provost Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Teachers College, Columbia University, believes the scope of this group is often constrained by those "from elite organizations that have funding to support participation in these activities." Without such support, membership costs often "exclude people from the Global South, from minority-serving institutions, from teaching institutions and so on and so forth, necessarily constraining the cultural expression within," she said.

Cost aside, "these guest lists are often based on insider information," Rowley added. For example, when planning committees are compiling lists of candidates for panel discussions and awards, they tend to gravitate toward colleagues at similarly nondiverse institutions.

Then there's the menu. "Who gets to decide what we eat?" Rowley said. The offerings are often broad at conferences, she said, "but what ends up in the invited-speaker section?" Plenary sections in particular are often constrained by traditional views about what is valued, as are the articles published in

journals “that are managed by similarly elite organizations and institutions. In effect, these traditions perpetuate cultural racism,” she said. “We’re systematically excluding people from the conversations in these societies that then generate the science that governs our future.”

Rowley outlined four considerations for moving the field forward. First, she called for alternatives to the current publication model dominated by “elite” publishers, noting that fields outside of psychology have taken the lead in this trend. Second, she called for more diversity among editorial boards, noting the need for underrepresented and excluded groups more generally. Third, she stressed that societies should rethink their dues structures and journals should build greater transparency and inclusivity into the process for submitting articles.

Rowley’s fourth point challenged the steps that many organizations have taken to address cultural racism, including adopting anti-racist statements and training programs that have been shown to often be counterproductive. “Certainly there’s little evidence that these activities are leading to what we really want, which is anti-racist organizations.”

Positions of power

Steven O. Roberts, an assistant professor of psychology at Stanford University, underscored Rowley’s concerns, noting the history of racism in psychological research—including that by [Lewis Terman](#), a Stanford psychology professor and eugenicist whose arguments on IQ “deficiency” led to the sterilization of tens of thousands of Americans, many of them people of color and low-income immigrants.

Algorithms inform everything from product design to parole decisions in ways that discriminate against diverse populations, especially people of color and women.

Ida Momennejad

Equally importantly, psychological scientists can also decrease racism, noted Roberts, an APS Rising Star and a [2021 recipient of the APS Janet Taylor Spence Award](#). He cited the groundbreaking “doll studies” by pioneering Black psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1940s, which demonstrated that “prejudice, discrimination, and segregation” created a feeling of inferiority among African American children and damaged their self-esteem. These findings were cited in the [U.S. Supreme Court](#)’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, which helped desegregate U.S. schools.

For psychological scientists to decrease racism, he noted, they don’t just need to conduct actionable research—they also have to get it published. “Who’s in the position to determine what can be published and what cannot?” In a 2020 article published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Roberts and colleagues examined more than 26,000 empirical articles published between 1974 and 2018 in six top-tier psychology journals. Almost all had been edited by White men, and few looked at race and racism.

“What’s not depicted here,” Roberts said at the APS convention, “is that the proportion of those papers is predicted by the race of the editor. Specifically, under White editors in chief, only 4% of publications focus on race and racism.” That percentage almost tripled, to 11%, when the journal editors were people

of color.

In exploring the roots of this disparity, Roberts and his colleagues found that White reviewers place less value on race scholarship. “It’s seen as less important, less generalizable to the broader world,” he said. This omission, in turn, discourages researchers who study race from submitting their research to most publications. Moreover, “we find that the race of the author predicts the race of the participants,” Roberts said. “So if you put the whole thing together, you’ll see that a POC [person of color] scholar who mostly studies POC people must now navigate a science that’s in many ways controlled by White psychologists.”

To remedy these problems, Roberts outlined some recommendations for journals, including increasing diverse representation throughout the publishing process and detailing the demographics of study samples. “Often reviewers are asked to evaluate a paper for how theoretically rigorous or novel it is, how tight the methods are, but rarely are we asked to evaluate diverse samples,” he said. “Just as we’re asked to justify our sample sizes or methods or hypotheses, why don’t we justify who we’re studying?”

Finally, Roberts encouraged the use of positionality statements: How are authors connected to the topic at hand? Even if researchers’ work has nothing to do with race or a social group, if they study only people who look like them or are in their own neighborhood, “maybe that raises questions about whether our science is as objective as we would like it to be.”

Pioneering progress

Other pioneers in the field can also offer guidance. Rihana Mason, the panel’s third speaker, cited Inez Beverly Prosser—the first African American woman to receive her doctoral degree in psychology, in 1933—who said, “everything possible to provide healthy and normal personality development should be the birthright of every child.” This simple quote “speaks volumes to a lot of the issues that we are trying to address today,” said Mason, a research scientist at Georgia State University’s Urban Child Study Center.

Nearly 90 years ago, Prosser’s research explored Black children’s development in integrated and segregated schools, along with matters such as school choice and teacher and student characteristics—issues that remain salient in classrooms today, Mason said. But she herself learned of Prosser only recently, at an exhibit on psychology’s “hidden figures” based on research by Leslie Cramblet Alvarez. “Our students today aren’t aware of pioneers like Dr. Prosser,” Mason said. Alvarez’s research “demonstrated that junior and senior psychology majors recognized the notable women and people of color to a lesser extent than White male pioneers. We need to start priming the pipeline of psychological sciences early by exposing them to the richness of our discipline’s history.”

More recently, Mason noted, University of Chicago psychologist Margaret Beale Spencer developed PVEST (phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory), a framework of human development used to examine how youth develop resiliency, identity, and competence, given their evolving understanding of self and their social, cultural, and historical context. PVEST has been important to the study of resilience among African American youth and “can be used as a way to prioritize humanity in diverse populations,” Mason said.

Mason and colleagues are using PVEST at the HBCU STEM Undergraduate Success Research Center, a National Science Foundation-sponsored project to strengthen STEM education and career readiness at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Led by scientists from Morehouse College, Spelman College, and Virginia State University, the project follows a model of community-based participatory research, drawing from participants at some 50 HBCUs. “We need our research to be useful and usable,” Mason said. She quoted Anthony DePass, a leader in the area of workforce development: “Periodically, scholarship liberates itself from the confines of ivory towers and pontification to relate to the people and their lives.” (Related: [Learn about Mason’s work involving academic pipeline programs.](#))

Simulating systemic injustice

Ida Momennejad, a senior researcher in reinforcement learning at Microsoft Research, rounded out the panel at the APS convention. She shared insights on how to simulate systemic injustice, noting that its ubiquity extends to research on car safety, in which the use of only White European men as safety testers resulted in designs that made women more vulnerable in car crashes.

Even today, Momennejad said, algorithms inform everything from product design to parole decisions in ways that discriminate against diverse populations, especially people of color and women. “The prominent reason underlying all of this is, typically, the teams that made these products were not diverse.”

Working with APS Fellow and former Board member [Stacey Sinclair at Princeton University](#), [Momennejad ran agent-based simulations of structural bias](#). The simulations showed that unequal gender ratios in professions such as STEM fields, politics, and business lead to increased sexism among men in those fields and impose higher costs on women (e.g., lower morale and limited upward mobility) and institutions (e.g., higher turnover) than men. Sexist comments in meetings and other forms of sexism persisted even after gender ratios were changed to 50-50, and even when the targeted women objected. The only meaningful change, the researchers found, came when male allies increased their awareness of sexism and confronted the perpetrators.

Noting that the simulations were limited to binary gender identities, Momennejad added that future simulations will take a more intersectional approach.

This article was originally published in the September/October Observer until the name Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.