Psychology’s Role in Dismantling Systemic Racism: An Update from APA’s EDI Office

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The American Psychological Association (APA) is confronting a pivotal moment in its history. As the broader nation reaches an inflection point concerning the enduring effects of colonialism and racism, APA has undertaken association-wide efforts to examine its own role and that of psychology as a discipline in perpetuating systems of inequity. Maya Angelou described prejudice as “a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future, and renders the present inaccessible.” To confront injustices rooted in prejudice – past, present, and future – APA is committed to embedding equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) throughout all aspects of the association’s work. As a mission-driven organization that applies the best available psychological science to benefit society and improve lives, APA recognizes that the inclusion of diverse people, viewpoints, and experiences are key to the success of the association, as well as for psychology and broader society.

In 2018, APA established an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Office, positioned in the association’s Executive Office and tasked with leading a systematic approach to organizational EDI and strategies to apply the EDI lens to all aspects of the organization. In March 2021, APA articulated its mission and vision for achieving EDI excellence in the association’s Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Framework (APA, 2021d) providing the foundation for EDI strategic planning. In accordance with the association’s strategic priorities, as well as consistent calls from members, APA and psychology are working to address critical societal issues. Arguably, no issue is more complex and more closely tied to the foundation of our nation than racism. Thus, APA has mounted a sustained, long-term effort to combat racism – informed, guided, and supported by the EDI Framework, as well as by several policy resolutions adopted by APA’s governing body, the Council of Representatives.

For the first time in its 130-year history, APA is systematically and institutionally examining, acknowledging, and charting a plan to address systemic racism. The APA Council adopted a trio of resolutions in October 2021, setting APA on a path to atone for racism in psychology’s past and to improve the outlook for the future of the discipline, the association, and the larger society. Each of these resolutions adopted by Council...
builds on *Harnessing Psychology to Combat Racism: Adopting a Uniform Definition and Understanding* (APA, 2021b), a resolution Council passed in February 2021. This latter, definitional resolution on racism provided guidance to psychologists and APA to consider four levels of racism – internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural – in their efforts to counter racism within hearts and minds, as well as across societal systems. It also instructed APA 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.”

Consistent with the February 2021 resolution and its commitment to catalogue the long history of harms to communities of color and to inform an apology and a path toward healing and reconciliation, APA commissioned a historical chronology (APA, 2021e) from the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron. In addition, recognizing that many historical records and narratives were created by White people and have been centered in Whiteness, APA concluded that it was imperative to capture the oral history and the lived experiences of communities of color. As a result, the association commissioned a series of listening sessions (APA, 2021f) and surveys, which also informed the trio of October 2021 resolutions focused on dismantling systemic racism. Throughout the work on the apology and resolutions, APA was repeatedly confronted by the fact that the entire narrative of psychology – from textbooks to histories to journal articles – often excludes people of color and their voices.

As a scientific organization whose mission is to benefit society and improve lives, APA failed to do so on an issue that has had an immeasurable negative toll on the basic human rights of security, health, well-being, and societal participation of generations of people. For that reason, on October 29, 2021, APA’s Council unanimously passed the *Apology for the Role of the American Psychological Association in Promoting, Perpetuating, and Failing to Challenge Racism, Discrimination, and Human Hierarchy in the United States* (APA, 2021c), ultimately apologizing for the roles of psychology and APA in promoting, perpetuating, and failing to challenge racism, and for the harms that have been inflicted on communities of color as a result. APA acknowledges this apology must be accompanied by concrete actions to ensure reconciliation, repair, and renewal. A Task Force on Strategies to Eradicate Racism, Discrimination, and Hate was charged with overseeing the completion of the apology, as well as with advising the association on actions needed to address psychology’s history with respect to racism and racist ideologies. An Apology Advisory Subcommittee, which included the Task Force co-chairs, guided the work of other APA leaders in drafting the APA apology to people of color.

The association understands that history can repeat itself, that the past informs the present, and that many harms will continue to be perpetuated absent purposeful intervention. In addition to offering an apology for past harms, APA put structure into the work to advance racial equity in the *Resolution on the Role of Psychology and the American Psychological Association in Dismantling Systemic Racism in the United States* (APA, 2021g), delving more deeply into methods by which psychology can be used to help remedy harms in practice, education, criminal justice, training, and other domains. In addition, the *Resolution on Advancing Health Equity in Psychology* (APA, 2021a) centers race and racism as the key drivers of health inequities, making recommendations for psychological science, education and training, practice, public policy, and legislative advocacy. This resolution was informed by the work of the Presidential Task Force on Health Equity, appointed by APA Past President Dr. Jennifer F. Kelly, which produced a comprehensive report articulating a vision for the role of psychology in advancing health equity based on a review of relevant research, community-based initiatives, and policy work. Along with the knowledge and expertise provided by the task forces, the work to develop the resolutions involved a broad cross-section of individuals and organizations who weighed in with almost 350 comments, participated in listening sessions, completed surveys, and offered edits. Together, these resolutions commit APA to continuing to work on dismantling systemic racism.
In February 2022, APA released a comprehensive inventory of EDI and racial equity work, an action called for by APA’s Council and expressed in the Apology resolution. The intent of the **Racial Equity Audit Report** (APA, 2022) is to better understand the association’s ongoing initiatives focused on dismantling institutional racism and advancing racial equity within APA, the field of psychology, and society. The audit also examined the racial and ethnic representation of elected and appointed leaders and APA staff. The Audit Report also identifies areas to improve, including: (a) enhancing coordination of racial equity activities APA-wide (e.g., within boards and committees, state psychology associations, APA divisions, and staff), and (b) enhancing racial diversity and representation among staff, elected and appointed leaders, governance, and the psychology field.

APA’s Council of Representatives has directed APA’s CEO, Dr. Arthur C. Evans Jr., to develop a long-term plan to prioritize, operationalize, and ensure accountability for achieving the goals for advancing racial equity identified in the resolutions. This plan is to be presented to Council by its meeting in August 2022. Dr. Evans will do so in consultation with the Task Force on Strategies to Eradicate Racism, Discrimination, and Hate and other subject matter experts within and outside the association. The EDI Office is working with APA leadership, members, and racial equity advocates and experts – with focused attention on members from communities of color to which the apology was intended – to develop a plan to advance APA’s mission, vision, and strategic priorities utilizing a racial equity lens. Sustained, transformational change within the association, the field, and larger society is possible. Confronting prejudice to eradicate inequity is essential to advancing racial equity. Returning to the framing provided by Maya Angelou, APA has taken steps to confront its harmful past in hopes of mitigating threats to our future and making the present more accessible for all.

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