Psychological Science is Not Race Neutral: Comment on Roberts et al., (2020)

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Abstract

In their analysis, Roberts and colleagues (2020) argue that the editors, authors, and participants throughout subfields of psychological science are overwhelmingly White. In this comment, we consider some of the drivers and consequences of this racial inequality. Drawing on race scholarship from in and outside the field, we highlight three phenomena that create and maintain racial inequality in psychology: (1) racial ignorance, (2) threats to belonging, and (3) racial progress narratives. We close by exploring steps that journals and authors can take to reduce racial inequality in our field, ending with an appeal to consider the experience of scholars of color in race scholarship and in psychological science more broadly.

Keywords: inequality, race, psychology, meta-science

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“If psychological science is to tackle diverse questions from diverse perspectives, it must diversify.” (Roberts, Bareket-Shavit, Dollins, Goldie, & Mortenson, 2020, p. 9)

In Roberts et al., (2020), the authors marshal an impressive collection of evidence that describes the overwhelming Whiteness of psychological science. The work reveals that race scholarship is exceedingly rare in our field, and those who participate in it—including authors, editors, and participants—are all overwhelmingly categorized as White. In this comment, we draw on the available evidence from race scholarship to help us understand the drivers and costs of the racial inequality that permeates the field of psychology.

Racial inequality is a defining challenge of both society and our field. We acknowledge, however, that our own sense of urgency will not be shared by many. Because psychological science has connections to disciplines that vary from computer science to sociology, some may view race scholarship as peripheral to our discipline—a sort of niche research area (or “me-search”), with little bearing on the complex cognitive and affective processes that guide human psychology. Those who do see race as more central to the field may, nevertheless, view work from White authors, editors, and participants as just as informative as that produced by scholars and participants of color—or even more so due to its supposed objectivity (King, Avery, Hebl, & Cortina, 2018; Torrez, Kraus, & Dupree, 2020; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

Here, we turn to scholarship on race and racism to highlight established societal and psychological phenomena that call into question these assumptions and reinforce that our field does indeed face an urgent need to overcome the racial inequality that is deeply embedded within

it. Ultimately, research on *racial ignorance*, *threats to belonging*, and *the assumption of racial progress* all suggest that racial inequality will continue to stand as a significant and sustained barrier in the study of cognitive, developmental, and social psychology. We end by highlighting promising recommendations made by Roberts et al., (2020) that call for our field to deeply and explicitly consider author, editor, and participant race in its research practices and organizational structure.

The Problem of Racial Ignorance

Researchers are, in fact, people first. This reality clearly reveals one fundamental challenge facing White authors, editors, and participants in the study of race: Racial ignorance. Racial ignorance, a concept long explored in sociological traditions, refers to a general lack of knowledge about how race shapes the experiences of people in society (Mills, 2014; Mueller, 2020)—and it serves as both driver and consequence of the extreme Whiteness in psychology. A combination of structural and motivational factors conspire to heighten racial ignorance among White people relative to people of color. In structural terms, the US context is set up so that racial segregation is the rule (Massey & Denton, 1993). Americans—White Americans especially—grow, live, and work in racially homogenous neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, spending relatively little time in integrated contexts. When integration is proposed (or even passed) as law, White people tend to resist these policies through collective action (DuBois, [1899], 1973; Ewing, 2018; Shedd, 2015). The segregation that characterizes much of the US context obscures the magnitude of racial inequality in society, allowing White people to go about much of their everyday lives without confronting racial privilege (Shedd, 2015). Segregation therefore constitutes a significant barrier to the understanding of race and racism.

Critically, for White people, this segregation means that a fuller understanding of racism must be discovered in books rather than through lived experience. This challenge must not be minimized. Personal experiences can be particularly informative for rejecting dominant narratives of race and racism in the context of social science (e.g., Dubois, 1903; Hill Collins, 1991) and for learning how race shapes seemingly neutral or objective scientific practices, including the methods used to collect data for our studies (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

Beyond segregation, motivational factors heighten racial ignorance. One such factor, as social psychological research reveals, is the tendency to deny racial privilege. Specifically, White people benefit from obscuring the existence of the racial inequality that they benefit from (Mueller, 2020). This creates a motivated tendency among White people to, across many contexts, deny racial privileges that they incur as a function of their elevated status (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). For example, White parents tend to avoid mentioning race in conversations with their children because they view such conversations to be negative or unnecessary (Abaied & Skinner, 2020; Perry, Skinner, & Abaied, 2019).

We see a similar pattern with adults: White people tend to discount their racial privileges and endorse more meritocratic conceptions of society except in very specific circumstances where for example, their personal characteristics are affirmed (e.g., Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Phillips & Lowery, 2018). This pattern of racial ignorance aligns with research demonstrating that White people underestimate racial inequality's magnitude in society (Kraus, Rucker, & Richeson, 2017) and in the institutions that they are a part of (Boykin et al., 2020; Ray, 2019). Those who are more likely to underestimate such inequality are also less likely to hire racial minorities or support equity-enhancing policies (Dupree, Torrez, Obioha, & Fiske, in press).

What does this mean for psychological science? Together, these structural and motivational conditions produce a veil of ignorance among White researchers, editors, and participants that stands in the way of scholarship “tackl[ing] diverse questions from diverse perspectives” (Roberts et al., 2020, p. 9). It prevents White authors from seeing the relevance of race to a myriad of social and psychological experiences; it prevents White editors from seeing the relevance of race to a so-called “general audience”; and it prevents White participants from contributing to research that applies to more than one narrow slice of humanity. Ultimately, this veil of ignorance produces research that reinforces the notion that psychological processes are race-neutral—a self-perpetuating cycle of racial ignorance.

The Problem of Belonging

Racial inequality in psychological science undermines the ability of underrepresented minority scholars of color to feel a sense of belonging within our field. Belonging is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1994; Edmondson, 1999), and social psychologists have long studied the importance of belonging for underrepresented minorities in higher education (Good, Rattan, & Dweck, 2012; Steele, 1988; Walton & Cohen, 2007). The vast underrepresentation for scholars of color in our field has negative interpersonal, cognitive, and institutional impacts on these scholars as they attempt to conduct research. Interpersonally, stereotypes continue to depict Black Americans as socially (Dupree et al., in press; Lei & Bodenhausen, 2017) or biologically (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008) inferior. These stereotypes contribute to Black scholars facing patronizing interpersonal behaviors from even well-intentioned White colleagues (Dupree & Fiske, 2019). Cognitively, Black scholars must contend with additional cognitive demands that stem from deciphering whether the behavior of others is benign, or motivated by racial animus (Trawalter & Richeson, 2006; Shelton & Richeson, 2006).

Structurally, research on tokenism highlights how being the only member of a social identity group leads to inferences and observations suggesting that institutions are hostile toward members of that group (King, Hebl, George, & Matusik, 2010). For example, tokenism means that many scholars of color are not rewarded by the institution for much of the work that they do. Their typical work activities are overloaded by service requests as universities attempt to make good on promises of campus diversity (Rodriguez, Campell, & Adelson, 2015; Syed, 2017). When citation counts and other metrics of impact are typically used in promotion and tenure decisions, these additional service requirements represent unaccounted for scholarly contributions that exacerbate racial inequality in our field. Moreover, tokenism on journal editorial boards means that scholars of color face additional burdens in their editorial and reviewing responsibilities, sometimes being called upon to prevent the publication of scientific racism within our journals. Scholars of color are acutely aware of the disconnect between the work they are asked to do and the work that they are rewarded for. Together these conditions threaten a sense of belonging for scholars of color, preventing retention and full participation in our field.

Importantly, the problem of belonging constitutes both a cause and cost of the racial inequality in psychological science. A lack of belonging pushes scholars of color out of our field, contributing to an overwhelming Whiteness that reduces belonging. Racial inequality in psychology is once again shown to be a self-perpetuating cycle.

The Problem of Assumed Racial Progress

The magnitude of racial inequality described by Roberts et al., (2020) in psychological science was undoubtedly shocking to many readers. It likely engendered reactions that affirmed progressive values and a commitment to diversity—indeed, both tend to characterize higher

education institutions. However, this magnitude of racial inequality, more than 400 years after the first arrival of enslaved Africans to this continent, raises a crucial concern: Even among a collection of scholars who value diversity, our understanding of the collective action needed to counteract such conditions is wholly insufficient. Research finds that people in the US context tend to make assumptions about the automatic nature of the unfolding of racial progress in society (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; DeBell, 2017; Kraus et al., 2019; Seamster & Ray, 2018). This assumption, buttressed by narratives like the American Dream or the belief in meritocracy, that society becomes more equitable as time passes, underappreciates and dangerously ignores the significant collective struggle that is necessary to bring about real change (Boykin et al., 2020).

This belief in automatic, naturally-occurring racial progress can stand directly in the path of actual progress. Sustainable racial justice and diversity among tenured psychological scientists will mean explicitly contending with a history of racial inequality within our field—whose spaces, canon, and methods have all been exclusionary up to this point in history. An authentic and effective welcoming of demographic diversity in psychological science will require support for more radical forms of scholarship. This includes forms of scholarship that have historically been led by people of color (Hill Collins, 1991) and are openly critical of the institutions that must then promise to train, graduate, hire, promote, tenure, and sustain those same scholars. Continued belief in the natural and automatic unfolding of racial progress makes authentic and effective embrace of diversity in our field impossible. This belief negates critical examination of current practices, reconciliation with past and present racism, and the necessary transfer of editorial power.

The Way Forward

To summarize, racial ignorance among White scholars (due to structural and motivational factors), a lack of belonging among scholars of color (who are subject to additional interpersonal, cognitive, and institutional demands), and a presumption of automatic racial progress all conspire to create and maintain racial inequality in our field. Despite the abolishment of slavery and a civil rights revolution, psychological science remains overwhelmingly White, with no change in sight. This racial inequality contributes to a “White standard” that renders the experiences, value, and variability of people of color moot (Shelton, 2000). Ultimately, the Whiteness of the field mitigates our science’s generalizability, applicability, and social impact. How can psychological science remedy this inequity and enact actual change? Thankfully, Roberts and colleagues (2020) provide a number of tangible solutions to remedy the racial inequality in our field—and the myriad of negative consequences for both producers and consumers of knowledge.

We consider the two most promising recommendations that Roberts and colleagues (2020) pose for journals and authors to reduce racial inequality in our field. For journals, the authors recommend greater diversity of “individuals across all levels of the publication process” (p. 10). This means increasing the number of editors, reviewers, authors, and participants that hail from under-represented groups. The authors do not suggest an arbitrary target—rather, they suggest that scholars producing knowledge for journals from, for instance, the US context must be broadly representative of the racial demographics of that context. This strikes us as the most promising course of action. Because people of color are less subject to racial ignorance and the presumption of racial progress, diversifying the editors, reviewers, authors, and participants involved in such work will attenuate the systemic inequality in psychology research. This action also has the capacity reduce the lack of belonging experienced by scholars of color, who can see themselves and their experiences represented in the editorial boards and pages of journals. This

goal may seem abstract, but Roberts' et al., (2020) provide a number of specific policy changes to reach it, including posting diversity statements, creating diversity task forces, releasing diversity numbers annually, and creating badges to distinguish publications that do not rely exclusively on WEIRD samples or research teams (much like those we already have that distinguish publications with preregistered studies or publicly available datasets).

Roberts and colleagues (2020) also suggest that authors more firmly and explicitly center race in their scholarship by detailing and justifying the racial demographics of their samples. This alone could help prevent researchers from relying exclusively on mostly-White convenience samples (Rowley & Camacho, 2015) and making inaccurate and harmful generalizability statements (Simons, Shoda, & Lindsay, 2017).

The time is now for bold, field-wide action in the service of racial equity. Any combination of these concrete steps can reduce the racial inequality pervasive in our science and departments. However, all of us must participate in these actions; effective change will not occur if it is solely based on the unrewarded efforts of junior scholars of color.

Conclusion

Our field has two choices in interpreting the scholarship we have outlined here: We can continue with business as usual, ignoring the evidence suggesting that the racial inequalities outlined by Roberts et al., (2020) represent a significant and problematic organization of our subfields and its practices. Or, we can proceed as scientists, taking to heart the available evidence suggesting that these conditions damage our collective capacity to understand the psychological experiences of people throughout the world. As two people who see the inherent value and importance of psychological approaches to the study of race and racism, we urge the field to take the latter path, for it is one that takes us all toward greater equity and justice.

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