

CE

CONTINUING EDUCATION NEW GUIDANCE ON RACE AND ETHNICITY FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

BY STEPHANIE PAPPAS

The United States is becoming increasingly ethnically and racially diverse, yet discrimination and bias remain pervasive, as do large disparities in wealth, health, poverty and incarceration among racial and ethnic groups.

The field of psychology is not immune to similar inequality. In 2016, the American Community Survey found that about 84% of the active psychology workforce is white, an overrepresentation compared with the national population, which is 76% white (2007–16: *Demographics of the Psychology Workforce*, APA Center for Workforce Studies, 2018). Psychological research is largely based on whiter, wealthier and more Western samples than the global population, with the majority focused on a fairly homogeneous slice of U.S. society

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Learning objectives: After reading this article, CE candidates will be able to:

1. Discuss the goal and purpose of the new *Race and Ethnicity Guidelines*.
2. Describe how clinicians, educators and researchers can develop racial and ethnocultural responsiveness.
3. Discuss the importance of understanding bias and recognizing the influence of race and ethnicity in society.

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(Arnett, J.J., *American Psychologist*, Vol. 63, No. 7, 2008).

With these factors in mind, APA has released its first updated guidelines on race and ethnicity since 2003. The *Race and Ethnicity Guidelines in Psychology: Promoting Responsiveness and Equity* were adopted by the APA Council of Representatives in August. They follow a separate document, *Multicultural Guidelines: An Ecological Approach to Context, Identity, and Intersectionality*, adopted in 2017, that provided a broader umbrella view covering a wider cross section of identities than race and ethnicity alone.

The new *Race and Ethnicity Guidelines* are divided into four sections: fundamental, training and education, practice, and research guidelines. All are underpinned by the principle that considerations of social justice are inherent to an understanding of race and ethnicity, and the principle that issues of race, ethnicity, power and privilege are central to people's life experiences, says Karen Suyemoto, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and co-chair of the committee that developed the guidelines.

The guidelines also focus on developing psychologists' racial and ethnocultural responsiveness—as opposed to the more common term “cultural competence.” Competence, Suyemoto says, implies a static goal to be achieved, or an immutable personal characteristic.

Responsiveness, on the other hand, implies deliberate, continuous action.

“To be responsive you have to be continually changing, growing, understanding because our society is continually changing, too,” Suyemoto says.

FUNDAMENTAL GUIDELINES

The first section of the guidelines urges psychologists to recognize the influence of race and ethnicity in society, to maintain their scholarly knowledge of race and ethnicity, to be aware of their own position in the societal hierarchy and to address inequalities in organizations.

Unfortunately, most psychological research has been done on so-called WEIRD samples—in countries that are Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic. A 2010 review by anthropologist Joseph Henrich, PhD, and colleagues found that for many variables of interest, WEIRD samples may in fact be the least representative of humanity. For example, research on WEIRD samples may overestimate self-enhancing biases, analytic reasoning and even susceptibility to basic visual illusions (*Behavioral and Brain Science*, Vol. 33, No. 2–3, 2010).

The guidelines recommend that psychologists be aware that in every job and career stage, they are influenced by race and ethnicity, so they should carefully consider how racial and ethnocultural

norms may shape their own behaviors. They should also maintain a working knowledge of the scholarly literature on racial and ethnic disparities because ignoring this work may perpetuate harm: Research suggests that “colorblind” attitudes are associated with more prejudicial behavior. For example, Amherst College psychologist Deborah Son Holoién, PhD, and Princeton University psychologist J. Nicole Shelton, PhD, found that white participants primed with colorblind attitudes displayed more behavioral prejudice in interactions with ethnic minorities compared with whites primed with a multicultural approach to diversity (*Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2012).

Psychologists should also be aware of their own “positionality”—their understanding and awareness of their statuses and identities and the implications of these given the context of systemic power differences. In practice, this means evaluating how the values, norms and behaviors associated with one’s own ethnic or racial identities influence one’s own behavior. “It means you have a position in a larger system of privilege and oppression that affects your experience and your awareness of other people’s experience, and that you have to actively attend to that, particularly if you’re in a privileged position where you are more likely to be unaware,” Suyemoto says.

The guidelines also urge psychologists to address inequalities in organizations within and outside of psychology. In addition to the largely white makeup of

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the psychology workforce, there is evidence of racial bias in grant awards and underrepresentation in leadership positions. In a study of National Institutes of Health grant applications, researchers found that black grant applicants were 10% less likely than white applicants to receive an award, even after controlling for the applicants’ educational background, country of origin, training, previous research awards, publication record and employer characteristics (Ginther, D., et al., *Science*, Vol. 333, No. 6045, 2011).

TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Though multiculturalism is an increasing part of psychology curricula and training programs, there are often gaps, particularly in areas where research hasn’t kept up. For example, University of Texas at Austin psychologist Germine Awad, PhD, and Wafa Amayreh, PhD, of the U.S. Air Force Joint Base San Antonio—Lackland, reviewed the literature on prejudice and discrimination against Middle Eastern and North African individuals and found limited scholarship (*Handbook of Arab American Psychology*, Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016). What’s more, multiculturalism is sometimes seen as an add-on, rather than as an integral part of the curriculum, says Joseph Trimble, PhD, a psychologist at Western Washington University who co-chaired the guidelines’ development committee.

The guidelines advise educators to strive for an inclusive curriculum in an environment of racial and ethnocultural responsiveness. This means being

aware of racial and ethnocultural biases in psychological theories, as well as developing skills to facilitate discussions about race and ethnicity in the classroom. Teaching multiculturalism as a learning opportunity rather than as an ideology or set of policies may help reduce prejudice among white students, according to research by psychologists Kimberly Rios, PhD, and Ashley Wynn, PhD, of Ohio University (*European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 46, No. 7, 2016).

The guidelines also urge psychologists to promote reflective practice, self-awareness and critical thinking among students, trainees and colleagues, with a focus on developing “cultural humility,” or an openness to continual learning and self-reflection about issues of culture, race and ethnicity. Alongside humility and self-reflection should come knowledge and skill-building, the guidelines say.

Psychologists must also address issues of bias within educational organizations. This might involve pushing for the inclusion of racial and ethnocultural issues in accreditation standards and textbook standards, for example, and working to ensure that faculty and staff in psychology programs reflect the diversity of the student body or community. Psychology trainees are becoming increasingly diverse; according to the APA Center for Workforce Studies, the number of doctorates awarded to racial and ethnic minorities grew by 63% between 2008 and 2017. “Training and education are really where we create the future of our field,” Suyemoto says.



The guidelines urge psychologists to consider how their backgrounds shape their behavior in a larger system of privilege and oppression.

INSIGHTS FOR PRACTICE

In practice, too, psychologists should be aware of ways that race, ethnicity and culture influence assessments and treatments. Tests and assessments are often not validated with minority samples, making interpretation of results potentially inaccurate. Evidence also suggests that racial and ethnic minorities face bias in the health-care system that can result in treatment disparities. University of Akron clinical counselors Robert Schwartz, PhD, and David Blankenship, PhD, found that African American and black individuals were three to four times more likely to be diagnosed with psychotic disorders compared with European American or white individuals, while Latinx individuals were three times more likely to receive a psychotic disorder diagnosis than white individuals, both in the United States and internationally (*World Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2014). Not only do race and ethnicity influence how clinicians interpret

symptoms, discrimination can also be a risk factor for poor mental health outcomes. A longitudinal study led by Baruch College psychologist Nicholas Sibrava, PhD, found that experiencing discrimination increases susceptibility to post-traumatic stress disorder in African American and Latinx adults (*American Psychologist*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 2019).

The guidelines urge psychologists to reflect on ways their own positionality may affect the services they provide. For example, a reflective practitioner might consider the collective history of his or her racial or ethnocultural group in relation to a client's. The guidelines also encourage an understanding of indigenous and cultural healing practices and an openness to working collaboratively with indigenous and ethnic-minority healers. Finally, psychologists are urged to combat bias and oppression within practice settings and health-care systems. The guidelines point to the community psychology model

KEY POINTS

1

Race, ethnicity and culture can influence psychological research and practice at every career stage.

2

Practitioners should take a proactive approach to understanding their own statuses and identities in the context of systemic power disparities.

3

Psychological research has historically been conducted with white, largely American samples, limiting understanding of people from different countries and cultural backgrounds.

of considering the client in his or her social context. For example, a school psychologist who notices a disproportionate number of suspensions among black students could choose to counsel those students individually. However, intervening at a macro level by addressing the disparity with the administration could potentially help more students while preventing psychological trauma to the students in the first place.

GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH

When it comes to research practices, the guidelines urge scholars to study the well-being of racial and ethnic minorities and to reflect on the values and possible biases that influence their research decisions. Researchers should approach this work with savvy research methods: Too often, race and ethnicity variables are insufficiently operationalized in research studies. For example, using “black” and “African American” interchangeably ignores the differences in experiences between black immigrants and native-born African Americans. Imprecise use of these terms can make it difficult to compare results across studies and accurately interpret findings, Suyemoto says. Some of this imprecision is baked into federal data as well: The U.S. Census Bureau, for example, defines Middle Eastern and North African individuals as white, but research by Awad and others suggests that Middle Eastern and North African individuals experience bias and discrimination to a far greater extent than whites of European descent (*American Psychologist*,



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Vol. 74, No. 1, 2019).

Racially and ethnoculturally responsive standards for measurements and assessments are also often lacking, says Trimble, whose research has found that oft-used Likert-format scales don't elicit valid responses from some subpopulations, such as Inuit elders (*Handbook of Racial-Cultural Psychology and Counseling, Vol. 1: Theory and Research*, Wiley, 2005). The common expectation that minority samples will be compared with a white control group further perpetuates the notion of white as the norm. The guidelines encourage psychologists to understand these methodological issues and to avoid simple comparative studies.

Psychologists working with racial-, ethnic- or cultural-minority groups should recognize the history of exploitation these groups have experienced and strive for ethical and responsive research practices. For example, community-based participatory research is cited as inspiration. Researchers should see participants as partners and focus on ways to help them build local capacity and empowerment. Researchers should also consider who will own any data that emerge from the project, how community members might be involved in interpreting findings and how the findings will be disseminated to benefit the communities affected by the research.

"You can't just simply fly in, collect your data and leave,"

Trimble says. "It takes a lot of time to nurture a relationship with a community."

Finally, psychologists should seek to ensure that racial and ethnic equity is not just reflected in their own work but also in broader research systems. This might mean examining the foundations of the dominant methodology in a field; it could also encompass mentoring researchers of color or facilitating the participation of ethnic-minority professionals in peer review or providing training for peer reviewers to avoid bias.

"I know it might be possible to see these guidelines as daunting, but I see that as selling the field short," Suyemoto says. "There is a hopefulness in setting out aspirations that we as a discipline can move towards. I really believe that psychology should be and can be a leader in promoting the well-being of people of color and ethnic and indigenous minorities." ■

RESOURCES

APA Race and Ethnicity Guidelines in Psychology: Promoting Responsiveness and Equity
www.apa.org/about/policy/summary-guidelines-race-ethnicity

APA Multicultural Guidelines: An Ecological Approach to Context, Identity, and Intersectionality
www.apa.org/about/policy/multicultural-guidelines