

# Apology to People of Color for APA's Role in Promoting, Perpetuating, and Failing to Challenge Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Human Hierarchy in U.S.

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The American Psychological Association failed in its role leading the discipline of psychology, was complicit in contributing to systemic inequities, and hurt many through racism, racial discrimination, and denigration of people of color, thereby falling short on its mission to benefit society and improve lives. APA is profoundly sorry, accepts responsibility for, and owns the actions and inactions of APA itself, the discipline of psychology, and individual psychologists who stood as leaders for the organization and field.

The governing body within APA should have apologized to people of color before today. APA, and many in psychology, have long considered such an apology, but failed to accept responsibility. APA previously engaged in unsuccessful efforts to issue apologies in the past, including an apology to Indigenous peoples. The work done to make this apology to people of color a reality was led by the people and voices of a broad cross-section of today's APA—members, APA's elected and appointed leaders, and staff—in a shared commitment to not only truly assess the harms and the harmed, but also to take responsibility and commit to taking those collective learnings and direct them into an apology that will affect true change. It is informed by listening with intention to the voices of the past—as outlined in a stunning chronology of psychology's history—and especially informed by the voices of today, the lived experience of psychologists of color, Ethnic Psychological Associations, and those who serve people of color.

Consistent with its February 2021 commitment to catalogue the long history of harms to people of color and to inform an apology and a path forward toward healing and reconciliation, APA commissioned historical research by the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron (Cummings Center, 2021). In addition, recognizing that many existing historical records and narratives have been centered in Whiteness, APA also concluded that it was imperative to capture oral history and the lived experiences of communities of color, so commissioned a series of listening sessions and surveys, which also inform this resolution, by Jernigan & Associates Consulting.

The narrative that emerged from the listening sessions, surveys, and historical findings put into stark amplification the impact of well-known and lesser-known actions. It leaves us, as APA leaders, with profound regret and deep remorse for the long-

term impact of our failures as an association, a discipline, and as individual psychologists.

We know too well that history can repeat itself, that the past informs the present, and that many harms will continue to be perpetuated absent purposeful intervention. In offering an apology for these harms, APA acknowledges that recognition and apology only ring true when accompanied by action; by not only bringing awareness of the past into the present but in acting to ensure reconciliation, repair, and renewal. We stand committed to purposeful intervention, and to ensuring that APA, the field of psychology, and individual psychologists are leaders in both benefiting society and improving lives.

## ABOUT THIS RESOLUTION

In constructing this apology, APA benefited greatly from a report generated by APA Division 45, the Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race, titled *Protecting and Defending Our People: Nakni tushka anowa* (The Warrior's Path; APA Division 45, 2020). This Warrior's Path report reflects upon how APA and psychology can shed racist and colonial roots to embody the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion to become an actively antiracist discipline.

The structure of this apology focuses on acknowledging the roles of psychology and APA in promoting, perpetuating, and failing to challenge racism, and the harms that have been inflicted on communities of color as a result. It should be noted that this apology is accompanied by a second proposed resolution, "Psychology's Role in Dismantling Systemic Racism," which delves more deeply into methods by which psychological science can be used to remedy harms in practice, education, criminal justice, training, and other domains.

**WHEREAS** psychology cannot harness its potential to disarm and dismantle racism without addressing its own history of racism and support for human hierarchy (APA, 2021c). Since its origins as a scientific discipline in the mid-19th century, psychology has, through acts of commission and omission, contributed to the dispossession, displacement, and exploitation of communities of color. This early

history of psychology, rooted in oppressive psychological science to protect Whiteness, White people, and White epistemologies, reflected the social and political landscape of the U.S. at that time. Psychology developed under these conditions, helped to create, express, and sustain them, continues to bear their indelible imprint, and often continues to publish research that conforms with White racial hierarchy (Cummings Center, 2021; Helms 2003; Luther et al., 1996; Santiago-Rivera et al., 2016).

**WHEREAS** APA was established by White male leadership, many of whom contributed to scientific inquiry and methods that perpetuated systemic racial oppression, including promoting the ideas of early 20th century eugenics; Eugenics is defined as the idea that racial differences and hierarchies are biologically based and fixed, and was used to support segregation, sterilization, and antimarriage laws (Cummings Center, 2021).

**WHEREAS** eugenicists focused on the measurement of intelligence, health, and capability, concepts which were adopted by the field of psychology and used systemically to create the ideology of White supremacy and harm communities of color (Cummings Center, 2021; Gillham, 2001).

**WHEREAS** psychologists created, sustained, and promulgated ideas of human hierarchy through the construction, study, and interpretation of racial difference, and therefore contributed to the financial wealth gap and social class disparities experienced by many communities of color (Cummings Center, 2021).

**WHEREAS** APA has recently adopted a framework that affirms that human rights are universal and inalienable, that racism is a violation of human rights, and that APA must oppose racism in all its forms (APA, 2021e) and implemented an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) framework (APA, 2021d) to be infused throughout the association that holds APA accountable for promoting psychological safety, emotional intelligence, and belongingness throughout APA.

**WHEREAS** in February 2021, APA "reaffirm[ed] its denunciation of racism in all forms for its destructive psychological, social, educational, and economic effects on human rights and human welfare throughout the lifespan;" committed 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;" and established a standard definition of racism (PDF, 95KB) and a framework for understanding the following four levels of racism in designing and implementing antiracist research, education, training, policy, and clinical applications through the lens of intersectionality: structural racism, institutional racism, interpersonal racism, and internalized racism (APA, 2021c).

**WHEREAS** this framework for understanding the four levels of racism recognizes that racism is woven into the fabric of the historical origins of the U.S. and its territories and has become

integral to the functioning of its core institutions and organizations (APA, 2021c).

**WHEREAS** acts of racism have exposed long-simmering racial inequities and injustices and have prompted a national conversation about systemic racism, bigotry, and xenophobia (APA, 2020a, 2021c).

**WHEREAS** psychology has minimized and marginalized psychologists from communities of color and their contributions to the field (Guthrie, 2004). APA specifically acknowledges the harm it caused the field and the Black community during the height of the civil rights movement. APA ignored the opportunity to take a formidable stand to address poverty, racism, and social concerns affecting African Americans, despite the strong advocacy of our members, some of whom consequently left the organization to form the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi), an independent association. Further, APA acknowledges often excluding American Arab, Middle Eastern/North African (AMENA) individuals from APA statements regarding the impact of racism and discrimination and makes an affirmative statement here regarding their inclusion in this resolution (Awad et al., 2019).

**WHEREAS** psychologists established, participated in, and disseminated scientific models and approaches rooted in scientific racism when the discipline was first founded (Winston, 2020).

**WHEREAS** the field of psychology has not historically supported research on communities of color by not adequately reporting and including them, minimally reporting them as a demographic data point, and/or interpreting results based on Eurocentric research standards, thereby perpetuating invisibility and resulting in a lack of quality research that can inform practices and policies that impact communities of color (Helms et al., 2005; Buchanan, Perez, Prinstein, & Thurston, in press).

**WHEREAS** these views have often been centered in research used to advance the careers of White researchers who became "experts" with respect to the ethnically diverse studied group, without providing any follow up to that community or insight into the data findings and the implications for the researched community (Buchanan et al., in press; McFarling, 2021).

**WHEREAS** a general lack of faculty and advisors of color to assist with navigating and completing graduate programs has placed great burdens on current faculty of color to support students of color and champion all university-related issues pertaining to race and diversity, all of which is a consequence of racial disparities in the field and discipline of psychology which may be rooted in negative training-related and other experiences of faculty and students of color (DeBell, 2017; Constantine & Sue, 2007; El-Ghoroury, 2012; Keels, 2017; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; McCoy et al., 2015).

**WHEREAS** psychological science and practice have been used by psychologists and others to support segregated and subpar

education for many children of color (Jackson, 2005; Kazembe, 2021; Richards, 1997).

**WHEREAS** psychologists created and promoted the widespread application of psychological tests and instruments that have been used to disadvantage many communities of color (Fass, 1980; Helms, 2002; Kaestle, 2013; Kevles, 1968), contributing to the overdiagnosis, misdiagnosis, and lack of culturally appropriate diagnostic criteria to characterize the lived experience and mental health concerns of people of color (Anderson & Mayes, 2010; Cermele et al., 2001).

**WHEREAS** APA and its leadership failed to take concerted action in response to calls from Black psychologists (many of whom later formed ABPsi) for an end to the misuse of testing and assessment practices (including standardized assessments) and interventions in education and the workplace developed by psychologists and others that perpetuated racial inequality (Cummings Center, 2021; Gomez, Cano, & Baltés, 2021; Pickren & Tomes, 2002; Williams & Mitchell, 1978; Wilson, 2020).

**WHEREAS** for students of color, the system has been built to perpetuate multiple barriers to entry and completion, including the completion of training requirements that omit taking the perspective of diversity into account, the costs of tuition, and the costs of entrance examinations and related preparation programs (Lantz & Davis, 2017), all of which along with many other factors adversely impact the recruitment and retention and successful transition into the field of psychology for students of color.

**WHEREAS** APA recognizes that traditional diagnostic methods and standards do not always capture the contextual and lived experiences of people of color, which influences mental health outcomes and emotional well-being (Anderson & Mayes, 2010; Cermele et al., 2001).

**WHEREAS** psychology has been complicit in failing to effectively elevate the science behind the disproportionate concentration of adverse social determinants of health in communities of color, as well as the impact of climate change on these same communities. That includes acknowledging that neighborhoods populated primarily by people of color and members of low-socioeconomic backgrounds are overburdened with lack of access to healthy food, quality health care, and community safety, as well as disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards, including lead paint in older buildings, toxic waste facilities, and other sources of pollutants. As the incidence of adverse social determinants of health and climate change worsens, there will be increasingly deleterious effects on both the physical and mental health of these communities of color (Bullard et al, 2013; Rosner, 2016; Schell et al., 2020; Williams, 2018).

**WHEREAS** racist behaviors and ideologies are evidenced in the health inequities of pandemics and disease on Indigenous people (including over 570 Tribal Nations), Black/African American, Asian

American, Pacific Islander American, Latina/o and Latinx, and AMENA peoples and communities; psychologists also provided ideological support for, and failed to speak out against, the colonial framework of the government-sponsored industrial (boarding) and day school systems for Indigenous youth (Cummings Center, 2021); the tragic hate crimes and killings of Black people at the hands of law enforcement; the surge in hate crimes against and ongoing harms perpetuated by “model minority” stereotyping of Asian Americans Americans (Yip, Cheah, Kiang & Hall, 2021); the inhumane treatment and systemic targeting and historical exclusion of immigrants of color from the civil rights granted by U.S. citizenship, through immigration policy and its aggressive enforcement and the mistreatment and criminalization of undocumented immigrants who lack access to a pathway to U.S. citizenship; the continuing hate crimes and speech perpetrated against AMENA people; and the overall climate of xenophobia in the U.S. These examples of racism are widespread and impact either directly or indirectly all individuals who belong to marginalized racial groups, including multiracial persons (APA, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b).

**WHEREAS** racial inequities result from laws, systems, policies, practices, and cultural narratives that reflect racial bias and White supremacist ideology, and that APA and psychology, in keeping with the ethical values reflected in the APA Ethics Code (2016) have an important role and responsibility to disarm and dismantle racism in all its forms (APA, 2021c; Thomas, 2005; Yearby et al., 2020).

**WHEREAS** racism harms all people and infects their beliefs, ways of understanding the world, and interpersonal interactions (APA, 2021d; C.P. Jones, 2003).

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that APA sincerely and formally acknowledges, accepts responsibility for, and owns the actions and inactions of APA itself, the discipline of psychology, and prominent individual psychologists who stood as leaders for the organization and field, and that APA sincerely and formally apologizes to communities of color for these actions and inactions.

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that APA rejects “hegemonic science”—that is, research focused on identifying and reinforcing supposed hierarchies of human value based on a White-default—and will continue to oppose it through culturally responsive training, ethical/equity-focused approaches, peer review, and publications (e.g., APA, 2021d).

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that APA reaffirms that race is a social construct with no underlying genetic or biological basis and debunks the notion that different groups can be ranked hierarchically on the basis of physical characteristics (APA 2021c).

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that, consistent with the 2012 Final Report of the APA Presidential Task Force on Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity, the 2017 APA Multicultural

Guidelines, the 2019 Race and Ethnicity Guidelines, and the 2021 Resolution on Human Rights, APA will encourage psychologists and trainees to consider the limitations of White Western-oriented clinical practice, and gain awareness of other healing approaches emanating from Indigenous and other non-Western and cultural traditions. APA will continue to learn and update new information on racism in diagnosis and clinical practice, and on the pursuit of equity, diversity, and inclusion in health service psychology, including psychological testing and assessment, while fostering practice based in culturally relevant evidence.

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that APA commits to developing future policy that is grounded in its ethical values; is based on a broad definition of research that appropriately includes knowledge by, for, and about communities of color; and decenters Whiteness in science, scholarship, and practice. Given that such research is currently lacking for many communities of color, APA will advocate for increased funding and opportunities for scholars of color to fill this void and will encourage the development of future policy that considers the generalizability and appropriateness of current research to inform recommendations and actions and ensure rigorous, evidence-based approaches for all populations.

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that APA encourages ethical scientific research that actively engages communities of color as equitable partners and is based on the lived experiences and perspectives of those communities of color to develop needed interventions created for diverse populations and delivered by diverse providers.

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that APA will examine, review, make recommendations, or require revisions for terms referencing communities of color (such as “minority”) in journals, correspondence, titles, etc., to ensure that they are consistent with the *APA Publication Manual* (APA, 2020) and the EDI inclusive language guidelines (APA, December 2021) to accurately describe the communities in a nonderogatory manner.

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that APA acknowledges that an apology absent ameliorative action is without impact, and thus commits to the following immediate actions of remedy and repair, in addition to long-term actions specified above. These actions are anchored in creating immediate and real structural change for the organization.

- APA will engage in a comprehensive audit of all its EDI and other antiracism-related activities including ethnic representation of governance leaders and central office staff and policies, practices, and procedures currently underway and in use—to include how psychologists of color will have access to the results of the audit and its intended impact on society, to be concluded by the February 2022 meeting of the Council of Representatives.
- Not later than August 2022, initial actions will be proposed for approval by Council, based on recommendations from members and ethnic groups, with respect to implementation of the following three priorities, though Council may offer different tactics than the examples noted below:
  - » **APA will prioritize efforts in knowledge production and scholarship**, such as those that enhance psychology’s scientific methods based on culturally diverse knowledge production, and those that create mechanisms to count and acknowledge all racial and ethnic groups in APA-sponsored research and membership surveys (e.g., regularly offering “AMENA” as a demographic category that survey respondents may choose, avoiding clustering small population samples, such as American Indian and Alaska Native psychologists, in “other” categories).
  - » **APA will prioritize efforts in training, opening pathways, and workforce development**, such as those that expand opportunities for students of color to pursue careers in psychology; promote mentorship of psychologists of color; improve psychology graduate education and training to include diverse, non-Western cultural perspectives; increase mechanisms, strategies, and practices to raise participation and success rates for psychologists of color in academia, publishing, and governmental licensing; increase representation of communities of color throughout APA’s elected and appointed leadership; expand opportunities for leadership and leadership training for psychologists of color; and enhance the visibility of psychologists of diverse backgrounds.
  - » **APA will prioritize efforts in clinical practice and health equity**, such as those that elevate both advocacy for and training in culturally competent, easily accessible care models; and those that improve the discipline’s knowledge of and responsiveness to the needs of communities of color. The foundational work on this has already begun, as outlined in the “Resolution on Advancing Health Equity and Psychology,” developed by APA’s Presidential Task Force on Psychology and Health Equity.
- To improve accountability and transparency, APA will establish and share metrics on progress toward the objectives identified, establish timeframes for accomplishing these objectives, communicate regularly to members of the association regarding progress toward meeting the objectives, and incorporate feedback received from key stakeholders regarding progress toward objectives, as a means of continuous quality improvement.

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that future APA actions could include targeted apologies and restorative processes for specific communities of color that extend beyond the content, format, and style of this formal Council resolution to be responsive to, and respectful of, the unique cultures and traditions of a given group, such as by the inclusion of elements respectful of the cultural traditions of Indigenous peoples.

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that future APA actions could also include targeted interventions to benefit other groups that have experienced systems of oppression, including those based on religion, sex, class, sexual orientation and gender diversity, and disability identity.

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that APA reaffirms its rejection of racism and racist ideologies and its commitment to dismantling racism in all forms, including within the discipline itself, will continue to work to identify psychology's significant potential to dismantle racism in important systems and sectors of society, and will continue to advocate for policies that create a more equitable and inclusive society that honors the needs and well-being of people of color.

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