

Bias

The Impacts of Anti-Black Racism in Psychology

How "Whiteness" structurally sustains anti-Blackness in psychology.

KEY POINTS

- Psychology is built on pseudoscientific findings that have informed the dehumanization of Black people.
- "Whiteness" within the field of psychology perpetuates racial hierarchies and anti-Black racism.
- Black scholars face pervasive anti-Black racism rooted in the dominance of Whiteness, the default standard.
- The field of psychology must move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives to begin dismantling Whiteness.

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"The people who do this thing, who practice racism, are bereft. That is something distorted about the psyche. It's a huge waste and it's a corruption and a distortion." – [Toni Morrison](#)

How Psychology Has Historically Promoted Anti-Black Racism

Historically, the field of psychology has been at the forefront of providing the public with information on the science of human behavior, thoughts, [intelligence](#), and emotions. While important, as scholars we must acknowledge the racist history of the field of psychology, and how it sustains anti-Black racism. Many notable scholars have advanced research that is shrouded in Whiteness that advances a harmful image of Black people. These scholars promote a racial hierarchy by advancing Whiteness as the standard, the norm for what is acceptable and appropriate. Such pseudoscience has informed policies related to sterilization, segregation, intelligence testing, and immigration, maintaining Whiteness at the expense of those who are strategically marginalized and undervalued (see APA's [Historical Chronology](#) page on the topic). This harmful narrative did not just remain in academic journals, as it laid the groundwork for ongoing [discrimination](#) and marginalization and established Whiteness as "[the frame for educational and scientific practices](#)." Today, we continue to see psychology's role in creating a discourse of inequality that has greatly influenced public policy, scientific advancements, and clinical interventions. While psychology's long-standing role in upholding white supremacy is an

unfortunate chapter, its legacy continues to inform the present. "Whiteness" is "[the overt and subliminal socialization processes and practices, power structures, laws, privileges, and life experiences that favor the white racial group over all others.](#)"

Whiteness Sustaining Anti-Black Racist Practices in the Academy



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The psychological workforce continues to be [predominately white](#), and the academy has shown itself to challenge Black students and faculty to prove their intellect, worth, and right to exist in a space founded for the uplifting of those of European descent. From their very founding, institutions privileged individuals of European ancestry who were already advantaged in economic, political, and religious status (see [Wiggin et al., 2023](#); [Zembylas, 2021](#)). Today, Whiteness continues to be the sustaining power that creates rules to determine who has access to specific resources, and to uphold oppressive ideologies within a system (e.g., the academy). [Lee J. Cronbach](#), a prominent and groundbreaking educational psychologist, has stated, "*The psychologist's job... is to facilitate or anticipate natural selection...He takes the system for granted and tries to identify who will fit into it. His devices have a conservative influence because they identify persons who will succeed in the existing institution. By reducing failures, they remove a challenge which might otherwise force the institution to change.*" This perspective highlights Lee J. Cronbach's calling to psychologists in the academy to continue to uphold existing oppressive systems and deny access to those who seek to challenge or dismantle them. Thus, removing those who do not want to abide by the rules of Whiteness.

Whiteness guides the [education](#), research, clinical training, and delivery of mental health services in the field ([Helms, 2016](#)). Black trainees frequently receive guidance from White psychologists and faculty who consciously or unconsciously uphold the values of Whiteness, leading to discriminatory actions such as undermining students' abilities and lived experiences, hindering their clinical progress, and impacting their recommendation letters and clinical placements. This may result in Black students feeling isolated, othered, and detached from the field of psychology ([Galán et al., 2023](#)). While the support of Black mentors and advisors further along in their careers is crucial for the development of Black trainees, they, too, face anti-Blackness in ways that affect their research, clinical advancement, tenure, and retention.

Whiteness is also present in the concept of “cultural taxation” in academia, which demands that Black scholars, regardless of their [career](#) status, take on increased mentorship duties, participate in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives, use their lived experiences as learning tools, and assume other responsibilities with undefined expectations without being compensated or acknowledged for their efforts ([Padilla, 1994](#); [Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009](#)). This added burden is a significant factor driving departures from academic, research, and clinical positions ([Padilla, 1994](#)). Without Black faculty and clinicians, Black trainees may lack the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging and develop their identities during their training ([Gaston et al., 2016](#)). This then leaves Black community members who need mental health services without the opportunity to connect with providers who share their cultural background and experiences ([Chu & Robinson, 2024](#); [Moore-Lobban, 2023](#); [ABP, 2022](#)). This is particularly important since clients who work with mental health professionals of the same racial/ethnic background are more likely to attend more counseling sessions, report greater improvement in their overall functioning, and are less likely to prematurely terminate counseling ([Smith & Trimble, 2016](#)).

The Consequences of Anti-Black Racism in Academia

Structural racism within the mental health profession and institutions of higher education drives many Black professionals to leave the field. Mental health professionals describe being subjected to racism, such as colleagues undermining their experiences or dismissing their professional standing. Experiences of marginalization within the profession, coupled with workplace [microaggressions](#), create hostile environments for some Black professionals, making retention particularly difficult. Black mental health professionals also report being called upon to address racial issues in the workplace and to take on disproportionate [emotional labor](#) due to their [identity](#). Over time, the cumulative effect of experiencing racism while supporting students and clients who are also navigating systemic racism negatively impacts the personal well-being of Black mental health professionals whose work is often undervalued and under-rewarded.

The tragic death by [suicide](#) of a dedicated Black scholar underscores the profound and destructive impact anti-Black racism in the academy can potentially have on one's well-being. According to reports, this scholar bravely spoke out about experiencing [bullying](#), harassment, and racial discrimination by [leadership](#) at the institution, but was often ignored. Such a heartbreaking loss calls for urgent reflection and action, emphasizing the toll that systemic racism and dehumanizing practices can have on the mental and physical well-being of Black academics. The constant effort by Black scholars to stay true to their heritage, break down barriers, honor their ancestors, and represent their communities often goes unrecognized and is overshadowed by the deeply rooted dominance of Whiteness within academic and professional environments.

Recommendations for Living Unapologetically to Combat Whiteness



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As we look today, the field of psychology has made pivotal strides to acknowledge anti-Black racism, however, the roots of racism remain and continue to influence how Black people are treated in research, practice, and academia. Black scholars deserve to engage in collective healing that addresses and mitigates the oppression, racial [trauma](#), and discrimination experienced in the field of psychology. Black scholars are necessary to encourage change, but how can they be well and do the work they are passionate about in their respective communities if Whiteness is not acknowledged and uprooted and the contributions of Black scholars valued?

Whiteness is not a problem that can be fixed with surface-level diversity initiatives, workshops, and grants that bring in a small group of Black scholars. It demands a shift in the foundation of the field's longevity of pathologizing Blackness and promoting white hierarchical norms — to practices of equity, justice, liberation, and support for humanity. We recommend the following to live unapologetically:

Recommendations:

1. Build and Strengthen Community

Foster relationships among Black scholars and allies committed to dismantling anti-Blackness within academia. Creating supportive networks across early, mid, and late-career scholars ensures the continuity of mentorship and guidance in navigating the persistence of white and Eurocentric norms that marginalize Black scholars.

2. Engage in Culturally Sustaining Research

Conduct research that honors and advances the understanding of Black experiences. Black scholars should feel empowered to explore topics connected to their racial and cultural identities, despite systemic biases that discourage such work. It's essential to challenge the double standard where White scholars frequently study White communities without scrutiny.

3. Prioritize Anti-Oppressive Scholarship

Attend and present at conferences that emphasize anti-bias, anti-oppressive research. Such spaces provide opportunities for meaningful engagement and [collaboration](#) on work that seeks to create tangible, real-world impacts.

4. Advance Research with Purpose

Black scholars often carry the responsibility of conducting research that addresses systemic inequities and delivers practical solutions. This commitment reflects the awareness of challenges faced by marginalized communities and the drive to enact change.

5. Center Black Joy and Self-Care

Celebrate and cultivate Black joy in daily life as an act of resistance and renewal. Prioritize self-care to ensure health and longevity in the field. Black scholars did not create systemic inequities and cannot dismantle them alone; nurturing the spirit is essential for sustaining their contributions to academia.

6. Commit to Mentorship and Guidance

Recognize the ongoing need for mentorship at all career stages to address structural inequities and foster [resilience](#). Sharing strategies and experiences helps Black scholars thrive in spaces that often exclude or undervalue them.

Today, the profession must commit to diversifying its ranks, valuing Black scholars, and appropriately centering the lived experiences of Black people in clinical and research settings, without the pervasiveness of Whiteness. It is only by confronting and addressing the systemic biases that have sustained Whiteness and anti-Black racism in the field of psychology that we can move toward an equitable future in the field.

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Full Blog Post: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sound-science-sound-policy/202412/the-impacts-of-anti-black-racism-in-psychology>