Toward Epistemic Pluralism:
A Call for Designing and Supporting Anti-Oppressive Scholarship
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Since the Enlightenment, science has provided a stamp of neutrality to legitimize greed and oppression by white men, perpetuating myths that uphold capitalist, patriarchal white supremacy (Winston, 2004). As the field of psychology reckons with this enduring legacy, we examine how dominant ways of “doing science” entangle researchers in the reproduction of white supremacy. This essay (1) illuminates how epistemological and methodological idolatry fastens psychologists to white supremacy and (2) provides a roadmap for disruption and reimagination within the field.

As graduate students, we believe in the promise of psychology as “the study of the mind and human behavior” (VandenBos, 2007). We advocate for epistemic pluralism, an openness to multiple ways of perceiving, understanding, and constructing knowledge in the world. By scrutinizing the institutionalization of epistemic exclusivity, we espouse a more expansive community of practice that engages questions of power and embraces the rich complexities of our world. Through “both/and” epistemological and methodological approaches, the field can create and share knowledge with the potential to unravel systems of oppression. Often the burden to challenge and “re-visions” mainstream scholarship falls on BIPOC scholars (Rich, 1972; Garcia, 2020). As white researchers, we implore other white researchers to oppose the universalism of whiteness, pursue anti-racism, and move in solidarity with BIPOC scholars’ ongoing, long-standing work (Buchanan et al., 2021; Helms, 1993).

Psychology’s positivist roots have positioned researchers as “objective viewers of reality” (McGrath & Johnson, 2003). This tradition ignores that “researchers are...people first” (Dupree & Krauss, 2020) who live in a patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist society and bring biases to their work (Grady, 1981; Helms, 1993). Yet mainstream discourses rarely consider the cultural embeddedness of psychological research. Measurement is “political, with implications for who
and what is included and excluded and thus who is deemed typical and atypical” (Rogers et al., 2021). Although psychologists purport to uncover universal truths about human nature, canonical theories are often gendered (Rutherford, 2020), ethnocentric (Winston, 2004), and incomplete (Dupree & Krauss, 2020; Medin et al., 2017). Difference has been historically conflated with deficit (Cole, 2013; Kornbluh et al., 2021).

To conduct research that disrupts white supremacy, then, is first to probe one’s positionality. As Ragin (1994) reminds us, researchers are instruments. When psychologists identify research questions, we encourage them to ask themselves questions, too. Why do I think new knowledge should be produced? Are there limits to what I do or can know? How might I contribute knowledge that subverts or exists outside of race-based capitalism? We challenge psychologists to understand their personal and collective history, power, and identity. Individualized struggle, we also note, only reaches so far; institutions must develop the infrastructure to support epistemic shifts (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Dawson et al., 2020). Accordingly, we encourage universities to embed self-reflection in graduate-level training; funders to reward humility; and peer-reviewers to champion methodological diversity.

Because mainstream funders and publications see experimental and survey research as natural outgrowths of psychology’s positivist orientation, the field has operated primarily as a set of ahistorical, decontextualized quantitative methodologies. Crucially, though, the seed of psychology lies in questions themselves — not the methodologies, nor the epistemologies whence they stem. Psychological questions can be rooted in constructionist soil. Psychological questions, which can explore change, uncertainty, and paradox, require a broader toolbox than scales and stimuli. Non-dominant methodologies, such as phenomenology and action research, specialize in capturing complexity, tapping into the messiness that is human nature (Syed &
McLean, 2021). Epistemic pluralism — when enacted by students, embraced by faculty, and elevated by the field — begets theoretical and methodological diversity and repositions psychology on more fertile terrain.

Psychologists are well-situated to develop frameworks that describe dominant cultural influences and identify sites of resistance. As examples, Rogers et al.’s (2021) “m(ai)cro,” De Leersnyder and Kim’s (2011) “emotional acculturation,” and Gamson’s “collective action” (1992) models foreground the simultaneity of individual and social processes. Such frameworks equip researchers to attend to intersectionality — the social construction and experience of intersecting identities across race, gender, ability, religion, time, and place (Comas-Díaz, 1991; Bowleg, 2008; Warner et al., 2016). Anti-racist frameworks empower psychologists to design studies amplifying subcultures that defy or transcend white supremacy (Fine et al., 2021; Toraif et al., 2021). By recognizing that systemic ideologies shape everyday lives, researchers can redress the original sin of psychology: emphasis on individuals isolated from “invisible” cultures of power.

We call on psychologists to illuminate these cultures, including American corporate capitalism (Buchanan et al., 2021; Kasser et al., 2007; Perez & Salter, 2019), whiteness (Helms, 1990; Sue, 2007), settler colonialism (Sinclair, 2020), and the gender binary (Bradford et al., 2019). In a society where researchers are on the conveyor belt of institutionalized racism (Tatum, 2017), psychologists can welcome the challenge of seeing — and making — the world anew. We believe epistemic pluralism can reshape psychology into a more powerful scientific endeavor, for all people.
Bibliography


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