

# The Psychology of Racism: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the release of the *Kerner Commission Report*, a U.S. government examination of the social unrest, protest, and violence that erupted in primarily Black neighborhoods in urban centers during the mid to late 1960s (The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968). Whereas societal racism in the forms of discrimination and racial segregation were indicted in the report, it remains unclear how much progress has actually been made toward eradicating racism in the United States either in its policies or among its citizenry. Further, it remains uncertain what role, if any, psychological science may play in maintaining societal racial discrimination and the vast racial disparities that continue to exist in any number of important life domains (e.g., wealth, health, education, housing). Moreover, can psychological science inform renewed efforts to eradicate societal racism?

This special issue is one effort to address at least some of these questions. Although a special issue is decidedly insufficient to cover all of the emerging research on the psychology of racism, the articles included here are intended to better position psychological science to inform and shape more thoughtful discourse regarding the nature of racism, how it affects individual cognition and health, and, importantly, how best to combat it.

Specifically, the articles that have been curated for this special issue focus on emerging lines of research on the psychology of racism with the intention of highlighting new ways of conceptualizing (and reconceptualizing) the problems of racism (Salter, Adams, & Perez, 2018, pp. 150–155) and racial privilege (Phillips & Lowery, 2018, pp. 156–162). Together, the articles offer more nuanced perspectives on the broad effects of both sociostructural and interpersonal forms of racial bias on the development of basic components of visual perception (Markant & Scott, 2018, pp. 163–169), the emergence of ethnic/racial identity (Yip, 2018, pp. 170–175), and both the psychological and physical

health and well-being of racial minorities (Lewis & Van Dyke, 2018, pp. 176–182). These articles also address some of the unexpected challenges that have arisen from seemingly benign attempts to disrupt discriminatory practices among individuals and institutions, for instance, by providing people with more accurate information about racial disparities in criminal justice outcomes (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018, pp. 183–187). Moreover, in this moment of rising national ethnic/racial diversity and calls for the same in many institutions, several articles included in this special issue offer thoughtful consideration of the current state of the psychology of diversity and what seems to be a mixed story of promise and peril as countries, communities, and organizations become increasingly diverse (Craig, Rucker, & Richeson, 2018, pp. 188–193; Plaut, Thomas, Hurd, & Romano, 2018, pp. 200–206; Tropp & Barlow, 2018, pp. 194–199).

Collectively, the articles in this special issue reveal the roles of individual-level cognitions, interpersonal and intergroup processes, and sociostructural forces in creating and maintaining racial bias and biased outcomes, despite any number of efforts to the contrary. In so doing, these articles suggest a need to direct intervention efforts at both the societal and individual levels, given the overwhelming evidence that the racially patterned structures of society not only tune basic cognitive processes but also engender psychological processes that serve to reify, justify, and reproduce themselves.

The articles in this special issue, however, are best understood in conjunction with several other recent articles that have appeared in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* in the last year, including recent work on the failure of psychological science to capture the nature of prejudice directed toward Native Americans

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(Fryberg & Eason, 2017), research on the consequences of explicit dehumanization among and toward a variety of ethnic/racial and religious groups (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017), and, importantly, recent research on the psychology of social protest, in general, and the Black Lives Matter movement, in particular (Leach & Allen, 2017). Moreover, the articles presented in this special issue should also be considered alongside outstanding research on the science of implicit racial bias (Axt, Ebersole, & Nosek, 2014; Stanley, Phelps, & Banaji, 2008), neural processing of race (Kubota, Banaji, & Phelps, 2012), and the dynamic nature of interracial contact (Richeson & Shelton, 2007), as well as in conjunction with important new work on multiracial categorization and identity (Gaither, 2015).

Last, I must acknowledge that despite efforts to ensure otherwise, the special issue is regrettably overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, U.S.-centric. While the focus on racial, ethnic, and ethno-religious bias, rather than a broad focus on prejudice, was intentional, the reliance (and overreliance) on U.S. perspectives and authors was not. But, again, the articles in the special issue should be understood as contributions to a larger conversation in the service of getting a better understanding of the dynamic nature of contemporary racism, how it shapes our conceptions of race, and, further, how racism continues to inform the lived experiences of members of ethnic/racial minority groups as well as members of dominant racial groups. In other words, the authors of these contributions and I offer this work as an opening, rather than the conclusion, of a purposeful engagement with the psychological science of racism.

Just over 2 years ago, Samuel Sommers and I offered our thoughts on a potential research agenda for the psychology of race and race relations (Richeson & Sommers, 2016). At the end of that commentary, we called for renewed attention to the study of racism, especially in its more structural, cultural, and explicit forms. The articles included in this special issue reflect one effort toward answering that call.

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