

This is my protest: What psychologists can add to conversations about Ferguson

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Abstract

In the United States, while deaths of Black individuals at the hands of the police occur at unbelievable rates, many continue to proclaim that we live in a post-racial society or that racism is an artifact of the past. Psychologists can, and indeed must, make a unique contribution to conversations about recent race-related events such as Ferguson and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. On the one year anniversary of the shooting of Michael Brown, this letter briefly highlights several phenomena established in psychological literature on racial biases such as the Superhumanization bias and findings from Shoot, Don't Shoot paradigms that may increase public awareness on acknowledging contemporary racial disparity and inequity.



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ABSTRACT

In the United States, while deaths of Black individuals at the hands of the police occur at unbelievable rates, many continue to proclaim that we live in a post-racial society or that racism is an artifact of the past. Psychologists can, and indeed must, make a unique contribution to conversations about recent race-related events such as Ferguson and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. On the one year anniversary of the shooting of Michael Brown, this letter briefly highlights several phenomena established in psychological literature on racial biases such as the Superhumanization bias and findings from Shoot, Don't Shoot paradigms that may increase public awareness on acknowledging contemporary racial disparity and inequity.

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One day
/when the #glory comes
/it will be ours
/it will be ours

A few days after Eric Garner's killer was acquitted, which was just ten days after Ferguson protested the decision to not indict Michael Brown's shooter, we started by sharing a question we had been running over in our minds, an emotion we had been feeling, even in that very moment of sitting in that room, or a reason why we each showed up to "A Conversation about #Ferguson and #EricGarner". We were a round table of Asian American and White clinical and social/personality psychology doctoral students and one Black male professor.

This space happened because several members of the University of Washington Psychology Department's Diversity Steering Committee were working together to figure out a "training" to hold for first year students on how to avoid inflicting the **minority spotlight effect** when teaching in classrooms [If an individual is the only member of a visible minority present in a setting, try not to ask them (used as a gender neutral singular pronoun) to speak for their entire group. Try not to ask me what do Asian people think about this? Try not to look at just me, when I'm the only Asian-looking person in a room and a topic comes up about Asian people. It leads to negative emotions (examples measured are: uncomfortable, worried, embarrassed, nervous, anxious, distracted, and conspicuous) in the individual you are asking (Crosby, King and Savitsky 2014). As we sat together trying to discuss this training, I felt like I was getting to stretch my legs, getting to **talk about race** and not feel like I have my guard up, like I have to defend myself, like I have to prove everything that I'm feeling, figure out every argument, points 1 to 5 before I go out "in the world" and say something about **my lived experience**. It was here that we realized that some of us were sitting around watching the news and reading relevant research with tears in our eyes, and doing this on our own. So we decided to try to come together and talk about how Ferguson (as a summary word) is making us feel, how we think that as psychologists, there are ways in which we can contribute to the larger conversation, and as we face going home for winter break, how are we going to talk to our friends and family who might have a different perspective.

My feeling that I started us off with: I could hear my heart beating faster all day in anticipation for this, my stomach was jittery, like something was fluttering inside it. You know, the fluttering when you feel like something hard and maybe good or maybe awful is going to happen and you



can't tell how it's gonna go. I felt somehow responsible, like if I'm going to ask for this, I hope it feels worth it.

Other people's feelings: hopelessness. helplessness. paralysis. anger. responsibility/duty as people who know something about the science of human behavior to say something or do something, but also, if the system was built from the very beginning to keep some people in power and others not, so the system is not even broken, it's functioning exactly as it was designed, the **system was built this way**, how could we not feel hopeless helpless paralyzed angry?

These are some of the points from our conversation that have continued to percolate in my mind:

We were reminded that America has been a country with slavery longer than it has been free. We were reminded to think about the **historical context** in which all of this is housed. [First slaves arrived in Jamestown in 1619, the Thirteenth Amendment was enacted in 1865, and not enforced until 1941 (Blackmon 2008).

Many of us resonated with the idea that we might know something relevant to the social discourse, and it feels like our duty/responsibility to do so, but for some reason have not taken action to share it publically. Our Facebook walls are about puppies and babies and foodies, almost as though we don't care enough about other things to give them airtime. It's not true. But it's like we're paralyzed about how to say something original/authentic/from our own minds and emotions, it's hard even to post a link from someone else who said something about it. Like we're used to either only talking about the shiny moments in our lives, or debating other academics about constructs and have lost the ability to speak with meaning without discussing statistical effect sizes.

I think I feel compelled to say something particularly because I happen to have the privilege at this moment to be perceived as an **ally**. Yes, having "ally status" is a privilege. It's a privilege to be checked lest it goes unrecognized and uncapitalized upon. At the same time, I have not for one minute since 11/24 felt like an ally, because I think of an ally as fighting for someone else's rights. And I don't feel like this is about someone else, or some group of 'others'. This fight is mine because I'm human. #Blacklivesmatter because Black lives are freaking human lives. I know that "ally" is often distinguished because part OF ally privilege is that ... allies get to be tired, and drop the burden off at the door if they want. They get to be too angry for words, too frustrated, and they get to give up. Allies don't have to walk in fear every day, to work twice as hard for half as much, to stop wearing hoodies and playing with toy guns. So I know, that even though I don't feel like an ally, I can't just put it down, I'm under no illusion that "I know what it's like every day to wake up and look in the mirror and know that the world sees me as _____". I will never really know. Allyship is also a privilege because however abhorrent, the reality is that sometimes people hear messages from allies louder than they would hear it from the ones whose lives are most affected. Something about ... absence of personal gain and subsequent bias? Like when men stand up for women's rights and somehow it's like in purer form/more clearly heard than if "the angry feminist" does it. All this to say, I don't feel like an ally, because this isn't about some 'other', it's my fight, it's my humanity. AND this is a moment where I am perceived as an ally, so watch me as I try to use it.

I had an interaction recently with highly educated people I deeply care about, where I mentioned **white privilege** and the conversation shut down immediately, because hearing that phrase was so aversive, that it elicited immediate defensiveness. The thing that struck me the most was how utterly shocked I was by this encounter with **white fragility**, therefore indicating just how disconnected from reality I have been. I forgot that I have been spending all of my time in a space where almost everyone hears "white privilege" and can give you the Peggy McIntosh citation for it (McIntosh 1988). That's not exactly what it's like out there.

But actually, out there, is not that far away. I'm surrounded by undergrads in a liberal, granola state, who I've regularly heard say things like racism doesn't exist in America any more because Barack Obama is able to be in the White House and economic disparity is no longer a thing because umm hello, look at how rich Oprah is. The professors in our department who ask minority students sharing about experiencing microaggressions, "Isn't it possible that you are being too sensitive and that's not what they mean?" (Sue et al. 2007)

Or all of the people we know standing firm with police officers who keep insisting that race has nothing to do with it, that they either don't have a racial bias, or can behave as though they have set it aside.

So here are some things we know from psychology studies, again, the science of human behavior.

Superhumanization Bias

Researchers at Northwestern and UVA demonstrated that White participants are more likely to superhumanize (assigning supernatural, extrasensory, and magical qualities to) Black people than they are to superhumanize White people. Furthermore, White participants' tendency to superhumanize Black people also predicts them perceiving Black people as **less capable than White people of feeling pain** (Waytz, Hoffman, and Trawalter 2014).

Less Pain-Relieving Medication given to Black patients

Black children exhibiting the same symptoms as White children are less likely to be prescribed pain-relieving medications in the ER (Johnson et al. 2013).

Racial disparities in pain treatment are observed all settings (e.g., postoperative, emergency room) and across all types of pain (e.g., acute, cancer, chronic nonmalignant) (Green et al. 2003). Doctors are twice as likely to underestimate pain in Black patients than non-Black patients [notably the non-Black patients in the sample were 80% White] (Staton et al. 2007).

Shoot, Don't Shoot Paradigm

Social psychologists examine how race affects people's shoot/don't shoot decisions in videogame-like simulations. In one common simulation paradigm, participants view images of people in background scenes are instructed to exhibit a *shoot* response to armed targets and a *don't-shoot* response to unarmed targets as quickly and accurately as possible. Over 20 studies done with this task consistently show that participants (ranging from college student samples to police officer samples) are faster and more accurate at shooting an armed Black man compared to an armed White man, and faster and more accurate in responding, *don't-shoot* to an unarmed White man compared to an unarmed Black man. In other words, people are racially biased: they are **biased to shoot Black men and not shoot White men** (where bias refers to being more inclined or predisposed towards something) (e.g., Correll et al. 2007).

More endorsement of violence against Black targets

Another study paradigm involves viewing a videotape of a group of police officers beating a suspect, who participants are led to believe is either Black or White. They are also asked, "How justified were the police in using the amount of force they used?" "How much did the suspect deserve the treatment he received?" "How much did the suspect's behavior make violence necessary?" White participants undergoing this paradigm demonstrated a greater endorsement of violence against a Black suspect than against a White suspect, suggesting an **increased tolerance for police brutality against Blacks than against Whites** (Goff et al. 2008).

What is the point of sharing these biases?

It helps me understand that **human behavior is caused**. This does not mean there is a "moral reason" to why behavior happens. This is not just about finding individual people culpable for their actions. Understanding that these biases are in our worldviews, in the way we think and process all information helps us to acknowledge the reality that we live in a **racially biased system**. This helps me to radically accept [meaning acknowledgement independent of approval] that as a result of living in the system, we are racially biased, and our biases affect our behavior. It is not true that **racism** [(succinctly defined as: **prejudice plus power**, or in other words, prejudice against a group of people, accompanied the social/system-level power in which to enact that prejudice and benefit from the privileges resulting from the enactment (Operario and Fiske 1998) no longer exists because a Black man is president.

Do you recognize your biases? Maybe you can try to check yours:
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/education.html>

In light of this very brief sampling of existing scientific knowledge, I'm also struck by how each interaction moment we have involves a decision point: **do I care about being right or being effective?** This research convinces me that I am right. However, I can be right and alone on an island. Or sometimes, I might choose being effective [meaning doing just what is necessary to achieve my goal (Linehan 1993)]. If I define my goal as shaping someone's perspective who is different from mine, maybe I have to keep a couple of things in mind, when choosing effectiveness, in order to get through.

Just as it is hard for me to talk about, to raise up, to be courageous enough, to not be too tired, to have enough resources, to be willing to risk additional **minority stress** [which harms mental and physical health, spanning low self-esteem to coronary heart disease (Pascoe and Richman 2009)] to approach someone and talk about a system of racial oppression [they] are complicit in, I have to be empathic that it is also hard for the person hearing it. It is hard to hear you benefit from others' suffering. It is hard to hear that you have privilege. So as much as it pains those who have to live without privilege, this conversation will likely go better if I validate [their] experience as well. If I validate the kernel of truth of what [they] are saying, if I hear [their] story,

and where [they] are coming from, that's choosing being effective over being right, and sometimes (not all the time) I will choose being effective.

And then when it's all said and done
/we'll cry glory, oh glory
/we'll cry glory, oh glory

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