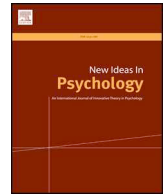




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## Adverse racial climates in academia: Conceptualization, interventions, and call to action

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## ABSTRACT

Racial conflict at universities across the US has been the focus of academic concern and media attention, yet often administrators and faculty do not understand the problems or know how to approach solutions. Drawing from many branches of psychological science, this paper describes how an oppressive academic climate results in negative outcomes for students and faculty of color, such as psychological distress, grievances, discrimination lawsuits, faculty turnover, and student dropout. Described are some empirically-supported actions departments can employ to improve the racial climate and thereby promote racial healing and diversity, including forums to facilitate conversations about inequity, experiential diversity trainings, removal of environmental microaggressions, recruitment and retention of minority faculty and advisors, repairing biased curricula, and addressing bias in teaching evaluations. Also advanced is a call to action for administrators to improve receptivity to those suffering as a result of an adverse climate, responding to racism when needed, and taking action on a larger scale, with an emphasis on the role of psychologists.

## 1. Introduction

Racial conflict at universities across the United States has been the focus of academic concern and media attention (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Many students, staff, and faculty have been calling attention to the problem of widespread racism, and noting that officials have often not responded, or not responded quickly enough. One website tracked demands from students at 80 universities who are calling for quantifiable changes in the status quo to improve the academic climate for racial minorities, and these concerns have been echoed in the academic community and research literature as well (Bernier, 2015; Biasco, Goodwin, & Vitale, 2001; The Demands, 2016). In the face of this outcry, it would be inadvisable for universities to ignore the themes imbedded in these complaints, which include a call for more diverse faculty, sensitivity training for students and faculty to reduce racism, and more accountability in response to racial discrimination.

Racism can be defined as beliefs, attitudes, and acts that denigrate or disadvantage individuals or groups because of presumed racial or ethnic group affiliation (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Schmid, 1996). The conceptualization of racism can generally be placed into two broad categories (Clark et al., 1999): attitudinal (e.g. prejudice) or behavioral (e.g., discrimination); however it is important to understand that racism is also structural in nature, as it is woven in nearly all of our social systems, institutions, and policies for the benefit

of White Americans at the expense of people of color (Salter, Adams, & Perez, 2018). Individual and structural racism exist in synergy, each supporting the other. Research resoundingly concludes that a climate marred by racism leads to physical and mental unwellness in ethnic and racial minorities (Berger & Sarnyai, 2015; Chou, Asnaani, & Hofmann, 2012; Clark et al., 1999). College campuses produce repeated experiences of discrimination for students of color (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), which are major determinants of quality of life and psychological distress for them (Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003). When people of color are unable to resolve these problems in the environment, it results in disproportionate dropouts among students of color (Piotrowski & Perdue, 1998; Sailes, 1993), poor retention of minority faculty (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2013; Cropsey et al., 2008), discrimination lawsuits, and even the forced resignation of officials held responsible for the situation (e.g., Svrluga, 2015). Victims of racially hostile environments may experience diagnosable psychiatric symptoms including traumatization, anxiety, depression, and extended periods of disability (e.g., Carter & Forsyth, 2009; Williams, Printz, Ching, and Wetterneck, 2018). Because of the importance in our society of higher education, these effects and disparities also create unfair labor-market advantages and perpetuate intergenerational advantages for Whites throughout the lifespan (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Thus, addressing racism in higher education is a crucial goal with immediate and long-term benefits for

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students of color from both a social justice and public health perspective.

Conditions have not substantially improved for underrepresented minorities over the last several decades, and in some respects they have worsened. For example, gaps between White and both Black and Hispanic students in attaining a college degree have been increasing since 1980 (Rothwell, 2015). Furthermore, large disparities in academic quality are observed for enrolled students (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), with 82% of new White students enrolled in the top 468 elite schools, but only 9% of new Black students enrolled in these same schools. The vast majority of students of color are enrolled in two-year and four-year open access schools, which produce less successful career trajectories for graduates.

### 1.1. Why racial problems persist

Given that many people strive to be unbiased when confronted with racial issues, one may wonder why racial problems persist, especially at universities, which tend to espouse egalitarian values (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Milkman, Akinola, & Chugh, 2015; Plant & Devine, 1998). Racism in America today can be harder to see than in previous eras because overt and legally codified forms of discrimination have been reduced or eliminated (i.e., segregation statutes) but legal forms of structural racism are maintained. These racist structures on college campuses interact with individual-level psychological racist processes to produce a number of well-documented forms of oppression for students and faculty of color.

At the individual level, mainstream socialization processes make it difficult for many people to see their own and other's racist processes and behaviors. As a result, White people tend to underestimate the degree and severity of racism in our structures and communities (e.g., Carter & Murphy, 2015; Jones, Cox, & Navarro-Rivera, 2014). Thus, when victims of racism advocate for changes to reduce systemic racial discrimination, bias, and inequities, such attempts are often socially punished by being dismissed, ridiculed, or met with defensive and avoidant reactions (e.g., DiAngelo, 2011; Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010). Furthermore, individual racism makes it likely majority groups will perpetuate rather than solve structural problems (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982) documents how people may preserve and increase their self-esteem by embracing the belief that their group is better than the out-group, and this typically requires also believing that the out-group possesses negative attributes. In the case of stigmatized minorities, these negative attributes become pathological stereotypes to explain group differences at the expense of the oppressed, leading to discriminatory behaviors (Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Williams, Gooden, & Davis, 2012).

Other salient mechanisms that act at the individual level include aversive racism, in which individuals who support racial equality have conflicted and often unconscious, negative feelings toward people of color (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). This results in biased behaviors in ambiguous situations or when people of color hold positions that violate social expectations based on the traditional racial hierarchy (e.g., an African American dean). One may hope that, due to advanced education, faculty at institutions of higher education would be less biased than the general population, but research suggests only trivial differences in implicit bias across educational levels (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006) and ongoing prejudicial behavior toward students of color by faculty (Milkman et al., 2015). Biases against people of color may be manifested in the form of microaggressions – brief, everyday exchanges, in the form of seemingly innocuous comments and subtle or dismissive gestures and tones that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a minority group (Pierce, 1970; Sue et al., 2007). College students of color cite microaggressions as the primary form of day-to-day racist experiences (Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, &

Solórzano, 2009), contributing to anxiety, stress, and traumatization (Williams, Kanter, & Ching, 2018), and microaggressions are a major stressor among faculty of color as well (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008; DeLapp & Williams, 2015; Pittman, 2012).

Individual racism intersects within the structures and institutions of higher education to create and maintain oppressive environments for people of color. This system can be conceptualized as a form of violence inasmuch that the resulting institutional racism results in pain, suffering, and injury to people of color. Furthermore, it is difficult to instigate change, as efforts to address racism on campus often seem unfair to those who have not experienced racial prejudice and have difficulty seeing the full extent of the problems, creating a sense of inequity and corresponding resistance to remediation efforts (Kravitz & Klineberg, 2000). Thus, attempts to address structural problems must address individual obstacles as well.

Although we have some understanding of the factors that cause and maintain poor racial environments, more research is needed on how to best remedy the situation (Paluck, 2006). For example, there are no standards for essential elements of diversity programs, no consensus on what the goals should be, and no clear outcome measures to determine if they reduce racism on campuses (McCauley, Wright, & Harris, 2000; Paluck & Green, 2009). That being said, there is much we do know that can be applied in the service of equity and dismantling racism in higher education. Deliberate valued action is an ethical obligation, even if there are elements of scientific theory and evidence that are still imprecise. What follows is a pragmatic discussion of several well-documented forms of oppression that people of color experience on college campuses, and a call to action for those with the ability to intervene. This paper is most centrally intended to provide practical tools for academic leaders (i.e., department chairs, division heads, center directors, and diversity committee chairs), although understanding the issues described here can be useful for all members of the academy, from undergraduates to presidents. Included is a description of how individual and structural processes intersect to maintain and perpetuate these problems, and interventions to improve the academic racial climate are offered, drawing from current research and examples from various campuses.

Although written from a psychological perspective, the information presented applies to many types of academic departments, colleges, and even other organizations and venues as well. Likewise, there are numerous ways people are diverse, and many of the issues discussed here could apply to other stigmatized identities, such as gender differences, sexual orientation, national origin, and disability. These are all important areas of concern, and improving the climate to address each of these deserves a more expansive treatment than can be accomplished in a single paper. Rather than weakly address all forms of diversity, the intention is to provide a more complete and compelling treatment for a single critical area of diversity as it applied to race and ethnicity. It should be understood, however, that people of color are not a single homogenous group, and so the issues herein may not be equally applicable to all people and groups. Many have intersectional identities that include many stigmatized identities (such as being LGBTQ in addition to being Chinese American), which will require additional consideration. Table 1 outlines the major topics discussed, describing the specific form of oppression contributing to a given problem and how it could be addressed.

### 1.2. Bias in faculty hiring practices

In 1993, 16.1% of all faculty were people of color, whereas by 2013, this number had increased to 26.8% (Finkelstein, Conley, & Schester, 2016); however over that same 20 year period, the population of people of color in the US also increased from approximately 26%–36%, so there are almost no real net gains in terms of representation. Nationally, only 6% of higher education faculty are Black and only 5% are Hispanic (Kena et al., 2015), well below expectations based on national census

**Table 1**  
Practices in academic departments resulting in an adverse racial environment.

Common Issue	Resulting Problem for Racial Environment	How to Address It	Level of Intervention	Timetable
Bias in faculty hiring practices	Promotes stereotypes about fitness to teach by race Isolation and alienation of faculty of color Cultural taxation/extra diversity work	Recruit and hire more ethnically and racially diverse faculty	Department and college level	Several years
Inadequate advising for students of color	Inferior academic outcomes for students of color Not competitive for graduate studies	Academic advisors must have expertise in minority issues and some should be people of color	Department and college level	Several months
Bias in evaluation of teaching effectiveness	Undeservedly low ratings for diversity courses Difficulties in tenure/promotion for faculty	Stop using student course evaluations to rate effectiveness	Department level and college level	Immediate
Eurocentric biases in curricula	Less relevant or interesting for people of color Courses perpetuate stereotypes and biases	Provide more diversity courses Integrate diversity into all courses Ensure textbooks meaningfully include people of color	Department level	A year
Environmental insults and omissions	Feeling alienated/not belonging in people of color Perpetuation of stereotypes and biases	Remove environmental insults and rectify omissions	Department and college level	Immediate to years
Frequent experiences of microaggressions	Psychological distress and psychopathology in people of color, low self esteem, increased risk of suicide	Provide safe forums for dialogue Provide diversity trainings Encourage individual growth	Individual, department, and college levels	Several months and ongoing
Racial discrimination and harassment	Psychological distress in people of color Reduced interest in school	Empathetic listening Discipline of perpetrators	Individual, department, and college levels	Immediate

figures in which 13% of Americans are Black and 18% are Hispanic (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011; US Census, 2017). In addition to underrepresentation, people of color who do have faculty positions are overrepresented as adjunct and assistant professors but underrepresented as full professors and higher-level administrators, which limits their power and influence and replicates the problematic socio-racial hierarchy currently present in American society (Kena et al., 2015; Turner, González, & Wood, 2008).

In psychology, 78% of faculty in accredited doctoral psychology programs are White, although only 61.5% of the US population is non-Hispanic White (Smith, 2015; US Census, 2017). Although many college students would like to be taught by a more diverse faculty simply because they value diversity (Miville et al., 1999), it is also important because environments that facilitate consideration of multiple perspectives from diverse others are beneficial for both psychological well-being and intellectual engagement on campus (Bowman, 2013; Morrison & Grbic, 2015). Diversity improves the learning experience for all as it introduces new perspectives, disrupts stereotypes, and facilitates appreciation of differences (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2015). Research suggests that a critical mass of 20–35% minorities is needed to produce beneficial effects in the environment, such as greater tolerance of difference among White people and increased feelings of inclusion among minorities (Berrett & Giorgi, 2015; Hagedorn, Chi, & Cepeda, 2007), although it should be noted that numerical representation is not sufficient if the academic racial climate is otherwise poor.

Individual and structural problems persist in the absence of a critical mass of diverse faculty. Minority faculty members report that many of their students have never had the experience of being instructed by a person of color and have no schema for academic learning from them (e.g., Bradley, 2005; Harlow, 2003). This may perpetuate negative stereotypes about the intellectual fitness of underrepresented minorities and promote beliefs that scholarly knowledge is the unique domain of White people. In addition to providing a critical mass, adequate numbers of diverse faculty are important for effectively mentoring students of color. Many students of color prefer mentors who understand their cultural concerns (Maton et al., 2011) and may even experience racism, intentional or unintentional, from their White mentors (e.g., McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015). Graduate students require a close relationship with faculty, and the mentoring relationship and perceptions of diversity within the academic environment are seen as critical for recruitment, retention, and satisfaction among minority graduate students (Rogers & Molina, 2006).

Furthermore, when minority faculty are underrepresented, they may feel isolated (e.g., Sekaquaptewa, 2014), and they are more likely to face “cultural taxation,” which includes doing a disproportionate amount of mentoring of minority students and other unrecognized diversity-related work (Atkinson, Casas, & Neville, 1994; Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011).

It is logical that improving the ethnic and racial diversity of the faculty is a necessary but not sufficient step in improving the racial climate (Turner et al., 2008). This, however, is easier said than done, as individual and structural barriers resist change. For example, at the individual level, it is well known that negative hiring decisions may be triggered by an applicant's Black-sounding name (Milkman et al., 2015). At the structural level, a multitude of well-documented disparities exist throughout childhood and adolescence for students of color that limit educational success, broadly defined, and restrict the number of students of color who achieve graduate degrees in psychology, for example. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), 61% of undergraduate degrees in psychology are awarded to White students, but 76.6% of the doctoral degrees in psychology are awarded to White students (NSF, 2016). This makes it harder to hire faculty of color as there are fewer available to hire (called the “leaky pipeline,” Clay, 2009). But this does not completely explain the problem. Other individual obstacles, such as implicit biases and decreased motivation, interact with structural obstacles, such as a poor racial climate, to produce discriminatory hiring practices when people of color do apply (Gasman, Abiola, & Travers, 2015; Ziegert & Hanges, 2005).

Furthermore, minorities should not be hired simply as ‘token’ or so-called ‘diversity’ hires. Of a nationally representative sample, 37% of Americans do not support affirmative action hires (Gallup, 2015), which makes token hires a divisive issue with potential repercussions for minorities. Token hires may evoke negative reactions and (mis) perceptions of unfairness, resulting in backlash directed towards the new faculty member (Kravitz & Klineberg, 2000), marginalization (Niemann, 2003), and even stereotype threat, which can cause decreased performance (Leslie, Mayer, & Kravitz, 2014).

University programs, such as the University of Michigan's ADVANCE program (Linderman, 2015), that attempt to diversify faculty hiring in the context of multi-component campus-wide reform efforts with respect to recruitment, retention, climate, and leadership may produce better outcomes than traditional approaches (Cross & Slater, 2002; McMurtrie, 2016). In psychology departments, one

approach could be to create a sub-division dedicated to cultural diversity science that includes meaningful numbers of faculty, numerically on par with other sub-divisions, such as developmental, quantitative, or clinical. This would likely result in a number of ethnically diverse faculty but not be exclusive to minorities, as qualification would be based on expertise rather than race. Departments also may create joint appointments with diverse faculty from other departments, or bring in faculty as joint hires between psychology and disciplines that enjoy more diversity, such as Pan-African or Hispanic/Latino/a Studies. This practice may make a department appear more diverse than it actually is but it can be a place to start in the face of real shortages of faculty of color, in terms of helping solo faculty feel more connected and helping students of color feel more represented.

### 1.3. Inadequate advising practices for students of color

Some leaks in the pipeline may be stopped with improved college advising for students of color. For example, some faculty have noted that Black undergraduates often approach them during their senior year for advice about how to get into a doctoral program, and at that point it is too late for those students to get the GPA or undergraduate research experiences needed to be competitive for graduate school (Williams & Kanter, 2019). It seems that these students are not getting the same quality of advising as afforded to White students, advisors are not adapting their advising practices to the needs of students of color, and that advisors may perpetuate bias and stereotypes in their advising practices, contributing to disparities in achievement (Crosby & Monin, 2007). Correspondingly, research suggests that many White advisors favor a colorblind, detached and formal approach to advising, which fails to meet Black students' cultural needs (McCoy et al., 2015). Racial colorblindness is an ideology where racial differences are ignored, which can be invalidating to students who are proud of their race or who have suffered because of it.

It is clear that advisors must demonstrate cultural competence, so that students can perceive the advisor as someone who is able to understand, empathize and problem-solve around their real-life issues and backgrounds (Chan, Yeh, & Krumboltz, 2015; Museus & Ravello, 2010). Cultural competence is described as gaining awareness, knowledge, and skills to promote optimal functioning in diverse settings with an understanding of the impact of societal and institutional systems. To that end, all advisors should have adequate and ongoing training in cultural issues as they relate to students. Considerable research suggests that employing what has been termed an "intrusive" advising style – a more proactive and involved role of the advisor in the personal and academic affairs of the student – improves outcomes, including improved retention rates, GPA, and graduation rates among at-risk students, including students of color (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Molina & Abelman, 2000; Museus & Ravello, 2010). Unlike hiring faculty, where a single hire or two may not be sufficient to instigate real change, a department hiring a culturally competent advisor with expertise in minority student issues may greatly improve outcomes for students of color at risk for drop out or other poor outcomes. Some of these advisors should be members of the ethnic groups present in the department, as students of color may feel more trusting of advisors who are perceived to understand their worldview, values, and priorities. It is possible, however, that individual and structural barriers exist to hiring advisors similar to those discussed above for hiring diverse faculty. Finally, advisors should be held accountable by examining objective indicators of academic success across racial and ethnic groups among the students they serve.

### 1.4. Bias in evaluation of teaching effectiveness

The vision of a multicultural, bias-free campus is that diverse faculty are present in adequate numbers at every level of the system, but as previously mentioned, people of color are underrepresented as full professors and top administrators (Finkelstein et al., 2016; Gasman

et al., 2015). To be promoted, teaching effectiveness is often an important metric. Although there are many ways teaching effectiveness may be measured, student course evaluations are particularly problematic, especially for faculty of color. Research shows that multiple forms of individual bias influence student course evaluations such as sexism, physical attractiveness, and racism (Boring, Ottoboni, & Stark, 2016; Hamermesh & Parker, 2005; Ho, Thomsen, & Sidanius, 2009), and students vent anger at professors through evaluations regardless of learning outcomes, especially if the course offers racially or otherwise challenging content (e.g., Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Nast, 1999). Students show less respect for faculty of color than for White faculty, which manifests as racist, abusive comments and lower course evaluations (reviewed in Bradley, 2005). The retention of biased student course evaluations as part of the academic tradition, with raises and promotion tied at least in part to these evaluations as "evidence" of teaching quality, may be seen as the packaging of these individual biases into a structural problem.

Although many structural problems, by their definition, appear to be entrenched, the problem of biased student evaluations is an example of a structural problem that can be easily remedied: stop using them. In many cases, ending this practice and implementing fairer methods of evaluating teaching effectiveness simply requires a departmental meeting vote (as was the case in several divisions at UC Berkeley; e.g., Kamenetz, 2014). Pre- and post-tests of student knowledge are a more objective and accurate way of determining how well professors are able to impart knowledge (Stark-Wroblewski, Ahlering, & Brill, 2007). Another technique employed in many departments is peer evaluation of teaching, which is not completely free of racial bias and may potentially trigger stereotype threat in minority faculty (Steele & Aronson, 1995), but likely is more objective than student evaluations considering that peers have experience teaching themselves and are not being graded in the course. Although undergraduate students can rate how much they like an instructor, and sometimes help identify areas in need of improvement, students are not ordinarily qualified to evaluate the teaching ability of faculty. Their ratings may be used to supplement other more objective metrics but should not be a sole indicator of faculty teaching skill.

### 1.5. Bias in curricula

Individual and structural racist processes intersect and manifest not only as who is teaching and advising students but also what courses are offered to students, and what is included in those courses. Regarding courses taught, research indicates that diversity courses reduce bias, and that taking more than one diversity course appears to improve student well-being and orientations toward diversity (Bowman, 2010; Denson, 2009). However, structural barriers exist. Although some sort of cultural diversity requirement is becoming the norm for colleges and universities, a national survey of 100 institutions found that required diversity courses were not as effective at teaching diversity and inclusivity when compared to elective diversity courses (Laird & Engberg, 2011). The survey also documented that 37% of the institutions in the sample had no diversity requirement at all. Problems also exist at the individual level, as teaching White students about diversity and racism is challenging. Attempts to raise awareness of bias and to discuss these topics can increase interracial anxiety, helplessness, guilt, and fear of being misunderstood, leading to avoidance and defensiveness (Case, 2007; Perry, Dovidio, Murphy, & van Ryn, 2015; Sue et al., 2010). And as mentioned previously, engaging students with topics like racism and White privilege can result in lower student course evaluations (e.g., Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009).

Regarding what is included in courses, in the general courses, diversity may be inadequately addressed and racial biases may be promoted. For example, racial bias is pervasive in our textbooks in terms of errors of omission (minimal treatment of minorities); stereotypical representations; omission of minority perspectives; simplifying

unpleasant facts to make them more palatable for White readers; isolating minority issues to special inserts or peripheral chapters; and cosmetic treatments of minorities that provide the illusion of equity (Collins & Hebert, 2008; Zittleman & Sadker, 2002).

Strategies that effectively engage White students in these topics and produce more positive outcomes are an active source of research inquiry. Denson's (2009) meta-analytic review of 27 curricular interventions found a moderate effect size on measures of racial bias, suggesting that interventions are beneficial, but most of these intervention studies were uncontrolled and more research is needed to identify and maximize effective components of interventions. As lectures and readings on multicultural topics are often not sufficient to bring about a meaningful shift in perspective, research supports the importance of active learning, experiential strategies that put participants in contact with counter-stereotypical examples, and teaching concrete strategies for overriding bias (Lai et al., 2014). One obvious way to do this is with intergroup contact, where students engage in interracial interactions, which appears to reduce anxiety and increase empathy towards the outgroup (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). This is consistent with Denson's (2009) meta-analysis, which found a significant increase in intervention effectiveness when interventions included a contact component, although some research suggests that intergroup interactions can increase anxiety and avoidance (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015), and this may have to do with the degree to which participants feel their identity is threatened by the intervention (e.g., Lai et al., 2014). Thus, effective inter-group contact exercises must be thoughtfully implemented (Pope, Pangelinan, & Coker, 2011). One compelling example comes from the University of North Carolina, as part of its comprehensive diversity program for clinical doctoral students. There is a critical experiential component referred to as a "cultural plunge." With the help of an advanced student facilitator, "plungees" plan an experience where they are in a stigmatized minority position rather than in a position of privilege, and despite the challenging nature of the experience, they report positive feedback from participants (Bardone-Cone et al., 2016).

Our academic environments are historically Eurocentric in their learning priorities, and there is a need for active efforts to broaden these priorities to be more relevant to people of color and more informative to the larger student body. Course content that reflects diversity and inclusiveness across content areas is more accurate. Thus, in addition to adding new diversity courses to the curriculum, existing courses across disciplines should be vetted to eradicate bias and stereotypes and more accurately represent our multicultural world and history. Faculty seem to know they should include diversity in their curricula, but many do not know how to do it (Merryfield, 2000). There may be social pressure to profess coverage of diversity issues but it may be done inadequately or not at all. Faculty should look carefully at their reading materials and syllabi and solicit input from others with expertise on cultural issues to contribute material that will help balance out tendencies to provide information from a Eurocentric perspective (Collins & Hebert, 2008; Gerstein & Chan, 2015). Deliberate effort will be needed to meet the important goal of fostering diversity, and department leadership needs to transmit this message to the faculty (Kezar & Eckel, 2008; Ng, 2008). Departments should acknowledge the challenges of doing this work well and consider offering incentives to teach courses with a diversity focus (e.g., higher pay, extra merit points, separate quality cut-offs) and work to ensure diversity in existing curricular materials. Further, faculty should be accountable for their choice of textbooks, and one way this could be addressed is by a textbook review committee that could examine several books each semester to provide feedback to departments about problematic book selections.

### 1.6. Environmental insults and omissions

The brick-and-mortar academic environment itself may contain racial insults and omissions that contribute to a poor, unwelcoming racial

climate, called *environmental microaggressions* (Sue et al., 2007). Departments should take stock of the unspoken messages transmitted by such representations, as lack of diverse images can communicate prejudice and threat to people of color (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008), and reinforce and substantiate the existing biases in hiring and curricula discussed above.

The issue of environmental microaggressions recently played out at Yale University, when after much debate over racist imagery and building names, Corey Menafee, an African American service worker, intentionally broke a stained glass window depicting smiling slaves carrying baskets of cotton (Gonzalez & Goodman, 2016). University officials struggled with how to respond to the situation. The worker was fired and charged with felony mischief, but subsequently rehired under the condition that he would not speak out about the case. Though the event was called vandalism by some and activism by others, Menafee's actions may be better conceptualized as a traumatic reaction to being forced to work in a racially hostile environment (e.g., Carter & Forsyth, 2009; Williams et al., 2018).

It is possible to find peaceful and appropriate solutions for these types of problems. One African American faculty member described a situation where, for decades, a Confederate monument stood in the center of a busy public intersection adjacent to the campus. Each day during her walk from the parking lot to her office, she passed by the 70-foot-tall granite obelisk, the largest Civil War monument in the state. Many solutions had been advanced to address concerns raised by those who found the monument inappropriate, but no actions had been taken. Although a structural problem by definition, she took an individual-level approach to change. While giving a diversity training for the university's executive office, she explained how this monument affected her personally as an African American. Shortly thereafter, the university president in partnership with the mayor made a plan to move the monument to a more appropriate location. A key factor in this positive outcome was for the president to hear first-hand about how this affected a real person at a very human level, underscoring the importance of individual level processes such as empathy and mutual understanding in creating change (Holoién, Bergsieker, Shelton, & Alegre, 2015; Shelton, Trail, West, & Bergsieker, 2010; Williams & Kanter, 2019).

### 1.7. Frequent experiences of microaggressions

An individual-level construct that has received much recent attention is the experience of microaggressions, including subtle snubs, slights, and insults directed toward minorities (Sue et al., 2007). Studies of the campus life experiences of Black students document that Black students experience microaggressions and other racist interactions regularly, from students and faculty as well (Kanter et al., 2017; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Mustaffa, Jones, Curry, & Allen, 2016; Solórzano et al., 2000), and one of the most consistent concerns cited by campus protesters is the need for sensitivity training for faculty to reduce racism (e.g., Berner, 2015). Types of microaggressions reported range from indignities that students receive so often they have habituated to them (e.g., "Can I touch your hair?") to profiling by campus police to insults that shock and upset them for prolonged periods (e.g., a professor stating that research suggests Blacks are genetically inferior). Research on microaggressions across racial and ethnic minority groups suggests associations with negative mental health outcomes, including depression and negative affect (Nadal, Griffin, et al., 2014), low self-esteem (Nadal, Wong, et al., 2014), and even an increased risk of suicide (O'Keefe, Wingate, Cole, Hollingsworth, & Tucker, 2015).

Many campuses now provide workshops or dialogues for the larger campus community to address the racist interpersonal interactions that students of color experience. These dialogues can trigger individual-level biases and anxieties in White participants who subsequently respond defensively and perpetuate the very microaggressions the forums are intended to reduce (Sue et al., 2010; Sue, Lin et al., 2009; Sue,

Torino et al., 2009). Overall, however, meta-analyses of the effects of diversity trainings suggest that they produce small-to-moderate improvements on measures of attitudes and bias, with stronger effects if the dialogue lasts longer or occurs in a series rather than stand-alone (Kalinowski et al., 2013).

These forums serve several important functions, including the facilitation of cross-group connections (Thurston-Rattue et al., 2015). When cross-racial participants exchange personally vulnerable details with each other, interracial anxiety decreases and friendship increases (Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008). Thus, in these dialogues, White participants are encouraged not only to listen with empathy to the narratives of Black participants but to reciprocally disclose vulnerable details themselves. One established example of this kind of work is intergroup dialogue, an in-person facilitated conversations between members of different social identity groups for purpose of improving understanding, relating and action (Gurin, Sorensen, Lopez, & Nagda, 2015). Intergroup dialogue has been shown to reduce bias and promote perspective taking in studies at the University of Michigan, including positive outcomes with the broader campus community (Miller & Donner, 2000), and as such it can be one useful way to reduce racism by encouraging individuals to examine the socially constructed ideologies that guide or misguide their beliefs while improving interpersonal connection.

Of faculty who were asked in annual self-assessments to summarize their academic efforts relative to diversity, most focused on content changes (89.9%) and teaching methods (40.9%) but very few actually reflected on themselves (7.4%) (Sciame-Giesecke, Roden, & Parkison, 2009). The importance of cultural competence for faculty is becoming increasingly prominent. Competence in a culture one was not socialized into is a process rather than an end-point, and as such cultural humility is the best approach when engaging with others from different ethnic and racial groups (Foronda, Baptiste, Reinholdt, & Ousman, 2016). Although it will be challenging, faculty must be encouraged to engage in self-reflection to improve their own behaviors, and structural changes may be required to achieve this. Although some faculty exhibit resistance to the idea of mandatory trainings, research supports the effectiveness of mandatory trainings over voluntary (Bezrukova, Spell, Perry, & Jehn, 2016). Mandatory trainings have other benefits as well. First, by definition they minimize self-selection bias and the common perception of trainings that they are “preaching to the choir.” They may also send the message that the organization is strongly committed to diversity, which has been hypothesized to increase the motivation to learn (Bezrukova et al., 2016) Resistance against mandatory diversity trainings may itself be an enactment of structural bias, as there is ample precedent at universities for mandatory trainings (e.g., sexual harassment, HIPAA regulations, and research ethics).

It is important that trainings be provided by individuals that faculty will respect, which in psychology departments means other academic psychologists who understand both diversity issues and the scientific literature. Research indicates that minorities conducting diversity trainings are more respected than White trainers, who may be perceived to have less life experience in managing racial events (Lieberman, Block, & Koch, 2011). However, White professors are perceived as more competent, at least by students (Ho et al., 2009), and it is valuable for White trainers to discuss their emotions, struggles, and growth surrounding issues like White privilege (Sue, Torino, et al., 2009). Thus, trainings offered by a diverse team (e.g., minority female and a White male) may best engage all faculty concerned.

### 1.8. Racial discrimination and harassment

The final topic discussed here is how campuses respond to complaints of racial discrimination and harassment, which involves both individual and structural issues. It is particularly difficult for students to know how to respond to racial discrimination inflicted by faculty or others in a position of power, due to traditional hierarchies that may

create fear of retaliation, perceived lack of accountability, and hopelessness about change. Students and lower ranked faculty may be reluctant to complain to a department chair or ombudsman, who likely also is White. If a person of color approaches the offending faculty member or a colleague about racial issues, people of color may find themselves misunderstood or even attacked by defensive faculty.

At the individual level, when a faculty member is approached by a student, staff member, or other faculty of color who describes a negative racial situation, a very important moment for healing and growth is at hand but may be squandered because of individual-level obstacles. The person of color has chosen to engage the offending faculty member in a vulnerable interpersonal interaction and undoubtedly enters it with fears of being misunderstood (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005) or becoming the target of further prejudice (Shelton, Douglass, Garcia, Yip, & Trail, 2014). The White responder may fear being seen as prejudiced which makes it harder for the interaction to succeed (Shelton, West, & Trail, 2010). Research suggests that if the White responder is able to overcome these biases, listen, demonstrate accurate empathy and understanding in this moment, and produce a positive inter-group interaction, the person of color will demonstrate improved physiological recovery (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Shelton, Trail et al., 2010).

In clinical psychology, we are trained to attune to issues of vulnerability and trust in our interactions, so the importance of responding with empathy and caring is key to our work, especially when discussing racially sensitive material (e.g., Miller, Williams, Wetterneck, Kanter, & Tsai, 2015). However, administrators or faculty members from other fields may not attune to the importance of these responses in the moment. A fundamental requirement for trust and closeness to develop is *perceived responsiveness*: When one person engages in a vulnerable disclosure, the discloser must perceive the listener to respond with understanding, validation, and caring (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Reis, 2007) and this applies to cross-racial relationships as well (Davies et al., 2011; Page-Gould et al., 2008). Therefore, when approached by a person claiming to be the victim of a racially discriminatory experience, microaggression, aggressive action, or assault, a key, and empirically supported, element of the response is to listen and demonstrate understanding, validation, and caring. Following the impulse to interrogate the victim through aggressive questioning about the accuracy of the event is likely invalidating and harmful to the relationship, and has been referred to as “gaslighting” (McKinnon, 2016). It also likely is important to recognize the larger social context of racial injustice in this moment and not be colorblind for the person to feel fully heard (e.g., DeLapp & Williams, 2015; McCoy et al., 2015).

Although most experiences of racism may be small and unintentional, sometimes they are overt and intentional and require more than a private, individual response. At one university, some students were writing derogatory messages, including racial slurs and swastikas, on a residence hall whiteboard. This made many minority students upset and afraid. There was a residence hall meeting where some suggested that the upset students of color should just take the acts as a joke or ignore them; and still others considered it a free-speech issue and did not think anything should be done. A residence hall exercise was subsequently implemented to educate students about stereotypes, and residence advisors were given diversity trainings, but this was unsuccessful in relieving tensions. Distressed students were offered the opportunities to file a report and move to another residence hall (Krauth, 2016).

The problem is that rather than disciplinary actions, the perpetrators were given a platform to continue their hurtful behaviors via group discussions. Additionally, an undue burden was placed on the victims to file reports that students worried could result in retaliation. Situations like this have negative effects on victims, decreasing students' interest in school, reducing feelings of competence, and increasing the likelihood of dropout (Martin, Goodboy, & Johnson, 2015).

Unfortunately, institutional mechanisms for addressing racism and discrimination are often ineffective, compounding distress and distrust among people of color. It is important to consider how individual level biases may result in inaction, or lack of sufficient action, at what is perceived to be a structural level issue. White people are more likely to see racial harassment, such as the example above, as minor mistakes that do not require a formal response, but minorities tend to see them as severe, want a response, and feel a stronger sense of organizational justice and safety if action is taken (Chrobot-Mason & Hepworth, 2005). Individual obstacles also exist that make it hard for victims to report problems, including fear of disbelief and retaliation (Chakraborti & Garland, 2003; Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002).

Structural changes, here, may be necessary to overcome these individual obstacles. When harassment and discrimination occur, in addition to conveying empathy to victims, policies that support swift and clear responses by administration are essential (Cortina et al., 2013). Research on disciplinary responses to harassment and discrimination in the military concludes that active leadership and strong disciplinary actions are key, and without these other support structures (i.e., resources and training) are not effective (Larson et al., 2013). Feedback to the public about disciplinary actions is complicated because, at times, appropriate responses are not publicized due to legal privacy considerations. Nonetheless, it likely will allay fears and increase trust in the system if there are clear efforts from the University to educate the campus community about these privacy protections and that behaviors that threaten the safety and well-being of any group are responded to swiftly with full disciplinary action, that effective genuine resources are available, and that victims will be protected (Larsen, Nye, Ormerod, Ziebro, & Siebert, 2013; Martin et al., 2015).

### 1.9. Conduct a departmental climate assessment

A negative racial climate may not be readily observable when a department or institution is governed by those for whom White privilege is largely invisible. Furthermore, simply asking faculty of color (again, who are usually lower ranked; Finkelstein et al., 2016; Kena et al., 2015) and students of color how they experience the racial climate may not generate complete or honest answers (Stangor et al., 2002). When people of color speak up about the realities of discrimination, they are often dismissed as complainers, and so power differentials or fears of social punishment may be a factor (e.g., DeLapp & Williams, 2015; Garcia, Reser, Amo, Redersdorff, & Branscombe, 2005). Thus, an outside climate assessment of racial and ethnic diversity issues is often the best way to get accurate feedback on what the environment is truly like for people of color (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Such an assessment, ideally conducted by psychologists who are knowledgeable in diversity and organizational issues, might include anonymous surveys, individual interviews, and focus groups to get a full picture of department strengths and weaknesses. When the final report is produced, it will be important to quickly start the process of implementing recommendations, and not simply shelve the report, which is a common reaction in response to exposing deep racial problems. Further, data gathering should be ongoing to guide important conversations, prompt reflection, address discomfort with race, plan for institutional transformation, and achieve excellence in creating a racially inclusive learning environment (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

## 2. Conclusion: next steps and call to action

As a field, psychology has already contributed much to addressing the problem of racism. Various psychological disciplines have their own tools to help tackle different parts of the problem. Excellent work by social psychologists has increased our understanding of the individual level biases and other processes that govern prejudiced and discriminatory behavior. Clinical psychology has explicated the mental health consequences of a poor racial environment on people of color.

Educational psychologists have addressed effective methods for teaching about diversity. However, psychologists may be reluctant step out of their research environments and into direct applications of research with respect to campus climate. The reality of a structural, entrenched racist system, which has evolved over decades, may engender feelings of hopelessness about change, resulting in inaction. However, this article clarifies how individual and structural factors interact, how individual interventions may produce structural changes, and how structural changes may greatly facilitate individual responding. Understanding the individual psychological processes that serve as obstacles to structural change and effective implementation of campus climate interventions is essential and is a primary domain of psychologists. Correspondingly, individual professors have things they can uniquely contribute to the effort at improving the climate.

For example, as discussed above, many campuses currently are implementing public forums or dialogues about race, microaggressions, or related topics. As anyone who has led or attended one of these groups knows, they are fraught with peril, and the ways in which a discussion may suddenly turn toxic are somewhat predictable (Sue et al., 2010). While extant research suggests that these interventions are effective in general (Kalinowski et al., 2013) more attention can be paid to the psychological obstacles that surface in these interactions for White participants, such as inter-racial anxiety, avoidance, and resentment. Scientific evaluation of dialogue-style interventions is needed, but so is the development of scientifically informed models of behavior change to guide the content and processes of the interventions. There are well-developed strategies for iterative intervention development and evaluation that can be tailored and brought to bear on this topic (e.g., Rounsaville, Carroll, & Onken, 2001).

Likewise, addressing problems associated with biases in hiring, advising, curricula, environmental insults, and responding to discrimination all involve individual obstacles. These obstacles include implicit biases, lack of awareness of biases, and lack of contact with people of color to reduce biases, that prevent noticing structural problems and taking effective actions to ameliorate them. Psychologists also have much to offer when they get directly involved in campus activities, become allies of campus change agents, advocate for change directly, and use their expertise to solve campus problems that exist today. Much anti-racism activity is happening on campuses right now and psychologists' voices are important to these efforts.

Additionally, leaders within schools, department, and divisions, are needed to inspire and motivate resistant faculty and keep sympathetic faculty motivated to keep working for change, and psychologists have much to say about resistance and motivation. For example, research indicates that the inclusive ideology of multiculturalism (valuing differences) is often not perceived as such by Whites, which may be one reason for resistance. Thus it is important to convey that diversity is not about including minorities and excluding White people, but that everyone is valued, needed, and important (Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011). Furthermore, there is a great deal of "diversity within diversity," notably those with intersectional minority statuses, and this will need to be considered with respect to all interventions. It is important for those in leadership positions to champion the cause of an improved and inclusive climate, as the proactive management of diversity initiatives requires a commitment with a clear purpose and vision for the organization (Ng, 2008). Psychologists can help chairs, deans, and presidents craft these important messages and articulate the vision for an environment that embodies a diverse and harmonious academic community. Psychologists can provide leadership and intervene when crises occur and facilitate forums for community healing. Psychologists can provide training when needed and be agents for change.

That being said, psychology departments suffer from many of the same individual and structural problems that plague other departments and campuses. This creates barriers to advancement for some of the people who are uniquely poised to understand these difficulties and

find answers (e.g., psychologists of color). Psychology must prioritize change as a discipline to remain relevant and credible in the ongoing dialogue about our society's racial problems, which means challenging the status quo. Psychologists reading this are asked to consider how they have contributed to these dysfunctional systems, if even through passivity and acceptance, and what they can do to help bring about change. Deans, division heads, chairs and directors of clinical training programs are urged to review their units' strengths and weaknesses, and ask themselves what they can do now to improve the climate for people of color, even if only a little, with the ultimate goal of a full, multicultural, bias-free environment. As noted, a campus climate assessment can be invaluable for elucidating these issues (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

A concern at many campuses is increasing the diversity of the student body. It is worth considering the possibility that enrolling more students of color, without efforts to improve the existing campus racial climate, may be problematic and unfair to those students. Much evidence documents that students of color become disillusioned, distressed, and dissatisfied in such an environment, and many will drop out (Cropsey et al., 2008; Piotrowski & Perdue, 1998; Sailes, 1993). Discussions surrounding the recruitment of such students should better emphasize the need for them to be received into a supportive environment. Although increasing the number of students of color may help with some issues (e.g., isolation), it will not help with most of the structural issues reviewed herein.

Correspondingly, more students of color will be the natural result of improvements to the campus climate. Faculty who pay attention to these issues will find their research labs populated with an increasingly diverse group of ethnic minority students, international students, multilingual students, and religious and sexual minorities. The research focus and perspectives of these future scholars constitute invaluable contributions to our departments and to the field of psychology as a whole. No special efforts are needed to recruit these diverse students when they perceive a warm and welcoming environment. This does not mean that recruitment efforts are not important, but if the essential elements described here are in place, recruitment efforts will certainly be more successful; special retention initiatives will not be needed, as these spaces will both stimulate learning and foster psychological well-being.

Although more research is needed, we do know enough to start making improvements, and it is our ethical duty to do what we can based on the best evidence available. Change is never easy, but the problems facing our institutions of higher learning will not resolve without deliberate action. There is room for all of us to work harder to create healthy and diverse academic spaces.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

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