

# Understanding Power and Privilege: New Angles for a New Era

Melanie Wilcox, PhD

July 1, 2024



Mountain Plains (HHS Region 8)

**MHTTC**

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network  
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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# Land Acknowledgement Statement

Today, the University of North Dakota rests on the ancestral lands of the Pembina and Red Lake Bands of Ojibwe and the Dakota Oyate - presently existing as composite parts of the Red Lake, Turtle Mountain, White Earth Bands, and the Dakota Tribes of Minnesota and North Dakota. We acknowledge the people who resided here for generations and recognize that the spirit of the Ojibwe and Oyate people permeates this land. As a university community, we will continue to build upon our relations with the First Nations of the State of North Dakota - the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation, Spirit Lake Nation, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.



The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful and recovery-oriented language in all activities. That language is:

STRENGTHS-BASED  
AND HOPEFUL

INCLUSIVE AND  
ACCEPTING OF  
DIVERSE CULTURES,  
GENDERS,  
PERSPECTIVES,  
AND EXPERIENCES

HEALING-CENTERED AND  
TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE

INVITING TO INDIVIDUALS  
PARTICIPATING IN THEIR  
OWN JOURNEYS

PERSON-FIRST AND  
FREE OF LABELS

NON-JUDGMENTAL AND  
AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS

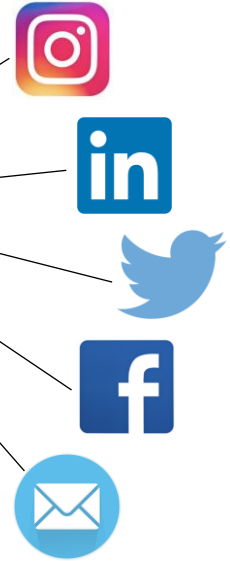
RESPECTFUL, CLEAR  
AND UNDERSTANDABLE

CONSISTENT WITH  
OUR ACTIONS,  
POLICIES, AND PRODUCTS

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# Understanding Power and Privilege: New Angles for a New Era

Melanie M. Wilcox, Ph.D.  
University at Albany

# About Me

- Ph.D., Counseling Psychology, University at Albany (2015)
- Associate Professor of Counseling Psychology, University at Albany
- Research:
  - Culturally and structurally responsive psychotherapy and training
  - Racial and socioeconomic inequity in higher education
  - Whiteness, antiracism, social justice
- President-Elect, Society of Counseling Psychology
- Licensed Psychologist and Board Certified in Counseling Psychology
  - Part-time practice (100% telehealth), Aguirre Center for Inclusive Psychotherapy in Atlanta



# What comes up for you when you hear...

Racism

Privilege

Intersectional oppression

White supremacy

Intersectionality

Microaggressions

Gendered racism

Oppression

Structural racism



An illustration of a woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a blue top, with her hand to her chin in a thinking pose. She is surrounded by a large, grey, cloud-like thought bubble. Inside this bubble, there are various white, hand-drawn symbols: question marks, exclamation points, speech bubbles with three dots, and wavy lines, representing a state of mental confusion or difficulty.

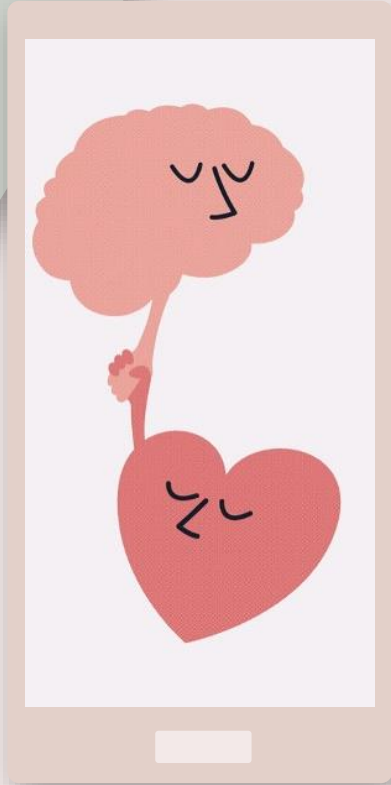
Why Is This So Difficult?

# Critical Self-Compassion: An Oxymoron?



Not  
Necessarily

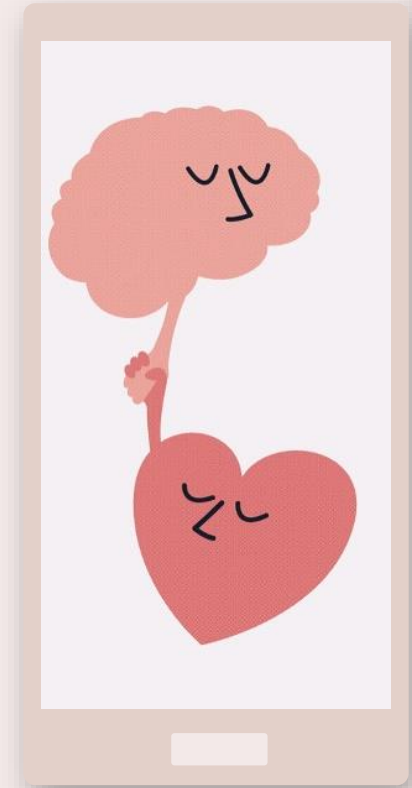
# Critical Self-Compassion



- *Cultural humility* is core to everything we will be discussing
- We cannot possibly know everything—including others' experiences, or things that we were never taught
- We often cannot know what we don't know!
- Critical self-compassion (Wilcox et al., 2022): having care and patience for oneself and the reactions we might be having while simultaneously balancing
  - Holding ourselves accountable,
  - Exercising curiosity for from where the reaction might originate, and
  - Allowing ourselves to *feel* what we are feeling without *acting* out toward others

# Critical Self-Compassion

- This maps well onto the balance that we must strike with cultural responsiveness work
- No, we didn't personally cause horrific abuses that happened decades or centuries ago
- We *do*, however
  - Benefit from them daily
  - Knowingly and unknowingly engage in behaviors that keep systems of oppression in place
- Once again, from a place of critical self-compassion, we must allow ourselves grace for the things *we had no control over*, while taking responsibility for the *things we can do today*
  - Otherwise, it will be very difficult – if not impossible – to foster the qualities necessary for culturally responsive psychotherapy and clinical supervision

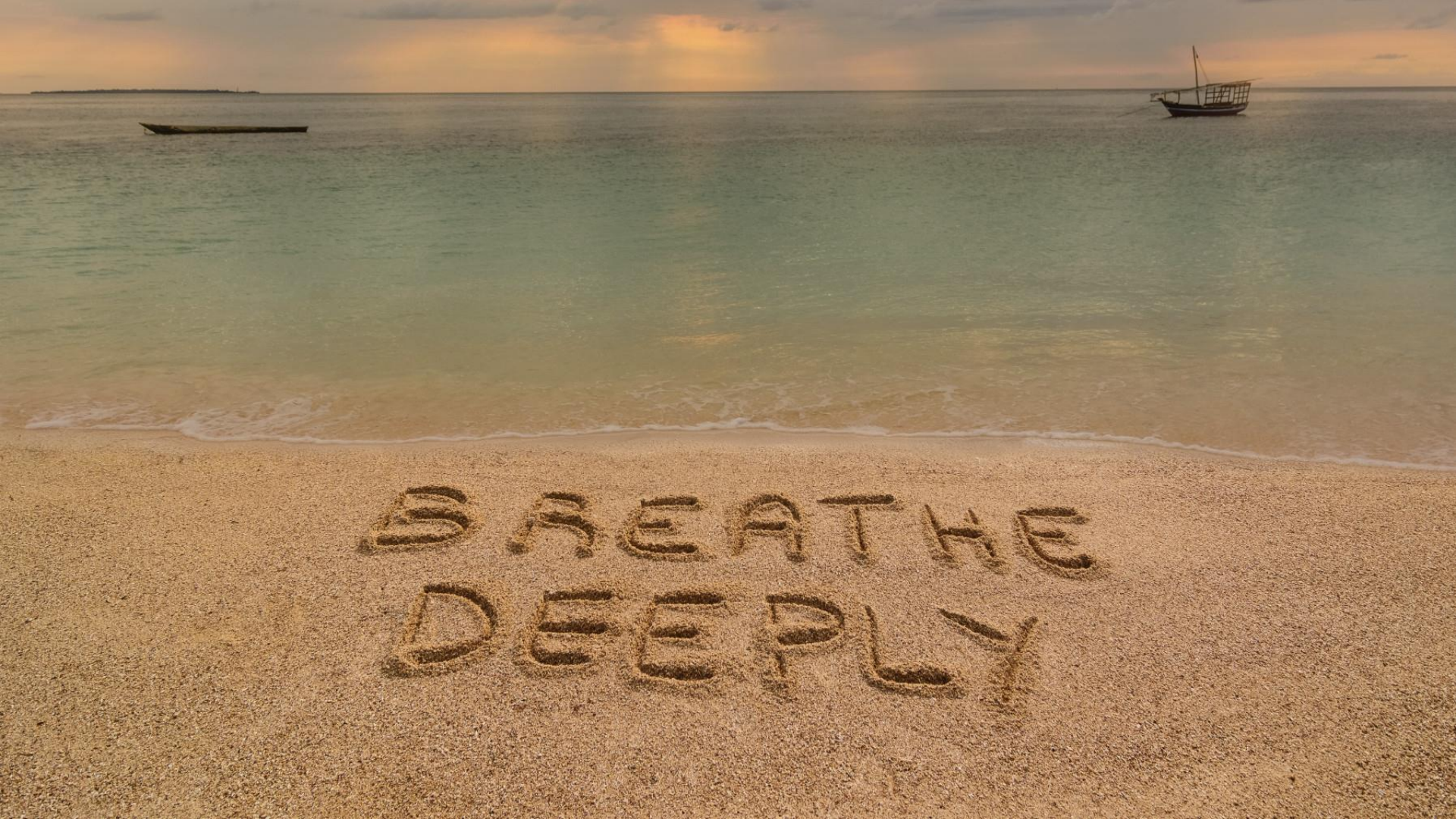


# My Asks of You

- Mutual respect
- Listen to *understand* rather than listening to *respond*
- Remember that everyone's zone of proximal development is different
- Be mindful of *impact* regardless of intent
- Expect imperfection
- If you feel a strong reaction, exercise critical self-compassion



BREATHE  
DEEPLY



**BUT FIRST:**

A neon sign with the text "BACK TO BASICS" is centered on a dark brick wall. The sign is enclosed in a glowing blue rectangular frame with rounded corners. The words "BACK TO" are in pink neon, and "BASICS" is in white neon. The letters are in a thick, rounded, sans-serif font.

**BACK TO  
BASICS**

**ANEW**

“When we lack courage in our language, our actions will lack courage.”

*~ Dr. Thema Bryant, Past APA  
President, May 26th, 2002*



# Racism



- The APA is—finally—reimagining its approach to, and understanding of, racism
- To the surprise of many psychologists, psychology is often the last to arrive

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Date created: May 29, 2020

## 'We Are Living in a Racism Pandemic,' Says APA President



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## Structural Racism is a Public Health Crisis: Impact on the Black Community

< Policy Statements and Advocacy

< Policy Statements

Policy Statements

Policy Statement Database

Development Process

Archiving Process

Date: Oct 24 2020 | Policy Number: LB20-04  
Key Words:

### Abstract

Racism has a long-standing history in the United States and across the world that permeates almost every institution. From the education system and the health care system to environmental issues, the criminal justice system, and the field of economics, Blacks and African Americans have suffered across multiple generations at the hands of the racist practices that plague each of these institutions. This policy statement calls on APHA to help support and fund research focused on addressing structural racism and help develop solutions to mitigate racism within the institutions in the United States.

## CDC DECLARES RACISM A SERIOUS PUBLIC HEALTH THREAT

BY BLAIRE BRYANT, SARAH GIMONT | APRIL 20, 2021



CDC declares racism a serious public health threat and states it will take action to address how racism impacts health outcomes



Counties across the country have declared racism a public health crisis or emergency, and are working to take practical steps toward systemic inclusion

On April 8, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared that racism is a serious public health threat and stated that it would be taking specific action to address the issue. The declaration comes as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately impacted communities of color, has laid bare the racial health disparities in the United States. The announcement also echoes declarations at the state and local level, where counties across the country have declared racism a public health crisis or emergency and are working to further efforts to address the current impact of race on resident health outcomes, status and quality of life. Last July, NACo membership passed a policy resolution declaring racism a national public health crisis paralleling the CDC's announcement.

## AMA: Racism is a threat to public health

NOV 16, 2020 • 5 MIN READ



Kevin B. O'Reilly  
News Editor



PRINT PAGE

## AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Home // News & Advocacy // Press Room // Op-Eds // Mental-Health Leaders: We Must End...

Date created: August 18, 2020

## Mental-Health Leaders: We Must End Pandemic of Racism

Appeared in the *Orlando Sentinel*

By Arthur C. Evans Jr., PhD, Saul Levin, MD, Angelo McClain, PhD

*Orlando Sentinel* published this article Aug. 18, 2020.

“

Will this be the year we finally begin to dismantle systemic racism in the United States?

f

COVID-19's disproportionately lethal impact on Black, Latinx and Native American people has revealed just how unequal our nation's health outcomes are. Meanwhile, the high-profile slayings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and far too many other Black Americans have ignited the biggest wave of protests in more than a half-century—and prompted people of all colors and creeds to acknowledge just how pervasive racism is in our society.

in

”

”

The American public is starting to see racism as a public health crisis. Addressing that crisis will require comprehensive change to American life, from our economy and educational system to housing and health care—including the way we approach and treat mental health.

# Our Role in Dismantling Racism



## APA RESOLUTION on Harnessing Psychology to Combat Racism: Adopting a Uniform Definition and Understanding

FEBRUARY 2021

**WHEREAS** racism has been an enduring, insidious, and pervasive feature of the United States (U.S.) landscape that often operates outside of the conscious awareness of its targets, perpetrators, and beneficiaries, and has had an incalculable, negative toll on the basic human rights to survival, security, health, well-being, and societal participation of generations of people in the U.S. and across the globe (Alvarez et al., 2016; APA, 2012, 2019);

**WHEREAS** the belief that people of color were inferior was used to justify Indigenous peoples' forced removal and genocide and the enslavement of Africans, thereby establishing racism and settler colonialism and violence at the root of the ascendant U.S. and legitimizing racial and economic inequality;

**WHEREAS** racism was constructed as a basis to create and sustain White supremacy by assigning value to people of European descent and disproportionately allocating societal resources and opportunities to them, while limiting or refusing access to opportunity among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), thereby severely marginalizing their status and blunting the potential of the entire society (C.P. Jones, 2018; Mosley et al., 2021);

**WHEREAS** positionality refers to one's own position or place in relation to race, ethnicity, and other statuses and how our identities relate to the systems of privilege and oppression that shape our psychological experiences, relationships, and access to resources (APA, 2019);

**WHEREAS** White privilege is unearned power that is afforded to White people on the basis of status rather than earned merit and protects White people from the consequences of being racist and benefiting from systemic racism; such power may come in the form of rights, benefits, social comforts, opportunities, or the ability to define what is normative or valued (APA, 2019; Neville et al., 2013);

**WHEREAS** White supremacy—the ideological belief that biological and cultural Whiteness is superior, as well as normal and healthy—is a pervasive ideology that continues to polarize our nation and undergird racism (Helms, 2017; Liu et al., 2017; Liu, 2019);

**WHEREAS** racism is not only limited to racist ideas, attributions, expectations, assumptions, and behaviors held by individuals but also has shaped and undermined almost every aspect of U.S. society, including our laws, policies, educational systems, customs, and cultural narratives, weakening our political and civic institutions and creating many political and social fissures (Anderson, 2016; Helms, 2017, 2020; Liu et al., 2019);

**WHEREAS** in the current anti-immigrant climate, xenophobia and discrimination adversely impact the lives of Latino/a/x people (APA, 2012), and policies and programs that exclude, segregate, separate, detain, and physically remove immigrants from the U.S. reproduce racial inequalities in other areas of social life through spillover effects that result in significant negative consequences for immigrants and their families (Aranda & Vaquera, 2015);

**WHEREAS** hate crimes against Asian Americans have increased dramatically in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, spurred by the current social and political climate in which COVID-19 has been labeled as the "China virus" or "Chinese virus" (Zhang et al., 2021);

**WHEREAS** racism intersects with other social and personal identities (e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability status, socioeconomic status, etc.) in ways that compound experiences of oppression among diverse groups in the form of sexism, heterosexism, ableism (Deschamps & DeVos, 1998; Gee & Ford, 2011; Helms 2015; Liu et al., 2017);

**WHEREAS** cultural racism is the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one's racial and cultural heritage over another (e.g., designing a curriculum that overwhelmingly features the accomplishments of people deemed "superior," APA, 2019, citing J.M. Jones, 1979);

**WHEREAS** to overcome and eliminate the pervasive harms of racism, it is essential to directly confront oppression using a culturally-centered and strengths-based approach to achieve psychological liberation, promote empowerment, and influence social reality through cultural and humanistic change (Akbar, 1984);

The American Psychological Association has committed to addressing **systemic racism** and psychology's role in its maintenance as well as its treatment

American Psychological Association, February 2021: APA Resolution on Harnessing Psychology to Combat Racism: Adopting a Uniform Definition and Understanding

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that psychologists should consider the following four levels of racism:

1. **Structural** (laws/policies/practices that produce cumulative racial inequities, including the failure to correct explicitly racist laws/policies/practices)
2. **Institutional** (policies, practices, procedures of institutions)
3. **Interpersonal** (implicit or explicit)
4. **Internalized**

# Our Role in Dismantling Racism

## APA Council Resolutions, October 2021:

- *APA's Apology to People of Color in the U.S.*
  - *APA's Historical Chronology examining psychology's contributions to systemic and structural racism and upholding White supremacy*
- *Role of Psychology and APA in Dismantling Systemic Racism Against People of Color in the U.S.*
- *APA Resolution on Advancing Health Equity in Psychology*



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## **APA Policy Statement on Equitable and Inclusive Student Admissions in Higher Education**

AUGUST 2023

## **The U.S. Supreme Court Majority's Ignorance of Racism on Most Campuses Will Increase the Psychological Damage and Academic Harm Inflicted on Students of Color**



## **Role of Psychology and the American Psychological Association in Dismantling Systemic Racism Against People of Color in the United States**

OCTOBER 2021

Historically, racism has been used to divide the public, fuel racial violence, and reduce support for health care, economic, and education policy that would benefit the well-being of society (Blacksler & Valles, 2021; Cui & Worrell, 2019; McGhee, 2021). American psychology, including APA, has been complicit in actions that have perpetuated racism. Therefore, an important aspect of APA's continued work in understanding how psychology can meaningfully contribute to dismantling and dismantling individual and systemic racism, is to first acknowledge that racism has had a historical underpinning in White supremacy and in supporting structures of White privilege institutionally and structurally for centuries.

The purpose of this resolution is to identify psychology's role in helping to expose, understand, and ultimately dismantle racism that is operating across all levels in each of the following systems of society - education, science, health care, work and economic opportunities, criminal justice, early childhood development, and government and public policy, as addressed below, while acknowledging that systemic racism also has impact beyond these sectors.

For the first time, APA and American psychology are systematically and intentionally examining, acknowledging, and charting a path forward to address their roles in racism. At the same time, this is an insufficient response with respect to both psychology's responsibility and its potential to heal. In short, this resolution is in itself necessary but not sufficient. The resolution possesses moral legitimacy only as one step in an ongoing process, not as an endpoint. Not later than the Council of Representatives' second meeting of 2022, and with advice from the Task Force on Strategies to Eradicate Racism, Discrimination, and Hate and other subject matter experts within and outside the Association, APA's CEO will develop a plan to prioritize, operationalize, and ensure accountability for achieving the goals of the resolutions set forth below.

This resolution also acknowledges the complexity of ethnoracial dialogues, especially in the United States (U.S.). While the limited and forced federal categorization and definition of ethnicity and race exist, the minoritized experiences of individuals and communities facing systemic racism cannot be easily and plainly described. For this reason, in this resolution, "ethnic and racial minorities," "ethnically and racially diverse individuals," "people

of color," and other terms are interchangeably used while also mentioning specific ethnic and racial groups. Terms such as "people of color" are also used as inclusive language for biracial and multiracial individuals who must navigate multiple race-related systemic challenges. The resolution also warns that a monolithic approach to understanding ethnically and racially categorized people without appreciating the diversity within factors and intersectional identities in itself is a form of systemic racism that denies various unique challenges and strengths that exist within each ethnic and racial group.

### **EDUCATION**

**WHEREAS**, Racism at every level permeates the landscape of education in the United States (U.S.), from housing and policies that determine where children are zoned to attend school in prekindergarten through postsecondary and lifelong learning, to the detriment of the academic achievement, self-concept, persistence, and success of students of color (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Burt et al., 2018; Sosna & Weathers, 2019; Voight et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2003);

**WHEREAS**, Access to quality education, affirming and safe education environments, and positive academic support impact not only people of color but also the larger society, given that attainment of education positively influences economic, vocational, physical health, psychological health, community, and social well-being (Gage et al., 2019; Kuzmen et al., 2006; Sullivan et al., 2014);

**WHEREAS**, Education holds the promise of personal and communal well-being for students of color (Worrell et al., 2020), but that the history of racism has consistently led to deluding, under-resourcing, and police presence in schools, specifically depriving people of color and affecting their job procurement, job experiences, and other educational outcomes (Freeman, 2021; Metz, 2019);

**WHEREAS**, teachers of color continue to be underrepresented in U.S. K-12 schools, which can negatively impact the self-image of students of color in predominantly White educational spaces (Clark & Clark, 1947; Galias et al., 2021; Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009; Kohli, 2008; Mabelka & Madson, 2003; Okonlua et al., 2021);

# Important Advances in Psychology

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that APA affirms that psychological practice needs to adopt culturally responsive, evidence-based prevention, early intervention, and recovery frameworks based on a population health approach to dismantle power structures in the behavioral health care system that serve to create barriers to effective and quality care to people of color;

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that through continuing education policies, as appropriate, APA will encourage psychologists and other providers to seek further education and training on implicit bias, microaggressions, and the necessity of a developmentally, culturally sensitive and race conscious, trauma-informed, and lifespan approach to treatment when working with populations with histories of oppression and intergenerational trauma;



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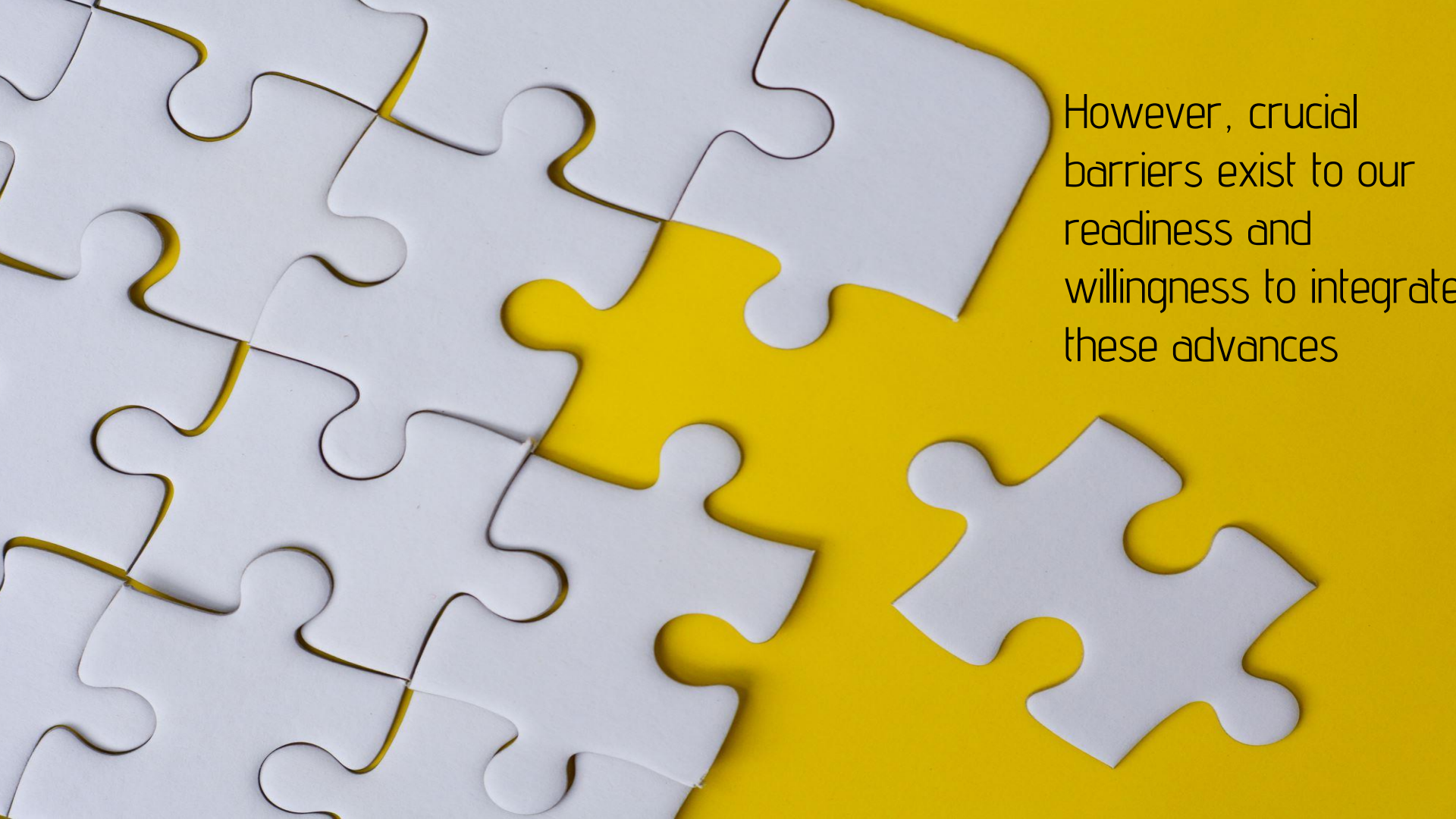
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However, crucial barriers exist to our readiness and willingness to integrate these advances

# How we often understand “culture”

Hays’ ADRESSING Model has serious limitations, but it nonetheless can be a helpful starting point

- **A**ge
- **D**isability (physical/psychological/genetic/acquired)
- **R**eligion/Spirituality
- **E**thnicity/Race
- **S**exual Orientation
- **S**ocial Class/Socioeconomic Status
- **I**ndigenous Heritage
- **N**ationality/Citizenship
- **G**ender (covering both sexism and cissexism)

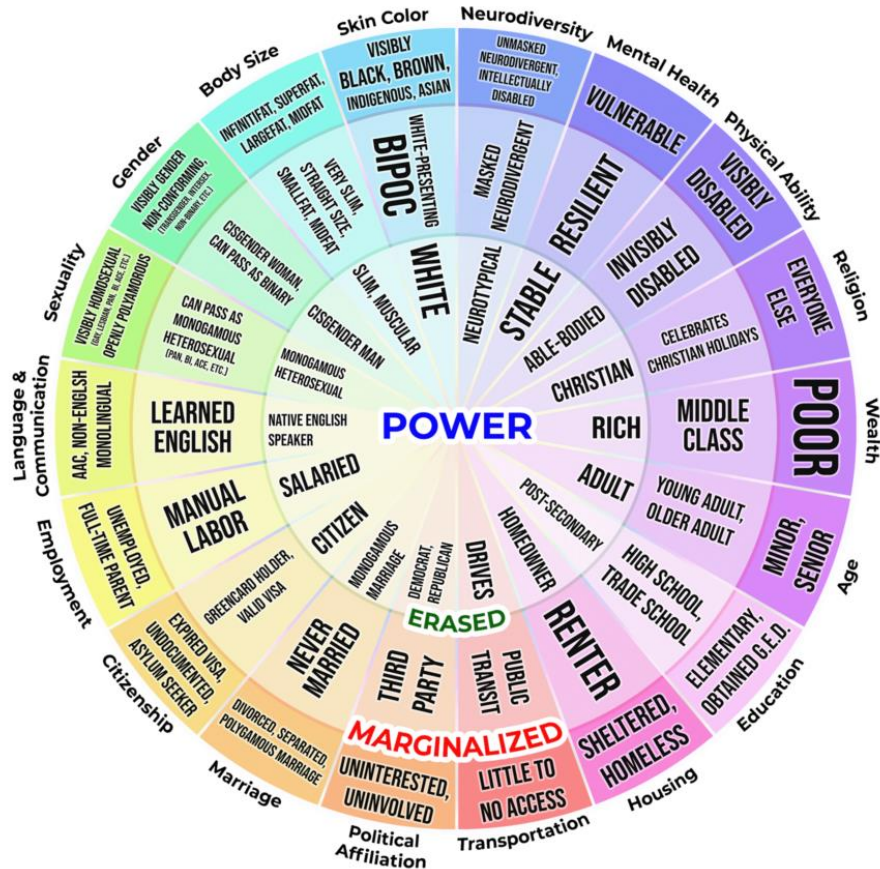
Critical: On each dimension, *who has the **power to oppress?***

- This is not binary, either; who has the closest *proximity to power*



# INTERSECTIONALITY WHEEL OF PRIVILEGE

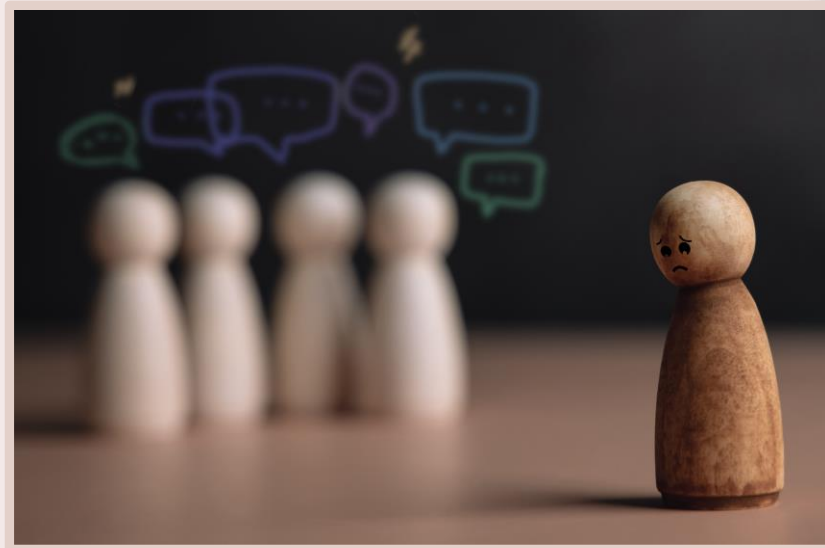
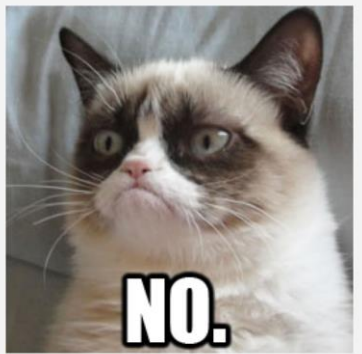
As Observed in the USA





# Privilege

- Possibly one of the most misunderstood concepts
- What people often hear: “You had/have it easy”



Privilege is better understood as the *absence of barriers based on a particular dimension or domain*

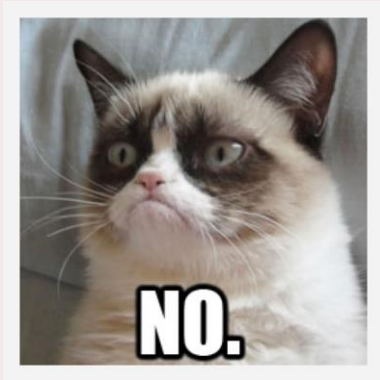
# Privilege

- My story, for example – a lot of things were very difficult for me. Race, however, *didn't make those things even harder*.
  - Indeed, sometimes the absence of those barriers – or more precisely, the fact that my peers of color had to encounter them – *gave me little graces that my BIPOC peers weren't given*
  - The occasional bootstrap by which to pull myself up, if you will
- Can be individual (e.g., I'm given a job over a BIPOC applicant) or systemic (e.g., my father being given his VA benefits that BIPOC Vietnam vets were denied)



## But Wait, There's More!

○Another myth: Privilege is additive; you have it (or don't) on certain dimensions, and you can essentially add for yourself a "privilege score"



# Privilege and Intersectionality

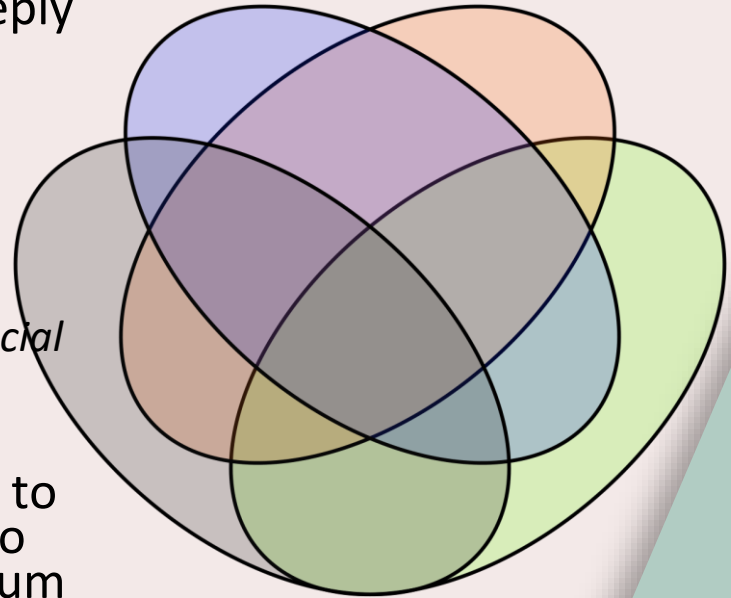
○The misunderstanding of privilege and the misunderstanding of intersectionality are deeply intertwined

○Grzanka (2020, p. 249): Intersectionality is

- A lens or a frame
- A critical framework for conceptualizing human experience, particularly *power and inequality*
- An approach for understanding *multiple social identities* and how they function in contextualized systems of inequality

○In practical terms, it is a lens through which to recognize that privilege and oppression are no more additive than  $\text{Na} + \text{Cl}$  being merely sodium and chloride elements

- Once bonded, they become a **new substance**: table salt



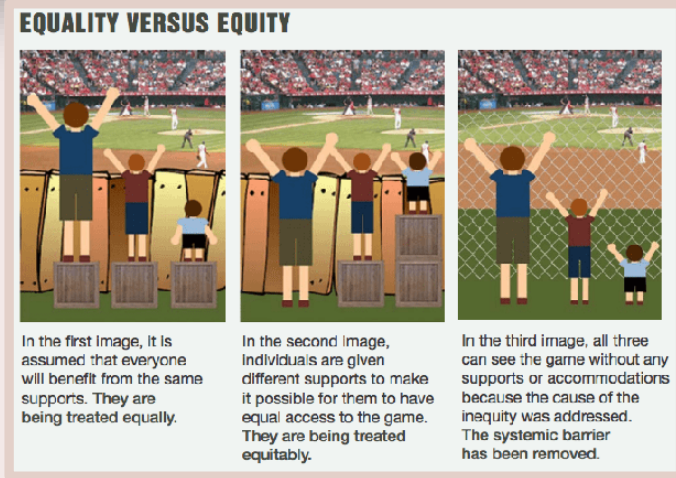
# Privilege and Intersectionality

- Dr. Jioni Lewis's work on *gendered racism* is a great example of this
  - Black women do not just experience racism + sexism, but rather, *gendered racism*, with specific forms and effects
  - Moreover, the gendered racism that Black women experience is different than that experienced by other women of color
  - Gendered racial microaggressions have specific detrimental effects beyond racial microaggressions or sexist microaggressions alone
- Other work (including my own, e.g., Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021) starting to examine intersectional oppression, but hard to do so in a truly intersectional way (i.e. examining *table salt* rather than  $\text{Na} + \text{Cl}$ )



# Privilege

- Liu considers manifestations of privilege experienced by anyone other than White cisgender heterosexual owning-class Christian men *proxy privilege*, which
  - Can be granted or taken away by power brokers when we do not adhere to our proscribed roles
  - Is not portable nor enduring
  - Often results in increased efforts on the part of the marginalized person (White women, people of color, lower SES White men) to obtain or maintain this privilege
- This “keeps us in line” (i.e. upholding systems of oppression) – when we talk about the “risks of doing this work” or “don’t rock the boat,” this is exactly what we are talking about.



# Revising Privilege...Peggy McIntosh

“unearned advantage”...“Conferred Dominance”

*For this reason, the word "privilege" now seems to me misleading. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work systematically to over empower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance because of one's race or sex.*

# Microaggressions

- Microaggressions:
  - *Brief, everyday, and often unintentional exchanges that convey denigration, invalidation, or even insulting messages to people of color or individuals from other minoritized backgrounds (Sue et al., 2007)*
- They are NOT called micro because their impact is small – their impact is actually profound
  - Called *micro* because they are subtle and often – though not always – beyond the offender's awareness





# Microaggressions

- A common response to learning that one may have committed a microaggression is a focus on intent: *But I didn't mean anything by it!*
- Remember: **Impact over intent**
- Two of the three types of microaggressions are, by definition, unintentional
  - Microassault (*not* unconscious; intent is to harm, e.g., racist epithet)
  - Microinsult: Convey rudeness, insensitivity, or snubbing
    - Often unconscious
    - Can be verbal (“Are you the affirmative action hire?”) or nonverbal (avoidance)
  - Microinvalidation: Communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of people of color (or other minoritized individuals)
    - “I don't see color”
    - “Not everything is about race”



# Microaggressions: Bystander Intervention

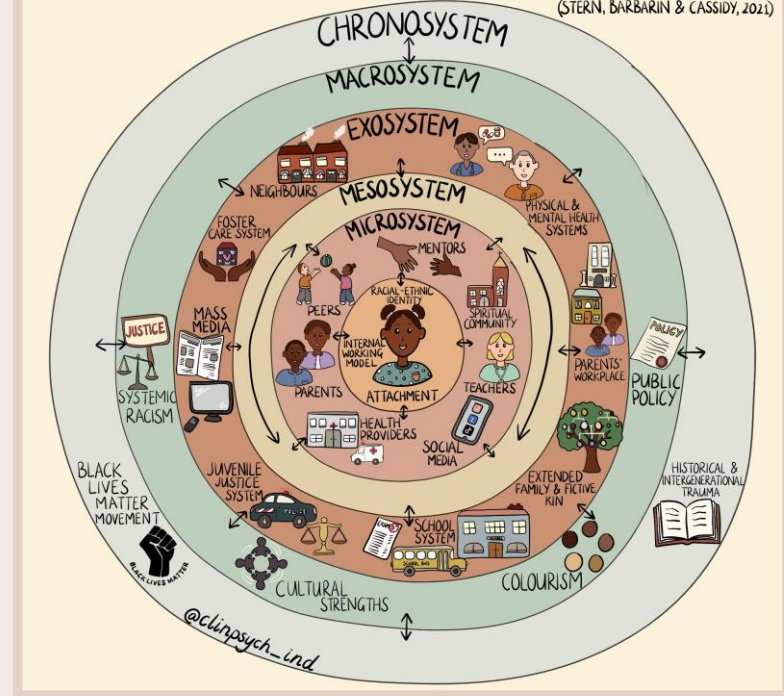


- Recent work (Sue et al., 2019, *American Psychologist*) has articulated intervention strategies for intervening upon microaggressions and macroaggressions when witnessing them (vs. perpetrating them)
- Three levels:
  - Directed toward perpetrator (in re: a microaggression)
  - Directed toward institution (in re: macroaggression)
  - Directed toward societal structures (macroaggression)
- Strategies:
  1. Make the invisible visible (speak up; monitor trends; organize peaceful demonstration)
  2. Disarm the micro/macroaggression (express disagreement; exercise right to serve in leadership; lobby, protest)
  3. Educate the offender (appeal to offender's values; institute mandated training; raise children to understand racism, prejudice)
  4. Seek external intervention (alert authorities; report inequitable practices; foster cooperation over competition)

# BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS MODEL (1976)

ADAPTED TO FOCUS ON BLACK YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & ATTACHMENT PROCESSES IN CONTEXT

(STERN, BARBARIN & CASSIDY, 2021)



True social justice intervention—  
at any level—requires the ability  
to conceptualize *structurally*

We cannot conceptualize  
structurally unless we learn  
deeply about *systems, structures,  
and history*

# New Counseling Psychology Values

Moore-Lobban (2023)



1. Critical Consciousness
2. Prevention
3. Strengths-Based
4. Advocacy
5. Flexibility and Adaptability
6. Collectivism
7. Accountability and Repairing Harm
8. Liberation
9. Healing

# Thank You!

Does anyone have any questions?

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