**Race/Ethnic Relations and the Obama Presidency—Perspectives of Leaders in the Field**

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Discussant Remarks by Mona Amer, PhD

It is humbling and an honor to participate in this panel with so many inspirational scholars and leaders in the field. Much appreciation to Stan for inviting me to join.

**Has racism been resolved during Obama’s presidency?**

* No, otherwise this session would not be filled with so many people, or else it would have been organized by the division focused on history of psychology.

**What were the synthesized conclusions of the presentations?**

1. The fiction of a post-racial society and color blind ideology –found in media, political discourse, even individual self-perceptions of not being racist – has perpetuated manifestations of racism further, ranging from microaggressions to police killings.
2. Obama’s presidency has had some positive effects, as a result of his presence as a black president, how he has handled sensitive events, and also his unique leadership style which is not the alpha male. This has contributed to resilience and empowerment of minority groups, positive identity development, greater advocacy, encouraging people to take leadership positions, and institutional changes (e.g., appointing Supreme Court justice, visit to a reservation and honoring sovereignty).
3. Overall there seems to be limited self-reflection and insight and ownership related to racism, whether at the individual or societal level, even if some people feel uncomfortable or confused at some level.

**What are 5 ways to strengthen the impact of multicultural psych/ racism scholarship?**

1. More nuanced research is needed to capture differences in groups, contexts, etc. For example:
   1. Different groups may face different forms of prejudice and racism.
      1. People may claim that it is a post-racial world and that they are not racist while at the same time explicitly saying that they do not like Muslims or Arabs and that those people should leave the U.S.
   2. Prejudice and discrimination is not implicit for all groups, and policies favoring minority groups have not happened for all groups.
      1. Extra airline screening for Muslims women wearing the hijab is a written TSA policy.
      2. For Arabs and Muslims, discrimination is overt, explicit, ongoing, and accepted.
   3. The distinction between implicit and explicit processes are sometimes not so clear.
      1. Implicit racism may have contributed to the policemen shooting African Americans or Native Americans
      2. However, killing someone is the most explicit form of racism there is
   4. Prejudice and discrimination are not just personal and psychological phenomenon, and they don’t “just happen”
      1. Government reports (e.g., by Department of Homeland Security) document that racism, White supremacy, and rightwing extremism has increased after 2008 alongside the economic recession, paralleling a similar trend during the mid 1990’s recession that culminated in the Oklahoma City bombing.
      2. There are political and economic contextual processes that impact racism trends are not studied much by psychologists.
      3. There is a 57 million dollar islamophobia network, made up of small groups of foundations and wealthy donors, that are engaging in a concerted effort to spread fear, prejudice, misinformation about Muslims
      4. Anti-muslim media propaganda supports government foreign policy so there are political motives to keep it going
   5. People and groups react to being targets of racism differently
      1. Internalizing
      2. Gaining resilience, joining initiatives of resistance, becoming empowered
2. Use research methodology that directly empowers marginalized groups
   1. More applied methods to document what works in improving race relations
   2. More empowerment/participatory approaches
      1. This does not mean simply consulting and building rapport with a group while the researcher is still essentially in charge of everything.
      2. It means methods that truly transform the power relations in research, where communities are full partners in the process, including deciding on the research topic, collecting and analyzing data, having ownership over the data and results, co-presenting the results in community and academic settings, etc.
      3. The group experiences empowerment, and is able to more independently conduct research on their own, and can use data to improve their conditions and leverage resources such as grant funding.
3. Learn more empowerment-oriented and other research methods and findings by exchanging knowledge with psychologists in other nations
   1. American psychology is insular and self-centered
   2. Students in the U.S. don’t usually study the writings, theories, and research related to racism or discrimination produced in other countries.
   3. We don’t usually know examples of programs or initiatives aimed at improving race relations that were developed in other countries.
   4. We can not afford to remain isolated, the reality is that the world is interconnected even in terms of racism issues
      1. The increase in intolerance towards people of color, and right-wing extremism is not just in U.S., but paralleled in Europe, Australia, Canada
      2. When someone in Ferguson is killed, people in Syria send out a photo showing their support and newspaper propaganda in nations use the event to bolster legitimacy of their own police brutality
   5. We can not claim language barriers, we should work to translate from other countries just like they work hard to translate from English
      1. There are nations where there psychological work on racism is in English, include South Africa (which faced apartheid) and UK (which has similar issues of health disparities in the Black and Minority Ethnic community)
   6. International collaboration will enrich our perspectives, we learn from successes in other parts of the world
4. To collaborate and exchange knowledge with other parts of the world, we need to better understand what is happening in the world
   1. We need to understand the contexts, issues
   2. We need to break out of the information bubble that our media places on us
   3. For example, the media story of Boko Haram’s kidnapping of girls was stripped of context (e.g. history of child kidnappings including LRA’s kidnapping of thousands children over the past decades, political issues with the government, etc.)
      1. This gives the impression of radical Muslim crazy people who randomly engage in uniquely horrific and inexplicable acts.
   4. Similarly media reports of protests after a black person is killed is decontextualized and sanitized, providing very little contextual analysis of the systemic factors that led to these events.
      1. This gives the impression of irrational black thugs who are inherently prone to violence and destruction
5. Given the media bias, we need to take more leadership in having our voice heard on the media, and thus directly change media to better represent communities of color
   1. The media rhetoric is dangerous, perpetuates prejudice
   2. Hardly ever do we see psychologists invited to discuss racial tensions, it is usually pseudo-experts and people who have their own agendas
   3. Media is focused on basic questions such as “Is it really racism? Is racism still an issue?” that psychologists have answered ages ago. Then they often debate whether or not media is biased.
   4. We need to modify the dominant narrative, we also have power and privilege and can provide the counter-narrative
   5. Everyone should be an activist in talking with the mainstream news, radio, Internet outlets etc.

**What are some questions raised by the speakers that would be good final food for thought?**

1. We already have a good understanding of racism from social, contextual, even neurobiological perspectives… how can we move this understanding forward to engage in “ongoing conscious promotion of awareness”?
2. What kind of work can be done to raise race consciousness?
3. How can we develop a society that draws on the beauty of our diversity; how can we “live constructively in a diverse world”?
4. What kind of leader are you going to be in this process?