COMMENTARY

Critical race theory as a guide for White I-O psychologists' reflection and reflexivity

Brittany N. Lynner

Department of Psychology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA
Email: Brittany.lynner@colostate.edu

Following the death of George Floyd, many White people (including me, the author of this commentary) joined book clubs that centered on examining Whiteness in a racialized society. After finishing the final chapter of books such as *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi (2019), *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017), and *White Fragility* by Robyn DiAngelo (2018), my book club, like others, disbanded and further reflection would seemingly dwindle until the next brutal police shooting of an unarmed Black man. Industrial-organizational psychology scientists and practitioners alike formed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committees with lofty goals to tackle systemic inequities that permeate our institutions and organizations, yet the reticence of addressing Whiteness in our research and practice has persisted. In conjunction with Hyland's (2023) recommendations for engaging in reflective practice, White I-O psychologists across research and practice areas (i.e., not just those in DEI spaces) must consider how White ears and eyes, that is, a White frame of reference, influence our work. Through participation in ongoing reflective and reflexive processes, racial blind spots will unveil themselves, propelling forward a future wherein I-O psychologists are better positioned to meet employees' varying needs across a diversity of lived experiences and social identities.

With that said, it is challenging for White people to know where to begin in examining our Whiteness. White people are typically not taught to understand their Whiteness as a race and are often not made aware of how race influences their experiences. Calls to ban critical race theory (CRT) in our classrooms, organizations, and other contexts further inhibits discussions about Whiteness, including the history of racism and its embeddedness in our current society. However, by learning CRT as an academic and legal framework, we can embrace a more equitable future for the field of I-O psychology. CRT may serve to guide White I-O psychologists' ongoing reflection and reflexivity by considering its five tenets: (a) permanence of racism, (b) counterstorytelling, (c) critique of liberalism, (d) interest convergence, and (e) Whiteness as property (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Prior to diving into these tenets, I must acknowledge that, as a White person, I am using this commentary as a platform to speak directly to other White I-O psychologists, but I recognize that non-Black people of color can also use CRT to engage in reflection and reflexivity as they examine their roles in perpetuating systemic Whiteness.

Permanence of racism

As I-O psychologists, we cannot assume that our research and practice are free from racism. Because Whiteness is the norm in U.S. society, we must instead name racism as active in our field, evaluate how the permanence of racism drives our organizational policies and practices, and

scrutinize the role we individually play in establishing and maintaining such policies and practices. Within applied psychological research, WEIRD (White, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) samples have historically been the standard (Henrich et al., 2010), serving as the basis for our theory development and organizational "best" practices. White I-O researchers must consider how Whiteness influences the theories we utilize, the research questions we ask, the participants we recruit, the analyses we conduct, the findings we articulate, and the infrastructure within which we operate. In parallel, White I-O practitioners must critically evaluate the lens under which decisions are made, including who makes the decisions and whose voices are not heard in the process. Positionality and subjectivity should be at the forefront of White I-O psychologists' minds as we consider how racism is operating internally—both in ourselves and in our field. Kendi (2019) claims, "One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist'" (p. 9). Notably, we cannot evaluate how racism is operating internally if we are stuck on concerns of being "not racist." White I-O psychologists must move beyond these concerns to instead ask what we are doing to directly confront racism in our research and practice.

Counterstorytelling

Counterstorytelling relies on critiquing dominant narratives and challenging assumptions that are rooted in Whiteness (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). As mentioned, White people may not recognize themselves as racialized beings who can speak about racialized experiences; however, neglecting to consider White frames of reference allows colonial research and practices to persist unchecked. Instead, I-O psychologists must consider how dominant ideologies dictate our research questions and workplace policies. One important step for our field is to redefine psychological theories, which requires listening to the narratives of people of color instead of "trying to adapt or fit people of color into conceptualizations derived from the White majority culture" (Tinsley-Jones, 2001, p. 578). In terms of practice, I-O psychologists should reflect on how dominant ideologies inform organizational norms and human capital management. Stewart (2017) encourages us to flip the dominant narrative by shifting from asking questions such as "Have everyone's ideas been heard?" and "How many more of [pick any marginalized identity] group do we have this year than last?" to asking questions such as "Whose ideas won't be taken as seriously because they aren't in the majority?" and "What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority here?" (para. 10). White I-O researchers and practitioners can engage in counterstorytelling by monitoring when, how, and why our questions and beliefs stem from dominant ideologies. Further, White I-O psychologists can apply the notion of counterstorytelling by working alongside BIPOC (Black and Indigenous people of color) colleagues to elevate the voices of historically excluded and underrepresented communities.

Critique of liberalism

Critique of liberalism challenges liberal thought that has consistently failed people of color, including colorblindness, neutrality, and incremental change (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). As I-O psychologists, we must acknowledge that identity-blind ideologies uphold dominant narratives, facilitating prejudice and discrimination (Leslie et al., 2020). Instead, White I-O psychologists should reflect on how our social identities and lived experiences influence our frames of reference and examine whether we have been conditioned to maintain order via incremental change or to challenge systems that enable White supremacy. White I-O psychologists may be inclined to reevaluate "'feel good' DEI efforts" (McCluney et al., 2020, p. 53) that are informed by identity-blind ideologies catering toward making White people and those in power comfortable instead of aggressively disrupting structural racism.

Interest convergence

In the words of Lopez (2003), interest convergence is "the belief that Whites will tolerate and advance the interests of people of color only when they promote the self-interests of Whites" (p. 84). Interest convergence is particularly evident in institutional and organizational diversity efforts that rely on a business case. For example, initiatives marketed toward advancing women in the workplace often advance White women, whereas women of color do not experience similar development or promotion opportunities (Tulshyan, 2019). Accordingly, when making organizational DEI decisions, White I-O psychologists have the responsibility to reflect on whether progress is advancing at a pace that is appropriate for meeting underrepresented and historically excluded persons' needs, or whether progress is incrementally being made at a pace that is tolerable for those in power (Lopez, 2003). Further, when conducting research with BIPOC communities, White I-O psychologists must critique their impetus for pursuing such work, questioning whether their goals are to further self-interests, to "help" a community that needs to be "rescued" and/or to dismantle systemic inequities. To spur action, White I-O psychologists may consider "passing the mic" by inviting BIPOC colleagues to collaborate as a means to further the interests and opportunities for others while simultaneously decentering our Whiteness.

Whiteness as property

Whiteness as property is associated with coloniality and ownership, which we observe when White I-O psychologists are cultural outsiders conducting research or otherwise serving a community with different racial or ethnic identities. In scientific research, a presumption is made that researchers have the "'right' (and ability) to intellectually know, interpret, and represent others" (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008, p. 49). White I-O psychologists must reflect upon the role we play in directing and owning our work by considering when this notion of ownership comes at the expense of others. Through continuously monitoring our Westernized ways of knowing, we can ask ourselves why and in what instances we are delegitimizing other forms of knowledge (Bejarano et al., 2019). In doing so, we will take steps toward the decolonization of our research, practice, and field as a whole.

Conclusion

Although the tenets of CRT are generally not intuitive for White people who have yet to reflect upon their racial experiences, we can adopt a long-term approach toward examining our Whiteness. Through application of CRT to guide our reflection and reflexivity, White I-O psychologists may be emboldened to reevaluate all steps of the research process, from the questions we ask to the implications we make. We may be inspired to challenge how, why, and by whom organizational decisions are made and for whom such decisions benefit. We may be spurred to critique our dominant ideologies and Westernized ways of knowing and instead consider strategies to decenter our Whiteness, such as by elevating the voices of our BIPOC colleagues. By grounding the five tenets of CRT (permanence of racism, counterstorytelling, critique of liberalism, interest convergence, and Whiteness as property; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) in our reflection and reflexivity processes, White I-O psychologists can spark change in our—change that is instrumental to tackling systemic inequities permeating our teams, institutions and organizations, and our society at large.

References

Bejarano, C. A., Juárez, L. L., García, M. A. M., & Goldstein, D. M. (2019). *Decolonizing ethnography: Undocumented immigrants and new directions in social science.* Duke University Press.

Cannella, G. S., & Manuelito, K. D. (2008). Feminisms from unthought locations: Indigenous worldviews, marginalized feminisms, and revisioning an anticolonial social science. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, & L. T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies* (pp. 45–59). Sage.

DeCuir, J., & Dixson, A. (2004). "So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, **33,** 26–31.

DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism.* Beacon Press.

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, **33**, 61–83.

Hyland, P. (2023). All we like sheep: The need for reflection and reflexivity in I-O psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, **16**.

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist.* One World.

Leslie, L. M., Bono, J. E., Kim, Y. S., & Beaver, G. R. (2020). On melting pots and salad bowls: A meta-analysis of the effects of identity-blind and identity-conscious diversity ideologies. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **105**(5), 453.

Lopez, G. R. (2003). The (racially neutral) politics of education: A critical race theory perspective. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, **39**(1), 68–94.

McCluney, C. L., King, D. D., Bryant, C. M., & Ali, A. A. (2020). From "Calling in Black" to "Calling for antiracism resources": the need for systemic resources to address systemic racism. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, **40**(1), 49–59. https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-07-2020-0180

Stewart, D, (2017, March 30). Language of appeasement. *Inside Higher Ed.* https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/03/30/colleges-need-language-shift-not-one-you-think-essay

Thomas, A. (2017). *The hate u give.* Balzer & Bray.

Tinsley-Jones, H. A. (2001). Racism in our midst: Listening to psychologists of color. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, **32**(6), 573.

Tulshyan, R. (2019, July 1). Do your diversity efforts reflect the experiences of women of color? *Harvard Business Review.* https://hbr.org/2019/07/do-your-diversity-efforts-reflect-the-experiences-of-women-of-color