

# “Let’s Get In Formation”: On Becoming a Psychologist–Activist in the 21st Century

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Throughout the history of the United States, there have been many social movements that have resulted in an array of historic societal outcomes—ranging from the end of racial segregation to women’s voting rights to the legalization of same-sex marriages. Despite the positive outcomes derived from political activism, many psychologists have struggled with how to advocate for social justice while maintaining their professional responsibilities and ethical boundaries. The current article reviews the historical ways that psychologists have participated in political movements—from the use of psychological research in landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases to psychologist-led pushes for policy changes in psychology, medicine, and other mental health related fields. Next, a critical review provides some of the major controversies or dilemmas regarding psychology, social justice, and political participation—including (a) ethical concerns and professional boundaries, (b) the utility of political neutrality in psychology, (c) psychologists’ balance and self-care, (d) psychologists’ lack of advocacy training, and (e) beliefs concerning the role of social justice advocacy in psychology. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the concept “psychologist–activist”—highlighting the many ways that psychologists across various subfields and institutions can combat oppression on individual, interpersonal, group, and institutional levels.

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Despite decades of progress toward equity for historically marginalized groups, systemic oppression has persisted over time and has manifested in multiple ways (Nadal, 2013; Sue et al., 2007). For instance, in 2016 the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline continued—despite the dissent of Native Americans from the local Standing Rock Sioux tribes, who cited scientific evidence of the environmental threats to their water and sacred tribal grounds (Hoyer, 2017). Further, in the month following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Southern Poverty Law Center (2017) reported an estimated 315 hate crimes targeting immigrants; 221 hate crimes toward Black people; 112 hate

crimes toward Muslims; and 109 hate crimes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people. Amnesty International (2017) cited over 100 threats to human rights within the first 100 days of the new presidential administration—highlighting discriminatory or biased policies and rhetoric related to issues like access to health care, women’s reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, immigration, indigenous people’s rights, policing of communities of color, and climate change.

In recent years, many individuals and groups (particularly those with historically marginalized identities) have organized politically to vocalize their disdain of hate, discrimination, or social injustice. As an example, the Black Lives Matter Movement became popularized in 2014, after a series of police killings of unarmed Black men across the United States. Through mainstream and social media, the movement yielded public discourse about systemic racism, police bias, and police violence—with calls to action for law enforcement, health care, training, research, and media (A. V. Hall, Hall, & Perry, 2016; Jee-Lyn García, & Sharif, 2015). In fact, when Beyoncé Knowles released her track “Formation” (Brown, Frost, Hogan, Williams, & Knowles, 2016) on her *Lemonade* album in 2016, she covered many themes related to race, gender, social class, and other intersectionalities. In the song’s chorus, she sings, “Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation”—suggesting a call for commu-

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nities (especially Black women) to organize politically to combat racial injustice and other inequities.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, it examines the historical relationship between psychology and social justice movements—providing examples of the myriad ways that psychologists have been politically active and have successfully advocated for issues related to social justice. Second, five dilemmas in psychologists' participation in social justice activism are identified and discussed, and the American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethics Codes are referenced to support that social justice activism is an ethical responsibility for psychologists. Finally, recommendations are provided for how psychologists can become "psychologist-activists" and partake in social justice activities through clinical practice, education, research, and training as well as in their personal lives. It is hoped that through this review, readers will gain more critical awareness about systemic barriers to social justice and human rights consider activating their commitment to advocate for the good of humanity.

### Historical Connections Between Psychology and Social Justice Advocacy

To understand the current relationship between the field of psychology and social justice, it is important to highlight the many ways that psychologists have participated in activism and political movements in the past. First, since the early 1900s, psychology research has influenced various sectors of American society, including (a) public opinion and societal stigma, (b) government policies and laws, and (c) changes in practices and policies regarding physical and mental health. Second, within the psychology profession itself, psychologist-led organizing and activism has led to multiple changes in APA governance and structure, ethics, and standards of practice in psychology and other mental health fields.

### The Societal Influence of Psychology Research

There are many noteworthy examples of how the research of pioneer psychologists has directly or indirectly transformed societal perspectives. First, many psychology researchers have been cited in landmark Supreme Court cases—which then resulted in amendments to legislation on federal, state, and local levels. For instance, Mamie Phipps Clark (who became the first Black woman to receive a PhD in psychology from Columbia University in 1943) conducted research on White and Black children's reactions to dolls of different races. Her husband, Kenneth Clark, later collaborated with her on these projects, and in sum, their studies found that both White and Black children preferred White dolls, suggesting that Black children learn that their own race is bad, inferior, or less attractive than is Whites'—due

to systemic oppression and negative socialization of Black people. In the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) U.S. Supreme Court case, the Clark doll studies were cited as support of the harmful impact of racism; the historic decision led to desegregating public schools across the United States (Lal, 2002).

Decades later, the research of Gregory Herek and Ilan Meyer would be instrumental in the fight for marriage equality (Nadal, Mazzula, & Rivera, 2017). In the 1990s, Herek began to research sexual stigma and hate crimes against gay and lesbian people (e.g., Herek & Berrill, 1992; Herek, 1998); in 2003, Meyer introduced his minority stress theory Meyer (2003), which theorized how LGBTQ people (and other historically marginalized groups) experienced psychological distress as a result of navigating systemic and interpersonal discrimination. While Herek's work was cited in the repeal of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policies, both scholars testified as expert witnesses in *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* (2012), the California Supreme Court case that challenged the state's Proposition 8 ban on same-sex marriage; that case led to *Hollingsworth v. Perry* (2013), the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case that found California's marriage ban unconstitutional. Two years later, the *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) SCOTUS decision legalized same-sex marriage across the United States (Nadal et al., 2017).

Psychology research has also been instrumental to changing policies and practices within health and mental health professions. In the 1950s, Evelyn Hooker initiated experimental psychological studies to explore whether gay men quantitatively possessed more symptoms of psychopathology than did heterosexual men. At the time, homosexuality was still diagnosed as a psychiatric disorder—with treatments involving inhumane methods like castration, electroshock therapy, or lobotomies. Although many of her colleagues critiqued her empirical methods, she persisted and continued her research program—which has been cited as the first of many studies that influenced the 1973 removal of homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder from the third edition of the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders* (DSM-III; Kimmel & Browning, 1999). Decades later, public opinion data indicated that positive attitudes toward LGBTQ people have increased significantly—with some studies finding that perceptions of lesbians and gay men increased at rates that were significantly more rapid than for any other social group (e.g., Flores, 2014).

Feminist psychology researchers and scholars were also instrumental in changing the ways that women's experiences are conceptualized or pathologized in the field of psychology. In the 1920s and 1930s, psychoanalyst Karen Horney wrote extensively about the sexist perspectives of male psychoanalysts. Decades later, these essays were compiled in her book *Feminine Psychology* (Horney, 1967). Horney was considered quite controversial in her time, particularly because there were so few female psycholo-

gists, because women were still expected to be deferential to men, and because so few female psychologists were vocal about sexism (Nadal et al., 2017). Decades later, social psychologist Carol Gilligan revealed how sexist views negatively impacted psychological theories of child and adult development, critiquing the research of Lawrence Kohlberg, who relied primarily on male samples and generalized negative traits of a small female sample to all women. Gilligan also hypothesized how systemic sexism influenced negative personality traits (e.g., girls who have low self-esteem or who take less initiative because societal sexism teaches them to be submissive to boys). Gilligan's (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* offered new feminist theories of moral development, integrated more female samples, and accounted for the effects of societal sexism and gender role expectations on girls' and women's psychological development. The research of Horney and Gilligan was instrumental in the formation of feminist psychology, as well as how psychologists understand gender, gender roles, and sexism today.

Psychology research has also heavily influenced societal views on race and racism. In the 1990s, Claude Steele, Joshua Aronson, and Steven Spencer began to describe stereotype threat—or the risk of confirming an internalized trait or bias about a person's social identity group (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). Initially they investigated the test-taking abilities and differential scores between Black and White students on intelligence tests, and experimental studies indicated that Black students performed significantly more poorly when they were informed they were being measured on their intelligence, whereas White students' scores did not differ either way. Similar experimental studies found women scoring significantly more poorly with math tests when informed that the test was expected to produce gender differences. Twenty years later, research on stereotype threat has influenced the ways that educators and policymakers understand standardized tests (like the SATs or GREs), with many scholars arguing for colleges and universities to interpret standardized test scores differently for certain groups or to completely remove standardized tests as admissions criteria (Spencer et al., 2016).

Similarly, the psychological research on microaggressions has influenced public opinions about race, gender, and culture. Although Chester Pierce first described racial microaggressions in the 1970s, the concept was reintroduced by Derald Wing Sue and colleagues (2007). Microaggression theory grew exponentially in the past decade, with hundreds of empirical studies and media sources highlighting how subtle discrimination affects people of color, women, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and others (e.g., Nadal, Whitman, Davis, Erazo, & Davidoff, 2016; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014). In February 2017, *microaggressions* was added to the Merriam-

Webster dictionary, demonstrating its impact and integration in mainstream society (Associated Press, 2017).

### The Role of Psychologist-Led Activism in the Profession

Psychologists have participated in many advocacy efforts that have resulted in policy and practice changes within the profession. Since the founding of the APA, there have been many efforts for the field to become more inclusive and justice-oriented. For instance, during APA's inception in the 1890s, systemic sexism prevented women from being able to study psychology, resulting in few female psychologists for decades. In the 1960s, as the feminist movement grew, and as the number of women psychologists increased, women reported still feeling marginalized within APA and began to organize. (Hogan & Sexton, 1991). In 1969, the Association for Women Psychologists was formed as an organization independent from the APA that would advocate for feminist psychology; in 1973, the APA Division on the Psychology of Women was established as a way of fighting for women's issues within the APA (Russo & Dumont, 1997).

In a related vein, because there was a lack of racial diversity in the APA prior to, and during, the Civil Rights Movement, psychologists of color started to formally organize in the late 1960s to fight for racial inclusion and multicultural competence in the field. Beginning in 1968, different ethnic minority psychological associations emerged, including the Association of Black Psychologists, the Society of Indian Psychologists, the Asian American Psychological Association, and the National Latina/o Psychological Association. In 1974, psychologists of color initiated for the APA Minority Fellowship Program and advocated for the Division on the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race as APA's 45th division (Nadal et al., 2017). Together, these organizations vocalized concerns regarding racism within psychology, while initiating policies that standardized cultural competence for the field overall. As an example, various community organizing efforts resulted in the APA's integrating multiculturalism into its ethical standards, while also adopting policies like the Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists (American Psychological Association [APA], 2003).

Psychologists' attitudes toward LGBTQ people were profoundly influenced by the combination of scientific research and community activism. For instance, whereas Evelyn Hooker's research is cited as influencing the removal of homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder in the *DSM-III*, it was an organized group of lesbian and gay psychologists who lobbied for the APA to pass a resolution that declared that homosexuality was not a mental illness in 1975 (Kimmel & Browning, 1999). Further activism by LGBTQ psy-

chologists resulted in the APA's adding sexual orientation as a protected class in its nondiscrimination policy in 1975, the recognition of the Division on the Psychological Study of Lesbian and Gay Issues as its 44th division in 1985, and the establishment of the APA Office of LGBT Concerns in 2006. Advocacy efforts by psychologists also influenced the APA's standards for psychotherapy with LGBTQ clients, with the publications of *Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients* (APA, 2012) and *Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People* (APA, 2015). Over the years, the APA has taken political stances on many LGBTQ-related issues (using empirical evidence and academic literature to support their causes), passing resolutions and amicus briefs on anti-LGBTQ work discrimination, antisodomy laws, LGBTQ parental and adoption rights, and marriage equality (Haeny, 2014).

### Psychologists' Dilemmas With Social Justice Activism

Despite the vast history of psychologists' involvement in social justice activism, as well as a large majority of psychologists' identifying as liberal—approximately 84% of academic psychologists (Duarte et al., 2015) and 77% of counseling and clinical psychologists (Bilgrave & Deluty, 2002)—there are many reasons why contemporary psychologists may struggle with advocating for human rights. These dilemmas include (a) ethical concerns and professional boundaries, (b) the belief in political neutrality in psychology, (c) a desire to maintain personal balance and self-care, (d) the lack of psychology training on social justice activism, and (e) the belief that social justice advocacy is unnecessary in psychology. Utilizing the APA's 2002 and 2010 versions of the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (APA, 2002, 2010) and previous psychological literature, I address these dilemmas, arguing that social justice work is ethically integral to the profession.

#### Dilemma 1: Ethical Concerns and Professional Boundaries

Some psychologists may believe that they are professionally obligated to remain politically neutral to maintain their ethical boundaries as psychologists (Haeny, 2014). The APA's (2002) Code of Ethics explicitly states: "Because psychologist's scientific and professional judgments and actions may affect the lives of others, they are alert to and guard against personal, financial, social, organizational, or political factors that might lead to misuse of their influence" (p. 1062). Some psychologists may interpret this clause alone as a reason for avoiding politics altogether in order to avoid "misusing" their influence as psychologists. Further, APA Standard 3.06 (Conflict of Interest) states:

Psychologists refrain from taking on a professional role when personal, scientific, professional, legal, financial or other interests or relationships could reasonably be expected to (1) impair their objectivity, competence or effectiveness in performing their functions as psychologists, or (2) expose the person or organization with whom the professional relationship exists to harm or exploitation. (APA, 2002, p. 1065)

Although at first glance, one may presume that psychologists should avoid all roles that impair their objectivity or expose their clients or constituents to harm, the code clearly states "professional role"—suggesting psychologists can engage in political activity in their personal capacities (i.e., during their free time). In fact, the APA Ethics Code "applies only to psychologists' activities that are part of their scientific, educational, or professional roles as psychologists" (APA, 2002, p. 1061) and that "activities shall be distinguished from the purely private conduct of psychologists, which is not within the purview of the Ethics Code" (APA, 2002, p. 1061).

Further, perhaps some psychologists avoid taking public stances on controversial issues because they want to refrain from misusing or exploiting their knowledge and expertise in the public eye. Some may cite APA Standard 5.04 (Media Presentations), which states:

When psychologists provide public advice or comment via print, Internet or other electronic transmission, they take precautions to ensure that statements (1) are based on their professional knowledge, training or experience in accord with appropriate psychological literature and practice; (2) are otherwise consistent with this Ethics Code; and (3) do not indicate that a professional relationship has been established with the recipient. (APA, 2002, p. 1067)

Following this code, it appears ethical for psychologists to take public stances on political issues—so long as they certify (a) that their assertions are based on professional knowledge and experiences, (b) that such statements are consistent with psychological literature, and (c) they do not violate other ethical standards. Thus, if psychologists wanted to write op-ed pieces about the negative impacts of systemic racism on mental health, it would be ethical as long as statements are (a) supported by their professional knowledge and experience (e.g., their experience in research or clinical work with clients who battle internalized oppression), (b) their assertions align with psychological literature (e.g., they cite studies on stereotype threat, microaggressions, colonial mentality, internalized racism), and (c) they do not break other ethical standards (e.g., they do not disclose confidential information about clients or research participants).

Though participating in activism or progressive movements does not inherently violate APA Ethics Codes, some potential detrimental effects may occur that should prompt psychologists to take precautions. Haeny (2014) described a scenario in which a notable psychologist signed a controversial petition and in which a proponent of the petition used the psychologist's namesake and title to condone the petition—despite a lack of psychological or scientific evidence to support the cause. One way to avoid such an

instance is to sign petitions (or take public stances) on only issues concerning which one is fully aware of psychological or scientific support (Haeny, 2014). Psychologists can also avoid ethical violations by not taking public stances on issues based solely on personal, religious, or political opinions or in which there is a lack of scholarly research (e.g., testifying in court that homosexuality is unnatural).

Further, when psychologists become aware of ways their opinions are misrepresented, they take efforts to correct misinformation, as supported by Standard 5.02 (Statements by Others) which states: “Psychologists who engage others to create or place public statements that promote their professional practice, products, or activities retain professional responsibility for such statements” (APA, 2002, p. 1067). As an example of this standard, imagine a psychologist who publishes a critique on an established study of interest (e.g., microaggressions, implicit bias, or stereotype threat). Now, imagine a mainstream news article with a headline that reads that a “top psychologist” claims that the research area is “not supported by science”—despite the hundreds of peer-reviewed, empirical articles written about the concept. Although psychologists have a right to critique any body of research, they also have an ethical obligation to ensure that their names or expertise do not contribute to false information or public misperceptions.

One other ethical concern regarding public stances for practitioners is whether clients would have adverse reactions when learning of their psychotherapist’s political views. Haeny (2014) offered a hypothetical scenario in which a client discovers that her or his clinical psychologist has differing political views (e.g., the client sees the psychologist campaigning for a political party), which may potentially disrupt the therapeutic alliance. To avoid this situation, Haeny recommended that the psychologist either engage in only “behind the scenes” work or encourage someone else with similar values to take on the role instead. Although this suggestion may have been intended to assist psychologists in practicing caution and avoiding multiple relationships, it communicates the belief that psychologists should remain apolitical, or conceal part of their identities, for the sake of avoiding social discomfort or rifts in psychotherapy. An alternative (and still ethical) recommendation would begin before a client even learned about a therapist’s political beliefs. A practitioner should be willing to facilitate conversations with clients about their identities and possible cultural dynamics at the start of therapy, which often results in stronger therapeutic alliances (Vasquez, 2007) and more effective treatment outcomes (Owen et al., 2016). Similar to how a therapist would be expected to facilitate a difficult discussion on religion, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality (before or after a topic arose), an effective clinician could also facilitate difficult conversations about political participation or ideology.

Some psychologists have recommended that practitioners discuss issues of power and boundaries with their clients throughout the psychotherapy process (Barnett, Lazarus, Vasquez, Moorehead-Slaughter, & Johnson, 2007). In fact, it would be beneficial for therapists to initiate early conversations on a variety of ethical concerns related to confidentiality or multiple relationships (e.g., how they would maintain confidentiality in their communication outside of therapy sessions or how they would manage instances in which they see each other in public spaces). So if, or when, a boundary crossing occurs (e.g., clients run into their therapist at a supermarket or concert, clients learn of their therapist’s political activism outside of the therapeutic room), clinicians and clients will have already had a dialogue about their relationship and power dynamics, which could facilitate a familiar or expected process-oriented conversation.

## Dilemma 2: The Utility of Political Neutrality in Psychology

A second reason that psychologists do not get involved in progressive movements is the notion of political neutrality, or the teaching that psychologists must be apolitical or neutral to be most effective. Critical psychologists, who challenge the traditional tenets of mainstream psychology through progressive lenses, have described how psychology has historically been taught to be politically neutral and scientifically objective (Fine, 2013; Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009). As a result, many psychologists may believe that political activism compromises psychology as a science. Some psychologists (e.g., Lilienfeld, 2017) have argued that psychologists who study multicultural concepts like microaggressions should rely less on the reported lived experiences of people of historically marginalized groups and instead support their arguments solely with traditional scientific methods. Critical and multicultural psychologists have described how mainstream psychologists with this type of thinking maintain a privileged worldview and a restricted level of analysis, which not only contributes to the status quo but also furthers the oppression of various groups (Fine, 2013; Fox et al., 2009; Sue, 2015).

The desire for clinical and counseling psychologists to be neutral may be derived from Freudian or psychoanalytic techniques that promoted therapeutic neutrality—or the stance that a psychotherapist does not self-disclose any personal information, in order to uncover clients’ transference in therapy. Modern relational psychoanalysts have questioned the effectiveness of neutrality, as well as the unrealistic nature of the practice (Katz, 2010). Furthermore, therapist self-disclosure generally tends to be an effective part of psychotherapy, especially when used sparingly and when a rapport is already established (Henretty & Levitt, 2010). Research has also supported therapist self-disclosure

to especially be effective with cross-cultural therapeutic dyads (Lee, 2014), which can be particularly helpful because people of color and LGBTQ people tend to avoid, or prematurely drop out of, psychotherapy (Nadal, 2013; Sue & Sue, 2015). Thus, if neutrality is not deemed to be a necessary component of clinical practice (and is even detrimental in some cases), neutrality cannot be deemed necessary in other aspects of the field.

In academia, political neutrality may be viewed as a necessity—particularly for faculty members who worry about tenure and promotion. Although tenure is meant to protect academic freedom, even tenured professors avoid teaching or researching controversial topics unless they have been promoted to the rank of full professor (Ceci, Williams, & Mueller-Johnson, 2006). Further, because students' biases often result in lower teaching evaluations for faculty of color and women faculty (Reid, 2010), it may feel even more crucial for certain professors to be politically neutral in the classroom. Similarly, forensic psychologists are also trained to strive for neutrality, in order to appear most credible in courtrooms and other legal settings (Sage-man, 2003). Yet, given the long-lasting history of racial disparities and racial injustice within the criminal justice system (Tonry, 2010), it is unclear whether neutrality should continue as a standard.

Whereas psychology researchers may argue that political neutrality is a requirement for objectivity, critical psychologists contend reflexivity needs to be practiced and promoted, particularly due to the sociohistorical ways psychology has been unjust to oppressed groups (Fine, 2013; Teo, 2015). Scholars have argued how psychology unintentionally perpetuates colonialism and that psychology pedagogy and practices need to be decolonized to avoid further perpetuating oppression (Goodman et al., 2015). Further, psychologists need to be aware of how their worldviews influence their ability (or inability) to recognize systemic oppression (Sue, 2015). They must recognize colorblindness is well intentioned but erroneous and harmful (Sue et al., 2007) and that neutrality can convey complicity to, and complacency with, injustices toward historically marginalized people (Sue, 2011). Thus, being apolitical or apathetic is detrimental to advancing human rights.

### **Dilemma 3: The Need for Psychologists' Personal Balance and Self-Care**

A third reason for a psychologist's hesitance to be involved in advocacy is the fear that participation in activism could become an additional stressor or burden. Psychologists (and other clinicians) who feel overworked or overextended may hesitate in adding nonprofessional activities that could negatively impact their own capacity to help others, their own mental health, or both. Norcross and Guy (2007) described an array of occupational hazards faced by prac-

ticing psychologists—ranging from patient behaviors (e.g., hostile or angry patients, suicidality) to unhealthy working conditions (e.g., office politics, paperwork abundance). Practicing psychologists who work with trauma survivors often experience secondary traumatic stress disorder or vicarious traumatization as a result of guiding their clients through their traumatic experiences (Wise & Barnett, 2016). Academic psychologists are also at risk for burnout, particularly when they have decreased sleep, family time, social support, and leisure time (Padilla & Thompson, 2016).

Some psychologists may be cognizant that political activism can sometimes in result in burnout, resulting in some who believe it would be more effective to stay politically passive. Gorski and Chen (2015) described how people involved in social justice advocacy are highly vulnerable to stress and social isolation; feel pressure to maintain their activism; or develop an increase in exhaustion, cynicism, or inefficacy to engage in the work. In fact, some activists have reported cultures of selflessness or martyrdom in which community members ignore their personal needs in favor of the movement. These experiences contribute to activist burnout which has been defined as “the act of involuntary leaving activism, or reducing one's level of activism” (Rettig, 2006, p. 16). Not only does activist burnout threaten individuals' mental health, but it impedes the thriving of organizations and movements.

Burnout symptoms of any sort become an ethical concern for psychologists when these symptoms impede their ability to work effectively with their clients and constituents. When psychologists feel overwhelmed or unable to work effectively, they may consider revisiting APA Standard 2.06 (Personal Problems and Conflicts), which notes: “When psychologists become aware of personal problems that may interfere with their performing work-related duties adequately, they take appropriate measures, such as obtaining professional consultation or assistance, and determine whether they should limit, suspend, or terminate their work-related duties” (APA, 2002, p. 1064).

Because psychologists and social justice advocates are both at risk for burnout, it is imperative for psychologists who do engage in activism to take proactive measures and engage in self-care, or “the activities and strategies each psychologist uses to establish and maintain wellness while working to minimize the effects of distress and to, one hopes, prevent a degradation in professional functioning” (Wise & Barnett, 2016, p. 210). In some ways, self-care can be viewed as an ethical obligation, due to APA Standard 2.03 (Maintaining Competence), which instructs psychologists to “undertake ongoing efforts to develop and maintain their competence” (APA, 2010, p. 1064). Self-care can take many forms for different types of psychologists, with researchers citing the most common practices as seeking one's own psychotherapy, relaxation techniques (e.g., meditation, prayer, yoga), humor, socializing with loved ones

and professional colleagues, positive self-talk, and scheduled breaks throughout the day (Wise & Barnett, 2016). In a related vein, some scholars may argue that participating in social justice activism may be considered a form of self-care. For individuals who have experienced and overcome oppression, political participation and activism can be personally healing, which can then improve one's sense of self, sense of purpose, strengthening of identities, and ability to thrive (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016).

#### **Dilemma 4: The Lack of Advocacy Training in Psychology**

Although a lack of multicultural competence training is still a concern across various subfields of psychology (Sue & Sue, 2015), some psychology programs have used various pedagogical techniques to advance social justice training for their students, such as service learning and difficult dialogues pedagogies (Toporek, & Worthington, 2014). Despite this, specific training focusing on public policy advocacy is notably missing in psychology, resulting in a lack of familiarity with the types of political advocacy that psychologists can get involved in or the skills that are needed to advocate within particular working environments (Hill, 2013). When psychologists (and other practitioners) complete advocacy training, they tend to (a) feel more motivated to be involved and (b) feel more competent and familiar with contemporary political issues (Heinowitz et al., 2012). When students are introduced to advocacy training in their graduate programs, they are more equipped and knowledgeable in public policy issues, which they can utilize as early career professionals (Lyons et al., 2015). If continuing educational credits on advocacy training are offered (e.g., in departments, at conferences, or by state psychology associations), psychologists who did not receive adequate graduate training in advocacy could have opportunities to develop their knowledge, awareness, and skills in this area.

#### **Dilemma 5: The Necessity of Social Justice Advocacy in Psychology**

Some psychologists may not be interested in progressive movements because their personal or religious beliefs align with the conservative policies in place (e.g., they identify as prolife, anti-LGBTQ rights, or as opponents to multicultural teachings in psychology). Naysayers may argue that people who advocate for social justice are merely engaging in "identity politics," which claims people of oppressed groups are merely fighting for their own needs (Bernstein, 2005). Social psychologists have reported that many conservative psychologists believe they are the ones who are discriminated against in psychology (particularly in academia) due to the liberal leanings of the field (Inbar & Lammers, 2012). Thus, some psychologists may be content with the current political climate and see no need for any type of activism.

Although people obviously have the right to their own personal beliefs, it is important to revisit the ethical implications for maintaining such views. First, psychologists must acknowledge Standard 3.04a (Avoiding Harm), which explicitly states that psychologists "take reasonable steps to avoid harming their clients/patients, students, supervisees, research participants, organizational clients, and others with whom they work, and to minimize harm where it is foreseeable and unavoidable" (APA, 2010, p. 493). Not only do psychologists avoid committing any type of harm in their own practice with clients or constituents, but they also do whatever is possible to prevent harm from occurring in the field. For instance, a collective group of psychologists and mental health practitioners had taken stances to minimize harm in the field by speaking out against leaders of the APA for their involvement with the U.S. Department of Defense in the torture of detainees at Guantanamo Bay during the George W. Bush administration. (LoCicero et al., 2016). Such efforts resulted in revisions of the APA Ethics Code in 2010 (later reprinted in the *American Psychologist* in 2016) to reflect the APA's stance on torture. Standard 3.04b (Avoiding Harm) now asserts:

Psychologists do not participate in, facilitate, assist, or otherwise engage in torture, defined as any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person, or in any other cruel, inhuman, or degrading behavior that violates 3.04(a). (APA, 2016, p. 900)

Another way that psychologists can minimize harm is to competently work with people of different cultural groups and to ensure other psychologists do, too. Sue (2015) described how cultural oppression can be the most harmful act committed toward people of color and other marginalized groups in psychotherapy. If a psychologist is unable to (a) acknowledge the many systemic injustices that affect their clients' and constituents' lives or (b) integrate cultural considerations in their treatment, research, training, or supervision, they may potentially cause harm in the lives of their clients and constituents. For instance, if psychotherapists believe that they are colorblind or invalidate the everyday realities of clients of color or LGBTQ clients, their clients may not return to therapy or get the help or support they need elsewhere (Nadal, 2013; Sue et al., 2007). As such, multicultural competence has been integrated into the APA Ethics Code, as supported by Standard 2.01b (Boundaries of Competence), which yields:

Where scientific or professional knowledge in the discipline of psychology establishes that an understanding of factors associated with age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language or socioeconomic status is essential for effective implementation of their services or research, psychologists have or obtain the training, experience, consultation or super-

vision necessary to ensure the competence of their services, or they make appropriate referrals. (APA, 2002, pp. 1063–1064)

Thus, given the decades of psychological research on multicultural competence (see Sue & Sue, 2015), psychologists are ethically obligated to integrate multiculturalism into their work and to examine the many systemic and cultural factors that impact their clients' and constituents' lives.

An additional argument for supporting the need for social justice is Standard 3.01 (Unfair Discrimination), which reads: "In their work-related activities, psychologists do not engage in unfair discrimination based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, or any basis proscribed by law (APA, 2002, p. 1064). Although most psychologists do not knowingly participate in any type of discrimination (Sue et al., 2007), they must be aware of the many ways that people experience oppression in their lives, as well as ways the field has promoted both overt and subtle discrimination. Sometimes psychologists gain evidenced-based knowledge about discrimination from their training or education. For instance, in their training, they may learn that reparations therapy and other sexual orientation change efforts are empirically ineffective and cause trauma and other psychological harm to queer and transgender people (Nadal, 2013). Through their research or training programs, psychologists may become familiar with anecdotal or clinical knowledge that may assist in their work with clients. As an example, they may learn that survivors of sexual assault are often blamed for the crimes committed toward them, which often leads to low self-esteem, self-destructive behaviors, and other negative outcomes (Ullman, 2010). Because of this, psychologists who work with survivors may do what they can to validate or normalize survivors' experiences and encourage survivors to externalize blame instead of internalize negative feelings and to continue to seek help. Through research, psychologists may learn of constructs related to discrimination that cause harm. For example, if psychologists are knowledgeable that implicit bias exists and can affect how people in power view historically marginalized groups (Sue & Sue, 2015), they can educate others about ways to identify such biases, which may reduce both overt discrimination and microaggressions.

Finally, the General Principles listed in the APA Ethics Codes are intended "to guide and inspire psychologists toward the very highest ethical ideals of the profession" (APA, 2002, p. 1062). Although they are not viewed as overt obligations, they are helpful in further understanding about why psychologists should advocate for social justice. Each of the principles (e.g., Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, Fidelity and Responsibility, Integrity, Respect for People's Rights and Dignity) can demonstrate multiple reasons for advocating for social justice. However, Principle D (Justice) is especially important to support necessary action

for advocacy for psychologists' constituents: "Psychologists recognize that fairness and justice entitle all persons to access to and benefit from the contributions of psychology and to equal quality in the processes, procedures and services being conducted by psychologists" (APA, 2002, p. 1062–1063). Following this principle, it is crucial for psychologists to integrate justice into their lives. Not only do they acknowledge that all people deserve access to the contributions of psychology (e.g., psychological services, education, and research) but they know that there may be particular barriers that limit such access. Therefore, if systemic, institutional, or interpersonal barriers hinder people from equitable access to psychological services, psychologists speak out against unjust practices. For instance, in 2017, congresspersons introduced a new health care system that would replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA)—proposing to remove requirements for Medicaid to cover mental health, substance use, and behavioral health services (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2017). In response, APA (2017) took a stance against the bill, particularly in advocating that mental health and substance use services continue to be available to all. Though the ACA repeal failed twice, it was crucial for APA (and psychologists in general) to advocate for health care access for all. If they were silent, their inaction would communicate compliance with millions of people's losing their health insurance, as well as the potential continuation (or increase) of untreated mental and behavioral illness in our country.

### On Becoming a Psychologist–Activist in the 21st Century

Given the many outlined reasons why psychologists should participate in political activism, particularly in the advocacy for historically marginalized groups, the article concludes with an invitation for readers to identify with the term *psychologist–activist*. Borrowing from the literature on "scholar–activists" or "activist–scholars"—which describes educators who feel caught between the academy and social activism (Hale, 2008), psychologist–activists make efforts to balance both roles. They may find themselves advocating for the clients and communities they serve; they may take leadership or advocacy roles to instill changes in policy, scholarship, and practice; or they may engage in some combination of these. The first known usage of the phrase was in a biography of Kenneth Clark, a pioneer Black psychologist and the first Black president of the APA (Phillips, 2000). Perhaps one can honor Clark's legacy, as well as that of the many other aforementioned pioneer psychologist–activists, by engaging in social justice activism on individual, interpersonal, organizational, and institutional levels. Highlighted in the next sections are a few practical ways to promote justice—offered with the caveats that (a) it would be impossible for one person to engage in each of these



activities at any given moment, (b) that individuals can do their parts in their own respective ways, and (c) particular actions or activities would have different meanings for diverse types of psychologists and across subfields of the profession.

### Organizational and Institutional Approaches to Fighting Oppression

There are many ways that groups and organizations can advocate for human rights. First, the research on intergroup contact theory suggests that when individuals are exposed to people of other identity groups (e.g., race, sexual orientation), their prejudice toward other groups tends to decrease (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Over the last 20 years, intergroup dialogues (IGDs) have been established at a number of college campuses as a way of building relationships across diverse groups, becoming aware of one's social identities and power, critiquing systems of oppression, and developing the skills to promote social justice; empirical research has found IGDs to result in increased knowledge of social justice, increased empathy toward others, and increased perspective taking and engagement (Miles et al., 2015). One institutional recommendation would be for IGDs to be integrated into various work environments. For example, organizational psychologists may employ IGDs as a tool to promote communication or mediate conflict, whereas school psychologists may encourage teachers to use IGDs in their classrooms. Further, in hospitals and clinics, practicing psychologists can use their existing groups (e.g., psychotherapy groups, professional organizations, or staff meetings) to discuss issues related to systemic oppression, power, and privilege, in sincere and meaningful ways.

Institutions of higher education can integrate IGDs into their curriculum by funding undergraduate courses—because multiple studies have found that such classes influence students' confidence and ability to advocate for social justice, their capacity to communicate with others who are different from them, and their ability to integrate social justice principles into their postcollege lives (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). In other institutions (e.g., corporations, criminal justice system), diversity trainings must go beyond 1-day workshops or facilitations, which studies have found to be ineffective because cultural biases cannot be undone with brief trainings or surface-level dialogues (e.g., Israel, Harkness, Delucio, Ledbetter, & Avellar, 2016). When brief trainings occur, institutions must consider integrating personal narratives, because didactic or informational lectures are not as engaging or influential as are intimate dialogues, particularly concerning groups to which individuals may have little exposure (Walch et al., 2012).

Institutions must also take steps to respond to injustice when it occurs, especially when inaction perpetuates histor-

ical or collective trauma. When universities fail to respond to, or cover up, sexual assaults on campus, rape culture and systemic sexism prevails. When psychology organizations had historically ignored atrocities like the torture of political prisoners, inhumane experiments on people of color, or merciless treatment methods on LGBTQ people, they condoned systemic violence. Psychologist-activists can circumvent these institutional betrayals, or "institutional action and inaction that exacerbate the impact of traumatic experiences" (Smith & Freyd, 2014, p. 577), by making sure they speak their collective voices and fight until their concerns are met. Institutional leaders must learn that multiculturalism and inclusivity is much more beneficial for diverse working environments—resulting in greater productivity, collegiality, collaboration, and job satisfaction (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009).

### Individual and Interpersonal Approaches to Fighting Oppression

Psychologist-activists already exist in the field as scholars, educators, researchers, consultants, and practitioners. Many psychology researchers conduct critical participatory policy research, in which they challenge the power structures that define scientific method or merits, while working with community members to ensure that research is told from their narratives (Fine, 2013). Critical researchers know that it is crucial to understand marginalized people's experiences from their own perspectives and to not impose Western, heteronormative values or approaches to conflate or misrepresent those stories. In a related vein, many clinical, counseling, and community psychologists have embraced the tenets of "liberation psychology," which seeks to liberate individuals, especially those of historically oppressed groups, from the systems that uphold oppression. Liberation psychologists may guide clients to deconstruct what is normalized, raise consciousness of how to combat oppression, and (re)conceptualize themselves as both decolonized individuals and as members of a collective (Martín-Baró, 1994). Liberation psychologists may also assist others in overcoming their internalized oppression, or the ways in which they have been socialized to believe negative messages about themselves and their groups (David, 2013).

Psychologist-activists who are scholars, educators, and trainers recognize the multiple ways they can use their power to combat oppression. Not only do they inspire students in their classrooms, but they also turn to both mainstream and social media to impart their wisdom. They know to not only publish studies that other academics will read (or that will get them tenure) but ensure that their work is available (and intellectually accessible) to less privileged people with a human right to knowledge. Regarding targeted audiences, G. C. N. Hall, Martinez, Tuan, McMahan,

and Chain (2011) described how there is a much smaller percentage of active dissenters of diversity (i.e., those who are overt in their biases and who are likely less amenable to change). Accordingly, educators may consider focusing more of their efforts on motivating the larger percentage of passive supporters of increasing diversity, who become more aware or socially conscious during a diversity-related crisis or when diversity seems more personally salient and urgent. For instance, in response to the fatal violence occurring at a White nationalist rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, a ABC/Washington Post poll found that 83% of participants believed that holding neo-Nazi views is unacceptable, while 9% of participants believed neo-Nazi views to be acceptable (Langer, 2017). In moments like these, psychologists can motivate others to become more active supporters of diversity inclusion by educating their peers, constituents, and loved ones about the many societal threats to human rights and to explicitly convey how complicity equates to compliance. When passive supporters recognize that their inaction or silence contributes to oppression, such cognitive dissonance may prompt action and commitment to social justice.

Parents, guardians, and older family members can serve as psychologist-activists when they teach children about social justice through racial-ethnic socialization, which previous studies have revealed are predictors of self-esteem, capacity to cope with discrimination, academic achievement, and psychological outcomes for Black Americans and other people of color (Hughes et al., 2006). Parents of color are not the only ones who need to teach their children about race—just as it is not just the responsibility of only parents of girls to teach their daughters about sexism. Psychologist-activists can initiate age-appropriate conversations with children of all identity groups—discussing how systemic oppression affects both privileged and unprivileged people and how it is society's collective responsibility to ensure that justice prevails.

Finally, as individuals, psychologist-activists realize that personal growth and learning are lifelong processes. They challenge themselves by exploring how their power and privileges influence the ways that they see the world and how the world sees them. When they belong to historically marginalized groups, they identify the ways they enact oppression, too, and the intersectional dynamics they participate in. When they have power or privilege, they use those identities to advance social justice, while constantly checking how their identities affect their biases, attitudes, and behaviors. They acknowledge that people are genuinely “allies” when they know they do not need to be identified as such; they also are comfortable with the notion that some people will never, or will be hesitant to, view them as allies at all. They work on their defensiveness. They thrive on learning. They integrate justice into every aspect of their

lives, while always staying gracious, because they know injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.

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