

Ethical Practice – you in or out?

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I was asked by the New Zealand Psychological Society to write about the webinar that John Eatwell and I presented to the Institute of Organisational Psychology in July 2020. The topic of which was the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and addressing inclusivity and diversity in the context of I/O Psychology¹.

Some questions that have emerged from this webinar engagement included:

- What role do psychologists (individually and collectively) play in upholding racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination (both in our practice and the community)?
- What are some of the factors that prohibit effective social action?
- What can we do to increase active engagement in social justice issues?

These areas of inquiry also stem from my own experiences of

1 Eatwell, J., & Patel, S. (2020) Webinar presented to Division of I/O Psychology, July 23 2020. [Diversity and Inclusion: Why it matters for your organisation; Black Lives Matter and IO Psychology.](https://organisationalpsychology.nz/christchurch-programme/) <https://organisationalpsychology.nz/christchurch-programme/>

meeting and working with many psychologists; yet only being confident that a handful of them systematically consider and reflect on issues of racism, gender identity, sexual identity, culture, and other critical dimensions (not to mention intersectionality) in their practice.

This article subsequently explores the common gap between our psychologist social justice obligations and our practice, with a purposeful focus on racism. It explores some contributing factors which may account for this gap and is by no means a comprehensive analysis of this complex area. Some suggestions for ways to consistently apply social justice principles in our practice and strive towards antiracism are also made.

Psychologists as holders of power and privilege vs. psychologists avoiding the use of power and privilege for good

As practising psychologists in Aotearoa, we have a moral and professional responsibility – an obligation – to contribute to socially just outcomes for the communities in which we work. This is noted in practice documents for registered and practising psychologists in New Zealand; we are required to demonstrate the Core Competencies

set out by the New Zealand Psychologists Board (2018)². To do so necessarily requires culturally safe and ethical practice, as per the *Code of Ethics for Psychologists Working in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (NZPB, 2002) and *Cultural Competencies* (2017). Principle 4 of our Code of Ethics³ also specifies “Social Justice and Responsibility to Society”.

The above are specifically referenced here to highlight the accountability we have to these requirements and as part of this in our participation in the Continuing Competence Programme (CCP)⁴. Indeed, the high trust nature of the relationship between the registered Psychologist and the profession’s regulating body is demonstrated by the declaration.

2 The New Zealand Psychologists Board (2018). *Core Competencies For The Practice of Psychology in Aotearoa New Zealand.* http://www.psychologistsboard.org.nz/cms_show_download.php?id=533

3 The New Zealand Psychological Society, The New Zealand Psychologists Board and The New Zealand College of Clinical Psychologists (2012). *Code of Ethics For Psychologists Working in Aotearoa New Zealand.* <https://www.psychology.org.nz/journal-archive/code-of-ethics.pdf>

4 The New Zealand Psychologists Board (2017). *The Continuing Competence Programme for Psychologists Practising in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Guide for Participants.* http://www.psychologistsboard.org.nz/cms_show_download.php?id=499

As psychologists, our positions of trust, power and privilege are significant, at both individual and societal levels. We are called upon by a variety of professionals and institutions to advise, consult, facilitate change, and research. However, there is a difference between ethically safe practice (i.e., non-maleficence) and socially just practice (i.e., benevolence). These are not the same outcomes and serve different agents. Loosely, non-maleficence is about protecting the public from harm as well as the practitioner from egregious legal action. Benevolence, on the other hand, is about the commission of social goods in practice or related activity.

There can therefore be no doubt that racism is alive and well, both in Aotearoa and abroad. However, in the absence of specific racist or violent events do psychologists have a tendency to avoid talking about racism and/or holding ourselves accountable for our role in it?

This raises questions such as when we see unjust societal norms, which detrimentally inhabit individual and collective thinking and wellbeing, do we routinely address and challenge these? If not, what barriers stand in our way? There are many potential contributing factors here; experience, consequences, training, status, issues of intersectionality to name a few.

Is it also because, as is so often the case, psychologists are less affected by these issues and as a result there is the privilege of opting out of social justice issues rather than being the voice of marginalised groups which by definition have less power and privilege?

When these issues are raised by those who are affected, how is this perceived, heard and framed and what does the corresponding response often look like? Sarah Maddox (2018)⁵ summarises this well here and provides a helpful perspective, as well as some advice, which supports an understanding of why these issues may often be challenging to discuss:

'When you debate a person about something that affects them more than it AFFECTS you. Remember that it will take a much greater emotional toll on them than you. For you it may feel like an academic exercise. For them, it feels like revealing their pain only to have you dismiss their experience and sometimes their humanity. THE FACT that you may remain calm under

5 Maddox, S. (4 November 2018). Cited, 1 October from <https://pin.it/40L9BJe>

these circumstances is a CONSEQUENCE of your PRIVILEGE, not increased objectivity on your part'. Stay humble'.

So in short, how do we hold ourselves accountable for upholding social justice principles?

Antiracism V Apathy

A very tangible example of psychologists struggling to actively and consistently uphold social justice principles is our response to racism. The murder of George Floyd and the increased profile of #BLM (Black Lives Matter) has led to many individuals, corporations, NGOs, professional bodies, and governments supporting principles of the movement, and engaging in reflective practices that invoke acknowledgement of systemic racism. This includes some New Zealand universities, such as AUT⁶ and Wellington⁷ and the New Zealand Psychological Society⁸. Internationally, some Psychologist Societies have also gone further and specified actions which support active antiracism⁹.

In her response to George Floyd's murder, Dr Kariama Müller, Senior Lecturer, Auckland University¹⁰ recently outlined the ongoing racial disparities across critical domains of New Zealand life and called for the 'team of five million' to fight against racism. The Human Rights Commission are also currently promoting part two of its 'Give Nothing to Racism' campaign www.voiceofracism.co.nz.

More recently, allegations of racism at Waikato university have also led to the commission of an independent review¹¹. And following this, there has been a call from other universities to more explicitly identify racism and take specific, accountable actions to address¹².

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6 <https://news.aut.ac.nz/news/black-lives-matter-and-nz-police-reform>

7 <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/news/2020/06/black-lives-matter>

8 New Zealand Psychological Society Media Release (12 June 2020). *Psychologists join calls demanding an end to racism*

9 BPS statement on racial injustice (2 June 2020). <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-statement-racial-injustice>

10 Müller, K. (2020) Racism is next fight for Team of Five Million. Published in Newsroom, 8 July 2020. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2020/07/01/opinion-karamia-muller-black-lives-matter.html>

11 Cited 1 October 2020, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihiki/426948/waikato-university-review-finds-racism-claims-were-incorrect-inaccurate>

12 Cited 1 October, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12367493

racism and/or holding ourselves accountable for our role in it?

When talking about prejudice, discrimination, racism, or sexism a range of responses are elicited from individuals and groups. The concept of ‘white privilege’¹³ is a term that often evokes discomfort and has been used to understand some of the ongoing disparities. Robin Diangelo in her book “White Fragility”¹⁴ (2018) also outlines a range of white responses, drawing on theory, history and her own experiences.

A racist is someone who is supporting a racist policy by their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea. An anti-racist is someone who is supporting an antiracist policy by their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.

These concepts underpin racism but disappointingly are rarely or reluctantly raised by psychologists. This is despite responses representing components of ‘white fragility’ very likely having been experienced by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Colour) clients and fellow psychologists.

Whilst there is, by some, a recognition that we have been socialised to associate white supremacy with the organisations that have an overt racially superior ideology, such as the Ku Klux Klan; there is less acknowledgement of the pervasive nature of white supremacy culture¹⁵. Let alone the recognition that when comments, views or

13 McIntosh, P. (1988) White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. Essay excerpted from Working Paper 189. “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See. <https://www.rialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh.pdf>

14 Diangelo, R. (2018). *White Fragility*. Penguin Books

15 Oku, T. White Supremacy Culture. Cited on 1 October 2020. https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf

experiences that do not align to this culture are expressed they are not well received.

So what are other factors which hinder some psychologists (of all ethnicities) from drawing upon the realities of racism to inform their work. Is it the same factors that facilitate a reaction to these injustices and realities of racism that could be described as oppositional and defiant? If so, how does being oppositional to the realities of racism align with the behaviour of an

ethical psychologist?

In the words of Desmond Tutu (no known date)¹⁶:-*‘If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality’.*

Very importantly how can we ensure that we are not merely neutral? Staying on track is certainly easier said than done and the definition provided by Kendi (2019)¹⁷; is offered as a key tool of assistance:-

‘A racist is someone who is supporting a racist policy by their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea. An antiracist is someone who is supporting an antiracist policy by their actions or expressing an antiracist idea. “Racist” and “antiracist” are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or

16 Tutu, D. (exact date unknown) cited on 1 October 2020 from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00016497>

17 Kendi, I. X. (2019) How to be an Antiracist. Penguin Random House UK.

not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos. No one becomes a racist or antiracist. We can only strive to be one or the other. We can unknowingly strive to be a racist. We can knowingly strive to be an antiracist. Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.’ (Kendi, 2019, p. 22 and 23).

The Work

To decide whether you are ‘unknowingly striving to be a racist or knowingly striving to be an active antiracist?’ is the first step on this ongoing journey.

Some simple suggestions to support antiracism are to ...

- Ensure you do your own work to develop your readiness, willingness and ability vs asking a BIPOC to educate you or make this *their* area of interest or passion.
- Expand your personal and professional network to include more diversity.
- Check out your own privilege – look for examples of it and keep a journal.
- Ensure you have done your own racial identity work through supervision, self-reflection etc. Monitor your reactions, assumptions and how these shows up in how you practise.
- When reflecting on your ‘evidence’ or theoretical assumptions; be clear about the authors you are reading or have been taught, your ‘go to’ sources of reference, personal and professional assumptions, the WEIRD¹⁸ness of studies

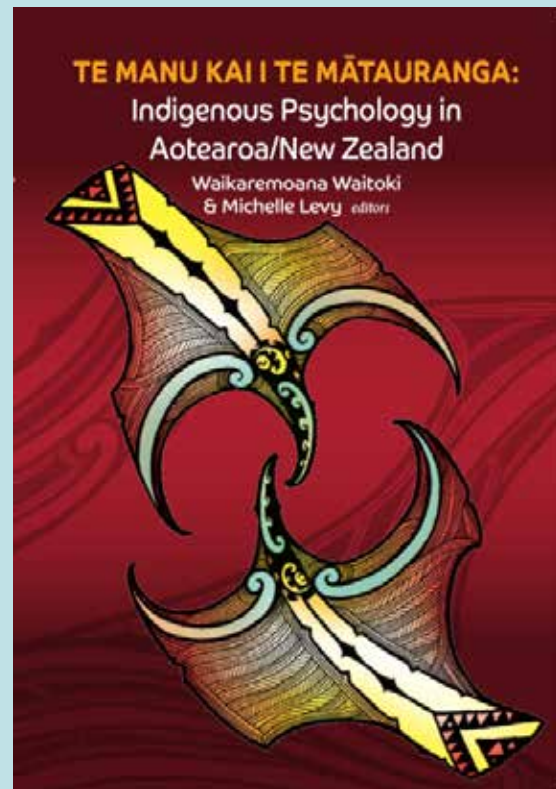
18 Singhal, J. (2019) The Psychologist. The British Psychological Society. *Psychology research is still fixated on a tiny fraction of humans*. February 2019

upon which you may base your practise. Some questions that may be helpful are: 'who is writing / wrote this; who benefits/ has benefitted from it and who is missing from it?'

- In your position of power and privilege as a psychologist, supervisor, leader, peer, mentor be active in having these discussions. Purchase, read about and discuss the relationship between ethics and antiracism in your supervision, team meetings, institutions, and decision-making processes.
- Above all, in the face of social injustice ask yourself '*Am I being neutral and how does this align to our Code of Ethics?*'

There is a plethora of resources online and I have intentionally not provided an exhaustive list here. Doing the 'work' means just that; explore what's available, ask others, join groups and engage in ongoing reflection. Add this to this year's CCP and hold yourself accountable.

If we all fully own and uphold our social justice obligations we can move towards a wholehearted acceptance of our obligations, as a profession, professionals and humans to be antiracist. If we choose not to and carry on as we are then the status quo remains and we will continue to get what we have always got.



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