



The White House “Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping” Will Chill and Discourage Much-Needed Action on Racism and Sexism*

*This is an official statement of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), Division 9 of the American Psychological Association, and does not represent the position of American Psychological Association or any of its other Divisions or subunits.

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On September 22, 2020, the White House issued an [“Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping.”](#) This order was preceded by a September 4, 2020 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) memorandum entitled [“Training in the Federal Government”](#) and accompanied by a September 22, 2020 Office of Personnel Management (OPM) memorandum entitled [“Mandatory Review of Employee Training under E.O. 13950 September 22, 2020.”](#) Several days later, on September 28, 2020, the OMB issued a complementary memorandum entitled [“Ending Employee Trainings that Use Divisive Propaganda to Undermine the Principle of Fair and Equal Treatment for All.”](#)

The following statement speaks to the aforementioned executive order and accompanying documents, and to the request for information on [“Race and Sex Stereotyping and Scapegoating”](#) that was issued by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) on October 22, 2020. This statement is being submitted to the OFCCP and will also be relayed to the Biden-Harris Transition Team, which has outlined Racial Equity as one of its top priorities.

Our organization, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), writes to respond to the executive order, related memoranda, and the OFCCP request for information, and to emphatically state that these documents misrepresent what the science says about the existence of prejudice and discrimination in America; misrepresent what Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training is and its importance in promoting constructive and needed dialogue; and reflect the federal government’s abdication of leadership on the very real and enduring problems of racism, sexism, and other forms of systemic prejudice and discrimination. To elaborate on these points:

- I. We must recognize the historical legacy of prejudice and discrimination in the United States and specifically within the federal government.

Discrimination is an empirical reality that inhibits a fair, meritocratic economy. Though federal law may prohibit discrimination based on demographic characteristics, this does not prevent discrimination from occurring in more subtle forms. In the United States, Black and Latinx people are still perceived as less competent and less hireable than White people with exactly the same resumes (Eaton et al., 2019; Pager, 2003). Black students are perceived as less fit for universities even when identical in qualifications to their White peers (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000) and are given fewer opportunities to further their study than their otherwise identical White peers (Milkman et al., 2015).

Research also shows that women are sometimes stereotyped as either warm and incompetent, or as cold and competent, and that as a result, they face unique challenges in workplace management roles (Connor & Fiske, 2017). Women can be penalized for being “too smart”; In one study, high-achieving men were twice as likely to be called back for interviews as their high-achieving female peers (Quadlin, 2018).

Decades of employment and payroll data indicate that race and gender disparities persist in wages and promotions across virtually all sectors of the U.S. economy. There is no scientific basis for pretending that success and rewards in the United States are dependent solely on one’s hard work and not also on one’s demographic features. Rather, upholding meritocracy requires explicitly taking such disparities into account. Not recognizing such disparities ultimately serves to undermine meritocracy and fairness (Walton et al., 2013).

The federal government’s own research shows that racism and sexism persist in the federal government. The U.S. Government Accountability Office reports persistent racial disparities in federal hiring, promotions, and discipline. For example, “While the State Department’s workforce has grown more diverse, racial or ethnic minorities are still underrepresented, particularly in the senior ranks. Racial or ethnic minorities in State’s Civil Service were 4% to 29% less likely to be promoted than their White coworkers with similar education, occupation, or years of federal service.” The GAO also reports that “racial or ethnic minorities in the Civil Service were 31 to 41% less likely to be promoted than whites with similar jobs or years of service” and that “Blacks, Hispanics, and males were more likely than whites or females to be tried in general and special courts-martial, in all military services” (WatchBlog, 2020).

Women also struggle to realize equality in the federal government workforce. A 2018 OPM report shows that women make up only 35.3% of the Senior Executive Service (Davidson, 2018). According to an OPM report on Federal Executive Branch Characteristics, women comprised only 42.67% of federal employees in 2018. In that same year, female federal employees made an average of \$83,178 annually as compared to male federal employees, who made an average of \$88,206 annually (Data Analysis Group, 2018). Research shows the persistence of sexual harassment and violence against women in the U.S. Military (Stockdale & Nadler, 2012). Research also shows the persistence of sexual and gender harassment in other areas of the

federal government’s purview, for example, among people involved with federally funded STEM research and education (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

Federal civil rights laws are necessary but not in and of themselves sufficient to eradicating racism and sexism, including within the federal government. We must continue to strive for parity—both within and outside of federal government settings—and we must also recognize that we still have much progress to make.

Recognizing the reality of racism and sexism in America is not stereotyping or scapegoating.

In its “Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping,” the White House writes that “It shall be the policy of the United States not to promote race or sex stereotyping or scapegoating in the federal workforce or in the Uniformed Services, and not to allow grant funds to be used for these purposes.” While it can feel uncomfortable to reflect on the advantages certain groups benefit from in the United States, those advantages still exist. Equating such a basic recognition of factual race and gender disparities in employment and U.S. workforces with “stereotyping and scapegoating” is irresponsible, inaccurate, and ignores the very real dangers and harms of stereotyping and scapegoating.

Furthermore, the language in the executive order is so vague as to make it difficult to talk about fundamental empirical findings. For example, to acknowledge that men and women differ in their perspectives of gender equity/sexism would be to risk “scapegoating” men as more sexist. To acknowledge that individuals who identify as White respond to implicit measures in ways that point to stronger associations between “Black” and “violence” would be to risk “scapegoating” Whites as racists.

The executive order and related documents also mischaracterize efforts to address these inequalities as unfair when in fact antiracism and antisexism trainings are designed to make workplaces *more fair*. In addition, by distorting the intent of U.S. civil rights law, the executive order prevents discussion of the issues and challenges at the heart of those laws.

Portraying inclusive and diverse narratives as anti-American and divisive is dangerous. The executive order and recent presidential tweets and speeches—such as the [speech given at the September 17, 2020 “White House Conference on American History”](#)— mischaracterize diversity and antiracism efforts as undermining rather than promoting fairness and democracy.

These political actions have portrayed and labeled antiracism and antisexism efforts as “radical”, “left”, “divisive”, and “anti-American.” In so doing, the current administration has pitted diversity and anti-racism efforts such as inclusive histories (e.g., the Pulitzer Prize-winning *1619 Project*) and curricula, such as ethnic studies, against founding and fundamental American ideals.

To the contrary, curricula more inclusive of the diversity of American experiences are fully consonant with fundamental American ideas *because* they are true and reflect reality and

because they do not reflect inaccurate stories that erase American diversity. To suggest otherwise is to dangerously obscure the truth and to affirm the exclusionary belief that “American = White” (Devos & Banaji, 2005) by marking experiences and histories tied to non-White Americans as not American.

Contemporary appeals for “colorblindness” are a misinterpretation of historic arguments for civil rights. Psychologists (Neville et al., 2013) use the term colorblindness to describe individuals’ efforts to pretend that race does not matter. Colorblindness in the United States represents the status quo; it is comfortable—for White people—and at first glance it seems egalitarian (Brannon et al., 2018).

The executive order and the President’s September 17, 2020 speech both evoke the language of colorblindness. A commonly used excerpt from the “I Have a Dream” speech by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is referenced in both. The famous quote involves King envisioning a world in which his children “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Using this quote to buttress calls for colorblindness reflects an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of King’s message. That is, when considered in its entirety, King’s speech aligns more closely with diversity and antiracism efforts than colorblind ones.

King knew the significance of race to the American experience. His historic speech highlighted why past and present calls for the eradication of injustice are not anti-American; the speech illuminates why such calls which motivate diversity and antiracism efforts are so important to strengthening American democracy by removing barriers to our collective unity, such as racism and White supremacy.

II. Science confirms that racism and sexism are real, harmful, and persistent.

It is undisputed scientific fact that people are treated differently depending on their race and sex. Citing just a few examples from the scientific literature, even when all other differences are eliminated or accounted for, studies show that ethnic minorities (compared to White people) are treated with more suspicion in public places (Schreer et al., 2009), are considered less desirable as romantic partners (Mendelsohn et al., 2014), are less likely to receive offers of employment (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Pager, 2003), are judged more harshly for crimes they commit (Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000), are more likely to be shot by police officers (Correll et al., 2007; Plant & Peruche, 2005), and are less likely to receive adequate care from physicians (Green et al., 2007).

Similarly, even when other differences are eliminated or controlled, women (compared to men) are offered less pay for the same work (Auspurg et al., 2017), are offered less informal support when joining organizations (Milkman et al., 2015), are less likely to be offered high-paying jobs and more likely to be offered low-paying jobs (Neumark et al., 1996), are offered fewer leadership positions, are disproportionately offered risky or precarious leadership positions (Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2016), and are less likely to be greeted or approached by servers in stores (Bourabain & Verhaeghe, 2018).

The science of racism and sexism is enormous and robust, not based on assumptions of “inherent” racism or sexism. While it is often uncomfortable for individuals to confront their own bias, the science is very clear on the widespread nature of racism and sexism in the United States. Far from relying on vague assumptions of inherent blame based on one’s race or sex, this science is based on millions of data points painstakingly collected over decades.

For example, a large body of research evidence shows that most people in the United States still have racial biases (Dasgupta et al., 2000; Dovidio et al., 1997; Gawronski et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2014; Greenwald et al., 1998; Nosek et al., 2007; Nosek & Banaji, 2001; Perry et al., 2015; Wittenbrink et al., 1997). These biases are reliably and objectively detectable and predictive of a range of discriminatory behaviors.

Ignoring the problems of racism and sexism is not a solution to either. Pretending that racism, sexism, or any other prejudice is no longer an issue will not make it so. A wealth of research reveals the problems with pretending to be colorblind or pretending that racism will go away if we just stop thinking about it or talking about it (Awad et al., 2005; Leslie et al., 2019; Norton et al., 2006; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Far from making people less racist, colorblind strategies consume cognitive resources, make us less natural in our interactions with others, make us incapable of recognizing racial discrimination when it occurs, and make us less likely to do anything about it when it happens. This is not a good strategy for making workplaces more equitable and fair.

A deliberate multicultural approach that acknowledges the reality of racism in the United States is much better suited for making a positive difference (Bonam et al., 2018; Leslie et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2013). Similarly, equipping people with the skills to recognize how their own social identities influence how they perceive others makes them better able to recognize and interrupt their own and others’ discriminatory behavior (Case, 2017).

Research findings across psychological subfields (e.g., developmental, social, counseling) converge to support the promise, not peril, of diversity experiences, education, and training. What policymakers and the public should know about diversity and antiracism efforts is that findings across fields in psychological science converge to support the efficacy and positive—not adverse—consequences of such initiatives (Brannon & Lin, 2020). These findings complement and extend findings from survey and experimental research in which diversity and antiracism practices have been shown to positively impact belonging and achievement among racial/ethnic minorities and meaningfully shift intergroup attitudes among non-racial/ethnic minorities (Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, 2015; Brannon & Walton, 2013). In other words, diversity and antiracism practices can constitute a win-win across social group lines, rather than a zero-sum game.

DEI training can support faculty in classroom settings and employees in workplace settings. When DEI training is done well, it makes a difference (Kalinowski et al., 2013). For example, a 2016 meta-analysis of 260 studies found that “the positive effects of diversity training were

greater when training was complemented by other diversity initiatives, targeted to both awareness and skills development, and conducted over a significant period of time” (Bezrukova et al., 2016).

- III. Civil society, and the private sector, must remain vigilant and not be cowed into silence on the pressing issues of racism and sexism.

Scientific/academic and free speech are at stake. The OMB memorandum that followed on the heels of the executive order essentially guides federal agencies to not fund research on DEI and related issues. Flagging terms like “intersectionality” and “unconscious bias” as problematic puts federal programs at risk that are essential to building and strengthening a diverse pipeline of scientists, as bias is often both *nuanced* (hence the need for an intersectional approach) and *subtle* (hence the need for an understanding of unconscious bias).

The establishment of a hotline is also worrying as it suggests that the White House seeks to formalize “thought police” in the workplace—and on college campuses. According to recent news reports, some institutions have already begun to suspend DEI programming (Flaherty, 2020). This executive order will chill discussion and debate in scientific and academic spheres—two spheres where discussion and debate on the issues of racism and sexism are absolutely needed.

DEI progress in the private sector is also at stake. Many private companies perform contract work for the federal government, including, for example, Lockheed Martin, UnitedHealth Group, Honeywell, General Electric, IBM, FedEx, and Berkshire Hathaway, Inc. (Fahey et al., 2017). The executive order will not only affect federal employees and agencies, but also the many, many people and companies in the private sector that carry out contracted work for the federal government. Since many businesses lack the internal expertise to understand what DEI science is and how it can benefit DEI discussions, businesses will be left to lean into “compliance-based” training which is demonstrated to be ineffective (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

This executive order is already having a negative impact in the private sector, with technology, software, and advertising industry groups writing that the executive order “fails to acknowledge the realities of ongoing racial inequality and inequities in America and represents an unwarranted intrusion into private sector efforts to combat systemic racism” (Guynn, 2020).

There is a real danger that this executive order will erode support for systemic change. This executive order and accompanying actions may spread misinformation about the reality of contemporary prejudice and undermine the perceived effectiveness of inclusive curriculum practices. This misinformation, once spread, poses the danger of impacting not only federal policy but also the decisions of individuals (e.g., parents, teachers, employers), business and civil society leaders, and policymakers at the state and local levels.

Within the education sector, for example: Parents may become less willing or open to bolstering diversity efforts at their children’s schools; teachers may lose confidence in selecting course materials that are inclusive of diverse perspectives; and university leaders may be less willing to bet already constrained monetary and human resources on the promise of diversity initiatives.

U.S. institutions outside of the federal government must redouble our efforts to overcome racism and sexism. In the President’s recent “White House Conference on American History” speech, he noted the power of parents. His executive order underscores the power of institutions. Indeed, parents, the broader public, and the variety of public and private institutions that serve the American people wield immense power to call for and effect systemic change.

Aligned with evidence from psychological science, we as a society should make decisions that uphold the values of diversity and inclusion. We should not politicize the empirical reality of intergroup relations, prejudice and discrimination, and social inequalities. These things are real and complex. They warrant institutional efforts to address and solve them. Collectively, we should use science to inform policies that will facilitate a fairer and more equitable society through evidence-based training and objective assessment of outcomes.

As an organization of psychologists and allied interdisciplinary scholars, SPSSI comes to this conclusion not because the values of diversity and inclusion are being “pushed” on us, but because we have drawn unbiased conclusions from the scientific evidence. As psychologists and interdisciplinary scholars, we also take the ethical position that science should be used to benefit the public. It is surely an indisputable public good to reduce prejudice and promote fairness. Of course, we share the dream of a world in which racism and sexism do not affect life outcomes, and we want to work toward that dream. At the same time, it is purely unscientific to pretend that this dream is now, or has ever been, a reality. Education and training should reflect this reality, not obscure it for political ends.

Sincerely,
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About SPSSI. Founded in 1936, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues is an association of 3,000 social scientists who share a common interest in research on the psychological aspects of important social and policy issues. To learn more about SPSSI, visit www.spssi.org.

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