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Commentary: School Psychologists as Advocates for Racial Justice and Social Justice: Some Proposed Steps

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I am extremely honored to have this opportunity to comment on the articles in this special issue of *School Psychology Forum* (SPF). Social justice and racial justice are critical frameworks from which to view school psychology. Individually and collectively, the works in this issue of SPF are a tremendous service to the field.

I approach this commentary from at least two perspectives. Wearing my researcher hat, there is a significant gap in school psychology in scholarship that speaks directly to racial justice and/or social justice. In identifying different forms of social justice, Diaz (2014) describes three broad categories apropos to this theme issue: distributive justice, procedural justice, and relational justice. Distributive justice has to do with how resources are allocated in society. Procedural justice relates to the process through which decisions are reached. Relational justice is about how people are treated.

These outstanding conceptual and empirical articles in this special issue of SPF advance social justice and racial justice across these three dimensions. For example, Albritton, Anhalt, and Terry in their article describe how moving beyond the traditional roles of assessment and diagnosis can promote greater access (distributive justice) and strong processes (procedural justice) for racially and ethnically diverse children to access and benefit from high quality early childhood programs. Similarly, in their article Ford, Wright, Washington, and Henfield provide a compelling call to action regarding both promoting access to (distributive justice) and appropriate assessment of (procedural justice) Black and Hispanic students as both relate to ensuring equity in gifted education.

Wang, Wang, Zheng, and Atwal provide powerful support for relational justice by shining light on bullying and Asian American elementary school students. In particular, the finding that 37.5% of the Asian American students who were bullied connected their being bullied with cultural differences is sobering. More uplifting is the finding that a positive school racial climate can serve as a protective factor for these students. At its core, bullying is an abuse of power. There is a lack of literature more broadly in school psychology that speaks to power dynamics in schools, a gap this study and others in this SPF special issue address.

In addition to advancing research, these articles challenge readers to take personal stock in our thoughts and actions. Thus, I also approach these articles and their meaning from a personal perspective. Specifically, I have been grappling with the question of how a White cisgender male—a person who is privileged in nearly every category save religion (I am Jewish) in the United States—can best make a contribution to advancing racial and social justice. As has been well documented, school

psychology as a field is overwhelmingly White (Fagan, 2014). How, then, can an overwhelmingly White field address racial injustice?

There is no easy answer and I do not for a second pretend that I am any particular exemplar of ally behavior. However, I believe there are a few basic steps.

The first step is simply to acknowledge that White privilege exists. I purposely did not add a citation to the previous sentence because to me this would be like adding a citation to saying that the sun rises in the morning and sets at night. School psychologists cannot reach our potential as advocates if we deny the basic facts of racial injustice, as well as our own areas of privilege.

The second step is to listen. As a White cisgender male, I can never fully understand what it is like to be someone who does not share the same privileges as I do. However, I can listen and learn from others. In our profession, this largely means listening to children, families, and educators. From this lens, Vega provides in her article both a crucial model for research and notable findings concerning college enrollment and persistence of high-achieving first-generation Latino college students. There is a lack of research that provides voice to students. Many of us were raised with the value of the golden rule of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matt. 7:12). I believe that there is a higher value, a “platinum rule” if you will, of do unto others as *they* would have done unto *them*. As school psychologists, it is our obligation to meet students where they are and not the other way around. This begins by asking questions and then listening.

The third step is to think. In this vein, I found Sullivan and Proctor’s conceptual article on the debate on racial disproportionality in special education to be refreshing, both in its boldness and nuance. The boldness comes in tackling a complex debate and taking perhaps an unpopular stand. Highlighting issues that cut across distributive, procedural, and relational justice, Sullivan and Proctor call for self-reflection and the discipline that comes with taking an ecological perspective. I was particularly drawn to reflect on this sentence in their article:

Critical self-reflection pushes school psychologists to ask themselves if they are searching for pathology or what the implications are of a search for pathology for racially and ethnically diverse students or students who are and have been traditionally underserved in U.S. schools in light of research on special education efficacy and outcomes for many students of color, particularly African American youth.

Similarly, while one might not be aware of the specific form and type of racial microaggressions that take place in internships that are documented by Proctor, Kyle, Lau, Fefer, and Fischetti in their article, the basic fact that microaggressions occur in internship should not be a surprise to someone with a justice mindset. Branching into the counseling psychology literature—which by itself is refreshing—they provide concrete examples of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. While it was on one level a neutral indicator to see that their participants’ experiences of racial microaggressions was similar to the norms in the standardization sample, as these authors point out the fact that microaggressions exist at all in school psychology is not a source of pride. There is a tendency within the public arena to consider any attempt to point out harmful words or actions as reflective of “thought police” or “political correctness,” as if the only option were to simply ignore microaggressions. I choose to believe that school psychologists as a group are not interested in turning the other cheek when it comes to microaggressions and have the capacity both to listen and to think when others point out that our behavior has harmed them. As one personal example, I vividly recall an experience as an undergraduate when I made a statement along the lines of “I don’t see color.” Fellow undergraduates—White and non-White—pointed out that these words were what we would now call a microaggression. As painful as it was to get this feedback and to realize that my comment was harmful, this experience led me to think

closely not only about what I had just said, but about other assumptions that I held. This reflection led to growth and I am forever indebted to those who challenged my initial statement.

The final step is to act. This is where the rubber meets the road. Do we stand by when there are obvious violations of students' rights, such as highlighted in the article by Blake, Gregory, James, and Hasan? I defy any ethical person to read this article and not become angry at the injustice that these researchers document so clearly. We know that racial inequities in school discipline are the norm and not the exception. Some educators may sustain this inequity intentionally and others unintentionally, but the harm is done either way. As this article highlights, one of the most potent ways to promote racial and social justice is to be the person in the room who has the data, both in the form of the specific discipline patterns in your school and in the form of having a command of the school discipline literature more broadly. Then school psychologists must act on this knowledge.

I realize that suggesting we acknowledge, listen, think, and act is not particularly novel or revolutionary. Yet, without being purposeful around social and racial justice, we run the risk of becoming lost and easily defeated. For a professor like me, these articles are a call to be a scholar-teacher-advocate. For graduate students, the call is to attend to how you are being socialized into the profession. Do you see it as your role to, as Song and Marth (2012) wrote, "love justice"? Finally, and most importantly, for practitioners are you ready not only to point out injustices, but also to endure the criticism that likely will follow and persevere toward positive outcomes?

These articles are a tremendous resource. I commend the authors and the guest editor, Sherrie Proctor, for her and their outstanding work and hope that we as a field take the lessons learned and advice offered in these pages to heart as we work together toward the goal of *enacting* racial justice and social justice. None of us created the racial and social injustice that is deeply rooted in U.S. society and none of us can solve these problems by ourselves. But we can share ownership of the charge to leverage our profession of school psychology toward a more just world.

AUTHOR NOTE

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