

# A Look into the Mirror: Reflecting on Systemic Racism and Implicit Bias

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Although the year has started anew, our country continues to be haunted by the sins of our past as senseless violence and social injustices continue to be inflicted upon Black, Indigenous People, and People of Color (BIPOC). Events in the last few years, such as the Fort Laramie Treaty violation against the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe because of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the separation and detention of refugee children at our borders, the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, or the inequities exposed by the global pandemic, are deeply rooted in generations of racism and implicit bias that plague our great nation. Although it is an ugly truth that most of us would rather not contend with, we need to look into the mirror once again and reflect upon how we contribute to, and actively dismantle, this insidious cancer. Admittedly, this appears to be a tall order at first blush. After all, what can I, a singular individual, do to combat racism and social injustice?

The answer, though seemingly complex, begins by reaching out to you, our APSAC community, who are already making a difference and are heavily invested in the well-being of the most vulnerable children, families, and communities that you serve. As a community of professionals dedicated to the prevention of child maltreatment, we can all work together to engage in an ongoing critical examination of systemic racism and implicit bias

that is prevalent in our own field. It is through such reflection that we are able to identify the dissonance between our commitment to ensure the safety and well-being of children and families and the use of research, policies, and practices that implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) sustain the trauma of racism and bias.

For example, the most recent publication by the Administration of Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020) highlighted the disproportionality that continues in the child welfare system, where African American children made up 20.6% of substantiated victims despite comprising only 13.7% of the total U.S. population. In addition, American Indian or Alaska Native children had the highest rate of victimization (15.2 per 1,000 children), followed by African American children (14.0 per 1,000 children). Care should be taken when we interpret such findings, particularly since these disproportionate numbers have been brought up time and again over the last few decades. That is, causality of such rates should not be attributed solely to race or ethnicity, avoiding victim blaming. Rather, we should look at the Gestalt of why such disproportionate numbers exist in our field, paying close attention to the systems that have contributed to these widening disproportionalities and disparities. These interconnected systems include, but are not limited to, the areas of child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and mental health, just to name a few.

It is at this point that I have to look in the mirror, reflect, and acknowledge the role of the system I work with (i.e., education) and how the problems of racism and social injustice persist. In looking at the same publication by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2020), education personnel made up the largest proportion of child protective services (CPS) referrals at 20.5%. This means that for a majority of school-aged children, entrance into the child welfare system begins, or continues, with schools due to its compulsory nature and the increased surveillance on children's well-being due to mandated reporting laws. When looking at school disciplinary practices, Black students and students with disabilities are often suspended or expelled at higher rates than other students (Lipscomb et al., 2017). Oftentimes, such severe or harsh disciplinary practices begin as early as preschool, given the increased likelihood that African American boys are perceived as more problematic (Gilliam et al., 2016). There is also evidence of the bidirectional effect between maltreatment and disabilities (Corr & Santos, 2017), which has been found to increase the risk for special education referrals (Stone, 2007). Unfortunately, such inequities result in long-term consequences as the achievement gap widens further across academic levels (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

When the risk factors for BIPOC children are taken together, one can see that their intersection increases the potential for referral to CPS at a much higher rate than for others. Although I cannot offer a quick solution to address such a wicked or ill-structured problem, acknowledging the tangled web of factors that promote systemic racism and implicit bias must be called out. Professionally and personally, this means that I need to be aware of, and explicitly understand, the confluence of systemic factors that provide the context in which children develop and learn.

As a researcher, I must therefore strive to employ theories or frameworks that move away from

deficit perspectives toward those that actively seek to explain how multiple ecological systems interact dynamically to explain different trajectories of development and learning. I also strive to employ research methods and statistics that allow the empirical testing of such complexities instead of “controlling for” these important contexts that influence development and learning. Just as it is difficult to understand evolutionary biology without understanding the environment in which species develop, it is difficult to understand developmental trajectories without considering the policies and practices that directly and indirectly influence the fair distribution of resources to help families and children gain a head start and succeed. Such endeavors are sometimes challenging because interdisciplinary perspectives need to be incorporated even though alternative frameworks and methods that differ from the status quo elicit discomfort.

As an educator, whether teaching courses in learning, development, maltreatment and advocacy, or statistics (yes, even statistics!), I find ways in which to engage both undergraduate and graduate students in critically examining what we have often taken for granted as unquestionable truth in foundational theories and methods. That is, we unpack the context in which theories were developed and empirical data were interpreted, understand how we can weave in contextual factors that influence well-being outcomes, and learn how systemic racism and bias may have influenced each step of the scientific process that affects policy and practice. Given the inequities we see in the education system, I believe that engaging in such critical discourse is necessary for the future educators enrolled in my classes.

Giving a voice to those who have none and speaking out when injustices are committed are no small tasks that continue to be a challenge, but one I hope to continue to reflect upon, learn from, and grow. However, this is a journey that I cannot and should not take alone. Many of you are in a similar

journey, and I invite each of you in our APSAC community to connect with one another. Efforts to promote anti-racism and increase social justice across systems and individuals continue in the form of trainings, policy changes, practice changes, and many others. Given such efforts, therefore, the dialogue and reflection should remain open among all of us in the APSAC community.

As Associate Editor, I, along with our Editor in Chief, Dr. Lisa Schelbe, hope to make this open dialogue and reflection a regular part of our APSAC Advisor issues. We will dedicate a section that allows people to share their own reflections and journey in acknowledging where such systemic problems of racism continue and offer ideas on how we as a community can help one another dismantle such problems. We therefore welcome your voice in these efforts and invite each of you, as members of our APSAC community, to connect with one another.

## About the Associate Editor

**Carlo Panlilio, PhD**, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education, and a faculty member with the Child Maltreatment Solutions Network at the Pennsylvania State University. He received his PhD in Human Development from the University of Maryland, College Park, with a specialization in Developmental Science and a Certificate in Education Measurement, Statistics, and Evaluation. He was a former Doris Duke Fellow for the Promotion of Child Well-being. His program of research focuses on the dynamic interplay between maltreatment, context, and development and how these processes influence individual differences in learning across the lifespan. His research is guided by an interdisciplinary approach to examine the multisystemic influences of early adversity on self-regulatory processes that explain variability in the academic outcomes of children with a history of maltreatment. He has published several journal articles and chapters and was editor of *Trauma-Informed Schools: Integrating Child Maltreatment Prevention, Detection, and Intervention*. Dr. Panlilio previously worked as a licensed clinical marriage and family therapist in private practice, community agencies, treatment foster care, and a residential treatment facility for adolescents.

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