

## Special Thematic Section on "Decolonizing Psychological Science"

# Beyond Adaptation: Decolonizing Approaches to Coping With Oppression

Nia L. Phillips<sup>\*a</sup>, Glenn Adams<sup>b</sup>, Phia S. Salter<sup>c</sup>

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, PEI, Canada. [b] Department of Psychology, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA. [c] Department of Psychology and Africana Studies Program, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA.

### Abstract

How should one respond to racial oppression? Conventional prescriptions of mainstream social psychological science emphasize the idea of *coping* with oppression—whether via emotional management strategies that emphasize denial or disengagement; problem-focused strategies that emphasize compensation, self-efficacy, or skills training; or collective strategies that emphasize emotional support—in ways that promote adaptation to, rather than transformation of, oppressive social structures. Following a brief review of the literature on coping with racism and oppression, we present an alternative model rooted in perspectives of liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994). This decolonial approach emphasizes critical consciousness (rather than cultivated ignorance) of racial oppression, a focus on de-ideologization (rather than legitimization) of status quo realities, and illumination of models of identification conducive to collective action. Whereas the standard approach to coping with oppression may ultimately both reinforce and reproduce systems of domination, we propose a decolonial approach to racism perception as a more effective strategy for enduring prosperity and well-being.

**Keywords:** liberation psychology, discrimination, oppression, coping, critical consciousness

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Handling Editor: Tuğçe Kurtiş, Department of Psychology and Women's Studies, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA, USA

\*Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Prince Edward Island, Memorial 207 Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada.  
E-mail: nlphillips@upe.ca



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A popular song as we write this paper is “Happy” by African American songwriter and producer Pharrell Williams. The song and video, which peaked at number one in over 20 countries and has inspired thousands of fan remakes across the globe, affirms the power of having a positive attitude and outlook in life. In a recent interview, Williams attributed part of his success to his “new” way of thinking about race, and particularly about being Black.

The new Black doesn't blame other races for our issues. The new Black dreams and realizes that it's not a pigmentation, it's a mentality. It's either going to work for you or it's going to work against you and you've got to pick which side you're gonna be on. ... I recognize that there are issues. We get judged on our skin. ... I don't allow that to run my life. (Winfrey, 2014).

Williams' post-racialist position does not wholly deny the realities of racism, but it suggests that a viable solution for buffering negative effects of racism is to cultivate a cheerful attitude: "Because I'm happy... Can't nothing bring me down."

Much research in mainstream social psychology adopts a similar lens about coping with identity-based oppression.<sup>i</sup> An emerging consensus of psychological research is that perception or awareness of racism and other forms of identity-based oppression is itself a psychological stressor that contributes independently to poor outcomes (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). Despite conditions of stark inequality, systemic and epistemic violence (e.g., Teo, 2008), and other lingering effects of European imperialism and colonialism in the modern global order—what decolonial theorists refer to as the *coloniality of power* (e.g., Quijano, 2000)—interventions in psychological science often target the mindset and efficacy beliefs of people from oppressed groups as a prescription for health and well-being in situations of oppression. In contrast, we draw upon theoretical resources of liberation psychology to propose an alternative paradigm. From this perspective, the psychological study of racism perception and well-being reflect the *coloniality of knowledge* (Mignolo, 2002): that is, preferential deployment of concepts that (1) have their epistemological foundation in beliefs and desires of a globally dominant minority; and (2) regardless of researchers' intentions or awareness, serve to reproduce further domination. As a result, the struggle against oppression must include efforts to decolonize conceptions and practices of coping and well-being.

## Coping With Oppression: The Dominant Frame

How do people in conditions of oppression navigate the pathogenic environments that they are forced to inhabit? Reflecting its standing as a "health science," a dominant framing of this question in mainstream psychology has been to treat oppressive circumstances as a stressor, which transforms the preceding question into one of "how do people cope with (the stress of) oppression?" (Williams, Spencer, & Jackson, 1997). Although there is considerable debate and variation among theoretical models of coping, a common feature of virtually all models is an initial assessment or appraisal, leading to a negative emotional state that the individual must alleviate. The method a person employs to lessen this negative state depends on the perceived nature of the problem and the most applicable or efficacious manner to address that problem. While it is beyond the scope of the present discussion to suggest a definitive framework for organizing theory and research on coping more broadly, we provide a rough categorization of coping processes sufficient to proceed with a discussion of "coping with oppression." To this end, we consider the categories of emotion-focused coping, problem-focused coping, and community-based coping.

### Emotion-Focused Strategies

Discussions of coping developed in the context of discussions about general life stressors (Antonovsky, 1979; Lazarus, 1966). What are the implications of this model when one appropriates it to consider the case of coping with oppression? Standard perspectives on coping suggest that the preferred response to oppressive circumstances is to act directly on harmful environments to counteract the problem. However, perhaps reflecting beliefs about the intractability of oppression, many discussions of coping with oppression in social psychological science consider emotion-focused coping strategies (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Outten, Schmitt, Garcia, & Branscombe, 2009) that treat the psychological symptoms of the problem rather

than source the problem itself. According to this approach, people can minimize the trauma associated with oppression by ignoring or subjectively distancing themselves from the problem.

## Denial

One emotion-focused response that people might use to cope with realities of oppression is denial: conscious rejection or cultivated ignorance of the fact that one inhabits a situation of injustice or oppression. If a person is unable to act on the source of an environmental threat that will continue to operate indefinitely, she might at least achieve some peace of mind by blocking knowledge of oppression.

Indeed, social psychological research suggests that denial is a common response to oppression. For example, research on the personal-group discrimination discrepancy indicates that even in contexts where people in marginalized communities acknowledge the social reality of identity-based oppression, they may resist recognition of such instances of oppression in their own lives (Crosby, 1984; Dion & Kawakami, 1996; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). Denial of oppression is especially pronounced for people and contexts that endorse ideologies of meritocracy (Choma, Hafer, Crosby, & Foster, 2012; Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). Contexts that promote meritocracy tend to place value on self-efficacy and hardiness, values that go hand-in-hand with belief in a just world and, unsurprisingly, are associated with greater denial of oppression (Foster & Dion, 2003). That is, those who endorse just world beliefs are the ones most likely to reject the possibility that they, personally, are victims of unjust discrimination.

Beyond documenting denial as a common response to situations of oppression, mainstream research within social psychology has reinforced the idea that denial has “benefits.” Much of this work considers the problematic psychological consequences of racism perception. For example, consider research on *stigma consciousness*: the tendency for people to experience themselves in terms of marginalized social identities (Pinel, 1999). Among people from historically oppressed groups, those who score high on the measure of stigma consciousness not only are more likely to perceive both personal and group discrimination (Pinel, 1999), but also tend to suffer greater decrements in performance (Brown & Pinel, 2003) and report lower self-esteem (Pinel & Paulin, 2005) than those who score low on the measure of stigma consciousness. Similar conclusions emerge from research on *race-based rejection sensitivity*: the extent to which people “anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection” based on their connection to stigmatized identity categories (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002, p. 897). In one study among first-year Black American students at a Predominantly White Institution, those who scored high on the measure of race-based rejection sensitivity reported more negative race-based experiences (e.g., experiencing racial profiling on campus) and reported less university belongingness over the course of the study than did those who scored low on the measure of race-based rejection sensitivity. Implicit in both research programs is the idea that awareness of racial oppression can be detrimental to well-being, with the further implication that people might deny or remain ignorant of their racial marginalization to avoid the detrimental consequences of this awareness.

Besides literal denial, people can also avoid awareness of discrimination or oppression by practicing forms of interpretative denial (Cohen, 2001). That is, people can face the reality of their marginalized position, but construct their situation in a way other than oppression. For example, in situations where people lack a sense of self-efficacy and belief in the possibility of social change, they are more likely to seek out justifications for inequality (Stewart, Latu, Branscombe, & Denney, 2010). Similarly, token systems can create the (false) impression of egalitarianism by promoting belief in individual mobility (Danaher & Branscombe, 2010). The presence of visible token minorities

also increases system-justifying beliefs and legitimation of inequality (Brown & Diekmann, 2013). Under these circumstances, people can acknowledge unequal outcomes, but attribute this inequality to something other than oppression.

To summarize, denial—in both literal and interpretative forms—can be an appealing response when people face situations of enduring oppression that they perceive to be unavoidable. In that case, one way to manage the stressful implications of awareness about oppression is to avoid such awareness. Of course, a problem of this response is that although it may defend against the psychological pain associated with awareness of oppression, it does not defend against the negative outcomes that one will continue to experience as a result of that oppression.

### **Disengagement**

As an alternative to denial, people might acknowledge that they inhabit situations of identity-based oppression and then cope with that stressful situation in a more active fashion. If they perceive that they are relatively powerless to change the circumstances that oppress them, they might cope through practices of disengagement: that is, neutralizing the emotional stress of oppression by denying the relevance or importance of the domains along which the oppression operates.

A prominent example of disengagement in the social psychological literature comes from research on stereotype threat. This research shows that the anxiety associated with confirming widespread negative beliefs about one's group leads to disidentification with the relevant domain (Steele, 1997). Women who face stereotypes of deficiency in mathematical skills relative to men, or people of African descent who face stereotypes as less intelligent than people of European descent, can maintain a sense of equanimity in the face of barriers by claiming that their performance in these domains is not important or self-relevant (Keller & Dauenheimer, 2003; Schmader, Major, Eccleston, & McCoy, 2001; Stone, 2002).

To the extent that disengagement reflects tendencies for people in situations of identity-based oppression to critically examine (and decide whether to invest in) mainstream systems of value, it can have important effects of generating alternatives to mainstream ways of being. More frequently, though, disengagement takes the form of concession by abandoning interests or pursuits in which people would otherwise engage. This strategy meets self-protective needs, but it ultimately can reinforce negative stereotypes and prejudices. For example, if a woman disengages in mathematics, she will likely perform poorly in this area, providing additional evidence that women in general lack mathematical skills (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). So, on the one hand, disengagement strategies allow individuals to avoid feelings of rejection, disappointment, or diminished value. On the other hand, by failing to confront oppressive circumstances and representations, disengagement strategies serve to reproduce realities of domination. In this regard, disengagement is good for individuals yet directly contributes to collective realities of continued oppression.

### **Problem-Focused Strategies**

Theory and research on coping proposes that the most effective means to respond to stressors is to face problems directly when possible. However, when considering responses to oppression, social psychological theory and research suggest that problem-focused strategies in the context of oppression can be ineffective or even counter-productive, especially to the extent that they focus efforts on individual-oriented strategies that are ineffective at addressing systems of oppression. Two such examples of these strategies are compensation and empowerment.

## Compensation

Research suggests that people from historically oppressed groups may modify their behaviors in order to counteract negative consequences of oppression. Oftentimes such strategies are deployed in the context of personal experience with oppression in anticipation of, or direct response to, racism. In these cases, people may specifically try to behave in a stereotype-inconsistent fashion (Kaiser & Miller, 2001) or in a particularly socially skilled manner (Miller, Rothblum, Felicio, & Brand, 1995) so that biased individuals will be unable to justify discriminatory treatment. This is consistent with the notion of the “Black tax,” where people of African descent feel that they must work harder and be better than non-stigmatized Whites in order to achieve comparable standing or be taken seriously (Cohen, 1998; Whiting, 2009). Similarly, research shows that women speak to their employers with greater competency than with their peers, while men show no differences in speech patterns based upon audience (Steckler & Rosenthal, 1985). These measures attempt to cut off oppressive practices before they begin by removing any *a priori* rationalizations for poor treatment.

However, compensation suffers from a number of shortcomings. Compensation efforts communicate that individuals must change themselves and adapt to society, thereby leaving unchanged the societal norms and practices that constitute oppressive realities. Moreover, as the notion of a “Black tax” suggests, the extra effort and energy that people from oppressed groups must expend to secure fair or standard treatment comes with significant personal costs. These costs include health problems in the form of both negative health characteristics (e.g., hypertension) and behaviors (see Bennett et al., 2004, for a review).

## Empowerment

Another problem-focused strategy for coping with oppression—one that figures prominently in popular discourse—is *empowerment*. Research suggests that empowerment of people from historically oppressed groups leads to increased psychological well-being and better coping with daily oppression (Johnson, Worell, & Chandler, 2005; Parsons, 2001; Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990; Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992). Across various conceptions of empowerment, a number of consistent themes emerge. These include *self-efficacy*, fostering personal beliefs about one’s own capabilities; *skill development*, encouraging people to work to acquire characteristics necessary to succeed within oppressive systems; and *connection-building*, so as to provide individuals with access to broader and deeper networks of social capital and material resources than they can access as individual actors.

In theory, empowerment approaches hold promise as a response to oppression, especially to the extent that they promote awareness of the systemically embedded nature of inequality and mobilize people to collective action. In practice, though, conventional articulations of empowerment strategies within social psychological science fall short of this promise, frequently through a failure to acknowledge or consider systems of power that constrain individual action (Hardy & Leiba-O’Sullivan, 1998). Rather than mobilizing people to dismantle the environmental or structural sources of oppression, conventional articulations of empowerment turn attention inward and mobilize people to change themselves and better adapt to situations of oppression. To the extent empowerment strategies emphasize skill development and other forms of individual action, they do little to create social change and also reproduce oppression for self and others. Empowerment strategies are most effective when they focus on collective mobilization, or attempts to enact social change (Bookman & Morgen, 1988; Gutiérrez, 1994; Perry, 1980; Schechter, 1982). However, such conceptions of collective empowerment await development.

## Community-Based Strategies

In contrast to the explicitly individual-level focus of most research on coping—and particularly coping with oppression—the emphasis on social support as a coping strategy explicitly acknowledges the fundamentally social or collective character of human existence. By definition, identity-based discrimination and oppression are collective phenomena; this suggests that people who experience discrimination-related stress or trauma can draw upon their identity-relevant communities to manage the negative effects of such experiences.

### Social Support

One response to the experience of oppression is to seek support from similar others who share one's negative experience. Research suggests that such forms of social support can buffer individual well-being from some negative consequences of oppression. For instance, research on lesbian women's perceptions of oppression finds a positive relationship between perception of (hetero)sexism and experience of psychological distress. However, the availability of social support serves a protective function, buffering lesbian women from the distress otherwise associated with awareness of sexism and heterosexism (Szymanski & Kashubeck-West, 2008).

Social support requires the presence of other, like-minded people with whom to share one's experience of oppression. Unfortunately, people may not always have access to such a resource. In these cases, the absence of social support may itself constitute a stressor that compounds the effects of oppression (Hughes & Eliason, 2002). Indeed, across settings, a common domination strategy has been to deny people from oppressed groups the opportunity to build communities of support. This strategy was evident in North American practices of slavery, where slave owners denied enslaved humans the opportunity to marry or maintain family bonds (e.g., between siblings or between parents and children). This practice not only destroyed potential bases for solidarity, but also deprived enslaved people of an important source of relational and ontological security upon which to base acts of resistance. More recently, supporters of the ban on state funding for ethnic studies programs in Arizona (USA) specifically mentioned the concern that these programs promote ethnic solidarity as a rationale for the ban (HB 2281, 2010).

What is the “active ingredient” of social support? Some research suggests that social support itself may not directly remedy the negative effects of oppression, but rather may operate to promote other discrimination-buffering characteristics through processes such as social validation and shared reality (Fischer & Holz, 2007). Drawing upon a community with similar histories of discrimination and oppression gives credence and substantiation to one's own experience of bias. The support and understanding of people who share, recognize, and validate one's experiences of oppression can be an important psychological resource that reduces the negative consequences of these experiences. They provide the sense that one is not crazy after all, despite the fact that one's perceptions deviate from mainstream accounts of “objective” reality (Whaley, 1997, 1998). To the extent that the “active ingredient” of social support is this sort of reality-validation function, it constitutes a decolonial approach to coping that we discuss in a subsequent section.

### Collective Identification

Similar to social support, collective identification may also serve as a community-based coping mechanism. Research suggests that identification with an oppressed group may lead to greater well-being in the face of adversity. In particular, the rejection-identification model (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999) proposes that the experience of oppression (and implication of societal rejection) can lead people to identify more strongly with oppressed group identity categories. In turn, the positive benefits of greater identification buffer people from the negative con-

sequences that would otherwise result from the experience of societal oppression and rejection. Researchers have observed support for the rejection-identification model among people from a variety of oppressed groups, including women (Redersdorff, Martinot, & Branscombe, 2004), international students in the United States (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003), gay men (Chae & Yoshikawa, 2008), and people with body piercings (Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001).

One advantage of collective identification versus social support is that, unlike the latter, the former does not require the physical presence of others. Accordingly, collective identification can provide some of the benefits of social support (e.g., solidarity, reality validation), even in circumstances where people who share and recognize one's experience are not physically present. However, collective identification also shares some of the same disadvantages of social support. Briefly stated, the prevailing sense of these community-based coping strategies is to distract individual focus away from shared negative experience(s) to a sense of belonging in communities of meaning and value (Landrum-Brown, 1990; Thoits, 1986). Although this feeling of belonging may provide genuine relief from the negative consequences of oppression, it constitutes a short-term buffer from the negative impact of discrete experiences of oppression that will do little to decrease the likelihood of future oppression for one's self or others—that is, unless it also promotes complementary action to address unjust systems.

## Summary

As a response to stress associated with situations of oppression, mainstream discussions of community-based coping have similar limitations as mainstream discussions of coping in general. Specifically, their focus on alleviation of symptoms that manifest at the level of individual experience implies resignation to realities of oppression and suffering. Rather than working with similar others to eliminate the sources of oppression, community-based strategies use these others as a means of ego-defense or ego-restoration. In other words, they promote short-term accommodation or individual adaptation to stressful circumstances, rather than long-term transformation of the oppressive structures that underlie the stressful circumstances. In this way, conventional discussions of coping in mainstream psychology reflect the coloniality of knowledge. That is, they not only promote an individualist construction of well-being that resonates with the atomistic ontology of European modernity, but also reproduce ongoing domination by naturalizing and failing to challenge the status quo.

## Beyond Coping: Decolonial Responses to Oppression

In contrast to mainstream perspectives on “coping” with oppression, we propose a framework that moves beyond the alleviation of negative states and/or ego restoration to actions that promote liberation. The conceptual roots of this framework lie in a variety of sources, especially the “liberation psychology” of Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994; see also Bulhan, 1985; Montero & Sonn, 2009; Shulman & Watkins, 2008). A key feature of many liberation psychology perspectives is an emphasis on what subsequent scholars have referred to as the coloniality of knowledge (e.g., Mignolo, 2007): the extent to which conventional accounts of social reality in mainstream sites of knowledge production (i.e., academia or news media) are not objective or neutral, but instead reflect perspectives of the powerful, pathologize experiences of the oppressed, and serve to reinforce domination. From this perspective, effective responses to structures of oppression require a process of mental decolonization involving the production of liberatory knowledge that has its foundation in the lived experience of people in oppressed communities. The epistemological perspective of the oppressed not only serves as a tool for critical consciousness about the

structural causes of suffering, but also provides a basis for identification and collective action to secure broader well-being. As a means of decolonizing knowledge and promoting responses to oppression with greater social justice potential, [Martín-Baró \(1994\)](#) proposed three pressing tasks for a liberation psychology: de-ideologizing everyday experience, utilizing people's virtues, and the recovery of historical memory. In the current paper we consider the insights that these tasks provide not only regarding limitations of mainstream psychological science, but also for illuminating a decolonial response to oppression.

## From Emotion Management to Critical Consciousness

As we noted in the section on emotion-focused approaches to coping with oppression, mainstream perspectives in social psychology tend to pathologize awareness of oppression. The basic idea that permeates mainstream understandings is not only that awareness of oppression comes with psychological costs (e.g., stress, anxiety, and/or depressive affect), but also that the mere perception of oppression can be sufficient to generate its own negative outcomes—thereby increasing the marginalization of people in marginalized communities. Rather than promoting vigilance against the threat of unavoidable oppression, these perspectives suggest that people could be spared psychological pain and further marginalization if they somehow avoid awareness of this threat. The noteworthy implication of this mainstream perspective is not only that it valorizes ignorance or denial (of the realistic threat of oppression) as a viable way of coping, but also that it elevates ignorance and denial as a standard against which vigilant awareness appears as deviant.

Unlike mainstream emotion-based strategies of denial of or disengagement from oppression, a decolonial response to oppression demands awareness, attention, and analysis of one's marginalization. Against the background of mainstream skepticism about consciousness of oppression, a fundamental feature of various liberation psychology perspectives is to validate and draw upon the experience of people from oppressed or marginalized communities as a privileged moral and epistemological space (i.e., to "utilize the people's virtues", [Martín-Baró, 1994](#), p. 31). This feature is a variant of the liberation theology principle of a preferential option for the oppressed, which in the present context refers to an epistemological framework that privileges the understandings of people in oppressed communities as a source of insight or truth about the character of social reality.

As an illustrative example, consider research on group differences in perception of racism in U.S. society. Research consistently demonstrates that White Americans perceive less racism in mainstream society than do people from subordinate racial groups (e.g., [Bonilla-Silva, 2006](#); [Feagin, 2006, 2009](#); for a similar pattern in South Africa see also [Durrheim, Mtose, & Brown, 2011](#)). Mainstream accounts of this difference tend to focus on Black Americans' perception of racism as the anomalous or deviant pattern that requires explanation. In contrast, the decolonial idea of accompaniment with people in marginalized communities as a privileged site of knowledge (see [Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013](#); [Watkins, 2015](#), this section) affords the recognition that group differences in perception of racism may be less about Black American perceptions than White American denial. One source of racism denial is the process of motivated perception. White Americans are motivated to deny the extent of racism to enable guilt-free enjoyment of racial privilege and defend the legitimacy of the social order from which they derive benefit ([Adams, Tormala, & O'Brien, 2006](#)). Another source of racism denial is cultural knowledge. Regardless of personal motivation, White Americans often perceive less racism than people from oppressed groups because they rely upon sources of cultural knowledge—including representations of history ([Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013](#)) and atomistic conceptions of racism as individual bias ([Adams, Edkins, Lacka, Pickett, & Cheryan, 2008](#))—that afford ignorance of racism. The epistemological perspective of marginalized communities provides tools to disrupt racism denial.



When White Americans gain exposure to forms of historical knowledge or conceptions of racism that resonate with the experience of people in marginalized communities, they tend to admit greater racism in American society (Adams, Edkins, et al., 2008; Nelson et al., 2013; Salter & Adams, 2015)

The epistemological perspective of people in marginalized spaces can be an important resource for *critical consciousness* not only about the reality of systemic oppression, but also about the likely effectiveness of various responses to that oppression. Critical consciousness, or *conscientização* (Freire, 1970/1993) refers to a reflexive understanding of the world and recognition of the interconnectedness of individual, social, and structural experience (de Laetis, 1990; Freire, 1973; Gurin, 1985; Gurin & Townsend, 1986). Critical consciousness requires an in-depth engagement with the social world and examination of structural systems that set limitations on well-being through discriminatory practice. Once people understand the social practices that maintain inequality, they will be better able to organize action to dismantle structures of domination and construct more just realities.

The emphasis on critical consciousness as the foundation for decolonial responses to oppression stands in direct contrast to mainstream perspectives in social psychology that advocate denial of oppression. Decolonial approaches do not dispute that consciousness of oppression is a potential source of stress; instead, they emphasize awareness of oppression and its sources as a necessary precursor to action against oppressive circumstances. If one is not aware of oppression or unsure of its source, then it is difficult to mobilize action to address the source. Rather than suppress awareness of oppression in order to maintain a sense of positive affect and personal empowerment, a decolonial response advocates not only unflinching awareness about the reality of oppression and its sources, but also conceptual tools—the *critical* in critical consciousness—for challenging conventional understandings of oppressive situations.

### **Problem-Focused Strategies of Empowerment, Re-Focused**

To the extent that mainstream perspectives in social psychology have articulated problem-focused approaches to coping with oppression, they have tended to emphasize responses, such as compensation and individual empowerment, that promote individual well-being and success despite oppressive systems. In other words, the focus of these problem-focused empowerment strategies is changing people to better navigate oppressive systems rather than changing the pathogenic environments that people in situations of oppression must navigate. Implicit in this construction is the idea that the “problem” that requires focus and correction is one of individual maladjustment rather than social injustice. In contrast, the critical consciousness associated with decolonial responses to oppression identifies pathogenic environments—not the people who must navigate them—as the source of the problem that requires an effective response.

Although decolonial responses to oppression share with mainstream perspectives a concern about empowering people to overcome the challenges of an oppressive environment, differences in conceptions about the location of the problem promote differences in the construction of (dis)empowerment. Mainstream approaches seek to empower individuals by providing them with skills and motivations necessary to overcome oppressive barriers and succeed in terms of conventional understandings of success. Although these skills and motivations may promote individual well-being, they reinforce the legitimacy and re-produce the reality of the oppressive systems that contribute to ill health and disease in general.

In contrast, the focus on critical consciousness within decolonial responses to oppression suggests an alternative conception of (dis)empowerment. In this conception, the source of everyday disempowerment is not a deficiency

of skills or motivation, but rather forms of violence. The foundation of oppressive systems lies in material forms of physical violence that the powerful wield in extraordinary outbursts that impose death, dislocation, and dispossession on vanquished communities. However, the everyday maintenance of oppressive systems also entails an ideological and epistemic kind of violence: an iron fist dressed in a velvet glove that makes it difficult to recognize the destructive power that the fist wields (e.g., [Jackman, 1994](#)). These forms of ideological or epistemic violence operate by legitimizing regimes of domination, portraying them as a natural and inevitable reality ([Teo, 2008, 2010](#)). Dominant ideologies disempower people by obscuring the extent to which present realities are the direct results of ongoing (and racialized) historical violence and by co-opting people to endorse and reproduce the ideological systems that contribute to their own domination.

Drawing on this understanding, an important consideration of decolonial responses to oppression is to switch the focus of problem-focused coping away from skill development to what [Martín-Baró \(1994\)](#) identified as the second pressing task for a liberation psychology: the “de-ideologization [*desideologizar*] of everyday experience” (p. 31). This idea emphasizes that dominant discourses and everyday understandings of social reality are ideological products that have emerged and persist because they reflect and reproduce the interests of domination. Mainstream forms of knowledge production (e.g., media or academic discourse) often re-present the status quo as the inevitable progression of a natural process of societal evolution, obscuring the ideological character of everyday reality. By portraying existing realities as the just natural product of societal progress, dominant discourses serve to obscure the coloniality of everyday life; that is, they constrain awareness that existing realities are the product of identity-based domination, not a neutral environment with equal opportunity for all. This denial of ideological positioning ultimately serves to naturalize and justify social injustice, as it suggests that inequality results from group differences in capacity or willingness to take advantage of supposedly equal opportunities. In contrast, the epistemological perspective of the oppressed provides conceptual tools from which to de-ideologize everyday experience.

Readers familiar with Euro American social psychology will recognize a connection between our discussion of alternative attributions for inequality and research on the self-evaluative consequences of attributional ambiguity (e.g., [Crocker & Major, 1989](#); [Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991](#)). This influential body of work has emphasized that people who are frequent targets of discrimination experience considerable ambiguity about the feedback they receive. They can attribute the feedback to something about them (e.g., the actual quality of their performance), or they can attribute the feedback to something about the perceiver (e.g., stereotypes, prejudice, or some other identity-based bias). In contrast to the dominant thread of research in mainstream social psychology that tends to associate attributions to discrimination with negative impact on well-being, researchers have noted that people from oppressed groups can take advantage of this attributional ambiguity to deflect the otherwise negative self-evaluative implications of biased feedback and other discriminatory outcomes. That is, making attributions to prejudice in the face of ambiguous negative feedback and system-blame attributions for societal disparities can have self-protective properties ([Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999](#); [Crocker & Major, 1989](#)).

The idea that stigmatized groups might attribute outcomes to prejudice to deflect personal blame and protect self-esteem has been controversial. In particular, critics note the implication that tendencies for people from marginalized communities to perceive oppression may reflect, not more accurate understanding about the reality of racism, but instead strategic motivations to “play the oppression card”: that is, to exaggerate the extent of oppression to deflect personal and collective blame ([Garcia, Reser, Amo, Redersdorff, & Branscombe, 2005](#); cf. [Crocker & Major, 2003](#)). Apart from the implication of motivated exaggeration, the important distinction between the notion of critical consciousness and work on the self-evaluative implications of attributional ambiguity concerns the outcome of interest.

The perspectives are similar in that they both emphasize the positive effects of perceiving (rather than denying) that outcomes are due to oppression. The perspectives differ in what they imagine these positive effects to be. Research on self-evaluative implications of attributional ambiguity shares with mainstream perspectives a focus on emotion-focused coping, in the form of consequences for individual self-regulation. In contrast, the focus on motivated systems of dominance is less concerned with emotion or other forms of individual self-regulation and more concerned with promoting critical consciousness of oppression and empowering people in oppressed communities by orienting them toward opportunities for collective action.

### **Collective Empowerment: Identity-Based Meaning and Action**

One response to the work on attributional ambiguity is the rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999) that we discussed in the previous section on community-based coping. This model proposes that it is not the attribution of outcomes to oppression, per se, that produces positive consequences for well-being. Indeed, attributions to pervasive oppression, by themselves, are likely to produce less well-being to the extent that they trigger the outcomes that other researchers have associated with stigma consciousness or racial rejection sensitivity (for a review, see Schmitt et al., 2014). Instead, the rejection-identification model suggests that attributions to pervasive discrimination result in decreased well-being unless they trigger increased identification with the oppressed community, which then buffers people from the otherwise negative consequences (Branscombe et al., 1999). In other words, consciousness of discrimination may contribute to well-being to the extent that it allows people to access collective resources for resilience (Outten et al., 2009) in response to identity-threatening situations (see Neville & Pieterse, 2009).

An important consideration for decolonial responses to oppression, then, concerns the forms of critical consciousness that promote collective identification. In recognition of this important consideration, the third pressing task in the Liberation Psychology of Martín-Baró (1994) is *recovery of historical memory*. In the words of Martín-Baró,

The prevailing discourse puts forth an apparently natural and ahistorical reality, structuring it in such a way as to cause it to be accepted without question. This makes it impossible to derive lessons from experience and, more important, makes it impossible to find the roots of one's own identity, which is as much needed for interpreting one's sense of the present as for glimpsing possible alternatives.... The recovery of historical memory supposes the reconstruction of models of identification that, instead of chaining and caging the people, open up the horizon for them, toward their liberation and fulfillment. (p. 30)

The importance of critical consciousness to the topic of collective identification lies in dismantling representations of history that reflect and reproduce forms of domination and replacing them with alternative forms of collective memory that reflect and promote identification with perspectives of people in oppressed communities.

Evidence for the effect of “recovered” historical memory in promoting support for reparative action comes from an investigation of displays for Black History Month (BHM) that we conducted in secondary schools of a city in the mid-western USA (Salter & Adams, 2015). We observed that schools with majority White populations were more likely than majority Black (and Latino) populations to de-emphasize struggles against racism and to link BHM to larger issues of cultural diversity rather than Civil Rights. This relative prominence of different Black History Month representations in the material reality of different school environments is not inconsequential, but instead affords different courses of action. In this case, BHM displays from predominately Black and Latino spaces afforded increases in perceptions of racism among White American participants, which in turn mediated support for anti-

racism policies (Salter & Adams, 2015). In other words, representations from schools with a majority of Black and Latino students afford support for anti-racism policies because they alert viewers to the ongoing significance of racism in contemporary U.S. society. The recovery and broad distribution of representations of history that afford perception of racism and support for reparative action constitute a productive and liberatory response to situations of oppression.

### **Summary: Decolonizing Coping**

An emphasis on the recovery of historical memory and development of critical consciousness constitutes a shift away from strategies that implicitly or explicitly advocate adaptation (i.e., to oppressive systems) toward strategies that focus on social transformation. This alternative focus illuminates the coloniality of knowledge in mainstream social psychology and “coping only” response strategies. Mainstream psychological science places a heavy emphasis on reducing stress via adaptation to local realities. But what if these realities are inherently oppressive (as decolonial critiques suggest of the modern global order)? Conventional scientific wisdom implies that the healthy course of action is for people to cope with the situation by adapting themselves to the oppressive social order rather than acting in some fashion to transform it. In this way, mainstream psychological science acts as a conservative force that promotes not only resignation to, but also legitimization or naturalization of an unjust status quo. It elevates oppressive constructions of reality to the status of a natural standard to which individual actors must successfully adapt, and implicitly de-legitimizes attempts to transform those oppressive realities. As we have noted repeatedly, this adaptationist stance to oppressive realities may bring short-term benefits, but it is inimical to long-term or collective well-being if those oppressive realities are the root of the pathology in the first place.

In contrast to mainstream psychological constructions of coping that emphasize individual adaptation to oppressive realities, a decolonial response to oppression emphasizes social transformation. Rather than elevate the unjust status quo to the level of natural or inevitable, a decolonial response to oppression de-naturalizes the status quo by revealing it to be the project of violent repression and injustice. Rather than grudging resignation to the oppressive status quo, decolonial responses encourage imagination of social justice alternatives to the status quo.

Our focus in this paper is a reconsideration of mainstream perspectives that advise people from historically oppressed communities to adapt to, rather than challenge systems of oppression. As a result of this focus, we have not considered the implications that decolonial responses to oppression have for people who benefit from racial and colonial domination. Such people have even more motivation than people from marginalized communities to deny the extent of global oppression, as recognition of this oppression threatens the legitimacy of the racialized global order from which they benefit. Given this motivation, people from dominant groups are perhaps especially likely to develop epistemological tools that both prevent recognition of oppression and afford a construction of the racialized global order as the natural or inevitable product of modern progress and cultural development. By allowing these epistemologies of ignorance to persist unchallenged, mainstream responses to coping with oppression help reproduce domination.

In contrast, decolonial responses to coping promote critical consciousness (rather than identity-enhancing denial), disrupt epistemologies of ignorance that naturalize the racialized injustice of the modern global order, and illuminate models of identification (e.g., imagination of community with broader humanity) that afford dis-investment in the racialized injustice of the modern global order. In other words, decolonial responses to coping seek not only to liberate people in marginalized communities from ongoing racist and colonial violence, but also to liberate people

in dominant communities from forces that compel them to perpetrate (often in mindless fashion) forms of racist and colonial violence.

## Implications for the Task of Decolonizing Psychology

To conclude this contribution to the special section, we step back from the particular discussion of decolonial approaches to coping and examine implications that this discussion raises for the project of “decolonizing psychology”. The general strategy is one that informs many contributions to the special section. In particular, we draw upon the epistemological perspective of people in oppressed communities for insights and alternatives to prevailing understandings of well-being, consciousness, and peace.

### Beyond Individual Bodies: Decolonizing “Well-Being”

A first implication for decolonizing psychological science concerns limitations of a psychology rooted in individualism (Bulhan, 1985; Fanon, 1961/1965; Martín-Baró, 1994). What Martín-Baró noted of mental health—namely, that “mental health is a dimension of the relations between persons and groups more than an individual state” (1994, p. 109)—applies to the concept of well-being in general. The atomistic focus in medical and psychological science on individual bodies as the locus of health obscures the social foundations of well-being. This focus is not only inadequate for understanding the suffering produced by systems of oppression, but also acts as an ideological foundation for reproducing oppression.

The atomistic conception of well-being that prevails in mainstream psychological science judges phenomena on the basis of their capacity to provide an individual person with maximum happiness or self-actualization. Accordingly, psychological science tends to valorize ways of being that bring short-term benefits to isolated actors, regardless of the long term or broader social consequences of those ways of being. In contrast, as the present discussion of racism denial suggests, ways of being that fulfill self-defensive motivations in the present may not prove adaptive—that is, they may not equip people well to navigate local realities—in the long run. Moreover, the “winning” or optimal strategies that maximize benefits for an individual actor might not be winning or optimal strategies for an aggregate or community of individuals. For example, beyond a certain threshold, individual accumulation of wealth may not lead to increases in individual well-being. However, accumulation of wealth concentrated in the hands of the few does result in low overall well-being (Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). This is not only because the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few comes at the cost of less wealth in the hands of the global multitude, but also because inequality is harmful for the sense of community and trust that provide people in general—including the wealthy—with the ontological security necessary for a sense of daily equanimity and well-being.

### Beyond “Perceptual Baggage”: Decolonizing “Consciousness”

An additional implication of our discussion for decolonizing psychological science concerns implications for approaches to consciousness. Mainstream perspectives in social psychology have tended to emphasize burdens of knowledge about systemic oppression. Conventional scientific wisdom in mainstream psychology suggests that the “excessive” focus on racism or oppression as a force in everyday society produces stigma consciousness, cultural mistrust, race-based rejection sensitivity, or some other forms of “perceptual baggage” (Johnson, Simmons, Trawalter, Ferguson, & Reed, 2003, p. 621) that put people at risk for poor outcomes. The implication is that

people would have better outcomes if they didn't carry around the perceptual baggage of consciousness about oppression.

There are (at least) two problematic issues to note regarding this “perceptual baggage” framing. The first issue—and most relevant for the topic of decolonizing well-being—is to question the extent to which consciousness of oppression is productive of poor well-being. Yes, a large body of empirical research indicates that people who tend to perceive identity-based oppression in ambiguous situations or in society as a whole are at risk for a variety of harms that one might summarize as depressive affect and disengagement from mainstream cultural spaces as a self-protective defense mechanism. Perhaps people could avoid the negative affective consequences of consciousness about oppression if they didn't carry around perceptual baggage: that is, if they cultivated blissful ignorance and trained themselves not to be aware of oppression. However, this short-term affective benefit (which, as we have noted above, tends to align with the short-term focus of psychological research on well-being) may be relatively insignificant compared to two different sets of harms.

One set of harms that comes into view when one extends the focus to a larger temporal frame is the violence and negative affect that people would incur if they naively remained invested in oppressive spaces where they face devaluation and barriers to positive outcomes. After all, the idea that people defensively disengage suggests that they are doing so to prevent harm from some kind of threat. Research on the experience of people in oppressed minority groups has documented the toll that everyday oppression—both spectacular violence and the more typical slow violence (Nixon, 2011) of everyday micro-aggressions—takes on their well-being. To the extent that awareness of oppression helps people avoid these forms of aggression, they can avoid the negative consequences associated with them.

Another set of harms comes into view when one extends the focus from individual to collective outcomes. By cultivating ignorance about oppression, mainstream approaches provide people in marginalized spaces with little basis for changing the oppressive circumstances. How can people from marginalized spaces address their marginalization if they give in to system-justifying motives to see the world as just, delude themselves about the security of their position, convince themselves that racism and colonialism are things of the past that have little impact on the modern global order, and therefore ignore the problem? By elevating denial of oppression as a normative standard in the name of promoting well-being, mainstream perspectives ironically leave intact the systems of oppression that are the ultimate source of poor well-being in the first place.

Of course, mainstream perspectives in psychology may endorse denial of oppression precisely because they believe this to be an accurate perception of the status quo. This possibility raises the second problematic issue with the “perceptual baggage” framing. It identifies tendencies of people from oppressed groups to perceive racism in everyday affairs as the exotic or deviant tendency that requires explanation, while it elevates denial of racism to the status of a natural standard: something that does not require explanation because it reflects the objective perception of the way things are. The implication is that claims about racism in the modern global order are a form of delusion—a deviation from accurate perception of an objective reality that is relatively free from oppression—that people from marginalized spaces could avoid if they would just shed their “perceptual baggage.”

In stark contrast to this mainstream pathologization of consciousness about oppression, decolonial responses to oppression emphasize the importance of consciousness and sober assessment of everyday reality. Of particular importance for decolonial responses to oppression are varieties of critical consciousness about the socially constructed character of everyday realities. Critical consciousness entails the recognition that existing realities are

not the leading edge of a “just natural” march of human progress or a path to global modernity along which people in marginalized settings inevitably lag behind. Instead, critical consciousness requires the unflinching awareness that the modern global order is a product of colonial violence that imposed particular constructions of reality (e.g., gender relations, family arrangements, forms of government, modes of livelihood, practices of knowledge, and other ways of being) as normative standards, displacing the diversity of human life-ways in the process.

The important consequence of this awareness is to de-ideologize everyday realities (Martín-Baró, 1994). One sense of *de-ideologize* refers to the moral value aspect of ideology. Rather than the pinnacle of human evolution to which all communities should aspire, critical consciousness illuminates the foundation of the global modern order in acts of violence and injustice that call into question its claims to a position of moral superiority. Another sense of *de-ideologize* refers to the conceptual knowledge aspect of ideology. Critical consciousness affords the awareness that the global modern order is not natural or inevitable, but instead is one construction of reality among many possible others. In turn, the important consequence of de-ideologization of everyday reality is to open the space for imagination of alternative realities. Once people can imagine alternatives, they can organize activity to realize those alternative constructions of reality.

### **Beyond Harmony: Decolonizing “Peace”**

A final implication of our discussion for decolonizing psychological science concerns the “prejudice problematic” (Wetherell, 2011): an emphasis on individual bias as the source of identity-based oppression. Several observers have noted that the conception of oppression as individual prejudice resonates with a “perpetrator perspective” in discrimination law (e.g., Freeman, 1977). From this perpetrator perspective, the relevant questions to ask in situations of potential oppression are (1) whether the actor, as potential perpetrator, performed some act of differential treatment that reflected antipathy or bias and (2) whether the actor was aware or in control of the action and meant to do it. If the answer to these questions is no, then it suggests—from the perspective of the perpetrator—that no oppression occurred (cf. Adams, Biernat, Branscombe, Crandall, & Wrightsman, 2008).

Extending the lens beyond the “perpetrator perspective” in discrimination law, one can note how the mainstream emphasis on the prejudice problematic resonates with the epistemological and ontological perspective of people in positions of dominance. This conception of oppression is not just the natural reflection of objective reality. Instead, it reflects neoliberal individualist beliefs and an atomistic ontology, characteristic of people in positions of power (e.g., Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012), that view action as the source of agentic individuals abstracted from context.<sup>ii</sup> Likewise, this conception of oppression is not politically neutral. Instead, it reflects identity-defensive desires (often outside conscious awareness) to limit the scope of oppression by applying the concept only to those instances where an actor consciously intended harm motivated by antipathy. This limited scope excludes from consideration the accumulated consequences of centuries-old actions or cases in which colorblind, equal, or apparently non-prejudiced realities result in disparate impact. Alternatively stated, this construction treats oppression as isolated acts and directs attention away from broader systems that perpetrate “slow violence” across larger social, geographic, or temporal scales (see Nixon, 2011). In this respect, the prejudice problematic—and particularly, a construction of oppression as individual prejudice—constitutes an example of what Mills (1997, 2007) refers to as an “epistemology of ignorance”: a form of knowledge that affords lack of consciousness about realities that would otherwise be obvious.

Besides the construction of oppression as individual bias, the prejudice problematic proposes bias-reduction as the preferred solution to identity-based oppression. Here again, this focus is not politically neutral; instead, by

deflecting attention away from injustice, and directing energy toward changing hearts and minds, the focus on bias reduction tends to reflect and promote the interest of ongoing domination (e.g., Adams, Biernat, et al., 2008; Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010; Hammack, 2011; Wright & Lubensky, 2008). It delegitimizes moral indignation about the violence of oppression and instead promotes tolerance and harmony as higher moral goods. This emphasis on tolerance and harmony may indeed be attractive for people who are comfortable with the status quo. However, if the status quo is the product of injustice and violence, then the call for harmony or peace amounts to a call to tolerate injustice.<sup>iii</sup> In one particularly vivid articulation of this idea, mainstream approaches to intergroup relations hear the calls from the marginalized majority world hungering for social justice, and responds to these calls with the advice to “let them eat harmony” (Dixon et al., 2010).

In contrast to the mainstream emphasis on prejudice reduction as the solution to oppression, a more liberatory conception locates the solution in actions that contest material and ideological domination. Those of us who enjoy the benefits of material and ideological domination are unlikely to surrender these benefits without protest. In such cases, the presence of conflict and disharmony may be a desirable sign of progress toward justice rather than an undesirable disturbance of enforced peace that a privileged few enjoy in their gated-community islands of affluent security amid a sea of extreme inequality and want.

## Conclusions

Social psychology has been a primary site of academic research on social justice, and many of us social psychologists identify social justice issues as a topic of our research. Yet, perhaps despite our best intentions, our work as social psychologists on issues of anti-oppression and social justice typically draws upon conceptual tools that reflect and reproduce interests of domination. Chief among these conceptual tools is an atomistic understanding of well-being that abstracts persons from social and historical context. This insidious ideology leads researchers to focus on how isolated individuals might manage (i.e., cope with) the negative effects of their marginalization, rather than acting to dismantle oppressive structures that are the source of their marginalization. In turn, by deflecting efforts at change away from oppressive systems, mainstream perspectives of social psychological research contribute to the reproduction of an unjust status quo.

In contrast to the epistemological foundation of mainstream psychological science in sites of global power, perspectives of liberation psychology advocate a “preferential option” for the perspective of the oppressed as a privileged epistemological foundation for a more human(e) psychology. This shift in epistemological perspective provides important tools to decolonize forms of knowledge, like atomistic conceptions of well-being, that masquerade as neutral or natural standards to which humanity should aspire. Rather than promote inattention to (or ignorance about) structural forces of oppression, a decolonial response emphasizes the necessity of critical consciousness about these structural sources as a precursor to effective action and the construction of more sustainable forms of well-being. Rather than ask individuals to adapt to their oppressive circumstances in the name of personal (and social) peace/harmony, the preservation of long-term well-being requires a decolonial response to systems of oppression that emphasizes the transformation of unjust social systems in the name of justice.

## Notes

i) Throughout this paper, we use the general term *oppression*—prolonged cruel or unjust treatment—as shorthand to refer to the more specific case of racialized injustice associated with the *coloniality of power* (e.g., Quijano, 2000): that is, direct,



systemic, and epistemic forms of violence that result from the lingering effects of European imperialism and colonialism inherent in the modern global order. Conversely, we use the general term of liberation as shorthand to refer to the specific case of freedom from such racialized violence.

ii) As decolonial theorists note, this Enlightenment conception of action was not a purely intellectual development divorced from political economy. Instead, this conception was inextricably implicated in—that is, was both a product of and affordance for—colonial expropriation and violence. Alternatively stated, the experience of freedom from contextual constraint that characterizes this dominant subject position came at the cost of increased constraint on the action of the dominated, whose productive action was a key element of the conditions of possibility that afforded the Enlightenment experience of abstraction from context and freedom from constraint.

iii) As we worked on this paper, world leaders gathered in South Africa to honor the memory of Nelson Mandela. Observers of the occasion (e.g., Beinart, 2013; <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/12/09/nelson-mandela-demanded-justice-before-forgiving-white-south-africans.html>) have noted how American discourse has emphasized Mandela's efforts as a peace-maker who promoted harmony by forgiving and embracing his oppressors. American discourse has tended to obscure or minimize Mandela's efforts as a freedom fighter who was willing to engage in acts of violence, if necessary, to obtain justice. Of particular relevance for the present analysis, Beinart (2013) notes that this relatively one-sided portrayal reflects an emphasis on peace and nonviolence in the present while obscuring truth about past violence that produced the present state of affairs.

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