


# Social Psychological Research on Racism and the Importance of Historical Context: Implications for Policy

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## Abstract

Psychology is the study of the mind, how it works, and how it affects behavior. In the context of intergroup relations and, specifically, the study of racism, the tight focus on mind and behavior has meant an incomplete understanding of racism and, crucially, an incomplete—and sometimes harmful—accounting of ways to redress it. Here, we put forth and summarize a long-standing but oft-neglected critique that psychology, by neglecting historical and systemic racism, offers incomplete and sometimes harmful solutions to redressing racism. We then discuss four examples of research that, by connecting psychology to history, might lead the way to better solutions. We close by joining others who have suggested that psychology must acknowledge historical and systemic racism and offering guidance for how researchers and psychology as a field might do this.

## Keywords

history, intergroup relations, policy, race, racism, social psychology

Psychology is the study of the mind, how it works, and how it affects behavior. In the context of intergroup relations and, specifically, the study of racism, the tight focus on mind and behavior has meant an incomplete understanding of racism (e.g., Brannon et al., 2017; Jones, 1998; Martín-Baró, 1994; Salter et al., 2018). Here, we extend the argument that psychology has focused too much on individual-level processes. We consider how this has led to an incomplete and sometimes harmful accounting of ways to redress racism. We argue that when individual-level solutions are put forth without historical sociocultural context, they can be harmful because they run the risk of obscuring systemic racism—the ways by which society privileges White people and disadvantages people of color through racist norms, practices, and policies and the historical legacies of these racist norms, practices, and policies (Feagin & Ducey, 2018). Minimizing systemic racism, in turn, obscures needed systemic change.

Indeed, research has shown that a historical lens is critical for perceiving and understanding systemic racism. This work has shown that historical knowledge about race and racism is associated with and leads to acknowledging systemic racism and supporting

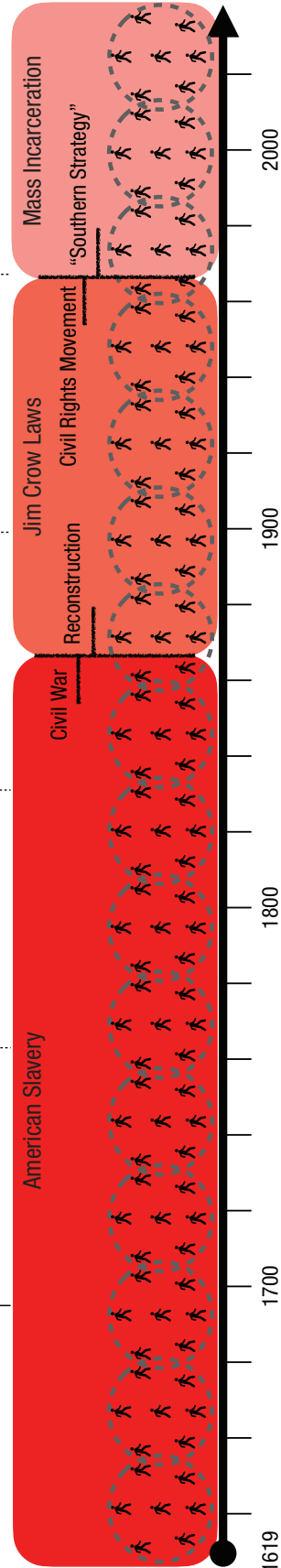
measures to redress it (e.g., Bonam et al., 2019). Paying attention to historical context can help psychological research connect individual prejudice, which is well studied, to systemic racism, which is not (see also Rucker & Richeson, 2021). By doing so, it can lead to constructive critiques of individual-level solutions often forwarded on the basis of psychological research.

In this review, we discuss four policy-relevant examples within the U.S. context. For each example, we start with a policy-related problem and describe some compelling psychological research addressing that problem. We then consider research incorporating historical context. We detail how such research shifts understanding of the problem and its solutions, from an understanding grounded in individual-level analysis to one that incorporates a system-level analysis. We capture our approach in Figure 1, the bottom portion of which shows individuals within groups within racist

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Policy Example	Relevant Historical Context		Implications for Individual Psychology	Implications for Policy Conversations
	American Slavery	Jim Crow Laws		
Confederate Monuments: Keep them or remove them?	Lynching of Black people is commonplace as a form of White social control and terrorism.	Confederate monuments are erected near institutions (e.g., courthouses) or Black spaces, often after Black progress.	Black Southerners show least support for Confederate symbols. White individuals' racist attitudes ("hate") predict their support for Confederate monuments, but also their Southern pride ("heritage").	Monuments are associated with hate at the systemic level. If we believe monuments associated with hate should not stand, then these should not stand.
Firearms: Who supports gun rights? Whose gun rights are protected?	White citizens are lawfully permitted to enter free and enslaved Black households to search for and seize firearms.	Black codes restrict Black people from owning firearms.	Individuals are increasingly seeking guns for felt safety, yet anti-Black motives still play a role in White individuals' gun attitudes, which also influence support for gun rights.	Gun laws should ensure the rights and safety of all people and not undermine those of marginalized communities. However, focusing on felt safety is not enough to mitigate the proliferation of guns.
Health Care: How do we reduce health-care disparities?	Race science is intended to justify treatment of Black people as inferior and not human.	Eugenics is commonplace, and medical-school training reinforces racist assumptions about race differences.	White individuals, on average, think Black people feel less pain than White people to the extent that they believe race is biological and Black people are physically tough.	Reducing health-care disparities should entail challenging cultural narratives. This may mean reimagining medical-school curricula. Debiasing individuals is not enough.
Pandemics: When do we support harsh policies to fight pandemics?	Racist narratives about Africa as a diseased place are used to justify the colonization of African land and enslavement of African people.	Beliefs about race and "contamination" are used to justify segregation (e.g., at public pools and water fountains).	White individuals, on average, are more concerned about a disease if it is associated with Africa, compared with other regions, and are willing to support harsher policies to stop its spread.	Policymakers should be mindful of ways in which policies amplify historical harms. Policymaking should not be guided by racist narratives.



**Fig. 1.** Considering the historical context of present-day systemic racism in the United States. Historical context informs individual psychology and, in turn, policy conversations. The timeline at the bottom shows three successive U.S. racist systems, each incorporating individuals within groups that overlap, such that knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and so on, are passed from one generation to another. The top portion of the figure presents four policy-relevant examples illustrating the importance of considering the historical context of systemic racism.

systems across time. The presence of racist systems is stable across time, even as those systems change, from slavery to Jim Crow to mass incarceration. The figure illustrates how the nature of systemic racism became less explicitly racist over time (e.g., mass incarceration must operate under a cultural norm of racial egalitarianism, which was not present during slavery or Jim Crow), a pattern reflected in the fading background color of the systems as time passes. The groups within these racist systems overlap across time, to highlight how individual knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, customs, and so on, are passed down from generation to generation (see Brannon et al., 2017). For each policy domain, the upper portion of the figure gives examples of historical context—from American slavery to mass incarceration—with implications for individual psychology and policy today. (Note that some of the examples are those found in the text, and others supplement the text.) We aim to highlight how individual-level psychology, divorced from historical context, is insufficient for understanding and redressing racism within each policy domain.

### **Confederate Monuments: How Contending With History Shifts Attention From Racial Attitudes to Systemic Racial Violence**

There are more than 1,500 Confederate monuments in the United States (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019). These monuments have been at the center of heated debate, lawsuits, protests, and even violence, as in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. More than 100 monuments have been removed in the past few years, often in communities grappling with histories of racial exploitation, violence, and discrimination. Still, many communities are at a standstill on this issue; some community members claim that these monuments reflect hate and must come down, and others claim that these monuments reflect “heritage, not hate,” and must stand (Morning Consult & Politico, 2021). We believe psychology research can add to this debate. It has documented Americans’ divergent beliefs, that monuments reflect heritage and hate, and has shown that Southern pride and racist attitudes both predict support for the Confederate flag (e.g., Wright & Esses, 2017). This work sheds light on individual beliefs and individual psychology. It shows that people’s Southern pride (“heritage”) is indeed associated with their support for Confederate monuments. This work, then, gives voice to each side of the debate, allowing the debate to proceed as a war of opinions.

Work by historians and other scholars provides useful context, laying bare the underlying racist motives

in a now-muddled policy debate. It shows that Confederate monuments were built to intimidate and terrorize Black communities (American Historical Association, 2017). Inspired by this work, in our own work we have considered the historical context and meaning of Confederate monuments (Henderson et al., 2021). We connected Confederate monuments to racial violence, specifically, lynchings. We examined lynching—an extreme form of racist violence sanctioned by formal institutions (e.g., Ifill, 2018). We reasoned that if Confederate monuments reflect systemic violence, Confederate monuments and lynching should be associated. This is indeed what we found—that the number of lynchings in a county is a significant predictor of the number of Confederate monuments in that county, controlling for relevant covariates (e.g., population, county area). This work, then, reveals that the “heritage, not hate” claim is false. These monuments are associated with hate. They are lasting and visible representations of anti-Blackness, and tied to periods when explicit anti-Black racism was tolerated and normative at both the systemic and the individual levels. If, as a society, we believe monuments associated with hate should not stand (at least as originally erected), then Confederate monuments ought to be removed from public spaces.

### **Firearms: How Contending With History Shifts Attention to Systemic Racism in Seemingly Race-Neutral Policy Debates**

The United States has the highest rates of civilian firearm ownership globally and the highest rates of firearm-related deaths among comparable industrialized countries. Psychological research has begun to contribute important insights into guns and gun ownership. It has found that guns can provide a sense of psychological safety, particularly among people who perceive the world as a dangerous place and who own guns for personal protection (for a review, see Buttrick, 2020). This work, then, sheds light on individual psychology and the symbolic meaning of protective gun ownership and provides new avenues for intervention. It suggests that public campaigns aimed at increasing support for gun-control measures ought to reassure people that the world is a (relatively) safe place and that the government and other institutions will protect them. However, this ignores historical context. Adding historical context in this case can reveal underlying racist motives in a seemingly race-neutral policy debate.

Throughout U.S. history, many White Americans have used the right to bear arms to maintain White supremacy. For example, before the Civil War, “well-regulated militias,” granted by the Second Amendment, were used

as slave patrols (Winkler, 2011). Some Southern states enacted laws that permitted all-White militias and citizen patrols to enter free and enslaved Black households to search for, seize, and administer punishment for found firearms (Cottrol & Diamond, 1991). After the Civil War, many Black Union soldiers legally purchased their firearms to protect their families and communities from the expected backlash of former White enslavers and Southerners. On cue, armed White-supremacist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, sought out Black households known to possess firearms and seized Black Americans' legal firearms violently and often fatally (e.g., lynchings; Winkler, 2011).

In more recent history, stricter gun-control laws passed with the full backing of conservative politicians and groups when Black Americans used legal gun ownership to resist racial oppression. The Mulford Act of 1967, which prohibited the open carrying of loaded firearms in California, was signed into law by California Governor Ronald Reagan and supported by the National Rifle Association. Although the law was race-neutral at face value, the quick passage and implementation of the law were attributed to concerns about the Black Panther Party, whose members had begun carrying loaded firearms to protect Black Americans from police brutality in the late 1960s (Winkler, 2011).

Guided by this history, some psychological research has shown that gun ownership is tied to anti-Blackness. For instance, research has shown that counties' dependence on slavery—as measured by county-level population of enslaved people in 1860—predicts present-day rates of gun ownership (Buttrick & Mazen, 2022). Moreover, in our own work, we have found that anti-Black attitudes strongly predict opposition to gun control among White Americans (Higginbotham et al., 2022; see also Filindra & Kaplan, 2016, for experimental support). In three experiments, we also found that White Americans with strong anti-Black attitudes associated the right to own a gun with White people more than with Black people, and were less supportive of gun rights such as concealed carrying when they perceived Black Americans to be legally using these rights at a faster rate than White Americans (Higginbotham et al., 2022). These findings raise difficult questions about gun-reform efforts intended to reassure Americans that the world is a relatively safe place and that the government and other institutions will protect them. In practical terms, what does it mean to reassure White gun owners who feel threatened by rapidly changing racial demographics, given that firearms have long been used to reinforce White supremacy? Most notably, these findings highlight the need for interventions that ensure that all gun owners, including Black owners and owners from other marginalized groups, feel safe and protected.

## **Health Disparities: How Contending With History Shifts Attention From Racial Attitudes to Cultural Narratives Rooted in Racist Institutions**

The goal of health care is to reduce pain and suffering. But work on pain and pain-care disparities has made it clear that patients of color—and Black patients, in particular—are suffering. This work has shown that, compared with White patients, Black patients are less likely to receive pain medication, and when they receive it, they receive less of it (Green et al., 2003). Social psychological research addressing this disparity—including our own—has focused on racial bias in pain perception. It has shown that people in the United States, including medically trained personnel, often assume that Black people feel less pain than do White people<sup>1</sup>—hence, the disparity in pain management (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2016; Mende-Siedlecki et al., 2019). The solution, this work suggests, is to debias medical personnel. This work exposes a heretofore unrecognized source of bias in health care and suggests new solutions. But these solutions—targeting individual-level biases—ignore historical context.

Adding historical context can contextualize these individual biases and help people realize that these biases are not benign or innocent, but rooted in a long history of exploitation. In some of our work, we have found that many people in the United States, including medically trained personnel, assume that Black people's bodies are fundamentally and biologically different (Hoffman et al., 2016). For example, many medical students and residents in our sample believed that Black people age more slowly than White people. Many believed that Black people's skin is thicker than White people's skin. Historically, these beliefs—beliefs about racial differences, biological inferiority, and physical strength—justified chattel slavery and the inhumane treatment of enslaved people (Kendi, 2016). Today, these same beliefs are associated with the belief that Black people feel less pain than White people and with disparities in treatment recommendations (Hoffman et al., 2016). This work, then, suggests that racial bias in pain perception is not only an individual-level issue; it has roots in historical narratives. And challenging these racist narratives will be difficult. Research suggests that medical schools' curricula continue to use race as a proxy for biology; in one study, for example, researchers coded lecture slides used in medical-school classes and found that race, when mentioned, was almost always presented as a biological risk factor (Tsai et al., 2016). The solution, then, is not only debiasing medical personnel but also challenging historical narratives about race and biology, including in medical-school curricula.

## **Pandemics: How Contending With History Shifts Attention From Racial Attitudes to Racist Narratives Used to Justify the Dehumanization of Black People**

At the time we wrote this manuscript, another wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was sweeping the world, renewing calls for mask mandates, shutdowns, and travel bans. Psychology research has contributed to understanding of disease, and reactions to disease. It has shown that people often fear unfamiliar out-groups because of the pathogens they might carry (e.g., Murray & Schaller, 2016). This work suggests that responses to diseases—particularly diseases tied to out-groups—are rooted in pathogen avoidance. It provides important insight into individual psychology and how bias can be rooted in concerns about one's survival. These insights, however, ignore historical context specific to race and racism. Adding historical context, in this case, can draw attention to the global and exploitive origins of anti-Black racism.

Narratives about race, nations, and disease have a long and ugly history. Indeed, European powers justified the colonization of Africa by depicting Africa as a dark and diseased place (Vaughan, 1991). This dehumanizing has persisted. This was clear in the news coverage of and response to HIV/AIDS and Ebola (Seay & Dionne, 2014). In our work (Trawalter et al., 2022), we found that, on average, people in the United States were more concerned about a pandemic originating in Africa than about a pandemic originating elsewhere, and were more supportive of travel bans against African countries than of travel bans against other countries. We also found that people in the United States were more concerned about contracting COVID-19 after reading about COVID-19 rates in an African, as opposed to a European, country. In fact, they were as concerned about COVID-19 after reading about low COVID-19 rates in Africa as they were after reading about high COVID-19 rates in Europe. They were also more supportive of travel bans against an African country to the extent that they were more worried about COVID-19 in the African than in the European context. These findings suggest that many people continue to see Africa as a diseased place, even when the facts do not support this conclusion. Moreover, these concerns inform their policy support, including their support for travel bans.

Taken together, this work suggests that the response to pandemics continues to be guided by racist narratives—narratives rooted in a history of anti-Blackness and colonization. Pandemics are devastating, of course, but society's responses cannot be guided by these narratives (see also Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2022). Our work suggests that society needs to confront

historical narratives, not only individual bias, to respond to diseases and pandemics in ways that do not amplify historical harms.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Last year, the American Psychological Association issued an apology for its role in “promoting, perpetuating, and failing to challenge racism” and resolved to do better (American Psychological Association, 2021). It acknowledged that addressing historical and contemporary harms due to racism will require redress at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic levels. Psychological research—with its focus on individuals—can speak to individual and interpersonal redress. But this focus can also provide a narrow lens. A casual reader of psychological research could come away with the impression that Confederate monuments reflect heritage, that guns promote felt safety, that health-care disparities in pain management are the result of physicians' faulty perceptions, and that policy responses to pandemics are grounded in legitimate fears of contagion. They could also come away with the impression that debates over Confederate monuments, guns, health-care disparities, and pandemics are overblown and simply require individual-level change. Psychological research that is centered on history and its legacy, however, reveals important nuances: Confederate monuments are associated with hate, guns are tied to the maintenance of White supremacy, physicians' perceptions follow from a long history of medical racism, and responses to pandemics are biased in ways that further the reach of long-held racist narratives. Such research can make people more mindful of individual- and system-level solutions.

Looking ahead, how can psychological research make history and its legacy more legible? The first step is relatively straightforward: Psychologists can provide historical and sociocultural context when presenting individual-level research. The next steps are decidedly harder: Psychologists will need to incorporate historical and sociocultural analysis into research questions, hypotheses, designs, analyses, and conclusions. These steps will require diverse multidisciplinary teams, which can make research harder and more time- and resource-intensive. They will require acknowledging and challenging racism in who is included in the research process and how the resulting work is reviewed and valued (e.g., Bharat et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2020). They will require reimagining the promotion and tenure process, which is currently driven by the number of publications in top-ranked journals. Multidisciplinary work is often more difficult to publish in disciplinary journals and is increasingly difficult to publish in

top-ranked multidisciplinary journals (Callier, 2018). A related point is that social psychologists will need to value other methodologies (see Lewis, 2021). Although social psychologists can experimentally manipulate perceptions and knowledge of history (see Salter et al., 2018), incorporating historical context and measures may not always fit experimental paradigms.

Psychologists can do this. Psychological research can challenge racism by providing individual-level solutions—it already has—but in ways that do not ignore the history of racism or obscure the need for coordinated systemic change. One way it can do this is through deliberate and concerted efforts to incorporate historical context. This kind of research could then point to when and why individual change is not enough and systemic change is necessary; it could shed light on when and why people oppose systemic change and how to overcome such opposition; and ultimately, it could reveal the imprint of historical racism on cultures and individuals, and bring about meaningful social change—change that can reduce harm and empower racially marginalized groups. We think it is that kind of research that will bring psychologists to the policymakers' table, as it should.

### Recommended Reading

- Bharat, B., Chenneville, T., Gabbidon, K., & Foust, C. (2021). (See References). Offers concrete recommendations for how to position racial justice at the center of psychological research.
- Bonam, C. M., Nair Das, V., Coleman, B. R., & Salter, P. (2019). (See References). Shows that increasing historical knowledge leads to greater recognition of systemic racism.
- Feagin, J. R., & Ducey, K. (2018). (See References). Defines systemic racism and outlines its historical antecedents and contemporary manifestations.
- Roberts, S. O., Bareket-Shavit, C., Dollins, F. A., Goldie, P. D., & Mortenson, E. (2020). (See References). Documents racial inequality in psychological research, specifically showing that psychological research has often neglected issues of race and racism, often at the hands of White editors and White authors.
- Rucker, J. M., & Richeson, J. A. (2021). (See References). Lays out the importance of historical knowledge for recognizing systemic racism and provides a framework by which a historical lens in psychological research could ameliorate current understanding of systemic racism.

### Transparency

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### Note

1. In these studies, participants were asked to estimate the amount of pain a Black or White person or patient would feel in various scenarios (e.g., if they slammed their hand in a car door, cut their finger on a piece of paper, or had a broken bone or a kidney stone).

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