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ARTICLE



Attachment research and anti-racism: learning from Black and Brown scholars

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ABSTRACT

Preliminary evidence suggests that people and scholars of African and/or Latin American and Caribbean origin are often under-represented in mainstream attachment scholarship. In this commentary, we highlight the difficulty of conducting attachment theory research outside of the United States, particularly in Latin American countries. We reflect on the contributions by the authors of this special issue. We also identify (a) ways in which to center the experiences of Black and Brown people and scholars to push the field toward antiracism, and (b) the challenges of attachment theory and research in becoming anti-racist by considering the structural nature of racism.

KEYWORDS

Attachment; racism; anti-racism

The movement for Black lives has protested against the murder by the police of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, as well as many other Black and Brown people¹ in the United States. This movement is a struggle for Black liberation which includes freedom from systemic racism (Hargons et al., 2017), that has extended to some countries in Latin America following the murder by the police of people of African descent in 2020, such as João Alberto Silvera Freitas in Brazil and Anderson Arboleda in Colombia. Racism against Indigenous people is further compounded with economic exclusion and exploitation in countries such as Peru (Santos, 2014), and Chile, where protests have been met with abuse and repression by law enforcement (PNUD, 2017).

This racial reckoning is also taking place in academia. Although scholars in some fields of psychology have already examined the implications of the movement for Black lives on research, practice, and youth activism (Hargons et al., 2017; Hope et al., 2016), other fields are now addressing these issues. In this context, the current special issue in *Attachment and Human Development* on “Attachment Perspectives on Race, Prejudice, and Antiracism” is timely. In this commentary, we review articles by Dunbar and Leerkes (in press), McBride Murry et al. (in press), Mikulincer and Shaver (in press), and Tyrell and

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Masten (*in press*), that provide counter-narratives to the dominant portrayals of Black families and attachment patterns as pathological. We also identify (a) ways in which to center the experiences of Black and Brown people and scholars to push the field toward antiracism, and (b) the challenges of attachment theory and research in becoming anti-racist by considering the structural nature of racism.

Learning from Black and Brown scholars

This moment is an opportunity for attachment researchers to learn from Black and Brown people (e.g. Fuller & García Coll, 2010), and scholars who have conducted outstanding theory, research, and interventions on racism and antiracism for decades, and whose work is often rendered invisible (e.g. Syed et al., 2018). This is important because some evidence suggests that researchers and people of African and/or Latin American and Caribbean origin are often under-represented in mainstream attachment theory. We identified 1.47% articles centered on populations of African origin and 1.47% articles centered on populations of Latin American and Caribbean origin published from 2010 to 2020 in arguably the most prestigious journal on attachment theory and research, *Attachment and Human Development*.² Researchers of African and/or Latin American origin comprise a small minority of the corresponding authors of articles published in this period (for exceptions, see Mooya et al., 2016; Nóbrega et al., 2019).

Moreover, some evidence also suggests that attachment theory is not prominent in scholarship centered on the lives and experience of people of African and/or Latin American and Caribbean origin. We identified zero articles focused on attachment theory published from 2010 to 2020 in the *Journal of Black Psychology* (a journal of the Association of Black Psychologists) and only 2.29% of articles focused on attachment theory published in the *Journal of Latinx Psychology* (a journal of the National Latinx Psychological Association). In some countries in Latin America, however, attachment theory has received increasing attention in the last decade following the pioneer work of scholars such as Germán Posada and Olga Alicia Carbonell in Colombia and Sonia Gojman in Mexico, and efforts to create research networks and projects (Causadias et al., 2011).

Although this evidence is preliminary, it suggests a disconnection between attachment theory and researchers and people of African and/or Latin American and Caribbean origin. This is unfortunate, given the potential of attachment theory to illuminate relational dynamics and their developmental legacy (Sroufe et al., 2009), and the considerable importance and investment put on family, parenting, and community by people of African (Taylor et al., 2016) and/or Latin American and Caribbean descent (Abreu et al., 2020). But instead of drawing on these strengths to document the link between secure attachments and a range of positive well-being indicators, some studies using attachment theory among people of African descent often focus exclusively on experiences of risk and poverty (Dexter et al., 2013), which can reinforce deficit models (Tyrell & Masten, *in press*).

Attachment theory has been criticized for its lack of cross-cultural validity, its over-reliance on assessment instruments centered on the experience of Europeans and European Americans, and its disregard for cultural variation (Keller, 2018). Our goal is not to reiterate these arguments. On the contrary, we believe attachment theory is a valuable framework to advance our understanding of human development as well as

an important tool to improve our knowledge of intergroup processes (Tropp, 2021). We are part of a group that created an attachment research network in Latin America (Causadias et al., 2011), published the first handbook of attachment in Spanish (Torres et al., 2014), and conducted innovative attachment research in Chile (Cárcamo et al., 2016), Mexico (Salinas-Quiroz, 2015), and Peru (Nóblega et al., 2019). Pioneering research has also been conducted in Africa (Mooya et al., 2016).

We believe our research could enrich attachment theory and expand its potential to explain the developmental implications of early relationships. However, studies that are not published in English, or led by English speaking scholars, are often ignored, not cited, and rendered invisible. We argue that attachment theory is an incomplete endeavor that needs to incorporate the knowledge, experience, and perspectives of people and researchers of African and/or Latin and Caribbean descent, as well as Indigenous, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and multiracial people. Even some of our own work and academic communities have often failed to represent the lives, experiences, and scholarship of Afro-Latinx and Indigenous people, endorsing a fallacy of raceless Latinidad (Adames et al., 2020).

For instance, those of us working in Latin America have struggled with the high costs associated with conducting attachment research; attachment research often requires extensive training on measures such as the Adult Attachment Interview, the Strange Situation Procedure, and the Attachment Q-sort. This training tends to be expensive and often provided exclusively in the United States, requiring a considerable time and financial investment from scholars in Latin America. Also, conducting attachment research in Latin American is challenging because we often lack the academic infrastructure, adequate funding, and recruitment capabilities to collect large samples. Publishing in journals such as *Attachment & Human Development* can be difficult too given that many scholars in Latin American are not fluent in English. At the end, attachment research in Latin America remains limited to a few scholars that have the academic, financial, and linguistic capital to overcome these constrains.

The special issue on “attachment perspectives on race, prejudice, and antiracism”

In this issue, Dunbar and Leerkes (in press) investigated Black mothers’ preparation for racial bias messages, as well as restrictive and supportive responses to their children’s distress at age 5, and children’s behavioral and emotional self-regulation at age 6. They found that children’s self-regulation was predicted by mothers’ preparation for bias when they reported moderate levels of suppression and high levels support in response to children’s distress. We note that historically, Black people have been expected to suppress their emotions as a survival tool during various articulations of White terrorism (e.g. the transatlantic slave trade, Jim Crow, and even presently as White supremacists and police target them). Creating a “safe haven” within Black families is crucial in fostering a sense of safety within contexts that threaten their survival. As attachment researchers seek to be anti-racist and address issues of underrepresentation, we urge them to listen to the needs of Black and Brown families.

McBride Murry et al. ([in press](#)) conducted a study on the effects of racism and family relationship quality in African American youth's transition from middle childhood to adolescence. They found that family relationship quality buffered against the effects of racism by reducing the incidence of anxiety and depression, and had the positive effect of promoting social competence. Important research such as this is needed as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse about Black families, employed a robust methodology, and documented the protective and promotive role of relationships in Black youth development. Furthermore, future research should examine how family relationship quality may buffer against the development of racist attitudes among White families.

Mikulincer and Shaver ([in press](#)) introduce a “broaden and build” cycle of attachment security as a means of overcoming prejudice, discrimination, and racism. The authors argue that sense of safety and security emerges from interactions with sensitive caregivers (and later, relationship partners), and promotes emotion regulation, resilience in the face of adversity, and empathy to others. They suggest that attachment security can help decrease and overcome prejudice, discrimination, and racism by diminishing biased attitudes and discriminatory behavior toward members of other social or racial groups, and protecting those who experience discrimination against its negative effects, as well as discrimination directed toward oneself.

Tyrell and Masten ([in press](#)) argued that theory and research on Black fathering is anchored in a deficit perspective, disregarding the structural inequalities and challenges they face, and the protective function of fathering in Black families. The authors argue for improving theory and methods to better reflect the rich dynamics of attachment in Black families. Future research should also focus on co-parenting between Black fathers and mothers, and Black fathering with boys and girls. Research is also needed on Black gay fathers, since they may challenge gendered and parenthood expectations and are judged more harshly than lesbian mothers because they are perceived as violating traditional gender roles and the hegemonic model of masculinity (Salinas-Quiroz et al., 2018). Additionally, researchers should consider the way Black fathers support their lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender non-conforming children.

The importance of addressing the structural nature of racism

One of the main challenges of attachment theory and research in becoming anti-racist is to consider the structural foundations of racism, of which global White supremacy is the largest example. Several racism scholars move beyond individual-level prejudice and emphasize the systemic and institutional nature of racism that serves to create and maintain racial inequities (Neblett, 2019; Neville et al., 2013; Seaton et al., 2018); the antiblackness and racial inequities that moved people to protest in the streets in 2020 during a global health pandemic. Most psychology researchers in this area draw on the pioneering work of James Jones (1972), who defined racism as the use of power against a racialized group considered inferior by people and institutions with or without the intentional support of the whole society, and operating at the individual (or interpersonal), institutional, and cultural levels.

Although investigations of interpersonal racism are critical for understanding its influence on individuals, they should be accompanied by research on how racism is embedded within societal structures. This is crucial because structural racism is

a dynamic interaction between history, culture, institutions, and interpersonal relationships (Churchwell et al., 2020). Racism goes beyond individual racial bias and prejudice, encompassing laws, social norms, and institutional policy (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Omi & Winant, 2015). Racism extends individual experiences in the here and now, as it has enduring collective effects on people. What is needed to advance the field is an articulation of the lived experiences and histories of specific groups (e.g. African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans). This would include a recognition of the enduring racial trauma triggered by police and state violence, slavery, and genocide.

To advance anti-racism we need to reject the idea that some groups are superior and others inferior, acknowledge that racial inequalities and power differentials are driven by racism, commit to overcoming these dynamics through institutional and cultural transformation, and change policies and not just how people think (Kendi, 2019). At its core, anti-racism is an ongoing process of direct action taken by institutions, communities, and individuals to eradicate racial oppression (Aldana et al., 2019). The over-psychologizing of complex social-political-economic processes can be avoided by centering the discussion on the perspectives of people of African and/or Latin and Caribbean descent, as well as Indigenous, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and multiracial people. For these reasons, we welcome the contributions to this special issue that acknowledge the structural nature of racism and its repercussions, while emphasizing the strengths of Black families.

Conclusions and future directions

In sum, we believe this special issue is an important reminder of the need to challenge racism and become anti-racist. We need to do better to honor the legacy of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Alberto Silvera Freitas, and Anderson Arboleda, amongst many others. We invite attachment researchers to learn from Black and Brown scholars in psychology and other fields who have conducted outstanding theory, research, and interventions on racism and antiracism for decades. The field could benefit from a deeper analysis of racism and the ways it operates within this area of study and in society more generally. Also, building on the articles on this special issue, more research is needed on the cultural strengths that mitigate against the harmful effects of racism, and that promote positive development within Black and Brown families and communities. We encourage attachment researchers to make structural changes to the field by inviting Black and Brown scholars to their editorial boards, research teams, and handbooks. There is a time to talk, and there is a time to listen. Now is the time to listen to experts on racism and anti-racism, read their work, and cite them.

Notes

1. We use the term Black and Brown broadly to represent people of color who are minoritized. Although we focus mostly on people of African and/or Latin American and Caribbean origin, we also include in this label Indigenous, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and multiracial people.
2. For full details about the search strategy and results for each search, see https://osf.io/3tjfm/?view_only=bce3986efb5745738d8352a03cd8173c

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