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Behavioral & Brain Sciences

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December 11, 2020

National Institute of Mental Health
Office for Disparities Research and Workforce Diversity
6001 Executive Boulevard, Room 6200, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663

Dear Dr. Beckel-Mitchener:

I write on behalf of the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences (FABBS). FABBS is a coalition of 26 scientific societies that share an interest in advancing the cognitive, brain, and behavioral sciences in support of furthering research knowledge and improving public health and welfare. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the NIMH Request for Information on “Fostering Innovative Research to Improve Mental Health Outcomes Among Minority and Health Disparities Populations.”

The impact of racism, both individual and systemic, on mental and physical health is well-documented in the social and behavioral sciences. In addition, cognitive and behavioral scientists have shown how bias, including implicit bias, operates to disadvantage minorities. Further, behavioral scientists and health psychologists have explored how racism “gets under the skin” to impact mental and physical health. The development of a minority mental health research agenda will provide much-needed attention and a coherent strategy for addressing a long-standing public health problem.

We recommend that the “next generation” research agenda include an analysis of the links between racism, bias, prejudice and health at *all levels of analysis*: environmental, cultural, psychosocial, behavioral, cognitive, and biological (e.g. physiological, neurological). While our recommendations are focused on research examining the mechanisms by which racism impacts mental health, a thorough understanding of how racism affects all aspects of behavior will be important in developing a full and coherent description of the problems and potential solutions.

Due to the ongoing interpersonal and systematic discrimination faced by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities, and, most recently, the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these communities, it is imperative that researchers continue examining the effects of discrimination as well as ways to help mitigate these effects. Although discrimination is widely assumed to drive significant health disparities observed between groups in



society, we need more research that addresses the processes through which discrimination affects mental health, in particular.

Specific recommendations for research priority areas:

Mechanisms

- Consider multiple levels of analysis to measure interpersonal and structural discrimination to enhance our understanding of the contextual influences of discrimination in ways that can inform policy.
- Investigate the pathways through which emotional responses to interpersonal discrimination promote or reduce the risk of engaging in maladaptive health behaviors. The experience of discrimination can put people at higher risk for engaging in health behaviors that may serve a stress-reducing function in the short-term, but may ultimately increase risk for disease (e.g., alcohol drinking). For example, when and for whom does engagement in a risky behavior: (a) serve to cope with a stressor by diffusing an aversive emotional state; (b) reflect a break-down of self-regulation, making tempting, unhealthy behaviors harder to resist and healthy behaviors less appealing; or (c) reflect a steep discounting function such that effects far into the future are given less weight than effects in the near present? Understanding these pathways can better inform future interventions.
- Examine the self-regulatory and affective mechanisms through which interpersonal discrimination impact health behaviors.
- Research that examines the interaction of stress and behavioral responses to discrimination, such as negative affect and disinhibition.

Interventions

- Explore coping strategies at the individual, family and/or community level, such as racial affirmation, that highlight positive group-identifications and feelings of connectedness. Racial discrimination is linked with systematic disadvantage and social inequities that can foster hopelessness, perceived inefficacy, and anger, all of which can increase the use of coping strategies that can have harmful health effects.
- Research on support networks has been theorized to be a potentially important adaptive coping mechanism in response to discrimination-based stress, but more empirical evidence is needed. A 2009 meta-



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analysis found mixed results for the effects of social support on physical health [Pascoe, E. A., & Richman, L. S. (2009). Perceived discrimination and health. *Psychological Bulletin*, 135(4), 531-554.]. Psychosocial resources such as social support may be an important mechanism by which individuals cope with the stress of perceived discrimination, but there is little generalizable empirical evidence to determine whether social support does in fact make a difference in how people respond to these experiences.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input. Research in this area is critically needed to help resolve a persistent problem in public health, especially now as COVID-19 has highlighted the urgency of the issue. Research in the cognitive and behavioral sciences can make significant contributions to our understanding of the problems and our ability to address these critical issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Juliane Baron'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial 'J' and a long, sweeping tail.

Juliane Baron
Executive Director