

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Previously Published Works

Title

Ethical Implications of Using the Term “Non-white” in Psychological Research

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1zq6b9vr>

Journal

Ethics & Behavior, 24(4)

ISSN

1050-8422

Authors

Madowitz, Jennifer
Boutelle, Kerri N

Publication Date

2014-07-04

DOI

10.1080/10508422.2013.858604

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



Ethical Implications of Using the Term “Non-white” in Psychological Research

Jennifer Madowitz & Kerri N. Boutelle

To cite this article: Jennifer Madowitz & Kerri N. Boutelle (2014) Ethical Implications of Using the Term “Non-white” in Psychological Research, *Ethics & Behavior*, 24:4, 306-310, DOI: [10.1080/10508422.2013.858604](https://doi.org/10.1080/10508422.2013.858604)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508422.2013.858604>



Accepted author version posted online: 15 Nov 2013.
Published online: 15 Nov 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 115



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Ethical Implications of Using the Term “Non-white” in Psychological Research

Jennifer Madowitz

*Joint Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology
San Diego State University/University of California, San Diego*

Kerri N. Boutelle

*Joint Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology
San Diego State University/University of California, San Diego
Department of Pediatrics and Department of Psychiatry
University of California, San Diego*

Psychologists have long been concerned with the welfare and competent treatment of underserved populations. However, terminology used in psychological research is not always conducive to cultural sensitivity. This article discusses why the term “non-white” may be less sensitive to diverse populations and provides practical alternatives to this nomenclature. In addition, the authors examine the literature from 2008 to 2012 to establish whether the term “non-white” is still used to describe populations in psychological research. The article concludes with several recommendations for how researchers could choose to proceed in regards to identifying populations using culturally sensitive and relevant language.

Keywords: non-white, human subjects, ethics, discrimination, research participants

INTRODUCTION

A primary tenet of the American Psychological Association’s (2002, 2010) Code of Ethics is to “do no harm.” This fundamental principle has a long history over the advancement of medicine, psychology, and psychological science. However, some of the nomenclature that is currently used in psychological research may not be fulfilling this ethical standard. The purpose of this article is to evaluate the ethics of using the term “non-white” in psychological research literature.

The use of race in psychological and other health research has been a difficult and contested aspect of data collection and analysis (Sun, 2010). Although the use of the term “non-white” has become taboo in many research areas, psychology research manuscripts have continued to utilize this nomenclature to describe research samples. This issue is of importance due to the relatively harmful nature of the term “non-white.”

Correspondence should be addressed to Jennifer Madowitz, San Diego State University/University of California, San Diego, Clinical Psychology, 8950 Villa La Jolla Drive, 4459 Nabal Drive, La Jolla, CA 92037. E-mail: jmadowitz@gmail.com

USE OF THE TERM “NON-WHITE”

Clinical psychology researchers are in a unique position to influence activities in the scientific literature. Researchers who work with underserved populations in certain settings often find difficulty in recruiting such persons for large-scale psychological studies. Psychologists are often forced to combine race and ethnic groups in statistical analyses by virtue of the fact that studies do not have large-enough samples of diverse populations to analyze each racial and ethnic group separately. Although there has been a movement to improve recruitment and retention of diverse populations, the issue of small sample sizes of diverse populations persists (Alcaraz, Weaver, Andresen, Christopher, & Kreuter, 2011; Kao et al., 2011; Quinn et al., 2012).

Most statistical methods rely on having large-enough samples, which limits the methods of analysis that can be performed when the racial/ethnic categories are not large enough. When the number of participants in each group does not reach a specific level that will provide statistical power, many researchers combine different ethnic minority populations into one group to run analyses. There is a common practice of dichotomizing study populations into two samples: one being Caucasian, and another consisting of a combination of any and all other persons who self-identify with different ethnic groups. This may be a necessary step for successful statistical analyses and exploring possible effects within a given study. Many researchers choose to define the second, heterogeneous group as “non-white.” However, the use of the term “non-white” in these situations is a controversial step, and one that can be easily avoided (Sun, 2010). There are several terms that allow for researchers to dichotomize their samples while avoiding using the term “non-white.”

To demonstrate the use of the term “non-white,” we performed a literature search using PsycINFO. The search was restricted to the years 2008 to 2012 to evaluate the most recent trends in modern psychological research. The authors first began with a general search that would yield all psychological research manuscripts published on human psychological research. When searching PsycINFO for years 2008 to 2012 specifying document type: journal articles, and population group: humans, this search yielded 516,898 results. Following this initial search, the authors added the search term “non white,” this search yielded 3,471 results. Additionally, the researchers modified the search term to “non-white,” which yielded an additional 596 results. A final search was performed which included “nonwhite” as the search term; this search yielded 190 search results. Thus, the researchers located 4,257 articles that included a variant of the term “non white.” Thus a base rate of .82% was found for psychological research manuscripts that use the term “nonwhite” to define sample populations within this 5-year period.

Although this is a small percentage of the total number of psychology research articles published in this time frame, this is evidence that the practice of using the term “non-white” is still present in the psychology research publications.

THE POTENTIAL HARM CAUSED BY USING THE TERM “NON-WHITE”

The term non-white categorizes the person by defining what they are not. As Dr. Sun Key confirms in his article on criminological research, “‘Non-white’ is not a race, not an ethnicity, not a culture, and not a social class” (Sun, 2010). The possible harm with this definition is that it reiterates the idea that the racial standard in American society is white, and therefore all other races should

be measured using “white” as a reference point. For those interested in the general concept of “white” as the default and accepted racial category in American society, the authors direct interested parties to one of the definitive publications on white privilege written by McIntosh (1988).

This type of term is not used for other demographic descriptors, that is, one does not see the term “non-doctors” to describe psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family therapists. Another example pertaining to race would be to refer to a group of people as “non-Asians.” For a child or adult in the United States, having one’s self defined by not being in the historical “in-group” may be harmful for general well-being, as has been discussed in terms of chronic exposure to racism (Brondolo, Hausmann, et al., 2011; R. Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). The use of the term “non-white” could be interpreted as “racial microaggression,” a subtle but negative or invalidating interaction involving a person’s race (Sue et al., 2007). Psychological researchers may not know that this categorization has the potential to be harmful, but such subtle and passive actions can have an effect on diverse populations, even if there is no malicious intent. Studies on chronic exposure to racism have shown negative effects in the realms of psychology and medicine (V. R. Clark, 2001; Fang & Myers, 2001). These findings may even become more pronounced in institutionalized racism (in this case, through nationally funded scientific research) as opposed to individual exposure to racism (Brondolo, Love, Pencille, Schoenthaler, & Ogedegbe, 2011).

There are further ethical dilemmas of using the term “non-white” beyond the potential to propagate institutional racism. When a study participant self-identifies as a member of an ethnic minority population, they have consented to allow the investigator to use this information for scientific research. However, when the investigator changes this self-identification from the specific group in question (e.g., African American) and changes it to “non-white,” the investigator has identified the participant in a way that they did not actively identify themselves. This creates the possibility that the term “non-white” may potentially provide scientifically inaccurate information due to its lack of specificity. For instance, the current president of the United States, Barack Obama, may identify as African American, and would therefore be put into the category of “non-white,” which is not technically correct, as he is one half Caucasian. Persons who identify as “mixed race” in research studies may automatically be relegated into the “non-white” category, especially if explicit details are not required by the study protocol.

PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVES

As Toni Morrison (1987) wrote, “Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined” (p. 190). It is possible that the term “non-white” has been created or used by those who would not fall into this category. It may be a more advantageous option to use nomenclature that has been created in diverse communities to best describe these communities in a respectful way that allows for self-determination.

There are various alternatives to the term non-white. “People of color” was a term coined in the 1960s by members of the civil rights movement to provide a positive identifier for people who are from diverse backgrounds. The term “citizens of color” was used as early as 1963 in Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. The term “people of color” is a positive alternative to “non-white” because it does not define a people based on what they are not—a definition based on deficit. “People of color,” however, suggests an identity that is based in pride and self-affirmation, as opposed to comparison with a historical group.

Another option for researchers is to include the individual ethnicity (Hispanic or Latino, Not Hispanic or Latino), and racial categories (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Black or African American, white) that are provided by the National Institutes of Health (2001). Researchers may put forth the full names of the categories in text, in notes, or in figures. It is then possible for the data to be collapsed in order to provide for a Caucasian group and a group with diverse racial backgrounds. Once the study participants have been dichotomized into two groups, the researcher may refer to this group as “the racially diverse group,” “ethnically diverse group,” “the group of diverse racial backgrounds,” or the “heterogeneous group.” Thus the collapsed group diverse races would be defined by their own characteristics, rather than being defined by what they are not (i.e., white).

DISCUSSION

Although the number of psychological articles that contain the term “non-white” may be in the minority of psychology studies, there is clearly a large number of articles that are still being published using this vernacular. Although researchers may argue that it is necessary to dichotomize study populations into two groups to obtain the required statistical power: these two groups are often divided into (a) Caucasian and (b) members of ethnic minority groups. However, it is not a requirement that the second mentioned group is defined as “non-white.”

The purpose of this article was to analyze the use of the term “non-white” and reasons why psychologists should move away from this terminology. We also provided evidence that the use of “non-white” is still pervasive. We presented several rationales for why researchers should avoid using term “non-white” when aiming to conduct multicultural research in a respectful manner, including the possibility that the term “non-white” may be interpreted as a microaggression. Finally, we have suggested a simple but empowering phrase—“people of color”—to use instead of “non-white” in regards to when researchers have no choice but to combine racial and ethnic populations to conduct reliable statistical analyses. Although “people of color” is a definite improvement on the term “non-white,” it is not perfect. This may be expected, as “people of color” came not out of scientific literature but instead out of socio-political terminology. The term “people of color” still serves the purpose of possibly grouping many different ethnicities and racial categories under one umbrella term. This may still cause difficulties, as individual identities are not given the attention that they deserve. Additional recommendations include footnoting actual percentages and racial categories when researchers must dichotomize into two groups. Psychological researchers should always consider the implications of their terminology, and the term “people of color” is a viable and practical option for modern researchers interested in cross-cultural models. There are further options as well, including listing the National Institutes of Health categories and referring to groups with diverse racial backgrounds.

There is hope that in the future, greater consideration will be taken when applying defining terms to groups of people in order to ensure a healthy and respectful interchange. Further studies into the pervasiveness of the term “non-white” in current psychological research may be helpful in sounding the alarm for change. Although this article did provide alternatives, these suggestions were in no way exhaustive, and further recommendations should be developed and presented to the research community. This may be a task optimally suited for the American Psychological Association Division 45: The Society for the Study of Ethnic Minorities, or another task force

within the American Psychological Association. Appropriate terminology is likely to continue to evolve. University undergraduate and graduate programs should educate both their students and their faculty as to the implications of the term “non-white” so that it is used with extreme caution and qualification, if at all.

REFERENCES

- Alcaraz, K. I., Weaver, N. L., Andresen, E. M., Christopher, K., & Kreuter, M. W. (2011). The neighborhood voice. *Evaluation & the Health Professions, 34*, 336–348. doi:10.1177/0163278710395933
- American Psychological Association. (2002). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist, 57*, 1060–1073.
- American Psychological Association. (2010). 2010 amendments to the 2002 “Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct”. *American Psychologist, 65*, 493. doi:10.1037/a0020168
- Brondolo, E., Hausmann, L. R., Jhalani, J., Pencille, M., Atencio-Bacayon, J., Kumar, A., . . . Schwartz, J. (2011). Dimensions of perceived racism and self-reported health: Examination of racial/ethnic differences and potential mediators. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 42*, 14–28. doi:10.1007/s12160-011-9265-1
- Brondolo, E., Love, E. E., Pencille, M., Schoenthaler, A., & Ogedegbe, G. (2011). Racism and hypertension: A review of the empirical evidence and implications for clinical practice. *American Journal of Hypertension, 24*, 518–529. doi:10.1038/ajh.2011.9
- Clark, R., Anderson, N. B., Clark, V. R., & Williams, D. R. (1999). Racism as a stressor for African Americans. A biopsychosocial model. *American Psychologist, 54*, 805–816.
- Clark, V. R. (2001). The perilous effects of racism on blacks [Review]. *Ethnicity & Disease, 11*, 769–772.
- Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. (2002). *American Psychologist, 57*, 1060–1073.
- Fang, C. Y., & Myers, H. F. (2001). The effects of racial stressors and hostility on cardiovascular reactivity in African American and Caucasian men. *Health Psychology, 20*, 64–70.
- Kao, B., Lobato, D., Grullon, E., Cheas, L., Plante, W., Seifer, R., & Canino, G. (2011). Recruiting Latino and Non-Latino families in pediatric research: Considerations from a study on childhood disability. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology, 36*, 1093–1101. doi:10.1093/jpepsy/jsr030
- King, M. L. (1963, December 23). I Have a Dream [Speech]. Retrieved from <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study, 4*, 165–169.
- Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved: A novel*. New York, NY: Random.
- National Institute of Health. (2001). *NIH policy on reporting race and ethnicity data: Subjects in clinical research*. Retrieved from <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-01-053.html>
- Quinn, S. C., Butler, J., III, Fryer, C. S., Garza, M. A., Kim, K. H., Ryan, C., & Thomas, S. B. (2012). Attributes of researchers and their strategies to recruit minority populations: Results of a national survey. *Contemporary Clinical Trials, 33*, 109–116. doi:10.1016/j.cct.2012.06.011
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist, 64*, 271–286.
- Sun, K. (2010, March 9). How the use of “White Vs. Non-White” contaminates criminological research. *Psychology Today*.