

Universalism is Not White: Commentary on Sue et al. (2024)

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Abstract

This commentary responds to Sue, Neville, and Smith's (2024) claim that principles such as universalism, individualism, objectivism, and empiricism are "pillars of white epistemology." Drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois' embrace of Western intellectual traditions, this commentary argues that such ideals are not inherently racialized but rather central to human flourishing. In their critique of universalism, Sue and colleagues conflate the misapplication of universalism with the intended meaning of the concept. Rather than characterizing universalism in racial terms, this commentary contends that its accurate application promotes fairness and inclusivity and aligns with civil rights and human rights movements. Defining valuable concepts like universalism through a racial lens risks alienating scholars and undermining ideas that could advance mental health and psychological research across all demographics.

Keywords: universalism, racism, whiteness, antiracism, epistemology

"I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension." -Du Bois (1989/1903), *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 80

In the above quote, one of the most renowned Black scholars in American history, W.E.B DuBois, claims his right to embrace the ideas advanced by certain Western intellectuals. The race of the thinkers was no barrier to him. Making such a statement today would likely be characterized as simplistic, if not naïve, obtuse, or White-centered. Sue, Neville, and Smith (2024) make such an argument in the special issue on "Dismantling racism in the field of Psychology and Beyond," in which they claim the ideals of universalism, individualism, objectivism, and empiricism, born of the Enlightenment period are "pillars of white epistemology." Focusing on universalism as one example, I contend that they conflate the actual definition of universalism with its misuses. I also argue that redefining such principles that are largely conducive to human flourishing as the foundation for racial oppression discourages researchers, practitioners, and activists from engaging and applying them (as DuBois did) for human flourishing. Ultimately, this approach is damaging to psychological researchers, practitioners, and psychotherapy clients of all demographic backgrounds.

What Sue and colleagues more accurately criticized are distortions and misapplications of ideals, not the ideals themselves. For example, in Figure 1, they summarize universalism in terms of "Whiteness as a default standard," "pathologizing differences," "color-blindness," and "power evasion". With the exception of color-blindness, these behaviors all represent individuals' abuses of universality and their failures at practicing it. That is, such individuals treat a specific cultural frame as universal, pathologize others who do not fit within it, and are closed to the existence of structural racism. I know of no conceptualization of universalism that explicitly or implicitly includes these practices or views in its definition. For example, from an ethical perspective, the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (Blackburn, 2016) defines universalism as the "idea that moral demands apply to everyone, no matter what their local cultural or historical traditions may be" and from an epistemological perspective, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Baghrmian & Carter, 2020, section 1.2) defines a similar construct of absolutism as "the view that at least some truths or values in the relevant domain apply to all times, places or social and cultural frameworks. They are universal and not bound by historical or social conditions." These common definitions, focused on the transcendence of culture, are the opposite of what Sue and colleagues described.

While it is true that standards considered white, such as beauty characteristics that reflect European features, are often *treated* as the universal bar by which all others are judged, it is a mistake to conflate this with it accurately *representing* formal definitions of universalism. This point has been made many times throughout US history by civil rights advocates who expose the hypocrisy of political leaders declaring the universally inherent value of all humans but only applying it to those like them. What such figures have taught us is that the failure of some to live up to a worthy principle in no way diminishes the value of the principle itself. Rather, it diminishes the integrity of those declaring to be adherents of it. In other words, what individuals do in the name of universalism is irrelevant to the question of whether universalism is a concept worth endorsing.

When it comes to color-blindness, Sue et al. (2024) state that universalism "allows therapists to approach clients of color through a color-blind lens" in ways that ignore racial group

membership and deny racism. In this case, the authors refer to a modern notion that equates color-blindness with evading the effects of race and racism. This way of critiquing color-blindness as an ignorant, if not harmful, outlook is widely endorsed in social science (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Yi et al., 2023). However, this view represents a recent departure from a previously common definition that has also been at the heart of human rights movements. Authors such as Hughes (2024) and Mounk (2023) argue with historical evidence that the original and intended definition of color-blindness, the one used from slavery abolition through the civil rights movement, is to treat individuals as equals *irrespective* of race. Importantly, being color-blind in this way is not the same as being *racism-blind*. Mounk argues that color-blind policies sometimes *require* acknowledging and redressing injustices where individuals are treated differently by race to ensure that they are treated equally.

In summary, while the concept of universalism originated during the Enlightenment, it is no more a European, or “white” concept than the ideas to which DuBois claimed a connection. Many from all walks of life have deepened, advanced, and appealed to notions of universalism throughout history in ways that have resulted in a fairer society. The idea that all humans share a common connection and are more similar than different is central to many civil and human rights movements across the world. In addition to being inaccurate, it is counterproductive to refer to universalism in terms that are associated with any one racial group. Doing so, especially in our highly polarized society, can discourage non-white scholars of psychology from honestly engaging the construct. Similarly, psychotherapeutic practice that devalues or dismisses the notion of treating individuals as equals irrespective of race stands to be counterproductive for supporting mental health.

Psychology, like other disciplines, would best be served by evaluating the merit, robustness, and effectiveness of ideas rather than who developed them and who misuses them. If our goal is to improve our understanding of human behavior and advance mental health, we should be open to the best ideas for achieving this, regardless of where they originate and who tends to use them more. Universalism is one such idea.

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