



PART 1: ATTACHMENT

This article is the first in a three-part series for *The Guardian*: “The Weaponization of Whiteness in Child Welfare”, featuring Guardian contributor MJ (Maleeka Jihad) and various experts in child welfare as co-contributors. Look for the next articles in this series in future *Guardian* issues.

The Weaponization of Whiteness in Child Welfare

by MJ (Maleeka Jihad) and Jessica Handelman

Racism in Psychology

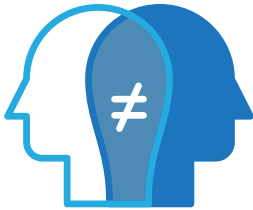
For centuries many Black, Brown, and Indigenous psychology professionals have called for the end of the weaponization of psychology (theories and diagnoses) against people of color involved in educational, legal, and medical systems.

This article focuses on the psychology theory known as **attachment theory**. We will provide the history and evolution of attachment theory, as well as how the theory has been utilized as a tool to justify the separation of families involved in the family regulation system (also known as the child welfare or child protection system).

In October of 2021, the scientific and professional organization that represents psychology in the United States, the American Psychological Association (APA), adopted the **Resolution Apology to People of Color for APA's Role in Promoting, Perpetuating, and Failing to Challenge Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Human Hierarchy in U.S.**

The American Psychological Association failed in its role leading the discipline of psychology, was complicit in contributing to systemic inequities, and hurt many through racism, racial discrimination, and denigration of people of color, thereby falling short on its mission to benefit society and improve lives. APA is profoundly sorry, accepts responsibility for, and owns the actions and inactions of APA itself, the discipline of psychology, and individual psychologists who stood as leaders for the organization and field.

The governing body within APA should have apologized to people of color before today. APA, and many in psychology, have long considered such an apology, but failed to accept responsibility. APA previously engaged in unsuccessful efforts to issue apologies in the past, including an apology to Indigenous peoples. The work done to make this apology to people of color a reality was led by the people and voices of a broad cross-section of today's APA — members, APA's elected and appointed leaders, and staff — in a shared commitment to not only truly assess the harms and the harmed, but also to take responsibility and commit to taking those collective learnings and direct them into an apology that will affect true change. It is informed by listening with intention to the



voices of the past — as outlined in a stunning chronology of psychology's history — and especially informed by the voices of today, the lived experience of psychologists of color, *Ethnic Psychological Associations*, and those who serve people of color.¹

Attachment Theory

A theory is defined as a plausible explanation of an occurrence. Within the mental health profession, theories are used to hypothesize about a concept or a collection of thoughts or behaviors to explain a given situation or occurrence. Theories may be well-substantiated and may or may not include supporting evidence.

Attachment theory, generally, focuses on the bonds and relationships between people. Created by British psychologist John Bowlby in 1970s and further developed by American-Canadian psychologist Mary Ainsworth through the 1990s, Bowlby believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life.² Attachment theory has been instrumental in determining whether children in out-of-home placement (including foster care) should return to their families, or transition to kinship care.³

WEIRD

When evaluating theories (such as attachment theory) in child welfare cases through the lens of cultural respect,⁴ it is imperative to analyze all angles within which a particular theory is being presented, utilized, or introduced. To effectively analyze a theory in a culturally respectful manner, professionals must inquire about the theory's history, whether the participants represent a diverse group of people, the location of where the theory was

established and studied, and the cultural diversity of theorists or researchers who conducted the study.

For example, most psychology research participants are characterized as being WEIRD. WEIRD is the acronym for **Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic** societies. The descriptive term WEIRD was

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first introduced by psychologists Joseph Henrich, Steven Heine, and Ara Norenzayan in the *Journal of Behavioral and Brain Sciences*.⁵ In introducing the term, these psychologists

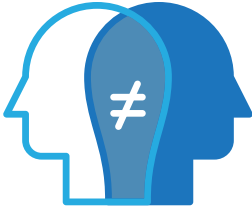
1 *Apology to People of Color for APA's Role in Promoting, Perpetuating, and Failing to Challenge Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Human Hierarchy in U.S.* October 2021. Available at: <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/racism-apology>.

2 Bretherton, I. (1992). The origins of attachment theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. *Developmental Psychology*, 28(5), 759–775. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.28.5.759>.

3 For the purposes of this publication, kinship is a person identified by a parent, child, family member, or caregiver as a person that is in relation to family or child involved in the family regulation system.

4 "Cultural competence" is commonly referred to as the ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own. Cultural competence has been replaced with the term "cultural respect" by professionals of color working within the mental health field. Cultural respect refers to one's understanding of their own bias and limitations surrounding the lack of ability to understand or empathize with cultural experiences that are different from one's own, and holding respect for, and acknowledging those differences.

5 Henrich J, Heine SJ, Norenzayan A. The weirdest people in the world? *Behav Brain Sci*. 2010 Jun;33(2-3):61-83; discussion 83-135. doi: 10.1017/S0140525X0999152X. Epub 2010 Jun 15. PMID: 20550733.



highlighted the overrepresentation of white people in psychology studies and findings, as well as the lack of diversity not only in the psychology researchers, but also with the participants in the studies. Keeping this in mind, WEIRD participants represent as much as eighty percent of study participants, but only twelve percent of the world's population. They are not only unrepresentative of humans as a species, but on many measures, they are outliers.⁶

Attachment Assessments and Evaluations in Child Welfare

Implicit bias and unconscious beliefs are often embedded into evaluation measures. Attachment evaluators should work to minimize error grounded in these cultural biases, stereotypes, and differences in worldviews.⁷ To do so, every effort should be made to accurately and respectfully reflect the parent or caregiver's unique experiences and perspectives throughout the evaluation process, and the cultural values and traditions important to the family structure. Without these efforts, the evaluation or assessment will not offer any useful or practical information for the court to consider in determining a child's best interest. The child's best interest should be assessed through a culturally respectful lens of maintaining the family's unique customs, values, and community connections as much as possible.

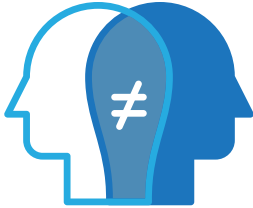
It is best practice to demonstrate cross-cultural competence in the mental health profession. Thus, attachment theory should not be used for any client or family without considering the family's culture because attachment theory was founded on WEIRD principles. Often, attachment evaluators completely omit this most fundamental factor of cultural respect when assessing attachment and permanency. Evaluators may not consider the family's culture because all parties to the case share the same race, and they may view that factor as irrelevant. Culture and race, however, are distinctly differentiated.

Culture comes in relatively obvious forms, such as music, dance, food, clothing, language, skin color, art, and celebrations. There are also the less obvious forms, such as religion, history, rituals, patterns of relationships, rites of passage, body language, and the use of leisure time. Even more profound, however, are forms of culture that require extensive inquiry and observation for an evaluator to understand, such as the meaning of community, notions of leadership, patterns of decision-making, beliefs about health, help-seeking behavior, notions of individualism versus collectivism, and approaches to problem-solving. These manifestations of culture are typically learned through modeling, usually at an early age.⁸

6 Cooperrider, Kensy. *Episode 10: WEIRD: Adventures of an Acronym*. Many Minds Podcast, Diverse Intelligences Summer Institute. (July 1, 2020). Available at: <https://manyminds.libsyn.com/weird-adventures-of-an-acronym-0>.

7 See, e.g., Colo. Rev. Stat. §12-245-203.5

8 Lee, Kien. *The Importance of Culture in Evaluation: A Practical Guide for Evaluators*. The Colorado Trust. Available at: <https://folio.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/10244/489/CrossCulturalGuide.r3.pdf?sequence=1>.



Without considering these cultural values and traditions, children and families will be deprived of having their unique family histories and cultural identities as part of the evaluation process and eventual permanency outcome. Failing to consider the family's culture, or completely omitting that aspect within an assessment, will deliver the greatest injustice to the children and the families in the years following a permanency determination on the basis of "attachment" alone.

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Systemic Racism in Child Welfare

Systemic racism is discrimination or unequal treatment on the basis of membership in a particular ethnic group (typically one that is a minority or marginalized), arising from systems, structures, or expectations that have become established within society or an institution.⁹

Families of color who are disproportionately represented in the system and who are more likely to experience negative outcomes through their involvement in the system compared to white families defines systemic racism in child welfare.¹⁰

The parental rights of Black parents are terminated at higher rates than white parents.¹¹

Black children are 13.7% of the child population, and yet, make up 21.1% of all children in foster care.¹²

11% of Black children will experience foster care placement before their eighteenth birthday compared to 4.9% of white children.¹³

Weaponization of Whiteness in Child Welfare

The weaponization of whiteness in child welfare is understood as "centering whiteness." Particularly the "dominant" white culture is defined as the "correct" or "right" way of how a family should look, engage, and exist in society. Specifically, the child welfare system is a microcosm of white dominant culture within America.¹⁴ To weaponize whiteness is to center the morals and ideals of white individualistic culture as prominent, over the morals and ideals that are unique to people who identify as belonging to a collective culture. Collective

⁹ Oxford Dictionary. Definition: "systemic racism."

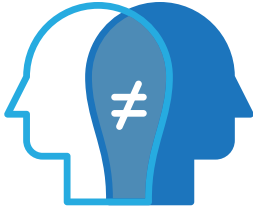
¹⁰ National Conference of State Legislatures. *Disproportionality and Race Equity in Child Welfare*. (January 26, 2021). Available at: <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/disproportionality-and-race-equity-in-child-welfare.aspx>.

¹¹ Children's Rights. *Fighting Institutional Racism at the Front End of Child Welfare Systems*. Available at: <https://www.childrensrights.org/fighting-institutional-racism-at-the-front-end-of-child-welfare-systems/>.

¹² U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2022). *Child Maltreatment 2020*. Available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.

¹³ Minoff, Elisa. "Entangled Roots: The Role of Race in Policies that Separate Families." Center for the Study of Social Policy, October 2018. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/entangled-roots>.

¹⁴ Cantey, N., et al. *Navigating Racism in the Child Welfare System: The Impact on Black Children, Families, and Practitioners*. Child Welfare Vol. 100 No. 2. Child Welfare League of America, Inc. (March-April 2022).



cultures emphasize and embrace the needs of the group as a whole over the needs of an individual. Individualists are classified as a part of the WEIRD population of people.

There is a significant link between the lack of culturally diverse professionals in the field of child welfare and the lack of cultural respect from white professionals working with and providing services to people of color. This is due in part to a widely held misconception by white treatment providers that they are deemed “qualified” to work with all cultures after earning their social science degree. However, the educational institutions that award these degrees are established on WEIRD ideologies that fail to consider or implement cross-cultural respect.

Weaponization of Attachment Theory = Forced Cultural Assimilation

Weaponizing whiteness in the child welfare system involves professionals utilizing attachment theory concepts to argue for the placement of children with strangers (i.e., foster care) over returning home to the caregivers from whom they were removed, or to placement with identified kin. Generally, the (mis)argument made by many professionals utilizing “attachment theory”¹⁵ has been that removing a child that is securely attached to a temporary caregiver (i.e., foster parent) will be irreparably damaging and will create an attachment disorder for the child that will cause an onset of psychological problems. This commonly themed argument is not supported by scientific evidence as it relates to families and children involved in the family regulation (child welfare) system. In fact, attachment theory does not provide any clear direction for practitioners in terms of how or when to intervene to address attachment needs for children, especially in the child welfare context. Children in care are likely to be managing multiple loyalties and there is little information about how to handle these multiple attachments appropriately.¹⁶

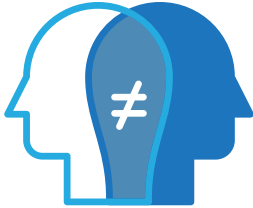
In addition, a recent comprehensive review of attachment theory highlighted the lack of clarity around the concept of attachment disorders. “The terms attachment disorder, attachment problems and attachment therapy, although increasingly used, have no clear, specific, or consensus definitions.”¹⁷

As a matter of best practice, professionals should understand that “attachment” may mean different things to the various people in children’s lives, especially if there are both individualistic and collective cultural differences among caregivers. When working together on case planning to support children in care, it is important to clarify the assumptions made about children’s attachments. In this effort, professionals must

¹⁵ Attachment theory is in quotations because this theory was never intended to be used to inform custody decisions or permanency outcomes. See McLean, S. *Children's Attachment Needs in the Context of Out-of-Home Care*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2016). Available at: https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/cfca-practice-attachment_0.pdf.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Chaffin, M., Saunders, R. H. B. E., Nichols, T., Barnett, D., Zeanah, C., Berliner, L., Egeland, B., Newman, E., Lyon, T., Letourneau, E., & Miller-Perrin, C. (2006). Report of the APSAC task force on attachment therapy, reactive attachment disorder, and attachment problems. *Child maltreatment*, 11(1), 76-89, 77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559505283699>.



be mindful that attachment may be defined and expressed differently among various cultures. While the relationship between attachment and behavior has been well described for very young children, caution should be applied when using behavior to infer attachment status in children from diverse cultures or childrearing contexts.¹⁸

The argument that attachment should serve as a basis for a child not returning home to their family or kin completely overlooks, and ultimately ignores, the overarching cultural implications of such a reckless assertion. Consider an example of a Black child who has been in a white foster home since birth and has remained in this home for his entire two-and-a-half years of life. The child's biological family identifies with collective cultural norms, but the child was placed into a foster home that upholds individualistic norms and values. The child's maternal cousin comes forward and presents himself as a long-term placement option for the child. The cousin has ties to the child's community, extended family members, and maintains the family's traditions and cultural values that have been passed down through generations. In this example, we must weigh the short-term risk of

Stated simply, "culture lived will better meet a child's best interests than culture learned."

emotional harm caused by changing caregivers with the long-term risk of emotional harm caused by losing the child's family members, cultural identity, and the family's traditions and values that have existed for many gener-

ations. The greater risk of emotional harm for this child will be upon his adoption by the non-biological caregivers. In essence, this child's adoption into a white family, who would be deemed as "better" for this child than his own family members, would ensure nothing short of what would be considered "forced cultural assimilation."¹⁹

Even if a white family is willing to make efforts to expose a child to their own culture, their understanding of how to truly address that child's long term cultural and societal needs as a person of color will fall understandably yet tremendously short of what that child's family will be able to give him effortlessly. Stated simply, "culture lived will better meet a child's best interests than culture learned."²⁰

Resolution and Implementation: A Call to Action

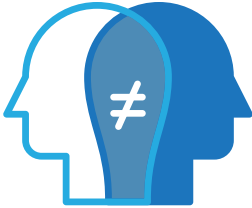
Where do we go from here? The central theme here is first to have a fundamental understanding that there is systemic racism deeply embedded into the current practices and decisions at every stage of the child welfare system. From hotline reporting, to foster care placements, to permanency decisions, there are various recommendations for strategies to address disproportionality and disparities in child welfare practice:²¹

¹⁸ McLean, *supra* note 15.

¹⁹ Cultural assimilation is defined as the incorporation of a culture into the general host society. The acceptance of a host culture may result in the loss of cultural identity of an ethnic group. See Oxford Dictionary. Definition: "cultural assimilation."

²⁰ District Court Senior Judge Dinsmore Tuttle, 2018 Order Granting Change of Placement and Custody for Purposes of Adoption, Adams County, Colorado (quote used with permission).

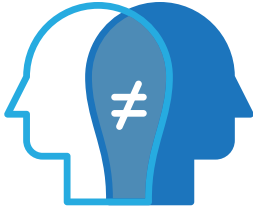
²¹ *Disproportionality and Race Equity in Child Welfare*, *supra* note 10.



- Understanding and addressing the impact of individual biases in reporting, investigating, intervention, and placement processes.
- Developing culturally responsive and respectful practices.
- Recruiting and retaining foster families of color.
- Engaging communities of color when developing new policies.
- Using data to identify and address disparate outcomes.

Cultural experts recommend the following practices to begin implementing culturally respectful case planning throughout a family's involvement in a child welfare case:

- **Investigation**
 - Each entity and professional involved with a family should conduct an independent investigation that includes finding family members and others from the child's community as potential placement options.
- **Parenting Time**
 - Absent an imminent risk of safety as determined by a culturally respectful professional, visitation between a child and parent should begin at a location within the child's community in order to preserve familiarity and cultural norms for the child and family.
 - Family time should increase in length and frequency over the life of the family's case involvement. If visits are supervised at the beginning of the case, moving towards unsupervised visits should be constantly evaluated throughout the entirety of the case.
 - When a child comes from a collective culture, family members who have been involved in the child's upbringing should be included in visitation whenever possible to ensure appropriate support and uphold cultural connection for the child and family.
- **Evaluations and Assessments**
 - Ensure that any attachment evaluators, therapists, and service providers are culturally respectful in an effort to prevent falsely elevating "attachment" over cultural connections and family integrity.
 - Recommendations from a provider working with the family must be formulated through a cultural lens that holds the family's unique values and norms at the forefront of any recommendation.
- **Multidisciplinary Teams**
 - When working with diverse populations, the team, office, and/or work model should reflect the population you are serving by including diverse professionals (i.e., attorneys, social workers, those with lived experiences) with different ethnicities, religions,



cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This will provide the team with appropriate skills to support diverse clients.

Reflective Questions for Practitioners and Attorneys

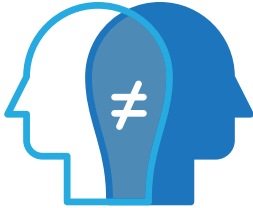
As professionals working with communities that differ from one's own cultural identity, it is critically important to constantly evaluate our own biases on a regular basis. Professionals should be able to identify biases as they relate to the recommendations for the families that are system-involved.

Questions to consider when identifying a treatment and or service provider for clients:

- Is the service provider from the same cultural background of the client/family?
- Has the client been offered the option to choose the provider with whom they prefer to work, or participate as a team in selecting a provider?
- What are the service provider's identified cultural barriers?
- Does the service provider discuss their cultural limitations with the client?
- Does the service provider include community collaborations in working with the client?
- What treatment modality does the service provider utilize, and is the modality culturally respectful?
- Does the treatment method reflect the family's culture-specific values?
- How is success defined by the client? Will the service provider work toward a common goal of success as defined by the client through a culturally respectful lens?

The Work Begins Now

Race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, and cultural ideologies must be kept at the forefront of any practice while working with diverse populations, especially for professionals who are navigating the family regulation system with their clients. Having an understanding that system-involved families of color statistically have a higher rate of negative outcomes than their white counterparts, due in part to lack of cultural respect, is paramount to addressing this fundamental issue. When we know that families are better served by keeping their cultural and familial integrity intact, we can begin to demonstrate culturally respectful practice. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHORS:



MJ (Maleeka Jihad) is a social worker and international psychology professional specializing in intergenerational cultural family dynamics as it relates to racial trauma within the family regulation system. She is the director of MJ Consulting (<https://www.mjconsultingdenver.com/>) and the nonprofit MJCF: Coalition (<https://www.mjcfcoalition.com/>), an agency focused on dismantling systemic racism in the family regulation system through education, advocacy, and policy reform. MJ also works as an adjunct faculty member at the Graduate School of Social Work with the University of Denver and is obtaining a PhD in Organizational Development and Change specializing in Social Justice (at Fielding Graduate School) with a foundation of International Psychology courses from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology.



Jessica Handelman is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in Colorado. She is currently in private practice specializing in parent-child evaluations, therapeutic placement transitions, and consultation in dependency and neglect matters as well as domestic relations cases. As an infant and early childhood mental health specialist, Jessica regularly provides services and consultation throughout Colorado on issues concerning the psychological impact of child welfare involvement on children in out-of-home care and the manner in which permanency outcomes impact a child's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. She is actively involved in various organizations and agencies that seek to abolish structural racism in child welfare. Jessica has testified in over a dozen jurisdictions in areas such as childhood trauma, attachment and bonding, child development, and best interest of the child.