



The Asian American Psychological Association

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Asian American Psychological Association's Support of an Ethical Process at Teachers College Columbia University

We offer this statement in response to students and colleagues who have sought guidance and leadership from the Association in relation to the recent announcement by Teachers College, Columbia University administration that indicates findings of plagiarism.

Challenges & Context

As is likely true of most of our colleagues and students both within and outside of AAPA, we have spent much time grappling with our thoughts and feelings about this news. Our deliberations have been particularly complicated because the individuals involved in these events are highly respected colleagues and for many of us, they are our mentors, colleagues, advisors and personal friends. Hence, it is inevitable that our personal feelings and relationships intersect with our professional commitments.

Furthermore, we are highly conscious of the potential for racial division that this incident may elicit. We are deeply disturbed by individuals who are not part of this case who have exacerbated this situation in the press, in editorials and in blogs by depicting our colleagues, their work, and their abilities in racist terms. Although this framing obviously has no merit and is based in racism, it underscores the ways in which this incident may be used to undermine social justice. We stand with other psychologists of color and all people who support racial justice in denouncing these racist discussions. Furthermore, to the extent that the charges of plagiarism are framed as being racist based solely on the backgrounds of the parties involved, we fear that this may create fragmentation among individuals and associations who have devoted themselves to the creation of multicultural/multiracial alliances and a scholarship based on academic rigor. Therefore, we caution against any stance that focuses on racism as the primary issue as we believe that this diverts attention from the core issues of academic integrity.

Ethical Process

In facing the challenges in this situation, we find our voice and our compass in the professional standards outlined in the American Psychological Association's Code of Ethics (2002) and in principles of social justice.



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As an Association and as individuals, AAPA stands in support of the highest standards of academic integrity and scholarship. APA's Code of Ethics compels action from all psychologists who believe that a breach of ethics has occurred and we support those who follow the Ethical Code in this regard. We refer our students and colleagues to Section 1.01 of the Ethical Code which states that "*If psychologists learn of misuse or misrepresentation of their work, they take reasonable steps to correct or minimize the misuse or misrepresentation.*" This is the ethical imperative that grounds all of us.

The Association supports all individuals who act with good intention in order to maintain ethical standards. We believe that it is important to support those who take personal and professional risks in order to ensure those standards are upheld. A charge of plagiarism is a serious and challenging matter with significant ramifications. It is inevitably a difficult and emotionally laden decision to bring a serious charge of ethical misconduct, particularly if those bringing the charges are students or junior faculty with less status or privilege. Although we cannot, as outsiders, be familiar with the details and the merits of any given case, we believe in the process of standing up for what one believes is just and fair, even when there is risk involved. We have always encouraged those who believe they have experienced injustice to step forward and take action against it. We have seen throughout history and in our personal lives the personal and systemic pain and oppression that results from silence and inaction. We appreciate the efforts of individuals such as Drs. Christine Yeh, Karen Cort and Tracy Juliao for their willingness to bear the burdens of maintaining the integrity of the profession from which we all benefit.

Consistent with an ethical process, any individual faced with ethical violations has the right to appeal and the Association supports this right. We recognize the personal and professional costs to all parties involved in this case, and believe that upholding a fair and unbiased process is central to repairing the professional damage incurred by those involved. We extend our support to those persons and institutions who strive to weigh the evidence in this case in a fair and unbiased manner. If the result of such a process is that a person or persons have been unjustifiably charged, we would extend our support to those persons. However, if the charges were to be substantiated, while we may extend our personal support to those charged, we cannot as an Association condone unethical behavior.

As an Association, we have not been privy to the full scope of evidence nor do we believe that it is appropriate to make definitive judgments based on personal belief, second-hand information, or innuendo. However, it is our understanding that Teachers College administration



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initiated an 18-month investigation by an independent legal firm followed by a faculty panel review that substantiated the charges of plagiarism. We understand that these findings are under appeal and further review by Teachers College. Therefore, we caution against the temptation to reach definitive conclusions before the appeals process is concluded. Thus, we extend our current support to all parties involved for the emotional difficulties they must inevitably be encountering during this process. Our Association makes a clear distinction between supporting an ethical process and the outcomes of that process. In our view, we support the ethical process that has been initiated and we await the final outcomes.

Ethical Outcomes

Our belief that it is best to take action against what one perceives as unjust rests on a belief in due process and justice. Speaking out against the perception of injustice enables a dialogue and a process of investigation that aims at exploring the merits of the charges and evaluating the bases of the perception of injustice. It is imperative that this process be thorough and fair. However, we recognize that racism is an insidious aspect of our society. Given that both parties involve people of color, we do not believe that these individuals and their charges or countercharges were motivated by racial bias. However, as people of color and as an Association dedicated to social justice, we are aware that systemic inequities are frequently pervasive aspects of institutions, where the institutional context as well as the processes of decision-making may be influenced by racism and sexism. Therefore, we express our deep hope that those involved in the appeals process at Teachers College be cognizant of these larger social dynamics and actively protect against the influence of racial and gender bias.

Given the severity of the charges presented, it is our belief that an ethical outcome can only come from a just process that respects the arguments of both parties and fairly and carefully evaluates the evidence.

Therefore, we urge Teachers College to provide our colleagues with

- a. due process free of bias and preconceived notions
- b. the opportunity to present their arguments and evidence
- c. decisions based solely on the merits of the evidence used to support both the charges and countercharges
- d. a speedy, thoughtful, and just resolution

Professional Accountability and Dialogue

In urging an ethical process and outcome from Teachers College, we are cognizant of the fact that this review and appeals process is occurring within the scope of the university and in relation to the roles of these individuals as faculty members and students of the university – both past and present. However, because all parties are also psychologists, it is our



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belief that it is incumbent upon psychological associations and their leadership – be it APA’s Society of Counseling Psychology, the APA Ethics Office, or other professional psychological organizations with jurisdiction over both parties- to determine and demonstrate professional accountability. Specifically, we call upon the professional leadership to make a determination about this case *relative to the professional standards of psychology*.

As a step towards accountability, AAPA encourages its members and all psychologists to engage in active dialogue about issues of authorship, publication, plagiarism, and ethics in public venues such as the listservs, newsletters, APA Monitor, websites and so forth. Moreover, it is critical for psychology to address how it can develop systems of accountability that encourage the maintenance of ethical standards and attend to the risks for those in positions of less power such as students and junior faculty. Despite the clear challenges of this situation, it is an opportunity for psychology as a discipline to demonstrate that we not only have ethical standards, but we also have an ethical and due process of professional accountability.

It is our belief that our ability to address, learn from and ultimately heal from this situation can only be achieved through dialogue and active engagement. Silence as individuals and organizations runs the risk of being subject to projection and misinterpretation. Therefore, we urge our colleagues and students to engage in dialogue with one another as they carefully consider the personal, social, and systemic ramifications of different perspectives and yet remain cautious and refrain from premature conclusions. We particularly urge all psychologists to consider the ethical ramifications and obligations of our field and the ways in which we may personally, interpersonally, and systemically enable and support the realization of these standards in this incident and in the future. Through this engagement, it is our belief that we can best hold ourselves, our discipline, and our organizations accountable to the professional standards to which we all aspire.