

AKRI Reparation Acknowledgement

The A.K. Rice Institute (AKRI) was founded to promote group relations approaches to understanding unconscious, social, and system dynamics in groups and organizations. Institute members along with participants in our conferences and events have for decades reported feeling that our mission is deeply impeded by our failure to address systemic racism in our organization. Our history of ignoring the harms done to people of African descent within AKRI connects with an egregious disregard for the ongoing impact of chattel slavery in our culture. We are speaking of the ongoing racist ideas and violence that have lasted centuries and continue today in the form of mass incarceration, racial terror, political disenfranchisement, housing segregation, separate and unequal education, health inequalities, pathologizing the Black family, stolen labor and hindered opportunity, the wealth gap, and more (Alexander, 2010; APA, 2022; California Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans, 2022; hooks, 2014; Kendi, 2016).

Reparations for the harms done to people of African descent by slavery on this continent are long overdue. A first step in reparations is an apology (Nichols & Connolly, 2020; Coates, 2014; Neiman, 2019). As we advance our work, AKRI now seeks to affirm our commitment to reparations for harms emanating from the transatlantic slave trade, its manifestations in the United States of North America, and its ongoing impact in our country. We acknowledge that true reparation is actually not possible. Though the harm that has occurred and the suffering that has been endured cannot be undone by compensating for it, reparations in other forms are essential (Caflish, 2020; Coates, 2014; Neiman, 2019).

Nichols and Connolly (2020) “view whiteness as synonymous with the systemic ideology of white supremacy, and not the same as white people.” Oppressive dynamics are an outcome directly connected with the pernicious institution that was American slavery and are based in “economic, political, and cultural self-interests” of those who benefit from them (Kendi, 2016). As responsible citizens, we cannot remain silent in the face of the destructive practices and policies of continued White supremacist culture. We need to face and learn from the legacy of chattel slavery in the United States and examine how it fosters injustice and oppression of the members of our social and professional communities. White presenting people do not experience racial stress in the way that Black presenting people do. Not having to struggle with racial discomfort leads to lacking racial stamina (DiAngelo, 2018).

With this statement, the A.K.Rice Institute strives to apologize for transgressions we have done knowingly and unknowingly to people of African descent, our fellow institute colleagues and our many conference participants, who have been hurt in ways we can acknowledge, and in ways we may not know. We apologize for not actively addressing the psychological harm experienced by people of African descent as a result of current systems that have emerged from the history of chattel slavery (Nichols & Connolly, 2020).

These psychological insults are seen for example:

- When people of African descent repeatedly feel they are drawn into a role of teaching White people about their experience, taking care of White people's naiveté and ignorance, as if the emotional and historical evidence, the learning, is not readily available, while White presenting people do not identify and speak about their Whiteness.
- When White presenting people insist on having good intent without acknowledging that what they are saying has had a racially hurtful impact (for example: when a White person refers to Black members of a conference with an outdated term and is initially not aware of the impact, but then responds defensively when it is pointed out);
- When non-Black people remain silent when witnessing a Black person being treated in a harmful way;
- When people of African descent are repeatedly dismissed and not listened to and people with racial privileges are not aware how they are making people of African descent feel unwelcome, left out, and ignored;
- When people of African descent are told they are making everything about race (and that it is really about class or authority and leadership);
- When Black identified people are used as a diversity token and end up feeling not being fully taken in as a person;
- When conference staff composition has been White centered with the majority of staff members being White and White leadership being unquestioningly assumed as the norm;
- When a colorblind lens is used (we are all human and the same - race is invisible) and leads to the erasure of a Black person's experience and a form of othering (Carter & Pieterse, 2020; McRae & Short, 2010);
- When White people can turn a racial conversation around and make it all about their own suffering and often more explicitly so, White women (see Brazaitis, 2004), and "confuse comfort with safety" (DiAngelo, 2018);
- When people become vague, tongue tied, and awkward when the subject of race comes up;

- When Black people are repeatedly reminded of their ancestral suffering and continued current collective vulnerability, while having this be denied by the White majority lens;
- When White people seem to feel that they are exempt from the forces of racism (DiAngelo, 2018);
- When people feel like they are not implicated in systemic racism, because they have a Black friend, a Black spouse, or voted for Obama (Yancy, 2015);
- When those of African descent are given power in a role (small or large study group team lead for example, or a role on the Board) and then our actions deauthorize them in that role;
- When the term “without memory or desire” (Bion, 1967) is used to pretend that people enter without a past and can be blank slates in a new situation.

Further, AKRI has seldom reflected on the colonialist inheritance embedded within our methods, while claiming to promote a method of learning that offers deep insight into group and organizational behavior. In our institute, the unexamined acceptance of hierarchical systems of leadership, a Western/Eurocentric-default focus on a particular approach, and attendant group dynamics theory growing out of this default, has yielded a learning process that privileges one particular vantage point. This singular approach has evolved at the expense of other more culturally-informed, community oriented understandings of group dynamics. For example, within African American culture there is a focus on the role of faith based communities. These organizations and related systems are essential developments in American culture at large, yet overlooked by AKRI’s focus embedded in Western, Eurocentric, patriarchal, and heteronormative systems.

Further, in our work, the scholarship of White contributors has received continued focus. The contributions of people of African descent (see for example: Braxton, Crawford-Zakian, Connolly, Dumas, Green, Johnson, Mack, Malone, McRae, Miller, Powell, Short, Taylor, Wagner, Wells, White, Wilton) have been noticed, though at times simultaneously marginalized. Often the writings of these authors touch on race related dynamics in groups. They are deprioritized in pre-conference readings, because they are not seen as directly related to the traditional theory of group relations and are thought of as more secondary readings.

In our institute's history, opportunities for advancement in group relations and organizational work, including Board involvement, are disproportionately taken up by people who identify as White, particularly in comparison to the proportion of people who identify as Black or of African descent. In our institute, people of African descent have

been recognized for their history of achievements, yet prior to the past few years, their presence in positions of power within the institute have been sparse.

We have proceeded without adequately reflecting on our approach (the group relations conference, an experiential learning model, at the core of our work) for decades. Notwithstanding personal agency and resilience, people of African descent can become repositories for hurtful “unwanted” projections that then run the risk of being internalized/personalized and felt as “true” by either the projector, the bystanders, and/or the recipient of the projection. We have provided in-conference interpretations, but they have not been sufficient in connecting to the psychological, social, and historical context in which the projections occur. Further we have overlooked the impact of these projections on Black identified people as they leave our conferences.

We have anecdotal data that people of African descent have reported having health related issues following their involvement in group relations conferences. This is consistent with research data that show that those of African descent have greater health disadvantages compared to other racial groups and it has been speculated that these are due to discrimination they experience (see for example Mays, Cochran, and Barnes, 2007). We have failed to take this into consideration on many levels.

We have failed to ensure that staff members are adequately trained to be aware of structural racism that unduly burdens members of African descent. We have further failed to provide adequate post-conference interpretation and support to individuals in becoming unburdened or “unloaded” from holding unwanted projections on behalf of a group. Yet, we have continued forward without taking up the challenge of restructuring that would reduce the impact of oppressive formats, which we continue to embrace.

The above list does not delineate all specific harms experienced by people of African descent during group relations conferences or other AKRI events. While there is ample evidence for the above mentioned recurring dynamics, we will point out one piece of evidence here. In the forming of the Reparations Committee, a significant majority of AKRI members of African descent did not want to join the effort as there was a lack of trust and hope in AKRI’s ability to work through this process in an authentic and meaningful way (based on AKRI’s history). It felt too painful and difficult to participate.

We believe that reparations for the after-effects of slavery and related systems of oppression as expressed in AKRI, consciously or unconsciously, offer a pathway to atone for these practices and policies within and beyond our organization. To guide our efforts to repair past racial harm, and to amend practices to prevent future harm, the Board of Directors of AKRI endorses the United Nations guidelines for reparations (UN report, 2005; EGPS statement, 2021). The UN resolution (2005) begins with: “The Basic Principles and Guidelines prescribe that victims of human rights abuses have a right to

reparations.” The resolution then outlines specific actions. In a UN report (2021), harms to people of African descent are specifically cited. We take these statements as a contribution in our efforts at crafting reparations.

The Board of Directors of AKRI and the majority of our membership endorse this apology as a first step in the process of reparations. We are aware that an authentic apology requires a commitment to change (Neiman, 2021; APA, 2021) and that “an apology absent ameliorative action is without impact” (APA, 2021, APA, 2022).

We commit ourselves and our institute to the study of White supremacy within AKRI. This includes the process of examining and changing our practice in the areas of:

- Admission to our conferences, our institute, our Board, and our committees, along with examining our training practices.
- Power and power dynamics (such as privilege, opportunity, historical opportunity, resources) as they emerge and what they are attached to.
- Methods used and accepted as “given” when they are in fact oppressive.
- Reviewing literature that gets prioritized on our website, in our training programs, and in our conference offerings.
- The myriad facets of oppressive practice not here articulated, though felt and reported by institute members and conference participants.

We further commit ourselves to maintaining an ongoing reparations committee that focuses on planning events related to the topic of reparation (speakers as well as experiential events), continuing to examine the structural issues within AKRI, and supporting the Board in implementing structural changes as outlined in the Reparations Committee recommendations document.

For the Board of The A.K. Rice Institute

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