

## Social Justice and ABCT: The Specter of Unintended Consequences

**Dean McKay**, *Fordham University*

**Elysa Koppelman White**, *Oakland University*

**Amitai Abramovitch**, *Texas State University*

**Jonathan S. Abramowitz**, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

**Evelyn Behar**, *City University of New York-Hunter College*

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### Correspondence to

Dean McKay, Ph.D.,  
Department of Psychology,  
Fordham University,  
Bronx, NY 10458;  
mckay@fordham.edu

THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE is filled with stories of how investigators and broader scientific movements with righteous intentions harmed individuals (for a detailed illustration, see Gould, 1996). Social science, in particular, has a checkered history in its attempts to directly intervene in human behavior that result in unintended harmful outcomes. Individual therapy approaches have historically been assumed to be benign, at worst, if the intervention does not produce the desired effects. This assumption has been deemed dubious (Lilienfeld, 2007) and recent recommendations for systematic assessment of harms have been put forth (McKay et al., 2018). In this article, we raise concerns about potential unintended harmful consequences, specifically antisemitism, from the well-intentioned social justice model of mental healthcare, which the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) has recently embraced. Specifically, as the social justice model rightfully addresses the unique needs of historically oppressed groups, it can also indirectly lead to a desire for retribution against groups defined as oppressors.

The rapid embrace of the social justice movement by ABCT, as evidenced, for example, by the invited address on Liberation Psychology by Bryant (2023) and throughout the recent two-issue special series on harms in the misapplication of cognitive-behavioral therapy in *the Behavior Therapist* (Miller & van Dyk, 2023; van Dyk & Miller, 2023) reflects a sincere desire to promote the well-being of groups of people who have historically faced injustice. Although there is not yet a single agreed-upon social justice model in psychology (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019), a common perspective is the rejection of neoliberalism—an economic philosophy that emphasizes free markets, deregulation, privatization, and minimal government intervention—which is seen as contributing to structural inequities (discussed in Fraser, 2009). Framed as an effort to address longstanding intergenerational harms resulting from political oppression, this perspective has a noble aim that is likely agreeable to any pluralistic-minded clinician. There is little dispute that systematic political oppression has occurred and continues to affect marginalized groups through harmful policies. Contemporary methods to treat intergenerational trauma and associated psychopathology that emphasize social justice models aim to integrate a range of culturally informed psychosocial approaches to address the historical harms due to oppression (discussed in Comas-Diaz & Jacobsen, 2024). Although descriptions of social justice-based approaches to treatment appear clear and straightforward, as with prior therapy movements, the potential risks of these approaches are not always immediately evident. Integrating these models with the extensive research base of CBT would seem to be a logical and beneficial next step.

One strength of the broader CBT movement has been the assessment of treatment targets. In this regard, a search of the available research reveals limited empirical investigation of how historical oppression is reliably and validly assessed. There is preliminary evidence that some assessment tools are valid measures of intergenerational trauma (reviewed in Isobel et al., 2018), but evidence for their specificity is less clear-cut. As contemporary social justice activism is encouraged on the part of the client and therapist as prescriptive for addressing historical oppression and trauma (Comas-Diaz & Jacobsen, 2024), it is imperative for clinicians to have a sound understanding of political movements and historical contexts.

As much as we agree with the importance of equality and inclusivity, we argue that ABCT risks unintended consequences by embracing the kind of social justice perspective described above, particularly when navigating complex political and historical trends. Historical social justice activism, such as the civil rights movement, motivated by the same noble aim, was steeped in the idea of universalism—the belief that all people, regardless of their individual differences, are fundamentally equal and deserving of the same rights, opportunities, and treatment. Universalism is a primary recognition of the common humanity and dignity of individuals who are all deserving of basic human rights, with a secondary respect for the amazing unique differences of individuals that fill out and give meaning to their common humanity. Enlightenment thinkers codified universalism as a force against injustice. Briefly, the Enlightenment stressed that human reasoning could serve to improve the lives of humanity (Conrad, 2012), with universalism as a key tenet of this philosophical movement. Indeed, Martin Luther King, Jr., used the ideals of universalism as the foundation of his movement, whereby it was emphasized that we must recognize the worth of each individual and judge each person on the “content of their character and not the color of their skin.”<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, the social justice movement of today criticizes universalism and falsely claims that it attempts to “impose certain cultures on others in the name of abstract humanity that turns out to reflect just the dominant culture’s time, place, and interests” (Neiman, 2023, p. 30). Recent analyses have even recommended the complete abandonment of this philosophy as a guide to psychotherapy (Sue et al., 2024). However, the shift away from universalism in this new social justice movement raises concerns, as it shares troubling similarities with certain totalitarian doctrines. Adolph Eichman and Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmidt both suggested that “universalist concepts of humanity are Jewish inventions meant to disguise particular Jewish interests seeking power in non-Jewish society” (Neiman, p. 30). As Susan Neiman aptly points out, this ideology is dangerously close to the contemporary (and misguided) argument that “Enlightenment universalism disguises particular European interests seeking power in an increasingly non-white world” (Neiman, p. 31). The new social justice rejects universalism’s focus on unique individuals as individuals, even within particular groups with which they identify (Sue et al.), and embraces tribalism instead (i.e., Neiman).

Tribalism is dangerous when its focus on power is combined with a rejection of universalism because nuance, complexity, and uniqueness are replaced with simple characterizations of identity groups, generalized accusations of oppression, and universal assumptions about individuals. Accusations of oppression against groups and assump-

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<sup>1</sup>Neiman (2023) expresses reservation in using the term “tribalism,” noting that some people might take offense at the word as some kind of insult to groups for whom tribalism is part of their social structure and in this context it is being used in a somewhat negative way. However, there are also no suitable social constructs to capture the phenomenon. Yascha Mounk (2023) also talks about this phenomenon throughout his book and uses the words “warring tribes” in discussing the likely consequences of this ideology in the context of distributive justice in healthcare.

tions about individual identity based solely on group affiliation can be misguided when the nuance, complexity, and uniqueness favored by universalism are eschewed (e.g., Talisse, 2019).<sup>2</sup> Tribalism also leads to a desire for retribution which, problematic in its own right, is even more problematic when such retribution is directed by misguided assumptions about groups and their individual members. Thus, clinicians who embrace the social justice model are also embedded in a social system that implicitly stresses retribution against groups and their individual members for real or perceived perpetrated wrongs. Recent research demonstrates that a moral desire for retribution among politically left-leaning individuals can emerge when the public narrative suggests an imbalance in control between the out-group (oppressed) and the perceived in-group (oppressor) (Kunst, et al., 2018). In other words, when presented with an individual who is assumed to be a member of an oppressed group, the quest to identify and punish the perceived oppressor is a naturally occurring consequence. This moral stance is not new for the political left. Survey data from the mid-1970s showed that politically left-leaning college students endorsed the idea that they held morally superior positions and that those holding positions they disagreed with were deserving of punishment (Glantz, 1975). Retribution as a fundamental response to perceived injustice is natural. Quick, intuitive, and automatic, “cognitions and emotions in [this] response appear as a scripted package typically involving anger and the desire to punish” (Sivasubramaniam, 2017). This retributive impulse is fed by the idea that punishment restores a power imbalance that is caused by a transgression, and studies show that individuals are “more than willing to indulge it even if it is costly to them” (Sivasubramaniam). This response can be tempered with a recognition of ambiguity, nuance, and facts unique to particular situations—a response that entails thoughtful consideration (Sivasubramaniam). The motive of retribution on the new social justice model, however, is potentially quite dangerous precisely because the rejection of universalism toward tribalism amounts to a worldview that fails to see the nuance, ambiguity, and facts regarding situations or individuals that would otherwise temper its force.

It is on this point that ABCT, and the social justice movement in general, encounters a problem: Within this framework, Jews have been cast as oppressors (Rubin, 2013; Spinner-Halev, 2001; Walker et al., in press). This stance existed in social justice therapy groups before Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, and has only accelerated since. According to Talisse (2019), this is to be expected since as people more strongly align themselves to a certain identity, their beliefs often become more extreme. To illustrate, a recent article documented extensive discrimination toward Jewish therapy clients and Jewish therapists, particularly if they expressed solidarity with Israel (Deutch, 2024). The extent of discriminatory and antisemitic actions, framed in the context of social justice (Friedersdorf, 2024; Kim, 2024; Rosman, 2024), has been well-documented through campus protests in the spring of 2024 and in the significant spike in hate crimes against Jews since the start of the Israel-Hamas war. In the 2 months following the attacks of October 7, 2023, there was a 337% increase in hate crimes against Jews (Anti-Defamation League, 2023). The universal recognition of the human desire for freedom, compassion, and empathy, as well as the recognition that all people experience pain and suffering, is at the core of universalism (Mathu, 1999) and rightly remains at the center of any effective psychotherapeutic endeavor. The explicit abandonment of this Enlightenment principle opens the door to potential discrimination on

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<sup>2</sup> Talisse (2019) explains in greater detail, calling it *belief polarization*. As people more fervently identify with a particular group, their beliefs tend to become more extreme. This can lead to a tendency to label individuals in other groups in negative ways, even often solely on the basis of looks.

the basis of the endorsement of relativism in its place and broad-based, often misguided, assumptions about circumstances, groups, and individuals.

The importance of addressing recommendations for discarding Enlightenment principles in the name of embracing social justice has relevance specifically to the conduct of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), broadly defined. Most definitions of CBT emphasize the empowerment of clients to address their inner emotional experiences through directly challenging the systems in which they live that might contribute to distress, and through rehearsal of new adaptive skills, all in collaboration with the clinician. Models of CBT have always emphasized their personalized nature (Kazantzis et al., 2018), necessitating that effective clinicians exert cultural knowledge and sensitivity and, if they lack it, seek out appropriate consultation or refer to a clinician who possesses the requisite knowledge. This approach is fully in line with a universalism model and inconsistent with emergent treatment programs that stress relativism and, indirectly or directly, assignation to an oppressor group. The labels “oppressed” and “oppressor” represent a superficial and binary perspective that flattens out the full range of diverse characteristics of any individual. Further, while oppressed individuals can also be oppressors, the problem and harm inherent in identifying entire groups as “oppressors” deprives its members of individual liberty and personal identity. Indeed, Enlightenment thinkers, who were all White European men, would be grouped together as oppressors despite their formulation of universalism being a direct response against the prevailing colonizing approach of the countries where they resided (discussed in McKay & White, in press). Furthermore, while the idea that groups can be both oppressors and oppressed is true in theory, the possibility of it is undermined by the very ideology that is being proposed. Since beliefs about oppressors generate desires of retribution, oppression of an oppressor group is seen by most not as oppression but as justly deserved punishment. It is ironic that this epistemological mindset is so popular, given that it is so antithetical to that of a profession that focuses on each patient as a complex human being and that recognizes and embraces the uniqueness of each individual and the ambiguity and nuance of each situation that ultimately led the individual to seek help. The diminishment of diversity through overly general labels has been decried in the American Psychological Association’s (APA) *Inclusive Language Guide* (see the portion on recommended elimination of the use of the term BIPOC; APA, 2023). Despite this, the term “oppressor” has been used to refer to Jews in a contemporary context, without regard for the individual political viewpoint of any single Jewish member of society, a group that comprises less than 2.4% of the U.S. population (discussed in Walker et al., in press). This “othering” and dehumanizing stance would be offensive to any other underrepresented group but goes without protest from the very same social justice advocates within our profession.

Labeling Jews as oppressors also overlooks the long history of antisemitism, which dates back through all of recorded history. In fact, antisemitism has been labeled “the oldest hatred” (discussed in Phillips, 2018). Adherents to the social justice model began to frame Jews as oppressors in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attacks on Israel, well before any defensive response was mounted (Stephens, 2023)—and they did so without a proper understanding of the ambiguities and nuances of this history and the current war. This is particularly salient given that the current social justice model, expressed through institutional movements such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) approaches, specifically excludes Jews despite the long-standing discrimination they experience and the fact that they are a clear minoritized group (discussed in Walker et al., in press). In psychology, the neglect of legitimate concerns by Jews was on

specific display in the statement issued by the APA in the immediate aftermath of the October 7, 2023, attacks. In that statement, there was no mention of harm to Jews, and there were numerous inaccuracies regarding the nature of the conflict (discussed in Walker et al., in press).

The relevance of our points to ABCT is highlighted by two important facets. First, although ABCT is a multidisciplinary organization, its membership has long been dominated by doctoral-level psychologists. As such, the training model for most members derives from programs accredited by the APA. The second facet emerges from the first, namely that the APA has been clearly moving in the direction of a full embrace of the social justice movement in doctoral education (i.e., Toporek & Vaughn, 2010) and internship training (Cullinan et al., 2024). Accordingly, as ABCT moves further in the direction of including social justice perspectives on treatment conceptualization, it will be necessary to address the potential harms that might accrue with the abandonment of universalism. We are confident that models of social justice-based treatment can be modified to ensure that nondiscrimination is assured for all potential clients and therapists.

As far as we know, history and political theory are not part of the formal education of mental health practitioners. However, the authors are all students of the history of our profession and acutely aware of social movements that have been harmful to Jews (i.e., eugenics; history reviewed in Farber, 2008). It is in this historical context that we implore our colleagues to think very carefully about what is meant by the term “oppressor” and whether they are engaged in unintentional harm to others. We are confident that members of the organization are compassionate and empathetic. Awareness of the potentially misplaced sense of retribution and its consequences will go a long way toward a truly inclusive social justice framework of CBT.

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