

Mental Health Disparities Research: An Introduction to New Directions

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In early 2020, shortly before the United States began to shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) recognized the need to address the persistent mental health care disparities that continue to impact millions in this country, despite the significant advances made in mental health with respect to access and quality of care. While the complexities related to disparities reduction and the necessary skills required to conduct culturally and linguistically appropriate care and research have become more widely known and accepted, identifying strategies that create a meaningful reduction in mental health disparities and impact on minority mental health remain elusive. This recognition and the urgent desire to address the issue led NIMH to partner with the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) to plan and cosponsor a workshop (1). This virtual workshop held over 2 half days was organized to encourage dialogue about current research and to identify knowledge gaps and innovative strategies to address challenges in mental health disparities research. The workshop featured a diverse panel of researchers who provided their brief perspectives on multidimensional innovative approaches to address a range of mental health and mental health care disparities challenges and served as a think tank that generated novel approaches that the research enterprise and health care system could adopt to support an equity agenda. I served as one of the co-chairs involved in the planning and convening of this workshop, and among the important recommendations that we received from the workshop participants was to distill and broadly disseminate the information and knowledge shared during the workshop to help inform health disparities reduction and equity efforts.

From this interest in disseminating information from the virtual workshop to a wide audience, the idea for this special issue was born. As the special issue concept began to develop, there was a desire to highlight innovative, multidimensional disparities research that could be translated to inform clinical practice that advance health equity. There was also an interest in highlighting information from the workshop that described the historical and contextual issues related to mental health disparities and that articulated the innovative

future directions of mental health disparities research and care from multiple perspectives represented at the workshop. After much planning and coordination with the *American Journal of Psychiatry* Editors, it was determined that some of the NIH Institute leadership and researchers featured during the workshop would expand upon the brief perspectives of their presentations in writing overview papers for the *Journal*.

As such, the papers included in this special issue represent the perspectives and considerations of NIMH and NIMHD grantees/researchers, program staff, and leadership who were among the numerous participants and attendees that made the virtual workshop a success. These papers range from conceptual and theoretical commentaries to a historically and contextually grounded vision for future disparities research. On behalf of my co-chairs and colleagues that helped plan, convene, and support the virtual workshop and its related activities, I thank all of those that participated and attended, and I am proud to present this special issue as a collection that will continue to inspire and promote important research and clinical work to advance mental health equity.

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