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## Towards an Eternity: Celebrating The Association of Black Psychologists' 50th Anniversary

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## **The Formation ( – 1968)**

Western psychology was not created for Black people. Indeed, from the 19<sup>th</sup> through 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, psychological research was a popular tool used to reify racial hierarchies, with descendants of Afrika at the bottom (Guthrie, 1976). In 1840, the U.S. Census Report published intentionally inaccurate data that Black people in the north had higher rates of “insanity” than those in the south to argue that the psyche of Black people was incapable of handling freedom (Suite, La Bril, Primm, and Harrison-Ross, 2007). This mindset was evident in leaders in the field, as former president of the American Psychological Association (APA), Robert Yerkes, once argued that there was sufficient evidence that apes were stronger “thinkers” than Afrikan people (“Why Apes Are Probably the Only Animals That Can Think”, 1919). In this climate, Black people struggled to find adequate representation in psychology and to have their contributions recognized. According to Holliday (1999), European American psychologists widely held the idea that there were pervasive intellectual and social deficits that made it difficult and unnecessary to identify qualified Black graduate students.

This idea persisted late into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1960, large research universities like Yale, Harvard, UCLA, Cornell, and Stanford had yet to graduate a single Black psychology doctoral student (Wispe et al., 1969). As psychology graduate programs continued to deny entry to Black students, the prospect of a psychology that included the voice of America’s marginalized peoples seemed implausible. Rather than allowing Black voices to contribute to psychology’s inquiry into the socio-cultural differences between racial and ethnic groups, psychologists continued to posit “deficiency” models of racial differences (Holliday, 2009). That is to say, any observable difference between Black and White people was assumed to result from a deficit in Black people’s culture or biology. For the few Black psychological professionals in the field at this time, this landscape was more than untenable—it was destructive (Obasi, Speight, Rowe, Clark, & Turner-Essel, 2012).

These tensions came to a head when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was invited to speak at the APA’s annual conference. At the time, Dr. King had been advocating for pride in what he termed a “psychological maladjustment.” Specifically, he refuted the idea that Black people should ever become adjusted to conditions such as economic inequality, segregation, or religious bigotry. Rather, he venerated the psychological maladjustment of the prophet Amos as well as those throughout history he saw as looking past their realities in order to advocate for justice and moral truth. Dr. King described a solution through a formal psychological organization that would empower this type of “maladjustment” (Allen & Leach, 2018). So, upon taking the stage at APA, King (1968) implored the psychological community for the sort of support he understood they could

uniquely provide. He argued that the social sciences could play an essential role for the civil rights movement in unraveling the effects of racism on Black people. On September 1, 1967, Dr. King invited the APA to be the type of ally he had envisioned for the civil rights movement, but to a muted response. Less than a year later—on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968—Dr. King was assassinated (Meyer, 1969).

In the coverage of his speech that followed, newspapers largely ignored his call to action and instead criticized Dr. King for what was seen as blaming White people for Black problems (“Negro Leader Blames Whites for Disorders”, 1967). Yet, according to Hall-Campbell (2013), in a decade that also saw the assassinations of legendary leaders like Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, and Medgar Evers, many people responded to Dr. King’s death with a continued fire for political activism. This spirit carried over to the social sciences, where a number of scholars became advocates for anti-racist psychology (Guthrie, 1976). It was that energy and more that followed a number of Black psychologists to APA’s national convention in 1968 (Hall-Campbell, 2013). That Dr. King’s address resulted in little tangible action from the APA helped galvanize over 200 Black psychologists who would go on to create The Association of Black Psychologists, Inc. (ABPsi; Cooke, 2017). And while the purpose of Dr. King’s message to social scientists may have been lost to the wider American audience due to misreporting, ABPsi’s mission was hard to ignore:

“Members of [ABPsi] have pledged themselves to the realization that they are Black people first and psychologists second. The members of the new group feel they can no longer ignore the exploitation of the Black community by some elements of society (“Over 200 Black Psychologists Pool Resources”, 1968, p. 5)

Their intentions were clear: ABPsi publicly condemned the use of Black people as research subjects while continuing to ignore the effects of racism in psychology. Indeed, it was the sort of “maladjusted” organization that Dr. King had envisioned.

### **The Work (1969 – 2018)**

ABPsi as an organization has maintained a commitment to optimizing the psychological, spiritual, and physical well-being of Afrikan people since its nascence. In the year following the initial formation of ABPsi, the organization expanded by immediately displaying its solidarity with Black psychology graduate students. As Dr. George Miller issued his 1969 presidential address to hundreds of professionals at the annual APA convention, a group of students representing the Black Student Psychology Association (BSPA) took the stage in protest (Obasi et al., 2012). The BSPA was distinct from ABPsi and believed that Black psychology graduate students needed spaces to raise issues related to their

experiences (Obasi et al., 2012). However, the BSPA allied itself with ABPsi in order to draw attention to the APA's inadequate responses to the problems of racism within psychology. Once the BSPA students secured the microphone on the APA convention stage, they voiced concerns over the APA neglecting the grievances that ABPsi had aired for two years straight (Williams, 2008). Specifically, the students discussed the need for the APA to do more community-level work with Black people, and to better support Black graduate students. Gary Simpkins, National Chairman of the BSPA, highlighted how psychological research elevated a damaging representation of Black people due to the biases of the researchers. In addition, he once again brought the exclusion of Black students from psychology graduate programs to the forefront of the conversation (Obasi et al., 2012).

Determined to forge a different path relative to the APA, ABPsi immediately drew up a 10-point plan under the leadership of the 4<sup>th</sup> National President of ABPsi, Dr. Robert L. Williams, to ensure that psychology programs around the country committed to training Black psychology students. Each department was asked to: (1) create and maintain a committee for Black graduate student affairs in psychology, (2) ensure that at least 20% of incoming psychology graduate students were Black, (3) commit five years towards the problematic dearth of Black psychology graduate students, (4) ensure that Black applicants to psychology graduate programs were screened by the committee for Black graduate student affairs instead of general admissions, (5) prioritize the evaluation of Black applicants by the committee for Black graduate student affairs in psychology, (6) waive the standard application for Black applicants, (7) ensure that adequate financial support and opportunities are made available to Black graduate students in psychology, (8) create and maintain a tutorial program for newly admitted Black graduate students in psychology, (9) maintain adequate institutional support for the committee for Black graduate student affairs in psychology, and (10) commit to exploring other programs for the support of Black graduate students in psychology (Williams, 2008). Thirty-five graduate programs in psychology accepted the plan out of the 300 it was sent to, and with that, ABPsi had already begun to make their impact (Williams, 2008; Cooke, 2017).

In 1970, ABPsi turned to another popular tool of scientific racism—IQ tests (Williams, 2008). IQ testing had gained popularity in the U.S. after the APA employed the army alpha and beta to optimize the U.S.'s war efforts (Gould, 1981). Following the end of the war, researchers began to employ IQ testing in order to try and unpack existing gender, ethnic, and class hierarchies. For decades, IQ tests that penalized anyone for not being acculturated to White-America were used to disparage and discriminate against America's disenfranchised (Gould, 1981). In order to document the impact of cultural biases

on IQ test questions, Robert Williams developed the Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity (BITCH-100; Williams, 1972). This test was designed to center the cultural intelligence endemic to Black communities that was overlooked in traditional IQ tests. A comparison of scores between Black and White examinees revealed that the Black group scored an average of 34 mean points higher on the test relative to the White group. In highlighting these racial disparities, Williams (1972) argued that the extant racial disparities on IQ tests at the time were, in large part, due to rampant cultural bias. ABPsi publicly declared a moratorium on the IQ testing of Black students until sufficient tests that fully captured their ability were created. Since that time, professional members of ABPsi continue to develop and optimize assessment tools that have been used to uniquely understand the capabilities of Black students (Williams, 2008).

Two years after that moratorium, in Santa Clara, California, ABPsi endeavored to ensure the 1972 trial of Black Panther Dr. Angela Davis was protected from the racial bias characteristic of America's justice system (Hilliard, 1978). Specifically, the Bay Area branch of ABPsi was enlisted to refine the jury selection of the trial by assessing for various personality variables and sociopolitical attitudes. This involved documenting the juror's feelings towards communism, Black people, Black militancy, women, and Dr. Davis herself in order to advise Davis' legal team on jury selection (Hilliard, 1974). They cited a history of racially biased juries resulting in disproportionately punitive outcomes for Black defendants. Indeed, the prosecution would go on to state that the intervention of ABPsi played a crucial role in Davis' trial and eventual acquittal (Hilliard, 1978).

As research and activism based in Afrikan-centered psychology continued to expand, ABPsi created their own peer-reviewed professional publication, *The Journal of Black Psychology*, in 1974 (Obasi et al., 2012). ABPsi continued to grow and make progress by electing their first female president, Dr. Ruth King, in 1976. During the late 1970s and 1980s, ABPsi continued to establish itself as the first organization in the U.S. focused on and dedicated to a culturally-grounded approach to psychology for individuals of Afrikan descent. This focus created a shift in paradigm among many Black psychologists that was more in alignment with traditional Afrikan culture (Obasi et al., 2012; Williams, 2008). This shift was undoubtedly heavily influential in the future course of ABPsi. In the 1990s, when the country was combatting an AIDS epidemic that had cost millions of lives and had distilled anti-black and homophobic thought, ABPsi sought to protect Black lives. ABPsi President Dr. Robert L. Williams and Dr. Fred Phillips were awarded approximately five million dollars in grant money to tour the country providing HIV/AIDS awareness training to psychologists (Williams, 2008).

Today, ABPsi continues to engage in activism, develop theory, and is at the forefront of research on Black people globally. In addition to regularly providing expert testimony to the Congressional Black Caucus, ABPsi has publicly denounced Donald Trump for psychological terrorism (Nobles, 2018; Association of Black Psychologists, 2018). While those that have done the work to amplify the voice of Black people within psychology may not always receive the spotlight they deserve, the positive impacts of that work continue to be felt as mental health becomes a topic discussed more and more within the Black community. Today, ABPsi builds on the legacy of those early Black psychologists.

### **To an Eternity (2018 – )**

There is no better time to reflect on ABPsi's impact on the field of psychology and on Black lives than now. In the summer of 2018, ABPsi returned to its place of formation, Oakland, California, and celebrated its 50th anniversary, with a convention theme of *Building for Eternity*. Members from around the world came together as students, professionals, and family to celebrate the work that ABPsi has put forth over the past 50 years, and to recommit to the future and destiny of the organization. The convention was comprised of several events: Afrikan dance and drumming performances, a gathering of the stools of the organization's past presidents, fellowship events for students and elders, a sunrise tribute to the Ancestors, poster and oral presentations, an awards ceremony, and *Mbongi* assembly talks, just to name a few.

According to Fu-kiau (2007) the Bantu Kongo term of Mbongi refers to a way of structurally 1) gathering together the best minds and practices; 2) taking, seizing or accepting responsibility for solving and resolving the problematics of the Afrikan community; 3) capturing, critiquing and clarifying those "things which concern us dearly"; 4) exposing the "truth" of our reality as reflected in and represented by our spiritual, intellectual, social and artistic memory and creations; and 5) uncovering, correcting and utilizing the core meaning and purpose of a people in the service of human development and well-being. The Mbongi Assembly at ABPsi institutionalizes the idea of a community of thinkers and activists having responsibility to take care of the welfare and well-being of its people (ABPsi, 2018). This year's five Mbongi talks were used to plead the cases of the following topics: 1) From Theory to Therapy: The Emergence of Black Psychology; 2) Healing Our People, Social Justice, Activism and the Future of Black Psychology; 3) Pan Afrikan Black Psychology Global Initiative: The Restoration of Wellness Throughout the Afrikan World; 4) The Emerging Shift in the Legalization of Marijuana: The Untold Mental Health Challenges To Black Families and the New Legal Profiting; and last but most certainly not least, 5) To Be Healthy, LGBTQ/SGL, and Black/Afrikan: Theorizing, Defining, Healing

Ourselves While Building for Eternity. These Mbongi's helped facilitate dialogue surrounding topics that need to be discussed if one of ABPsi's goals is truly to see an eternity.

ABPsi President Dr. Huberta Jackson-Lowman addressed membership with regard to the future direction of the institution of ABPsi during the convention's opening ceremony. She emphasized how crucial it is for individuals of Afrikan descent to heal and recover from the *Maafa*—the 'great disaster' of the Afrikan Holocaust that represents the physical and psychological enslavement of Afrikan descent people (Ani, 1994; Kambon, 2012). Dr. Jackson-Lowman discussed the importance of collective work and responsibility and passing the reins of leadership on to the next generation to aid in the organization's sustainability. She stated that, "We must always remember that we are ONE people, connected at the roots. We cannot allow ourselves to be divided by skin color, income, education, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or ethnicity" (H. Jackson-Lowan, personal communication, June, 27, 2018). Such unity will be needed to aid in ABPsi building for eternity.

## Conclusion

Members of ABPsi are all too familiar with what it feels like to live and work in an environment that constantly reminds them that it was and is not designed for them to succeed. The founding of ABPsi in response to a psychological landscape that was in many ways opposed to the mental wellness of Afrikan people is evidence of just how resilient and self-determined this community of people are. Some of the organization's future goals, as expressed by President Dr. Jackson-Lowman, include building an Afrikan-centered infrastructure in order to continue to affirm Afrikan reality and sovereignty, utilizing technology to disseminate information to the Black community throughout the world, addressing the professional needs for development for Afrikan healers, collaborating with like-minded groups, organizations, businesses and institutions, increasing visibility, and becoming a Pan-Afrikan institution.

These goals undoubtedly grew out of a history of scientific, political, and spiritual resistance. Five decades after the formation of the organization there is copious evidence for the unique persistence of wellness and justice, from disputing the deficit model of understanding Afrikan people and opposing the widespread use of maladapted IQ tests on Black children, to ensuring a fair jury trial for Angela Davis and openly condemning the psychological terrorism of Donald Trump. However, these future endeavors, once reached and maintained, will have a proactive undertone that will help ensure the longevity of this institution. The eternity of this organization would not be possible were it not for the over 200 Black psychologists who were brave enough to lead the charge in

founding such a powerful and healing organization, and their immediate successors. It is upon their shoulders that current members of ABPsi stand.

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