

A 40-Year History of the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi)

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Dr. Thomas Parham, vice chancellor at the University of California, Irvine, recently asked me, “Dr. Williams, did you ever think the Association of Black Psychologists [ABPsi] would survive for 40 years?” I responded to Dr. Parham’s inquiry by essentially saying, “Yes, Tom. We African Americans are a strong, resilient people. We survived slavery, racism, discrimination, and segregation. Certainly we could survive as an organization that was doing the right thing for our people.” With that thought in mind, I began to think over the formation, development, and progress of the ABPsi over the past 40 years. As historian, elder, and past president of ABPsi, I watched its growth from infancy to adulthood. The following information chronicles that growth process from past to present. (See the Appendix for a list of ABPsi’s presidents over its 40 years.)

BIRTH OF ABPsi: SEPTEMBER 2, 1968

ABPsi was founded on September 2, 1968, during times of turbulence, turmoil, and unrest in this country. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated on April 4. Many riots occurred as a consequence of his assassination. Senator and presidential candidate Robert Kennedy was assassinated 2 months after Dr. King’s assassination. A rapid surge of Black consciousness was (“Black is beautiful”) sweeping the country.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I wish to thank Dr. Lawford Goddard for providing information on the dates of ABPsi meetings.*

JOURNAL OF BLACK PSYCHOLOGY, Vol. 34 No. 3, August 2008 249-260

DOI: 10.1177/0095798408321332

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The following press release, from September 1968, summarizes the initial thrust of ABPsi:

The Association of Black Psychologists was formed as a national organization during the recent San Francisco meeting of the American Psychological Association. More than 200 Black Psychologists who hold positions in various academic, public, industrial and governmental programs met to develop a nationwide structure for pooling their resources in meeting the challenge of racism and poverty. The Association charged that APA through inadequate positive measures condoned white racist character of the American Society, and failed to recognize the new Black movement as the most promising model for solving problems stemming from the oppressive effect of American racism.

Members of the Association have pledged themselves to the realization that they are Black people first and psychologists second. Accordingly, they will not continue to ignore the exploitation of the Black community by those elements of society who maintain traditional patterns of operation or who are unable to create meaningful alternative modes of affirmative action.

ABPsi also will address its attention to increasing the number of Black students and professionals in psychology. Moreover, it will press for improving the training and certification of psychologists who seek to work with minority groups in some enabling capacity.

Drs. Charles W. Thomas and Robert L. Green were unanimously elected as the first co-chairmen of ABPsi. Sister Ernestine Thomas served as the association's first national secretary. ABPsi had become a reality. Dr. Thomas put the concerns of the association as follows:

(1) The American Psychological Association (APA) has not related to the needs of the Black community; (2) APA has used the Black community as a resource for research and has never utilized its own resources to assist the Black community in overcoming the effects of white racism; and (3) APA has failed to utilize its resources to eradicate racism within the white community.

As an outgrowth of the early formative meetings, a document titled "A Petition of Concerns Submitted by the Association of Black Psychologists" was submitted to the APA by ABPsi, which read as follows:

The Association of Black Psychologists being urgently concerned about its role and that of the American Psychological Association in the Black People's struggle for dignity and equality in this country recognize the following problems as in need of immediate attention:

1. The extremely limited number of Black psychologists, Black graduate students, and Black students in the undergraduate program
2. The failure of the American Psychological Association to direct its scientific and professional energies toward the solution of prominent social concerns, particularly the issues of poverty and racism and
3. The fact that the general organizational structure of the American Psychological Association reflects a serious lack of adequate representation of Black Psychologists.

We see as the first task that of obtaining the full commitment of the American Psychological Association to an all-out attack on these problems. We recognize and applaud the actions already taken by the American Psychological Association to ameliorate the handicapping effects of racism in psychology through such efforts as the organization of the Committee on Equality of Opportunity for Black Psychologists. Much more, however must be done, and with a sense of greater urgency. We therefore propose:

- 1) That the American Psychological Association officially endorse the Kerner Commission's Report on Civil Disorders citing white racism in America as the factor chiefly responsible for the present conditions of injustice, inequality, and social unrest so prevalent in the country today.
- 2) That the American Psychological Association immediately set about the reorganization of its own internal organizational structure so as to provide for greater representation and concern for the Black community. More specifically, we strongly recommend that the membership of all official committees, boards, and other groups within the American Psychological Association which develop and/or implement policies directly related to the Black community involve Black Psychologists recommended or endorsed by the Association of Black Psychologists.
- 3) That the American Psychological Association brings to bear its full resources and creative energies to the matter of finding solutions to the problems of racism and poverty. The success of such efforts, however demand recognition that a significant part of the research emphasis must be shifted from total preoccupation with the ghetto as a source of the problems to a consideration of the institutions, practices and forces within the larger white community that contribute so heavily to maintenance of the status quo.
- 4) That the American Psychological Association immediately establish a committee to study the misuse of standardized psychological instruments to maintain and justify the practice of systematically denying educational and economic opportunities to Black youth. Further that pending the thorough review and reassessment of the issue on the highly questionable validity of these measures, a moratorium be directed on comparative testing and evaluation projects.
- 5) That the American Psychological Association re-evaluates the adequacy of certified training programs in clinical and counseling psychology in terms of

- their relevance to social problems, particularly in terms of their relevance to social problems, particularly with regard to the problems of poverty and life within the ghetto.
- 6) That at its October 1968 meeting with the American Psychological Association Board of Directors and/or Council of Representatives recommend that immediate steps be taken to get by whatever means necessary significant numbers of Black students into their graduate and undergraduate programs. That the American Psychological Association immediately transmits this recommendation to each department as a prerequisite for accreditation.
 - 7) That the American Psychological Association in consultation with representatives of the Association of Black Psychologists establishes a funded Ad Hoc Committee to implement and evaluate the progress of the recommendations listed above, and that the regular reports are made in the American Psychologist and at subsequent national meetings of the American Psychological Association.

These were compelling issues and concerns raised by ABPsi. The APA's responses to our concerns were mostly evasive and noncommittal. The president of the APA responded to our concerns by saying that it was inappropriate for the Board of Directors or the Council of Representatives to speak for (at that time) 30,000 members on any issues. Thus, much of the initial thrust of ABPsi during its originating years (1968 to 1970) was spent in deconstructive methods by denouncing racism and the APA and building Black pride through organizing our own autonomous, professional association.

1969 TO 1970: MEETING IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

At the 1969 annual meeting of ABPsi in Washington, D.C., I was elected chairman and Henry Tomes vice chairman. At the APA presidential address, Black students of the newly formed Black Student Psychological Association (BSPA) took over the microphone from the president of the APA. Dr. Gary Simpkins reported the following:

It was decided that we [the BSPA] would attend the National Convention of the American Psychological Association [in 1969]. Arrangements were made to meet with other students and groups in psychology from around the country at the convention in Washington, D.C.

After a series of Black caucuses, it was decided that the students would take over the podium at the presidential address and present their concerns to the convention. When the president of APA, Dr. George Miller, was introduced, Black students lined the front of the podium.

“Oh my—another one—oh my,” sighed George A. Miller, President of the American Psychological Association, as he learned of yet another disruption at the APA’s annual meeting in Washington. . . . The demands of Black Americans were again brought to the clear attention of the psychologists when black graduate students in psychology appeared in force at George Miller’s presidential address. After a brief conversation with APA President Dr. Miller, one of the students took the microphone and said, “I would like to introduce Gary Simpkins, National Chairman of the Black Student Psychological Association. He has something to say.”

I came to the podium, and the student handed me the microphone. I addressed the convention on the concerns of Black students. I stated that the history of psychology represented a history of racism. I spoke on the abuse of the Black community by White researchers who due to their racist stereotypes and faulty assumptions printed in the literature a distorted picture of a Black’s life.

I talked about the need for additional Black psychologists in the Black community and the barriers erected by the field of psychology to prevent Black students from entering the doctorate program; how the test they developed did a good job screening out Black students, but a poor job of screening in Black students. I cited a statistic during a twenty-year span that the top ten universities in the country granted over 7,000 Ph.D.’s, of which only 7 were given to Blacks.

After my presentation, the Association of Black Psychologists, represented by Drs. Charles Thomas, Robert Green, and Robert Williams, voiced solidarity with the students. They eloquently reinforced and expanded on the problems facing psychology and its dealings with the Black community. The White psychologists also voiced support of the students’ concerns, especially in the areas of research and recruitment of Black students for doctoral training. They admitted that historically much of the activities of psychologists in the Black communities could be labeled racist or the misuse of knowledge and power.

During my tenure as president of ABPsi, I drafted a 10-point program and sent it out to over 300 psychology departments. Each department was asked to make the following commitments:

1. Establish a permanent committee of Black graduate student affairs in psychology in order to a) serve as a liaison committee with the Association of Black Psychologists, Black Student Psychological Association and the American Psychological Association in the recruitment of Black students b) give advice, help and any assistance necessary to Black students after their arrival on campus (i.e., just as foreign students receive assistance in housing, tutoring, and other needed functions); c) assist and serve in an advisory capacity to the Black students throughout their stay at the university.

2. Establish that a minimum of 20% of entering graduate students in Psychology is Black each year. Twenty per cent is a minimum percentage and more may be admitted if necessary.
3. Establish that the department commits itself for five years with the unique problem of Black students. Five years should provide a good supply of students upon which to make appropriate evaluations.
4. Establish that Black applicants for graduate training in Psychology be initially screened by the Committee for Black Graduate Student Affairs rather than the Admissions Committee. This committee should be able to identify Black candidates and be prepared to alert the department to their potential candidates.
5. Establish that evaluation of Black applicants by the Committee of Black Graduate Students be weighed heavily in consideration for admission to graduate school.
6. Establish that the application required by many graduate schools be waived for Black Graduate students.
7. Establish that adequate financial support in form of fellowships, teaching assistantships, trainee ships and tuition remission scholarships are provided for Black graduate students.
8. Establish that a tutorial program be provided for incoming Black students and, if possible be supported by grant funds.
9. Establish that reasonable support for the Committee for Black Graduate Student Affairs in Psychology be supplied by the Department to assure an adequate recruitment effort.
10. Establish that Department will actively explore other programs which are developed to promote graduate training for Black people in Psychology.

Only 35 psychology departments adopted the entire 10-point program. Several departments adopted only parts of the 10-point program. The main reason for their rejection was based on the second item: to establish a 20% commitment of entering Black students.

At our 1970 convention in Miami, Florida, I cautioned our members "to break the quasi-dependency and symbiotic relationship with APA." It was at that convention that we decided not to meet at the same time or in the same city as the APA. It was also at that meeting that Dr. Wade Nobles introduced the notion of African philosophy and African psychology to Black psychologists. "I am because we are; and because we are, therefore, I am" became the unifying theme of ABPsi. We knew that we could not develop an African-centered organization in a Eurocentric organization. From that point on, ABPsi moved into a constructive mode and allowed African philosophy to become the foundation for Black psychology.

It was also during my tenure as chairman of ABPsi that I asked Dr. Reginald Jones to conduct a feasibility study to determine the need for a

Journal of Black Psychology. Dr. Jones reported a unanimously positive response to his inquiry. The first issue was published by the editor, Dr. Williams David Smith of the University of Cincinnati, in 1974.

1970 TO 1979

In an excellent article on the highlights of ABPsi, Dr. Ruth King (1977-1978) reported on further developments of ABPsi:

Miami Beach, Florida, September 1970 was the location where ABPsi members elected Brother C. Stanley Crockett, Ph. D. who served at the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute at La Jolla, California as Chairman; and Dr. Reginald Jones, then at the University of California at Riverside, as Chairman-Elect. At the 1971 Convention held in Washington, D.C., Brother Reggie Jones moved in the Chair and Brother James S. Jackson, Ph.D. an Assistant Professor in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan was installed as Chairman-Elect, elected by mail ballot prior to the convention. The latter practice has continued to date. In August 1972, the Association announced that Brother Thomas O. Hilliard, Ph.D., a Clinical Community Psychologist on the staff at Westside Community Mental Health Center in San Francisco, was Chairman-Elect. Brother George Jackson, Ph.D. serving as Assistant Dean for Essex County College won the Chairman-Elect slot at the 1973 Convention in Detroit, Michigan in August. Nashville, Tennessee, August 1974 was the scene of the annual meeting when Brother George moved up and Brother William Hayes, Ph. D. was voted Chairman-Elect. Brother Hayes was serving as Research Director at Westside Community Mental Health Center in San Francisco. (p. 10)

At the 1976 Chicago convention, the male dominance of ABPsi was broken. Dr. King was voted the first female president-elect. "Organization for survival" was the theme of the convention. Survival became a recurring theme for the organization. Dr. Alvis Adair was voted president-elect for the 1977 convention, to be held in Los Angeles. However, Dr. Adair assumed a college presidency and Dr. King continued to serve as president for 1977 and 1978.

1980 TO 1989

During the years 1980 to 1989, ABPsi continued to grow under the leadership of such notables as Drs. Daniel Williams, David Terrell, Kobi Kambon, William Lyles, W. Monty Whitney, Melvin Rogers, Harold

Fairchild, Na'im Akbar, Dennis Chestnut, and Susanne Randolph. Convention sites were in a variety of cities, such as Cherry Hill, New Jersey; Denver; Cincinnati; Washington; Oakland, California; Atlanta; and Fort Worth, Texas.

1990 TO 1999

In 1990, ABPsi organized its first international meeting in Ocho Rios, Jamaica. Dr. Linda James Meyers was voted the next president of ABPsi. In her presidential message, Dr. James Meyers (1991) stated,

We are at the stage of development where our identity has developed to the point of self determination. . . . We have come a long way toward our goal of institution building, but we have a long way to go before we can function at our fullest capacity and make the impact we all desire. (p. 6)

The 1991 convention met in New Orleans, Louisiana. The theme for the convention was "Reaffirming Our Identity: Africentric Psychology in the 21st Century." Dr. Timothy R. Moragne of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, was selected as the 24th president of ABPsi. In his presidential message, Dr. Moragne (1992) stated,

When the ABPsi reaches its full strength and viability, we will be able to provide real solutions to the problems that provide the fuel for the burning rage that courses through disenfranchised members of our population. We can't just get along with injustice! (p. 5)

The theme of the 24th annual ABPsi convention in Denver was "Celebrating the Reality of African Psychology." Dr. Maisha Bennett was elected for a second time as president of ABPsi. In her presidential talk, "The Second Time Around," Dr. Bennett (1992) stated in response to the question of the survival of the organization, "I knew that if our ancestors could build pyramids and develop the science of mathematics, then surely we—the descendants of those great thinkers—can build a national office that has order, structure, procedures and a balanced budget" (p. 6).

Dr. Anna Jackson, associate dean of Meharry Medical College, was elected as president of the organization in 1993. The convention theme for the 25th convention, held in Toronto, Canada (our second international meeting) was "African Psychology Throughout the Diaspora: The International Connection." In her presidential address, "Healing and Liberation: Critical Challenges," Dr. Jackson stated, "We gather in Canada, the final destination of many of

our ancestors who made the perilous journey from slavery to freedom. Simultaneously, we reflect upon our accomplishments as an organization and use them as building blocks for the future” (p. 4).

Dr. Amos Wilson (1993) gave an electrifying address titled “Re-Defining Psychology: From Alienation to Liberation.” Dr. Wilson warned that: “it becomes important for us to distinguish between the psychology of African people under oppression—or what I call the psychology of alienation—and an African-centered psychology or a psychology of liberation” (p. 4).

The 26th annual meeting of the ABPsi was held in Philadelphia. Its theme was “Prevention and Health Promotion: An Afrocentric Prescription for Wellness.” Dr. Wade Nobles was elected president and in his presidential message asked,

Do we heal the whole community or do we watch the final demise of our great people? The ancestral spirit demands that we heal. It is our destiny. When we meet this challenge, the name of the ABPsi will taste sweet in the mouths of our children’s children’s children forever and the day after forever. Together we must respond. No one else can do this but us. (Nobles, 1994, p. 5)

The President’s Council announced its inauguration of the undergraduate paper and graduate paper competitions. The association was awarded a 5-year National Minority Organization HIV/STD Prevention Project grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The grant provided technical assistance to community-based organizations.

The Student Circle (formerly the Student Division) was organized in 1993, as an integral component of ABPsi. The Student Circle is a professional organization dedicated to enhancing the psychological well-being of individuals of African American descent and serves as a voice for the next generation of Black psychologists.

Drs. Joseph White and Nancy Boyd-Franklin received the Distinguished Psychologist Awards. White (1995), in his inimitable manner, stated,

I want to acknowledge the next generation because the future belongs to you. You will take us to the next level which is just barely visible on the horizon. Each generation creates something for the next generation to build on. (p. 4)

Dr. Boyd-Franklin (1995) persuasively pointed out,

It is no accident that we are here today. It is not an accident that there is ABPsi. We are here because we were meant to be here. You are in this field because you were meant to be here. And so not let anyone in any of your institutions convey to you that you are not meant to be here. (p. 5)

The 31st annual meeting of ABPsi was held in Charleston, South Carolina. Dr. Afi Samella Abdullah of Tallahassee, Florida, was elected national president. Her president's message, "Cultural Healing: Sankofa to Maat," recognized that ABPsi's essence is spirit. Dr. Abdullah (1999) ended her presidential message by saying, "We must return to our culture. We must return to Maat. We must return to our true selves" (p. 6).

2000 TO 2008

In 2000, the 32nd annual meeting of ABPsi was held in Accra, Ghana, representing the third international meeting. The convention's theme was "Sankofa: The Healers' Journey." Featured events included historical tours of Accra, tours to Cape Coast and Elmina (slave dungeons), tributes to enslaved ancestors, and healing ceremonies with traditional healers (*okomfo*) in Kumasi.

This trip was the culmination of a plan to retrace the middle passage through Atlanta, South Carolina, and back through the door of no return in Ghana, spearheaded by Dr. Nsenga Warfield-Coppock (now deceased) in the early 1990s.

Dr. Willie S. Williams (in press) the 36th president of ABPsi, remarked,

I heard the sound on the Gold Coast of Ghana in the year 2000 on the occasion of my first visit to Africa for the 32nd Convention of the Association of Black Psychologists. Me, as a son of segregated Alabama, at the dawn of a new millennium in the land where my metaphysical journey began in the 15th century; a journey in no way charted to bring me home. Yet as I gazed at the Atlantic Ocean, my being there then seemed less a paradox and more a very natural closing of the concentric circles that had guided my life and career to that point.

The 2003 convention met in New Orleans, Louisiana. The theme was "Building on the Strengths of Our Culture, Our Community and Our Children: Positive Youth Development." The convention focused on the ABPsi mission of promoting and advancing the profession of African psychology, influencing and effecting social change, and developing programs whereby the organization can assist in addressing community issues. At the 2003 convention, a resolution passed to change the term of office of the president from a 1-year to a 2-year term, effective for the 2005 to 2007 presidential term. Dr. Robert Atwell served as the first 2-year president beginning in 2005. Dr. Dorothy Holmes serves currently as the second 2-year president.

Dr. James Savage pioneered the establishment of the licensure, certification, and proficiency (LCPP) in Black psychology. The LCPP represents ABPsi's initiative as a certifying agency of counselors, therapists, service

providers, and practitioners who render service in the African American communities.

The 40th annual convention is scheduled to be held in Oakland, California. The theme for the conference is "To Be African From the Beginning to Now: 40 Years of Meeting the Challenge of Black Mental Health."

Yes, Dr. Parham, we have not only survived over the past 40 years, we have established ourselves as a viable organization that is making contributions to the world. As you said in your closing presidential address,

The good news is that over time, we have grown and developed into an organization which is committed to meeting the needs of its professional membership, as well as addressing the mental health and social concerns of a larger African American community. . . . we have grown beyond our initial vision. (Parham, 1996, p. 9)

APPENDIX

ABPsi Presidential History

| <i>Number</i> | <i>Term</i> | <i>President(s)</i> |
|---------------|--------------|--|
| 1 | 1968 to 1969 | Dr. Charles W. Thomas ^a and Dr. Robert Green |
| 2 | 1969 to 1970 | Dr. Robert L. Williams and Dr. Henry Tomes |
| 3 | 1970 to 1971 | Dr. Stanley Crockett ^a |
| 4 | 1971 to 1972 | Dr. Reginald L. Jones ^a |
| 5 | 1972 to 1973 | Dr. James Jackson |
| 6 | 1973 to 1974 | Dr. Thomas Hilliard ^a |
| 7 | 1974 to 1975 | Dr. George Jackson ^a |
| 8 | 1975 to 1976 | Dr. Williams Hayes ^a |
| 9 | 1976 to 1977 | Dr. Ruth G. King |
| 10 | 1977 to 1978 | Dr. Ruth G. King (replaced Dr. Alvis V. Adair, president-elect) |
| 11 | 1978 to 1979 | Dr. Maisha Bennett |
| 12 | 1979 to 1980 | Dr. Joseph Awkard ^a |
| 13 | 1980 to 1981 | Dr. Daniel Williams |
| 14 | 1981 to 1982 | Dr. David Terrell |
| 15 | 1982 to 1983 | Dr. Kobi Kambon (aka Dr. Joseph Baldwin; replaced Dr. Bobby Wright ^a , president-elect) |
| 16 | 1983 to 1984 | Dr. Williams Lyles ^a |
| 17 | 1984 to 1985 | Dr. W. Monty Whitney |
| 18 | 1985 to 1986 | Dr. Melvin Rogers |
| 19 | 1986 to 1987 | Dr. Harold Fairchild |
| 20 | 1987 to 1988 | Dr. Na'im Akbar |
| 21 | 1988 to 1989 | Dr. Dennis Chestnut |
| 22 | 1989 to 1990 | Dr. Suzanne Randolph |
| 23 | 1990 to 1991 | Dr. Linda James Meyers |

(continued)

APPENDIX (continued)

| <i>Number</i> | <i>Term</i> | <i>President(s)</i> |
|---------------|--------------|----------------------------|
| 24 | 1991 to 1992 | Dr. Timothy Moragne |
| 25 | 1992 to 1993 | Dr. Maisha Bennett |
| 26 | 1993 to 1994 | Dr. Anna M. Jackson |
| 27 | 1994 to 1995 | Dr. Wade Nobles |
| 28 | 1995 to 1996 | Dr. Thomas Parham |
| 29 | 1996 to 1997 | Dr. Fred Phillips |
| 30 | 1997 to 1998 | Dr. Dana Dennard |
| 31 | 1998 to 1999 | Dr. Afi Samella Abdullah |
| 32 | 1999 to 2000 | Dr. Mawiyah Kambon |
| 33 | 2000 to 2001 | Dr. Anthony P. Young |
| 34 | 2001 to 2002 | Dr. Mary Elizabeth Hargrow |
| 35 | 2002 to 2003 | Dr. Harvette Gray |
| 36 | 2003 to 2004 | Dr. Willie Williams |
| 37 | 2004 to 2005 | Dr. James Savage |
| 38 | 2005 to 2007 | Dr. Robert Atwell |
| 39 | 2007 to 2009 | Dr. Dorothy Holmes |

a. Deceased

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