

Leaving a Legacy for the Future: Psychology and The ABPsi

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As healers, scholars and students of human behavior, we must ask ourselves: What legacy are we leaving for the next generation of psychologists? As an Association—and as individuals—we must challenge ourselves and ask: How have we contributed to the reclamation of the African spirit, the African family, African consciousness, and African nation building, right here, right now, in each moment, with each decision, with each action and each inaction?

“The one who cuts the trail does not know that it is crooked.”

The meaning of the proverb is quite simple: the litmus test of our leadership as psychologists will be revealed in the quality of mental health and sense of community found among our people. How straight is our trail?

We have a daunting task before us because the assault against the integrity of the hearts, minds and souls of people of African ancestry, across the diaspora, remains constant, relentless and pervasive. We live in a time when the cultural retentions that have kept us sane—and in community—struggle for survival and voice. Disproportionate numbers of our men, women and children are caught in the web of jail, imprisonment, and foster care. Disparities in health care, education, housing and employment abound. Babies are raising babies – without the knowledge and instruction of a cohesive village helping to raise the child. How straight is our trail? How relevant are we? What difference are we making?

The ABPsi is committed to fashioning a straight and meaningful trail. As I approach the sunset of my term as president of ABPsi, and reflect on our efforts to fashion a straight trail, I am encouraged yet humbled. ABPsi was born out of a sense of social justice, consciousness, and courage, and commitment to the mental health of Black people. The Association formed in direct protest to the practices and ideology of APA and has remained distinct and autonomous from APA to this day. Yet, ABPsi is strong enough and clear enough in its own mission and identity that it has been able to forge collaborations with APA in the service of the mental health of Black communities. As an Association we have not forgotten what our organization’s founders proclaimed at a press release in 1968 during a formal protest at the APA convention in San Francisco:

Members of the Association have pledged themselves to 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 action....ABPsi pledged to effect change in those areas that the APA has been insensitive, ineffectual, and insincere (Williams, 1974, pp. 11-12).

The founders of ABPsi united to actively address the serious problems facing Black psychologists and the larger Black community. This included the history of 400 plus years of enslavement, violence, oppression, and disenfranchisement and the ongoing legacy of racism

with its negative effects on Black people's mental health and well-being (as seen, for example, in disparities in health, education, housing, employment, rates of incarceration, and placement of children in the child welfare system, crime, community violence, gangs, and mental health) (Grills, in press).

As we strive to fashion a straight trail, over the last 4 years ABPsi has been keenly focused on building bridges to strengthen the Association's ability to have a meaningful impact.

To name a few, these bridges include national initiatives and partnerships

- 1) on mentoring Black youth with the National Alliance of Faith and Justices and the CARES Mentoring Movement,
- 2) on emotional emancipation self help groups with the Community Healing Network,
- 3) on challenging the war on drugs with the Institute of the Black World 21st Century,
- 4) on obesity among Black women and girls with the American Psychological Association,
- 5) on supporting and mentoring Black psychology graduate student research with the Black Graduate Student Conference in Psychology, and
- 6) on reducing disparities in mental health with the African American Health Institute.

These bridges also include international collaborations and outreach including a special issue of *The Journal of Black Psychology* devoted to a Pan African discussion of African Psychology spearheaded by former ABPsi president, Dr. Wade Nobles. This emerged in part due to the large contingency of ABPsi members at the 30th International Congress of Psychology in South Africa (July, 2012), and the overwhelming interest and support for Black Psychology by our continental African counterparts. The special issue is expected to be released in summer 2013 and as a follow up a special delegation from Africa is being organized to attend our 2013 convention in New Orleans. ABPsi will become an institutional member of The Forum of African Psychology; an Africa based assembly of African psychology associations.

Yet, with all that we have done, we have much, much more to do, both in bridge building, theory development, research, and praxis. You, we, ABPsi must be on the frontlines providing tools and supports for our communities to raise strong boys and grow strong women, cultivate strong leaders, advance an inclusive education, shift the tide from the pen (the penitentiary) to the pencil (educational achievement). And we must be intelligent in our strategy.

We know from our African cultural heritage that the seat of intelligence is not the brain, but the heart; that knowledge is not the end point, but wisdom informed by experience; and that it is in the cultivation and protection of the collective that personal well being is assured. In other words, at the heart of it all we must understand the cultural imperative that should anchor our work in African centered psychology. "*Psyche is not independent of culture, they make each other up*" (Holdstock, 2000, p. 6).

Baba Asa Hilliard, in an email communication, wrote passionately on this cultural imperative in his discussion of Cultural Transmission (June, 2006)

Africans seem not to get it! Culture is power, for self-determination, and for domination. Any African structure that does not include a cultural transmission and protection mission betrays its people. Every African individual owes a debt to ancestry and to posterity. Intergenerational cultural transmission is as vital as the basics of food, clothing and shelter. Without intergenerational cultural transmission, all else has little meaning. Baffour (Asa G. Hilliard, III)

As ABPsi moves into the future, we must be mindful of the trail we leave for posterity. It is time to use our African sensory system to form our image of reality; to more fully open the *Eye of the Heart* that we might have whole sight and effective action. We must reclaim our African mind and right to mental health. In sum,

Developmentally, as an organization, ABPsi is just entering middle adulthood with all the growing pains and lessons learned that come with that station in life. We have matured and are maturing as we live our mission in the context of limited resources, formidable social issues confronting our people, and competing attention for those who would be professional and student members. Although we have accomplished much we have more to do. Organizationally we are growing in our relevance, our visibility, our financial solvency, and our internal operations. We must and will continue to build our numbers in membership, the strength and numbers of our local chapters, the reach of our international constituents, and our fiscal fitness. We must and shall continue to do the important work of developing relevant theory, expanding the envelope for what constitutes research and knowledge production, and designing models of praxis consistent with the culture and world-view of people of African ancestry. (Grills, in press, p.8).

References

Grills, C. (in press). The context, perspective, and mission of ABPsi: Past and present. *Journal of Black Psychology*, xx(x) 1-8.

Hilliard, A. (June, 2006). Personal email communication.

Holdstock, L. T. (200). *Re- examining Psychology: Critical perspectives and African Insights*. NY: Routledge.