

***Special Issue on Violence against Individuals and Communities:  
Reflecting on the Trayvon Martin Case***

**Violence against Individuals and Communities: Reflecting on the  
Trayvon Martin Case - An Introduction to the Special Issue**

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**Abstract**

*In February 2012, Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida. The incident and subsequent police response, or lack thereof, resulted in debate, controversy and outrage regarding the role that racial bias may have played in this incident. Although there were many individuals who mourned the death of Trayvon Martin, the perception of this as a racially based incident was clearly discrepant between white individuals and communities of color. In the midst of this mourning and debate, psychologists and counselors responded as community members, professionals and researchers. This special issue of the Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology was initiated in March 2012, as a forum for counselors and psychologists to voice the impact of this and similar incidents as well as to propose social action that we can take as professionals to prevent and respond to hate related violence. This article provides a foundation and overview for the special issue.*

**Keywords:** Trayvon Martin, hate crimes, social action, oppression, dialogue

## Introduction

This special issue is intended to be a collective action taken in the wake of race related violence. It is meant to be a forum for counselors and psychologists, both professional and prospective, to have a voice in a way not often encouraged in professional venues. In this introductory article, I present an overview of the insight and work of authors who contributed to this special issue as a foundation for understanding how we, as counseling and psychology professionals, act on injustice using our personal and professional selves. Further, I share observations that arose in the process of editing this special issue in the hope of bringing forward questions and challenges that I believe underlie the potential of counselors and psychologists to influence social change in our communities and professional structures.

The impetus of this special issue came one year ago when, while walking home, a young black man, Trayvon Martin, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer. Many of the articles in this issue have this incident at their center whether exploring the incident itself, the ways psychology and counseling may be used to prevent or address this and similar incidents, calls for justice, or autobiographical expressions of the effect that the incident had on counselors and psychologists as human beings. As of this writing, the judicial process continues slowly as arguments regarding motive, intent, and issues of race are debated. Since the incident in February 2012, there have been numerous other murders and acts of hatred perpetuated in the context of race. For example, in August 2012, a self-proclaimed white supremacist entered a Sikh Gurdwara (place of worship) in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, and killed six people, wounding four others. The gunman was killed at the scene and, although no trial will determine his intent, his public history of race-based hate is clear (CNN, 2012).

It is important to note that this special issue was initiated in March 2012, when the media attention and residual effects of the tragedy were still recent. As this marks one year since Trayvon Martin's death, the content of this special issue is no less current or relevant. There is a recognition that time has passed; yet, many of the concerns still remain. Sadly, similar incidents continue to occur, too numerous to list here. The strategies and recommendations provided in this special issue provide important guidance and reflection.

The intent of this special issue is to provide a forum to address the influence of structural and individual racism on acts of violence against individuals and communities. When we envisioned this special issue, we maintained the goal of the *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology* to "promote deep reflection on community change and system transformation in which counselors, psychologists, and other human service professionals play a role" (JSACP, 2012). This special issue is unique among professional journals as we, the editors, are committed to providing a space for scholarly discourse as well as voice and personal reflection in light of very disturbing events that affect many on personal as well as professional levels. This creates quite an undertaking as the *Journal*, as a venue, is professional, yet we believe it is imperative to recognize and honor the connection between the personal and professional.

Psychologists, counselors and other helping professionals who are involved in social change work are part of the communities they study, counsel, teach, practice, and for whom they advocate. As such, leaving out their voices does a disservice to the individual, community, and profession and neglects the ethical and professional importance of positionality. In building and reviewing this special issue, it has been clear that this integration of personal and professional created unique challenges for authors as well as reviewers, and now potentially the reader. This introduction is intended to provide a framework as well as highlight issues and strategies raised by the authors of this special issue. Several themes appear including consideration of the sociopolitical context; examining race and racism as a precursor to preventing violence; recommendations for dialogue, action and policy; and finally, co-trauma, personal reaction and professionalism. This overview is followed by an exploration of observations and reflections on the process of addressing something so personal within a professional context.

### **Considering the Sociopolitical Context**

At the writing of this introduction, it has been one year since Trayvon Martin was killed. The power of that event is that it represents more than one young man's death. It represents and echoes a pattern of violence against individuals and communities perpetuated within the context of racial, ethnic and religious fear, bias, and hatred. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Annual Report on Hate Crimes, there were 6,222 hate crimes reported in 2011. Of those reported, the FBI classified the crimes as motivated by perpetrator bias as follows: 46.9% racial bias, 20.8% sexual orientation bias, 19.8% religious bias, 11.6% ethnicity/national origin bias, and 0.9% disability bias. Of those classified as motivated by racial bias, 71.9% were victims of a perpetrator's anti-black bias (FBI, 2012). There are two important notes to consider. First, hate crimes are underreported for a wide variety of reasons including the reality that not all police jurisdictions participate in the FBI's hate crime reporting program, methods of collecting data vary by agency, many victims do not report hate crimes to the police for fear of retribution, and the victim must consider the crime to be motivated by hate in order to be classified as such (National Institute of Justice, 2010; Shively & Mulford, 2007). Second, these statistics are likely a small estimate of violence perpetrated in which race or other identity dimension influenced, in some way, the actions of the perpetrator. For example, in cases where police action is taken and the targets of the police action are ethnic minority individuals, the reporting of that action most likely does not include an examination of the role that race bias may have played in the choices made by the police. Race bias is unlikely to be factored into examining the extent of force used unless community uprisings occurs such as in the case of Trayvon Martin or the 2009 murder of Oscar Grant in Oakland, California (Rosynsky, 2009). For readers unfamiliar with Oscar Grant, he was an African American man who was unarmed when he was shot and killed by a White transit police officer who claimed to have mistakenly used his pistol instead of taser. Protests in the community erupted with questions of the role of racial bias in the incident when it appeared that the investigation of the incident was slow and inadequate. Reflecting on these cases, the point made by Mays, Johnson, Cole, Gellene, and Cohran (2013) is relevant: social practices and public policies that have historically conflated crime with African Americans influence the perceptions and action of law enforcement.

Of the articles in this special issue, several themes emerged that widen the spotlight beyond the killing of Trayvon Martin to the broader sociopolitical context and authors' personal connections to that context. For some authors, his death was a reminder of the trauma and survival they, and others in their families and communities, have experienced throughout life given the

context of racism toward African Americans (R. Bell, Jones, Roane, Square & Chung, 2013; Pope, 2013; Williams, 2013). For others, the incident and the media's focus on the hoodie Trayvon was wearing, with the implication conflating crime, hoodies, and African American men, is a reminder of violence and oppression faced by other groups, in particular Sikh men. With some parallel to the assumption of criminality of African American men (Mays et al., 2013), public assumptions of terrorism has given rise to violence against Sikh men identified by their turbans (Ahluwalia, 2013; Arora, 2013).

### **Examining Race and Racism as a Precursor to Preventing Violence**

Despite the awareness of the long and violent history against African Americans and other ethnic minority individuals in the United States, the intensity of tragedies such as the killing of Trayvon Martin often provoke questions about how incidents like these can continue to happen. The influence of racism on perpetrators of such violence (Mays et al., 2013) and the conception of race (D. Bell, 2013) provide opportunities for consideration and examination that can lead to prevention interventions focused on potential perpetrators. Mays and her colleagues argue that research on individual racism can be useful in dissecting and understanding the behavior of perpetrators of hate crimes and more importantly, the reactions of police to African Americans. Further, they assert that using this research to understand the behavior of perpetrators puts the focus of prevention on the source of the violence, rather than the victims. Thus, shifting the lens of prevention to the cause. This resonates with the narratives of several authors in this special issue that expressed frustration with insinuations that Trayvon Martin was in part responsible for the behavior of Zimmerman because he wore a hoodie (e.g., R. Bell et al., 2013; Christensen et al., 2013; Pope, 2013). Mays and her colleagues use the Los Angeles incident of the Rodney King beating as a detailed case study of the interaction and reaction of police and apply research on racism and behavior. Alternatively, Deanne Bell examines the concept of race, and in particular, the use of "Black" as an identifier and questions whether it is possible, as a society, to move from current conceptions of race and racism when we continue to frame discourse through the lens of race. Palmer (2013) takes a different tack and suggests that perhaps the concepts of personal and social power may contribute to the understanding the actions of Zimmerman, the perpetrator in the Trayvon Martin case. She proposes that a greater understanding of the connection between violence and the pursuit of personal power may help illuminate indicators of violence as well as develop more effective preventative strategies.

### **Action, Dialogue and Public Policy**

The potential for social action in light of tragic events is seen profoundly in a number of different contributions in this special issue (Ahluwalia, 2013; Dale & Daniel, 2013; Mays et al., 2013; Lyubansky, 2013; Pope, 2013; Williams, 2013). The outcome of preparing for dialogue, for many authors, also involved some aspect of acknowledging and processing their own reactions and feelings often rooted in historical and contemporary oppression that made this tragedy personal. The importance of this process should not be underestimated. Primary lessons in ethical practice for counselors and psychologists require examination of personal beliefs and wellbeing. Unlike the historical assumption that human service practitioners can enter their work value-free, the process of acknowledging how tragic events such as the killing of Trayvon Martin, the Oak Creek shooting, and the countless other acts of violence affect

practitioners is a critical reflexive process that can facilitate greater competence as well as strength of conviction in taking action as professionals.

The range of avenues for taking action in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin varied widely and was fostered by lively discussion on the professional listserv of Division 45 of the American Psychological Association (The Society for the Psychology Study of Ethnic Minority Issues; APA). The action discussed included foci such as community based action, professional training and education, and institutional and public policy. Many of these strategies were represented and elaborated upon by authors in this special issue (Dale & Daniel, 2013; Mays et al., 2013; Pope, 2013). It is significant that creating and facilitating dialogue is the most notable theme across the listserv posts, as well as the articles appearing in this special issue, perhaps best capitalizing on skills that are central to counselors and psychologists.

One strategy discussed by multiple authors in this special issue is that of professional training and education. Dale and Daniel (2013) focus on training implications and emphasized the need for engaging students in dialogue about the incident as an important educational process. Specifically, they suggested various ways discussions of the Trayvon Martin case could be used in training; in part, to bring awareness of how racial discrimination influences counseling, mental health, and wellness to the surface as well as personal reflection. Dale and Daniel emphasize that clients and trainees of color may be affected by these events differentially and that it is important to facilitate processing of reactions. In particular, they noted that students of color may have powerful reactions related to the killing of Trayvon Martin, and events like it, as these events may reflect their own experiences of discrimination. For white students, the events may trigger denial of race, guilt, anger, and uncertainty about how to respond in socially just ways.

Educating the public, as well as counseling and psychology students and professionals, about the realities and consequences of racial and religious profiling as well as cultural strengths and humanity of individuals and communities that have faced bias are also noted in several articles (Ahluwalia, 2013; Williams, 2013). For example, Ahluwalia describes action taken in the Sikh community after the Oak Creek shooting including educating the public and developing avenues for reporting profiling that support not only the Sikh community but also other communities targeted by profiling.

The role of counselor educators and psychologists as leaders facilitating dialogue in academic environments more generally is also an important strategy. Williams is compelling in his integration of his personal affective reaction both in response to news of the incident as well as in response to his drive and process of attempting to take meaningful action. He describes his reaction to the Trayvon Martin tragedy and chronicles the challenges, both external and internal, he experienced trying to take action as a new faculty member. His candor in describing his uncertainty and fears is powerful and useful for those of us who have expertise and yet feel novice and vulnerable. He also speaks to the importance of creating support, a coalition of like-minded individuals and communities, to bring varied expertise, credibility and moral support. From this experience, he distills nine lessons learned that can guide new social change agents. Similarly, advice about creating consistency between one's actions, intentions and beliefs is tremendously useful for professionals and students embarking on social action.

Dialogue is also central in Lyubansky's (2013) discussion of restorative justice in which he stresses the need for systemic change to address profiling of African American men. Lyubansky describes the application of restorative circles as a method of moving beyond punishment of crimes to include reparative and restorative justice using a case from Seattle in which an innocent First Nations man was killed by a police officer.

Moving from dialogue to policy, Mays and her colleagues (2013) describe the importance of using psychological science to address racism through public policy and awareness. They use noted events in the history of the United States, and Los Angeles specifically, to describe the ways in which psychological science has been used to counter racism and discrimination and make recommendations for future advocacy and public policy involvement of psychologists.

### **Co-trauma, Personal Reaction and Professionalism**

Counselors and psychologists are called to facilitate healthy growth and functioning of individuals and communities as well as to respond to, and understand, human trauma. In teaching, I, like many educators, tell my students that they are possibly the most important tool in the work they do. At the same time, they are human and subjected to many of the same circumstances and life events experienced by the individuals and communities they serve. There have been considerable shifts over the development of the fields of counseling and psychology since the early 1900s reflecting the political and social climate of the times. This is seen in shifting influences of the medical model, deinstitutionalization, civil rights, and other momentous forces (Baker & Subich, 2008; Harris, 1997).

Within counseling and counseling psychology, there has been an increased emphasis and acceptance of the need to move beyond individual intervention to examine and acknowledge the role of systemic forces in health and wellbeing. Along with this, has been increased attention to the role of advocate and social change agent as an important part of counseling and counseling psychology (Ali & Lees, 2013; Lee, 2012; Toporek & Liu, 2002; Vasquez, 2012). One of the criticisms of dominant traditions of psychology and counseling is that there is a separation between client and practitioner, the subject and the researcher, in a way that distances the professional from the community. As the profession shifts to recognizing ourselves as integral with the community, professional and personal selves co-exist. Yet, the tradition of scholarship leaves very little space for voices that integrate the personal and professional, particularly when those voices are marginalized.

Voices that reflect the integration of personal and professional invite the reader to try to understand the raw pain, anger, and frustration expressed by Christensen and her colleagues (2013) and Reston Bell and her colleagues (2013). Reston Bell and her colleagues provide a context so that the reader may hear their pain, anger and emotions as human beings and honor the reality of that experience as emerging professionals. Similarly, Christensen and her colleagues provide three diverse reflections integrating historical and contemporary perspectives for emotive response. Acknowledging her identity as a community member, educator, researcher and psychotherapist, Arora (2013) shared her pain as well as the voices of Sikh men interviewed since 9/11 regarding their experiences of profiling, violence and hostility.

The narratives contained in the special issue are powerful and prompted questions throughout the process of editing this special issue including the tenuous relationship between social justice and scholarship; the place that emotion and human experience has for counseling and psychologically oriented professionals, particularly in the face of historical and ongoing trauma; and, the interaction between power, privilege, race, and position.

### **The Tenuous Relationship between Social Justice and Academia as an Interaction between Power, Privilege, Race, and Position: Reflections of the Editor**

The race related milieu surrounding the Trayvon Martin tragedy, a representation of ongoing violence perpetuated against African American boys and men in the United States, exists within the context of allowing space for marginalized voices as long as they are acceptable and palatable. This is a form of systemic oppression. In essence, this process silences and further marginalizes communities and members of the counseling and psychology professions who belong to those marginalized communities. At the same time, the goal of shared understanding, building alliances, and working together toward social change means that some element of sharing and hearing voices needs to bridge the gap between those who have traditionally held privilege in academia and those who have been traditionally marginalized. This reflects the complexities of recognizing the oppressive ways of academia. While acknowledging and adhering to some of the conventions that provide credibility and standards for professional and ethical practice (e.g., peer reviewed process, empirically driven assertions, etc.), how do we understand the role of emotional response and reaction in the context of academic writing that is supposedly objective and not swayed by emotional responses? For example, in my position as editor of this special issue, we used a masked peer review process and included reviewers from a range of ethnic and socioracial backgrounds, all of whom have contributed to social justice literature in counseling and psychology.

As an editor, I wanted to ensure that the feedback provided to authors honored their experience while reflecting a goal of readability, professional discourse, and scholarship. As Reston Bell and her colleagues articulated in the introduction to their article, the sharing of personal experience may strike some readers emotionally, positively or negatively. To silence this experience would perpetuate a history of silencing, and an assertion of dominance. In editing an issue of a professional journal that specifically sought to integrate personal and professional, experience and scholarship, the challenge of amplifying historically oppressed voices within our profession as well as rigorous scholarly standards remained in the forefront. The journal does not see these as mutually exclusive. And, if this is an unusual path for a journal to take, how do our traditional venues address or consider, if at all, the process of silencing voices in the effort to produce products of "high scholarly standards"?

I ask these questions, aware of my positionality as a white woman, socialized within the racialized United States and trained as a psychologist within a relatively traditional and dominantly framed counseling psychology doctoral program. It is a challenging process to acknowledge my anger, frustration and flailing hope each time I hear about a Trayvon Martin who is killed, an Oak Creek Gurdwara that is assaulted, and the many other instances of violence perpetrated by hate and ask myself "how am I using my privilege to prevent this from continuing?" Simultaneously, as a white person who is in a place of professional privilege, I am aware that there are undoubtedly places I don't see how my actions silence others, how my

rage is felt differently from those who have brothers, sisters, sons and daughters who are the target of violence. I must keep myself accountable acknowledging this positionality. I also believe that in order for the fields of counseling and psychology to move forward toward social justice, a critical examination and transformation is needed regarding the ways that discourse, scholarship and professionalism is defined.

### **Update and Conclusion**

As I conclude this introductory article, the outcome of the trial of George Zimmerman, the man who shot Trayvon Martin, is still uncertain. Trayvon Martin's family is predicted to file a civil suit against the Homeowner's Association and George Zimmerman. The hearing in which Zimmerman is expected to argue immunity due to Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law is tentatively scheduled for April 2013 (Weiner, 2013). The outcome of this trial is uncertain, yet it is not the outcome of the trial that will prevent future tragedies like this one. Rather the strength, conviction and work of communities and individuals is needed to move to social action and work to ensure that hate, misunderstanding, prejudice and bias do not continue to shape the potential and experience of the next generation.

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