

***Special Issue on Violence against Individuals and Communities: Reflecting on the Trayvon Martin Case*** [This article appears in the Narratives and Reflections section of the Special Issue]

## **Reflections of a Black Male Counseling Psychology Doctoral Student: Lessons Learned from APA Division 45 Commentary and the Role of Social Justice for Counseling Psychologists**

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### **Abstract**

*The tragic killing of Trayvon Martin has received nationwide media coverage, even garnering commentary by the U.S. President. The attention is unique in the sense that young Black men in Martin's age group have consistently been the most likely to be killed as a result of homicide and often ignored by the media. A personal reflection is provided to give context to the racial socialization process as well as the internal struggles being faced by some Black men in the United States. In addition, postings have been shared from the American Psychological Association Division 45 electronic mailing list capturing the social justice activism process in pursuit of justice for Trayvon Martin. The results of this article call for deeper analysis of the cause of racially motivated killings.*

*Keywords:* Trayvon Martin, Violence, Safety, Social Justice, APA Division 45

### **Introduction**

The tragic killing of Trayvon Martin has served as the impetus for social justice action and critical discussion about racism and violence in the U.S. For instance, President Obama issued a challenge to the nation when he stated, "I think every parent in America should be able to understand why it is absolutely imperative that we investigate every aspect of this, and that everybody pulls together - federal, state and local - to figure out exactly how this tragedy happened..." (Thompson & Wilson, 2012). A national cadre of psychologists stood ready to answer the call. Division 45, the Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues, a division of the American Psychological Association (APA) provided a space for critical discussion of the killing of Trayvon Martin. Early conversations took place on Division 45's electronic

mailing list which allowed psychologists across the nation to engage, discuss, and plan future scholarship endeavors. Many of the conversations resulted in professional presentations at the 2012 APA convention.

I have been privy to the conversations of professional psychologists in regards to the killing of Trayvon Martin. The electronic mailing list provided an academic space to understand current sociopolitical issues through the lens of professional psychologists. The first section of this article is my attempt to provide a brief glimpse into the internal processing and daily strivings as I learned how to survive as a young African American male in this society. Cokley (2012) referred to this need to survive as a sad reality where young Black men have to be socialized to appear nonthreatening or risk being identified as suspicious or dangerous.

The killing of Trayvon Martin awakened conversations surrounding the pervasive stereotype of young Black men as dangerous. For example, social demonstrations such as the Million Hoodie March were in direct protest to the assertion that a hoodie could be associated with suspicion. Hayes (2012) explains, that the Million Hoodie March was a clear reminder that when worn by someone older, or Whiter, the hoodie is just a sweatshirt. Next, I will focus on the reflective pieces, commentary, and social action as discussed on the Division 45 electronic mailing list. Then, I will integrate my personal reflection and Division 45 postings in attempt to expand the working definition of social justice to include safety as a resource that is not equitably distributed or readily available to Black men. In naming this "sad reality" and conceptualizing safety as a resource I hope to provide an anchor for social justice work to enhance established tools in the fight against racial oppression.

### **Reflections of a Young Black Man**

In 1991, I moved with my family from Okinawa, Japan to begin third grade in the United States. I spent most the remainder of my elementary, middle and high school years living in Southern California. In some ways, living in military housing became a buffer from the reality of being a young Black man. I thought of myself as American and I was treated like many other military dependents. It was not necessary to be aware of the fact that I was Black. In Japan, I was American. The "sad reality" began when my mother retired from the military and our family no longer lived in military housing. Often she would warn and remind me of how I was "supposed to act" when I was away from home. These warnings can be understood as racial socialization messages (Barr & Neville, 2008) and are one example of racial socialization in my family.

Racial socialization as defined by Stevenson (1995) is a concept that describes the process of communicating messages and behaviors to children to bolster their sense of identity given the possibility and reality that their life experiences may include racially hostile encounters. Stevenson's conception of racial socialization implicitly captures the idea of maximizing opportunities for safety through limiting potential individual level mistakes resulting from unpreparedness. During adolescence the messages changed as my mother would explain that, as a Black man who was physically larger than most students in my age group, I needed to be careful of how I presented myself and constantly be aware of my surroundings in unfamiliar spaces. These messages are consistent with Barr and Neville who explain that there is an increase in protective racial socialization messages during adolescent development. As a male

child, the messages I received often centered on the ability to comprehend negative stereotypes and societal messages while fostering coping strategies to deal with racism (Thomas & Speight, 1999). My mother's biggest fear was that I would end up dead or in jail for being in "any place" at the wrong time. What my mother knowing or unknowingly did was train me to remain in a hyper-vigilant state of constant scanning, risk-evaluating, and discerning of environmental spaces.

Now, in the twilight of my twenties and beginning my second year as a doctoral student I see that my mother's parental concern was warranted. For example, in 2010, amongst the 3,949 single-bias hate crime incidents, 70 percent were victims of an offender's anti-black bias (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). Individuals that share my visible racial group are subject to becoming victims of violence and unfortunately this is not an emerging trend; rather, it represents the deep internal wounds of this country. Gibbs (1988) explained that Black men as a group are an endangered species due to the systemic oppression and institutionalized racism that exists in our society.

Homicide is the leading cause of death for young African Americans from the ages of 10 to 24 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Looking specifically at homicide rates among non-Hispanic, African-American men in the 10-24 year age range, we see that 60.7 per 100,000 are killed which exceeds the rate of Hispanic men at 20.6 per 100,000 and non-Hispanic, White men in the same age group 3.5 per 100,000 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010) giving young African-American men the most elevated homicide victimization rate of any race or gender group. The main point is that simply being visibly Black men, we are circumstance to racism, suspicion, and violence. I live in a world where my physical presence has the potential to evoke fear that legitimizes any potential harm that is received. Further, highlighting the above point are the impassioned words of Marsella (2012):

There is a deep, abiding darkness in the soul of our times. A passion for violence and hate that is omnipresent and unrelenting in its pursuit of satisfaction and satiation. I am filled with grief and sorrow as a witness to the injustice, indifference, and faceless presence that is devouring our world. I offer you and every victim of this endless and timeless horror of our times my apology and promise to work toward inner and outer peace in my thoughts and actions. Hope is not enough. Patience cannot heal. Our own nation, our institutions, our popular culture are the very sources that sustain and nurture violence, destruction, and death. If there is any meaning to come from the killing of yet one more Black, one more repetition of a killing that has crossed centuries and place, let it be that this evil be confronted in all its forms across our land. We must not permit time to remove this killing from our mind or conscience or actions. It is time for a national atonement--a confession and a public plea for forgiveness for what we have wrought, and continue to deny.

### **APA Electronic Mailing Service Commentary and Postings**

As a current graduate student it is easy to find comfort in the halls of academia now having survived the critical developmental period of ages of 10-24 for young Black men. The initial calls for justice for the killing of Trayvon Martin on the Division 45 electronic mailing list were a way of not only staying informed about the case from a professional psychologist's point of view but

it was also comforting to know that other professionals shared my concern for dismantling systems of oppression. The following is a summarized list compiled by (Milburn, 2012) outlining some of the suggestions of Division 45 members:

1. Send a letter of support from Division 45 to Trayvon Martin's family (Breland-Noble, 2012; Milburn, 2012, Wyatt, 2012)
2. Submit op-ed pieces that "uses psychological research to comment on" "implicit racism/stereotypes," "racism, microaggressions, stereotypes, violence and trauma," and the "new racism" (Burns-Glover, 2012; Gholson, 2012; Thomas, 2012)
3. Identify how the work of Melba Vasquez's APA Presidential Task Force on Prejudice and Discrimination may be applied ( Thomas, 2012)
4. Work with APA Public Interest Directorate to keep this case in the spotlight and use psychologists as the experts that the media call on to discuss racial profiling, stereotyping, etc., and as legal experts for jury selection, expert testimony on "implicit bias," etc (Banks, 2012)
5. Provide pro bono "mental health services for the family."
6. "Have a town hall meeting" with the Sanford community (where the killing took place) during the APA 2012 convention.
7. "Offer [racial profile] training to local law enforcement that is general enough to be a program that Division 45 can sponsor where ever we are, like at the NMCS [National Multicultural Conference and Summit] or in cities where the EC [Executive Council] is meeting for its midwinter meeting" (Buckley, 2012).
8. Some sort of forum (maybe at the APA convention) to express concern about the state of African American children in the US; specifically, that "too many of our children are 'killed' in many ways on a daily basis" (Casas, 2012).

The above comments extracted from the electronic mailing list include contributions by such distinguished psychologists as: BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Martha Banks, Sabrica Barnett, Jane Berry, Tamara Buckley, Manny Casas, Georica Gholson, Alyson Burns-Glover, Bertha Holiday, Jeff Mio, Vicky Mays, Alfiee Breland-Noble, Monica Pedemonte, Sherri Taylor, Anita Thomas, Rebecca Toporek, and Gail Wyatt. Through the months of March and April 2012, these postings offered incident-specific suggestions such as, letters of support to the Martin family, petitions for Federal and State Departments to investigate the case, and the offering of pro bono counseling services to the Martin family. The discussion included a deeper analysis of Trayvon Martin's death as one piece of a larger pattern that devalues the humanity of Black men. This is in contrast to many media commentators, news outlets, and general public which typically viewed the death of Trayvon Martin as a tragic isolated incident that should be properly pursued through the criminal justice system; although, many of the professional psychologists on the Division 45 electronic mailing list saw his death as a part of a larger systemic issue.

For instance, as one of her presidential initiatives of 2011, APA President Melba J. T. Vasquez convened a task force aimed at reducing and preventing discrimination against people whose social identities are marginalized. The APA (2012) task force report titled, *Dual Pathways to a Better America: Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity*, operated on two major premises; (a) An enormous toll is exacted on human capital when systematic biases, stereotypes, and discrimination are perpetuated and (b) acceptance of and support for social diversity is critical to the health of the population, especially in light of the fact that diversity of the U.S. population is ever expanding (APA, 2012 p.8) Overall, the report documents the psychological effects that stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination have on individuals, families, and communities. To mitigate the negative consequences of these attitudes, the Task Force Report outlines pathways for diversity that include educational outreach and embracing new forms of media to promote diversity and social inclusion. In the end, the report suggests that discrimination and social exclusion are painful at multiple levels and exact huge costs on human capital.

### **Teaching in the Classroom and the Community**

One way to focus on the macro-issues as psychologists is to continue to infuse these issues into academic course work. In my early career as a graduate student I had the privilege of serving as a teaching assistant in a multicultural psychology course taught by Dr. Joseph R. Morris where we incorporated current events into the course work. This approach to the multicultural course provided counseling trainees the opportunity to critically think about current events while integrating theory into what we were discussing. For example, J.R. Morris (personal communication, January 27, 2012) stressed the importance of the third-rail in initiating change at the macro-level. In this context, the third-rail refers to a group, organization, or coalition of people who are motivated by civic duty and not by a particular political affiliation. The pressure generated from petitions signed by over 2 million people on Change.org and the organizing of the Million Hoodie March are examples of social activism from the third-rail enacting pressure upon institutions to create change. The importance of incorporating current events into the graduate curriculum was also highlighted on the Division 45 electronic mailing list by Daniel (2012):

Those of us who teach and train need to address this matter with graduate students, interns and fellows. A few of them do not follow current events and consequently are totally unaware of the case. Graduate students who may provide services to ethnic minority males who are at risk for the same experience (as Martin) need to know that talking about the vulnerability of these adolescents is not hyperbole—it is real the teen could die.

Students who receive graduate training to begin careers in the helping professions are expected to see an expansion in their range of critical thinking and perspective taking ability. Graduate training represents an opportunity for students to expand their worldview. Potts (2012) provided a non-exhaustive reading list that included suggestions for reading materials to further our understanding about violence, systemic racism and oppression (see appendix). This list may be helpful in promoting critical thinking in the classroom as well as providing materials for community outreach as suggested in the APA Task force report. Many of the books listed in the appendix will challenge students to employ critical thinking that is counterintuitive to traditional

academic coursework. One example is Michelle Alexander's (2010) book, *The new Jim Crow*, where she provides considerable evidence suggesting that many of the U.S. institutions create crime rather than prevent it (p.8). Reading work such as this should alter the way that we work with clients who may be circumstance to the inequities of these institutions. Initiating conversations about systemic racism and oppression will start the growth process (Potts, 2012). I agree that having these conversations in community organizations, workplaces, and other atmospheres of commune is one way that we can dismantle systems of oppression. Sandra Mattar and Helen Neville organized a symposium for the 2012 National APA Convention in Orlando, Florida entitled, "Taking Back Our Country: Psychology of Hate, Intolerance, and Resistance" that addressed the issue of police brutality and racism (Mattar, 2012). The convention was located approximately 30 miles from the Sanford community. Symposiums such as this provided additional opportunities to engage in civic discourse informed by psychological science.

### **Social Action: Mobilizing and Speaking Up**

Links were posted on the electronic mailing list to provide members information to email and write the Sanford police department, Mayor, Attorney General, Governor, U.S. Senators, Congresswomen, and Change.org to petition for the officials to repeal the Stand Your Ground law (2005) and for the prosecution of Martin's killer (Gholson, 2012). Rhea Farberman, the APA director of Public and Member Communications provided updated information about how APA was responding to the Martin shooting:

We have been getting and expect more press calls about the shooting and how the psychological research on implicit bias might help us understand what happened and why. Other applicable research (and experts who talk to the media) can be found in the areas of police training and screening; especially for auxiliary personnel. We have a number of members in our media referral database who can speak to these research areas including Lorraine Greene and John Dovidio. A study conducted by James Brokmole which suggests that holding a gun increases a person's bias to see guns in the hands of others. I think we need to be careful about any further statements or actions until all the facts are known. In the meantime, our hearts go out to the Martin family. We will attempt to inform the coverage of the shooting based on our members' expertise and the available research (Vasquez, 2012).

It is important to provide a platform for experts to discuss issues pertinent to the community. This point was further elaborated by Mays (2012) who suggested, in addition to research about implicit bias, there should also be a focus on racism, discrimination, stereotyping, and the psychological response of both communities and families to the incident. It is important that psychologists highlight the need to create a better sense of safety, security, and protection in communities. The relevant research suggested by Mays included James Jones, Guy Seymour, Wizdom Powell-Hammond, Jennifer Richeson, Phil Goff, Jennifer Eberhardt, and Mays herself. APA's resolution on "Racial/Ethnic Profiling and other Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Law and Security Enforcement Activities" (APA, 2001) may be one way to explore the many suggestions listed above. The resolution encourages research efforts to investigate: (a) the role of racial/ethnic bias and stereotyping in traffic stops, other law enforcement activities, and security activities (e.g., airport and border security); (b) the prevalence of racial/ethnic profiling and

racial/ethnic disparities in law enforcement and security activities; and (c) related effects on individuals, communities of color, and law and security enforcement officers and agencies. Also, APA should promote programs to increase awareness of local, state, and federal government officials, as well as the public, about issues and concerns related to racial/ethnic profiling and other racial/ethnic disparities in law and security enforcement. APA also should encourage the development of strong community-police relationships. APA also should promote programs that help law/security enforcement agencies recognize and overcome racial/ethnic profiling and other racial/ethnic disparities in law and security enforcement.

The APA resolution supports research on making law enforcement officials aware of racial profiling and working with them to develop strong community police relationships. Mio (2012) provides criticism of the resolution language suggesting it may not support social justice activism such as leading protests. Similarly, Casas (2012) explained that the resolution rightly provides a rationale for addressing profiling and disparities in law and security enforcement through the use of research and training programs, but it does not say anything about direct social justice action. The comments of Mio and Casas represent an example of engagement in civic discourse with organizational structures. They highlighted the importance of direct social action in keeping Trayvon Martin's story relevant in the news media. The direct social justice action included the Million Hoodie March, professional athletes donning hoodies and posing in solidarity before nationally televised sporting events, and even one of my professors wearing a hoodie to class as a means of sparking discussion about the absurdity of Martin's killing. Direct social action kept the Martin case relevant, but returning to the larger implications which are the safety of African Americans and young Black men in particular, the critical question becomes how will psychologists build on the work that has been done and increase the safety for Black men in the U.S.?

Burns-Glover (2012) hoped that APA can work to get its representatives on media outlets to discuss the bigger issue of safety- she wonders "why any Black man or woman has to worry that their son will not return home when he goes out to a convenience store?" In the same vein, Garrett-Akinsanya (2012) asked "how many Black boys wearing hoodies and tennis shoes have to get shot before we put a stop to, shine a light on, and eradicate the sociopathic nature of systemic racism." Wyatt (2012) explained (that as psychologists) we need to highlight this case and several others in a discussion about the new racism. The new racism can be thought of as colorblindness that is a socio-political ideology that maintains racial order and institutionalized systems of advantage in subtle and covert ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003). When seen through a colorblind lens it is likely that the killing of Trayvon Martin will be viewed as an isolated incident; however, many of the Division 45 scholars that were in support of direct social action continually highlighted the broader significance of Martin's death. Casas (2012) reminded contributors to the electronic mailing list to make our voices heard in support of Trayvon Martin's parents' efforts to obtain justice for the killing of their son. He suggests that too many of our children are "killed" in many ways on a daily basis and the failure to speak out against such killings is to passively condone them.

I detailed the above postings here as they clearly demonstrate civic engagement amongst psychologists, APA organizational structures and procedures, and the national community. Detailing the commentary surrounding the killing of Martin as seen through contributors to the Division 45 electronic mailing list highlighted a creative way of engaging in social action through the electronic dissemination of information at the national level.

## **Social Justice and Safety as a Resource**

The killing of Trayvon Martin has substantially impacted the way I think about healing and helping the community. As I envisioned how I would therapeutically work with the Martin family while conducting individual therapy sessions as they bereave the loss of their son, I wondered what I could really say to comfort them. What words could any therapist offer to parents who must prematurely bury their children? I personally believe in the benefits of talk therapy and I think that most people would profit from 50 minutes of therapeutic space, but what can we tell clients who leave the office and instantly return to their same oppressive realities? It seems then, in addition to our work as practitioners, that it is imperative to perform social justice advocacy work at the systemic level.

The main reason that I chose to conduct my graduate work in the field of counseling psychology was because of the academic emphasis on multiculturalism and social justice issues. The conceptual working definition of social justice established at the (2001) National Counseling Psychology Conference is a concept that advocates engaging individuals as co-participants in decisions which directly affect their lives; it involves taking some action, and educating individuals in order to open possibilities, and to act with value and respect for individuals and their group identities, considering power differentials in all areas of counseling practice and research as explained by Blustein, Elman, and Gerstein (as cited in Toporek & Williams, 2006, p. 18). Missing from the above definition is that social justice within the context of counseling psychology can be a vehicle to focus us on helping to ensure that opportunities and resources are distributed fairly and helping to ensure equity when resources are distributed unfairly or unequally (Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006, p. 1).

The social justice framework is one major framework for counseling psychologists to engage in action. Building on the working definition of social justice, I argue that politics are not a limitation; rather, they are inseparable from social justice work. At the root of all research questions there are political implications; stating assumptions forthright would actually reduce biases. In putting possible political implications on the table, it becomes increasingly apparent that questions have political implications. Multicultural social justice informed work is a worldview situated in self-awareness and willingness to engage with clients and all people from a stance of not knowing and curiosity. A core goal is to understand the unique individual and larger systemic needs. While interventions are implemented at the individual level to address the immediate pain, follow-up/follow-through interventions are co-created with the client to address their needs in a real and lasting way. Political implications should be deliberately stated and placed on the table; as politics in their most basic form, are the negotiation of how resources will be distributed. Mental health services are resources that often are not equitably distributed and our goal as professionals trained in human behavior is to figure out how to distribute these vital resources. Further, safety is a resource; simply having the ability to leave the house wearing whatever style of clothing that you desire and move spatially without evoking the glare of suspicion is freedom. From this perspective, having dark skin while donning a hoodie is a huge tradeoff that may not be worth one's life. Moving forward our question simply becomes: Is safety in scarce supply when it pertains to Black men?

## Closing Thoughts

As counseling psychologists, we should continue to work at the systemic levels to enact change. Pertinent to the issue of violence and danger, we could conceptualize safety as both a resource and opportunity that is not equitably distributed to Black men in this society. This deeper level of analysis will lead us to question: Was the killing of Trayvon Martin an isolated incident that at best was conducted by a perpetrator of a racially motivated hate crime? Or, is it the continued adoption of polices, laws, and procedures which provide an illusion of protection often at the expense of Black life; thus, rendering safety a limited resource? Conceptualizing safety as a resource is consistent with the suggestions in the APA task force report which include: protecting human capital, engaging in educational outreach, and embracing new forms of media to support diversity and social inclusion. Explicitly interweaving safety as resource into the social justice framework of counseling psychology will provide a means to gauge when safety is distributed unfairly or unequally.

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