

Thirty years of advocacy and activism in the Section on the Psychology of Black Women

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“It has been said that women’s activities tend to focus only on white women and minority activities tend to focus on men, leaving minority women without attention. We are trying to work on this from our end and have two active groups with a specific focus on minority women.” (Wallston, 1978)

So wrote Barbara Strudler Wallston, then-President of Division 35, to Esteban Olmedo, the first director of the newly-established APA Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs, in December of 1978. The two groups to which Wallston referred were, of course, the Committee on Black Women’s Concerns, which began in 1976 as the Task Force on Black Women’s Priorities, and the Task Force on Hispanic Women’s Concerns, which began in 1977. Both groups eventually become formalized as Sections of Division 35 and continue to play vital roles in its governance. In this column I focus on the origins of the Section on the Psychology of Black Women, to acknowledge the work of its feminist foremothers, and to highlight the contributions of Black women in psychology and the need for ongoing documentation of these contributions.

Origins of the Section on the Psychology of Black Women

In 1976, the President of Division 35, Martha Mednick, asked Sandra Rice Murray to chair a Task Force on Black Women’s Priorities (Mednick & Urbanski, 1991). It was clear to Mednick and others that the concerns of Black women psychologists were not receiving adequate attention. In December of that year, the Task Force presented its initial report with a core membership of four psychologists: Sandra Rice Murray, Gwendolyn Puryear, Winnie Emoungo, and Carolyn Payton (Murray, 1976). By April of 1977, the membership of the Task Force had grown to ten, and this expanded group met to establish their priorities. These were defined as: 1) the identification of persons interested in Black women’s concerns; 2) the identification of extant research and writing on Black women; 3) research on the Black woman’s role as worker; 4) a compilation of data on demographic variables (Murray, 1977). Accordingly, a proposal to fund the development of a resource bibliography on Afro-American women and psychology was drawn up. By August of 1977, the Task Force had compiled “Psychological Perspectives on Black Women: A Selected Bibliography of Recent Citations,” consisting of 140 published articles, dissertations, and books covering the years 1975-1976. The positive reception of this resource fuelled the development of an expanded annotated bibliography that eventually grew to over 1300 references.

The Task Force members also discussed the importance of maintaining an ongoing presence in the Division. To this end they recommended that the Task Force become a standing committee with the chairperson elected by the committee members. As Mednick has noted, the Division’s Executive Committee responded to this recommendation with some hesitation. At issue was the Division policy that there would be no standing committees other than Membership. Despite this hesitation, however, the Committee on Black Women’s Concerns (CBWC) was successfully formed. Sandra Murray became interim chair, and in 1978 Pamela Reid was elected to serve as the first official chair of CBWC.

Building on the priorities identified by the Task Force, CBWC worked with the Women’s Program Office at APA to compile and publish a directory of Black women in psychology. Subsequent chairs of CBWC were Gwendolyn Puryear (1980-1982) and Vickie Mays (1982-1984). In 1984, the Committee was replaced by a Section on the Psychology of Black Women. Vickie Mays continued as Chair of the Section until 1986. She was succeeded by Sandra (Murray) Nettles (1986-1988), Peggy Carr (1988-1989), Veronica Thomas (1989-1993), Martha Banks (1993-1995), Lula Beatty (1995-1998), Ruth Hall (1998-2001), Elizabeth Davis-Russell (2001-2004), BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, (2004-2006), and Beryl Wingate (2006-present).

Since its inception, highlights of the Section’s work include an award program, including the Graduate Student Research Prize and the recently established Carolyn Payton Award for early career psychologists;

frequent convention programming focusing on the history and concerns of Black women; and the sponsorship of an annual dance at the APA convention which is used to support a number of important social causes. Current priorities include increasing the number of student and early career psychologists in the work of the Section and the Division [Please contact the current President of the Section, Dr. Beryl Wingate, for more information: Beryl.L.Wingate@wellsfargo.com]. Perhaps most importantly, as Lula Beatty, past-President of the Section, has noted, the Section provides a place where conversations about the concerns and issues of Black women and Black women psychologists are central, not tangential.

Historical Accounts of Black Women Psychologists

One of the first activities of the Task Force on Black Women's Priorities was to locate, compile, and organize psychological research and writing on Black women. In the 1970s, this was a manageable task. Now this literature is vast. However, the literature on the *history* of Black women psychologists is just beginning. Their exclusion and marginalization in psychology have been profound (see Bing & Reid, 1996). In the spirit of honoring the Section's early priorities, and encouraging the use of this small but expanding literature in research and teaching, I have compiled a preliminary bibliography on the history of Black women psychologists. It can be accessed at the Division 35 Heritage website - <http://www.psych.yorku.ca/femhop/>, in the section "Links to useful resource/information sites." Up with our Black feminist foremothers!

References

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