

The Godfather of Black Psychology

Elijah Noisin

Georgia Gwinnett College

Joseph L. White was a professor, scholar-activist, mentor, and “Godfather of Psychology” (History Of Counseling, n.d.), more on this later. Joseph was born in 1932 in Lincoln, Nebraska (American Psychological Association, 2012), but was raised in Minneapolis (African American Registry, 2005). In highschool, Joseph was a waiter for “large hotels” (DeAngelis, 2016). The racial oppression in the 1940’s had Joseph planning for a future as a waiter (African American Registry, 2005). This all changed when his mom, Betty Lee, sent him to san francisco, for better living conditions, to live with his aunt (DeAngelis, 2016). In San Francisco he was not allowed to join the waiters union (DeAngelis, 2016), because of the color of his skin. So, Joseph planned for the military (African American Registry, 2005). His aunt, who graduated from UCLA, pointed him to go to college since it was free, in San Francisco, and he would not have to go to Vietnam (DeAngelis, 2016). This begins the story of Dr. Joseph L. White! A man both “street smart” and “book smart” (Cokley et al., 2019). Dr. White married Myrtle White, and had three daughters: Lisa, Lynn, and Lori (African American Registry, 2005). Dr. White began teaching in 1969 and retired 1994 (Phillips, 2017). Dr. White passed November 21st, 2017 on his way to Thanksgiving Dinner, age 84 (African American Registry, 2005). This was not before he left his legacy in the Psychology community.

In highschool, Dr. White was said to be a “C+” student (Social Science Space, 2017). At 17 Dr. White would attend Sanfransisco State University; he would take one psychology course (DeAngelis, 2016). Young Dr. White was most captivated by Pavlovian Conditioning and defense mechanism posited by Frued (DeAngelis, 2016). Dr. White recognized the similarity between Pavlovian Conditioning and the intergroup and intragroup hatred of African-Americans in the 1950’s stating: “[Pavlovian Conditioning, specifically Pavolov’s Dogs]That’s the way they condition people. They say black is bad, bad, bad, bad, [until you don’t have to say it anymore]”

(DeAngelis, 2016). Dr. White would also begin to understand the concept of “perspective” from Sigmund Freud’s research on defense mechanisms (DeAngelis, 2016). This was Dr. White’s first glimpse of the power of psychology.

After highschool Dr. White would receive his BS from San Francisco State University (American Psychological Association, 2012). After undergrad Dr. White applied for a PhD program at California State University at Berkeley, but he was not accepted (DeAngelis, 2016). Rather than quit, Dr. White returned to San Francisco State University to earn a Master’s degree (American Psychological Association, 2012). At the age of 25 Dr. White had a Master’s degree, wife, and served two years in the military (African American Registry, 2005).

Dr. White had his first daughter, Lisa, while starting graduate school at Michigan State University (DeAngelis, 2016). While attending MSU Dr. White observed that nothing at the school was “black”; this observation made him feel invisible (DeAngelis, 2016). While attending MSU Dr. White and other black scholars would meet to talk about student life, one of those scholars was Malcom X (DeAngelis, 2016). Malcolm X warned Dr. White of the lack of acceptance he would receive from colleagues because of the color of his skin (DeAngelis, 2016). Malcolm X “joked” that whites would refer to him as “Dr. Nigger”; Dr. White would recall Malcom X’s words while looking for a job after he graduated MSU (DeAngelis, 2016). In 1961 Dr. White received his Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from MSU (American Psychological Association, 2015), and Dr. White graduated as the top student in the 50 years of MSU's establishment (DeAngelis, 2016). Dr. White recalled being “the first black psychologist he ever knew” (Gillman & Parham, 2017) (e.g. in 1968 there were only ten black psychologists in America (DeAngelis, 2016)). Graduating from MSU changed Dr. White from “nicest Negro to being a militant Negro.” (Social Science Space, 2017). Dr. White spent most of his career at

University of California at Irvine; he was highly regarded academically (e.g. dean, professor, consultant, etc.) (American Psychological Association, 2012)

Dr. White believed in giving back to his community (American Psychological Association, 2015). Dr. White wanted to help psychology students find more practical paths in psychology (African American Registry, 2005). Dr. White established (1968) the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at California State at Long Beach (American Psychological Association, 2012). The EOP provided educational opportunities for over 250,000 low-income students in the span of 40-years (American Psychological Association, 2012). The questions asked for acceptance into EOP were focused on readiness for school rather than grades (African American Registry, 2005). Dr. White highlighted seven strengths for assessing readiness for school: “improvisation, resilience, connectedness to others, spirituality, emotional vitality, gallows of humor, and healthy suspicion of white folk” (African American Registry, 2005). The EOP program would continue to spread to all 23 California State Universities (African American Registry, 2005). In the same year Dr. White would also create a Black Studies Program at San Francisco University (African American Registry, 2005). Dr. White gave his community the most important good. Knowledge, Dr. White wanted to give black people a different perspective of blacks in psychology (American Psychological Association, 2015). This was accomplished with his popular magazine publishing “Towards a Black Psychology”.

Dr. White knew many influential people of the time. Dr. White served on the campaign for 35th John Kennedy (Gillman & Parham, 2017). Dr. White was close with, previously mentioned, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and Martin Luther King jr. (DeAngelis, 2016). Dr. White was moved by Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream ” speech. Dr. White said he went through all stages of “Black Identity Development”, the pre-encounter, the encounter,

immersion, and “emersion”, after listening to Dr. King’s speech (The Association of Black Psychologists, 2015). At this point Dr. White was tired of hearing the same Euro-centric perspective of psychology which promoted the idea of Black deficiency, pathology, and inferiority (The Association of Black Psychologists; Cokley, 2020). These two events inspired Dr. White to focus on social justice in the academic community, primarily in the field of psychology (DeAngelis, 2016). Dr. White and several other Black psychologists would storm the APA Board of Directors meeting in 1968. Dr. White took over the podium and condemned the APA of systemically curtailing support for Black members in the association (Cokley et al., 2019; DeAngelis, 2016)

Dr. White’s contributions to psychology were possible because he understood the limitations of and negative perspective of African-Americans in eurocentric psychology (Cokley et al., 2019). Dr. White’s contributions to psychology were thought to be the precursor to strength based psychology, or positive psychology (Cokley, 2020). Dr. White was a co-founder of the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi) in 1968 (American Psychological Association, 2012). In 1970 Dr. White published “Towards a Black Psychology” in Ebony Magazine (American Psychological Association, 2015). Dr. White was also the founder of the APA’s Division 45 (DeAngelis, 2016; History Of Counseling, n.d.). Many of these contributions were considered to be the foundation to multicultural psychology (DeAngelis, 2016).

After Dr. White stormed the halls of the APA Board of Directors meeting in 1968; Dr. White would co-found The Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi) (Social Science Space, 2017). The ABPsi’s preamble states: “[That] Black Psychology is the unification of African principals, values, and traditions: spirit permeates everything, everything is connected, the collective is the most important element, and communal self knowledge is the way to mental

health.” and also promotes “optimal functioning”. Today, ABPsi has over 1000 members. This, however, was not Dr. White’s largest impact.

In a time before I was born, 1970’s and older, Blacks were perceived as a group that was unable to delay gratification, to self-love, to speak properly, as culturally deprived, and having a dysfunctional family structure (Cokley, 2020). This was due to the fact that Whites, at the time, set the “norm” for what was appropriate and what was not (Cokley, 2020). This led many psychologists to pathologize Black culture as maladaptive, deprived, and disadvantaged (Cokley, 2020). After the creation of ABPsi, word got out about Black Psychology, and Ebony Magazine, the “Black Twitter” before the internet, reached out to Dr. White wanting to know more about Black Psychology (DeAngelis, 2016). In response, Dr. White offered to write an article for their next issue. “Toward a Black Psychology” was that article, published in 1970 (American Psychological Association, 2015). “Toward a Black Psychology ” was the first published article about Black positivity to be written by a Black professional (Cokley, 2020). Rather than write about the negative aspects of Blacks, Dr. White wrote about the strengths and positive aspects of the Black community (DeAngelis, 2016). Some topics touched in Dr. White’s article were on: two-parent parenting vs a village, Dr. White argued that Black children are taken care of by the whole community not just the parents, and Black paranoia (i.e. being cautious around White people) was a healthy thing, given the time period (Cokley et al., 2019). “Toward a Black Psychology” also pointed out the lack of acceptance Whites had towards Blacks, stating ““It is very difficult, if not impossible, to understand the lifestyles of Black people using traditional theories developed by white psychologists to explain white people” (White, 1970, p. 45)” (Phillips, 2017; Cokley et al., 2019). Dr. White explains that the reason he did not publish this in an academic journal was because he wanted his message, Black positivity, to reach those in the

hood and in the neighborhood (Social Science Space, 2017; Cokley et al., 2019). “Toward a Black Psychology” was the starting point and foundation to Black and multicultural psychology (American Psychological Association, 2012; American Psychological Association, 2015). This article was also the reason why Dr. White is considered “The Godfather of black Psychology” (Gillman & Parham, 2017).

Dr. White wrote five books, some he co-authored, before he passed. One of his most regarded books was *Psychology of Blacks* (Cokley et al., 2019). Dr. Cokley says it is a required read for any psychologist. *Psychology of Blacks* promotes constructive conversation on: Black families, Black identity, Pan African influence on Black culture, Black linguistics, Black mental health, Black educational achievements (Cokley et al., 2019). These were considered by Dr. White as major concerns of the Black community. Dr. White tried to be as impartial as possible when writing *Psychology of Blacks* (Cokley et al., 2019).

It was well known that anyone in the proximity of Dr. White would leave with a clear path for their future (Cokley et al., 2019). This dubbed Dr. White “The Conductor Of the Freedom Train” (History Of Counseling, n.d.). The Freedom Train was a tight network of academic professionals that would provide aspiring doctors, normally of color, with academic support, professional training, and research opportunities, with Dr. White being at the center of this network (Cokley et al., 2019). In other words, the Freedom Train was a “Pipeline for undergraduates looking to earn a PhD in Psychology” (History Of Counseling, n.d.). Dr. White believed that one could achieve anything if they could see a clear path; path clarity would allow one to make connections that would help build success towards the achievement (Cokley et al., 2019). Dr. White would do this without coddling his mentees, but would push them out of their comfort zone when he felt they were ready (Cokley et al., 2019).

Dr. White is said to have mentored over 100 PhD students, he was the conductor of the “Freedom Train” afterall (African American Registry, 2005). Dr. White has become a role model for psychologists of color (African American Registry, 2005), and after writing this paper Dr. White has become one of my role models. Some honorable mentees Dr. White mentored were: Dr. Nancy Boyd Franklin and Dr. Harriette Pipes McAdoo (Family Psychologist with focus on Black Families), Dr. Francis Terrell, Dr. Sandra Terrell, and Dr. Arthur Whaley (Sociologist focused on affect on Blacks due to racism), Dr. Michael Connor (Dr. White’s first mentee), Dr. Allen Ivey and Dr. William Parham (Multicultural Therapist), Dr. Stanley Sue and Dr. Derald Wing Sue (Chinese Psychologist), Dr. Thomas Parham (President of University of California), Dr. William Parham, and Bill Maurer (Economic Anthropologist) (Gillman & Parham, 2017; History Of Counseling, n.d.; Cokley et al., 2019).

Dr. White’s contributions to enriching the understanding of ethnic minorities and advancing opportunities for Blacks people were not unnoticed. Dr. White received: the Citation of Achievement and Community Service from Clinton in 1994, Janet E. Helms Award from Columbia University in 2003, UCI Alumni Association’s Extraordinarius Award in 2004, Honorary Doctor of Law from Minnesota University in 2007, Alumnus of the Year from San Francisco State in 2008, and Presidential Citation from APA in 2015 (American Psychological Association, 2012; American Psychological Association, 2015; Gillman & Parham, 2017). These awards were awarded to Dr. White for his devotion to social equality, mentoring future scholars, and his own academic knowledge.

I find Dr. White’s story inspiring. Writing this paper helped me understand the importance of the “Black Perspective”. Before writing this, I would always argue that there is no such thing as the “Black Experience”, and I would have written off Black Psychology as some

new “buzz word”. The “Black Experience” is more than just being a Black person growing up in “A White man’s world”. The “Black Experience” is growing up in a world that has hidden your ancestry from you and told you that your culture is “wrong”. That is the Black Experience. Dr. White realized, like myself and those at the top, the true power of psychology, perspective. The power to understand perspective garners you the ability to change perspectives. Dr. White realized this and set out to change the perspective that Black men and women had of themselves. I wish he were still alive today, so that I could meet him and get on the Freedom Train with the rest of the PhD students. Before Dr. White passed he was planning to compile his lectures into a comprehensible book (Phillips, 2017). That would have been a good read.

References

- African American Registry. (2005). *Joseph White Paved Way Black Psychology*. African American Registry,.
https://web.archive.org/web/20180106033356/http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/joseph-white-paved-way-black-psychology
- American Psychological Association. (2012). *Joseph White, PhD*. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/ethnicity-health/psychologists/white>
- American Psychological Association. (2015, January). *Joseph L. White, PhD, Awarded 2015 APA Presidential Citation*. American Psychological Association.
<https://www.apa.org/about/governance/president/citation/joseph-white>
- The Association of Black Psychologists. (n.d.). *The Association of Black Psychologists Response to the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington*. The Association of Black Psychologists. <https://www.abpsi.org/pdf/Responseto50thAnnMarchonWashington.pdf>
- The Association of Black Psychologists. (n.d.). *Preamble*. The Association of Black Psychologists. <https://www.abpsi.org/pdf/AfricanCenteredPsychologydefinition.pdf>
- Cokley, K. (2020, July 20). *Why Black Psychology Matters*. Psychology Today.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/black-psychology-matters/202007/why-black-psychology-matters>
- Cokley, K., Palmer, B., & Stone, S. (2019). Toward a Black (and Diverse) Psychology: The Scholarly Legacy of Joseph White. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 45(2), 112-121. DOI: 10.1177/0095798419828243
- DeAngelis, T. (2016, January). Game changer. *Monitor on Psychology*, 47(1), 46.
<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/01/game-changer>

History Of Counseling. *Joseph White*. (n.d.)

<http://psychology.iresearchnet.com/counseling-psychology/history-of-counseling/joseph-white/>

Phillips, A. (2017, December 1). *Joseph White, pioneering black psychologist who mentored students at UC Irvine, dies at 84*. Los Angeles Times.

<https://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-joseph-white-20171130-story.html>

Social Science Space. (2017). *The Godfather of Black Psychology: Joseph White, 1932-2017*.

Social Science Space.

<https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2017/12/godfather-black-psychology-joseph-white-1932-2017/>

Gillman, H. & Parham, T. (2017). *Passing of Dr. Joseph White, 84*. Office of the Chancellor.

<https://chancellor.uci.edu/engagement/campus-communications/2017/171130-passing-of-joseph-white.php>