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## The Fierce Urgency of Now: An Appeal to Organized Psychoanalysis to Take a Strong Stand on Race

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The first words of the title of this article were spoken by the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" (April 16, 1963), his "I Have a Dream" speech (August 28, 1963), and in his protests of the Vietnam war. His 1967 quote presents his prescient words in a fuller context.

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.

I am calling on national and international psychoanalytic organizations, such as the American Psychoanalytic Association, Division 39 of the American Psychological Association and the International Psychoanalytical Association—guided by our field's liberating principles and values and as an obligation and duty—to act now

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by formulating, adopting and promulgating a firm position on "the race issue." In our Association and in many others, this issue continues to be manifested in racism, in which one racial group claims superiority and targets other racial and ethnic groups as inferior, thereby justifying inhumane treatment of the "othered" races. The inhumane treatment includes ongoing institutional racism and discrimination, mass incarceration of blacks, especially men, and indiscriminate shootings and killings of blacks. This issue and the two preceding TAP issues trace the history and institutionalization of racist practices in society and relate how theory, supervision and practice as taught in psychoanalytic educational and training centers are tainted by racism.

Scholarly publications are now frequently published that address the various ways our psyches are damaged by racism, both of the perpetrators and those on the receiving end (e.g., Salman Akhtar, 2012; Katie Gentile, 2013; Pratyusha Tummala-Narra, 2013; and I, 2006, 2016, have addressed this subject). There are also some positive larger institutional efforts to include race in psychoanalytic curricula, such as the new initiative within the American Psychoanalytic Association that awards small grants to psychoanalytic centers to develop required curriculum offerings that address race. Up to now, however, the organizing bodies in psychoanalysis,

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# Conversations on Psychoanalysis and Race: Part Three

## Introduction

Michael Slevin and Beverly J. Stoute  
Co-Editors

At its origins in the early 20th century, psychoanalysis was racialized. The cultural footprint of race on American psychoanalysis is large. Of theory and practice, the literature is thin and sparse. And it is often ignoble, enmeshed as it is with the racial history of the 20th century in America.

Dorothy Holmes begins this last part of the three-part series with a concluding call to arms: "The Fierce Urgency of Now." She directly and forcefully addresses what, perhaps, has at heart motivated us, the co-editors of this series: At this historical moment in our country and in the development of

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psychoanalysis, we have an ethical responsibility to heal the wound of racism that afflicts our institutes and psychoanalysis itself. If we do so, with dedication and thoughtful depth, psychoanalysis has the potential to better heal our patients and contribute to the healing of our country.

Beverly Stoute, co-editor of this eight-article series, "Conversations on Race," has written an elegant and sophisticated overview of that history in a literature review that is yet personal.

Anton Hart then brings to the fore a contemporary perspective on this foundational issue of race that made this series necessary and important: the "othering" of African-American people deeply embedded in our cultural unconscious.

We are deeply appreciative of those who have given so deeply of themselves to write for "Conversations on Race," and we thank those who have read their contributions. We hope we have contributed in some modest way to the dialogue leading to action that Dorothy Holmes so eloquently challenges us to join.

APSA

## Fierce Urgency of Now

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like the ones mentioned above, have not acted as a whole, in unison, or at the highest levels, to affirm the core importance of the experience of racial injustice to the formation of intrapsychic life and behavior. I believe such an affirmation is imperative, and the time for it is long overdue. I urge us not to be, in King's words, "too late."

Why is such an organization-wide statement important? As much of the psychoanalytic literature on race points out, doing the work that can be done on race in the consultation room is very difficult. Psychoanalysts are themselves encumbered by racism, i.e., conflicted; frightened; sometimes identified with



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and blinded by the privileges associated with racism; sometimes discouraged from acting or criticized for doing so by colleagues, by those who supervise them or by those who may be idealized. A clear stand on race taken by the national and international psychoanalytic organizations that spawned us, to which we belong, and to which we pledge our allegiances, would provide necessary scaffolding to do the work that can be done on race.

## Five Vital Policy Recommendations

The psychoanalytic organizational policy on race I am recommending would have five components:

1. The policy on race would speak for the entire organizations adopting the policy.
2. It would publicly denounce the psychologically harmful and traumatizing nature of racism, with explicit recognition that it leads to intrapsychic, characterological and behavioral abnormalities in those who continue to perpetrate it and those on whom it is imposed.
3. It would affirm the necessity of working therapeutically with racial issues in psychoanalytic treatments.

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4. It would support ongoing psychoanalytic scholarship and research on race.
5. It would require that education and training in psychoanalysis and training analyses address race in order for practitioners to develop competence to work on race with patients.

What I am calling for is a tall order. The history of psychoanalysis speaking up positively and with one voice against negative cultural trends is not particularly encouraging. That fact has been widely covered of late. In a misguided view of positivist science, Freud eschewed speaking about the damaging effects of the Holocaust on himself and other analysts (Emily Kuriloff, 2014), believing that a focus on the subjectivities of experience with the Holocaust would taint one's necessary objectivity as a psychoanalyst scientist-clinician.

Psychoanalysts also have a history of being blind to their own authoritarian tendencies, to the extent that some psychoanalytic research on the subject has been ignored or relegated to sociology (e.g., Theodor Adorno's psychoanalytic work on the authoritarian personality and my own work, 2016c). Similarly, there is some evidence, that I have also noted, of psychoanalysts' tendencies to "other" those different from themselves, as in the painful era when those other than medical practitioners need not apply for psychoanalytic training. Even darker, Robert Wallerstein, in 2014, and I, in 2016, documented the "long term corrosive effects on organized psychoanalysis in Brazil" of analysts being involved in torture in South America. This history across many generations powerfully suggests a strong influence on psychoanalytic institutional thinking and practices of the worst trends in the cultures in which psychoanalysts have lived.

Thus, what is being proposed, though difficult, is a golden opportunity for organized psychoanalysis to get on the right side of history regarding race. To quote King again: This is a time for vigorous and positive action. Without organized psychoanalysis taking the strong position recommended, there is danger that the good scholarly, clinical and programmatic efforts I cited earlier in this article

will not have the widespread effects they deserve. The organizational position I recommend will give structure and encouragement to all to take hold of race with the same steadfastness and courage we have applied to the other core clinical issues of psychoanalysis (internal conflict; disturbances of self; interpersonal conflict; family conflict; characterological problems). They, too, have their scary aspects. We are emboldened and faithful in our efforts to tackle them because we know we must. We must study the literature in all of these areas; we must learn how to conceptualize them and work with all of them to help our patients, to progress in training and to maintain our competence as practitioners.

### Take a Bold Step

The case I am making is that race—that courses through our societal practices, often destructively, and deeply affects us all—deserves the same attention in psychoanalysis as those more familiar factors. It is time for organized psychoanalysis to recognize and ratify these truths. Without providing the policy and values frame around race I am proposing for organized psychoanalysis, the good research and examples of best practices cited in this paper will remain isolated and siloed, and never be optimally effective. We can take the bolder step I am recommending. One recent example of how it can be done was when organizations of physicians, including psychiatrists, social workers and nurses banded together to speak against any practitioner being involved in the degrading and dehumanizing practices of enhanced interrogations. To quote Paul Summergrad and Steven Sharfstein, in 2015, the voice of organized psychiatry, on why it was incumbent on the American Psychiatric Association to speak forcefully for the entire organization and all its members:

First, the American Psychiatric Association must take positions when fundamental issues of science, ethics, or practice are either called into question or need articulation as a matter of public policy.... It is our obligation to speak out as a profession....

Actions on difficult issues for our profession require principled leadership from the highest governance of the organization....

Regarding how race works in our society, with its broad, persistent and deeply damaging effects on us all, it is now time for organized psychoanalysis, at the highest governing levels, to formulate a bold, clear policy regarding race. I hope the specific five-point proposal I made above is a helpful starting point. For all of us who have focused our psychoanalytic scholarship and its clinical applications on race and its all too frequent complement, racism, it is gratifying to see more and more focus on the subject in our psychoanalytic journals and in programming at our meetings.

The one missing piece is the larger organizational embrace of the subject, which is the specific next step I have proposed. The development of a psychoanalytic policy on race that would be widely disseminated is a necessary addition to existing scholarly, programmatic and practice contributions on race. Not only would such a policy support those who do this difficult work, it will encourage the necessary education and training to help others include race in their work. It will contribute significantly to breaking a long, unworthy tradition of silence in psychoanalysis on controversial cultural subjects. Let me emphasize, my appeal is that the highest levels of leadership in organized psychoanalysis articulate policy on race.

For psychoanalytic organizations to remain silent at this time in our culture when racism raises its ugly head once again, so very virulently, would be a betrayal. Failure to act now would betray our deep understandings of the anguish and psychological disturbances racism causes, and would betray those who have dared to address these issues without robust organizational support.

Leaders: the time for you to act is now.  
Please, do not be too late. APSA

### Editor's Note:

For information on the full references cited in this article, please contact the author at [crescent@gwu.edu](mailto:crescent@gwu.edu).