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The Holmes Commission's Journey toward Racial Equality in American Psychoanalysis: Reflection and Hope

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and Beverly J. Stoute

By the time this article appears in *TAP*, you will have had chances to consider the Holmes Commission project's examination of systemic racism within American psychoanalytic organizations—in, for example, *TAP* 55.1 (Winter/Spring 2021), at various presentations at Division 39 and APSaA meetings, and in earlier written interim reports of the commission's survey and interview studies. Through those studies, the commission documented widespread systemic racism within psychoanalytic institutions and within and across various governing bodies for those institutions. These findings were further illustrated and documented through an intense and lengthy self-examination by the commissioners of our own racial selves.

That self-examining process yielded its own dataset and is the focus of this article. Learning to hold the pain, disagreement, and at times dissension among the commissioners as we reckoned with revelations of our own vestiges of systemic racism offered a model for working with and through systemic racism. This experiential discovery in the room, in the here and now is a hallmark of psychoanalytic work. We held the pain

through facilitated inspirational exercises and rituals including using evocative poetry and music to encourage us to stay in the struggle—for example, R. Masten's 1977 hymn "Let It Be a Dance." May readers find it inspiring as you think about the work toward racial equality in psychoanalysis that lies before you now:

Through the good times and
the bad times, too
Let it be a dance
Morning stars come out at night,
without the dark, there is no light
If nothing's wrong, then
nothing's right
Let it be a dance
Let the sun shine, let it rain,
share the laughter, bear the pain
And round and round we go again
Let it be a dance

Now, to the dance the commission did and
the dancing that all of us are called to do.

Formation and early days

The commission was founded in
August 2020 on a recommendation by

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Holmes Commission

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Black Psychoanalysts Speak that the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA) form a high-level body to examine systemic racism within psychoanalysis—to wit a commission, not a committee. The recommendation was in concert with APsaA's own intention to study systemic racism within its ranks. In accepting the recommendation, APsaA agreed that a commission be established and named it the Holmes Commission on Racial Equality in the American Psychoanalytic Association, with Dorothy E. Holmes as its eponymous chair. Work of the commission began in earnest with its inaugural meeting in October 2020 after several consultations between the commission chair and the leaders of APsaA who, at the time, were William C. Glover, President, and Kerry J. Sulkowicz, President-Elect. Anton Hart, Dionne R. Powell, and Beverly J. Stoute were appointed by the chair as commission co-chairs—an organic and pre-



Dorothy E. Holmes



Anton Hart



Dionne R. Powell



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meetings, which became signature elements: one was to start each meeting with something inspirational; the other was an opening grounding ritual. For our first meeting on October 11, 2020, we watched a video performance of the Stanford Talisman Alumni Virtual Choir singing what is known as the Negro National Anthem, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." All of us listened intently. Many of us swayed, prayed, and sang along. Some cried as we grasped the import and anchor the lyrics gave us for our work. We found motivating truth in singing "a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us." We committed to

would not have been able to design and conduct the study at the high level that we did.

It is also important to note that APsaA did not have authority over or ownership of the commission's work or its work products. The commission's power came from self-authorization to form itself as a collective with the shared purpose to identify racism within largely English-speaking North American psychoanalysis, to support reducing systemic racism by showing the harm it is doing to psychoanalysis, and to pursue racial equality in psychoanalysis.

Why August 2020?

The need for significant racial inquiry within psychoanalysis had been established when TAP published, in early 2017, Holmes's call for organized psychoanalysis to take a stand publicly on race (issue 51.1). However, the more immediate impetus to act was the 2020 awakening of the sleeping white dog of racism occasioned by the brutal murders of unarmed Blacks by police—Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd—and other public racist acting out that drew national attention, such as the bird watcher/dog walker incident in New York City's Central Park. With these societal atrocities in focus, APsaA acted to form the commission.

The commission's opening meeting was inspirational. At the time we were eighteen strong, plus one distinguished consultant. We recognized the deep psychological disturbance as well as the shameful social reality of systemic racism and that our efforts to understand and reduce its toxicity would best start by examining its presence and deleterious effects in our own field—psychoanalysis—and its institutions. Given that our culture's history of accomplishments regarding race is regularly followed

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scient choice given their stellar work on race and other aspects of intersectionality. In addition to the leadership team, the slate of members included the APsaA president and past-president as *ex officio* members, Nancy J. Chodorow, M. Fakhry Davids, Ebony Dennis, Francisco J. Gonzalez, Forrest Hamer, Rafael Art Javier, Maureen Katz, Kimberlyn Leary (distinguished consultant), Rachel D. Maree, Teresa Mendez, Michael Moskowitz, Donald Moss, Usha Tummala-Narra, Jasmine Ueng-McHale, and Kirkland Vaughans.

The commission began work with high hopes and a fierce determination that American psychoanalysis should closely examine systemic racism within its own ranks. All commission meetings were held virtually by secure Zoom conferencing. We developed two ways of beginning our commission

"face the rising sun of our new day begun." The lyrics of the song galvanized us to take up our work with zest and conviction. The grounding element was to call the roll at the beginning of each meeting, the intent of which was to offer all members the opportunity to center themselves for the work and be recognized and validated for that work.

A note of appreciation is important before proceeding further. APsaA provided the direct funding and staff support for the Holmes Commission work and did so generously and unhesitatingly. APsaA also showed gratitude to the commissioners by providing support for them to attend APsaA conferences during the tenure of the commission. The commission is grateful to APsaA for its support, without which we

by serious setbacks and upticks in racist violence, we humbly accepted that our efforts to address systemic racism within psychoanalysis would no doubt have their challenges and setbacks. With such recognition, we set what we thought was a generous timetable—eighteen months—to do the work and produce findings and recommendations. So, we anticipated publishing and promulgating our work by the end of the first quarter of 2022. More in a bit on why it took longer.

Many participated in the study's surveys and interviews, and many added field data by sending vignettes of experiences with and within systemic racism as well as critiques of the study. All these sources of data were essential for the project and deeply appreciated; they play important roles in our findings and recommendations. The commission thanks every participant whole-heartedly. We are also deeply indebted to Michael Russell, our methodologist who designed our study instruments and gave guidance all along the way on data analysis and interpretation. He is a scientific and technical expert at the highest level and was a steady and steadying presence throughout.

Why did it take us longer than we planned?

We worked steadily in monthly two-and-a-half-hour meetings of the whole commission from October 2020 through December 2022 and in weekly one-hour leadership team meetings of the chair, three co-chairs, and most often our methodologist. The main reason for the lengthier-than-anticipated commission work was that it is indeed hard to wake up "sleeping racial dogs" and keep them awake. There is a deep resistance to acknowledging one's participation in a racist system that must be incessantly encountered and processed in order that a national study of systemic racism such as the Holmes Commission study can maintain its cohesion and focus. There is a countervailing tendency toward fragmentation and enactments in which racism is denied or disavowed. That was evident in what was reported to us in the data we collected from the surveys, the

interviews, and the field data. We found a chronic disinclination within psychoanalytic institutions to adequately acknowledge racist aspects. People and institutions tend to cling to white privilege rather than face the pain of recognition. Institutional leadership is inclined to fragment around racial issues, and core psychoanalytic institutional components—such as curricula, supervision, and work on the couch—lack adequate consideration of race in their individual and collective manifestations.

At least as important as the findings from our surveys, interviews, and field data is our recognition that systemic racism—at least in terms of one of its components, namely, identification with white privilege—came to be manifest among the commissioners in our work together. This understanding became a major, time-consuming, and necessary aspect of the commission's work. It led to structural changes in the commission and ultimately to a recognition of a parallel process within the commission that we could use as a paradigm for the field of psychoanalysis in its efforts to move forward on race.

Racial ghosts within our work

Here are some examples of structural change that occurred within the commission as a function of our recognition of the racial ghosts that found their way into our interactions with one another. The following reports are organized in terms of the degree of challenge experienced in recognizing bias and its influences and in moving to positions that were more accountable and more equitable.

1. The commission launched with the name of "The Holmes Commission on Racial Equality in the American Psychoanalytic Association." As we worked and recognized the robust participation in all aspects of the study of independent psychoanalytic institutions outside of APsaA, our working frame of reference became "The Holmes Commission on Racial Equality in American Psychoanalysis." This change acknowledges that the problems with racism in psychoanalysis

cross governance boundaries; thus, solutions need to cross boundaries as well. We also understood that progress will best be achieved by different psychoanalytic governance bodies working together; this requires working through tendencies to be adversarial, exclusive, and hierarchical. With these considerations in mind, we appointed M. Fakhry Davids, a respected clinician and scholar on racism who practices in London and is active in British psychoanalytic organizations. Also, we reached out to the Canadian Psychoanalytic Society to participate in our project.

2. Though we queried ourselves repeatedly and sought counsel of others, we still managed, initially, to not appoint an optimally diverse commission. Once the original commission of eighteen was appointed, we came to recognize that as we celebrated the wide diversity among us and rich array of expertise on racism and other aspects of intersectionality, we had still omitted East Asian representation and representation from the field of social work. Rather than *just* go ahead and add this representation—which we did—we also owned and processed our omissions. The original commission was composed roughly of 45% African American members (including the entire leadership team), 11% Latinx members, 11% South Asian members, and 33% white members. We undertook a reflective process to understand what influences at first made us, a racially-ethnically diverse group, less than optimally inclusive in our choice of commissioners. We benefitted from acknowledging that the marauding ghosts of racism and white privilege resided in us and expressed themselves in exclusionary acts, despite our conscious intentions to the contrary.
3. Another such example manifested itself in the leadership team. For the team to develop its leadership mind to work hopefully, energetically, and effectively, dynamics of friction and exclusion based on authority, age, and

competitiveness had to be processed. We had to reveal ourselves and bear hurt feelings while recognizing that our individual talents as leaders were valuable and we needed to make room for each other.

The chair sought outside consultation, a process revealed to the co-chairs, for support in becoming freer to share the reins of leadership for the benefit of our work. This process was painful, particularly in the awareness that Blacks can identify with white privilege in their use of power. Dorothy, as chair of the commission, examined and owned, as painful as it was, her own vulnerability to this influence as a form of identification with the aggressor. Each member of the leadership team did similar self-examining work around their vulnerabilities, and we shared with one another something about our own styles and histories in order to build scaffolding for good leadership teamwork. Through this process work, the leadership team was able to establish and maintain solidity that made it easier to help other commissioners process potential and actual eruptions of privilege that occurred in the work.

4. To promote robust participation in phase one of our study—the survey—the commission agreed to recruit a body of helpers, members at various levels in the institutions which we wished to survey. We asked them to work with their colleagues and leaders to maximize participation at all levels of membership and in as many capacities as possible. We agreed to call these partners the commission's Ambassador Corps. As the commission met over time, we recognized that we would need more help in promulgating our findings and facilitating consideration and adoption of our recommendations. A white member of the commission expressed concern about the militaristic and exclusionary connotations of the name Ambassador Corps, especially that our findings and recommenda-

tions would thus be less well-received. A lively, engaged process led to considerations of other titles such as emissary. However, we found them wanting insofar as they evoke associations with crusading and evangelistic efforts that historically imply exclusion—us versus them—and sometimes denote violence and colonization. Finally, the group settled on the name Consultation-Liaison Network as consistent with our aspirations to be universalistic, inclusive, and collaborative. One element of this work was further processed when attribution for the term "liaison" was misassigned to a white member of the commission after first being offered by a Black member. Once this error was made, we corrected it, and put in the effort of working through in order to gain more voluntary control over another expression of white privilege.

5. During the commission's work, controversy, even some dissension, occurred about leadership and management of the commission's operations and practices, one of which was our grounding exercise of the roll call. At the beginning of meetings, the chair calls out the name of each commissioner, who in turn confirms that they are present, and absences are acknowledged. For that moment, of course, everyone looks at that individual on their screen. One day, a member of the commission challenged the practice as unnecessary on the grounds that it took up time that could be better used in other ways. We had intentionally adopted it as a grounding ritual for the commission meeting openings, so many of the commission members felt alarmed, hurt, and angry. The comment cast a pall on the meeting. Considering the context and the way in which the challenge was made, several voiced that they experienced it to be enacting a racist attack on the commission's work, including the fact that the commission's leadership team was Black. From a systemic point of view,

such backlashes are to be expected. Some easing of tension occurred when a younger, Black-identified member noted that the roll call was enjoyable and important because, each time, it gave them an experience of being recognized individually, welcomed, and appreciated. The whole commission learned that such experiences are deeply meaningful to Black persons in a white-majority society marked by the echoes of slavery, and which they had not routinely had in the psychoanalytic world. What the younger person shared helped the commission reconstitute and regain perspective. Nonetheless, a small minority voiced concern that the person who questioned the roll call had been unfairly attacked. Extensive additional processing was needed to recognize that rather than an individual manifestation, the disturbance was in fact a *group* phenomenon that found its way into an individual who gave voice to it. We came to understand that *any one of us* could have given expression to such an attack, which is inevitably aroused when processing racism.

The existence of the minority view confronts us with the reality that any group that undertakes work toward racial equality will include people who represent different points in the quest for racial equality and different points of view on how to achieve it. Yet, reckoning with systemic racism must bring into the fold all who come to do the work. Such reckoning includes recognizing and learning from one's own foibles and vulnerabilities to the influence and pull of white privilege dynamics as a resistance to change. Working with this as part of our process has helped the commission hold together and move forward assiduously to complete its task. A part of that task involves showing the field of psychoanalysis at large that wrestling with the grip of systemic racism makes room for constructive change for the many who want psychoanalysis to become a racially equitable profession. This we considered to be *a* but not *the* only valid psychoanalytic way of doing our work.

The method which we offer as a model includes focusing on tasks (e.g., doing the surveys and interviews, interpreting their meanings and implications, and making recommendations), that is, the important *manifest* content. A second component is recognizing and processing *latent* content that includes vestiges of systemic racism and other forms of oppression that have the power to erupt and undo.

There is hope for psychoanalysis if we acknowledge that racism unchecked diminishes us individually and diminishes psychoanalysis as a discipline. There is hope if we recognize and use psychoanalysis's potential to identify and heal manifestations of racism in our society.

Why process as well as content?

Processing racial enactments was necessary in order to maintain the power relation established early on so that all members could fully and openly engage in the commission's work. Enactments disrupted that relation. The words of one of the commissioners are informative in this regard: in reflecting on a pre-publication copy of this article, that commissioner said, "You can get a clear sense of racial tension in the report of our process, as well, of course, as in our data. The power of the article resides, I think, in the fact that it not only describes such tension, it brings it. Read the article and you—whoever you are—will likely experience some manifestation of tension, and this, I think, is all to the good. It functions as an alert. Such tension is a requirement, says the article, unapologetically, and in fact, almost enthusiastically."

What is our hope for psychoanalysis when it comes to systemic racism?

Based on 400-plus years of white dominance and white privilege, systemic racism is a deep, indwelling force in American culture. It affects us all, compelling us into actions that deny the voice and power of othered ones. Our study findings unequivocally show the presence of systemic racism within psychoanalysis in its underrepresentation of people of color in our institutions; in its insufficient effort to increase the presence, full partici-

pation, and advancement of people of color; and in its failure to include race and racism as core elements in what we teach, how we organize our curricula, how we respond to racist incidents, and how we analyze ourselves and our patients.

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recognize and use psychoanalysis's potential to identify and heal manifestations of racism in our society. Our data clearly show that institutions that fail to make these efforts are devitalized and tend to lose younger members, including recent graduates of color. When any one of us shows that we are influenced by racism and its corollaries, such as white privilege, there is an opportunity, painful as it surely may be, to increase one's own power and generativity through inclusiveness. It is a long, difficult process, as the commission's work demonstrated, but it is well worth it. We may not be able to eradicate systemic racism, but we can continue to work to acknowledge its pernicious manifestations and thereby free up more energy to enliven and authenticate our work to achieve racial equality. The commission's work emphasizes the need for the development of transformative psychoanalytic collectives, the Consultation-Liaison Network being one such example. We appeal to all who read this article and study the work of the commission to support that initiative *and* to join with others to meet head-on the ceaseless efforts of systemic racism to claim us. The work cannot be rushed and may never end.

We must *not*, as Thich Nhat Hanh says in his 1987 essay "Washing Dishes," hurry to get the job over with. It is more satisfying to stay with the job in the moment, every moment it takes. Now is the time for psychoanalysis

to make work on race—yes, *for the indefinite time the work takes*—an affirmative obligation, an opportunity. In the words of another commissioner, "The process work is just as critical to our progress as is the documented survey and interview data. Racial equality cannot be gained through merely reading articles or by polite discussions but must be *experienced*, then examined and re-examined from an experiential basis that enables us to see the parallels between our group and the world in which we live. So, to my way of thinking and teaching, this approach is a mandate for learning."

The Holmes Commission offers this article as an invitation to join the mandate to achieve racial equality in American psychoanalysis—as painfully as required and as joyfully as we can make it. As much as possible, let it be a dance we do. APSA

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