



## Position Statement on Race-Based Violence and Racial Profiling

Recent events, including the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, a young black man in Florida, and the subsequent trial of George Zimmerman, re-awakened us as a nation to the continuing problem of race-based violence and racial profiling across the United States. These painful events brought needed national attention to the ongoing problems and complex inter-relationships of race and violence in this country. Sadly, our nation has a very long history of racial violence that has not been adequately treated and thus it persists. There is increasing public awareness of disproportionate incarceration of men of color, which leads to long term negative effects on community stabilization, education, health, intergenerational transmission of poverty and income disparity.

However, despite the public rhetoric of diversity and multiculturalism, race remains one of the most difficult and fraught social discourses in America today<sup>1</sup>. The psychodynamics of race center on "deprivation and domination, powerlessness and control, and privilege and rejection," all of which silently underlie our cultural conversations about race<sup>2</sup>.

The American Psychoanalytic Association believes that all components of our society need to participate in a deeper discussion of racism and violence in order to elucidate the forces that contribute to the preservation of both, understand their pernicious effects, and search for remedies. We believe that psychoanalysis, the original "talking cure," can contribute a methodology for understanding cultural permissiveness towards racism and violence and point the way to a potential "cure"—engaging in a fearless, difficult and ultimately liberating conversation leading ultimately to changes in public policy.

Psychoanalysts, like all members of our society, can and must contribute to the understanding of this problem and the search for solutions. Specifically, psychoanalytic understanding can illuminate causal factors including individual and large group dynamics, delineate mental health effects of racial profiling and race-based violence, and point the way to ameliorative steps we must take as a society.

### *Psychoanalytic understanding of causal contributions*

- The past, left unanalyzed, profoundly affects the present. Only by bringing past conflict and trauma to light and openly discussing its origins and effects can individuals and societies be free of its hidden pernicious effects. The foundation of psychoanalysis is about how the past impacts the present.
- The African-American community understands that violence against black people is born out of a very violent traumatic past in this country and a set of experiences that is transmitted intergenerationally<sup>3</sup>. Black men, women and children, parents and families "know the fabric of (their) lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest."<sup>4</sup> This violence ranges from blacks disproportionately being victims of homicide<sup>5</sup> to the malignant impact of everyday American racism, including "regular encounters with stereotypes and other systemic forms of racism that exist throughout the larger culture."<sup>6</sup>
- Denial and disavowal are used by individuals and large groups to avoid confronting painful realities. "Denial" is a defense mechanism that buries painful truths beyond consciousness; "disavowal" is a defense mechanism that preserves a painful view of reality in consciousness but deprives it of feeling and meaning so that it can be ignored. However, aspects of reality that are denied or disavowed continue to have dangerous negative impacts on adaptation. Facing painful realities

requires building the capacity to mourn into our lives, both on the personal and family levels and on the societal level.

- Psychoanalytic understanding of large group dynamics has identified that groups "construct" an "other" in order to project negative fantasies and feelings into them. Aggression is also disavowed and projected onto the "other". Helplessness is transformed into scapegoating. A dangerous dynamic of restitutive aggression can emerge. "Hatred leads to fear and fear to hatred in an ever-increasing vicious circle."<sup>7</sup>
- Regulating and reducing aggression and violence requires careful attention to reducing its precursors—helplessness, xenophobia, scapegoating, and isolation of disparate groups.

#### *Psychoanalytic understanding of mental health effects*

- In our neighborhoods, there is an undercurrent of individual and community anxiety that cannot be minimized. Anxious parents and families in low-income communities, which are often dominated by African-American and other groups of color, are afraid to have their teenagers walk outside. Young men resort to sharing ideas on the Internet about how to avoid being hurt if stopped by the police. Many people, especially parents of color, feel an utter sense of helplessness and vulnerability.
- Patterns of racial profiling and race-based violence have a severe deleterious effect on the self-esteem of black youth who realize they are often seen as an ominous, unwanted "other", no matter how pacific and innocent their activity. Public commentators have asked if young black men feel they have value in this country.
- President Obama spoke to the nation about his own experience being aware of the fear that he as a black man inspired in strangers. He noted that black men walk across the street and hear car door locks click. Black men walk through a store and are followed by security personnel. Black men get in an elevator and notice that a woman grabs her purse and holds her breath. He said, "All of these have happened to me"<sup>8</sup>.
- Shame and guilt about unacknowledged hate and fear-- and their denial-- lead to emotional numbing and insecurity in the majority population<sup>9</sup>. These psychological factors in turn can restrict reason and judgment and may contribute to untempered aggression in vulnerable populations.
- Victims of race-based or anti-minority group aggression know that they have suffered. Yet they incur further psychological damage when despite an attack happening in the glare of daylight it goes unacknowledged. Worse still the perpetrator is often convinced that it is all the fault of the victim anyway. This leads to a further degradation of the "other" in society.<sup>10</sup>
- A psychoanalytic understanding of the mental pain experienced by minorities<sup>11</sup> illuminates a number of key phenomena:
  - The sense of being "different from the main group" leads to a breach in the holding function of society, which in turn leads to cumulative subtle trauma.
  - The majority uses the minority as a suitable target of externalization of depression and paranoid anxieties.
  - Human beings need enemies. The minority is not wanted by the majority but is needed to fulfill key psychological functions. Defining a group that is "not like us" and "less than us" can shore up the frail self-esteem of a vulnerable large group.
  - Minority individuals experience the "anguish of invisibility and the torment of hypervisibility"<sup>12</sup>. Depression is a major mental health consequence.
- In the larger community, there is dissemination of mistrust, undermining community ties and decreasing group function.
- Transgenerational transmission of trauma occurs with consequent depression, anxiety, learning problems and diminished vocational potential in subsequent generations.

#### *Psychoanalytic understanding of ameliorative steps*

- Institution of mourning rituals—Societies need places and rituals to accomplish group mourning processes in order to overcome the shadow of a violent past.<sup>13</sup>
- Institution of opportunities for conversation. As psychoanalysts, we know the power of words. As a society, we must use the power of words to confront our fears and hatreds and eliminate racially-motivated, socially endorsed, institutionalized violence. Talking helps in specific ways—by decreasing disavowal, allowing integration of thought and feeling, airing anxieties and promoting mentalization rather than acting out. Conversation can help replace a dangerous narrative with a constructive one.

- Promotion of a sense of individual responsibility and "speaking out" against racism. Observers and bystanders must not be silent.<sup>14</sup> We must "look into ourselves and beware of turning a blind eye to reality."<sup>15</sup>
- Confrontation by the majority group of its unconscious prejudices and blindness to the effects of these prejudices on minority groups and on themselves. The majority's role in minority problems must be actively examined and acknowledged.<sup>16</sup>

*Specific recommendations:*

1. Begin a national conversation about race, violence, and the related unresolved traumatic history in our country, bringing together minority and non-minority children and adults in neighborhoods, schools, churches and other communities.
2. Engage artists, architects and musicians in considering ways to use the arts to diminish denial and help us process our history in constructive ways.
3. Train law enforcement personnel in sensitivity to the psychological vulnerability of minority populations.
4. Educate teachers, pastoral care professionals and community group leaders to look for depression and behavioral problems in minority children who have been exposed to racial violence and profiling.
5. Examine state and local laws to see if they are designed to promote dialogue rather than to encourage violent confrontation.

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7 Segal, H. (1987). Silence is the real crime. *The international review of psycho-analysis*. 14:3-12.

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