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DOI: 10.1177/00957984950214003

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History of the Empirical Conference on Black Psychology

Algea O. Harrison
Oakland University
John L. McAdoo
Michigan State University
Harriette Pipes McAdoo
Michigan State University

In the past years, academic research-oriented graduate psychology programs have graduated a number of Black research psychologists. The tremendous need for minority input at all levels of higher education has compelled these researchers to become involved in numerous university committees, that is, "minority affairs." Some have been in the position of being the only Black person in their respective psychology departments. When their research focus was on the Black experience, they often did not receive the support and constructive criticism needed to sustain and refine such research ventures. For those researchers who do have the time and support for research, there is frequently the problem of overcoming the negative connotation given research in African American communities.

For these, and a variety of related reasons, A. Wade Boykin and J. Frank Yates saw a need for a small group setting that would allow an in-depth exchange among Black psychologists whose primary interest was research. The two young Black psychologists devised a plan for convening a limited number of persons to critique and present empirical studies and, in general, to promote a research orientation in the field of Black psychology. Indeed, to ensure that the discussion of individual projects would be thorough and constructive, the conference format gave investigators an opportunity to

JOURNAL OF BLACK PSYCHOLOGY, Vol. 21 No. 4, November 1995 329-331
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present their research problem, methodology, and interpretation for the scrutiny and feedback of all conference participants. Securing funding from the Russell Sage Foundation, Boykin and Yates, in June 1974, convened the first Conference on Empirical Research in Black Psychology, at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The following year, in June 1975, A. Wade Boykin and Anderson J. Franklin coordinated the next conference, also funded by the Russell Sage Foundation. This was held at Columbia University, in New York.

Subsequently, a series of conferences have been convened under the leadership of a dedicated group of Black psychologists: A. Wade Boykin, William E. Cross, Jr., Anderson J. Franklin, Algea Harrison, Harriette McAdoo, and John McAdoo. The site for Conference III in 1976, sponsored by the National Institute of Education (Department of Health, Education and Welfare; DHEW) was Cornell University. Following the format of the previous conferences, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH; DHEW) sponsored Conference IV in January 1979 at the University of California at San Diego, and Conference V at Howard University in June 1980. Some later conferences were also made possible by grants from NIMH. A conference grant from the Ford Foundation made Conference VI possible at Oakland University in November 1981. Conferences VII and VIII were held at Hampton University, November 1982, and University of Delaware, January 1984, respectively. The ninth conference was held at the University of California at Berkeley in January 1985.

The tenth conference, funded by NIMH, took a different format, in that only invited papers were presented. It was held on St. Thomas Island, U.S. Virgin Islands. A historical summary was made of where the field of empirical psychology had gone in the years since 1974 when the first conference was held at the University of Michigan.

The original format was continued with the next conference. The eleventh conference was held at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and Conference XII returned to its origins at the University of Michigan. When the McAdoos returned to Michigan, they began the process of developing Conference XIII, which was held in 1992 at Michigan State University. The 14th conference is in the early planning stages. Algea Harrison has the distinction of being the only individual to attend every empirical conference.

One of the major accomplishments of the series of conferences has been the publication and distribution of books and papers throughout the United States. This mechanism has provided information that is needed in the field of psychology. Notable are examples of how Black research psychologists have conceptualized and analyzed the Black experience with implications for
service to the Black community. In addition, the conference sessions have facilitated the establishment of a “network” among Black professionals across the nation. Finally, the series of conferences have fostered the emergence of a growing group of Black psychologists, committed to the continuation of Conferences on Empirical Research in Black Psychology.