

# Pioneers of Black Mental Health

## Why #BlackMentalHealth Matters?

Black History Month commemorates a celebration of leaders past, present, and future who have sought to combat structural oppression of Black communities. Anti-Black racism is a major social determinant of health that contributes to disparities in the field of mental health and substance use. This **report highlights the work of several pioneers** who were activists for mental health and wellness including mental health providers, artists, writers, and community leaders. Their remarkable efforts in expanding the fields of psychology, psychiatry, social work, and radical self care have impacted today and are influencing the leaders of tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>

## Did You Know? Firsts in the Field of Psychology

**In 1920, Francis Cecil Sumner, Ph.D. was the first African-American to earn a Ph.D. in psychology. Later in 1933, Inez Beverly Prosser, Ph.D. was the first African-American woman to earn a Ph.D. in the field of psychology.**<sup>2</sup>

**Francis Cecil Sumner, Ph.D.**

**Homestate: Arkansas**

**Also Known as: "The Father of Black Psychology"**

In 1920, Sumner became the first African-American to earn a PhD degree in psychology. He also was the co-founder of Howard University's psychology department. Much of Sumner's career centered combating racial injustice in the education system.<sup>2</sup>



## Did You Know? Firsts in the Field of Psychology Cont.



**Inez Beverly Prosser, Ph.D.**  
**Homestate: Texas**

In 1933, Prosser became the first African-American woman to earn a Ph.D. degree in educational psychology. Much of her career focused on the academic support and development of Black schoolchildren.<sup>2</sup>

**Joseph L. White, Ph.D.**  
**Homestate: Nebraska**  
**Also Known as: "The Godfather of Black Psychology"**  
**Notable Work: "Toward a Black Psychology" (1970)**

In 1961, White became the first African-American to receive a PhD in psychology at Michigan State University. White pushed for the psychology that was specific to the experiences of African-Americans. He also engaged in educational advocacy of Black schoolchildren and led efforts in founding The Association of Black Psychologists.<sup>3</sup>

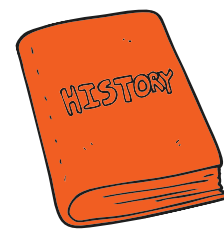


## Towards a Liberatory Framework

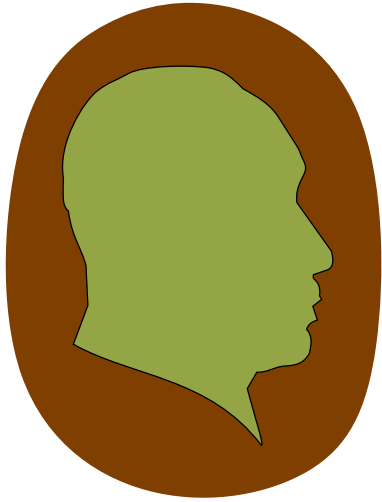


**Frantz Fanon, Ph.D.**  
**Homecountry: Martinique**  
**Also Known as: "The Godfather of Black Psychology"**  
**Notable Works: "Black Skin, White Masks", "The Wretched of the Earth", "A Dying Colonialism" (1959)**

Fanon was a psychiatrist who was instrumental in contextualizing the impact of oppressive, post-colonial conditions on the health and well-being of Black communities. Fanon's work had global implications and made significant contributions for anti-colonial movements and pedagogy.<sup>4-6</sup>



## Towards a Liberatory Framework



**E. Franklin Frazier, Ph.D.**

**Homestate: Maryland**

**Notable Works:** *Black Bourgeoisie*, *The Negro Family in the United States*, *Psychological Factors in Negro Health*

Frazier was a social worker and sociologist. Throughout his career, Frazier made significant contributions to the field of social work and produced works on the conditions of Black families and communities. He largely discussed throughout his work structural determinants of Black health and well-being.<sup>7-9</sup>

## Lesbian Feminist Spotlight

**E. Kitch Childs, Ph.D.**

**Homestate: Pennsylvania**

As a mental health practitioner, Childs actively worked to ensure accessible care, especially for LGBTQ+ patients and communities living with HIV. She advocated for Feminist Therapy and incorporated a social justice framework as part of treatment. Childs worked diligently for the liberation movement at the intersection of Black, Lesbian, and women's issues. She founded The Association for Women in Psychology.<sup>10-11</sup>

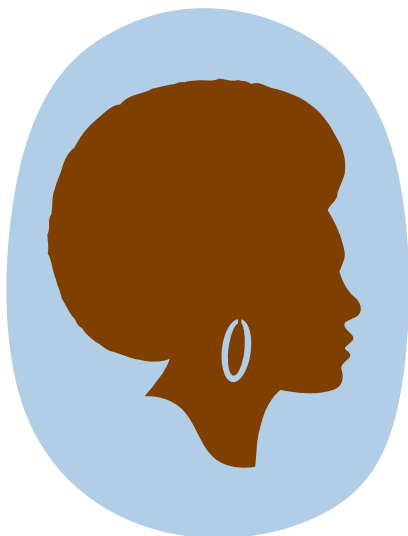


**Audre Lorde**

**Homestate: New York**

**Notable Works:** *Sister Outsider*

Lorde was a writer and poet whose works were instrumental in shaping Black feminism, and served as a strong proponent for radical self-care. She spoke of how joy, eroticism, and poetry could be used for empowerment. Lorde emphasized this practice as a means for survival and liberation. Additionally, Lorde often discussed mental health in her writings including living with depression.<sup>12</sup>



# Organizations that Advocate for Black Mental Health & Joy

## The Nap Ministry Based in Atlanta, Georgia



Tricia Hersey, an artist and activists, founded The Nap Ministry to advocate for the well-being, sleep health, and mental health of Black communities. Hersey is notable for “Rest is Resistance” framework and implements culturally-informed and historical healing practices combined with social justice as a tool for advocacy.<sup>13</sup>



## BLKHLTH

### Based in Atlanta, Georgia



The co-founders of BLKHLTH, Paulah Wheeler, Khadijah Ameen, Mercilla Ryan-Harris, Matthew McCurdy, work to combat health disparities impacting Black communities. BLKHLTH utilize anti-racism frameworks for health promotion and education including topics of wellness and joy.<sup>14</sup>

## More Organization Highlights:

- **Black Trans Femmes in the Arts**<sup>15</sup>
- **Knights & Orchids Society (TKO)**<sup>16</sup>
- **Therapy for Black Girls**<sup>17</sup>
- **Black Trans Health Initiative**<sup>18</sup>
- **Black Women’s Health Initiative**<sup>19</sup>
- **The Center for Healing Racial Trauma**<sup>20</sup>
- **Black Girls Breathing**<sup>21</sup>
- **The Sensual Self Podcast**<sup>22</sup>



# References

1. Racism and mental health. Mental Health America. <https://www.mhanational.org/racism-and-mental-health>
2. Featured psychologists: Francis Cecil Sumner, Phd and Inez Beverly Prosser, Phd. (2012). American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/ethnicity-health/psychologists/sumner-prosser#:~:text=Francis%20Sumner%2C%20PhD%2C%20is%20referred,a%20PhD%20degree%20in%20psychology>
3. In Memoriam: Joseph L. White. (2017). University of California: Academic Senate. <https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/in-memoriam/files/joseph-white.html#:~:text=oversee%20its%20mission.-,Dr.,hold%20a%20doctorate%20in%20psychology>
4. Novey W. (2021). Revisiting frantz fanon: His life and legacy on race, colonization, and psychiatry. American Journal of Psychiatry Residents' Journal, 16(4):11-12. doi:10.1176/appi.ajp-rj.2021.160406
5. Butts HF. (1979). Frantz Fanon's Contribution to Psychiatry: The Psychology of Racism and Colonialism. Journal of the National Medical Association, 71(10):1015-1018. doi:<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2537519/>
6. Stevens G. (2022). What Fanon still teaches us about mental illness in post-colonial societies. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/what-fanon-still-teaches-us-about-mental-illness-in-post-colonial-societies-102426>
7. Black Pioneers in social work and the Mental Health Field. (2022). ICAN. <https://ican.family/news/black-pioneers-in-social-work-and-the-mental-health-field>
8. Schiele JH. (1999). E. Franklin Frazier and the Interfacing of Black Sociology and Black Social Work. The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare., 26(2):105-125. doi:<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2571&context=jssw>
9. Frazier EF. (1925). Psychological factors in negro health. Social Forces, 3(3):488-490. doi:/10.2307/3005007
10. E. Kitch Childs. Feminist Voices. <https://feministvoices.com/profiles/e-kitch-childs>.
11. Richardson W. (PDF) feminist therapy: Pioneer E. Kitch Childs - Researchgate. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312640926\\_Feminist\\_Therapy\\_Pioneer\\_E\\_Kitch\\_Childs](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312640926_Feminist_Therapy_Pioneer_E_Kitch_Childs)
12. Oliphant VN, Broyles D, Clement DN, Wingate LRR. (2022). Mental health strategies informed by Black Feminist thought. Open Cultural Studies, 6(1):137-146. doi:/10.1515/culture-2022-0151
13. About. The Nap Ministry. <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/about/>
14. Blkhlth. BLKHLTH. <https://www.blkhlth.com/>
15. Artist residency. BTFA Collective. <https://www.btfacollective.org/artist-residency>
16. TKO society. TKO Society. <https://www.tkosociety.org/>
17. Bradford ADJH. (2022). Therapy For Black Girls. <https://therapyforblackgirls.com/>
18. Black Trans Health initiative. Trans Women of Color Collective. <https://www.twocc.us/our-work/black-trans-health-initiative/>
19. Black Women's Health Imperative. Home. Black Women's Health Imperative. <https://bwhi.org/>.
20. About. Center for Healing. <https://www.centerforhealingracialtrauma.com/about>
21. Black Girls Breathing. black girls breathing. <https://blackgirlsbreathing.com/>
22. Sensual self podcast. Ev'Yan Whitney, Sexuality Doula®. <https://www.evyanwhitney.com/podcast>