

Black Psychology

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Black psychology is an emerging discipline broadly defined as an evolving system of knowledge concerning elements of human nature, specifically study of the experience and behavior of people of African descent (Black populations). Historically, Black psychology stems from African philosophy, yet early perspectives in the United States focused on reacting to

Western psychology's characterization of Blacks as psychologically inferior. Contemporary perspectives proactively create racially sensitive models and establish African-centered models of human behavior for understanding the Black experience. Drawing upon emerging Black and African-centered psychological perspectives will contribute to the future of cross-cultural counseling with people of African descent.

The Emerging Discipline of Black Psychology

Historical Foundations

The historical foundations of Black psychology extend back to the educational systems of Ancient Egypt (Kemet, 3200 B.C.). During that time, African scholars developed complex philosophies, or systems of knowledge, which predated Greek philosophy. The African philosophical belief systems, contemporarily known as worldviews, informed members of society about how to understand reality and the structure of all things in the universe, including human relations and values. Duadi Azibo, Kobi K. Kambon, Linda James Myers, and Wade W. Nobles are a few of the notable Black psychologists who discuss the philosophical foundations of Black psychology based on four major components of African worldview: (1) Cosmology, the structure of the universe or reality, reflects interdependence, collectivism, and unity with nature; (2) ontology, the essential nature of reality, including the self, is a spiritual divine energy manifesting in the physical or material realm; (3) epistemology, the nature of knowledge, regards knowing reality through affective and cognitive self-knowledge using symbolic imagery and rhythm; and (4) axiology, the basic value system, focuses on positive human relations. Prior to the emergence of these African worldview concepts in Western academia, early Black psychologists were establishing their legitimacy and researching the inferior status of Blacks in traditional psychology.

Early Black Psychologists

In 1920, Francis Sumner became the first Black person in America to earn a Ph.D. in psychology. In 1938, Herman Canady convened the first group of Black educators in psychology as a caucus within the American Teachers Association (ATA) at its annual convention in Tuskegee, Alabama (the ATA was the primary professional organization for Black educators at the time). The group's main goal was to promote the teaching and the application of psychology, particularly at Black schools and among Black scholars.

Subsequently, numerous Black psychologists in the early 20th century published theories and research critiquing racist social policies. The research of Kenneth and Mamie Clark on racial preferences among Black preschool children helped to determine the 1954 landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which affirmed the unconstitutionality of separate but equal schools. Ironically, early theory and research also fostered a perspective of Blacks as

deficient, claiming that the effects of discrimination and oppression left Blacks with few strengths, self-hatred, and low self-esteem. In the late 1960s, the emergence of the Black Power movement and Black Nationalism inspired some African American psychologists to combat the deficit view and eventually form the first independent Black psychological association.

Association of Black Psychologists

The Association of Black Psychologists was founded in 1968 following a formative group of African American psychologists voicing frustration and outrage with the policies and practices of the American Psychological Association (APA). The Black psychologists attending the APA San Francisco conference in 1968 made several proposals requesting that APA address concerns regarding the effects of racism in multiple settings, such as the Black community, educational settings, psychological research, testing, and graduate training programs. Dissatisfied with the response, the formative group decided to establish an organization that would advance a Black psychology, separate and distinct from Western psychology.

In 1972, numerous Black scholars under the editorship of Reginald L. Jones published the inaugural text *Black Psychology*. Here, Wade W. Nobles introduced the African philosophical foundations of Black psychology and Joseph White formally advocated for a theory of Black psychology out of the authentic perspective of Black people in the United States. By 1974, under the inaugural editor William David Smith, the Association of Black Psychologists launched the *Journal of Black Psychology* to provide a peer review platform for publishing empirical research, original theoretical analysis of data, and discussions of current literature in the domain of Black populations. In 1984 the journal published a 10-year content analysis indicating a small increase in empirical articles using the traditional deficit view to explain Black behavior and a need for explanatory models based upon African descent values and the diverse cultural experiences among Blacks. During the journal's second period of self-evaluation (1985-1999), the results of which were published in 2001, the trend of articles focused on Black personality development addressing racial/ cultural identity and racial/cultural consciousness. In recent years the journal has focused on a number of health psychology special issues addressing substance abuse prevention, HIV/AIDS, gender, sexuality, and suicidal behavior and articles examining the psychological impact of racism and discrimination among Blacks. Today both the Black and African-centered perspectives contribute to the diversity of publications in this emerging discipline.

Black and African-Centered Psychology Perspectives

The Black (also called African American) psychology perspective is the study of the experience of Black populations, particularly in the United States, using principles adapted from traditional psychology to create racially and culturally sensitive models. The perspective uses traditional empirical methods to dismantle the prevailing view of the 1960s through

1980s that African Americans are culturally deficient against the normative standard of European American beliefs, values, and lifestyles. Unlike the deficit view, Black psychology's racial and cultural models emphasize cultural strengths and limitations in the context of social and environmental factors.

Alternatively, the African-centered psychology perspective concerns understanding human nature, using African philosophical values, thus going beyond oppressive social contexts. The perspective defines experience from an African-centered psychological orientation, emphasizing worldview dimensions of spirituality, collectivism, oral tradition, affective senses, and harmony in relationships. Equivalent to using traditional empirical methods of observing behavior is understanding human nature through feelings or emotional and cognitive processes of self-knowledge or self-realization. Although systematic research is limited, African-centered psychology models for understanding people of African descent—for example, the Azibo nosology diagnostic system of psychopathology and Na'im Akbar's classification of mental disorders—are emerging. Models of positive Black identity, Black families, and education are but a few examples of both Black and African-centered psychology perspectives.

Black Identity

First theorized by Charles Thomas (cofounding chair of the Association of Black Psychologists), William E. Cross, Jr.'s 1971 linear stage-based racial identity theory, labeled the Nigrescence model, gave rise to extensive research on how Blacks identify with and psychologically interpret the meaning of their racial group in the context of racism and social oppression. Most notably Janet E. Helms and other scholars went on to revise and expand racial identity theory, which now includes status-based, life-span development perspectives, multidimensional models, and measures of racial identity such as the Cross Racial Identity Scale and the Black Racial Identity Scales. A decade of empirical inquiry using the scales examines within-group differences of racial identity and its association with demographic variables, academic achievement, problem behaviors, acculturation, socialization, racism-related variables, and counselor preference of Blacks in cross-cultural counseling.

Concurrently, Wade Nobles's 1972 theory of African self-concept or African self-consciousness laid the foundation for decades of African-centered psychology research. Using African philosophical assumptions about human nature, the African self-consciousness view stresses awareness of one's past history, one's collective spiritual consciousness, and one's individual and group self-concept. Subsequent models of African-self consciousness focus on a spiritual and collective identity as the core of the Black personality. Various scholars conducted assessment and research of the African personality with such scales as the African Self-Consciousness Scale and the Black Personality Questionnaire. Psychometric scales such as the Afrocentrism Measure, the African Value for Children Scale, and the Spirituality Scale continue in use to advance understanding of the Black experience via the African-centered perspective.

Black Families

Black families are defined as extended family networks that involve immediate family, friends, neighbors, church members, and fictive kin or members not biologically related. African American perspectives examine both structural and functional aspects of family, emphasizing acculturation, socialization, and coping factors. Black perspectives also take care not to pathologize or highlight deficit views of Black families, but to promote the strengths and consideration of socioeconomic, historical, and political factors that affect families. African-centered perspectives additionally emphasize the family values of spirit, interconnection, children, cooperation, responsibility, and respect for elders.

Education

Black psychology perspectives on education are defined by emphasis on the educational experiences, needs, and career development of African Americans. Perspectives of the 1960s and 1970s addressing elementary school age children included combating culturally deficient paradigms about intelligence, language, dialect, and learning styles. In the past 2 decades researchers have turned to emphasizing the role of culture and advocating for culturally congruent education acknowledging racial/ethnic identity, socialization, home, spirituality, and community practices among youth and college-age students. Emerging African-centered initiatives teach youth about unique cultural concepts such as the Nguzo Saba principles (Umoja—unity, Kujichagulia—self-determination, Ujima—collective work and responsibility, Ujamaa— cooperative economics, Nia—purpose, Kuumba— creativity, and Imani—faith) of the African American holiday Kwanzaa and the Ntu (meaning “energy”) system of health and healing. The concept of Maat, referring to the principles of truth, justice, righteousness, reciprocity, harmony, balance, and order, is another cultural value system emerging in educational and Black psychological initiatives.

Future Directions

Black psychology is an emerging discipline transformed from reacting to Western psychology to constructing models that explain the Black experience from perspectives that are racially sensitive and emphasize the strength of African cultural values. Future theory and research will likely employ overlapping Black and African-centered approaches to generate practice models supportive of adaptive functioning and the diverse counseling needs of African Americans. Counseling paradigms that articulate the Black experience in both the context of racial oppression and the African worldview will increase Black psychology as a resource for cross-cultural counseling with people of African descent.

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