

Alternative Psychology: An African Framework for Understanding Identity, Health and Well-Being

Ezinne Adibe

August 15, 2011

## Alternative Psychology: An African Framework for Understanding Identity, Health and Well-Being

Worldview encompasses the lens through which one views and interprets the world based on a set of beliefs. Worldview both enfolds and informs the construction of reality (Myers & Speight, 2010). The beliefs, intuitions, perceptions, and behaviors of African (black) people both on the African continent and in so-called diaspora are shaped by a cultural worldview that places Africa as their foundational point of reference. Though there are cultural variations among African people, there are commonalities and affinities in the thought systems of all African people (Mbiti, 1970). Even through centuries of enslavement during the Maafa, as it is known in Kiswahili, or transatlantic slave trade, and the continued physical, mental, and spiritual assault on African people, these commonalities and affinities persist (Graham, 1999, p. 111). Where there have been attempts to sever the umbilical cord linking particularly Africans in the Americas to their mother source, Africa, the ancient traditions of African people are still visible in the communal and cyclical conception of reality that characterize an African ethos. According to T. A. Parham and T. M. J. Parham (2002), an African or African-centered worldview realizes the interconnectedness with self and the world, the importance of community as a salient element of existence, and the spiritual essence that permeates everything that exists in the world. In the field of psychology, examination into the thought processes and behaviors of black people should take into account an African-centered/Africentric/African worldview, the salience of race, ethnicity, culture, and the historical experiences of African (black) people.

Taking an emic approach when appropriate to psychological research, assessment, diagnosis and treatment when working with African/African-American/black clients can lead to more culturally competent treatment methods and contribute to literature on racial identity

development, ethnic identity development and mental health and well-being. With the ever-changing world and the impact of what is called globalization, there is an increasing need to re-assess the ways in which race, ethnicity, culture and mental health intertwine, particularly among black people both on the continent and in the so-called diaspora. On globalization and its impact on psychology, Marsella (1998) states:

Human survival and well-being is now embedded in an entangled web of global economic, political, social, and environmental events and forces. Global events and forces are now local events and forces! Willingly or unwillingly, the world has become the fabled "global village" (McLuhan, 1968, 1989), and the global village is multicultural, multinational, and multiethnic. The scale, complexity, and impact of these events and forces constitute a formidable challenge for psychology as a science and profession. (p. 1282)

The fabled global village, as Marsella (1998) notes, poses some challenges to etic, or universal approaches, to understanding thoughts and behaviors among diverse groups. Marsella (1998) calls for a major disciplinary response and rethinking of psychology's "assumptions, methods, and interventions" (p. 1242).

#### *Mainstream psychology and African-centered psychology*

The social sciences, a field of scholarship that studies society, is usually an umbrella term that includes such fields outside of the natural sciences as economics, anthropology and psychology. The roots of the social sciences can be traced to 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century European philosophy, particularly in what is commonly referred to as the Age of Enlightenment or Age of Reason. The Age of Enlightenment was characterized by trends in thought and literature in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, as well as in American colonies, prior to the French Revolution. The

foundations for Western philosophy and science go even further back into ancient Greece, a place commonly regarded to as a parent to Western civilization (Ani, 1994). A major focus during this Age of Enlightenment was on human reason. Critical to Enlightenment thinking were the ideas of rationality and reductionism. Through a diligent process of reason it was assumed that man could progress in knowledge, technical attainment, and moral values. Objectivity represented rationality, while subjectivity represented irrationality. Western psychology, or mainstream psychology, is defined as the “scientific study of behavior and mental processes” (T. A. Parham; T. M. J. Parham, 2002, p. 11). Western science employs a reductionist mentality and approach, whereby everything that exists in the universe is “brought into the frame of our senses” (T. A. Parham; T. M. J. Parham, 2002, p. 12). By contrast, African phenomenology and psychology cannot be restricted to such an approach. The universe, according to ancient and present African cultures, is composed of a seen and an unseen reality (Ani, 1994). The individual exists within this dynamic universe as part of this universe and is relatable to its objects, as opposed to divorced from them. The individual is also considered part of a collective reality, one that spans time. Time in the African worldview is cyclical, for the most part, as opposed to linear. Therefore, existence does not demand a present state of being, but also includes the past, present, and future, and likewise the unborn, living, and the dead, (Mbiti, 1970). As Ani (1994) notes, the “African world-view, and the world-views of other people who are not of European origin, all appear to have certain themes in common. The universe to which they relate is sacred in origin” and is organic (p. 29). There is emphasis placed on the experience of phenomena, and the attainment of knowledge through such modes as symbolic imagery. According to such a worldview, polarities do not form the basis for logic. Rather than an either/or structure, there exists a di-unital (both/and) structure (Carroll, 2010).

In Western psychology there are numerous theories proposed to explain human behavior and mental processes. Mainstream psychologists have provided frameworks for understanding human behavior across the life span. The question as to whether mainstream psychology has been too rigid in its approach to studying phenomena has led to various alternative views and proposals for reforming the field. Gergen (1985), who introduced social constructionism to a wider audience in the field, called into question the possibility of objective knowledge. Instead, Gergen proposed that “psychology should study the discursive practices by which we ‘construct’ the world and ourselves” (Liebrucks, 2001). While taking issue with the manner of Gergen’s attack on mainstream psychology, in what he felt was a missing of the mark by identifying social constructionism with a relativist epistemology, Liebrucks (2001) maintains that social constructionist critique is relevant. Liebrucks (2001) states that social constructionists argue that “psychological concepts characterize the behaviours and experiences of persons with respect not to purportedly hidden processes in the mind or brain but to the meaning these behaviours and experiences have in the context of a certain cultural discourse” (p. 382). Additionally, concerns over the validity of universal test instruments, diagnoses, and treatment in the field have caused some to propose more culturally competent methods:

“Psychological tests used for clinical diagnosis and personality description were developed for a mainstream, largely middle-class, European American population. When administered to diverse clients without corrections for cultural or racial identity, these tests may be pejorative and pathologizing. Such tests are called Anglo emics and are applied as genuine etics, or universals, without adequate demonstrations of cross-cultural equivalence (Dana, 2002, pgs. 8-9).

From which vantage point do we explore the thought processes and behaviors of African people? For African descended people in North America, is an African worldview relevant, taking into consideration the Maafa, cultural dislocation, and assimilation? In 1975, realizing the need for an alternative psychology, one that acknowledges the unique experiences of African people globally, black psychologists such as Dr. Wade Nobles called for the formation of African, or African-centered psychology (Carroll, 2010, p. 111). African, or African-centered psychology, which has benefited greatly from the research of Dr. Linda Myers, Dr. Amos Wilson, Dr. Kobi Kambon, Dr. Wade Nobles, Dr. Naim Akbar, and Dr. William E. Cross, Jr. among others, “offers a deeper understanding of things African, African culture and cultural adaptations, and what it means to be African” (T. A. Parham; T. M. J. Parham, 2002, p. 12). As Kobi Kambon states, “African psychology is defined as a system of knowledge (philosophy, definitions, concepts, models, procedures and practice) concerning the nature of the social universe from the perspective of African Cosmology” (Carroll, 2010, p. 112).

What is important to this discussion is the worldview of African people, as this informs research aimed at exploring the thought processes and behaviors of African people. An African/African-centered worldview “postulates that African epistemologies, ideals, and values must be at the center of any analysis involving African Black peoples (It also embraces the Pan-African construct of the unity and oneness of African people on the continent of Africa and descendants throughout the world)” (Graham, 1999, p. 110). Reflecting the scope and expanse of African-centered psychology, Nobles (1998) states:

African centeredness represents a concept which categorizes a “quality of thought and practice”, is rooted in the cultural image and interest of people of African ancestry and represents and reflects the life experiences, history and traditions of people of African

ancestry as the center of analyses. It represents ... the core and fundamental quality of the “Belonging,” “Being” and “Becoming” of people of African ancestry. Furthermore, it represents the fact, that as human beings, people of African ancestry have the right and responsibility to “center” themselves in their own subjective possibilities and potentialities, and through the re-centering process reproduce and refine the best of the human essence. (p. 190)

The objective of African psychology is the “complete mental, spiritual, and social liberation of African people throughout the diaspora” (T. A. Parham; T. M. J. Parham, 2002, p. 22). The crux of this discussion will be on affirming the integrity and identity of African psychology’s theories on human behavior through a presentation of the beliefs, values, and behaviors of African (black) people. African-centered/African psychology is “concerned with defining African psychological experiences from an African perspective, a perspective that reflects an orientation to the meaning of life, the world, and relationships with others and one’s self” (T. A. Parham; T. M. J. Parham, 2002, p. 13). A universalistic approach to understanding the thought processes and behaviors of African people does not reflect the unique experiences of African people both on the continent and in the so-called diaspora. As Myers and Speight (2010) note, “The experience of the vast majority of African people in the Americas, particularly during the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, is unique in human history by virtue of the nature of the brutal, inhumane socio-political economic system of chattel slavery” (Myers & Speight, 2010, p. 68). The African-centered worldview, however, goes beyond historical oppression (Graham, 1999). Nonetheless, the traumatic experience of enslavement and subsequent policies aimed at further subjugating African people have served to disrupt to varying degrees cultural traditions and family bonds, by denying African people normal family bonds, the practice of indigenous

languages, and religious rites and rituals, among other things. The psychological trauma of such events continues to impact the minds of black people worldwide (Myers & Speight, 2010).

Therefore, cultural dislocation, relocation, and assimilation are relevant to research on the mental health of black people worldwide, as this unique experience in addition to a genetic and cultural connection, have served to connect black people worldwide.

As Carroll (2010) notes, African psychology, using worldview as a framework, supports cultural links between continental Africans and Africans in the so-called diaspora, particularly African-Americans, through the method of looking at past and present African concepts and modes of behavior. African psychology presents a unified approach to exploring the thought processes and behaviors of African descended people grounded in the socio-historical experience of African people (Carroll, 2010). African psychology looks at continuity and interconnected relationships as a formidable aspect of cultural continuity among African people. (Carroll, 2010).

There is a debate as to the level of African cultural retentions in the Americas. Holloway (1990) notes that scholars interested in defining African-American culture have discovered a number of significant cultural and linguistic properties of African origin. One of those retentions was the importance of ancestral dream. “The ancestral dream is one of numerous forms of continuous revelations that enslaved Africans transplanted to the Americas (Thornton, 1992)” (Fairley, 2003, p. 546). In these dreams, deceased family members often appear to assist with past and impending family affairs (Fairley, 2003). Fairley’s (2003) findings in black communities in eastern North Carolina are strikingly similar to Berg’s (2003) findings among Xhosa-speaking peoples in South Africa. “In the African world-view dreams are very much part of everyday life. Dreams are regarded as being messages from the Ancestors” (p. 201). Similarly, Ephirim-



Donkor (1997) notes the importance of ancestors and ancestral messages through dreams among the Akan people of Ghana.

### Identity

Worldview has played a critical role in how African (black) people have shaped their own realities as well as how non-Africans have shaped realities for them. To understand how and why such terms as African, African American, and black exist, it is important to examine the systems of slavery, particularly transatlantic slave trade or the Maafa, as it is known in Kiswahili, and the subsequent system of Jim Crow formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States as a way to police the behaviors of black people through a set of laws that mandated racial segregation.

#### *The “black experience,” voyeurism and shifting identities*

From the Maafa and other systematic and racially motivated modes of grouping African people, many Africans were classified by such terms as Negro, colored, and African-American.

Black remains a label that many African peoples accept and affirm despite the historical connotations associated with the term. The black power movements helped to give positive meaning to the term (Robinson, 1995). A black identity served and still serves to unify African people on the continent and in the so-called diaspora based not on solely skin color but also on a common root: the African continent. A great deal of the literature on Africa, Africans, and other non-European peoples between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries reflects the racial and cultural biases of researchers of that time.

Hall (1900) who is considered an eminent figure in psychology and widely known for his storm and stress model for adolescent development, once stated, “No negro tribe has ever invented a language and Africa shows no progress. Contact with higher races has produced no permanent effect” (p. 301). Hall’s condescending views towards non-European groups, seeing

Africans and Native Americans as part of the “adolescent races” while condemning European imperialism, reflects his glaring cultural biases and paternalistic attitudes towards non-European groups (Richards, 1997). One may wonder how can someone who viewed Africans as mentally inadequate, and wrote as much, could produce a universally appropriate psychological model for adolescent development. Similarly, Freud distinguished between “civilized” and “primitive” peoples, the latter category he placed Africans in (Richards, 2001). Freud and Carl Jung both had a fascination and even an obsession with the unconscious mind and non-European peoples. Both Jung and Freud felt that African people were handicapped mentally (Richards, 2001). Freud, whose psychoanalytic theory proposed that childhood experiences and unconscious desires influenced behaviors, viewed the African continent and African people from an extremely voyeuristic viewpoint. He periodically referred to Africa as a savage place, yet he still found himself fascinated and drawn in to the cultures of the people who he perceived as primitive and infantile in mental development (Richards, 2001). From this example, and countless other examples, one can see how Africa and African people have been situated in narratives detailing the history of the world. Terms such as pagan, heathen, barbaric, and uncivilized came to signify the anthropological and psychological literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This literature can be classified as what is known as scientific racism, an ideology that grew out of evolutionary thought. Scientific racism was the “result of two lines of scientific thought merging. First, new ideas about heredity provided an explanation of the way traits could be held stable for generation after generation. Second, ideas flowered about the supremacy of the north European races” (Jackson & Weidman, 2005, p. 97). In psychology, the focus on scientific inquiry and attempts to understand man’s place in the world, no doubt helped to further cultural biases towards Africa and African people. Additionally, the system of slavery, which was well in effect during the 17<sup>th</sup>

and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, no doubt further disenfranchised African people. The institution of slavery provided wealth for the Western world. To justify the institution, notions of African inferiority were prevalent. Myers and Speight (2010) note some effects of this institution:

Never before had the level and extent of such dehumanizing practices of physical violence and brutality disallowed access to normal family bonds, denied practice of indigenous language, religious rites and rituals, and engulfed the humanity of a people, their minds and culture with a subordinating color caste system which continues to reign for over three hundred years. (p. 68)

Worldview, along with normative assumptions and frames of reference as Carroll (2010) notes, impact the study of human phenomenon from a culturally centered perspective. Therefore, it is necessary to re-frame the “black experience” from the perspectives of blacks themselves. Notwithstanding the varied experiences of African (black) people, there are commonalities, some have already been noted, and others will be noted throughout the course of this discussion.

In these colonial narratives and in some present day narratives, Africa and African people were and have been described from outside perspectives. In describing Africans as those without any culture ignored the fact that Africans had empires in where is now known as Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria, among other places on the continent (Thompson, 1984; Holloway, 1990). These destructive narratives deny the complexity and the richness of the continent and its many cultures; for instance, its indigenous ideographic systems such as Nsibidi and so forth. These narratives also impact future generations psychologically. According to Akbar, Chambers, and Johnson (2001), black children may internalize mainstream negative stereotypes about black people, resulting in an internalized negative self-esteem.

*“The largest forced migration in history”*

“The largest forced migration in history, the slave trade brought an estimated half-million Africans to what is now the United States over some two hundred years. This total is thought to represent about 7 percent of the entire transatlantic slave trade, though the exact figures are in dispute and the total volume of the trade may never be known” (Holloway, 1990, p. 1). The volume may be well over forty million if one considers those who perished during resistance efforts and on cargo ships (Holloway, 1990). By 1850, it is estimated that a third of people of African descent lived outside of the continent (Holloway, 1990). This speaks to the magnitude of the slave trade and its devastating social and economic impact on the African continent, especially West and Central Africa, from where many Africans were forcefully taken. The Maafa, or transatlantic slave trade, among other brutal and systematic events in the history of African people severed family bonds and cultural traditions, and designated African people as “other,” particularly in North America. The culprits involved in the Maafa included primarily European slave traders who came to the African continent with the intent of domination and accumulating resources both mineral and human. It would seem then that the European worldview at this time was focused on expansion beyond Europe and that a means for doing so and accumulating wealth was through conquest. The existence of a cultural other served as a justification for conquest, for instance in the early interaction of Spanish colonists with American Indians/Native Americans or in the interaction European (British, Dutch, Portuguese, French, etc.) colonists with Africans on the continent and in the so-called diaspora. This is among a number of tragedies. A more in depth examination into the thought processes guiding such behaviors towards those deemed cultural others is beyond the scope of this discussion, but would provide an interesting psychological framework.

Jim Crow, a racial caste system in the United States, was a continuation of the prevailing notions that African people were inferior, sub-human, and thus relegated to the lower rungs of society. “Jim Crow refers to laws that were passed by southern legislators in the 1880s that mandated racial segregation in public schools, libraries, parks, railroads, hotels, and restaurants” (Carter-Black & Kayama, 2011, p. 171). Many blacks in the United States who lived in the era of Jim Crow may recount many obstacles they had to face due to racial boundaries and how the state and federal governments exercised control over blacks, especially in southern states (Carter-Black & Kayama, 2011). For blacks, there was virtually no protection under the law at that time. These laws and racist acts in society often used “use humiliation as a tool to reiterate the difference between the status and value of the dominant group and those of the racial minority group” (Carter-Black & Kayama, 2011, p. 174). On the role of African Americans in the development of the United States, Myers and Speight (2010) state:

African Americans have remarkably managed to play an integral role in all levels of this nation’s development from economics, science and cultural arts to moral leadership. As a subjugated people, African Americans have spent almost 40% of their time in this nation since its founding without any human rights at all, another 45% of the period fighting for equality under the law, and the last 15% reputedly having achieved equal protection under the law (although the current mass incarceration of Black people belies that reality). This nation granted the descendents of enslaved African people in America the right to vote and made discrimination against them by virtue of their race illegal just forty years ago. (p. 68).

From a psychological standpoint, what have been the effects of this systematic oppression on the identities of African (black) people? “The critical contribution of the ascribed status of race/ethnicity is inadequately examined, the privileges of “whiteness” being invisible to

those so endowed. Among stigmatized ethnics, Jews have used the survival technique of changing the family name, but African or Asian ancestry with visibly distinguishing characteristics of skin color and texture of hair cannot be so simply discarded or disguised” (Henry, 1999, p.439). Arising out of the conditions of Jim Crow, the civil rights movement sought to challenge discrimination and brutality against blacks. Arising out of the civil rights movement, the black power movement also aimed to challenge discrimination and brutality against blacks in the United States as well as abroad. Both the civil rights and black power movements represented a pivotal period in race relations in the United States. Not only that, these movements served to challenge not only existing notions about the rights and capabilities of black people, but also served to reshape the way that blacks in the United States viewed themselves. Akbar, Chambers, and Johnson (2001) reference Harris (1995) who suggests that “maintaining ones racial or ethnic identity is a major challenge in a society that continually devalues Blacks. Black people must be able to affirm their distinctive identity (racial or ethnic identity) to distinguish themselves and to sustain a positive definition of themselves” (p. 342).

*Identity: The role of culture and the salience of race and ethnicity*

There have been several test instruments used to determine the salience of an African worldview among African descended people (African-Americans), with varying degrees of construct validity (McCombs, 1996; Kelsey & Ransom, 1996; Obasi, Flores, & Myers, 2009). Results of Obasi et al.’s (2009) Construction and Initial Validation of the Worldview Analysis Scale among “African, African-American, European, and European-American” respondents found clear worldview distinctions. “[A]lthough African Americans and European Americans live and interact together in the United States, they demonstrate significantly different

worldviews that are linked to their cultural past with which they may have little to no direct contact” (Carroll, 2010, p. 126).

Okpalaoka (2008) notes that prior to the 1970s no identity models existed that were specific to African Americans or ethnic minorities. Cross’ (1971) theory of Black Racial Identity Development was pivotal in filling a gap in research about African American racial identity attitudes. His theory examined nigrescence, the process of how an individual becomes black. As Akbar (1989) notes, Cross’ model initially conceptualized black identity formation as part of a reactive phenomenon occurring during the 1960s, a period in which many blacks began to challenge and change their self-images, attitudes, perceptions, and social behaviors. Also called a nigrescence theory and originally conceived as a stage theory, it “described the movement of African-American identity attitudes from perspectives placing low salience on race, through an encounter experience or series of experiences, to internalized attitudes where the salience of race in American culture is recognized” (Worrell, Vandiver, Cross, & Fhagen-Smith, 2004, p. 489). Cross’ nigrescence theory is one of the most important and critiqued theories in the area of African/Black psychology. It has generated discussion among social scientists about the psychological functioning of black people in America. The stages of Cross’s (1971) theory are: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. During the pre-encounter stage, individuals minimize their black identity and instead attempt to assimilate into what could be considered white American society. The encounter stage brings about exploration. Cross (1971) originally envisioned an encounter in this stage as a traumatic, racially prejudiced event that shakes up an individual’s psyche and challenges their original views towards race. In the immersion-emersion stage, a major shift occurs in an individual’s attitudes and behavior. Here, blackness is glorified and white, mainstream values are challenged.

In the internalization stage, specific actions push the individual towards a commitment to a black identity. In this stage, a secure black identity forms. In the fifth stage, the internalization-commitment stage, confidence and commitment to a black identity inspires the individual to elevate the status of blacks and work towards eradicating racism in society. Nigrescence theory has come under scrutiny by scholars who propose that black identity is a core component to personality, as opposed to a reactive phenomenon. Baldwin (1984), for instance, views racial identity development as a stable personality trait and Parham (1981) asserts that black/African self-identity is independent of socially oppressive phenomena, an assertion supported by Akbar (1989) as well. A fundamental divergence with the analysis of Cross' (1971) is the rejection of nigrescence as a process that occurs as a result of certain environmental interactions, namely that black self-identity arises in reaction to "oppressive conditions of Euro-American racism" (Akbar, 1989, p. 258). Baldwin (1981, 1984), and Nobles (1976) argue instead that black/African identity is a biogenetically determined core of the black self (Akbar, 1989). Akar's (1989) perspective on black/African identity leads us back to an African worldview. Akbar suggests that despite the legacy of slavery and the experience of African descended people (African-Americans), an African worldview remains a core of the black self. According to Nobles (1974), self-concept is theorized as the basic core of black personality and derived from an African worldview.



## Health and Well-Being

Because of the predominance of Western cultural values in American society, African Americans often perceive themselves and others via a worldview that is not African-centered (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 1994). For African (black) people, an African-centered worldview has shown to have a positive impact on indentify development and an overall sense of well-being (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 1994). Using empowerment strategies that take into account the principles embodied in an African/African-centered worldview can help to mitigate such negative experiences as discrimination and racism.

Empowerment strategies may consist of efforts to focus on the principles that characterize an African/African-centered worldview. Such principles as interdependence and material and spiritual are important. In terms of healing, these principles serve as frameworks for understanding the interpretation of disease and disorder, for mending broken relationships, and helping one to navigate his or her place in the world. The historical experiences of African (black) people calls for an examination into the ways that cultural dislocation, acculturation (voluntary and involuntary) shape the identities of African people and how resistance and resilience continue to serve as coping mechanisms today. Waites (2009) states, "People of African descent have a legacy of intergenerational kinship, resilience, spirituality, and hope (Bagley & Carroll, 1998; Denby, 1996)" (p. 278). Born out of African traditions and adaptation, African American multi-generational families have persisted in spite of oppression (Waites, 2009). Robinson and Howard-Hamilton (1994) encourage African Americans to use an African-centered paradigm as a basis for forming healthy self images and for developing meaningful relationships with others. The paradigm that they suggest follows seven principles: a) unity, b) self-determination, c) collective work and responsibility, d) cooperative economics, e) purpose,

f) creativity and g) faith. An African-centered paradigm supports and nurtures family and cultural strengths, fosters intergenerational kinship and interdependence, and encourages collaboration and support across generations (Waites, 2009).

### *Optimal theory*

Optimal theory proposes that “everything, including humans is spirit, that incorporeal, animating principle and energy that reflects the essence and sustenance of all that is” (Myers & Speight, 2010, p. 74). Optimal theory “emphasizes the interdependence and interrelatedness of spiritual, mental, physical, social and environmental well being” (Myers & Speight, 2010, p. 76).

Designed to help monitor and transform consciousness through an optimization and psychotherapeutic process, optimal theory embraces traditional African wisdom and thought (Myers & Speight, 2010). Optimal theory looks at an optimal mindset and a sub-optimal mindset (Myers & Speight, 2010). An optimal mindset moves people to operate from a place of security in self, well-being compassion, and peace, whereas, a sub-optimal mindset characterizes a fragmented sense of self, one that is rife with a feelings of alienation, insecurity, greed, and fear (Myers & Speight, 2010). A goal of Optimal psychology is to assist African people in attaining and retaining an optimal mindset in spite of multiple obstacles. Optimal psychology posits that the “holistic and integrative mindset that characterized African metaphysical traditions contributed to a transcendent consciousness” that has allowed black/African people to emerge resilient despite historical persecution and inequality (Myers & Speight, 2010, p. 70). More recently, optimal theory seems to have taken on a more inclusive approach, one not solely focused on African (black) people, but rather on humanity as a whole (Myers & Speight, 2010).

### *Ubuntu therapy: An African holistic form of therapy*

Is there a philosophy that addresses the African-centered principles that can be incorporated into the therapeutic process when working with African (black) clients? Van Dyk and Nefale (2005) suggest ubuntu therapy as an alternative healing model. Ubuntu, an Nguni word meaning personhood or humanness, speaks to an inner state of complete humanization (Van Dyk & Negale, 2005). Umuntu is “regarded as the centerpiece of existence and the primary concern of the Creator (Tixo) in all creations” (Van Dyk & Negale, 2005 p. 54). “Among the people of Africa, ubuntu is considered to be the most important quality of umuntu, being the quintessence of authentic human existence” (Van Dyk & Negale, 2005, p. 54). Ubuntu focuses on the principles of interdependence and collectiveness and speaks to the commonalities in African traditions. As Van Dyk and Negale (2005) note, ubuntu is multidimensional and speaks to the core values of African ontologies. The dimensions of ubuntu include God or the Creator as the head who breathes life into individuals giving them their humanity. The ancestors exist in this dimension as well and play a pivotal role in the well-being of the individual and of the family. In the second dimension, ubuntu (personhood or humanity) is the human essence itself that gives way to humanized beings. Absence of ubuntu leads to intrapsychic tension, confusion, and the disintegration of human relationships (Van Dyk & Negale, 2005). In the third dimension, the ideal person has the virtues of sharing and compassion. “Ubuntu, as philosophical concept, is a powerful source of healing for the people of Africa, who are torn among their God and ancestors, themselves (intrapsychic), their community (interpersonal), and their values and philosophy (psychotherapy or traditional healing)” (Van Dyk & Negale, 2005 p. 55).

“Why is ubuntu therapy appropriate for African (black) people? From Dakar in Senegal to Addis-Ababa in Ethiopia and from Cairo in Egypt to Pretoria in South Africa, one finds evidence of ubuntu” (Van Dyk & Negale, 2005, p. 57). Ubuntu therapy calls for an integrated

approach to psychotherapy, and acknowledges the disparities between non-Western and Western patients for whom these approaches were developed (Van Dyk & Negale, 2005). The ubuntu approach focuses on the client's worldview, so as to incorporate modes of healing. In dealing with African/African-American patients, it is important to acknowledge the role of families, especially those on a multi-generational level. An African-centered paradigm supports and nurtures family and cultural strengths, fosters intergenerational kinship and interdependence, and encourages collaboration and support across generations (Waite, 2009). In line with ubuntu philosophy, in ubuntu therapy, the person, family, group, or community is seen in relation to God and the ancestors (psychotheological level). In the ubuntu therapeutic process the therapist must determine how this relationship is viewed by the client. Is this relationship characterized by happiness, guilt, belief or disbelief? The therapist is to note such feelings and perceptions, as this will determine how he or she will navigate further into the therapeutic process. In the second dimension, the interrelationship of the person, family, group or community is explored. This dimension exists on an intrapsychic level. Is this intrareationship characterized by low self-image, anxiety, anger, and destructive feelings? The therapist is to also note in this dimension such feelings and perceptions. In African cultures there is significant emphasis on the community and collective consciousness. Threats to the individual's well-being and ability to realize their full potential of ubuntu as human beings affects the community. Through a healing process, African/African Americans can work to realize the principles of ubuntu. This collective consciousness should be seen as empowering and not inferior in relation to Western or European culture (Van Dyk & Negale, 2005). In the third dimension the interpersonal relationship of the person, family, group or community. This interpersonal level explores rejection, resistance to change, interdependence, rigid borders around the family or group system, and power struggle.

In ubuntu therapy, the therapist must understand what conflicts exist on a psychotheological, intrapsychic, and interpersonal level. Thus, it is important to listen closely to the client's perspective. According to M. M. Gergen and K. K. Gergen (2006), "All forms of therapy are lodged within some form of narrative" (p. 113). Exploring the client's narrative can help both the client and therapist to understand intra and interrelationships and enhance well-being. Since an African-centered worldview places such value on communalism, it is ideal that the therapy involves the individual and his or her family if possible. The therapist aims to help restore balance within the family system and assist the well-being of the individual. An advantage of ubuntu therapy is that it was developed for the "client who is struggling with conflict that arises because of the evolving nature of culture and the tension between purely African, traditional culture and a hybrid, Western, modernized culture" (Van Dyk & Negale, 2005, p. 59). This model acknowledges the complexities with respect to identity among Africans or African Americans and the impact of acculturation and assimilation. Ubuntu therapy is different from other approaches when working with African or African American clients. Other approaches may focus on individual conflict and well-being, without exploring the deeper roots of conflict and providing therapy that is culturally rooted. A disadvantage is that ubuntu therapy may not be seen as a viable model for healing among some who are inclined towards a Western approach. This may stem from ignorance or adherence to the Western approach because it is seen as mainstream. However, ubuntu still appears to be an important and viable alternative that seeks to understand and assist the lives of Africans or African Americans.

This discussion has generated alternative ways for exploring the thought processes and behaviors of African (black) people by exploring their varied experiences as well as their similar experiences. Culturally competent modes of research, assessment, diagnosis and treatment when

working with black clients take into consideration an African-centered/African worldview will require that those in the discipline of psychology understand the unique experiences of African/African-American patients and the roles that race, ethnicity, and culture play in the daily lives of this population. Ubuntu therapy, an African holistic therapy, takes some of the main principles of an African worldview and employs them in therapeutic practice. Ubuntu therapy can serve to help African/African-American patients grapple with identity, health and well-being in an ever-changing world, while still being grounded in the ancient African principles that have sustained African (black) people for thousands of years. Despite such traumatic experiences as the Maafa, or transatlantic slavery and Jim Crow, the principles of interdependence, spirituality, and interconnectedness still remain as important resilience mechanisms for African/African-American individuals and families. Further research into the salience of an African-centered worldview on blacks in the United States, and especially those on the continent in light of increasing immigration to the United States as well as the promotion of Western values in African countries, would provide an interesting discourse and contribute to literature on racial, ethnic, and cultural identity (Akbar, Chambers, & Johnson, 2001).

## References

- Akbar, M., Chambers, J. W., & Johnson, V. L. S. (2001). Racial identity, Africentric values, and self-esteem in Jamaican children. *Journal of Black Psychology, 27*, 341-358.
- Akbar, N. (1989). Nigrescence and Identity: Some limitations. *The Counseling Psychologist, 17*, 258-26.
- Ani, M. (1994). *Yurugu: An Afrikan-Centered critique of European cultural thought and behavior*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Baldwin, J. A. (1984). African self-consciousness and the mental health of African-Americans. *The Journal of Black Studies, 15*(2), 177-194
- Baldwin, J. A. (1981). Notes on an Africentric theory of black personality. *The Journal of Black Studies, 5*, 172-179.
- Berg, A. (2003). Ancestor Reverence and Mental Health in South Africa. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 40*, 194-207.
- Carroll, K. K. (2010). A genealogical analysis of the worldview framework in African-centered Psychology. *The Journal of Pan African Studies, 3*(8), 109-134.
- Cross, W. E., Jr. (1995). The psychology of nigrescence: Revising the cross model. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (pp. 93-122). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cross, W. E., Jr. (1991). *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Cross, W. E., Jr. (1971). Negro to Black conversion experience. *Black World, 20*, 13-27.
- Dana, R. H. (2002). *Mental health services for African Americans: A cultural/racial perspective*. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 8*, 3-18.

- Ephirim-Donkor, A. (1997). *African spirituality on becoming ancestors*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Fairley, N. J. (2003). Dreaming ancestors in Eastern Carolina. *Journal of Black Studies*, 33(5), 545-561.
- Gergen, M. M., & Gergen, K. J. (2006). Narratives in action. *Narrative Inquiry*, 16, 112-121.
- Graham, M. J. (1999). The African-Centered worldview: Toward a paradigm for social work. *Journal of Black Studies*, 30, 103-122.
- Hall, G. S. (1900). *The pedagogical seminary, Vol. 7*. Worcester, MA: Clark University Press.
- Henry, S. E. (1999). Ethnic identity, nationalism, and international stratification: The case of the African American, *Journal of Black Studies*, 29(3), 438-454.
- Holloway, J. E. (1990). *Africanisms in American culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Jackson, J. P., & Weidman, N. M. (2005). *Race, racism, and science: social impact and interaction*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Kelsey, R. C., & Ransom, R. M. (1996). "A Comparison of African and European Groups Utilizing a World-View Opinionnaire" in *Handbook of Tests and Measurements for Black Populations*, ed. Reginald Jones (Hampton: Cobb & Henry Publishers), 37-46.
- Liebrucks, A. (2001). The concept of social construction. *Theory Psychology*, 11(3), 363-391.
- Mbiti, J. (1970). *African religions and philosophies*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday.
- McCombs, H. G. (1996). "The Individual/Collective World-View Scale: A preliminary report" in *Handbook of tests and measurements for black populations*, ed. Reginald Jones (Hampton: Cobb & Henry Publishers), 47-56.



- Myers, L. J., & Speight, S. L. (2010). Reframing mental health and psychological well-being among persons of African descent: Africana/Black Psychology meeting the challenges of fractured social and cultural realities. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 3(8), 66-82.
- Nobles, W. W. (1998). To be African or not to be: The question of identity or authenticity - some preliminary thoughts. In R. L. Jones (Ed.) *African American identity development*. Hampton, VA: Cobb & Henry Publishers.
- Nobles, W. W. (1974). Africity: Its role in Black families. *The Black Scholar*, 5(9), 10-17.
- Obasi, E., Flores, L. Y., & Myers, L. J. (2009). "Construction and Initial Validation of the Worldview Analysis Scale (WAS)," *Journal of Black Studies* 39(6), 937-961.
- Okpalaoka, C. L. (2008). *You don't look like one, so how are you African?: How West African immigrant girls in the U.S. learn to (re)negotiate ethnic identities in home and school contexts*.
- Parham, T. A., & Parham, T. M. J. (2002). *Counseling persons of African descent: Raising the bar of practitioner competence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Richards, G. (2001). *Race, racism, and psychology: towards a reflexive history*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Robinson, L. (1995). *Psychology for social workers: Black perspectives*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Robinson, T. L., Howard-Hamilton, M. (1994). An Afrocentric paradigm: Foundation for a healthy self-image and healthy interpersonal. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 16(3), 327-339.
- Sanders, E. R. (1969). The Hamitic hypothesis: Its origin and function in time perspective. *Journal of African History*, x(4), 521-532.

Thompson, R. F. (1984) *Flash of the spirit*. New York, NY: Vintage Books:

Van Dyk, G. A. J., & Nefale, M. C. (2005). The Split-ego experience of Africans: *Ubuntu*

Therapy as a healing alternative. *Journal of Psychology Integration*, 15, 48-66.

Waites, C. (2009). Building on strengths: Intergenerational practice with African American families. *Social Work*, 54(3), 278-87.

Washington, K. (2010). Zulu Traditional Healing, Afrikan Worldview and the Practice of Ubuntu: Deep Thought for Afrikan/Black Psychology, *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 3(8), 24-39.

Worrell, F. C., Vandiver, B. J., Cross, W. E., Jr., & Fhagen-Smith, P. E. (2004). Reliability and structural validity of Cross Racial Identity Scale scores in a sample of African American adults. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 30(4), 489-505.