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## Article 76

# **A Feminist Counselor Looks at African Daughters in the New World: Some Differences for Mental Health Professionals to Consider**

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Many have lamented the failure of even feminist formulations to reflect the full spectrum of diversity among western women (Brown, 1995; Greene, 1996, 1997; Yancy, 2000). Comas-Diaz (1992) points out that successful mental health services of the future will have to adapt themselves to the use of integrative and comprehensive frameworks that encompass the realities of the everyday lives of African American women and other U.S. minorities.

Unfortunately, American counseling has incorporated gender, class, heterosexist and cultural biases (Espin, 1995; Greene, 1996; Williams, 1995). The pervasiveness of mental health professionals' White privilege (Wildman, 1995) and their roles in racial oppression have not been sufficiently considered.. It may be difficult for those who grew up during the last 40 years to realize that other than occasional characterizations as groveling, shuffling, or tap dancing buffoons and servants, African Americans did not exist in the media, or to many people, as real human beings prior to the 1960's. Similarly, any relationship between a White and Black woman was usually one of employer to maid or servant. Such a political environment may be well ingrained for older American women, affecting their interracial relationships. Many older African American women became accustomed to "acting" in deferential and submissive ways, which belied their resentment of, and contempt for White "ladies." Many had learned to "smile in dey faces" only to complain about them when they reached the safety of their African American families and friends (Terhune, 2008). These feelings and behaviors often carried over from the workplace to other settings and relationships. Consequently, there is often a pervasive distrust and dislike of White women by older African American women.

Some African American social scientists are exploring the differences between Black and White women. Indeed, hooks (1982) reports that "in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>

century America few if any similarities could be found between the life experiences” (p. 122) of African American and European American women. Wright (1991) noted that “although they were both subjected to sexist victimization, as victims of racism, black women were subjected to oppression no white woman was forced to endure” (p. 122). In fact, “white racial imperialism granted all white women, however victimized by sexist oppression they might be, the right to assume the role of oppressor in relationship to black women and black men” (Wright, 1991, p. 123). It is important to look beyond the surface presentation, or the data, particularly in the histories of older African American women, to often find anger and rage.

Along with the experience of anger and rage, a widespread feeling of sadness, a kind of “cultural depression,” has been part of the black individual’s response to historical and current conditions in America (Bland & Kraft, 1998; Byington, Fischer, Walker, & Freedman, 1997). Black rage and “cultural depression” may be predispositions of African American women. Understanding this depression within the context of their history and politics, however, is crucial to effective work with African American women.

In raising the woman’s consciousness about the impact of culture on her development, for example, both the culture and its impact will differ between the races. The cultures’ view of what is “pretty,” “sexy,” “masculine,” or “independent” may touch an African American woman’s life very differently than it touches the lives of White women. African American women have historically been defined as “not” pretty, perhaps “too” sexy, “too” independent, and “castrating matriarchs” taking over her man’s role when she was forced to support her family (Greene, 1996, 1997). These and other differences change the cultural context of women in African America.

Criticizing feminist theory for not being grounded in history and politics, hooks (1984) referred to Black women as living on the margin, “part of the whole” but “outside of the main body.” Because older Black women understand the margin and the center, it is this outsider/insider view that Black women can bring to other feminists for “the making of feminist theory” (p.15). Hooks (1982, 1984) speaks to the racism in feminist theory and asserts that people learn oppression from their awareness of their own lived experiences, or the contextualized meaning of their lives. Over two decades ago, hooks (1984) argued that it was the “individual opportunism in feminist theory that has undermined appeals for collective struggle” (p.23). Since then, feminist theory has been moving towards beginning to incorporate the voices of all women. The sentiments that occasioned Audre Lorde (1984) to once ask, “What woman is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heel print upon another woman’s face?” (p. 23) has begun to change. However, European American feminists may have been trained in an environment that is just beginning to adequately consider and understand the important differences that can differentially influence significant aspects of the lives of Black women. This article is an attempt to contribute to the knowledge of feminist theory by encompassing, as Collins (1989) suggests, “...theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality by those who live it” (p. 22).

Not only are African American women different from European American women, but they are also different from each other (Trotman, 2000). Because of the diverse influences on them, African American women’s perceptions of self may depend on the degree to which they have experienced segregated schools, colleges, and

neighborhoods or whether they have had the opportunity to experience acceptance and rejection by both African and European Americans. All of the cultural and historical influences brought to bear on Black women, rural versus urban, northern versus southern, West Indian versus Caribbean, and African versus American, etc., cannot begin to be addressed in this chapter. Knowledge of these differences and how their profound effects distinguish the psychological lives of African American women is, however, crucial to the successful understanding of African American women. Bulhan (1985) examined the ethnocentric basis of the history of psychological assessment, theories, and research findings central to the teachings of counseling, and concurs that “mental health professionals who seek to work with blacks must learn their history, culture, communication patterns, hurts, strengths and aspirations as they experience and define them not as professionals assume them to be” (p. 176).

Feminist counselors realize that the self is explained/defined through both self-narratives that explain individual life experiences and narratives that others construct about the self. An attempt to distort the realities of the histories of older African American women is but one of the phenomena that may have a negative impact on American women. Feminist social scientists must therefore be aware of the woman’s historical circumstance. This may be difficult to accomplish for those trained and educated without accurate knowledge of all women’s backgrounds.

### **Political, Economic, and Historical Background**

As previously suggested, the presentation of historical and current data alone is inadequate to the task of representing the lives and backgrounds of women. The contexts of African American women’s lives have been neglected, ignored, or distorted for so long that it will take many Black voices speaking of their lives and history before we will have a true picture of the past and present. However, some history and data may be helpful.

As the largest group of color in the United States, the 32 million African Americans come from diverse cultures, including Africa, the Caribbean, central Europe, and South America (Stewart, 1996). The term *Black* is too narrow to describe adequately the “rich history of the peoples who came to the United States from the continent of Africa” (Locke, 1992, p. 15). The exalted West African empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai were in existence between A.D. 500 and 1600. Each was very wealthy, with an abundance of gold, thriving agriculture, and successful trading efforts (Christian, 1995). The year 1619 is designated as the date when the first African settlers reached North America; however, this small group of 20 were not the first Africans to arrive in North America: Estevanico was one of America’s Black Spanish explorers. A member of the expedition of Pa’nfilo de Narva’ez, in 1538, he explored the area that became Arizona and New Mexico (Christian, 1995).

Despite a backdrop of struggle and hardship in the lives of African Americans, strengths of persistence, forgiveness, and resilience are evident (Exum & Moore, 1993). According to Nobles (1972), African Americans’ sense of self and cultural traditions has been derived from several cultural and philosophical premises shared with West African tribes. Myers (1991) states that Afrocentricity refers to a worldview that believes “reality is both spiritual and material at once...with highest value on positive interpersonal relationships between men/women; self knowledge is assumed to be the basis of all

knowledge, and one knows through symbolic imagery and rhythm” (p. 19). Within Afrocentric thought, the self is extended in unity with others and emphasis is on the collective. An African proverb, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am,” summarizes the saliency of the collective. This is in stark contrast to the traditional American ideal of “rugged individualism.” Among some African Americans, *consubstantiation*, or the sense that everything within the universe is connected as a part of a whole, is a way of seeing the world (Parham, 1992). Myers (1991) expresses that, in the Afrocentric paradigm, spirit and matter are one; a representation of one spirit manifesting good. *Worldview* refers to the way people make meaning. African Americans tend to have a nonlinear, or present time, orientation with less emphasis on particulars, a spirit of coexistence, and harmony with nature (Locke, 1992; Sue & Sue, 1990).

In African traditions, relations with people tend to be collateral, as opposed to individualistic (Sue & Sue, 1990). Communication patterns are not limited to verbal dialogue, and these tend not to be strictly linear as in Western society (Exum & Moore, 1993). Body movement, postures, gestures, and facial expressions represent dominant patterns of communication within the African American community. Dialect is a cultural element that has survived (Locke, 1992). Adapted from Hilliard’s work, Exum and Moore (1993) summarized elements of African American worldview. These include emphasis on the whole, as opposed to the parts; preference for approximations over accuracy; focus on people rather than things; and acceptance and integration with the environment. In addition to these values is a respect for nature, emphasis on groupness, and an extended or present time orientation.

Data derived from comparing African American women to the White “norm” often show “deficits” of African Americans and African American culture. Rarely do data show the resilience of African American women in the face of seemingly insurmountable oppression. Historically, studies of race and mental health have failed to consider the role of Black coping capacity (Franklin & Jackson, 1990). For example, despite the fact that African American women are disproportionately exposed to social conditions considered to be antecedents of psychological disorder, data from epidemiological community surveys do not always show that they exhibit higher rates of psychological distress than Whites (Neighbors, 1985; Williams, 1995). “The African American family structure evolved from African family structure, in which their strength has been the flexibility and adaptability of their family organization” (Sudarkasa, 1993, p.81-89). Block (1981) suggests that “the black culture stresses early in life the ability to ‘do it.’ Emphasis is placed on the active—managing difficult situations without showing stress” (p. 179). Such legacies of Black history and African cultural derivatives may have afforded African-American women some degree of resilience that some European-American women may lack (Carey, 1979; Kupper-Smith, 1987; Mahmoud, 1998; Waites, 2009). Rosa Parks spoke of her inspiration and stressed the strength of African-American women when she admitted that she has “... problems just like everyone else. Whenever I do, I think about my grandmother and my mother. They were such strong women...” (Parks & Reed, 1994, p. 57).

## **African American Voices**

Self-definition is an important concept in feminist theory. Collins (1991) has noted that “Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group” (1991, p. xii). This often distorts the context for the oppressed group. The many complicated historic, economic, and political layers of being a Black female must be understood. The process for feminist theorists is one of “rearticulating a preexisting black women’s standpoint and re-centering the language of existing academic discourse to accommodate these knowledge claims” (Collins, 1989, p. 747). Collins further explains that “Black Feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality by those who live it” (p.22). We must reconstruct the missing voices of women of color, through their own stories and words. Older African American female clients may reflect on the ancestors in the lives of African-American women:

...the nameless West African woman who represented all of our foremothers. Despite grueling work and ignominious abuse, she became both a student and teacher. She recognized her powerment. First she taught herself a new language. It certainly was not the standard American English of the time but it was enough to communicate with her slavekeepers and fellow slaves. And in this her motives were quite simple: Language would at least give her the power to name things in her captors own words. This woman studied “white folks’ ways.” not in any grotesque desire to emulate them, but in order to recognize and anticipate the many faces of oppression, brutality, and cruelty. (Cole, 1993, p. 182)

There is the feeling of hope, despite adversity and pain, as one reflects on her elders:

I think I see her sitting bowed and black,  
Stricken and seared with slavery’s mortal scars,  
Reft of her children, lonely, anguished yet  
Still looking at the stars (Fauset, 1973, p. 18 )

The well-known words of an early feminist, Sojourner Truth, spoke of the strength exhibited by Black women throughout our history as she exhorted to the crowd and asked:

I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man-when I could get it-and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?”(Linthwaite, 1987. p.129)

There are obvious differences in the employment histories of African American and European American women. As Jones (1985), points out, between 1889 and 1910 “Black women 65 and older in the urban South, were gainfully employed at a rate five times higher than White women in the same age bracket” (p. 114). The political context underlying this statistic may demonstrate an important power differential with significant

ramifications for the therapeutic relationship. The reality that Black women were often working *for* White women as their maids and servants may influence the African American woman's perception of her relationship with any White woman.

Few groups of women have had a longer history of both paid and unpaid work in the United States than Black women; yet traditionally, Black women have been absent from most published histories of working women, and where they have appeared, they often have been the victims of sweeping generalizations and unfounded stereotypes. The omission has been attributed by some historians to the paucity of sources of Black working women and by others to the "uniqueness" of the work experience of Black women, which makes it difficult, if not impossible to offer more than a superficial treatment of Black women in histories of (White) women workers (Harley 1990). Consequently, it is difficult for those who did not experience the degradation of the African American woman's work history to fully realize what it was prior to 1960.

In previous generations, the slave woman learned that her ability to work was the same as her man's because she was forced to do so. She was not exempt from harsh forms of labor deemed inappropriate for White women (Greene, 1996, 1997). She developed the qualities of hard work, perseverance, self-reliance, tenacity, resistance, and sexual equality (hooks, 1982). Many of these qualities persist today. On the African-American women's view of working outside the home, Associate Brand Manager at Revlon Mary Harrison said:

Our mothers always assumed we would work outside the home. There was never a choice—work was a necessity, not a privilege. We would follow in the footsteps of our grandmothers and great-grandmothers, working our fingers to the bone because "money doesn't grow on trees!" "Girls," she would say to my sisters and me, "pray as though everything depended on God, but work as though everything depends on you." (cited in Nikuradse, 1996, p. 155)

Differences in the work histories of older Black and White women are important, relevant aspects of American history that affect the present. Until recently, European-American social scientists often failed to acknowledge experiences which differed from their own (hooks, 1982; Altman, 1995; Brown, 1995; Espin, 1995; Greene, 1995; Greene & Sanchez, 1997). However "human" and understandable such ethnocentrism may be, we cannot continue to ignore the salience of ethnicity as a dimension that transforms the experience of sexism.

Older African American women who lived during the first half of the twentieth century faced more blatant, less sophisticated racism than their present day sisters. Many older Americans grew up believing that the United States of America would always be segregated and that they would always be second-class citizens. For some older American women, Black women and White "ladies" have been separated by law and tradition. Memories of "colored" and "Whites only" water fountains and restrooms; not being served by, or just knowing not to go to restaurants, hotels, segregated movie theatres, and other establishments which did not admit African Americans; the night riders, cross burnings and lynchings; and not being able to live where they wanted are all parts of the older African American woman's psyche.

Many had to pass empty seats to carry heavy loads on their weary bodies to stand at the crowded back of the bus. Friends or relatives were shot for daring to register to

vote, or killed for looking at a White “lady.” Perpetrators were never apprehended; or were freed after a farce of a trial. Bottles, rocks, or spit were hurled at children for wanting to go to a good school. Buses were bombed and burned because the riders wanted freedom. Press and media dehumanized Negroes, said it “didn’t happen,” “wasn’t so bad,” or “you deserved it.” Yet African Americans knew of the horrors from friends and family. Many wondered how White folks could leave church on Sunday morning, having heard a sermon on the sanctity of human life, and head out to lynch a Negro. Finally, they (we) and their children protested: We walked and sat-in; were arrested and jailed; and then there were the fire hoses, the dogs, more lynchings—memories of men hanging from trees, torn, bloodied pants where their genitals once were. The memories are painful. The shame was destructive, and it was pervasive in the lives of African American women who grew up before the mid-1960’s. Many of the childhood verses recited by older African American women that reflect the ethos of the time, “If you’ Black, get back; ... brown stick around; ... White you’ alright,” or “...eeny, meeny, miny moe, catch a nigger by his toe, if he hollers, let him go, eeny meeny miny moe,” clearly did not inspire self-respect. The words “black,” “African,” or “kinky hair,” and any terms that connoted or denoted African heritage, were shameful and considered insults. Black children reviled their own African features.

White American racism developed out of the need to rationalize enslavement. The etiology of American racism stems, in part, from an attempt by enslavers to decrease their cognitive dissonance brought on by the contradiction between the European, democratic ideals on which this country was founded, and the reality of American enslavement; the shame and self-hatred that racism engendered in generations of African Americans has produced pain and psychic wounds, difficult for Whites to fully comprehend (Beal, 2008).

Many may not realize that the concept of race was constructed to coincide with the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Snowden (1970 1991) reports that neither the ancient Greeks nor the early Christians ever espoused anything resembling racial superiority. In fact, they espoused a positive view of Africans. For Homer, Blacks were blameless of the gods; Diodorous mentioned their piety; Seneca noted their courage and love; Lucian believed they were, astrologically, the wisest of men; Herodotus found Ethiopians to be the most handsome of men; Martial sought the affections of Black women (Snowden, 1970 1991). The concept of race based on physical characteristics was non-existent prior to the advent of the African slave trade, and “... race did not become a biological category, adorned with the respectability of science, until the nineteenth century” (D’Souza, 1995, p.48). A nation built on the principles of liberty and equality is hard pressed to justify the enslavement of human beings. A convenient means of reducing the discomfort of the cognitive dissonance engendered by this set of circumstances was to view Americans of African descent as therefore not *really* human beings. Many older African American women grew up with the message that they were less than human. The pervasiveness of this sentiment permeated even the much-loved and widely read children’s classics such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

Good gracious! Anybody hurt?  
No'm. Killed a nigger.  
Well, it's lucky because sometimes people do get hurt.  
(Twain, 1981, p. 213)

The effects of racism were devastating. African American women have acquired and continue to need strength to fight for and protect their children, argued Johnetta B. Cole as she wrote that:

...This experience is inevitable. Even if the child attends an elite preparatory school or lives in a "liberal" neighborhood, that child is going to be hurt by racism. When a child asks, "Mama what's a nigger?" or says, "Mama, Joanie said her parents told her not to play with me," the pain and frustration a mother experiences is almost indescribable. What should she tell her child who is black? An enormous tribute is owed African American parents, particularly mothers, who for years have had the responsibility of providing balm for the wounds racism inflicted upon their children and the task of counseling them on how to weave their ways through and around its horrors. (Cole, 1993, p. 72-73)

Author Annette Jones White expressed evidence of African-American women's concern as she acknowledged that her "...mother's careful rearing of me made me see how wrong, unfair, and humiliating it was to have to live that your children might come to harm for just being themselves" (White, 1991, p. 188).

For African Americans, the effects of slavery, oppression, and discrimination may have cumulative effects over time. Some of the legacies of slavery, such as beatings and whippings as methods of discipline have affected the child-rearing practices of many African American women. On the positive side, Jaynes and Williams (1989) note that "The long history of discrimination and segregation produced among blacks a heightened sense of group consciousness and a stronger orientation toward collective values and behavior than exists generally among Americans" (p.13), and Pack-Brown, Whittington-Clark, and Parker (1998) speak of the African community's "respect for the elders" (p. 13). Clearly, African Americans have differences for mental health professionals to consider.

### **Counseling Implications**

Given the many differences among women, beyond those which are obvious, counselor educators may want to make sure that their multicultural counseling courses, in particular, and the counseling curricula, in general, reflect those differences which may have differential salience for the mental health of some black women. Courses which are too "color-blind" may leave students under-educated about areas to address for their African American clients. Feminist therapists' competency standards require in-depth knowledge of differences among women. Enns (2004) stated that:

In order to develop a fully integrated feminist counseling approach, it is important for the therapist to have working knowledge of a variety of academic and applied fields of study. These disciplines include but are not limited to the psychology of women and gender; women's, gender and

sexuality studies; ethnic, multicultural and global development studies; counseling and psychotherapy theories; sociological perspectives on gender, race, and class; and political science and social change strategies. (p. 9)

Other volumes (Trotman, 1977, 1978, 1984, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2005, 2006, 2009) have explored various approaches and ramifications of counseling and psychotherapy with African American women. The salience of the race of the therapist, the importance of cultural and social class of the therapist, the effect of therapist attitudes, same sex versus opposite sex of therapist, and the importance of role models have been identified as significant in the counseling and psychotherapy process of black female clients. Counselors must understand the antecedents and consequences in order to be able to empathize with her plight and not add to her burdens by questioning her perceptions.

Counselors may need to be creative in addressing the black woman's different needs. A black women's group, for example, can provide a safe setting in which the black woman can begin to re-experience some of the painful and damaging incidents of childhood. Some of the results of racism involve only other black people and may therefore be inappropriate for discussion outside "the family" of blacks. Racism as a shared experience of black women can be assumed, and there appears to be little need to discuss it in a black women's group. The black woman can explore her options, e.g., acquiescence versus assertiveness, as a reaction to racial oppression. The roles that the African American woman play can be enhanced, developed, and expanded through the role modeling of the group therapist and the other group members. As black women communicate honesty, sincerity, and love to each other, they also subtly and simultaneously identify the details and mechanisms of their successes, "thereby demystifying success and making it accessible to the [other] black female group members" (Trotman, 1984, p. 105).

Additional research, particularly qualitative research, would be useful to further validate and explore the phenomena presented in this article.

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