African americans and family therapy

[Family](#)

The African American family is far more complex than has been recognized. The complexities of the African American family, according to Billingsley (1992), is an intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means, including blood, marriage, formal adoption, informal adoption or by appropriation; sustained by a history of common residence in America; and deeply embedded in a network of social structures both internal or external to itself (Rasheed, 2003 p. 212).

Given the aforementioned cultural and ecological considerations, African Americans reliance on individuals within their natural support systems can probably better mitigate feelings of guilt, defeat, humiliation, and powerlessness than the use of mental health services. Many African Americans view therapy as being for crazy people.

Some assume that clinicians will operate in the same way as do professionals in other agencies, who have been intrusive in telling families what they can or cannot do an own. Others may view serious emotional difficulties as the wages of sin; the person who manifests psychiatric symptoms may be seen as mean or possessed by the devil.

For still others, turning to family therapy is perceived as turning to the system that has negatively influenced African American well-being (McGoldrick, Giordano and Preto, 2005 p. 96).

The holistic perspective that emphasized the influence of history, cultural, social, economic, and political forces in shaping contemporary African American family life must be considered in the therapeutic course. The confluence of these multiple forces not only contributes to the complexity of

the African American family but also to its diversity, as African American family is in fact a social reality with interplay of factors.

Discussion

African American Family: The Overview

It is essential to uncover first the characteristics of an African American family in order to apply the conditions of family therapy and the theoretical frameworks enveloping such conditions. As the holistic-oriented family theorists have focused on the strengths of African American families, there are those theorists who are giving increased attention to an African-centered or Africentric perspective for understanding African American families.

The Africentric perspective seeks to identify the residual values from Africa as a source of strength and resilience for the African American family in the face of racism and oppression (Rasheed, 2003 p. 217; Chibuco, Leite and Weis, 2005 p. 295).

As to begin examining the African American family from the perspective of resilience and strength, strong kinship bonds, strong education and work achievement orientations, flexibility in family roles, commitment to religious values and church participation, a humanistic orientation, and endurance in a hostile environment, are the perspectives of cultural character in an African American familial orientation (Rasheed, 2003 p. 221).

Strong kinship bonds and the extended family are heavily influenced by a traditional African cultural orientation that values collectively above individualism. It is generally acknowledged that the African American kinship

network is more cohesive and extensive than kinship relationships among the white population (Rasheed, 2003 p. 222).

Strong kinship bonds can provide valuable functions and needed services to African American families. In an earlier work on African American extended families, the process of problem occurrence within an individual's life may reverberate within the extended kinship network. Many extended family members became a part of an individual African American family through informal adoption or informal foster parenting (Rasheed, 2003 p. 222-223).

In terms of education and work achievement orientations, parents in these families have abundant experience with the harsh social realities of racism and oppression; yet, many African American parents still believe that the essential path to success in life is through higher education, work security, and social mobility.

Many parents who are without a college education strongly desire a college education for their children, as these parents expect their children to surpass them (Chibuco, Leite and Weis, 2005 p. 295. The extend family network may be involved in collective support to an individual family member to help him or her achieve a higher education, make a transition into a specific kind of work, or establish independent residence (Rasheed, 2003 p. 223).

Family roles also play essential parts in African American family, and has been described as egalitarian while characterized by complementary and flexible family roles. The widely accepted standard of paternalistic performance of the instrumental functions and the maternal expressive

functions does not necessarily apply to a large number of African American families.

Using data gleaned from the National Survey for Black Americans (NSBA) on household composition and family structure, it has been concluded that there is strong support among African American men for an egalitarian division of labor, regardless of their educational or socioeconomic status.

However, this has been deemed contradictory for college-educated African American women, since this latter group has been noted to support the flexibility and interchangeability of family roles and tasks (Rasheed, 2003 p. 224). On the other hand, the fluid interchange of roles within the African American nuclear family is assumed to have emerged out of the economic imperatives of African American life.

Gender role flexibility may present contradictory messages to young African American men in terms of encouraging them to embrace an androgynous gender role within the African American family although they are still expected to perform according to the white male gender role paradigm in non-family contexts (Rasheed, 2003 p. 224).

Family Therapy: Application to African American Families

The field of family therapy has grown considerably in the last 30, and application of family therapy concepts to African American families have demonstrated importance of understanding and respecting the cultural differences when engaging families in therapy (Diaz and Greene, 1994 p. 239).

Family is the principal source of support; hence, family therapy lends itself in a very positive way to the treatment of African American families (Collins, 2006 p. 124). In the major schools of family therapy, difficulties presented by individuals had been explained as manifestations of certain dysfunctional constellations characterizing their families.

Cultural relatively had been consistently ignored in this explanatory format. In each of the family therapy schools, methods of intervention have been directly or indirectly derived from this form of explanation.

Structural Family Therapy Model: Of the family therapy models that have emerged in recent years, perhaps the most useful in working with African American is the structural family therapy model.

The structural approach assumes families and family members are subject to inner pressures coming from developmental changes in its own members and subsystems, and to outer pressures coming from demands to accommodate to the significant social institutions that have an impact on family members (Chibuco, Leite and Weis, 2005 p. 295).

This model of treatment, originally designed for work with inner-city African American families is problem-focused and prescribes a variety of active role for the therapist, who produces change in the family by exploring and reforming structural patterns.

African American families redefine their roles, especially the women, and shift responsibilities in relationship patterns with men, children, or other members (Diaz and Greene, 1994 p. 239). Inherent in this process of change and continuity are the stresses of accommodating to new situations. The

strength of the family system depends on the abilities of family members to mobilize alternative transactional patients when internal or external conditions of the family demand restructuring (Chibuco, Leite and Weis, 2005 p. 295; Diaz and Greene, 1994 p. 239).

A family is said to adapt to stress in a way that maintains family continuity while making restructuring possible. If family members respond to stress with rigidity, unhelpful transactions may ensue (Chibuco, Leite and Weis, 2005 p. 295).