

Reframing Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being Among Persons of African Descent: Africana/Black Psychology Meeting the Challenges of Fractured Social and Cultural Realities

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Abstract: This paper will focus on innovations in psychological knowledge production over the past fifty years beyond a mono-culturally hegemonic psychology to one congruent with the social and cultural realities of persons of African descent. As Africana psychologist and educator, Asa Hilliard (1997), so aptly noted, there is something wrong with a psychology and psychological analysis that leaves African descent people strangers to themselves, aliens to their culture, oblivious to their condition, and less than human to their oppressor (p.xiii). However, this is exactly the psychology that people acknowledging African descent have inherited over the past four centuries. Progressive psychologists in the West have long criticized mainstream psychology for its complicity in the perpetuation of racism and have worked toward improved psychological understandings from a more culturally congruent framework. This paper will elucidate and critique the current state of African Centered psychology. An ethical imperative underlying the theory and practice of Africana/Black Psychology will be postulated, as well as, a vision for effectively meeting the challenges facing persons of African descent as they attempt to develop and maintain psychological well-being in the face of oppressive realities.

The Current State of Psychological Knowledge Production

As Africana psychologist and educator, Asa Hilliard, so aptly noted, there is something wrong with a psychology and psychological analysis that leaves African descent people strangers to themselves, aliens to their culture, oblivious to their condition, and less than human to their oppressor (Hilliard, 1997). However, this is exactly the psychology that people acknowledging African descent people have inherited and the psychological analysis that has been provided over the past four centuries in the West. Over the past forty years African centered psychological knowledge has been produced which places people acknowledging African descent and their cultural worldviews and teachings at the center of human process as agents with sacred authority. Human beings and their socio-cultural bearings are inseparable and this remains true for those professionals engaged in psychological knowledge production focused on the human psyche and its development. African centered psychologists have been forthright and deliberate in identifying the cultural underpinnings of their research. Such open acknowledgement, though uncharacteristic of mainstream western psychology, increases the capacity for objectivity and the opportunity for deeper insight into the subject examined. On the other hand, avoidance of such acknowledgement on the part of mainstream psychology has not only lead to complicity, but has also contributed directly to the perpetuation of social injustice, particularly when it comes to people of African descent.

Africana psychology has examined the influences of cultural and intellectual imperialism within the field of psychology and on the production of psychological knowledge. The cultural worldview currently prevailing has influenced the shift from psychology as a study of the soul to a psychology in service to particular dominant groups in societies. Psychology is problematized as a discipline whose knowledge production appears to narrowly serve the interest of the dominant group rather than the collective good within our society.

For a clear example of this alignment with the dominant group, one can look at the instance of the mainstream psychology of South African psychology which has also been criticized for being complicit in the apartheid regime, contributing to and reinforcing its ideology of white supremacy. From the early 1980s on, debates about the relevance of psychology in South African society have abounded. Given its alignment with the oppressive apartheid regime, South Africa's mainstream psychology cannot effectively respond to the socio-political challenges and mental health concerns facing this post-apartheid state. Mainstream western psychology may prove helpful for examining some of the distress created by the social context, but its incapacity to meet the mental health needs of people acknowledging African descent cannot be denied nor ignored. Africana psychology can provide improved psychological understandings from a perspective that is comprehensive enough to provide accurate insight making important contributions toward filling a major gap and ameliorating the absence of a relevant psychology.

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 practiced and sanctioned by the prevailing "moral" codes of conduct and legal system of persons of European descent in the United States. 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. These African people and their progeny are the collective from which the Black community emerges connected to oppressed and colonized people all over the world.

The multi-level and multi-generational psychological trauma of this unique experience has had an impact, not only on those acknowledging African descent in America, but all of humanity. Thus, to understand mental health within the context of society, concepts such as cultural dislocation, assimilation, and relocation as they influence the nature and functioning of the psyche of oppressed people must be examined. In addition, it is required we pay particularly close attention to the factors fostering survival, resistance, resilience, and triumph in the face of the worst forms of this extended oppression. 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. By exploring and analyzing the interdependence of the various institutions within the society (e.g., educational, legal, religious, and political), we can see how the status quo is maintained, social realities are fostered, and the development of potential for human growth is negatively influenced.

Many Americans of African descent are only two to six generations removed from the longest, most dehumanizing system of enslavement ever practiced in the history of humankind. To suggest that it all be dismissed or forgotten in a new mythical post-racial America (without the proper attention to its seriousness) is a return to the old premise that African descent people are less than human. Questions regarding how to discern and understand the heights of human functioning in the midst of a socio-cultural milieu that supports, -deliberately or by default-the imbalance of nature, the exploitation and oppression of the most vulnerable in society, and a “might makes right” ethical standard when it comes to human relations must be the concern of Africana psychology.

What has the development of the field of Africana psychology taught us about hidden (and obvious) barriers to the mental health of and social justice for African descent people that are both cultural and structural? Seldom discussed, but also having a potential deep psychological impact is the historical reality of having been sold out by warring Africans and bought by Europeans resulting in the death and enslavement of millions of Africans. The culture bound aspects of psychological knowledge serve -in both macro and micro levels- to unfairly advantage some individuals and groups and disadvantage others. Found central in this analysis is the role of cultural worldview as it enfolds and informs the construction of social reality. Cultural worldview, i.e., the designs for living and patterns of interpreting reality, is shaped by the conceptual system adopted to inform perceptions, thoughts, feeling, behavior, and experience, influences the development and production of psychological knowledge. Subsequently within the current cultural world view at least two key questions arise for African descent people: (1) what does it mean to be human, and (2) what is mental health within a toxic social context? Only an African centered psychology can effectively and accurately address these fundamental questions for those acknowledging African descent.

African psychology in contemporary times benefits from an understanding of the cosmology and cultural worldview from ancient to contemporary times (Myers, 2009). Parham (2009) reminds us that African-centered psychology is not homogeneous, however unity exists around the attempt to understand healthy psychological functioning from the level of cultural deep structure. Harnessing these insights to overcome mentacide, liberate minds, enlighten hearts, and change lives has been a quite a challenge within an oppressive social context that has proven toxic, hostile, and dehumanizing.

Ethical Imperative Underlying Africana/Black Psychology

As an active response to reclaim mastery of one's own 'productive forces', liberation struggles implicitly require the capacity to also control the nature, definition, and meaning of these 'productive forces'. At its simplest level, total struggle requires that one wages both a physical and a psychological war against oppression and the oppressor. If culture is the ultimate expression and definition of a people's capacity to create progress and/or determine history, then critical thought or science which is the reconstruction of that culture, must be one of the mechanisms for expressing and defining the people's capacity to create progress (Nobles, 1986, p.116).

African American psychologists and others have taken up the challenge and put forward psychological theories, research and analyses more congruent, useful, and relevant to understanding a more full spectrum of human experience. Over twenty years ago, Myers (1988) introduced the theory of Optimal Psychology based on a cultural understanding of human functioning that went beyond the limits of the prevailing western cultural worldview to acknowledge and embrace the spiritual aspects of being, the primary and proactive role of consciousness in human experience, and its subjective, yet socially constructed nature. The theory of Optimal Psychology was designed to explain the resilience of people acknowledging African descent who faced the unique experience of chattel enslavement that denied their humanity, and yet subsequently survived under social conditions of structural racism that have characterized American social policies, laws, and practices. Optimal Psychology posits, among other things, that the holistic and integrative mindset that characterized African metaphysical traditions that are now supported by quantum science and Eastern philosophies, contributed to a transcendent consciousness that allowed these non-immigrant Africans to emerge from a long and deplorable history of unequaled disenfranchisement to become the moral and spiritual leaders of the Civil Rights movement.

The need for a theory of Optimal Psychology emerges from the realization that mainstream psychology and its psychological analyses has not been effective in meeting the mental health needs of people acknowledging African descent, and non-immigrant African Americans in particular. For example, the mental health professionals of the day considered African captives who tried to escape to freedom mentally ill, prescribing extra physical abuse as the most effective treatment for captives appearing not to work with enthusiasm. In other words mainstream psychology as a discipline and the production of psychological knowledge colluded to purport that the healthy efficacious behaviors of enslaved Africans was insane, and sanctioned their abuse by their captors as legitimate, civilized, and caring. Clearly, the multi-generational mistrust of the psychology and culture of the captors and their progeny has been warranted with this history. Moreover, there remains a real need to determine the characteristics and parameters of true mental health and illness, and moral and spiritual development from a culturally congruent worldview.

According to Nelson (2007), the discipline of Africology must give us a prism through which we can correctly interpret the world around us, the capacity to ask the right questions, and to test the truth of the answers we receive on the basis of realities emanating uniquely from the African experience. In studying how non-immigrant Africans in America managed to survive four centuries of the terrorism of chattel enslavement psychologically, and managed to emerge from that history capable of taking on the moral and spiritual leadership needed to move this nation toward civil rights for all, Myers (1988) developed a theory of Optimal Psychology, and has been able to identify and study the teachings of a non-immigrant African American who in 1923 started a spiritual association devoted to “instilling the Ethiopian spirit in the children”. Prophet George W. Hurley, as his followers call him, put forward a set of beliefs, which he says came to him through the spirit realm. These teachings are in line with the characteristic of the wisdom tradition of African deep thought as exposed by Optimal Theory and were transmitted without the ordinary constraints of time and space.

In the first decade of the West’s 21st century, while the United States moves symbolically to embrace racial diversity with the election of its first African American (biracial) President, the American public remains entrenched in a level of denial that allows, for instance, 27,000 young African descent men to be killed, mostly by one another, between 2005-2009, and there is barely public acknowledgement, much less outcry, even from African Americans themselves (Alexander, 2009). It is as if the present state of affairs is normal, expected, and therefore, not alarming. The moral and spiritual consciousness of the Civil Rights Movement seems to have abated as the spirituality of Black people manifest in prior history may appear to have taken a turn toward less concern for the communal survival and more concern for the individual, personal self-interest promoted by the dominant society.

However, simultaneously a psychological analysis built around the experiences and cultural heritage has led to the production of psychological knowledge congruent with the reality of those non-immigrant African Americans remaining true to their ancestors’ teachings. Highly developed moral and spiritual acuity accounts for the historic pattern and prevailing strategy of taking the “moral high road” when it came to dealing with racism and the enslaving captors and their progeny, but may now contribute to a generalized reluctance to stand up and speak out against social injustice as the dominant cultural worldview is assimilated. This could be seen as African Americans’ acquiescence to their own oppression via the internalization of the dominant society’s degrading, dehumanizing view of themselves (Bulhan, 1985). Systems of oppression impose self-perpetuating limitations on the oppressed groups’ processes of self-development and self-determination. Thus, the benefits of being civil, peace-loving, and humble can also bear costs without a critical awareness of the social forces bombarding and shaping the individual as well as collective consciousness. Blacks’ natural disposition to “play nice,” is admirable, but if it leads to losing one’s moral compass and voice under alien cultural conditions, reassessment must be made.

An Alternative Perspective

Optimal theory posits the nature of the particular set of assumptions (e.g., about the nature of reality, knowledge, how one knows, human identity, what is of value), become the intangible force gestating consciousness giving birth to perceptions, thoughts, feelings, meanings, and subsequently behavior (Myers, 1988, 2003). These principles emanating from an optimal worldview become collectively implemented as social policies, laws, institutional practices and procedures. By virtue of its fragmented nature, the current dominant social reality constructed is prone to racism, sexism, classism, ageism, environmental degradation, elitism, rankism, and is thus, termed suboptimal. A sense of self alienated from its interconnecting core and moral compass informs discontinuous and fragmented perceptions which will fuel thought, feelings and behaviors that extend all the way through to social policies, practices and procedures, and laws. Institutionally reinforced, the principles underlying a suboptimal worldview will make it virtually impossible to create a just, sacred, and sustainable world. The fragmented mindset prevents holistic, integrative thinking, and will reflect the incapacity for the higher stages of ego, moral, and spiritual development (Myers, 2003).

As the theory of Optimal Psychology has unfolded it has become apparent that the potential for utilizing an optimal or suboptimal mindset by virtue of the belief or conceptual system adopted is something with which the individual must grapple irrespective of the prevailing cultural worldview reinforced. This conflict of consciousness can be identified and manifest within individuals as the struggle between one's higher and lower self, or higher and lower consciousness. In other words, when our consciousness presses us toward good and we move from a place of secure well-being, peace and compassion, those (optimal) sensibilities will be reflected in our actions and intentions. On the other hand, when our consciousness presses us to move from a place of alienation, insecurity, fearfulness, and/or greedy self-interest, the suboptimal perspective will inform our modus operandi. Thus, access to either conceptual system is universal and available. It is the socialization into cultural norms, those generalized designs for living and patterns of interpreting reality, that nurtures and supports the belief system that emerges as the prevailing cultural worldview. Thus, an optimal or suboptimal worldview will either facilitate or militate the attainment of social justice and equity.

To the extent a particular group of people collectively shares the same conceptual system and organizes to socialize its acceptance and practice by others, the potential for that conceptual system to become the prevailing cultural worldview is strong. The suboptimal worldview becomes the basis for the reality constructed and the social perceptions, practices and policies implemented are equally fragmented. Hence, contemporary debates such as, those around whether or not issues of race and poverty are cultural or structural, present a false dichotomy, as both are the predictable consequence of the same faulty, fragmented worldview responsible for their creation.

The prevailing fragmented cultural worldview in US society often goes unexamined, much less challenged, because its nature encourages a more superficial and appearance based social orientation, for example, there is more concern today with political correctness than moral correctness. In addition, the media influence to address social concerns and issues in terms of sound bites with limited opportunity for deep dialogue discourages the kind of critical thinking, critical self-reflection, introspection, and even appreciation for alternative points of view, that would support in-depth examination. These conditions set the stage for broad social endorsement of long-standing contradictions, such as those found with American racism which repeatedly show up in terms of legal and social policies that either wittingly or unwittingly disadvantage those of African descent, such as extending high stakes testing to younger and younger age groups despite the questionable utility of such tests and the consistent disparities in test scores.

Once a fragmented pattern of interpreting reality and materialistic designs for living have been endorsed and adopted in a society they become self-perpetuating and self-sustaining in a capitalistic economic structure that is built around a wealthy elite with economically challenged masses competing to survive. Problems with the creation of social justice abound and insight into how to solve the problems remains inaccessible when barriers with regard to race (and other human diversity markers that are not privileged) are socially sanctioned and constraints to critical thinking abound. The mono-culturally hegemonic nature and functioning of the prevailing cultural worldview in mainstream US society limits the nation's capacity to generate the moral leadership and the spiritual development required in the higher stages of human development and needed for a just society (Alexander & Langer, 1990). These barriers which can be defined as structural are really culturally, framed by the prevailing conceptual system reflecting a suboptimal worldview (Myers, 1988, 1992). These processes most likely occur unconsciously, the mechanisms to see the interrelatedness and interdependence of self and the good of all is fractured. Therefore, the fragmented and discontinuous, suboptimal reality will continue to create the perceptions, meanings, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that become the unjust, resource depleted, environmentally polluted, socially engineered system of functioning that currently characterizes society.

Defining Psychological Well-being

Thus, when the children of Odudua gather together, those chosen to bring good into the world are called human beings or the chosen ones. Odu Ifa: 78,1 (Karenga, 1999, p.142).

Africana psychology, centered on its distinctive cultural worldview, provides the focal point from which to deeply examine what it means to be human. For the most part African psychology has relied on various African cultural traditions to inform what it means to be human. According to Obasi (2009) among the Akan, the person is conceived as both material and spiritual, having a soul believed to originate from and be a manifestation of Supreme Being.

The Spirit, seen to be a primary building block that permeates all natural things in the universe and, the body, which houses vital entities and will return to the Mother Earth. Similarly, the Yoruba conceive the person multi-dimensionally with a physical body sculptured by divinity; a spirit, divine in nature coming directly from the Supreme Being which does not perish during physical death; the ori, the physical head responsible for the personality of the person, bearer of one's destiny, guardian protector guiding daily decision making; the okan or heart-soul, seat of intelligence, emotion, psychic energy, thought, and action; and the ojiji or shadow, constant companion of the person, a visible representation of the okan (Obasi, 2009).

Consistent with an African cultural worldview, Optimal Theory concedes that everything, including humans is spirit, that incorporeal, animating principle and energy that reflects the essence and sustenance of all that is (Myers, 1988, 2003). Thus, the question of who we are as humans has been answered by the awareness we are in fact, Divine Spirit. To be human is to be Divine Presence incarnate. Theorizing divine consciousness, Optimal Theory seeks insight into how we are sacred spirit and what it means to be one with Supreme Being, as our African ancestors taught, within the contemporary context.

Positing that human purpose is to realize union with Supreme Being, a holistic, integrative optimal conceptual system and worldview, valuing peace, harmony, justice, truth, reciprocity, righteousness, and natural order, can be juxtaposed with the fragmented, discontinuous suboptimal conceptual system and worldview into which most people have been and are being socialized and enculturated. As the capacity for both optimal and suboptimal functioning exists within each human being, an optimization process exists whereby progress toward unity consciousness can be realized by utilizing any sense of separation from Supreme Being as the opportunity for edification, growth, and mastery of lessons leading to a deeper, clearer, more cohesive, coherent, comprehensive realization of Oneness. Optimal Psychology teaches, as our African ancestors taught, that we create reality and have the power within us through many forces not recognized in the fragmented materialist worldview to achieve our purpose and destiny. Oppression and control of the African mind is maintained by the intellectual imperialism and conceptual incarceration imposed by a suboptimal cultural worldview widely adopted by the captors of African people and their progeny. Moreover, Optimal Theory acknowledges the lapses in and weaknesses of African cultural traditions that contributed to the Maafa. The purpose of negativity in human experience based on Optimal Theory is to serve as a mechanism for growth and edification toward realization of unity consciousness, that is, Oneness with Supreme Being. Accordingly, the human being may not always have control over what happens to them, but they always have control over the meaning they make of it and how they feel about it. Thus, one's experience of the circumstance or condition, which when wielded can ultimately transform the circumstance, condition and its meaning.

As human beings called Muntu or “living suns” (Fu-Kiau, 1991), the ultimate objective of any rite of passage is the developmental process of pursuing perfection or deification, becoming One with God (Hilliard, 1997, Nobles, 1985). Hilliard (1997) noted that within African deep thought the concepts of education and socialization were integrated into the larger process of human transformation, “the process of becoming more like the divine” (p.8). Nobles (2006) further explained the foundation of human beings within classical African philosophy as rooted in “being, becoming, and belonging”.

The theory of Optimal Psychology is devoted to gaining insight into divine consciousness, how human beings are sacred, divine spirit, thus it fits the tradition that Wade Nobles (1986) describes as that of the Sahku Sheti, deep penetration and illumination of the soul which inspires. One of the challenges facing the Sahku Sheti of African centered psychology is the necessity of freedom from the cosmological, ontological, axiological, epistemological and teleological constraints of not only years of training in mainstream psychology, but also, the prevailing societal cultural worldview that separates Supreme Being. A key strength of Optimal Theory is that it is built upon a framework for identifying and getting beyond conceptual incarceration of the prevailing cultural worldview and offers a process maintaining an optimal worldview that is developmental and self-sustaining. Optimal Theory builds upon the best of the tradition of wisdom and deep thought from classical African civilization through the challenges and triumphs of the Maafa of non-immigrant Africans in the Americas. Stepping outside of the western paradigm, Optimal Theory is designed to provide a structure for not only an African centered alternative worldview, but also, a process for monitoring and transforming consciousness through the optimization process and the psychotherapeutic process, Belief Systems Analysis.

The human being as well as human reality were all governed by divine law and the basic divine law was simply “to be” and in being, one was the creative cause which made humans divine. This divine law was, in turn, translated in an enduring moral mandate which stated that “to be” was permanently guaranteed by the human instruct “to become” The moral mandate of African humanity was “to become” and in becoming, humans revealed their “belongingness” to God(liness) (Nobles, 2006, p. 326).

Belief in the perfectibility of the human being is a central theme in this cosmic view of the world. It is from this tradition that Optimal Theory picks up the substance of African, as well as, Native American traditions, with the expectation that their function, conscious union with the Creative Life Force, remains constant, but their form must evolve and transform with the social context and challenges presented each generation. Trusting in that wisdom referred to in ancient writings to help guide us along the path of life, Optimal Theory does not fear nor resist the necessity to interrogate the upper reaches of human development. In contrast with mainstream western psychological paradigms, the intention to realize divinity through right relationship with the Creative Life Force and conscious union with the best of the Totality and one another is the goal.

Optimal Theory emphasizes the interdependence and interrelatedness of spiritual, mental, physical, social and environmental well being. Chissell (1993) defined optimal health as the best possible emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual, and socio-economic aliveness that we can attain, which has resonance for Optimal Theory in a larger context of balance, harmony, and order. To be mentally healthy within this toxic social context is to be consciously and deliberately engaged in the process of optimization, to develop increased knowledge of self, by recognizing self to be multi-dimensional (i.e., inclusive of ancestors, future generations, nature and community) in nature, and to master the Ten Cardinal Principles described by the ancients (Myers, 2003). These are: cultivating the ability to distinguish between the real and the unreal, and right and wrong, learning to be free from resentment under persecution and wrong doing, believing and coming to know the truth can be found and lived, being devoted to realizing union with Supreme Being and having faith in the ability for truth to be revealed, and learning to control your thoughts and your actions. Engagement in these practices will inoculate and support well-being resulting from right alignment as sacred Spirit.

Vision for the Future

Our contribution to the world will therefore not be so much in our sameness to the European as to our differentness. The very fact that we are not so much assimilated to the machinations and machinitis of the western world will be the thing to permit us to recapture and resurrect the lost spiritual force and the deeper human meaning which is fading from the universe. Once we have grasped this fact sufficiently, and reclaimed our stolen mission, we will then hold the irreplaceable key to a new humanity (Hare, & Hare, 2001, p.1).

The prescription for the future of psychology and psychological knowledge production as it relates to persons acknowledging African descent, race, and diversity in general is the adoption of an optimal cultural worldview comprehensive enough to inhere respect for all human diversity markers, cohesive enough to respect and rely on the convergence of knowledge across cultural groups, and sufficiently coherent to make available reason which can yield the unity containing and transcending oppositions. The African Centered Theory of Optimal Psychology, grounded in the wisdom tradition of African deep thought, documented in the ancient historical records of classical African civilization and the cultural realities and experiences of non-immigrant Africans in America who have remained true to their ancestors socio-cultural bearings, provides a diagnosis and an antidote. Unlike many non-immigrant African Americans, having been deemed less than human by their captors and their captor's progeny, there remains a group who never lost sight of themselves or succumbed to a double consciousness that saw self through the eyes of the other. These African descent people did not become strangers to themselves, but have been able to rise above the miseducation and disenfranchisement to chart a new course in psychological knowledge production.

Since its foundation mainstream western psychology has been the handmaiden of a society committed to the privileging of those of European descent and creating the value for being White and inferiorizing of those of African descent. Today the current capacity of mainstream psychology to identify healthy, efficacious behavior on the part of those acknowledging African descent, versus behaviors of Black people perceived as healthy that are quite pathological from a self-determined point of view, must be questioned. The humanity and value of Black people and their cultural traditions have been examined and reestablished within the context of the best of their heritage. Such has been the purview of the theory of Optimal Psychology emerging from the progeny of those non-immigrant Africans in America who remained steadfast in their respect and reverence for their ancestors traditions and whose American cultural identification is more in line with the values and beliefs of the indigenous Native Americans than the European colonizers (Myers, 2003). A Black psychology true to its name, representing the absorption of all of the colors of the spectrum, all of the energies, must be comprehensive enough to make meaning of the teachings in our earliest historical records in Africa, the birthplace of humanity, and the current state of affairs, with a depth of understanding capable of overcoming the constraints of mainstream western psychology in terms of cultural grounding and worldview.

The Association of Black Psychologists (1999) adopted the following definition of African Centered Psychology to guide theory, research, practice and action:

Black/African Centered psychology is a dynamic manifestation of unifying African principles, values, and traditions that are reflected within broader Pan-African or transcultural communities. It is the self-conscious 'centering' of psychological analyses and applications in African realities, cultures, and epistemologies. African centered psychology, as a system of thought and action, examines the processes that allow for the illumination and liberation of the Spirit. Relying on the principles of harmony within the universe as a natural order of existence, African centered psychology recognizes: the Spirit that permeates everything that is; the notion that everything in the universe is interconnected; the value that the collective is the most salient element of existence; and the idea that communal self knowledge is the key to mental health. African psychology is ultimately concerned with understanding the systems of meaning of human Beingness, the features of human functioning, and the restoration of normal/natural order to human development. As such, it is used to resolve personal and social problems and to promote optimal functioning (Parham, White, & Ajamu, 1995, p. 95).

Fortunately, creative leadership has been provided to African descent communities to facilitate mental health among Black people. There are a number of approaches that have taken the form of therapeutic interventions, for example Phillips' Ntu therapy and Myers' Belief Systems Analysis, numerous social programs and educational projects dealing with youth, such as Parham's Bakari Project and Nobles' Hawk Project, plus efforts toward community participatory engagement, which propose to develop of a climate of optimal health proposed by Myers (2003). Certainly more must be done given the psychological and spiritual needs within our communities.

Additionally, more work needs to be done to encourage cultural pluralism within higher education, so that scholars interested in pursuing African psychology do not meet with so much resistance and marginalization within the academy. African psychologists must also be fearless in their studies, realizing that in order to meet the mental health needs of people of African descent current systems in place must be revamped and revitalized and new systems must be created. Critical thinking must be cultivated at all levels of research, training and practice because the African psychology proposed is at odds with much of what we have been trained to assume true in mainstream western psychology. At the same time we should look at the remarkably convergence of knowledge across cultural groups, and particularly what neuroscience and quantum science has confirmed that fits so nicely into the teachings of ancient Africa.

If we are to liberate people so that we can create a more just, sacred, sustainable world, a spiritual transformative training system must be created. Optimal Theory can integrate the heights of knowledge across cultural groups to provide a comprehensive, cohesive, coherent understanding and appreciation of the fullness of human experience and potential in historical and cultural context. This spiritual transformative psychology is built on the lessons learned and sacrifice of people acknowledging African descent, particularly those who surmounted the greatest of human challenges, surviving 400 years of the terrorism of enslavement and extended psychological bondage.

African psychology must justly explore and examine knowledge ignored and/or marginalized in mainstream and spiritual literature in psychology. The intention will be to produce students with a deep understanding of the just, sacred and sustainable, and how to achieve it, particularly in the areas of moral and spiritual development, leadership, and therapeutic practice. Students must be encouraged to develop the speaking, writing, and critical thinking skills necessary to not only question privileged theories, cultural orientations, and clinical techniques, but also, to master problems specific to marginalized and underserved populations. Learning the skills necessary to reason with the unity that contains and transcends oppositions, and examining the designs for living and patterns of interpreting reality proven effective historically to manage the constant onslaught of social, educational, political and economic disenfranchisement, injustice, and abuse must continue.

Promoting examination of the complex nature of cultural, social-political, and developmental factors that shape spiritual and moral development among groups of indigenous and colonizing people, will expose students to the contributions of leading thinkers across disciplinary boundaries. At the same time training students to balance and become well-versed in the traditional clinical paradigms and vernacular most commonly used in mainstream psychology would aid in understanding where the voids are and how best to fill them. Such an orientation will prepare students to take leadership in promoting social justice, having had the opportunity to do the necessary critical self-reflection and introspection needed to integrate multiple healing perspectives. The future of Africana Psychology depends on the transmission of the foundational values of an optimal conceptual perspective to the next generation of psychologists. Optimal Theory calls for the fearless study of the metaphysical in the evolution of humanity, the sacred role of Ancestors, the use of ritual, the honoring of nature as an extension of the self and the community as viable and culturally congruent aspects of promoting and achieving health and well-being.

In conclusion, an Africana Psychology will elucidate those conditions and forces which facilitate and encourage the “being, becoming, belongingness, and beholding” of those of African descent while explicating and opposing those toxic societal conditions and forces which perplex, confound, and thwart human development. Africana psychology must forge the path, preparing the way for our community to persist in its becoming, ensuring the continued enlightenment of people of African descent. Accordingly, “as humans who are being, becoming, and belonging, we have a direct and indisputable connection to our African origin and...a subsequent sacred responsibility to our Ancestors” (Nobles, 2006, p. 330). Africana psychology, its proponents, theoreticians, researchers, practitioners and students all share this sacred obligation to our Ancestors.

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