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The Importance of Understanding Cultural Competence and Identity Development in African American Adolescent Females to Enhance Productivity in Counseling

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For many years, the African American adolescent female population has not been the focus in the literature on acquiring new and effective counseling skills for future counselors. It has been shown that this population is in need of counseling services but has not taken advantage of this opportunity. Much of the literature is focused on the integration of religion and spirituality as a means of effective counseling (Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002) when working with African Americans. In general, there are many different stigmas associated with African American adolescents. Ford, Harris, and Schuerger (1993) published a conceptual paper outlining themes and possible stereotypes found in White counselors counseling gifted African American students. The researchers, in their opinion, state that White counselors may have difficulty counseling African American students because of negative stereotypes and prejudices. One example used in this context that could effect the counseling session and relationship included counselors viewing this population as lazy and a waste of time in counseling sessions. These are just a few obstacles African American adolescents are faced with when entering counseling. Through these stigmas, different generations of African American adolescent females are growing up and assimilating into a society based on Western views.

The image of the African American woman has been defined differently over time. This change could possibly have a direct effect on African American adolescents. For this paper, adolescents will refer to those 12-17 years of age. As shown in the literature, African American adolescent females are more receptive to group counseling techniques which give the girls a chance to be around adolescents with similar views and experiences. Also found in the research, African American adolescent girls have been found to be more open with minority group facilitators. This gives the adolescents a sense of understanding and safety (Ford et al., 1993). Through this paper, I plan to discuss the historical image of an African American woman, common themes found in the literature pertaining to African American females, identity development in African American

adolescent females, effective theoretical frameworks, and the importance of multicultural competence in counselors of African American adolescents.

Identity and African American Females

African American Culture

Before one can define African American adolescents and the different themes described throughout the literature, one must first explore and gain an understanding of the African American female from a cultural standpoint. This knowledge is vital to understanding the cultural values and customs which have been passed down through the generations and influence the identity of African American adolescent females. African American culture is rooted in historical values and customs that were passed down throughout the generations. Culture is rooted in the historical aspects of one's past, which has been integrated into each generation as a means of sustainability and has been linked to one's own known identity (Berry & Blassingame, 1977). In this literature review, prominent researchers of African American culture will explore historically what culture is for African Americans and how it relates to the formation of their identity. Acculturation in the Eurocentric approach will be discussed as well as interventions on understanding the African American view.

A founding aspect of the African American culture was the formation of certain religious beliefs (Wheeler et al., 2002), songs, and proverbs. Not only did Whites project their own religious thoughts and beliefs onto the slaves, but also their own values. The African American slaves took these values and created their own to fit their lifestyle. In the African American culture, song and dance is an important cultural aspect, which was thus added to their religious worship. Slaves incorporated song, dance, and shouting into their religious sessions creating a new form of praise and worship (Berry & Blassingame, 1977).

From the formation of religion, there began an incorporation of teachings to the African American children that provided guidance and knowledge about life. These teachings were known as proverbs. Proverbs were an important facet of African American culture. The main objective of the proverbs was to teach modes of conduct, religious beliefs, hospitality, respect for elders, caution, bravery, humility, and cooperation. These proverbs were a collection of stories and experiences that reflected the slavery experience (Berry and Blassingame, 1977). Still to this day, many proverbs are used as a guiding path in raising young African American children.

These specific teachings were the building blocks for young African American children in constructing their identity. Many have taken these spiritual and cultural themes passed down through the generations and relied solely on their spirituality to aid in problem solving. The understanding and incorporation of these teachings in counseling could provide a rich experience for both the client and the counselor.

Issues for African American Women

Looking through a cultural lens, African American women have constructed their identity, which can only be fully defined through a multicultural theory. African American women often feel the pressure to pick an aspect of their identity to define themselves (Williams, 2005). In order to construct a safe environment for African

American females, counselors must embrace the multiple roles African American females face through different multicultural theories in counseling. African American women have since been able to cope with these issues through their religion and spirituality (Greer, 2011) that links their generation to their ancestors. These identity issues formed with African American females could have an effect in the younger adolescent population.

Within the literature, there are themes found to have some effect on African American women. These specific themes were generated through conversations with African American women and the struggles for this population. The prominent themes in African American women constructing their identity were emotional isolation, stress, internalized oppression, resisting racism, and integrating multiple identities (Williams, 2005). Many of these themes tie into how African American women were historically viewed and classified into different categories in which society has embraced, as a definition of what an African American woman should be.

Identity Development Among African American Adolescents

African American adolescents are exposed to themes found in the literature that could aid in their identity development. Some of these themes are a focus on a Eurocentric view of the world while trying to keep their African culture, environmental constraints, and racism (DeCarlo, 2005). Identity is developed during the adolescent stage of development. Throughout the literature, issues of pregnancy and sexual identity are major concepts with regard to African American adolescents. Identity can be characterized in many different ways and formulated through experiences one may have. Seaton, Yip, and Sellers (2009) stated that identity could also be formulated through the characteristics of a particular racial or ethnic group in which the adolescent perceives to be a member. This explains the formation of identity in African American adolescents in comparison to their counterparts.

There are different misconceptions about the population with the focus on the negative aspects of African American adolescent identity development. It is thought during this time that different themes can help to shape and form one's identity. With African American adolescents, there are many different factors that could aid in identity development. Throughout the literature, there is a focus on themes that have a negative undertone regarding African American adolescent development. According to Seaton et al. (2009), these themes focus on racial discrimination that may have a factor in the racial identity of African American adolescents. Though the literature highlights important negative aspects of African American adolescent identity development, there is not much of a focus on positive identity traits in African American adolescents. If the focus within the literature is based on the negative outcomes, then how is all the positive identity development of African American adolescents addressed and characterized?

Theoretical Frameworks

Afro-centric Theory

Within the discipline of counseling, several multicultural theories exist, such as multicultural counseling theory (MCT) and culture-centered counseling theory (Pedersen,

1991). Additionally, several culturally specific counseling theories have been developed to uniquely meet the needs of ethnocultural clients. For African American clients, Afro-centric counseling was introduced and used as a defining principle theory for the African American population (Azibo, 2010). Azibo utilized African-centered consciousness to explain how African Americans may be losing their cultural identity within the dominant Eurocentric culture. This African-centered framework has three components: racial awareness, racial identity, and racial preference, defined as:

- a. Racial Awareness—knowledge of the visible differences between racial categories by which one classifies people into these divisions and, once such knowledge is cognitively achieved, the acceptance of it.
- b. Racial Identity—a consciousness of self as belonging to a specific group differentiated from other groups by obvious physical characteristics.
- c. Racial Preference—the attitude or evaluation attached to a racial category and members and artifacts thereof.

This theoretical framework helps to explain the need for African American culture throughout each generation. For African American women, they can embrace their multiple roles while constructing their identity. By incorporating Afro-centric themes, counselors can enhance their cultural competence and use culturally specific interventions when counseling African American adolescent females.

Womanist Theory

African American women historically have had to take on many different roles. Within the literature, there are two alternative theories, which place the focus more on African American females. Feminist theory and womanist theory have been used in counseling to better evaluate the needs and issues of women. Feminist theory examines positive qualities such as emotional relatedness, empathy, and nurturance characterized by women's ways of being, knowing, caregiving, and moral decision making (Williams, 2005). Counselors have since used feminist theory when counseling women to highlight emotional and nurturance themes to better understand the client.

According to Ossana, Helms, and Leonard (1992), womanist theory was introduced in the early 1970s but was explored later by Helms' definition of the theory. Helms articulated four different stages: Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion and Emersion, and Internalization. Preencounter was defined as a non-conscious identification with external devaluing standards of womanhood. Encounter was defined as conflicted perspectives with regard to what is appropriate for oneself as a woman. The third stage, Immersion and Emersion, was defined as a rejection of male supremacist views of womankind and the search for a self-affirming definition. Finally, the Internalization stage was depicted as the development of personally meaningful internal standards of womanhood.

Through these stages, women can accept the definition of womanhood then slowly begin to change and construct their own view of womanhood into their own experiences (Parks, Carter, & Gushue, 1996). Womanist theory, or womanism, gives a holistic view of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Womanist theory focuses on three strategies: contextualizing the problem, drawing on a womanist legacy of social justice activism, and creating networks of support and connection (Williams, 2005). This

theory examines specific empowering strategies within minority women that counselors can use to better understand the needs of African American adolescent females. By integrating these themes, counselors could have a better understanding of their clients as well as their own selves.

Multicultural Counseling Competence

Multicultural counseling competence is essential in the performance of a professional counselor (Collins & Pieterse, 2007; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Awareness and understanding of one's own multicultural competencies assist in evaluation of the counselor educator. Within the literature, multicultural counseling competence (MCC) is a term that refers to a continued learning process. MCC focuses on different levels of diversity that include race, ethnicity, oppression, discrimination, sexual orientation, etc. MCC has three competency levels which are: counselor's awareness of one's own cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs; understanding the worldview of culturally diverse clients; and developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques (Levy & Plucker, 2008). With the integration of these three competencies, counselors will be able to fully be aware of their own MCC awareness as well as being more in tune with their clients. Construction of MCC within counselors can help to develop stronger relationships with clients who classify as non-White.

Other terminology surrounding cultural competencies with counselors and counselor educators is racial microaggression. Racial microaggression is a term that focuses on the combination to reflect an invisible worldview of White supremacy in individuals, institutions, etc., which induces enormous psychological distress in people of color, and creates disparities in education, employment, and health care for the target groups (Sue et al., 2008). This term defines issues related to socially marginalized and oppressed populations as a way of incorporating understanding of outside biological, social, and environmental concerns. It is the counselor's responsibility to address the issues that may affect them personally and in their respective professional fields as well (Sue et al., 1992). With the incorporation of counselor competencies within multicultural counseling, counselors can be more effective to underrepresented groups.

Interventions

The theoretical frameworks found in the literature support the incorporation of group counseling. Group counseling allows adolescents to engage with their peers on issues they may not have felt comfortable disclosing at an earlier date. Through an understanding environment with their peers, adolescents are more inclined to engage in counseling interventions. These adolescents feed off of one another's experiences and stories shared within the group (Ford et al., 1993). This then opens up the arena for African American adolescent girls to feel comfortable with sharing their stories and comments that can relate to other group members. Ford continues by suggesting group interventions have been shown to have a positive effect as opposed to individual counseling sessions where the clients do not feel understood or feel free to talk to someone that is not of their same ethnic background.

Though much of the literature is focused on group counseling techniques and interventions, individual counseling techniques can also play a role in the effectiveness

and productivity in counseling. Spencer and Oatts (1999) discussed how providing African American role models could enhance the perceptions of counseling for African American adolescents. This could be achieved by hiring more African American educators, examining the impact of homogeneous grouping of African American students, and increasing multicultural curriculums. Enhancing the African American faces in a counseling agency and among school counselors and counselor educators could help to create more productivity within the counseling field with African American adolescents (Howard-Hamilton & Franks, 1995).

Issues of race, social class, and identity development are another area of counselor multicultural competence that is not addressed fully in the literature. According to Day-Vines, Patton, and Baytops (2003), race and social class are issues that African American adolescents subconsciously bring into counseling sessions. To aid in the effectiveness of counseling, counselors should be aware of these un-addressed cultural issues and incorporate empowerment interventions and strategies to build trust with the client (Holcumb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas, 2001). Addressing ethnic identity issues in individual counseling could enhance the productivity in counseling by the counselor acknowledging these issues (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004).

Conclusion

Today, many Eurocentric values and customs are being incorporated into the African American ideal. Through counseling and other aspects of interactions between the two cultures, Eurocentric views are used to explore the minds of African Americans. This is not beneficial nor is it exploratory of the true meaning of African American culture. According to Cokley and Williams (2005), Eurocentric views have been used to depict an understanding of the African American culture. These views have since been shown to not have any positive effect on the true meaning and understanding of African American culture. Creating an Afro-centric approach in school-based areas could aid in learning and higher levels of educational engagement with African Americans (Fairchild, 1988). This type of approach fills in the missing cultural piece that connects African Americans to their counterparts.

When counselors counsel diverse clients only using a Eurocentric view, they create barriers to efficacy (West-Olatunji, 2008). Without effective counseling strategies, the needs of culturally diverse clients are not adequately served. Counselors may be doing minority clients a disservice by not being adequately trained with a culturally sensitive eye for these culturally specific themes. Multicultural theories focus on the multiple layers within each marginalized group. With a stronger emphasis on cultural competence, culturally marginalized clients, such as African American adolescents, can benefit from counseling services.

In conclusion, African American women have been poorly conceptualized within mainstream culture. This poor conceptualization has compromised effective service delivery by counselors. Utilizing African American customs and values into interventions, such as folk tales, dance, songs, and proverbs, can be helpful when working with African American women, in particular, whose identity reflects intersected values and beliefs that include gender, ethnicity, and class.

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