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**Counseling African American Women: Issues,
Challenges, and Intervention Strategies**

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Abstract

This article explores factors related to the utilization of counseling services by African American women. Personal perceptions, fear of social stigma, traditional coping strategies, support systems, and financial issues impact African American women's usage of formal counseling. Recommendations are made for counselors who are interested in working with African American.

Introduction

The lives of African American women have been affected by racism, sexism, classism, and colorization (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1981, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Walker, 1983). Although several degrees removed from the plutocracy, African American women juggle a host of responsibilities. They manage careers, raise children, contribute to society, and take care of extended family members. A substantial number of African American women have been able to deal with life's challenges successfully, while others have not. Navigation through life's demands has had a tremendous impact on African American women's sense of self, level of resiliency, and overall psychological development.

Current research on multicultural counseling offers support for the aphorism: Many African American women are reluctant to seek

formal counseling, opting for more traditional sources of support such as family, friends, and spiritual outlets. They often view the use of formal counseling as a sign of cultural or personal deficiency (Coker, 2002). When considering the intersections of race and gender, African American women continue to use counseling services less than their White female counterparts, but when presented with severe challenges They tend to seek counseling more than their African American male counterparts (Coker, 2003).

A major port of entry for African American women seeking counseling is through their children's school system. Although African American women may not readily seek counseling for themselves, they are more likely to seek help for a son or daughter who is experiencing academic or behavior difficulties. It is often in these environments that African American women are exposed to counseling *prima facie* and encounter guidance counselors who may suggest further individual or family counseling.

Factors Affecting the Use of Counseling

There is a scarcity of research devoted to the perceptions and use of counseling services by African American women. Many consider counseling only as a last resort, giving in only when they believe that their issue is so deviant, or so severe, that only a "head doctor" can help. There are several factors related to African American women's use of counseling services. Some factors are internal, factors that emanate from one's personal perceptions or fears. Other factors are external, the result of a woman's socioeconomic status. Based on research and the author's experiences as a counselor, the following five factors have been identified as significant issues.

Social Stigma

The Department of Health and Human Services (2001) published The Surgeon General's Report on *Mental Health: Culture, Race and Ethnicity*, which cited social stigma as a major reason that people of color do not seek professional counseling services. Fear of being considered unstable or even crazy are labels many African American

women work hard to avoid. Even in lassitude, there is a certain security in maintaining secrecy. Many would rather “handle their own business,” as one African American woman put it, than seek outside help from a stranger.

The Superwoman Syndrome

Some African American women experience the “Superwoman” syndrome (Wallace, 1978), giving little focus to their own mental health needs. As a result, many African American women suffer from exhaustion, depression, and numerous stress-related illnesses. The myth and stereotype of being a Superwoman adds a serious racialized and genderized twist to the social stigma many fear in using counseling services. The stereotype of being a Superwoman has been a controlling image (Collins, 1991) many African American women have been socialized to perpetuate. However, no human being can withstand constant stress or demands on their time and energy without some sort of psychological repercussions or emotional fatigue. African American women are often expected (by others and by themselves) to endure all, manage all, and be strong without complaint. This endemic syndrome has inhibited many African American women from seeking counseling services. It also indirectly works as an oppressive force almost to the point of being dehumanizing because it limits the range of vulnerable emotions one can express without being called “weak.”

There are legitimate historical reasons that many African American women possess *Superwoman* attitudes and behaviors. Slavery was a time of immense pain and suffering for all African American people. It was a time in history when legalized oppression, torture, and racial terrorism were the norm. The effects of slavery were particularly brutal for African American women. Not only were they subjected to the indignities of racism, but they were also subjected to sexual abuse (Jacobs, 1987; Morrison, 1987). They were used as reproduction machines, having no parental rights to the offspring they would bear (Walker, 1989). They had to watch as family members were lynched. As a survival mechanism, along with their faith and spirituality, African American women had to be strong emotionally

in order to endure unspeakable trauma. The personal and collective survival of their womanhood was dependent more on their ability to be strong. Further, much of African American women's identity is constructed on their ability to maintain relationships with others (Miller & Stiver, 1998). The image of the self-sacrificing family matriarch is still embedded in the minds and hearts of many African American women who see their role as keepers of culture, community, and family.

The strength of African American women continues to carry over into contemporary times. However, it is important for counselors to understand that while the existence of strength gives one an image of resiliency, fortitude, and perseverance, it can also mask real suffering. Just because a woman appears to cope with an issue does not mean she has transcended it (hooks, 1981). The Superwoman syndrome is a cultural legacy that is both a positive and negative coping strategy. It is a behavior and attitude that is comprised of necessary survival instincts. However, it also works to interfere with African American women's ability and willingness to seek help when needed, leading them to stay in stressful situations even longer (Greene, 1994).

Negative Perceptions About The Counseling Process And Individuals Delivering Counseling Services

A lack of counselors of color is a problem. Counseling is still seen as a White endeavor (Sue & Sue, 2003), which operates from a White middle-class value system (Guthrie, 1976). To a large extent there is a healthy level of suspicion and outright mistrust of the counseling profession. Historically, African Americans were studied almost exclusively to illustrate a negative point or to highlight a particular pathology. There continues to be a lack of counselors who possess the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to work with African American female clients. In addition, some African American women may have had prior negative experiences with "intruding" White social workers or other social/mental health service providers.

Community/Natural Built-in Help-Seeking Support and Networks

Many African American women have their own natural help-seeking support networks and activities. Within their everyday surroundings, African American women counsel each other in church communities; beauty shops; laundromats; and sitting side-by-side in cars, buses, or trains en route to work. Wherever African American women gather, there is an exchange of emotions, experiences, and coping strategies. For example, African American beauty salons provide a venue not only for physical beautification, but a space for information exchange and vicarious learning. African American women are able to sit, listen, and learn about how another individual may have dealt with a presenting problem (e.g., relationships, children, finances). It is in these environments that important cultural values, behaviors, and coping strategies are transmitted and reinforced.

Financial Hardships

African American women have learned how to survive economically in a turbulent world. The lack of money is a serious central issue in the lives of many African American women who disproportionately represent members of the working poor. One cannot predict or make plans for the future when one's day-to-day survival becomes an issue. Hence, dealing with "secondary" concerns such as stress gets put off or even ignored. In addition, there is a distinct class bias as it relates to the utilization of counseling services by African American women. It is seen as a financial luxury that many people cannot afford. If a woman has only \$20 available until payday, she is not likely to use that money for counseling services. Furthermore, women of lower income brackets often do not have employers who provide benefits such as Employee Assistance Programs.

Summary

African American women continue to face numerous challenges and responsibilities. On the whole, they do not seek formal counseling services to deal with life's problems. When they do seek counseling, they do so only when they are "sick and tired of being sick and tired," and have exhausted their own personal resources such as family, close friends, or church communities. When attempting to understand African American women's utilization of counseling services, one must consider their long cultural legacy of juggling multiple responsibilities and stressors in life. Living life as a Superwoman, that is, trying to accomplish many tasks without adequate physical or mental relief can have harmful effects on one's life. It can also prevent many African American women from seeking the help they may need when feeling overburdened. Social stigma, mistrust of the counseling process, and economic instability also influence the way African American women use counseling services.

Conclusion

It is important for counselors to raise their level of awareness about the issues facing African American women. They need to be aware of how the intersections of race, gender, and class can influence African American women's perceptions of their own mental health needs. The aforementioned factors that influence African American women's use of counseling services is not an exhaustive list, but rather a beginning focal point for understanding the many personal, cultural, and social complexities that shape African American women's help-seeking behaviors.

Counselors who are interested in working with this population need to examine their own biases, values, and assumptions regarding African American women. It is a *sine qua non* that counselors must increase their knowledge about the history of African American women, develop strategies that are designed to attract African American women to counseling, and provide culturally validating and enriching therapeutic interventions.

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