

# Empowering African Americans Through Social Work Practice: Integrating an Afrocentric Perspective, Ego Psychology, and Spirituality

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the important implications for using an integrated social work practice approach that includes concept from an Afrocentric perspective, ego psychology, spirituality, and empowerment, when working with African Americans. Because of African Americans' unique history and value system, social workers may require specialized training in practice approaches that are sensitive to African America culture. By integrating core concepts from an Afrocentric perspective, ego psychology, empowerment, and spirituality, the authors provide a culturally competent, practical social work approach that facilitates and furthers the well-being of African Americans.

**D**espite African Americans' social and economic progress, they continue to lag behind White America in the areas of income, education, and health (McKinnon, 2003). During the 1980s and 1990s, several conceptual articles have addressed the lack of progress made by African Americans and the theoretical knowledge needed for culturally appropriate treatment (Bulhan, 1985; Gutierrez, 1990; Jenkins, 1985, 1996; Jones, 1985; Mays, 1985; Pinderhughes, 1982; Schiele, 1996; Weaver, 1982). This article builds on that knowledge base by emphasizing the relevance of emerging social work theories. Most important, this article draws on the notion that integrating three important theoretical constructs—Afrocentric theory, ego psychology, and spirituality—leads to social work practice that empowers African Americans across their life span and within their environment.

In previous articles, African Americans' lack of progress has been attributed to several reoccurring themes: racism, oppression, stress, mental health and general health issues, and spirituality (Bulhan, 1985; Dansby & Thomas, 1985; Gutierrez, 1990; Jackson, 1983a, 1983b; Jenkins, 1985, 1996; Jones, 1985; Mays, 1985; Pinderhughes, 1982; Schiele, 1996; Weaver, 1982). For the most part, these articles identified these problems among African Americans without blaming them for their plight. This theoretical perspective is consistent with general social work theory and practice, which stress the strengths of the client and recognizes the deficits in the environment (Goldstein, 1996; Johnson, 1998; Turner, 1996). This article focused on integrating three theoretical constructs of Afrocentric theory, ego psychology, and spirituality and the reoccurring themes of racism, oppression, stress, mental health and general health issues, and spirituality.

## Reoccurring Themes

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A major reoccurring theme for African Americans is the impact of racism and oppression on their general health and mental health status (Gutierrez, 1990; Jones, 1985; Mays, 1985; Pinderhughes, 1982, 1989). Too often, African American functioning is negatively impacted by daily oppressive and racist experiences. The result, which is usually feelings of powerlessness, can lead to poor adaptation and a lack of competence (Gutierrez, 1990; Jones, 1985; Pinderhughes, 1982, 1989). Powerlessness has also been associated with poverty and a lack of resources (Gutierrez, 1990). When the trend of powerlessness is experienced through discrimination, racism and oppression, African Americans become at risk and vulnerable for general health and mental health problems (Barnes, Schneider, Alexander, & Staggers, 1997; Bulhan, 1985; Chestang, 1972; Gutierrez, 1990; Outlaw, 1993). General health and mental health problems among African Americans have historically been associated with stress and living in hostile and oppressive environments (Chestang, 1972; Outlaw, 1993).

In 2002, the National Center for Health Statistics reported high incidences of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes among African Americans. Similarly, African Americans have high incidences of cancer, infant mortality, chemical dependency, homicide, and injury. Lower mortality and life expectancy rates among African Americans have been associated with a lower socioeconomic and educational status. African Americans with higher education and income live longer, are insured, and have greater access to health care.

Likewise, African Americans continue to have high rates of anxiety disorders and depressive diagnoses (Brown, Ahmed, Gary, & Milburn, 1995; Fabrega et al., 1994; Neal & Turner, 1991; Snowden & Jones-Webb, 1993). Several studies suggest that the high level of mental disorder diagnoses and psychiatric admissions among African Americans is the result of racial bias among practitioners and their institutions (Bulhan, 1985; Mays, 1985). Misdiagnoses and high psychiatric admissions among African Americans may result from a need for more culturally competent mental health practitioners and organizations.

Very few practitioners and their organizations consider the value and role orientation inherent in the African American community (Jenkins, 1985; Mays, 1985; Pinderhughes, 1982, 1989; Schiele, 1996). Pinderhughes (1982) and other authors (Asante, 1980, 1990; Harvey & Rauch, 1997; Schiele, 1996) described these values as being transmitted from generation to generation and from Africa. These values include but are not limited to "affiliation, collectivity, sharing, obedience to authority, spirituality, acceptance to fate and past time" (Pinderhughes, 1982, p. 91). In contrast, Jones (1985) emphasized the dual influences of the majority culture and the African culture on African Americans. The African American culture gives emphasis to both African values as well as majority culture influences such as individualism, social status, and financial aspirations

(Jones, 1985). Nevertheless, social workers must consider how African Americans' values and role orientation influence their ability to function within the environment. Without considering these dual influences of African values and the majority culture, social workers and organizations that serve African Americans lack the cultural competence to meet their needs, particularly in coping with oppressive and racist environments.

## Emergence of an Integrated Theoretical Perspective

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To assist African Americans with the stress caused by oppressive and racist environments, social workers must be willing to support them in coping with and confronting these environmental factors and the resultant lack of resources. This support must include developing a better knowledge and understanding of stress and its impact on the functioning of African Americans. Social workers can assist African Americans in addressing these psychosocial stressors and their sources by utilizing integrated treatment approaches that include the empowerment, ego psychological, and Afrocentric theoretical perspectives. Social workers who integrate these theoretical perspectives are capable of expanding their conceptual knowledge base and broadening their understanding of problems experienced by African Americans. These theories allow for a closer look at both the internal and external factors impacting the lives of African Americans. The result is a more accurate assessment of the needs of this population and relevant environmental influences. Furthermore, the social worker is prepared to address more personal issues like the impact of racism on African Americans' self-esteem while confronting broader issues of social injustice and inconsistency in the environment (Chestang, 1972; Cross, 1991). Most important, African Americans are encouraged to advocate for themselves and build on their own strengths.

These theories are similar because they emphasize the strengths of African Americans and the impact of the environment on their functioning. Together, they provide a helpful and broad framework for intervention in the lives of African Americans.

In addition, social work practice with African Americans is enhanced through the knowledge and understanding of the cultural concepts inherent in an Afrocentric perspective. By aligning with these cultural and community strengths, the social worker can assist African Americans in their self-determination and connection to their community. Operating from this perspective, social workers express a commitment to social justice and service while respecting the dignity and worth of African Americans (National Association of Social Workers, 1999; NABSW, 1968). Simultaneously, social workers can fight against racism and oppression while addressing the general health and mental health needs of this group through an integrated empowerment, ego psychological, and Afrocentric approach to treatment. Empowerment theory is

useful because it is consistent with and applicable within the ego psychological and Afrocentric approaches because it focuses and recognizes the impact of communal and personal power (Harvey & Rauch, 1997).

## Empowerment Theory

Social workers, using empowerment theory, seek to help clients develop a stronger sense of self and group consciousness, cultivate resources, and increase their comprehension of the social and political realities of their client population (Gutierrez, 1990; Turner, 1996). When thinking about African Americans, these strategies can help this population, particularly in the areas of reoccurring issues like oppression, racism, and the lack of general health and mental health services. This approach can also assist African Americans in the area of improving their personal development.

Social workers practicing from the empowerment perspective recognize and acknowledge African Americans' personal and daily life experiences with racism and oppression (Gutierrez, 1990; Turner, 1996). They convey sensitivity about racism and oppression and validate its impact on African Americans' self-concept. While acknowledging African Americans' painful experiences, the social worker and client identify and build on the client's strengths in dealing with these experiences. These strengths, both personal and group, are supported by the social worker and utilized to improve the client's overall functioning. An example of group strengths is a client who has the support of his or her immediate family, extended family, and friends to complete various developmental and social tasks related to the client's survival. Similarly, African Americans' identification with the larger African American community can enhance self-esteem (Gutierrez, 1990). The client's sense of belonging limits feelings of alienation and isolation and provides a place to receive support for managing psychosocial demands. The client's support system, as a strength, can provide physical resources such as shelter, financial assistance, and emotional comfort. Individual strengths might be certain innate capacities like the ability to communicate, interact with others, or function under difficult circumstances. The role of the social worker is to help the client identify these strengths and then maximize their usefulness by identifying how these supports can be accessed to benefit the African American client.

From an empowerment perspective, the social worker is an advocate and is a part of the network and system of people that support the development of African Americans. The social worker is also used as a resource and for enhancing the client's ego development. Empowerment must be on all levels: "individual, interpersonal and institutional" (Gutierrez, 1990, p.150). The social worker attempts to assist the client to develop a sense of personal power by responding to and mastering the environment (Gutierrez, 1990; Turner, 1996). Some proponents of the empowerment perspective stress the importance of the synergistic

impact: The ability of African Americans to benefit from relationships that increase their potential to "create a larger result" (De Jong & Miller, 1995, p. 734). Through these transactions, African Americans become more effective in surviving hostile environments and are able to embrace the concept of collective power. Most important, the empowerment approach acknowledges and recognizes the power that exists when the social worker and the African American client collaborate to solve problems. This collaboration can be very effective in the arena of advocacy.

As advocate, the social worker can help the African American client confront oppressive and racist environments. Advocacy could mean involving professionals like other social workers or lawyers in alleviating oppressive and racist circumstances and pushing for the rights of those who are unjustly persecuted. Advocacy can also mean testifying at government hearings, meeting with government officials, and expressing concerns to political officials. These strategies teach African Americans about useful ways to access those in power and provide them with good modeling for system change. The social worker who facilitates activities like brokering, mediating, and advocating becomes an important empowerment figure in the eyes of the African American client.

On the individual and interpersonal level, African Americans are encouraged to reduce the self-blame and take responsibility for solving their problems (De Jong & Miller, 1995; Gutierrez, 1990). The social worker encourages activities that strengthen the self-concept and emotional and psychological development of African Americans. Together, the social worker and the African American client explore their inner strengths and resources for interacting with and connecting to the African American community as well as to other groups. Most of all, the social worker who uses an empowerment perspective will encourage positive growth and reflection on various life situations and events. By developing a more positive and realistic sense of self, the African American client is able to make better decisions about life, significant relationships and relationships in general.

The empowerment approach can be strengthened and its utility broadened by integrating cultural concepts from an Afrocentric perspective. An Afrocentric perspective adds richness to empowerment theory and provides a stronger base for working with African Americans. Both theories recognize how history, culture, and race contribute to and foster African Americans' self- and group development.

### *Afrocentric Perspective*

Schiele (1996) agreed with the importance of the Afrocentric perspective in the African American community and emphasized the concepts of spirituality and moral development. When working with African Americans, the social worker needs to support the client's spiritual beliefs and orientation. The social worker must assess how these beliefs have positively influenced the

African American client's development and determine how to build on this foundation. For example, if the African American client has internalized God as a loving, benevolent, and omnipotent being, then this internalized image could be used as strength (Harvey & Rauch, 1997; Pinkett, 1993). In very difficult situations, African Americans have relied on their belief in God to foster a notion that "everything is going to be all right." The belief in a "higher being" and "divine intervention" are increased as one's "faith" increases. These positive thoughts also engender feelings of being protected and provided for in the most oppressive and hostile situations. The social worker can be instrumental by respecting these beliefs and supporting the African American client's right and ability to make decisions about his or her life.

Like spirituality, the Afrocentric concept of collective responsibility (communalism) and activities encourages hope and faith in the future (Schiele, 1996). Through collective responsibility, African Americans minimize their alienation and isolation and support each other when overwhelmed by the oppressive and racist environment. *Collective responsibility* means taking care of each other and sharing the trauma of painful experiences. In turn, African Americans have a strong affiliation with each other. In some communities, African Americans have fictive kin and extended family who are unrelated persons but adopted as immediate family. These relationships create a feeling of belonging and community. A related Afrocentric concept is the notion that all things are "interconnected." As a result, African Americans tend to believe all people and events are interconnected: When you harm others, then you harm yourselves. When you do something immoral, that immoral act not only impacts you, but other people. This value reinforces the concept of a strong bond among African Americans.

Like other proponents of an Afrocentric perspective, Hill (1997) also documented religious orientation and strong kinship bonds as strengths of the Black family. He suggested that having a strong religious orientation and kinship bond helps to foster positive familial and nonfamilial relationships. He also suggested that having flexible family roles and strong achievement orientation are important for maintaining a family structure that strives for excellence. In the end, these protective factors shield African Americans from the impact of racism and oppression as well as increase mental and general health. Ego supportive approaches provide reinforcement for these protective factors.

### *Ego Psychology*

Ego psychology and an Afrocentric perspective are connected by their emphasis on the need to strengthen people, in this case, African Americans. Ego psychology may be utilized to strengthen the ego functioning of African Americans by increasing ego mastery and strengths, adaptation, and interpersonal relations (Goldstein, 1996; Turner, 1996). Similar to empowerment theory, ego psychology may be used to emphasize the strengths of African Americans but has a primary focus on their internal mechanisms. Social workers who use ego psychology can assess the negative impact of racism, gender discrimination, and oppression and determine what strategies are necessary to minimize any negative impact on ego functioning. These strategies include improving African Americans' reality testing concerning negative stereotypes and providing a supportive atmosphere to discuss their impact and explore problem solving about mastering and/or adapting to these oppressive environments. The social worker who uses ego psychology emphasizes the need for African Americans to feel encouraged, understood, and supported.

Another major focus of the social worker who uses ego psychology is to support African Americans' strengths. In this area, the Afrocentric perspective and ego psychology utilize the cultural and individual strengths of African Americans to improve their functioning (Goldstein, 1996). An excellent example of a cultural and individual strength is the importance of spirituality within the African American culture (Pinkett, 1993; Schiele, 1996). As a strength, African Americans have utilized their belief in God to survive in very hostile and difficult environments. In addition, values like collectivity, sharing, and obedience to authority have strengthened the African American and his or her ability to survive (Pinderhughes, 1982). Similarly, Afrocentric values like collective identity, interconnectedness, the spiritual nature of human beings, and affective knowledge can be supported by the social worker and strengthened through the social worker's acknowledgement and validation of their distinctiveness, that is, Afrocentric replenishment (Harvey & Rauch, 1997; Manning, 2000; Myers, 1988; Schiele, 1996).

In the context of ego psychology, it is important for the social worker to assist African American clients in internalizing these values and concepts to strengthen their self-concept. Through continued support and validation, the African American client will be able to incorporate and practice these values and concepts as a part of their everyday life. These concepts will assist the African American client in strengthening

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their sense of self and their world as a result of mastering and improving social relationships (Goldstein, 1996).

When validated and acknowledged in this manner, African Americans experience a holding environment that reinforces a positive racial self-concept and nurtures their strengths (Goldstein, 1996). This holding environment allows for optimal development and the integration of fragmented aspects of the daily experiences of the African American. Racism, oppression, and prejudice can be placed in their proper perspective. Therefore, African Americans are less likely to engage in negative and self-blaming behavior. By supporting African American' ego strengths, the social worker encourages these clients to address the social and political realities in their lives.

Empowerment theory, an Afrocentric perspective, and ego psychology can individually offer a positive framework for assisting African Americans. However, they are more powerful tools when used in an integrative approach. When social workers integrate these theories, they improve their ability to be more culturally competent in their work with African Americans. The collective use of these theories increases the social worker's sensitivity to the concerns of African Americans and allows for a greater understanding of their life circumstances (Goldstein, 1996; Gutierrez, 1990; Pinderhughes, 1982; Schiele, 1996; Turner, 1996).

Most, if not all, of these values can be incorporated into treatment strategies for working with African Americans. Because of the culturally competent contributions of empowerment and ego psychology theories, they can be easily integrated with an Afrocentric value orientation. The following statements are examples of clinical principles that reflect this perspective: (a) "Assessing the relationship between racism and oppression and the problems (i.e., mental health, health) presented by African American clients"; (b) "Using concepts from an Afrocentric perspective, empowerment, and ego psychology theories to assess the strengths of the African American clients, i.e., ego functioning, group consciousness"; (c) "Assessing the level of spirituality and religious involvement disclosed by African American clients, i.e., value orientation, participation in church activities"; (d) "Considering the value orientation of African Americans when developing and implementing Afrocentric, empowerment, and ego psychology intervention strategies"; (e) Integrating concepts, i.e., ego functioning, group consciousness from Afrocentric, empowerment, and ego psychology theories to enhance cultural competence when working with African Americans";

(f) "Advocating for African Americans experiencing stress from racism and oppression."

## Vignette

The following is a vignette to illustrate the use of an integrated perspective:

Mr. R works as a construction worker for a very large White construction company. He is very talented and has received bonuses several times in the past 10 years. Unfortunately, Mr. R has recently been experiencing stress in his work environment because of racial slurs and hostile remarks. In the past, he has not taken action because he felt the company would not support him.

More recently, Mr. R's stressors have interfered with his work performance and family life. Mr. R has had sleepless nights, a poor appetite, and frequent mood swings. He had been withdrawn from his family and refuses to communicate with his wife about job- and family-related problems. Mr. R is actively experiencing depression.

The empowerment approach that includes aspects of an Afrocentric perspective, ego psychology, and spirituality is very appropriate for working with Mr. R and his family. The social worker will assess Mr. R's depression to determine its origin and to

The social worker who uses ego psychology as a theoretical framework can easily incorporate empowerment, Afrocentric, and spiritual concepts.

what extent his work experience is contributing to it. Because the work experiences were directly related to Mr. R's depression, the social work actively engages Mr. R to resolve the circumstances causing his depression. The social worker focuses on helping Mr. R explore his responses to the environmental stressors. Mr. R was asked to reflect on the circumstances affecting him and the factual components of those incidences. Mr. R was also asked to identify persons in the environment who are generally supportive and respect his work ethic, including those in his family and community.

Once these positive relationships have been identified, the social worker would encourage Mr. R to utilize these relationships in a supportive manner. Similarly, the social worker will support Mr. R's ability to cope with and assert himself in this hostile work environment. If appropriate, Mr. R would be supported in taking legal action against the company. Mr. R may feel anxious about taking this step and need support to assert his rights and protect himself against a hostile and discriminating environment.

As a strategy, the social worker and Mr. R would also explore and role-play situations that might be encountered in the workplace. For example, the social worker might

support Mr. R in being more proactive about reporting these incidents to his supervisor or other appropriate managers to combat his fear of being fired. The social worker could explore the reality of his feelings and perceptions and support any effort by Mr. R to be empowered in these situations. Most of all, Mr. R would be encouraged to recognize his strengths, including his excellent work record and exceptional abilities.

Mr. R eventually decided to pursue legal action. The social worker assisted him in getting legal counsel and supported his decision to protect himself. During this period, the social worker continued to explore with Mr. R how his work environment has negatively influenced his sense of self and interpersonal relations. Utilizing strategies from ego psychology, the social worker focuses on strengthening Mr. R's ego. The social worker began by assessing Mr. R's ego functioning and supporting his ability to address the current situation. Often when people are under stress, they are less able to function. Mr. R's current ego functioning is being affected by internalized negative relations from current work stressors. One defense that Mr. R is using is overidentification. He has overidentified with many of his White coworkers and become preoccupied with being accepted. As a result, he has become increasingly more passive and insecure about his unique qualities and racial identity.

The social worker decided to work with Mr. R on rebuilding his sense of self and encouraging him to internalize a more positive view of himself. Since Mr. R was spending the majority of his time at work, he had little time to nurture relationships, those being family and friends who support a positive sense of self. The social worker explored with Mr. R the importance of these relationships and ways to begin reestablishing them.

The social worker discussed Mr. R's role as a deacon in the church. He was encouraged to see the church as a resource and possibly identify his spirituality as strength for coping within the work situation. The social worker supported Mr. R's belief in God and reinforced his commitment to participate in activities that express this belief. Mr. R reflected on previous times when his faith enabled him to meet difficult challenges. He began to reframe his present work experience as another challenge that he must face. He was reassured by reflecting on his previous successful handling of stressful situations. These reflections allowed Mr. R to reconnect with and invest energy in internalized positive self-images.

Reflecting on Afrocentric and cultural values that had once given him strength also encouraged Mr. R. At one time, he had a strong belief in collective work and responsibility, affiliation and kinship bonding. Mr. R had become preoccupied with his own individual effort to succeed by working for this construction company. This lifestyle created more and more distance from his family, community, and culture. He began to realize how his belief in collective work and responsibility had become diluted in a highly individualized and competitive work environment. He failed to utilize his kinship support system and recognize

the importance of an affiliation with cultural and social organizations in his community. The social worker reinforced any efforts by Mr. R to rekindle his cultural value system and to engage his support system.

## Conclusion

When practicing an integrative approach with African Americans, the social worker must support the development of a strong cultural and racial identification by enhancing ego development. The social worker who uses ego psychology as a theoretical framework can easily incorporate empowerment, Afrocentric, and spiritual concepts. Through the therapeutic process, the client internalizes a more stable identification with his or her culture and race while developing new coping strategies for dealing with oppressive environments.

When considering the racism and oppression experienced by African Americans, social workers need to employ intervention strategies that prevent stress and strengthen the general health and mental health of African Americans. The preceding principles provide a framework that guides and informs social workers in their work with African Americans. It is a beginning step needing further exploration and clarification.

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