African American Families and Mental Health: Culturally Responsive Care Now and in the Future
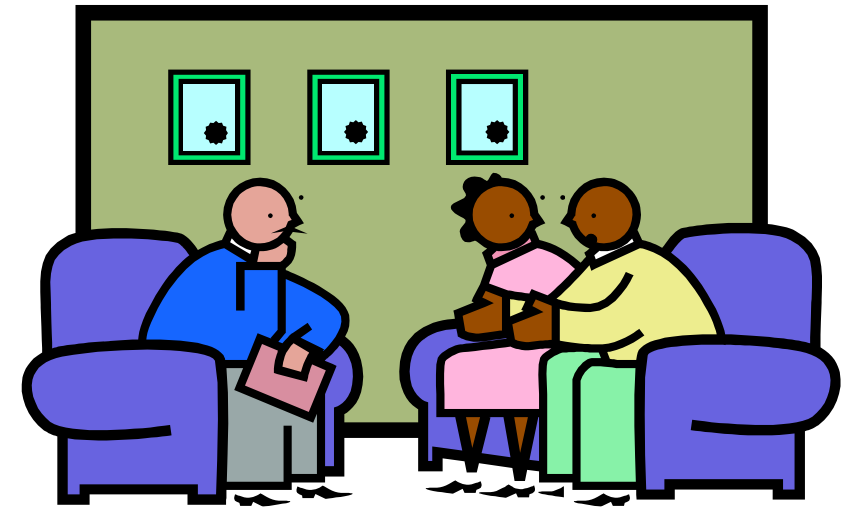
Carla Adkison-Johnson, Ph.D.

Emerita Professor and Researcher

Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology

Western Michigan University

Family Counseling

- Helps to resolve concerns embedded within the family system. Can address coping with specific family members that have mental and/ or emotional disorders.

- Can help in resolving child discipline and parenting issues (e.g. co-parenting, extended family, adolescent parent-child conflicts). Even though a child may have a mental disorder the parent can still maintain specific behavioral expectations.

- Builds healthy communication and relationships among family members.

- Helps to tear down (or address) generational baggage, strongholds and family secrets (including history of depression, anxiety, schizophrenia).

Contextual Humanistic Perspective

- How we **think** about African American Families and their overall mental health is how we **respond** to them in therapy (Johnson, 2006).

- A contextualized humanistic perspective is utilized in this presentation to view and appreciate the humanity of women of color (Johnson, 2006, 2016).

- Most notably, Humanistic Scholar, Dr. Adelbert Jenkins saw the value in understanding the contextual experiences of clients as well as their observable behaviors. He cautioned that "... ***it is not that the effect of environmental events on clients is unimportant; it is rather that such effects are not sufficient to understand psychological experience in the humanistic view***" (Jenkins, 1995, p. 9).

It is important to understand that African Americans have sustained their creativity, agency and resilience in spite of the racially hostile and environmental circumstances that have historically characterized their situation.

Theoretical Framework (s)

Contextual Humanistic Perspective

- *Intentions* **and** *purposes* of people have a significant influence on their lives and choices. The environment is not the only factor that shapes their thoughts and behaviors (Jenkins, 1995; Moss, 2015; Rychlak, 1988).

- Mothers and fathers who have endured racism, loss and extreme poverty can choose creative ways to achieve their parenting goals (Jenkins, 1989, 2005).

- **Acknowledging the humanity** of African Americans by **making agency central** in providing counseling services to African American families (Johnson, 2006, 2016).

Disability Critical Theory (DisCrit)

- "DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of **race and ability** and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms" (Annamma & Morrison, 2018, p. 11).

- That is, when one is viewed as different from the ideal normative and that difference is viewed as deficit, **there are a plethora of impacts**.

The Beginning...

The Black family, its definition, character, and form, does not begin with the American experience of slavery...the Black family is, therefore, best understood as a unit or system deriving its most fundamental character from its African heritage (Nobles, 1974, p.52).

Myth About African Americans and Therapy

- African Americans do not want to go to therapy.

- **False**: African Americans are *reluctant* about therapy for two primary reasons: concerns about the cultural competency of the therapist, racial assumptions therapists have/make about African Americans and confidentiality of the information shared (Belgrave & Allison, 2019; Boyd-Franklin, 2003)

Racial Assumptions: African American Mothers

- Judged unfit at higher rates than White mothers.

- African American women are often perceived as angry, reckless, and uncontrollable (Adkison-Johnson, 2021). Prosecutors are more likely to request leniency from mandatory minimum sentences for White mothers who are often seen by the court as "salvageable" and "sympathetic" (Clemons, 2014).

- A regular racist response to this dehumanizing typecast is to refer African American women to counseling so they can learn how to "manage their emotions" (Adkison-Johnson, 2022).

Adkison-Johnson, C. (2022). Child discipline and African American parents: Confronting anti-Black racism in the judicial system. In G. Roysircar-Sodowsky, S. Steen & K. Cole (Ed.), *Anti-Black racism in contemporary America (pp. 105-117)*. Cognella Press

Racial Assumptions: African American Fathers

- African American fathers often depicted as unwilling to provide or to take responsibility for their children, uninvolved in the lives of their children, and potentially violent (Hamer, 2001; Johnson, 2009, 2016; Gadsden et al., 2003; Wallace, 2017).

- Throughout their residency in the United States, African American men have been framed as violent, dangerous, and predatory.

- African American men are viewed through a punitive lens when evaluating their past and present parenting behavior (Doyle et al., 2013, 2016; Grief, 2011).

- African American fathers are often an afterthought when courts, counseling professionals and child welfare workers deliberate over parenting/child rearing concerns involving African American families.

Source: Adkison-Johnson, C. (2022). Child discipline and African American parents: Confronting anti-Black racism in the judicial system. In G. Roysircar-Sodowsky, S. Steen & K. Cole (Ed.), *Anti-Black racism in contemporary America (pp. 105-117)*. Cognella Press

Racial Assumptions: African American Parents

o Americans can grasp a White- Middle class child's emotional attachment to her biological parents. The public has a harder time, imagining a strong emotional bond between Black parents and their children (Roberts, 2002; 2022).

o There is a gap between the stated philosophy (Safety, Permanency and Child well-being) and <u>actual practice</u> of child welfare with Black parents (Best, 2023; Hill, 2010)

o According to parent advocate Mr. Corey Best, " We are looking for recognition of our **humanity** not sameness or equity."

Mental Health , Diverse Populations and Disparities

- Lack of cultural understanding and respect by health care providers contribute to underdiagnosis (underestimating the severity of the mental health condition) and/or misdiagnosis (overestimating or just wrong) of mental illness in people from African American populations (American Psychiatric Association, 2017)

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)

CACREP accredits over 929 master's and doctoral degree programs in counseling and its specialties offered by 449 colleges and universities across the United States.

Race/Ethnicity	Gender			Total
	Male	**Female**	**Alternative Identity**	
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.12%	0.44%	0.00%	0.56%
Asian	0.50%	2.14%	0.02%	2.66%
Black	2.60%	14.01%	0.09%	16.71%
Hispanic	1.71%	8.16%	0.09%	9.96%
Hawaiian Native or Pacific Islander	0.04%	0.11%	0.00%	0.16%
Two or More	0.61%	2.54%	0.01%	3.17%
Unknown/Other	2.51%	6.26%	1.75%	10.52%
White	9.70%	45.09%	0.32%	55.11%
International Student	0.26%	0.89%	0.01%	1.15%

Table title: All CACREP Student Demographics

NOTE. Some programs were unable to provide student racial/ethnic demographic information on the 2021 Vital Statistics Survey. The data in TABLE 7 are based on a sample of 66,709 students currently enrolled in CACREP-accredited programs, which accounts for 93.76% of all students currently enrolled in CACREP-accredited programs. All percentages were calculated individually and rounded to the nearest hundredth; the sum of the "Total" percentages may not equal 100%.

Competency Training: The Therapeutic Relationship

Dr. Kenneth V. Hardy (2022), an African American marriage and family national scholar, argued that clinical programs prepare students to work with White clients and become good White therapists. He stated:

"How could someone like me, who was completely educated and trained by Whites, who was fully indoctrinated in Eurocentric ideology, whose clinical exposure was primarily to White clients, and who was consistently and systematically discouraged from paying too much attention to race throughout his training, be anything but a good White therapist? p. 460 "

Competency Training: The Therapeutic Relationship

• Researchers and clinicians in the counselor education, social work, psychology, and marriage and family fields have indicated that the **therapeutic relationship is related directly to client change**, even more significantly than counseling techniques/treatment modalities (e.g., Hardy & Bobes, 2016; Locke, 1990; White & Parham, 1990).

• Clinicians are not prepared to work with Arican Americans. Cultural humility is necessary but <u>not</u> sufficient in working effectively African American clients.

The Therapeutic Relationship

• Establishing a sound therapeutic relationship is essential for culturally responsive counseling.

• Race has been acknowledged as an organizing principle in the therapeutic relationship.

• Cultural and racial bias can impede the formation of a supportive therapeutic environment (Jamal et al., 2020; Johnson & Caldwell, 2011; Hardy & Laszloffy, 2012).

Critical Emerging Issue

African American Families and Children with Disabilities

Black Parents and Children with Disabilities

Express dealing with ableists perspectives of their children and racist treatment from helping professionals (Burkett et al, 2017; Norton, 2020).

Concerned about police brutality of their child diagnosed with autism who does not respond or can not process a police command (Norton, 2020).

Few studies (Burkett et al, 2015; Burkett et al, 2017) are exploring the childrearing priorities and cultural expectations of African American parents.

Participants

•Purposive Sampling-wanted participants who could directly speak to the research objectives (Doyle et al, 2020). Five parents who participated in Parent Group Counseling.

	Participants				
	1 (Amon)	2 (Maya)	3 (Debra)	4 (Shantel)	5 (James)
Age	35	49	45	55	47
Racial identity	Black	Black	Black	Black	Black
Child Age	12	14	15	15	14
Disability	Bipolar/ Conduct Disorder	Bipolar	PTSD Autism	Bipolar	Bipolar/ PTSD

Findings

- African American parents in this study displayed agency and self determination as they navigated complex systems to rear their adolescent children. DisCrit and a Contextual Humanistic Perspective was used as critical interpretive frameworks for African American parents' experiences.

Two Themes

Follow my Directions

Counselor Undermines My Authority

Follow my Directions

I need you to follow my direction. You're 14 years old. You're becoming a man right now. You need to do what I say.

James

Follow my Directions

The other day when she came home, had all this lipstick on. We had agreed she could have a gloss, put some on in the morning—don't take it to school. The first thing she says, "Well, look –" Don't ever start a sentence with me with "Look." You're 15 and I'm 55. Stop. Go take it off and give me that lipstick... I don't even play. One thing, you gotta be cut and dry.

Shantel

Counselor Undermines My Authority

It's the 14-year-old who is the issue. Like I told his therapist he is pissing in my house in his room in the corner. I told him you will not do it in my house....They said give him a bucket so he could have something to pee in... he's trying to mark his–his territory. I told her (therapist) my son ain't no MFing animal. A lot of stuff that the therapist and probation officer, whoever the hell it is, I don't agree with half the time anyway.

Maya

Counselor Undermines My Authority

My daughter goes to a counselor right now. The woman, who is Caucasian, told her that she could work . I said, "On what planet?" She has mental illness, and if you don't deal with that first, how is she gonna work somewhere for somebody else? She filled out an application with my daughter and told her she could work a certain amount of hours every day. She couldn't even go to school that long.

 This woman has convinced her she can do anything she wants to do, and she doesn't have to follow any rules. She doesn't have to obey me.

Debra

Implications

Treatment modalities for mental and emotional disorders must consider external forces that impact the parenting of African American families who have children with disabilities.

Theoretical frameworks used in research and taught in counselor education programs must directly address the client (and their multiple identities) and the external forces they must negotiate.

Questions