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AN ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN-CENTERED PSYCHOLOGY, DIVERSITY, AND CULTURAL TRENDS USING THE SOCIAL THEORY MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Social Learning theory (SLT) is an avenue of behavior modification whose promotion of self reflection, proxy and collective agencies, serves as an excellent tool for dealing with diversity, self-esteem, self-identity and spirituality. These are all integral to the understanding and growth of the African American psyche. In implementing the SLT, scholar-practitioners challenged by the gap between the newly engendered African-centered psychology (ACP) and the impact of their service delivery will find themselves equipped to deal with pathological issues surrounding "Eurocentrism." Hence, they would have bridged the cultural and therapeutic gap. Further, they can modify ACP to enhance service delivery to a growing population due to the compatibility of the two schools of thought and themes.

INTRODUCTION

The 1960s was not only significant heralding the path for baby boomers, it was the era of civil rights and the quest for black supremacy. In the field of psychology, Blacks fought for improved and more culturally sensitive service delivery to diverse groups, specifically for Blacks (Black, Spence, & Omari, 2004; Carter & Forsyth, 2007; Kwate, 2003; Kwate, 2005; Munley, Lidderdale, Thiagarajan, & Null, 2004; Sheu & Lent, 2007). Other researchers including Kwate have proposed awareness and cognizance of treatment which is socially and culturally ground in African traditions and African

psyche. According to Kwate, these African-centered models of psychiatry had defied “orthodoxy” (p. 216) and challenged the social constructs of alternative models. Hunn (2004), joining the criticism of “Eurocentric” (p. 66) and dominant social constructs, also highlighted the exclusionary nature of this worldview. She added that *Eurocentrism* spawned destruction of competing philosophies, namely “Africentrism” (Wallace & Constantine, 2005, p. 370). If the current level of service is to be improved, scholar-practitioners will need to seek ways in which to bridge the disparity in treatment and the expectations of their clients. In the 21st century, the quest continues with some changes, much awareness and an openness of specialists to adhere to standards that befit their clients. This quest had led to this research which traced the historical development of African-centered psychology (ACP), its themes and its challenges with a view to developing solutions. Based on the ACP’s continued challenges of disparity in healthcare, and the need for behavior modification, the purpose of this paper is to compare ACP to the principles of Bandura’s social learning theory paying special attention to “self-efficacy, social modeling” (Bandura, 2006, p. 55) and spirituality. Ultimately, it is hoped that increased knowledge and sensitivity will lead to a more valued and culturally-sensitive treatment which can provide meaningful guidelines and theoretical focus of the issues of the African American population.

Introduction to Bandura’s Theory

Faced with inadequate behavioral theories, albeit their focus on individual change, Bandura proposed a unique theory that included “modeling,” and “self regulation” (Bandura, 2004, p. 614), which featured a change in the interplay between the individual and the environment. It gave a totally new slant to behaviorism. Bandura’s social cognitive theory was rooted in the neo-behaviorist school of thought with emphasis on central themes of learning through social, cognitive and behavioral modeling through the individual (Bandura, 2006a). It differed greatly by its dependence on “self processes” (Pajares, 2002, ¶ 4) and its lack of focus on biological determinism. Renshaw (2003) in supporting adaptation of a social learning theory concept assessed its strength which incorporated the social environment of the individual as a learning forum. In this sense the social learning theory emphasized the collective approach to learning which was also reflective of African centered values. Under this theory, learning occurred within “social relationships” (p. 360) which included the family, and church. It was not so much what took place but how individuals interacted within these groupings which was observable and worthy of replication. Bandura (2004) pointed out an important theoretical and therapeutic change which impacted health care in the 1960s. There was a shift from problem modification to specific conversation on the problem. There was also the encouragement of self empowerment in problem solving through these *social relationships*. These processes would prove helpful to the modification of personal behaviors in the therapeutic environment.

Individualism versus Collectivism

Contemporary America rewarded self-determinism and individualism and promoted strength and growth of the individual (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Within the African American psyche was the acculturated value of togetherness

and community which was one of the unique features of that culture (Wallace & Constantine, 2005). Further, Brook and Pahl (2005) discovered a “kinship connection” (p. 339) that was integral to the African American identity than individual goals. For the African American “collective coping” (Utsey et al., 2007, p. 124) was embedded in the culture indicating a preference for group centeredness. Notwithstanding this research, there were some researchers who rejected the mutual exclusion between individualism and collectivism (Brewer & Chen, 2007). They believed that the true definition of self included three tiers of relationship, namely “individual, relational and collective” (Brewer & Chen, p. 137). In this study, the author will adhere to the traditional connotation of self and individualism and juxtapose these concepts with collectivism.

African-centered Issues and Benefits

Among the problems facing the African-centered psychologist was that of racial identity, and racial discrimination. Dana (2002) defined racial discrimination as the inadequacy of services and treatment which faced the African American population. She criticized the usage of behavioral models which were largely based on *Eurocentric* values which were not beneficial as they favored stereotypes and racial bias. She suggested training which targeted biases and equipped psychologists with “cultural competence” (p. 7) as a means of delivering better health care. Her advocacy for this *competence* was also echoed by other researchers (e.g. Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007; Sanchez-Hucles & Jones, 2005). For the purposes of this study the author will use the concepts of “racial and ethnic identity” (Cokley, 2005, p. 518) which seem to be often confused, and used interchangeably. In essence, some researches proved that an understanding of both ethnic and racial identities was crucial to a healthy self understanding (Brook & Pahl, 2005; Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005). Helms, Jernigan, and Mascher added that a failure to adhere to this construct could lead to other problems such as “racial profiling” (p. 35).

Applications of Cognitive Theory

Bandura cited two different courses of learning which involved reinforcements through rewards and punishment and “social modeling” (Bandura, 2006b, p. 55). He argued for the practical benefits of social learning in effecting change, namely through attachment, association and future hope. He advocated for social change through “symbolic modeling” (p. 55) in the key role of motivating, and developing social consciousness. Alongside modeling was Bandura’s “perceived self-efficacy” (p. 56). The highlight of this mode was the ability to be a self-created positive thinker under the centralized theme of beliefs (Paignon, Desrichard, & Bollon, 2004; Pajares, 2002). *Self-efficacy* ran counter to the community spirit of African-centeredness, yet within the community there was the need to develop one’s own identity. Moreover, Bandura’s theory contrasted with the traditional theories placing more onuses on the individual and personal agency (Pajares, 2002). Bandura supported this dual role of self as he highlighted that motivation lay at the core of unilateral and collective achievement (Bandura, 2006b). Bandura added that it was modeling which established the *self regulatory* mode also determining whether the individual engaged in pessimism or optimism. Further, efficacy beliefs influenced the success of the futuristic self-producing

resiliency though reinforcement of past successes (Luszczynska, Gutiérrez-Doña, & Schwarzer, 2005). The tri-fold aspects of agency at the personal, proxy and collective levels are crucial to an understanding of cognitive learning theory. Bandura's recommendation is a blend of all three as in reality human beings experienced a blend of three agents at work.

Spirituality

Mazama (2002) defined African spirituality as a method of liberation and as an integral part of the African culture. He viewed the application of a Eurocentric and monotheistic God, as detrimental to the African. For the African American, spirituality was an ideal coping strategy which reinforced the collectivism of the culture (Constantine, Donnelly, & Myers, 2002). Within the support community was the African American's reliance on an unknown, namely the spiritual advocate. While forming a symbolic alliance with this role model, Bandura saw the individual's growing capacity for "self-regulation, and self-reflection" (Bandura, 2003, p. 167). The active ingredient in *modeling* lay in its symbolization (Bandura, 2003, p. 168). Bandura (2003) also cautioned against dependence on a divine proxy agency which might contradict the collective and individual self-regulatory aspects of social learning. Should a replacement of the personal agency powers occur, then the consequent action would be a replacement of the motivational powers of self-efficacy and also the adoption of a passive role in the individual. Some researchers have supported Bandura's proposal of a divine proxy agent whose role is supportive, fostering self reflection and *self-efficacy* (Oman & Thoresen, 2003; Silberman, 2003). Faced with a debate on the inclusion of a spiritual proxy agent as an aspect of social learning, Bandura redefined the agent's role as one of "supportive partnership" (Oman & Thoresen, p. 199). This agency however, limited itself to a monotheistic society. What we can surmise is that the proxy partnership with an unseen God cannot truly be seen as having a role modeling effect. This relationship serves more as a strong emotional support as the individual undergoes a strenuous path of change that may bring about some frustration and require inordinate amounts of perseverance.

Relevant Recommendations

African-centered psychologists would be well advised to utilize social learning and specifically Bandura's social learning theory to undergird their message of change and hope through social and symbolic modeling (Lightsey, Burke, Ervin, Henderson, & Lee, 2006). Bandura saw an easy transition into the arena of change as he envisioned personal behavioral change eradicating deterrents to growth in the form of self doubt. Pointing to the spirit of resiliency, Bandura underscored its power in the face of obstacles. African-Americans who are faced with self doubts and discrimination can find positive role models to emulate, whose experiences speak of hope amid strife and adversity. Optimism for the future was very much a part of self efficacy as it emboldened the individual for collective endeavors (Bandura, 2002). The Lightsey, et al. study reiterated the value of self-esteem as a superior companion to general *self-efficacy* in warding off depression and other negative thoughts. Bandura (2004) reminded that the debut treatment of phobic disorders was effected through "social modeling" (p. 620). With further testing the model can be used to test other mental conditions in order to

build a unique blend of optimism and *self efficacy*. Since human beings are not unaffected machines and do contribute to their socialization and hence their pathologies, then one tool of assisting them with their disorders should be the strict encouragement of “self-regulatory functions” (p. 623). Since human motivation is cognitively driven also, there is a place where efficacy beliefs can be used in a reinforcing sense to overcome self doubts and insufficiency. Bandura also endorsed the success of *self efficacy* in supporting increased motivation and personal achievements (Bandura & Locke, 2003). *Self-efficacy* implied individual control over actions. It negated the control of biological determination and placed more emphasis on the social environment.

Critique has been launched at the power of self-efficacy on the grounds that it was not beneficial (Vancouver & Kendall, 2006). Pointing out the weaknesses of *self-efficacy* theories, Vancouver and Kendall illustrated how the lack of individual mental preparedness led to frustration on the individual’s part. In addition, the lack of preparedness could mitigate goal achievement. They challenged that change and motivation hence were not as automatic as Bandura described them. Bandura countered this by reminding that specificity of goals was empowering and also the feedback involved in the process of empowerment energized the individual (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Vancouver (2005) has also discussed another weakness with social learning theories in general and with Bandura’s specifically. He said these theories were based on mechanistic approaches and negated the individual’s volition and mental processes. There were more relics of the behavioral period than of the cognitive genre. To the extent that they ignored these elements, they failed to be characteristic of human beings and hence were irrelevant (Vancouver, 2005).

Bandura (2004) recommended *social modeling* as an effective tool for treatment of phobias. Based on the discussions and evidence, the author also recommends that social modeling be used by scholar-practitioners and theorists alike to advance African-centered psychology. In light of the negative identity, which is a relic of a discriminatory era and African American psyche, the advocates of ACP will find Bandura’s social learning theory useful in eliminating negativity and in achieving behavior modification for these individuals which can lead to self efficacy and increased positivity. The author also proposes that the themes of African-centered psychology of self-definition, and spirituality which are unique features of the school of thought, be coupled and cross matched with Bandura’s themes of self-efficacy and spirituality in a cause and effect relationship. Support for Bandura’s theory as a valuable tool is cited from many sources (e.g., Bandura, 2004; Paignon, Desrichard, & Bollon, 2004; Richard, Diefendorff, & Martin, 2006). The author also recommends further research with existing theories, namely positive psychology to find similar themes which can be applied to the development of the field.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Social change is not automatic and any transition will need in-depth training and preparation on the part of the scholar-practitioner as facilitator and the individual as client. It also means addressing issues which coexist with those addressed in this paper,

namely socioeconomic status. Application of learning concepts must meet the standards of testing. Facilitators should not assume wholesale adoption of theories but through experimentation should be able to adopt concepts as they deem them relevant to their practices and to increase their cultural competence. Despite the debate as to the value of learning theories, the evidence of their strengths far outweighs the negative outcomes. Social learning theory is a valuable tool for the rebirth and rekindling of the African-centered spirit. Further, the issue of diversity exceeds the bounds of African-centered psychology, hence all scholar-practitioners can avail themselves of summary cultural competence through this avenue.

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