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Curriculum Design for Black (African American) Psychology

In this chapter, Black psychology is defined and a curriculum structure is presented that can be used as the basis for an introductory course; for inclusion in regularly scheduled courses such as introductory, developmental, abnormal, or social psychology; or for the development of over a dozen specialty courses in African American psychology. Emphasis is on the identification of source material that will assist the instructor in designing undergraduate and graduate curriculum content in African American psychology.¹

What is African American Psychology?

It is easy to say that African American psychology is that body of work that pertains to, and originates from, African Americans. It is more difficult to define the distinctive features of African American psychology, which in fact originate from an African philosophical base (Akbar, 1984; Baldwin, 1985) and can be seen in juxtaposition to a European cosmology or worldview (Baldwin, 1985). This emerging philosophy reflects differences in epistemology.

Instead of the traditional emphasis on the individual, which is characteristic of Caucasian American psychology, African American psychology emphasizes the collective or the tribe. It recognizes the historical connection between generations, rather than the ahistorical "me generation" that is consonant with an individual-oriented psychology (Fairchild & Tucker, 1982). It is concerned with understanding the individual's harmonious relationship with his or her surroundings and how that harmony may be disrupted. Finally, African American psychology deals with the proactive role of the psychologist in bringing about social change (Fairchild & Wright, 1984) rather than the detached perspective of the European American social scientist.

General Source Materials

Before turning to the specifics of curricular design, it is useful to identify a number of general sources of course materials.

¹ It should be noted that race names evolve, and "African American" is becoming a preferred name for persons of African descent living in the Americas (Fairchild, 1986a).


A number of journals regularly include articles of interest to the instructor of African American psychology. These include Journal of Black Psychology (published by the Association of Black Psychologists and the only journal devoted exclusively to this area), Journal of Black Studies, Western Journal of Black Studies, and Journal of Negro Education. A guide to other scholarly journals in Black studies may be found in a book by the Chicago Center for Afro-American Studies and Research (1981).

The last 10 years have also witnessed a proliferation of books geared specifically to African American psychology. These include edited volumes such as those by Jones (1980) and Boykin, Franklin, and Yates (1980) and several book-length monographs (Jenkins, 1982; Karembe, 1982; White, 1984).

In addition, a number of edited books have appeared that are not necessarily written from a psychological perspective but include chapters of interest to the instructor or student of African American psychology. Most important among these are the edited volumes by Sage Publications on contemporary Black thought (Asante & Vandi, 1980), Black men (Gary, 1981), Black families (H. P. McAdoo, 1981), Black children (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1985), and Black women (Rodgers-Rose, 1980). Other useful books and journals have a more multiethnic focus. For example, a special issue of Psychotherapy was devoted to ethnic minorities (Dudley & Rawlins, 1985), and several excellent books address clinical issues from multiethnic perspectives (e.g., Sue & Moore, 1984).

Instructors interested in supplementing reading material with audiovisual aids might consult Mind Productions and Associates (P.O. Box 11221, Tallahassee, FL 32302) for audiotapes by N. I. Akbar (1985) or the Association of Black Psychologists (P.O. Box 4979, Washington, DC 20040-5899) for audio- and videotapes by other prominent African American psychologists. The Sourcebook on the Teaching of Black Psychology (Jones, 1978), although somewhat dated, contains a wealth of information in terms of syllabi and classroom activities.

Curriculum Design

An introductory course should include some coverage of the major areas of specialization within African American psychology, specifically developmental, clinical, educational, community, and applied perspectives. In addition, specialized courses should be developed around topics that are of central concern, such as gender (African American men and women and their relationships), employment, health and mental health, criminal justice, personality (with an emphasis on self-concept and identity), race relations, testing, and IQ. In the material that follows, I describe some of these areas and identify representative course materials for each.

Life Span Development

African American developmental psychology has focused on the child (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1985; Spencer, Brookins, & Allen, 1985), the adult (Gary, 1981; Rodgers-Rose, 1980), and the aged (Jackson, 1980, 1982). In addition to this life span per-
spective, the instructor should identify the intergenerational nature of obstacles confronting the African American community and show how this history is manifested across age groups.

**Gender**

One of the most active areas of research and theory has been concerned with the African American woman (Allen, 1981, 1982; Murray & Scott, 1982; Rodgers-Rose, 1980; Stevenson, 1985). The African American man has received somewhat less attention, although a number of sources are available (Cazenave, 1984; Gary, 1981). Studies in both areas tend to emphasize the historical and contemporary transmission of gender inequality and its effects on individual functioning. Finally, the most controversial topic in this area is male–female relationships (see Fairchild, 1985b). Issues include imbalanced male–female ratios, the internalization of negative images in the broader culture, and the prescription of superordinate–subordinate gender roles in the broader society (Jewell, 1983; Semaj, 1982).

**The Family**

The African American family is an area with one of the longest research traditions in the social sciences. Of particular note are edited volumes by H. P. McDoo (1981) and Staples (1978) and concise analyses by Nobles (1978, 1981). J. L. McDoo (1981; 1983) provided a rare focus on African American fathers; Simms-Brown (1982) examined the female role in a family context, and DeJarnett and Raven (1981) provided an empirical analysis of power in spousal relationships. In this area, African American psychology counters negative stereotypes and biases while underscoring the strengths and resilience of African American families.

**Education**

The literature on educational psychology as it pertains to African Americans is also substantial and includes theoretical (Banks, 1982; Boykin, 1982) and empirical (Fairchild, 1984b) analyses. Source material is available on early childhood (Hart, Guthrie, & Winfield, 1980), high school (Hare, 1985), and postsecondary education (Ayers, 1983; Willie & Cunin, 1981). Special foci should include the role of Black English in education (Hilliard, 1983a; Troutman & Falk, 1982), school desegregation (Baddock, 1985; Hawley, 1981), the role of African American teachers and faculty (Exum, 1983), and policy analyses (Hilliard, 1984).

**Employment and Economics**

African American psychology has embraced issues surrounding employment and economics as keys to understanding the life circumstances of African Americans. Useful topics include the effects of job discrimination (Griffith & Griffith, 1986), interracial relations in the workplace (Asante & Davis, 1986), earnings and oc-

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**Occupational mobility (Collins, 1983), and unemployment (Bowman, Jackson, Hatchett, & Gurin, 1982).**

**African American Personality**

The study of the African American personality has historically been marked by extreme biases that have endorsed negative racial stereotypes (Banks, McQuater, Ross, & Ward, 1983). In contrast, most of the recent literature in this area has examined such issues as Black identity and activism (Allen, 1984), self-concept and self-esteem (Cross, 1978; Farrell & Olson, 1983; Stephan & Rosenfield, 1979), bi-culturalism (Chimezie, 1985), and personality assessment (Baldwin & Bell, 1985; Gynther, 1981).

**Clinical Issues**

Clinical issues in African American psychology are far ranging, including etiology (Bulhan, 1985), epidemiology (Williams, 1986), diagnosis (Jones & Gray, 1986), and treatment and training (Dudley & Rawlins, 1985). Special topics include race of therapist issues (Greene, 1985), gender issues (Smith, 1981), posttraumatic stress disorder among Vietnam veterans (Allen, 1986), drug and alcohol abuse (Tucker, 1985), and suicide (Baker, 1984). African American psychologists have been particularly concerned with societal factors that may affect mental health and with the development of culturally appropriate assessment, diagnostic, and treatment regimens.

**Psychological Testing**

The debate concerning the relation between race and IQ is one of the most controversial areas in African American psychology and has generated voluminous literature and a lively debate (see Eysenck & Xamin, 1981). It is useful to include and discuss works that have addressed African Americans as genetically inferior (e.g., Jensen, 1985) as well as those that sharply rebuke the racial inferiority perspective (e.g., Persell, 1981). Focused topics include race of examiner effects (Hanley & Barclay, 1979), social class effects (Tate & Gibson, 1980), and legal issues (Hilliard, 1983a). Many of the issues surrounding the race and IQ controversy also pertain to general psychological assessment (Cameron, 1980; Wyche & Novick, 1985).

**Other Areas**

Depending on the interests of the instructor, a number of additional areas may be presented, such as health psychology (Aidhenubwa, 1985; Boone, 1985), the mass media (Fairchild, 1984c; Fairchild, Stockard, & Bowman, 1986; Staples & Jones, 1985), race relations (Bowser & Hunt, 1981; Fairchild & Gurin, 1978), community psychology (Akbah, 1985; Johnson, 1981), crime and punishment (Benokraitis & Griffin-Keeve, 1982; Christianson, 1981; Denno, 1981; Kleck, 1981; Watts & Watts, 1981), and international perspectives (Awanbor, 1982; Bintie, 1984).
Instructors could also develop courses or sections of courses devoted to the work of a single individual.

**Conclusion**

African American psychology has grown substantially in the last 20 years. Sufficient curricular material now exists to develop a dozen or more specialized courses. This wealth of information greatly facilitates the development of an introductory course (Fairchild, 1984a) and provides opportunities for including relevant material into the traditional psychology curriculum. More important, the field has reached a point where it is now feasible to consider the development of a sequence of courses that would constitute a major or minor in African American psychology in college studies. To apply the African American philosophical base to the teaching of African American psychology, instructors would present the literature within a historical framework, seek understanding of the commonalities as well as the unique qualities of the African American experience, and encourage strategies that would bring about positive structural changes within the broader society.

**References**


Black psychology, also called African psychology, is an African cosmological lens applied to social or psychological phenomena. This is approached from two perspectives: The first perspective considers these concepts and theories as universal, which means that the lens is appropriate in studying all human beings, not just those of African heritage. This approach was embodied in early efforts by black scholars to challenge the assumption that African Americans were inferior. Over time, it grew to also African American Psychology: From Africa to America, Fourth Edition provides comprehensive coverage of the field of African American psychology. More coverage of literature and research on Blacks throughout the diaspora, especially in Africa, provide historical context and documents heterogeneity among African Americans in the United States. Expanded coverage of topics as a result of recent research includes LGBTQ individuals, African American fathers, colorism, intersectionality, electronic cigarettes, social media, and more. More… Available Formats. African American Psychologists and African-Centered Psychology. African Philosophy. African-Centered Research With African Americans. Methodological and Research Issues. Godfather of African American psychology; one of the founders of ABPsi; wrote article in ebony magazine that helped alter perception of black psychology; Wrote “The Psychology of Black People” (1972) Advanced understanding of psychology of AAs long b4 was recognized as discipline in psychology Argued that Western models of human behavior not appropriate for studying AAs; AAs must define their paradigms. Reactive, focuses on African American population understands humans through self realization seen in practice of Kemit people of Egypt considers self knowledge and intuition important as that which is observable. Western Psych vs AA Psych.