

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THEIR STATUS IN THE OF SOCIETY

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Abstract

The aim of this book is to provide an overview of two emerging and inter-secting psychological framework: womanist psychology. As with the sociological study of womanism, it is important to note that although in name these theories may be early in development, in praxis they are long-standing, often overlooked realities of numerous racially and ethnically marginalized women. This article explores the interdisciplinary foundations of these psychologies, the state of the current literature on each, and the needs for future development. We, the editors of this volume, hope that this work provokes new thought in these areas that will result in innovative, nuanced, and life-enhancing theories and interventions.

Keywords: Psychology of African American women, gender identity, issues, concept of womanism.

The intended audience is primarily psychologists and psychology students of diverse backgrounds who are committed to developing an inclusive, ethical, and culturally congruent approach to their understanding and application of psychology. The second and equally important audience is ethnically diverse women, African American and Latina women nonpsychologists in particular, who are interested in this work for either personal edification or scholarship in fields outside of psychology.

As we know, woman passed through many problems, obstacles and barriers to become an important member in the society. In the past, woman did not have any kinds of rights, she was isolated, neglected and mistreated by man. The psychology of African American women and Latinas is rich and complex, encompassing self-expression, creativity, nuanced gender roles, spirituality, community and family orientation, resistance, and resilience. We are women who bring healing, wholeness, and restoration to ourselves and our communities. The growing literature on our experiences, affect, cognitions, and agency includes narratives of survival, struggle, and soaring. Although we live with great risk economically, psychologically, socially, and politically, we also employ noteworthy ways of coping, growing, and thriving. As opposed to much general psychology literature that pathologizes or marginalizes our experiences, this work centralizes our psyches and unpacks the underexplored areas of our historical and contemporary ways of knowing and approaches to living. The value of the cultural and gender identity of African American women and Latinas must not be narrowly viewed from a deficit perspective but instead as an asset and contributor to meaning, identity, and strengths.

Psychologists, personally and through their professionally directed efforts of advocacy, counseling, teaching, research, and consultation, are in a unique position to promote equity and social justice (Comas-Díaz, 2000). The American Psychological Association (APA) has promoted a number of key priorities that have assisted in laying the groundwork for this work. APA's Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice and Organization (American Psychological Association, 2002) state that race and ethnicity must be understood in concert with other identity markers, such as gender,

socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, migration status, disability, and spirituality/religious identity. In the APA (2010) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, the organization noted, Where scientific or professional knowledge in the discipline of psychology establishes that an understanding of factors associated with age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language or socioeconomic status is essential for effective implementation of their services or research, psychologists have or obtain the training, experience, consultation or supervision necessary to ensure the competence of their services, or they make appropriate referrals. (p. 4)

This underscores the need for education regarding the psychology of African American women and Latinas. It is unethical to ignore these factors, and doing so can be clinically damaging. The Ethics Code states clearly that psychologists are to take steps to avoid doing harm to their clients. Specifically, Psychologists do not knowingly engage in behavior that is harassing or demeaning to persons with whom they interact in their work based on factors such as those persons' age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language or socioeconomic status. (p. 5)

APA (2001) also adopted a resolution to counter the prevalence and consequences of racism, oppression, discrimination, religious intolerance, and xenophobia, including the specific manifestations of these violations on women. These guidelines and resolutions clearly articulate the mandate for the field of psychology to be open to the multiple, layered, complex, intersecting identities of all peoples.

The term womanist was coined by Walker (1983): "a Black feminist or feminist of color committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health" (p. xi). In other words, in addition to centralizing survival and wholeness of women and men, a womanist does not create a hierarchy between the fights against racism and sexism but sees both of these fights as necessary and central. Womanism is a sociopolitical framework that centralizes race, gender, class, and sexuality as central markers of women's lived experiences (Brown-Douglas, 1993).

It moves beyond the compartmentalizing of Black women's experience as is often seen in feminism and multiculturalism and moves toward an integrated perspective and analysis. The womanist perspective maintains that addressing racism, ethnocentrism, and poverty is equally important as addressing gender issues, such as sexism (Henley, Meng, O'Brien, McCarthy, & Sockloskie, 1998). Similar to Black theology, central aspects of womanism are liberation, self-determination, and the humanity of all people with special attention to those who have been dehumanized. Similar to feminism, womanism honors women's multiple ways of knowing, including the valuing of spirit and the unspoken. Womanism is holistic in its recognition and celebration of the various aspects of black female identity.

According to Walker (1983), womanist identity has multiple aspects; one aspect is that the affect and behavior of a womanist demonstrate empowerment, love, spirituality, and strength. Womanist agency was described by Walker as courageous, audacious, and willful. Womanists love themselves and other women, sexually or nonsexually, and this love transcends boundaries to reach all of humanity, desiring that all people would survive and thrive. Walker further noted that womanists celebrate life fully, through the arts, such as music and dance, as well as through the spirit.

Despite the realities of oppression, a womanist recognizes her divine identity as a living reflection of powerful good on the earth. Womanists are also collectivistic and community oriented in that the focus of womanism moves beyond individual well-being to encompass the well-being of entire peoples and communities and then to humanity overall. To counter the notion that womanism is merely a subset of feminism, Walker described a womanist as purple in contrast to the lavender of feminism. In other words, womanism represents strength that is not a dilution or lesser construct than feminism or Black identity. Harrell, Coleman, and Adams (2014) noted that womanism is "a way of understanding the struggle for wholeness among women of African descent who refuse to collude with the invisibility of their womanhood or Blackness demanded by gender and racial oppression" (p. 75). Womanism is grounded in notions of possibility, hope, and change that enhance optimal living that transcends from survival to thriving (Westfield, 2007). Walker gave a psychological rationale for the use of the word

womanism in her 1984 New York Times interview (Bradley, 1984) when she stated that a new word must be created when the old word (feminism) fails to capture the behavior and change that one is seeking to identify.

It is important to take note of the criticism that has arisen regarding the term womanism. Although Walker (1983) explicitly included same-gender-loving women in her original definition of the term, Coleman (2013) described the tendency of many womanist theologians to exclude lesbian and bisexual women of faith from their scholarship and ministry. Their application of the term to only apply to the experiences of heterosexual Christian women has led to some lesbians of color rejection of the label womanist. Given its original inclusive intent as well as the presence of womanist theologians who are also inclusive in their use of the word, we find it valuable to claim the construct for this discourse of holistic psychology, which attends to life at the intersection of multiple identities, including but not limited to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexuality. Additionally, we note that some have championed the terms Africana womanist or African womanist to refer to a more Black nationalist political view, which is also less inclusive than the original construct proposed by Walker. Given its original meaning and the phrasing “Africana womanist,” which can distinguish the two constructs, we choose to embrace the term womanist as attending to and centralizing issues of race and culture while still holding on to the aims of creating communities that build bridges cross racial lines.

An additional debate has centered on who can adopt the label womanist, with some arguing that the term describes African-descent women, others broadening the term to include all ethnically marginalized women, and still others including all people who endorse the sociopolitical priorities of womanism. Concern has been raised about persons with White privilege coming into womanist scholarship and erasing Black women’s power and voice through appropriation. Another concern is that those who personally and/or politically are not committed to combating anti-Blackness and anti-womanhood will enter womanist circles and dilute the focus resulting in the repeated marginalization of African-descendant women. For the purposes of womanist and mujerista psychologies, we contend that ethnically marginalized women and men can contribute to womanist and mujerista psychologies through teaching, counseling, and research. Other persons who would like to practice, teach, or research womanist and mujerista psychologies should do so with particular self-reflection, awareness, and ownership of their privilege, respect for self-definition, and a focused active commitment to combating racialized gender oppression, as well as all intersecting forms of oppression.

Additionally, we recommend that persons who identify as feminists or liberation psychologists engage actively in immersing those fields in combating oppression that particularly targets African American and Latina women.

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