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Through the Prism of Black Psychology: A Critical Review of Conceptual and Methodological Issues in Africology as Seen Through the Paradigmatic Lens of Black Psychology

by

DeReef F. Jamison
North Carolina A & T State University
dfjamiso@ncat.edu

DeReef Jamison (dfjamiso@ncat.edu) is an Assistant Professor of the African American Experience in the Division of University Studies at North Carolina A & T State University. His research interests are African-American cultural and gender identity, community activism among Black psychologists, the psychological aspects of oppression and liberation, and the intellectual history and diasporic connections of Africana Psychology. He has taught courses such as: The Psychology of the African American Experience, The Psychology of Prejudice and Racism in the African Diaspora, African American Social Science, Africa, African Americans and Pan Africanism, and Introduction to African American Studies. Dr. Jamison has previously published articles in the *Journal of African American Studies* and *The Griot*.

Abstract

This paper attempts to address the invisibility of Africana psychological theory, research, and methodology in Africology by synthesizing the competing definitions, schools of thought, and research agendas in Black Psychology. Attention will be given to the various ways in which Black psychologists have attempted to deconstruct and reconstruct traditional psychological thought as well as construct new definitions, theories, measurements, and conceptual frameworks for understanding and interpreting the psychological experiences of people of African descent. Although psychology was identified by Karenga as one of the core components in the emerging discipline of African-American Studies, very few of the existing institutes, programs, and departments of African-American Studies include psychology as a major part of their curriculum. As a psycho-historical endeavor, a primary concern of Africana Psychology is with understanding how the historical experiences of being an African in America have impacted African-American psyches. Thus, it is argued that if the discipline of Africology is attempting to fully understand Africana experiences, Africology must re-examine the importance of psychology and its role in aiding Africana scholars interpret and understand the experiences of people of African descent in the Americas and throughout the diaspora.

Although Black [African, Africana and/or African American] psychology was identified by Maulana Karenga (1992) as one of the core components in the emerging discipline of Africology [African American, Black, Africana and/or Afro-American Studies], very few of the existing institutes, programs, and departments of Africology include Black psychology as a major part of their curriculum. As a psycho-historical endeavor, a primary concern of Black Psychology is to understand how the historical experiences of being an African in America have impacted African-American psyches. Thus, it is argued here that if the discipline of Africology is attempting to fully understand African American experiences, Africology programs must re-examine the importance of Black psychology and its role in aiding scholars interpret and understand the experiences of people of African descent in America. This paper attempts to address the invisibility of Black psychological theory, research, and practice in Africology by: (1) providing a brief history of the intellectual antecedents to the field of Black Psychology; (2) identifying the social and political context in which Black psychological theory, research and practice emerged; (3) synthesizing the competing definitions, schools of thought, and research agendas in Black Psychology; and (4) demonstrating the relevance and applicability of Black Psychology to the future of Africology in particular, and to the Africana life-world in general.

Black Psychology is composed of various schools of thought that reflect the particular theoretical orientations of its practitioners. However, it should be kept in mind that although the compartmentalization of these various schools of thought is useful for conceptualization purposes, there is also much overlapping between the various schools. Karenga (1992) has identified the schools of thought among Black Psychologists as the traditional school, the reformist school and the radical school. According to Karenga (1992), the traditional school is characterized by: (1) its defensive and/or reactive posture; (2) its lack of concern about the existence of and subsequently the development of a Black Psychology as evidenced by its continued support of “traditional” (Eurocentric) psychological models with minor changes; (3) its concern with changing white attitudes; and (4) its being critical without offering alternatives for correcting problems. One of the leading figures in the traditional school as identified by Karenga (1992) is Kenneth Clark who was the first and only black to be president of APA and in collaboration with his wife Mamie Phipps-Clark co-authored the famous doll study that influenced the Brown vs. Board of Education decision. Other influential scholars were William Grier and Price Cobbs with their classic text “Black Rage” (1968) and Alvin Poussaint’s “Why Blacks Kill Blacks” (1972).

In spite of the negative connotations explicit in many of the critiques of the traditional school (Karenga, 1992; Kambon, 1998), these scholars seem to have contributed significantly to the development of conceptual and methodological issues in Black Psychology. For example, the Clark study brought attention to the psychological processes involved in education (particularly issues of identity, self-hatred and self-esteem) of children of African descent, which in turn had a major impact on how the educational process was understood and perceived. Most importantly, the Clarks' studies demonstrated how social science research could play a role in not only influencing but also changing social policy.

Grier and Cobbs (1968) work illustrated the manner in which traditional (Eurocentric) scholarship could be applied to the conditions facing people of African descent. They argued that the causes of Black rage may be found in: (1) Blacks understandable and necessary cultural paranoia; (2) Blacks cultural depression and cultural masochism reflecting a general "sadness and intimacy with misery", i.e. Cornell West's (1993) concept of Black Nihilism and (3) Blacks cultural anti-socialism, i.e. disrespect for American laws which are designed to protect whites not Blacks (Karenga, 1992). While very Freudian in their approach, they do begin the process of defining the clinical issues of what constitutes the complexity and diversity of "psychopathology" among people of African descent.

It must also be acknowledged that Poussaint (1972) was among the first Black psychologists to address the issue of Black on Black violence. Nonetheless, Africologists should be critical of the fundamental assumptions underlying his question "Why Blacks Kill Blacks", since the title can be interpreted as meaning that Blacks are solely responsible for the violence in their community, and therefore observers may fail to acknowledge the social and political conditions that contribute to the violence seen in these Black communities (Wilson, 1998). However, Poussaint does put forth the argument that there are perhaps four reasons why Blacks kill blacks, which include: (1) the American cultural experience that teaches 'crime and violence as a way to success and manhood; (2) the fact that 'Americans respect violence and often will not respond to just demand except through violence' as with the revolts by people of African descent; (3) the sense of power violence gives the oppressed and (4) the dehumanizing transformation in incarceration which perpetuates the cycle of violence (Karenga, 1992). Thus, Poussaint's research raised the issue of Black social scientists investigating social and political issues that impact the quality of life experienced by Black people.

The reformist school shares with the traditional school the concern for white attitudes, but tends to place more emphasis on confronting public policies that maintain and support institutional racism, according to Karenga, (1992). Black psychologists in the reformist school “tend to emphasize the American slavery legacies of the continuing oppression of Blacks and the subsequent creation of a relatively distinct reactive pattern of adaptation among Blacks in America” (Kambon, 1998, p. 231). Major theorists in the reformist school were identified as Charles Thomas, Joseph White and William Cross (Karenga, 1992). These theorists began “to advocate an Afro-centric psychology but still combine it with traditional focus on appeal for change that would ostensibly benefit Blacks and whites and thus U.S. society” (Karenga, 1992, p. 325). Thus, members of this school of thought “stand as bridges between the traditional and radical schools, attempting a synthesis of the social and discipline criticism of the traditional school and the demands for and development of new models and professional engagement from the radical school” (Karenga, 1992, p. 329).

Similar to the declarations made by Black Psychologists such as Green (1974) and Smith (1974), Thomas (1979) emphasized the social responsibility of psychologists. He argued that Black social scientists are responsible for “defining, defending and developing information systems that will give Blacks increased socio-political power” (p. 7). In addition, Thomas contributes to the re-conceptualization process of Eurocentric/Western psychology within Black Psychology by critiquing the universalism embedded in Eurocentric psychology. Thomas reforms the conceptualizations of Merton (1967), Horney (1945), and Pettigrew (1964), who posited that humans may respond in various ways to the social, cultural and political conditions they encounter with primary responses consisting of turning against, turning towards, and turning away. Similarly, Thomas suggests that the oppression of people of African descent created social roles that were designed to sustain and maintain oppressive conditions, such as: (1) hybrid or bad niggers; (2) conformists or good Negroes; (3) marginalists or white middle class Negroes and (4) rebels or Black militants (Thomas, 1974; Karenga, 1992). Therefore, he takes the position that “if Blackness came into existence as a healthy support state, it cannot be logically used as a symptomatology of maladaptive behavior” (Thomas, 1978. pp. 21-22). Thus, Thomas argues that the psychology of people of African descent not be viewed as substandard to the European-American experience, pathological, or culturally deficient, but as a culturally specific psychology that is valuable in and of itself.

Joseph White (1980) continues this questioning of the conceptual framework as well as the value of Eurocentric theory and methodology. He asserts that “not all traditional elite psychological theory is useless” (p. 8). In urging the development of a Black psychology, White challenges Black social scientists “to come up with more accurate and comprehensive explanations” (White, 1980, p. 8) in order to gain a better understanding of the African American life world.

Thus, he warns that we should approach Eurocentric psychology with caution and determine the extent to which it is relevant and can be modified and made applicable to the life experiences of people of African descent (Thomas, 1980; Karenga, 1992).

William Cross (1971) took an innovative approach to the study of the development of Black consciousness for Africans in the United States. He is best known for his conceptualization of the various stages of Black identity. Building on Erickson's (1978) stages of child development that emphasized the contradictions and difficulties experienced when individuals or groups of people attempted to transition from one stage to the next stage of personal development, Cross established a theory of Black psychological development called "Nigrescence". The Nigrescence model attempted to account "for the progression of African Americans through sequential stages to arrive at a healthy racial identity" (Bellgrave & Allison, 2006, p. 20). The stages in the process of Nigrescence were identified as: (1) Pre-encounter; (2) Dissonance/Encounter; (3) Immersion-emersion; (4) Internalization and (5) Internalization-Commitment. According to the theory, "each stage is characterized by certain affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions" (Bellgrave & Allison, 2006, p. 21). Whether scholars were conducting research that sought to affirm and validate the theory, expanding the theoretical parameters of the theory, appropriating the theory for use with different diasporic populations, or countering the claims of the theory by offering alternative interpretations, a substantial amount of the literature on cultural identity in Black psychology has responded in some shape, form or fashion to Cross' theory of Nigrescence (Akbar, 1981; Azibo, 1988; Banks, 1976; Baldwin, 1979; Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1998).

While the reform school's analysis begins with the enslavement period up until contemporary times, the radical school argues that an authentic psychology of Black folk must go beyond the shores of the "New World" to discover the African roots of this American fruit (Nobles, 1974.) The defining characteristic of most of the radical school of thought is their emphasizing that an African worldview analysis is essential to understanding the psychology of people of African descent. Major figures within the radical school that contributed to the development of an African worldview analysis are Nobles,(1974), Akbar (1994), and Kambon (1998). Nobles' (1980) article "African Philosophy: Foundation for Black Psychology" was one of the first articles to articulate an African philosophical basis for understanding the psychology of people of African descent.

Compared to Black psychologists from the reformist school that focuses on the psychological consequences of being Black, Nobles argued that:

Black psychology is something more than the psychology of the so-called underprivileged peoples, more than the experience of living in ghettos or having been forced into the dehumanizing condition of slavery. It is more than the 'darker dimension' of general psychology. Its unique status is derived not from the negative aspects of being black in America, but rather from the positive features of basic African philosophy that dictate the values, customs, attitudes, and behaviors of Africans in Africa and the New World. (Nobles, 1980, p. 23)

Akbar (1994) posits that traditional Eurocentric psychology distorted the African definition of psychology from the study of the soul to the study of behavior. The consequences of this transubstantive error (Nobles, 1986; Akbar, 1994) is that the focus of Eurocentric Psychology shifted from the focus of psychology from spiritual aspects to Western Psychology's focus on materialism: (1) emphasizing objectification as the only method of studying; (2) quantifying as the only accepted measure of reality; (3) essentializing man as only material manifestation, i.e. body and behavior; (4) believing that there is no superior power or purpose in man; (5) believing that human behavior is what it is with no significant meaning beyond what is actually observed; (6) viewing invisible or intangible phenomena as irrelevant; (7) viewing life and consciousness as identical with physical processes; (8) ignoring the individuality of the person and the element of transparent awareness; (9) maintaining that humans are a product of biological determination, personal experiences, and chances; and (10) characterizing the death of the mind as the death of the body, and that one does not attend to life before or after death. Furthermore, Akbar suggests that Black social scientists re-examine scientific paradigms as they relate to psychological methodology (Akbar, 1994), the psychological legacy of slavery (Akbar, 1990), and the diagnosis of mental illness (Akbar, 1981) among people of African descent from an African philosophical perspective.

Baldwin (1980), Kambon, (1992) and Myers (1988) have further articulated the conceptualization of an African worldview. Kambon argues that an individual's definitional system is determined by their particular cultural reality and our worldview "determine[s] how we experience (perceive and respond to) the various phenomena of the ongoing process of everyday existence" (Baldwin, 1980, p. 96). He argues that people of African descent have a worldview that is culturally specific to their experiences. Furthermore, he asserts that an African cultural consciousness develops out of the African worldview at a conscious and unconscious level. However, under conditions of white supremacy domination and control the African worldview can be distorted and experience cultural misorientation, which is the internalization of the European worldview by people of African descent (Kambon, 2003).

Myers' theory (1988) is similar to Kambon's in her worldview focus. The primary difference in their views is that while Kambon's worldview analysis is race-specific, Myers views the African worldview paradigm as having "the cultural and historical capacity to unite all humanity" (Myers, 1999, xvi). Hence, if Africans are the original human beings and have historically developed certain cultural traits and personalities based on their environment (Diop, 1991, Wobogo; 1989), then the behavioral patterns found among other cultural groups are logical extensions and/or deviations from the original African archetype (Jung, 1959). Following this reasoning, Myers (1988) asserts that the African worldview is not only "optimal" for people of African descent, but for all of humanity, since this humanistic worldview began with Africans, and based on a result of biological and cultural evolution, extended to all those who descended from and followed after the African prototype for humanity (Jung, 1959; Bynum, 1999). According to Myers (1988), an optimal worldview consists of: (1) viewing the spiritual and material as one, (2) knowing self through symbolic imagery and rhythm, (3) valuing positive interpersonal relationships among people, (4) emphasizing the union of opposites, (5) processing the interrelatedness of human and spiritual networks, (6) identifying the extended self and the multidimensionality of self, (7) assuming self-worth is intrinsic in being, (8) valuing spiritualism, oneness with nature and communalism, (9) being positively consistent despite appearances due to relationship with the source, and (10) having a life space that is infinite and unlimited.

A major difference between the reform and radical schools is that in contrast to the traditional school, the radical school does not focus on changing white attitudes about Black people (Karenga, 1992) and for the most part the radical school emphasizes African culture and philosophy as the foundation for Black Psychology (Kambon, 1998). However, a closer examination of the radical school demonstrates that the radical school is not monolithic and may be in need of critical re-conceptualization. In their groundbreaking article "Voodoo or IQ: An introduction to African Psychology" (Clark, McGee, Nobles, & Weems 1975), which was one of the first articles to attempt to define and introduce the content emphasis of African Psychology, it was argued that Black psychology was a "radical discipline". Let us reconsider the particular type of radicalism they were suggesting. They stated that African psychology was "radical, not in a political sense per se, but in a scientific and philosophical sense" (Clark, McGee, Nobles, & Weems, 1975, p. 13). Interestingly, a distinction is proposed between political radicalism and scientific/philosophical radicalism. Thus, the articulations of the worldview paradigm by Akbar (1994), Nobles (1972; 1986) and Myers (1988) who have emphasized the philosophical foundations and dimensions of Black psychology are radical, but not in the same sense as other black psychologists in the radical school such as Welsing (1970), Wright (1984), and Wilson (1990; 1993; 1998).

This latter group seems to imply a political radicalism that includes critiquing white supremacy behavior and its influence on people of African descent, as well as challenging the social and political structures that impact the quality of life experienced by people of African descent. It is important to note that both philosophical and political radicalism are important aspects in Black psychology (Kambon, 1998). However, such distinctions can be helpful if we are to gain a better understanding and appreciation of the intricacies involved in Black psychological theory.

Both Welsing (1970) and Wright (1984) are psychologists from the radical school that contribute to the deconstruction of Eurocentric psychology's claim to universalism. Welsing and Wright do not argue that European psychological theories are irrelevant. What they argue is that to the extent that major psychological theories were standardized and normalized on European people, then these theories are more appropriately viewed as culturally specific to people of European descent. In contrast to the "Black Rage" (1975) analysis where Grier and Cobbs use standard European psychological principles to understand Black behavior, Welsing and Wright turn European psychology on its head and apply established Eurocentric theories to specifically understanding European thought and behavior (Ani, 1994). When Welsing (1970) uses a psychoanalytical approach to examine the cultural logic underlying white supremacy, and Wright (1984) uses the Eurocentric criteria of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual to explain the behaviors of people of European descent in relation to African people, they are combining reformist school methods with African-centered sensibilities to form their own unique version of radicalism.

Inspired by the work of Neely Fuller (1969), who posited that "If you do not understand White Supremacy (Racism)- what it is, and how it works-everything else that you understand ... will only confuse you" (p. 1), Welsing developed "The Cress Theory of Color-Confrontation and Racism, i.e. White Supremacy" (1970) as a guide to assist people of African descent to interpret and understand global White supremacy. The foundation of Welsing's theory is based on genetic and social factors. The genetic factor states that: (1) skin pigmentation has many adaptive functions which lack of pigmentation does not have (i.e. protection from disease, ultraviolet radiation, etc.) and thus the absence of color (low melanin concentration) represents a genetic deficiency; (2) the majority of the world's population are people of color, and are thus highly melanated people and are the norm among human beings; and (3) since people of African descent generally have the highest concentration of melanin among the races in the world, then they represent the group most despised and feared by whites (Kambon, 1998; Barnes, 1988; Welsing, 1970). Based on the underlying assumptions posited in the genetic factor, the social factor states that:

(1) since the majority of the world's peoples have more color/pigmentation than White people, then Whites are the numerical minority among the world's population and Blacks, of all the colored races of the world, therefore represent the greatest threat to White genetic survival (Kambon, 1998; Welsing, 1970); (2) White supremacy hostility and aggression against people of African descent manifests as psychological defense mechanisms that mask feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, fear, and envy toward people of color (Kambon, 1998; Welsing, 1970). In accordance with the genetic and social factors, Welsing puts forth three Freudian defense mechanisms (repression, reaction formation, and projection) that people of European descent use to oppress people of color, and especially African descent groups. These defense mechanisms consist of: (1) repressing their feelings of inferiority by denying them, (2) discrediting and despising people of color, (3) sun-tanning, using make-up, enlarging breasts, buttocks, and lips to acquire the physical characteristics of people of color, (4) elaborating myths about white genetic superiority, (5) projecting their hate and sexual desires on people of color, while hypocritically maintaining that it is people of color that lust and desire white people, (6) obsessing, focusing, and alienating the physical body from sex, (7) dividing and separating people of color by classifying them as minorities, and (8) imposing birth control on people of color in order to neutralize/marginalize the reality that people of color are collectively in the majority of the world's population (Karenga, 1992; Welsing, 1970).

Similarly, Wright (1984) argues that because, "Blacks are now a threat and a liability to the White race... As a consequence, the major research that White scientists are involved with today is genocidal in nature, e.g., nuclear warfare, population control, medication control, genetic engineering, psychosurgery, electrical stimulation of the brain and the highly complex behavioral technology" (p.1). Wright's theory applies to Eurocentric psychological criteria to understanding the behaviors characteristic of white supremacy directed toward peoples of African descent. Wright differentiates between the psychological functioning of the neurotic, psychotic, and the psychopathic based on the definition provided by the World Health Organization's (WHO) International Classification of Mental Diseases. To rationalize his use of Eurocentric theory, Wright states WHO's argument that theories are functionally relevant, "if they (theories) have concrete reality, i.e. they can be retained if they are useful in understanding and treating disease" (p. 5). According to the WHO's classification, Wright posits that the neurotic "is a person who suffers a great deal over problems that are handled fairly routinely by a well adjusted personality ...they are characterized by an inordinate amount of anxiety" (Wright, 1984, p. 4). In contrast the psychotic has an understanding of contact with reality. Thus, she/he has "a very good reality contact" (Kambon, 1998; Wright, 1984). Finally, the psychopathic "has severe malfunctioning and many times has to be hospitalized for long periods of time" (Wright, 1984, p. 4). As if anticipating the basic tenets of Ani's (1994) critical analysis of European thought and behavior, Wright identified the basic concepts of psychopathology in Whites as:

(1) an engaging personality; (2) an above average intelligence; (3) a high competence in everyday/normal functioning; (4) an appearance of honesty and humanness; (5) rejecting and ignoring of constituted authority and discipline; (6) a limiting capacity for close relationships; (7) a sexual inadequacy; (8) behavior that is totally selfish; and (9) having a low level moral and ethical development (Kambon, 1998, Wright, 1984). Wright concludes that these behavioral characteristics are manifested among people of European descent in their behaviors and attitudes toward people of African descent in essential areas of life such as religious practices, law and legal practices, sexual attitudes/behaviors, and attitudes/behaviors pertaining to health care and civil/human rights, while at the same time maintaining a rhetorical ethic that promotes Christianity, civilization, democracy and progress among others (Ani, 1994; Wright, 1984).

The late Amos Wilson (1998) promotes the most political focus of the radical Black psychologists in his emphasis on the social structure. He develops his focus around psycho-social analysis that seeks not only to interpret, critique and understand Africana realities under Western oppression, but to ultimately change them. The evolution of his work and the ideas and agendas expressed in them represent the type of “Africana Social Theory” that Bobby Wright spoke about when he stated that “Black Social Theory will not only tell us where we are going, but will also explain what to expect once we achieve our goal”(Wright, 1984, p. 22). In similar fashion, Wilson expressed the role Africana psychology must play in social theory that leads to social action and change when he asserted:

At the center of African-centered psychology...is a psychology of power. It does not merely describe the traditional nature of African people, or the orientations of African people based on traditional African culture. It is a psychology that is prescriptive as well as descriptive. It is a psychology of liberation. (Wilson, 1998, p. 7)

CRITICAL APPROACHES IN BLACK PSYCHOLOGY

According to Marable, “the concept of African American Studies [Africology] is essentially the black intellectual tradition” (2000, p. 1). Marable contends that this black intellectual tradition which encompasses Africology is descriptive, corrective and prescriptive. The discipline of Africology is descriptive in that it presents “the reality of black life and experiences from the point of view of black people themselves” (Marable, 2000, p.1). He contends that Africology has been corrective because it has “attempted to challenge and to critique the racism and stereotypes that have been ever present in the mainstream discourse of white academic institutions” (Marable, 2000, p. 2). And finally, Marable (2000) argues that Africology has also been prescriptive since scholars in the discipline “who have theorized from the black experience have often proposed practical steps for the empowerment of black people [thus] there is a practical connection between scholarship and struggle, between social analysis and social transformation” (p. 2).

Black Psychology follows in the tradition of the role and function of Africology as outlined by Marable. In close conjunction with the three schools of thought among Black psychologists, are three critical methodological approaches. These critical methodological approaches in Black Psychology are a microcosm of the conceptual crisis found in the discipline of Africology and serve as a lens for examining and exploring the various manifestations of debates concerning methods in Africology. The critical approaches or methods are conceptually different from schools of thought in that schools of thought explicitly express theoretical/ideological orientations (i.e. integration, assimilation, Black Nationalism, African-centeredness etc.). Kambon (1998) posits that “the fundamental issue separating African psychologists is that of ideology or sociopolitical philosophy” (p. 232). These ideological differences are characterized as: (1) racial integrationists /cultural assimilationists; (2) African American nationalists; and (3) Pan-African cultural nationalists (Kambon, 1998). Harrell (1999) agrees with Kambon and suggests that not only are the schools of thought in Black psychology ideological, but the ideological differences are similar to those differences found among African philosophers and historical social movements. Although critical approaches may imply associations with a particular ideological orientation, they are more representative of research agendas rather than schools of thought since they describe the intent underlying the purpose of the research being conducted. Similar to the schools of thought in Black Psychology, there is also overlap between the three critical approaches.

Banks (1982) identified the critical approaches or methods as deconstructive, reconstructive, and constructive. According to Guthrie (1998), during the first half of the twentieth century, the process of deconstructing myths about the psychological inferiority of people of African descent dominated the research agendas of early Black Psychologists. The deconstructionist approach “attempts to expose the error and weaknesses found in general psychology” (Nobles, 1986, p. 75). This is done by employing traditional methods to “expose the weaknesses found in general psychology” (Nobles, 1986, p. 75) and to “debunk and falsify the claims advanced about black people in the standard journals of the discipline” (Harrell, 1999, p. 63). Research done by Black psychologists such as Hilliard (1981), Thomas (1971), Jackson (1979), Cross (1971), and Banks (1976) are historically representative of the deconstructive approach.

Black psychologists who take the reconstructionist approach also focus on correcting errors, misinterpretations, and distortions of data found in the psychological literature concerning Black people. However, unlike the deconstructionist approach that stops at exposing weak science, reconstructionists attempt to modify and reconstruct these models into a more culturally relevant model for Blacks (Nobles, 1986; Kambon, 1998).

The reconstructionists take the position that there are techniques in traditional methods that have heuristic value and should still be used by Black psychologists and thus, in the Black psychologists' critique of traditional methods, it would be unwise to discard sound empirical methods just because some psychologists have misused certain methods to rationalize and justify Black inferiority (Boykin, 1979). The reconstructionists approach has been taken on by scholars such as White (1980), Hayes (1991) Savage and Adair (1977), and Boykin (1979).

The deconstructionist and reconstructionist approaches are in contrast with the constructionist approach. Although, they do not totally discard empirical methods, the constructionist approach uses them cautiously while questioning the belief that empiricism is the only valid way of knowing (Harrell, 1999; Kambon, 1992, 1998). The constructionists' places emphasize not only on exposing weak science or modifying traditional psychological theories to fit the needs of Black people, but also it focuses its research on creating new paradigms and methodologies that stem from "an organic, authentically African epistemological and ontological base" (Harrell, 1999, p.45). Constructionists are represented by such scholars as Akbar (1981), Nobles (1973, 1986), Kambon (1992) and Wilson (1978, 1991), Pasteur and Toldson (1982), Azibo (1996) and Myers (1988). Nobles asserts:

The ability to reveal or expose the truth of African reality will determine which of these apparent camps has more utility of continuing the advancement of the discipline...the reader is cautioned against placing the contributions of Black thinkers (Black psychologists) into artificial and premature divisions. The author (Nobles) has done so only in order to highlight the development of the developmental response. (Nobles, 1986, pp. 87-88)

He further posits that as Black Psychology begins to develop, there will be more agreement within these often overlapping schools of thought and critical approaches. However, at the present moment, "each approach is equally important, complimentary and necessary" (Nobles, 1986, p.87).

Crucial to any discussion of schools of thought, ideological orientations and/or critical approaches within the field of Black psychology is the question of methods. The debate over whether logical positivism, materialism, empiricism or spirituality is the most conducive approach has been a very intense discourse among Black psychologists (Akbar, 1985; Azibo, 1989; Boykin, 1979; Banks, 1982). Questions have arisen concerning the extent to which empirical methods can measure the various manifestations and nuances of the experiences of people of African descent. Specifically, the questioning centers on the issue of whether or not empiricism can measure and interpret the spiritual dimensions of the experiences of people of African descent.

While it has been argued that empirical methods are not inherently abusive (Boykin, 1979), Banks (1999) countered this argument by suggesting that empirical methods are often viewed as “just good doctrines put to ill purpose, when they may be no less than ill doctrines put to degenerate purposes” (p. 4). According to Banks (1999), the two major criticisms put forth by Black psychologists since the emergence of Black Psychology as a field of study have been: (1) that science is ideology, and (2) that empirical research is inherently destined to prove pernicious claims about people of African descent. He addressed the relationship between the theoretical and the empirical when he posited that the most critical considerations for developing theory are: (1) what methodological programs it is capable of justifying, and (2) what methodological framework does its protection and preservation demand. Thus, “criticism has at once formed the foundation of Black Psychology and the methodological perspective that guides its research practices,” according to Banks (1982, p. 6).

At the center of Banks articulation of the dialectics between the theoretical and empirical is the concept of “empirical falsification”. Empirical falsification implies that at the root of psychological theory and method is the attempt to deconstruct previous research by demonstrating the fallacies in the research and attempting to advance new theory that is more suitable to addressing the research questions at hand. Additionally, Banks (1999) asserts that “Theory does not advance ideas as the positivists...would believe; theory justifies ideas. Empirical methodology is not a tool of revelation and verification as the positivists believed in the early part of the century, but a tool of refutation and a shield of obstruction behind which those ideas which theory justifies are operationalized as programs” (p. 5).

In Banks’ (1999) analysis, the schools of thought in Black psychology are intertwined with critical approaches and methods. He describes the two schools of thought as characterizing how Black psychologists have dealt with the differences between ideology and methodology. The schools of thought identified are: (1) the Africanist and (2) Empiricist schools. The Africanist school has “a deep appreciation of the role of theory in the justification of ideological program, with only the barest attention to the protective demands of theory for a methodological framework” (Banks, 1999, p. 6). He maintains that “the role of method within the Africanist framework must be to protect theory and program, not contribute to them. But if the demands are for methodological practices that obstruct rather than defend the ideological program, the theories (by implication) demand revision (Banks, 1999, p. 6).

In contrast, the empiricist school, according to Banks, has attempted to establish “impeccable methodological credentials for whatever theoretical constructs those (scholars) might defend” (Banks, 1999, p. 6). Thus, for Banks (1999), “this school seeks the human core which lies beneath the African American peoples veneer and the White veneer of European peoples” (p. 6).

Both schools, in Banks view, are similar in their shortcomings in that “The Africanists have simply rejected a conventional methodology which would clearly not serve to verify and confirm its claims, but has failed to provide a comprehensive alternative, or come to terms with the essentially negative role it must play in knowledge growth...while the empiricists have made methodological integrity their foremost preoccupation, believing in its ability to lead systematically to a knowledge base from which theory and ideological programs can spring” (Banks, 1999, p. 7). Therefore, in order for Black psychologists to manifest the power to define as well as change the reality of Black life it is important that they are able to interpret and understand the life experiences of people of African descent, which requires “a contingent of Black researchers making a contribution” (Boykin, Franklin and Yates, 1979, p.18). Banks (1999) predicted that the contributions made by Black psychologists to the field of Black psychology are “likely to prosper in direct proportion to its [their] ability to deconstruct conventional falsehood, and its [their] ability to construct particularistic theory that stands in contrast to relativism, and a methodology of the absolute rather than the comparative” (p.8).

A DISCUSSION OF MAJOR ISSUES, CONCEPTS AND THEMES IN AFRICOLOGY AS MANIFESTED IN BLACK PSYCHOLOGY

One of the primary concerns in conducting scholarly research revolves around the issue of conceptualization. Questions such as what concepts are relevant to the issue(s) being studied? How do scholars’ particular theoretical orientations influence their choice of subjects and the type of research questions being asked? Answers to these questions such as these factor into determining the conceptual model from which researchers will approach their projects. For Black psychologists, the issue of conceptualization has been paramount in their efforts to produce meaningful scholarship that is culturally relevant. At times this has meant having to come to terms with the reality that many of the theories and concepts they were taught in their graduate training do not apply wholesale to people of African descent.

Two major thrusts in African American social scientists critiques of concepts used in psychological research are that: (1) the accumulating literature on the individual African American person, family, and community reflects the common practice of looking within the African American community and African Americans themselves for the sources of social disadvantage effecting their personal and collective destinies and (2) the tendency to describe the psychological functioning of African Americans in negative terms (Jenkins, 1995). Related to these concerns, Nobles (1982) argues that psychology “has become the single most powerful tool of oppression, and its single most effective technique has been to place itself, its conceptions and formulations, as the standard by which all people of the world are to be understood” (p. 100).

The placing of European-American conceptions and formulas as the universal standard can conceptually incarcerate Black psychologists as they seek to study African American life experiences. According to Nobles:

In this case “conceptual incarceration”, the knower is given a set of pre-determined ‘concepts’ and definitions to utilize in the ‘process of knowing’. The alien or incorrect concepts themselves, however, inhibit the process of these alien ‘ideas’. The notion of conceptual incarceration allows us to understand the delimiting quality of faulty or erroneous concepts provided in the process of scientific understanding. (1986, pp. 19-20)

It is in this vein that Lerone Bennett (1970) asserted “it is necessary for us to develop a new frame of reference which transcends the limits of white concepts. It is necessary for us to develop and maintain a total intellectual offensive against the false universality of white concepts...We must abandon the partial frame of reference of our oppressors and create new concepts which will release our reality” (p. 7).

EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL RELEVANCE TO AFRICOLOGY

After all the data has been collected and analyzed, the question becomes what is the relevance of Black psychology and what does it contribute to expanding the body of literature within Africology? Empirically, Black psychology demonstrates the importance of being evidence-based in one’s work. In many Africology departments, some students are learning that others should accept their arguments simply because they make sense, or worse, because they speak with passion. Perhaps, the empirical component of Black psychology can serve as an example of the importance of presenting evidence, even when what you say makes sense without it. By utilizing different types of methods in their research agendas, Black psychology may help to disabuse many students of the notion that methods will not make a difference in the quality of contributions they can make to Africology. Thus, Black psychology demonstrates the importance of knowing and utilizing a variety of methods in order to make scholarly contributions and shows the type of skills needed to improve upon these scholarly contributions.

Theoretically, Black psychology is not a marginalized field of study to be perceived as simply peripheral to “traditional” psychology and/or Africology but an area of serious critical inquiry that systematically studies the psychological experiences of people of African descent (Harper-Browne, 1996). Black psychology’s emphasis on recognizing and understanding culturally specific psychological issues that are particular to the historical and social experiences of people of African descent enhances the breadth and depth of Africology. By exploring the various ways that Black psychologists have examined Black experiences, Black psychology reflects the diversity and complexity of thought in Africology.

CONCLUSION

On a surface level, it could be argued that Black psychology has not substantively contributed anything novel to Africology. For example, before there was a formal conceptualization of a Black psychology in the psychological literature, social scientists of various ethnicities and theoretical orientations had already articulated the idea that people have particular ways of expressing themselves that stem from their cultural and social experiences. Academics in disciplines such as anthropology, political science, sociology and psychology had already acknowledged that race and culture were important social variables to consider when studying human experiences. In fact, the theoretical domains discussed during the evolution of Black psychology such as identity, education, language, methods, community, marriage and family, health disparities, sexuality and gender, clinical psychology, developmental issues and discipline construction are very similar to, if not the same, as the theoretical domains studied in other areas of Africology.

So what makes the contributions of Black psychologists within the field of Africology unique? In what ways do Black psychologists enhance the discipline of Africology and our understanding of the lived experiences of Black people? The scholarship in Black psychology does not necessarily introduce scholars in Africology to new phenomena to which they are totally unfamiliar. However, through the critical approaches of deconstruction, reconstruction and construction, scholarship in Black psychology does introduce new concepts and themes that are used as tools for interpreting old and new phenomena relevant to Africana experiences. The value of Black psychology relative to Africology is found in its ability to construct paradigms that serve as conceptual maps that assist Black people in navigating their cultural terrain and making sense out of their experiences.

Black psychology also parallels Africology in its attempt to establish itself as an instrument of social transformation. It appears that Black psychologists are at the crossroads in the development of a Black psychology that is relevant and functional to people of African descent. Now that the theoretical and methodological foundations for Black psychology have been articulated, a major issue becomes where does Black psychology go from here? The future direction of the social impact of Black psychological theory, research and practice within the discipline of Africology will depend on the extent to which contemporary Black psychologists view themselves as social scientists and social agents involved in a psychology of liberation that actualizes the lofty goals and standards prescribed for them in the literature.

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