AFRICAN AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGY, also known as Black psychology, is both an old and a new discipline. It is old in the sense that many African American psychologists are reclaiming an ancient African heritage in the origins of psychology; it is new in that these developments are occurring at the end of the twentieth century. Just as traditional psychology traces its philosophical underpinnings to the ancient Greek philosophers, African American psychology finds its roots in the philosophies and religions of ancient Africa. These common origins in ancient philosophical traditions produce similarities between African American psychology and the traditional psychology of Western Europe and America. What is much more striking, however, are their dissimilarities.

African American psychology can, in part, be thought of as a reaction to traditional psychology (which could also be appropriately labeled White psychology). This reactive stance is due to the fact that psychology, like all other social science disciplines, developed in the Western world in the context of the strong racial dynamics of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and other forms of racial exploitation. These dynamics, then, were translated into scientific justifications for the social policies of the day: Africans, Native Americans, Asians and East Asians, and Pacific Islanders were viewed as innately inferior to White Europeans and Americans, so that their exploitation was actually viewed as beneficent.

In recent years, however, African American psychology has also developed more proactive approaches to the philosophical and scientific study of human behavior. These proactive approaches may be viewed, in part, as the reclamation of ancient traditional theorems of human "Beingness," but may also be appropriately
characterized as affirmative actions to more truthfully examine African American personality, health and mental health, and interpersonal relationships.

A Definition

African American psychology is the body of knowledge that is concerned with the understanding of African American life and culture. African American psychology recognizes the commonality of experiences of African people throughout the world, and therefore may be applied with greater or less precision to African people in Africa, Europe, South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and North America. African American psychology focuses on the mental, physical, psychological, and spiritual nature of humanity. It is the collection of works that has been produced by African psychologists in the United States (African Americans) and throughout the world.

African American psychology is distinguished from White psychology by a number of idealist dialectics, or ideals in opposition. These ideals may be viewed as European American centered versus those that are African centered, and are values and worldviews that are fundamental to European American versus African ways of life. Table 1 provides a summary of these idealistic dialectics.

Overview

African American psychology is presented from two perspectives: the reaction of African American psychology to racist attacks on Black people by White social science ("deconstruction"), and the more proactive work of African and African American psychologists to better understand Black life, culture, and behavior.

African American Psychology: Deconstruction

Many historians of psychology trace the modern origins of psychology to Wilhelm Wundt’s psychological laboratory in Leipzig, Germany, established in 1879 (William James established a psychology laboratory at Harvard University in the same year). It is even more important to place psychology’s origins in its geohistorical context.

It was in the late fifteenth century and afterward when European explorers “discovered” and made contact with indigenous peoples in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Americas. These early contacts were marked by racial theories that dehumanized the newly “discovered” people. Unfortunately, the ensuing 300 years witnessed unprecedented genocide against indigenous peoples, particularly in the Americas and in Western and Southern Africa, and the enslavement of tens of millions of African men, women, and children. The cultural ethos of Europe and White America during these centuries was one of “Manifest Destiny”: the White races had a God-ordained mandate to “civilize” the primitive peoples of the world. That this “civilizing” included murder, rape, and enslavement is one of the longest and saddest chapters in modern human history.

In the scientific community, Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, published in 1859, had a mammoth influence on the emerging social sciences. Just 10 years later, in 1869, Darwin’s cousin, Sir Francis Galton, published what was to be a forerunner of scientific racism, Hereditary Genius, which is still in print. Thus, it is no surprise that the founders of Western psychology embraced the ideological underpinnings of scientific racism. As a result, the list of avowedly racist social scientists in the early years of European American psychology read like a “Who’s Who” of “great men” in psychology: Herbert Spencer, Edward Thorndike, Lewis Terman, William McDougall, G. Stanley Hall, J. Cattell, Carl Jung, Charles Spearman, and many others. More contemporary proponents of these ideas are Arthur Jensen, J. Philippe Rushton, William Shockley, and Richard Herrnstein.

From the earliest years of African American psychology (in the early twentieth-century United States), Black psychologists challenged or “deconstructed” the theories, methods, and conclusions of the scientific racism that was based on intelligence tests (for a review of this early work, see Robert Guthrie’s Even the Rat Was White [2nd ed.], New York, 1998). These challenges, by people such as Francis Cecil Sumner, who, in 1920, was the first Black American to receive a Ph.D. degree in psychology, illustrated the flawed conceptions of intelligence, the fact that tests of intelligence were inherently grounded in a particular cultural frame of reference (and therefore were culturally biased against Black people), and the more fundamental problems of a lack of controlled observation in making racial comparisons (that is, middle-class Whites, who had lived lives of advantage, were typically compared against lower-class Blacks, who were disadvantaged by segregation and the lack of equal educational opportunities).

Contemporary Black psychologists have challenged racism in psychology as fraudulent, with one leading exponent, Asa Hilliard III, calling the work “nonsense” and “nonsense” (see his summary article in Cultural Diversity & Mental Health, 1996, 2, 1–20; also see Halford Fairchild, Journal of Social Issues, 1991, 47, 101–115). More specifically, race and IQ arguments are flawed on both conceptual and methodological grounds. The first and most important of the conceptual problems has to do with the definition of the key hypothetical constructs: race and IQ. Race is best viewed as a socially constructed concept with little biological meaning—the overlap in genetic code between
AFRICAN AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGY. Table 1. European American–centered vs. African-centered ideals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>European American–Centered Ideals</th>
<th>African-Centered Ideals</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Individualism</em>: The focus is on the individual—her or his interpretation of events and reaction to changing situations. The individual is the unit of analysis in research</td>
<td><em>Collectivism</em>: The focus is on the collective or the “tribe.” One cannot understand an individual’s functioning in a way that is divorced from the group. The unit of analysis in research is the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Materialism</em>: An emphasis is placed on material reality, and the acquisition of material goods. Material reality is that which is observed, manipulated, and quantified</td>
<td><em>Spiritualism</em>: An emphasis is placed on spiritual reality, and the development of spiritual congruence with the Creator. The most important aspects of human existence are unseen, unobservable, and nonquantifiable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Control of nature</em>: An emphasis is placed on controlling nature—through science and development</td>
<td><em>Harmony with nature</em>: An emphasis is placed on harmonizing with nature, through a spiritual connection with the things of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Objective</em>: An emphasis is placed on purporting to be “value free” and “unbiased” in fact finding</td>
<td><em>Subjective</em>: An emphasis is placed on acknowledging values and biases and using these to bring about the liberation of African people</td>
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races is very close to 100% (indeed, there is often more genetic variation within so-called races than there is between races). The concept of IQ, too, is conceptually suspicious. Although viewed as a “fixed capacity” to learn or acquire information, the measure of intelligence (the IQ test) necessarily adapts to the changing ages of children, youth, and adults because their acquisition of information is a constantly changing (and growing) dynamic. Finally, by way of conceptual confusion, is the effort to partial out hereditary from environmental influences, as if these influences operate in isolation. In fact, genes and environment always operate together so that disentangling their unique contributions to intellectual functioning is a methodological impossibility (at least among humans).

One of the founders of modern African American psychology was Robert L. Williams of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. His work covered a great deal of ground in deconstructing racist theories of intellectual functioning, personality functioning, and language. In the area of intelligence, Williams developed the Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity, which was grounded in African American culture. He was able to demonstrate, not surprisingly, that Blacks outperformed Whites on this test, demonstrating that racial comparisons on culturally based instruments were invalid. His work on personality assessment similarly demonstrated the biases inherent in standardized personality measures and led to his creation of more culturally appropriate alternatives. Finally, Williams coined the term *Ebonics* (ebony plus phonics) to refer to the linguistic patterns of African Americans, and he showed that perjorative views of “Black English” were unwarranted.

Another very proactive approach within African American psychology was the assistance rendered in the legal challenges to the use of intelligence tests for educational placement. In California, this challenge was concretized in the well-known *Larry P. v. Wilson Riles* class action civil trial that alleged that African American schoolchildren were being disproportionately and inappropriately placed in special education classes on the basis of IQ tests. From 1977 to 1980, members of the Association of Black Psychologists, led by Harold Dent and William Pierce, provided expert testimony and guidance in the trial that culminated in a judgment in favor of the plaintiffs. From then through the end of the twentieth century, the use of IQ tests for the purposes of educational placement was banned in California.

**Challenges to the Integrity of Black Pupils.** Although the idea of innate racial differences in intellectual capacity may be considered adequately debunked, it is the case that racial differences in scholastic achievement are a fairly enduring finding in the social sciences. African American students, by and large, have lower average academic achievement levels than White students. Much of this racial difference in achievement has been improperly tied to differences in intelligence, as noted above. But more “liberal” approaches to the
understanding of racial differences—those that may eschew the odious notion of inherent (and therefore immutable) biological differences—have still reached questionable conclusions that challenged the personal integrity of Black students, their peers, or their families. Thus, William Ryan's idea of "blaming the victim" (New York, 1976) has surfaced in the majority of studies that examined racial differences in academic achievement. This line of research is perhaps best symbolized by the largest study of its kind, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, by James Coleman and his colleagues (Washington, D.C., 1966).

Theory and research by African American psychologists have critiqued the above line of research on both conceptual and methodological grounds. Many of the criticisms directed toward the race and IQ controversy apply to the study of racial differentials in achievement (as they should; IQ tests are, in the main, tests of scholastic achievement). A growing body of research within African American psychology has demonstrated that academic underachievement of Black youth is tied to many factors: teacher attitudes and the "self-fulfilling prophecy"; an alien curriculum (one that exerts the cultures of others at the expense of Black cultures); an inappropriate pedagogical praxis (emphasizing sitting, listening, and competitive testing rather than active learning in a more cooperative framework); and structured inequalities in educational opportunities (Black students, on average, attend schools that are underfunded, overcrowded, and have less experienced teaching and administrative staffs). It could be argued that any individual-level explanation for academic underachievement among Blacks should be held in abeyance until the structural inequities are rectified. In the context of systematic racial inequities in educational opportunity, studies that compare racial groups on scholastic achievement violate the criterion of controlled observation in social science research.

**Challenges to the Integrity of Black Families.** Perhaps due to the virtual absence of African American scholars in the social sciences until the 1950s (with the exception of a handful of pioneers, mentioned previously), research on African American life and culture was almost entirely performed by "outsiders" to the African American community. As with research on race and IQ, research on family life of African Americans has been fraught with conceptual, methodological, and ideological problems. Thus, a long line of research has pathologized the African American family by pointing to its presumed matriarchal structure, father absence, under- or over-stimulation of children, and its either permissive or rigidly authoritarian child-rearing styles. This line of research culminated in the highly influential policy paper on the Black family authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (*The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, Washington, D.C., 1965). Popularly known as the "Moynihan Report," this policy document concluded that the African American family was best viewed as a disorganized "tangle of pathology," with little hope of remediation.

The reaction within African American psychology, again, has been to challenge the conceptual, methodological, and ideological biases that have characterized much of the work that focused on family pathology. In addition, Black researchers began to focus more on the strengths of Black families rather than their weaknesses. Throughout the history of systematic family disruption during the centuries of slavery and de jure discrimination, the majority of Black families could be described as "nuclear" (two-parent) and egalitarian. Moreover, it is critically important to understand that any examination of family life must take the broader social, political, and economic contexts into account. Thus, the problems found among Black families are more related to these contextual variables than racial ones. Excellent sources for these views may be found in Robert Hill's *Strengths of the Black Family* (New York, 1972) and the edited volume, *Black Families*, by Harriette Pipes McAdoo (Beverly Hills, CA, 1981).

Far from being disorganized, African American families have been shown to exist in a complex kin network that spans space and time. These extended kin networks, operating in conjunction with the Black church, facilitated upward mobility and provided a buffer against the myriad stresses that confronted African American people in the eras of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. Harriette McAdoo, a leading researcher in this area, has called these effects a "kin-insurance" policy.

**Challenges to the Integrity of the Black Personality.** The primary sets of literature against which African American psychologists have been forced to react—to debunk or deconstruct—had to do with intelligence, achievement, and family functioning. As if these were not enough, a whole host of additional research foci have imperiled the integrity of Black people on a variety of other, more personal, grounds. Thus, lines of research question the personality functioning of Black people (low self-esteem, external locus of control, low impulse control, inability to delay gratification), their psychological functioning (Blacks are overdiagnosed with schizophrenia), or their culture (Blacks have been alleged to have a culture of poverty, a counterculture, no culture, etc.). In each instance, Black psychologists have reacted with criticisms and reanalyses that demonstrated the general lack of validity of the pathology perspectives for conceptual and methodological reasons similar to those already covered.
Constructive Approaches in African American Psychology

A fair case may be made for the perception that African American psychology is dominated by reactions to White psychology, particularly those applications of White psychology that have falsely portrayed African Americans as inferior or pathological. It may also be the case that were it not for the anti-Black biases of White psychology, African American psychology may never have had its genesis.

Robert Guthrie’s *Even the Rat Was White* traces both the history of White psychology’s fascination with race differences (with its anti-Black biases) as well as the early history of African American psychology. As noted earlier, African American psychology may be traced to the awarding of the Ph.D. degree to Francis Cecil Sumner in 1920. But African American psychology witnessed its rebirth in 1968 with the founding of the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPs). At the 1968 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (APA) in San Francisco, a group of about 80 Black psychologists, led by Joseph White (Professor Emeritus, University of California, Irvine), coalesced to discuss their frustrations within the nearly all-White APA. This was just 3 years after the publication of the “Moynhian Report” and 2 years after the publication of the Coleman Report (both of which were interpreted as disparaging to African Americans). It was 1 year prior to the publication of Arthur Jensen’s hotly debated treatise on race and IQ.

The year 1968 was also the peak of the “Black is Beautiful” and Black Power movements that emanated from the Civil Rights struggle of the late 1950s and early 1960s. This year also marked the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and was just 3 years after the assassination of Malcolm X. It is not coincidental, then, that ABPs would coalesce into an autonomous organizational entity at this crucial juncture in American history. Guided by the principle of self-determination, the founders of ABPs sought to address the professional needs of its members and to begin the development of new models of human behavior that would benefit the broader Black community. At the time of its founding, eight goals were articulated; these goals continue to guide the mission of the Association today:

1. To enhance the psychological well-being of Black people in America and throughout the world.
2. To promote constructive understanding of Black people through positive approaches to research.
3. To develop an approach to psychology that is consistent with the experience of Black people.
4. To define mental health in consonance with newly established psychological concepts and standards regarding Black people.
5. To develop internal support systems for Black psychologists and students of psychology.
6. To develop policies for local, state, and national decision making which affect the mental health of the Black community.
7. To promote values and a lifestyle that supports the survival and well-being as a race.
8. To support established Black organizations and aid in the development of new independent Black institutions to enhance our psychological, educational, cultural, and economic situation.

Now celebrating over 30 years of existence, ABPs thrives in the United States and has membership in a dozen countries worldwide. ABPs is governed by a board of directors consisting of a national president, an immediate past president, a president elect, a secretary, a treasurer, four regional representatives, the chair of the general assembly, and the chair of the student division. Appointed members of the board include the chairpersons of the national convention and publications committees, and historian. The board of directors is advised by the Council of Past Presidents and the Council of Elders. At the close of the twentieth century, ABPs had approximately 30 chapters in cities around the United States, with chapters in the early formation stages in Canada, Britain, and South Africa. ABPs publishes *The Journal of Black Psychology* and *Psych Discourse: The Monthly News Journal of the Association of Black Psychologists*. Through these publications and texts authored by its members, the proactive scholarship of African American psychology has focused on racial identity, African-centered models of health and mental health (and related research and intervention strategies), and the reclamation of a spirit-centered epistemology.

**Racial Identity Research.** The cultural movements that contributed to the founding of the ABPs were associated with a dramatic transformation in the psychological status of African American people. Once considered “colored” and “Negroes,” the African American population discarded internalized negative images and embraced signs and symbols that reflected a positive affirmation of self and group. These signs and symbols included changing the group name from Negro to Black, the adoption of positive slogans that reflected group pride (*Black is Beautiful and I’m Black and I’m Proud!), the naming of children in African-centered traditions, and the readoption of pride in the African heritage.

Black psychologists gave considerable attention to these psychological and cultural transformations. Perhaps the most influential theorist in this area, William Cross of Cornell University, developed the idea of “Negrencence: The Psychological Transformation of becoming Black.” First published in 1971, Cross’s model of the “Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience” posited
 Models of Health and Mental Health

One of the distinguishing features of African American psychology is the emphasis on the historical origins of contemporary reality. Thus, African people, throughout the world, have been characterized as the product of the Maafe: the 400-year history of domination, exploitation, genocide, slavery, and psychological incorporation that is unprecedented in human history. Some Black psychologists view the effects of these historical and contemporary forces as producing various forms of psychopathology among the majority of Africans (and African Americans), thus normalizing pathology within the African American community. Some have gone so far as to develop a "nosology" that classifies psychic diseases within the African American population. Others, however, are pointing to the unique resilience and strengths produced within African populations as a result of these experiences.

These cultural theories of African American functioning point to the enduring African value structures that have sustained African Americans through hundreds of years of slavery and discrimination. These values include an emphasis on the community, cooperative interdependence and sharing, respect for others, and a strong religious orientation.

Contemporary theorists and practitioners in African American psychology have focused a great deal of attention on redefining the African personality and conceptions of health and mental health. These efforts of redefinition have generally focused on African-centered epistemological frameworks or worldviews. What this means, practically, is that functioning is defined holistically and through the individual's connection within a larger collective. Most important is the emphasis on Spirituality (as opposed to mere spirituality) as a crucial aspect of human functioning. Here, human existence is explicitly acknowledged to consist of seen and unseen elements that operate together to produce health or illness. Optimal theory, as articulated by Linda James Myers (Understanding an Afrocentric World View: Introduction to an Optimal Psychology, [2nd ed.], Dubuque, IA, 1993), introduces the conjunction of spirit and matter in an African-centered cosmology, and is particularly concerned with this reintegration of spiritual elements into human functioning.

An African-centered orientation, then, is literally translated into a "back to Africa" movement in terms of studying and applying the many generations of knowledge that have accumulated through traditional African medicine practices. These practices focus on understanding and applying traditional pharmacology (emphasizing natural herbs, grasses, barks, and the like), utilizing communal human resources in the healing process, and reintegrating the person into spiritual-material wholeness.

The health and mental health challenges that confront African American psychology today include the continuing need to understand and cope with the racial stresses that result from the daily slights and indignities that produce feelings of marginality and threaten self-esteem; and grappling with the "excess deaths" that confront the African American community through human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), violence, hypertension, heart disease, cancers, and other behaviorally mediated life-threatening diseases.

Assessment

As noted earlier, much of African American psychology has been concerned with reacting to and correcting racist theory and research. Much of this negative research relied on tests and measures (such as standardized IQ tests) that were alien to African American culture and experience. In the past 30 years, however, a plethora of tests and measures have been developed that have been more culturally congruent with African American cultural experiences. These assessment devices focus on racial identity, informal help giving and receiving (as alternatives to formal psychotherapy), giftedness, spirituality, perceived racial stress and coping styles, cultural mistrust, acculturation, African worldview, parenting attitudes and behaviors, values, African self-consciousness, and family structure and relations (among others). Indeed, the work in this area of assessment has been so extensive that it proved worthy of two edited volumes by Reginald Jones (Handbook of Tests and Measurements for Black Populations, Hampton, VA, 1996).

In the latter third of the twentieth century, a plethora of tests and measures have been developed that are grounded within an African-centered point of view. These include Joseph Baldwin's African Self Consciousness Scale, Tonya Armstrong's Measure of Spirituality, and a variety of measures that focus on self-esteem.
alienation, life satisfaction, attitudes toward marriage and the family, and personality functioning.

Applications

In addition to the health-related foci and assessment described above, African American psychologists apply their approach to the solution of a variety of problems that are unique to the African American community. These include the problems of psychoeducational assessment; gender, sexuality and male-female relationships; and broader issues attendant on the continuing oppression and exploitation of African people around the world.

A very promising line of research is that stimulated by Harold Dent and his colleagues, known as "dynamic assessment." Here, instead of the static measuring of what children know (as in standardized IQ tests or academic achievement tests), dynamic assessment focuses on the actual learning styles of students. Thus, students are tested, taught, and retested, in order to discern the strengths and weaknesses in their styles of learning.

Similarly, contemporary African American psychologists have eschewed the pathology-laden treatment of Black women and men and have developed more transformative models of female and male functioning and male-female relationships. Leading these revisionist approaches are Na'Im Akbar (Visions for Black Men, Tallahassee, FL, 1991) and Gail Wyatt (Stolen Women: Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives, New York, 1997).

Notable advances in this vein are clinical treatment models for African American clientele. Anna Mitchell Jackson's model emphasizes a community of helping professionals working together in a more holistic approach that provides a "service chain" through multiple systems. This model, then, views treatment as inextricably tied to family functioning, functioning within the Black community, embracing Black cultural values and practices, and embedded within a particular political and economic context.

Fred Phillips's idea of Ntu psychotherapy (Ntu is Bantu for "spirit energy") is also noteworthy. Here, Ntu is reflective of African philosophical traditions that emphasize the linkages between mind and body, object and spirit, and client and healer. The task of therapy is to reconnect a person's mental life to his or her physical, emotional, and spiritual beings. The therapist-healer is viewed as necessarily connected to the client in helping in this transformative process. In addition, the Ntu model focuses on the seven principles of the Nguzo Saba, as developed by Maulana Karenga in connection with the observation of Kwanzaa (the seven-day nonsectarian holiday celebrated by Africans and African Americans—and others—around the world between Christmas and New Year). These principles are Nia (purpose), Imani (faith), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Kuumba (creativity), and Ujamaa (cooperative economics).

Finally, through the work of ABPs, African American psychology is becoming more globally self-conscious in reaching out to African psychologists in Europe, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and throughout the African continent. In this regard, it is explicitly recognized that many parallels exist in the histories and contemporary life circumstances of African people throughout the world. Through it all, the mission of African American psychology remains the illumination and liberation of the African spirit around the world. And in this, it is recognized that one cannot illuminate and liberate the African spirit without also illuminating and liberating the spirit of all of humanity.

[See also Minority Psychology.]

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Halford H. Fairchild