Black psychology relies on traditional ideology

By Bridget Murray
Monitor staff

Lisa Whitten, Ph.D., realized that psychology needed an African-American perspective the day an undergraduate professor told her class that African-American people aren’t verbal enough to benefit from psychoanalysis.

Whitten was furious. She stood up before the class of mostly white students and told the professor that African-Americans have a different verbal style, but psychoanalysis helps them just as much as any other group.

That eye-opening experience at the University of Michigan triggered a lifelong interest in raising awareness of black culture in psychology.

Now a psychology professor at the State University of New York College at Old Westbury, Whitten is one of a group of psychologists who teach black psychology, an Afrocentric approach to the discipline. "In a world growing in ethnic diversity, it is crucial that psychologists learn the role of race and culture in psychological development," she stated. It’s especially crucial, she said, not to be misinformed like her professor was.

What is black psychology?

Black psychology focuses on the historic and cultural roots of black peoples and rejects the use of European concepts to explain them, said Halford Fairchild, Ph.D., of Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif.

Black psychology is a study of liberation and freedom from oppression for African-Americans, said Fairchild. It exposes cooperation instead of one-upmanship and promotes the idea of strength through community gain, rather than strength through individual gain.

In contrast, Eurocentric psychology focuses on the "failure" of black men and how they deviate from the white behavioral code, said Fairchild. This "deficit" psychology, as he calls it, suggests that black families are falling apart, and that blacks are immersed in criminality, learned helplessness and a culture of poverty. Black psychology rejects victim-blaming models and lauds the strengths of African culture, such as spirituality, socialism and an oral tradition of storytelling through voice and gesture and verbal exchange between audiences and speakers.

"Eurocentric psychology differs itself from values and biases, but in black psychology, we evaluate and articulate them," said Fairchild. For instance, black psychotherapy examines external factors—such as racism and sexism—that contribute to an individual's ailments.

"Black psychotherapists try to remedy the damage of racism by encouraging patients to confront the ideology of white supremacy in a different verbal style," said Fairchild. "By realizing the racial journals. The movement has generated a mountain of scientific data on black culture and racial identity—enough material to create a black psychology major, Tones said.

"Black people have really embraced this approach to mental health," Akbar said.

Need for black psychologists

Psychologists are serving increasingly diverse populations and need to be culturally competent, said Anderson J. Franklin, Ph.D., of the City University of New York. At most, only 4 percent of psychologists are African-American in comparison with a U.S. population that is 12 percent African-American and growing, according to APA's Research Office. Black psychology helps African-Americans identify with psychology, and helps all psychologists make educated interpretations of research, he said. Fairchild and other experts in the area say psychology departments can infuse black psychology into their curricula by: offering seminars on ethnicity and minorities; incorporating black psychology in introductory courses; offering specific courses in African psychology; hiring more black faculty; offering more courses on multiculturalism; and using textbooks that include black psychology approaches such as black identity development, African-American communication styles, black behaviorism, African philosophy and counseling African-Americans.

To ensure that students are exposed to black psychology, Franklin believes it's best to incorporate it in introductory courses. Black psychology should be taught using a collaborative learning approach, not the Western lecture-completion format, said Fairchild.

"Black psychology is an inclusive, collective effort that takes place through a cooperative learning community," he said. In Fairchild's classroom, students sit in a circle and work together on projects. This makes students active learners, not "passive automatons."

The emphasis is on "we," said Bertha Holiday, Ph.D., APA's director of ethnic minority affairs. In a course she once taught on environmental psychology that emphasized the beliefs of black psychology, Holliday sent her students into ethnically diverse neighborhoods to interview the residents. The students wrote papers on ways the neighborhood strengthened their sense of cohesiveness as a community.

Promoting diversity

To keep tabs on programs' infusion of ethnic material, APA monitors Access to College and Career Recruitment, Retention and Training in Psychology. The group, which first

BLACK

Continued from page 33

met in December 1994, is gathering data on multicultural curricula. APA's new program accreditation guidelines, made official in February, require that programs incorporate diversity issues, and APA's Board of Educational Affairs recently formed a task force to promote multicultural curriculum in courses. As a result, psychology programs are starting to infuse this material.

The commission plans next to address the low number of African-Americans in the psychology profession, Tones said.

Also, APA's advocacy team has worked to involve psychology in minority fellowship and scholarship programs, and APA's Minority Undergraduate Students in Excellence program recruits outstanding black undergraduate psychology scholars for graduate education. These recruitment efforts reflect the inroads made by black psychologists and APA over the years, said Tones.

"Due to ABPsi's growth and APA's heightened sensitivity to black issues, the black psychology movement has come a long way," said Tones. "Judging from this progress, the best is yet to come. ▲