Curriculum Design for Black (African American) Psychology

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

What is African American Psychology?

It is easy to say that African American psychology is that body of work that pertains to, and originates from, African Americans. It is more difficult to define the distinctive features of African American psychology, which in fact originate from an African philosophical base (Akbar, 1984; Baldwin, 1986) and can be seen in juxtaposition to a European cosmology or worldview (Baldwin, 1985). This emerging philosophy reflects differences in epistemology.

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

General Source Materials

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

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

spective, the instructor should identify the intergenerational nature of obstacles confronting the African American community and show how this history is manifested across age groups.

Gender

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

The Family

The African American family is an area with one of the longest research traditions in the social sciences. Of particular note are edited volumes by H. P. McAdoo (1981) and Staples (1978) and concise analyses by Noble (1978, 1981). J. L. McAdoo (1981; 1988) provided a rare focus on African American fathers; Simms-Brown (1982) examined the female role in a family context, and DeJarnett and Raven (1981) provided an empirical analysis of power in spousal relationships. In this area, African American psychology counters negative stereotypes and biases while underscoring the strengths and resilience of African American families.

Education

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

Employment and Economics

African American psychology has embraced issues surrounding employment and economics as keys to understanding the life circumstances of African Americans. Useful topics include the effects of job discrimination (Griffith & Griffith, 1986), interracial relations in the workplace (Asante & Davis, 1985), earnings and oc-

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

African American Personality

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

Clinical Issues

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

Psychological Testing

The debate concerning the relation between race and IQ is one of the most controversial areas in African American psychology and has generated voluminous literature and a lively debate (see Eysenck & Kamin, 1981). It is useful to include and discuss works that have branded African Americans as genetically inferior (e.g., Jensen, 1984) as well as those that sharply rebuke the racial inferiority perspective (e.g., Persell, 1984). Focused topics include race of examiner effects (Hanley & Barclay, 1979), social class effects (Tate & Gibson, 1980), and legal issues (Hilliard, 1983a). Many of the issues surrounding the race and IQ controversy also pertain to general psychological assessment (Cameron, 1980; Wyche & Novick, 1985).

Other Areas

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

Conclusion

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

References


