Placing Blacks at Center of Psychology

Psychologist Says Effects of African American History Require Greater Sensitivity Than Standard Analyses

Dr. Halford Fairchild, who teaches psychology and black studies at Pitzer College in Claremont, was born and raised in South-Central, where he lives today. Fairchild defines himself as a social psychologist whose goal is to help change society, not just the individual. Dr. Fairchild has an extensive history of involvement with the Am. of Black Psychologists (ABPs), including service as a national president. Currently, he edits PsychoView, ABPs's journal, while also serving as recording secretary of the Los Angeles chapter. He is co-chair of the program committee for the 27th annual convention of ABPs, which will be held at the Hyatt Regency in Los Angeles today through Aug. 6. Fairchild was interviewed by Jay B. Davis.

In terms of defining black psychology, I think the distinctions are manifold. I teach a 14-week course, "Introduction to African American Psychology," which only scratches the surface of the distinctive features of the topic. It is the vast area of the social science that places African people at the center of analysis, and where the philosophical underpinnings are derived from a uniquely African cosmology, or world view. It places an emphasis on the collective and acknowledges that behavior is a product of a historical process.

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African American psychologists really do have a task in educating the African American public about the potential benefits of psychology.

We as African American psychologists have the dual role of repairing the discipline and restoring a sense of the legitimacy of African-centered psychology. What we have to do is work collaboratively with other areas of the helping professions, including the clergy, the traditional healer, in serving the needs of African people. I think it might be another 100 years before black psychology asserts its true role in aiding the community.

Approximately 2% of psychologists are African American. The low number of practitioners becomes problematic when we consider that we are underrepresented among those requiring psychological intervention. Here we are, 2% of those needing services and only 2% of the service providers. This wouldn't be problematic were it not for the fact that the non-black service provider often contributes to, rather than resolves, the problem.

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For the African American student, very often what we do is give voice to the experiences that they've had. Both are equally enthused about the material.

The Am. of Black Psychologists is concerned with the physical and psychological liberation of African people in this country and around the world. By that, I mean completing the healing of the damage to African people physically, psychologically and spiritually as a result of our many years of captivity. There is an enduring legacy from our years of captivity.

One of the things of this year's convention is this nearly 400-year history of domination and exploitation of African people by non-African people. It went very much to the core of our essence. What we are trying to recover from today is that dehumanization process; it continues to render us as second-class citizens of the planet.

A critical goal of the international conference is to disseminate information and to share our work with each other and with the larger community. ABP works feels that when we come to this city, in a sense we take something from this city. Therefore, it's also incumbent upon us to give something back by way of giving out and giving community workshops. One of the things we plan to do during the convention is to have key members go to community agencies and share their expertise.

I always say that a year of miscommunication can be erased by four days of the ABP's convention.

One gains a connection to professionals and students doing similar work. There's the exposure to the work of others. What we gain is a healing and rejuvenation in the midst of like-minded others. I've always felt that coming to the ABP's convention gave me the kind of energy and fortitude I need to see me through another year.

We have a T-shirt that says "South-Central and Proud of It." I was educated in the public schools of Los Angeles. Someone like me can afford to live pretty much wherever they want to, but I think it's important to live here because it keeps me intimately in touch with the reality so as to need of transformation. Let's forget where we came from, I think it's important to live in the midst of our people. I think the physical presence is a manifestation of where one's heart is.