Chapter 7
Culture of Family Togetherness, Emotional Resilience, and Spiritual Lifestyles Inherent in African Americans from the Time of Slavery Until Now

Fawn T. Robinson and Quiana Golphin

Mental health has continued to be a discussion point that has received little attention among African Americans. Often, the discourse highlights the reluctance to pursue help outside of the family/community as a betrayal of family values. Furthermore, African Americans have often cited an inability to trust those tasked with the responsibility of providing care, something which correlates to this population's known historical and present-day mistreatment in the United States. This chapter introduces readers to the worldview of African Americans by taking a closer look at how racial identity and culture may influence help-seeking practices. There is also a discussion on utilizing a trauma-informed approach when engaging with clients. Helping professionals acknowledge such an approach and agree that the expanse of trauma while they are attentive to its signs and symptoms encourages them to take cognizance of responding in a way that will not re-expose clients to trauma (SAMHSA, 2014). The ethical codes to which counselors subscribe necessitate attention being given to the diversity of clients (ACA, 2014). Moreover, counselors need to be attuned to the historical contributions which have shaped clients' worldviews (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015).

African American Identity & Culture

In defining culture, one must understand the difference between race and culture. Race is a social construct with no true definition. Race was created as a tool of oppression and based on physical characteristics (skin tone, facial features, or hair

F. T. Robinson (✉)
Carlow University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA
e-mail: ftrobinson@carlow.edu

Q. Golphin
University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

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texture) of a person or group. These oppressive methods have caused psychological and racial identity issues among African Americans. William Cross's (1971, 1991) Model of Psychological Nigrescence is a four-stage racial identity development which includes identity clusters for three of the stages: pre-encounter (assimilation, self-hatred, miseducation), encounter, immersion/emersion (intense Black involvement and anti-White), and internalization (Black nationalism and multicultural inclusive) (Cross, 1991; Vandiver et al., 2001; Worrell, 2008). A person's race does not define a person's culture. However, the African American identity and African American culture are tied to historical events: Slavery, Emancipation Proclamation, Jim Crow, Civil Rights Movement, War on Drugs, Mass Incarceration, and Black Lives Matter Movement to name a few. During these historical time periods, traumatized enslaved Africans and African Americans learned survival techniques that shaped and continues to frame modern day African American culture.

A culture is similar traditions, attitudes, beliefs, and narratives shared by a population of people from different races, ethnicities, nationalities, socioeconomic statuses, genders, ages, religions, or geographic locations. According to the American Counseling Association (ACA) (2014), culture is defined as "a socially constructed way of living, which incorporates collective values, beliefs, norms, boundaries, and lifestyles that are co-created with others who share similar worldviews comprising biological, psychosocial, historical, psychological, and other factors" (p. 20). Cultures are influenced by family structure, religions, foods, traditions, rituals, clothing, politics, civil movements, education, socioeconomic statuses, occupations, and internal and external perception of self and of others. Enslaved Africans were stripped of their inherent culture and forced to embrace another culture for survival. African American culture was created by the lived experiences of African descendants, historical oppressive structures, and societal influences and based on the slave culture which started prior to landing on the United States soil (Mintz & Price, 1992). In addition to the African culture, the African American culture is influenced by the Caribbean and American cultures as there were two waves of the slave trade from West Africa: (1) traveling directly to the United States and (2) traveling to the Caribbean Islands before landing in the United States. For the purpose of this chapter, the African American culture is defined as a culture created by people of African descent who were enslaved in the United States and experienced historical trauma at the hand of oppressive systems.

Protective Factors

From the time of slavery and being taken from their homeland, to living 400+ years in oppressive environments not created or designed for them, to continuous daily fear for their lives, African Americans rely heavily on their strengths. For African Americans and within the African American culture, three areas of strength resonate with their ability to survive: family togetherness, emotional resilience, and spiritual relationships.

Family Togetherness

The emphasis on family togetherness was started during the slave trade when the enslaved Africans built a collective bond essential for their survival as their family structures were being oppressed and destroyed by the division of males, females, and children upon capture (Mintz & Price, 1992; Moore Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005). This division forced the enslaved Africans to recreate and reestablish new family structures and a family culture (Mintz & Price, 1992; Moore Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005).

The family structure was no longer defined by blood relatives, and *jumping the broom* was done in secret (Mintz & Price, 1992; Moore Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005). The family structure now consisted of other enslaved Africans of all ages emulating the roles of a family. The extended family lived under the same roof, took care of each other, and helped to raise the next generations. As the African proverb says, *It takes a village to raise a child*. When the enslaved Africans were sold to another slave owner, their family members were taken care of, and they were embraced by other enslaved Africans, eventually calling them cousin, aunt, uncle, brother, sister, etc. Including non-blood relatives in the family structure is still a common practice in the African American culture.

In modern-day society, the African American family structure is still being threatened by oppressive systems. Oppression no longer resembles slavery in its pure definition; however, other systematic oppressive structures have been formed in society to destruct African American family system (Alexander, 2012; Tatum, 2003). For instance, the prison system and laws, regulations, and policies are negatively slanted toward the African American culture stemming from housing, banking, employment, education, etc. The war on drugs and mass incarceration imprison African Americans males and remove them from their homes. Police brutality is killing African American men and women and taking fathers and mothers from their children. As in the time of slavery, when families were torn apart, the enslaved Africans bonded together, reestablished family togetherness and community, and persevered through adversity. These practices are still relevant and intertwined in present-day African American culture.

Emotional Resilience

African Americans have a remarkable ability to be resilient. Through the suffering of slavery to modern-day adversities, African American people and communities are able to be strong and move forward. Emotional resilience thrives from a person's ability to emotionally rebound from experiencing high-risk adversities (e.g., systematic violence, oppression, discrimination, racism) (Hendrick & Young, 2013; Luthar et al., 2015; Masten, 2001, 2014). African Americans are exposed to race-based and cultural-based hardships on a daily basis. However, these difficulties do

not interrupt their successes. Some researchers perceive resiliency as a *process* (i.e., understanding how characteristics develop), while other researchers see it as an *outcome* (i.e., teaching resilience skills) (Hendrick & Young, 2013). Luthar, Crossman, and Small (2015) define resilience as a construct of two components: adversity and positive adaptation. Adversity is the exposure to high-risk conditions leading to "maladjustment in critical" areas, and positive adaptation is an unexpected successful adjustment in relation to the high-risk condition (Luthar et al., 2015, p. 4). African Americans experience mistreatment and unfair injustices that attack their mental health and physical bodies, their families, and their communities and culture. Yet, their protective factors of adapting and emotionally bouncing back from these challenges are what strengthens them as people and as a culture.

Spiritual Lifestyles

It is important to understand the significance of religion and spirituality among many African Americans as well as how they define the concepts (Cashwell & Young, 2011). Given that African Americans are not monolithic, counselors and other helping professionals need to explore the meaning assigned to the terms. For example, the concept of *religion* centers around ritualistic practices and beliefs directed toward the worship of that which is sacred or holy (Cashwell & Young, 2011). Conversely, *spirituality* focuses on an individual's connection with something larger than themselves. Moreover, it describes their quest for meaning and purpose in life (Cashwell & Young, 2011).

Armed with this knowledge, counselors and other helping professionals are positioned to harness the power of religion and spirituality to meet the needs of African Americans in the community, as well as inside the counseling office. Doing so, however, requires the awareness, knowledge, skills, and action described in the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) as well as the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) Competencies.

ASERVIC complements and is supported by the ACA Code of Ethics in that it recognizes the need to consider the impact that religion/spirituality has on the whole person. The ASERVIC Competencies consist of 6 focus areas which are further divided into 14 competencies. The six categories are (1) culture and worldview, (2) counselor self-awareness, (3) human and spiritual development, (4) communication, (5) assessment, and (6) diagnosis and treatment (ASERVIC, 2009). Competency areas are contained within the category areas and are useful to combine with approaches to counseling (Cashwell & Young, 2011).

One need not be a professional counselor to benefit from knowing and applying the principles outlined in the competencies to relationships with African Americans. The competencies lend themselves to ethical treatment and interactions with clients (ACA, 2014) – in this case, African Americans. Furthermore, it is paramount to understand the influence of history in shaping one's life experiences, perceptions,

and outlook (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015). While religion and spirituality may be foundational to some African American experiences, it is not the case for all. Furthermore, religion in the United States has not always been an ally of African Americans.

During slavery, slave owners, also referred to as masters, regularly used passages of biblical scripture to advance their agenda of ensuring the continued oppression and degradation of African Americans. Consequently, African Americans were not afforded the space or opportunity to view God as loving and supportive, but rather connected to and in the likeness of their White masters who continually subjected them to harsh treatment. Church services stood as an additional means of maltreatment and manipulation because African Americans were exposed to sermons that reinforced messages of total obedience and submission to their White owners.

Not only were the enslaved Africans required to submit to their owners in a new, unfamiliar land, but they were required to adapt to a religious belief system that was also new. Prior to arrival in America, Africans possessed and practiced their own religious and spiritual beliefs before being made to assimilate into that of the Whites (Moore Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005) which was often Christianity. Christianity served as the litmus test for whether their behavior categorized them as a good slave or a bad slave. Any deviation from the teaching of what the Bible stated consequently exposed them to sharp criticism and inhumane treatment.

Constant exposure to such abusive conditions took its toll on African Americans, and the effects can still be seen and felt today. They were constantly faced with having to discover ways to manage their suffering while simultaneously battling their insecurities with identity, in addition to trying to establish their worth and status as a human being. Although church attendance with their masters perpetuated their experience with pain and suffering, the enslaved Africans eventually began to hold secret worship services of their own in what has been referred to as the "invisible institution" (Frazier, 1974). During that time, they discovered that God was unlike the one presented to them in the services they attended with their masters. Their newly acquired image of God instilled hope for better days ahead, even though they were still being ruled by oppression.

As time progressed, the church represented a refuge, even if for a short time, where African Americans could attempt to rediscover the identity they lost upon arrival in America. They achieved this through reading the scripture for themselves which paved the way for an understanding of God's true attributes. Moreover, African American leaders began to emerge in the church. Churches provided African Americans with recognition and status, something they could not enjoy in society. Preachers were also seen as individuals other African Americans could trust (Adksion-Bradley et al., 2005).

In effect, African American preachers were identified as the pillars of the community. They provided guidance on life issues, education, politics, social justice and advocacy, and religious and spiritual matters (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). For example, during the Civil Rights era, church basements served as training grounds to prepare eager African Americans to fight for change by mobilizing the rally against discrimination and racism.

Whether it be Islam, Jehovah's Witness, Christianity, or some other faith, religion and spirituality has historically served as support for many African Americans. Consequently, it is this strong presence and relationship which has also shaped a great deal of African Americans' views of mental health. For example, consider the role of the African American preacher. During a time when life was stressful, i.e., the Civil Rights era, the preacher was one who was seen as a symbol of support. Again, this was a result of an established level of trust in their ability to lead and provide counsel (Adksion-Bradley et al., 2005; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Therefore, they were largely instrumental in shaping their members' views on world events, behavior, politics, and subsequently mental health.

Historical Trauma

Trauma is defined as resulting "… from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7). A memorable way to conceptualize trauma is that, sometimes, the events that one experiences may contribute to long-lasting, detrimental effects. Whether someone works as a mental health professional, an educator, clergy, or in some capacity where the interaction with others is probable, it is pertinent to be open to the worldview of others. Hence, that worldview may be shaped by trauma.

When the concept of trauma arises, it may evoke images or associations with combat-related PTSD, abuse, accidents, violence, etc. However, there are additional categories which need consideration, especially as they pertain to African Americans, such as historical trauma. Historical trauma is the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over a lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group experiences" (Brave Heart, 2003, p. 7). Given the harsh conditions African Americans were subjected to during slavery and beyond, it would stand to reason that some of those same effects are still present today. Although African Americans today did not have firsthand experience with what occurred during slavery, the remnants still serve as a source of distress among the individual, community, and family. Some of these effects may be in the form of anxiety, depression, and stress, some of which may also be exacerbated by discriminatory practices based on race.

Trauma-Informed Approach

Consequently, knowledge surrounding the effects of slavery, oppression, and discrimination can guide helping professionals to approach their interactions with African Americans through a trauma-informed lens. SAMHSA (2014) describes a

trauma-informed approach as one where there is a realization of the far-reaching impact of trauma in the lives of many people. Additionally, it is an approach where the signs and symptoms of trauma are recognized. What is important to note is that with African Americans, some mental health symptoms manifest themselves physically; therefore, awareness is imperative to foster healing. Furthermore, it is responsive to the existence of trauma by ensuring that policies and procedures reflect what is known about trauma. Lastly, this approach prioritizes the sensitivity to refrain from re-traumatization.

There are six principles in which the trauma-informed approach is grounded: (1) safety; (2) trustworthiness and transparency; (3) peer support; (4) collaboration and mutuality; (5) empowerment, voice, and choice; and (6) cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014).

The first principle is safety, where measures are taken to ensure that individuals experience both physical and psychological safety. Safety can be in the classroom, in the workplace, and in religious communities, as well as within the counseling relationship. Trustworthiness and transparency situates honesty at the center of the relationship. Being that trust, especially as it pertains to help-seeking, has been limited among African Americans, helpers need to be forthcoming in their intentions and well-doing. Peer support makes provisions for the comfort of a shared experience. Trauma survivors benefit from knowing they are not suffering in isolation. There is a healing that begins to occur when a survivor can lean on others who demonstrate a level of understanding that perhaps others would not. One could surmise that this type of support is what has served as a coping mechanism throughout history for African Americans.

Collaboration and mutuality acknowledge that sometimes there is a hierarchy of power that exists in relationships which needs to be leveled. For example, in a counseling relationship, the counselor demonstrates the necessary humility to understand that the client is the expert on his or her life. So, the counselor empowers their clients by making them participants in the decision-making process which will ultimately affect their lives. This is also demonstrated in another principle called empowerment, voice, and choice. The counselor harnesses the strengths of the client and incorporates those strengths into the treatment process to move them from victim to survivor. Doing so recognizes that cultural, historical, and gender issues, the sixth principle of trauma-informed care, may have stripped away the power once held by the client. Therefore, counselors and other helping professionals can facilitate the process of healing by taking action and acknowledging the effects of such issues in the lives of African Americans through advocacy.

Mental Health Interventions

Seeking mental health treatment can be an intimidating process for anyone. But, for African Americans, the process can be intensified as a result of the residual effects of slavery and the distrust of medical professionals and researchers. With that,

counselors and other helping professionals have to be familiar with the developmental domains of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC). The MSJCC consists of competencies divided into four developmental domains where clinicians are charged with being self-aware, understanding of the client's worldview, acknowledging the interaction between clients and clinicians and their privileged and marginalized statuses, and implementing culturally appropriate interventions.

Culturally appropriate mental health interventions are imperative when working with African Americans (Chatters et al., 2018; Plunkett, 2014). Protective factors such as family togetherness, emotional resilience, and spiritual connections contribute to African Americans overcoming adversity and mental health issues (McNeil Smith & Landor, 2018).

It is common knowledge that mental illness bears a stigma in the African American community. There is a reluctance to discuss or seek assistance for mental health concerns which may also be rooted in religious and spiritual beliefs. Religious beliefs, as with Christianity for example, often describe mental illness as a sin issue which can be cured through spiritual means like prayer or increased faith. However, the drawback associated with this belief is that those who are struggling with mental illness are left to engage in practices which may not fully address their mental health needs or improve their quality of life.

Research has stated that a more helpful approach to wellness would be to develop collaborative partnerships with key stakeholders in African American communities (Adksion-Bradley et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2000; Stanford, 2017). Preachers and other religious leaders would be instrumental in such partnerships because they possess the platform to influence the thoughts and behaviors of members of their congregations. It is imperative, though, that they find a balance between fostering spiritual and mental growth by acknowledging the existence of mental illness, especially among African Americans. Moreover, they may leverage their power to build bridges between the faith and secular communities by incorporating positive, inclusive language surrounding help-seeking.

Conclusion

Centuries of oppression and hardships suffered by enslaved Africans and their descendants contribute to psychological issues, racial identity issues, and survival strategies and techniques (Anderson, 2019; Mintz & Price, 1992). African Americans use family togetherness (presence, bonding, and support), emotional resilience (coping with hardships), and spiritual relationships (higher beings and connections) as resources of strength and mental health protective factors (Chatters et al., 2018; Hayward & Krause, 2015; McNeil Smith & Landor, 2018). Counselors and other helping professionals recognize that clients' presenting issues are influenced by the clients' personal lived experiences and effects on their culture, both of which may also include some form of trauma (ACA, 2014; MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015;

SAMHSA, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to be cognizant of such factors when developing helping relationships which, hopefully, will begin the much needed healing process among African Americans who struggle with mental illness.

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