Chapter 15
Culture, Creativity, and Helping: Using the Afrocentric Perspective in Community Healing

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Introduction to a Puppet Show

In the summer of 2013, a team of social work students, under the guidance of their professor, Marva Lewis, constructed Miranda's Puppet Show, a community-based psychoeducational intervention used to teach parents and children about emotions and getting their hair combed. In this chapter, we will discuss Afrocentric theory, using creative arts in community-based interventions, and practical strategies for social workers and other professionals seeking to make use of their own culturally rigorous techniques.

Miranda's Puppet Show is a world not unlike our own, one in which a community of helpers shows up to support parents in their day-to-day quest to provide a rich and meaningful upbringing for their infants and young children. Miranda is a child like most children. She is precocious and smart, inquisitive, and trusting. As our team engaged in the sketching of *Miranda's Puppet Show,* we all called to mind images of childhood shows that reflect the best ideals of community, tenderheartedness, and loving engagement, with a village of citizens all working toward a common goal.

Perhaps, one of my favorite themes in *Miranda's Puppet Show* is carried out through all three acts of the show, the parent–child relationship or attachment. It features Miranda running away from her mother to protest having her hair combed. The central tenet of attachment in Bowlby and Ainsworth's Attachment Theory (Tracy & Ainsworth, 1981) suggests that Miranda uses her mother as her secure base, her anchor as she runs away, testing her own reality in the larger world, and

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keeping her mother in mind all the while. Miranda protests as she runs away, and yet, rather than ignoring her mother, she brings her up to every adult she comes in contact with on her adventure. This is much like young children who run away from their caregivers as a means of reality testing and playfulness, and then return to the safety of the parent–child relationship.

When I discovered the method, *Talk, Touch, and Listen While Combing Hair!* (TT&L), developed by Marva Lewis (Lewis & Butler Byrd, 2016) to support healthy parent–child interaction, and based on my deep love of the arts, I was drawn to become a member of her team. I couldn't wait to get home after our initial brainstorming meeting to watch several episodes of the Punch and Judy Show on YouTube. I had long admired that style of comedy. I remembered staying up late to watch old TV shows and movies with my parents. Memories of *I Love Lucy* and other *Nick at Nite* grainy black & white TV shows flooded my dreams. It felt like a treat to study the ways in which puppetry had brought lessons for understanding and great joy to so many children and adults. Following a study of as many episodes as I could get my hands on, I worked with the team of graduate students as we set out on a mission to craft a show that would be fun for students and easy for amateur performers to read and understand. We stayed up all night with a skeletal framework created by Dr. Lewis, writing dialogue and interaction for *Miranda's Puppet Show*.

Attachment and Talk, Touch and Listen While Combing Hair

Attachment Theory helps us see that young children learn about the world of relationships from sensitive caregiving and responsive interactions with parents, caregivers, and other community members. Appropriate and contingent responses between a primary caregiver and young child result in a strong attachment relationship, providing emotional and psychological safety, encouraging the child to explore the world of people and things with curiosity and enthusiasm (Ainsworth, et al., 1978).

Central to TT&L is the idea that hair combing, something that parents do when caring for their children, allows parents time to pay attention and express a host of concepts including love, support, affection, sympathy, encouragement, excitement, and empowerment, just to name a few. These interactions lead to a strong and healthy attachment relationship that sets the foundation for positive relationships with other people throughout the lifespan (Sroufe et al., 2005).

The Conceptual Framework: An Afrocentric Lens for Creative Social Work Practice

The Afrocentric perspective, largely developed in historically Black colleges and universities, and contributed to by many modern-day researchers such as Jerome Schiele, Tricia Bent-Goodley, Colita Nichols Fairfax, Iris Carlton-LaNey, focuses

on using African philosophies, history, and culture as a starting place for understanding the world (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017). The Social Work field needs to integrate Afrocentric theories into its educational and training curricula while seeking new opportunities to put it into practice.

The benefit of *Talk, Touch, and Listen* is its alignment with core social work values and ethics such as our obligation toward social justice, person-in-environment perspective, and strengths-based approach when working with clients. As social workers, we have a responsibility to seek justice in all that we do in pursuit of social change. Social work practice requires us to consider the history, culture, and needs of the peoples of Africa and the diaspora, which includes those from the African continent, the Caribbean, Latin America, and African Americans. In considering specific culture and needs within the culture, professional social workers are advised to use an Afrocentric perspective to apply culturally rigorous approaches to practice.

Our collective professional obligation is further exemplified in the person-in-environment perspective, an approach that has long been a tenet to good, evidence-based practice. The Afrocentric perspective invites practitioners to pay attention to both strengths and needs of children and families who are historically and socially different from other cultural groups. Many times, the conflation of cultural competency is rooted in knowing the broad strokes of history that affected a large so-called minority community. The person-in-environment perspective asks us to approach this problem of marginalized and minoritized peoples differently. When applied, the person-in-environment approach helps us to carefully inspect and respect people, their physical surroundings, and their social and historical surroundings.

Finally, the infusion of an Afrocentric approach, alongside our professional ethics for social justice and social change, combined with the person-in-environment approach, allows us to approach our clients from a strengths perspective. Knowing one's history, culture, and philosophies helps both practitioners and clients to ground themselves in identities that are unique and powerful. For instance, the storytelling tradition of the African-American community creates a powerful opportunity to tap into creative endeavors like puppet shows, spiritual gatherings, and simple cookouts to bring a new message about healing from the trauma of historical oppression and slavery. Leveraging these gifts is powerful and also skill based. Storytellers within communities have a powerful ability to tap into the shared experiences that the dominant group is often oblivious to. By using the *Talk, Touch, and Listen* model as a point of reference, we hope to create an accessible tool for social workers that reflects an Afrocentric way of thinking.

Afrocentric Social Work Practice

Talk, Touch, and Listen While Combing Hair! flows from research that focuses on the importance of the mother and child's attachment relationship to the developing child's healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development (Wilson et al., 2018). The attachment relationship, optimally defined as secure and trusting, develops out

of many sensitive and responsive interactions between parent and child. The *Talk, Touch, and Listen* experience honors and reflects this theoretical frame, with a unique focus on the hair combing experience within the African-American community.

Important to understand, Afrocentric social work demonstrates that an intervention focused on supporting Black women and children is possible. This important approach should be integrated into practice, rather than something that is additional to treatment and intervention. In a world where anti-Black racism creates psychological impacts on all peoples of the African diaspora, the professional social worker should pursue with haste and vigor methodologies like *Talk, Touch, and Listen* that build psychological resilience.

Creating the Puppet Show: "Have You Ever Seen the Punch and Judy Show"?

Translating abstract statistics from research findings into pragmatic tools to support children and families is a challenging task. Much of evidence-based practice builds on techniques and theories established as appropriate with different populations. Translating a cultural practice of hair combing into a clinical intervention was daunting. A brief image seen while scrolling through the pages of a website on an unrelated topic was the catalyst for the development of Miranda's Puppet Show. What I saw was a still photo of the wildly popular Punch and Judy puppet show, a staple of street entertainment in Britain in the 1600s. What attracted my eye was how it was centered in the heart of the community, surrounded by throngs of laughing children and adults.

Briefly, the plots were short, depicting lively interactions between two puppets with exaggerated features. The central male puppet, Punch, and his wife, Judy, often engaged in shouting matches, arguments, or fights, with Punch using manipulative techniques or even hitting his wife over the head. You may wonder what this depiction of family violence has to do with promoting loving parent–child interaction while combing hair? How could a puppet show about an old white couple with the husband regularly beating his wife in jolly old England inform social work practice with Black children and families?

Prior to seeing the images of the Punch and Judy Show, I (Lewis) had read through the latest draft of a children's book created by a dear friend, Dollwyn Pierre from New Orleans, Louisiana. Familiar with the focus of my research on the importance of the hair combing task as an opportunity to bond with young children, Dollwyn created Miranda's Green Hair© (Pierre, 2004). The book normalizes the hair combing task and helps children connect emotionally to their daily hair combing experiences. The story is about a little girl who doesn't want to get her hair combed. She runs away from home, has some frightening experiences in the forest, and gets help from the animals and trees in the forest to find her way home.

The "aha" moment was how a lively, boisterous puppet show in the tradition of *Punch and Judy* could serve as a vehicle to reach communities of parents and children together on the emotionally charged topic of hair combing. The photo of the old English puppets wildly chasing each other around the stage evoked images of wild-haired two-year-olds chased by a frustrated parent with comb-in-hand trying to get the child to sit still to get their hair combed. The theme of violent interactions between two family members could be translated into the depiction of intense emotions that children feel in response to getting their hair combed. With a large dose of humor, the puppets could act out the emotions felt by both the child and the parent. Thus, Miranda's Puppet Show was born.

After developing an outline focused on the expression and recognition of emotions, a puppet show could serve as a community-based vehicle to help parents and young children to recognize the emotions of a young girl of color who doesn't want to get her hair combed. What emerged from this creative process was the idea of adding *Miranda's Puppet Show* as a companion to the *Talk, Touch, and Listen While Combing Hair! Parent Café*. Both could support learning to listen, creating opportunities to interact positively with one another, and entering into everyday conversations that are respectful.

What Is The Parent Café?

The *Talk, Touch, and Listen* Parent Café was originally designed to address the legacies of historical trauma for African-American descendants of enslaved African survivors of chattel slavery in the United States. For example, Colorism, valuing light skin over dark skin, is an unrecognized legacy of centuries of group oppression. The strong emotions associated with these experiences are not often discussed within families. These emotions may become part of intergenerational patterns of acceptance or rejection of children due to the parent's internalized stereotypes about racial features. The TT&L *Parent Café* provides a safe neutral space for parent peers to unpack their memories of childhood experiences of colorism, hair combing, and other racial traumas of acceptance or rejection by loved family members or unthinking neighbors and friends.

During the Parent Café, children sit in a setting that is separate from their parents or other caregivers, and follow a curriculum of interactive, artistic activities such drawing, painting, or learning how to recognize and understand the meaning of different emotions. They also spend time preparing items for the puppet show that follows the cafe.

Based on the World Wide Cafe model (The World Café Community Foundation Creative Commons, 2015), TT&L Parent Cafés are a series of "drop-in" groups that are offered to parents and families as a regular part of the community agency's early childhood services. The Cafés provide an informal place for parents to connect over a meal. Agency staff trained in the cafe model lead a gently facilitated tabletop discussion about tough topics of colorism and the meaning of terms like "good" hair.

Miranda's Puppet Show parallels the topics of acceptance, rejection, and conflict resolution that parents discuss in the monthly Parent Cafés and that are covered in the 8-week parent support group *Talk, Touch, and Listen While Combing Hair!* offered at the sponsoring community agency.

This is a two-generation approach to raise emotional awareness and create social support for parents. Through the voice of Miranda learning to express her emotions, we aim to interrupt historical or intergenerational family patterns, shining a light of hope so that children can be accepted for who they are. Primary goals are to encourage unconditional acceptance of children and to recognize the hurt caused by racialized Colorism. The Parent Café and *Miranda's Puppet Show* are relevant to people of color from marginalized, oppressed racial, ethnic, cultural, and minority groups around the world.

This entertaining activity engages parents in the ritual and routine of hair combing and storytelling as a daily opportunity to talk, touch, and listen to their child while combing hair. After participating in these gently facilitated conversations with other parents at a *Parent Café,* caregivers and children come together to enjoy an interactive and fun puppet show.

The Development of *Miranda's Puppet Show*

Miranda's Puppet Show was adapted from the original story, *Miranda's Green Hair*© by Dollwyn Pierre of New Orleans, Louisiana, and produced in 2013 by Samuel Bradley, Kaley Gerstley, Ian Farrell, Abbey Cettel, and Kendal Jackson, MSW graduate students at the Tulane University School of Social Work. The puppet show centers on a lively little girl of color with green hair. Her mother wants to comb her hair, and she has strong feelings about getting her hair combed. The central theme of the show is that Miranda does not know how to express her emotions and resolve the conflict she feels. Her mother wants to comb her hair and she has strong feelings about getting her hair combed. Her best friend, JoJo the Clown, leads her through a hilarious journey through the neighborhood, where she encounters a nosey neighbor and friendly postman or police officer.

The Structure of the Puppet Show

The interaction takes place on the front porch of a single-story house in the neighborhood of an urban city, similar to New Orleans, Louisiana. There are three scenes that tell the story of Miranda's efforts to avoid getting her hair combed. Throughout the show, the audience urges Miranda to express her emotions using rhythmic chants accompanied by musical instruments such as drums or rainmakers. The encouraging chants tell Miranda to show her feelings and seek help from other adults or the helping community. The seven basic emotions include *joy, surprise, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and interest* (Izard, 1992) and are incorporated throughout the

dialog of Miranda's Puppet Show. Each emotion is painted on a hand-held sign that the puppet Miranda holds up in front of her face as the audience loudly chants for her to express her emotion. Another puppet, JoJo, the Clown, reads the signs that Miranda holds and instructs the audience of children and parents to shout out the emotions as loudly as they can. Separate musical instruments are played to emphasize each specific emotion.

Our goal is to jointly build the parents' and children's emotional vocabulary. With this nonthreatening intervention, parents observe other children's responses to the emotions that their child might experience during hair combing. Seeing other children's responses to the task of combing hair may normalize their own child's reaction to what could be a painful or pleasurable experience.

By following the lighthearted antics of a little girl puppet that may look like their own child or remind them of themselves as children, parents and children learn to recognize and label seven universal emotions and normalize the expression of basic emotions in all children. Parents also can practice active listening skills in a nonthreatening environment with other peers. As parent caregivers comb hair, it will be important for them to listen carefully to their own child's verbal and nonverbal ways of expressing emotions. They can take the skills learned at the puppet show and in the Parent Café, back to their homes and everyday routines of combing their child's hair.

Finally, the two-generation goal of all these activities is to strengthen the parent–child bond, the parent's sense of self-efficacy, increase the recognition of basic emotions and emotional literacy, and ability to recognize and resolve conflict.

Build Community Among Parent Peers

Parents come together through food, fun, and being heard. The scenes presented in the puppet show are designed to demonstrate the positive roles of a variety of community members for social support. The characters of the nosey neighbor and the helpful policeman or postman are easily recognized by both young children and their parents.

Parenting children with the stresses of today's world provides many challenges. Participating in traditional parenting groups often has the very defined goals of addressing behavioral challenges in children, learning new child management techniques, or simply complying with the order of a juvenile court to attend "parent training." The final goal of this puppet show is to give parents an opportunity to relax, laugh, and learn with both their children and other parents in a safe, nonthreatening environment. To have *fun!*

Igniting Social Workers' Imagination Through Art and Creativity

Readers may wonder to themselves what some key takeaways are regarding building a puppet show and igniting social work practitioners' imagination. First, the process does not need to be expensive. The puppet stage built in the New Orleans

production cost just under $100 using PVC piping, bed linen, and tape. The puppets themselves were constructed using puppet arts and crafts cut-outs easily searchable on the internet. However, some of our other colleagues have purchased puppet theatres, stages, and puppets online for ease of convenience.

We borrowed sound makers (small drums and rainmakers) from musically inclined colleagues, but practitioners can also build their own sound makers or involve children in making them in an arts and crafts activity. To create the sound of a pair of maracas, you can fill a plastic cup with beads or peas and then tape a second cup to it right at the rims of both cups. When shaken, the cups with the beads/peas inside will give the distinct cha-cha sound of the maracas. This is an inexpensive and easy activity. Building puppet shows, singing songs with clients, and working on productions together are wonderful ways to build rapport and create opportunities for discussion with children and adults, supporting both the parents' and children's development.

Combing the Arts and Afrocentric Social Work Practice: Personal Reflections

Music, dancing, drawing, and storytelling are central components of the human condition. Across numerous cultures, beliefs, and values, people share the common trait of attempting to offer parts of themselves, their cultures, and their ideas through artistry. Art isn't limited; it can include puppetry, martial arts, graphic design, cooking, and a host of other activities that are designed to bridge the human experience with a shared and communal storytelling experience.

Not everyone talks, not everyone speaks the same language, and when we are talking, we might not know what we are saying or what we need to say. To circumvent this difficulty in connecting, we need the same tools our ancestors have relied on for thousands of years: art.

Why am I talking so much about art? I want to encourage social work practitioners to feel free to use the arts in their own practice. Whether you consider yourself to be creative or not, there is no better way to get started than to try it. Asking clients to draw, write, or sing about their experiences is an excellent option for helping them to express their lived experiences.

I encourage you to consider using your own cultural experiences to teach lessons, create space, and encourage creativity with your clients. They will be thankful for your thoughtfulness in this space.

The beauty of Miranda's Puppet Show is its simplicity. It allows us, the puppeteers, and showrunners, to take a playful approach to engaging children who may be at one of the most painful points of their young lives. In our case, we took the puppet show to the New Orleans Women's Shelter (NOWS), where many of the women were in the middle of transitioning away from living conditions made dangerous due to intimate partner violence.

While our team of performers and social workers in training worked with the children during playtime activities, the Parent Café's would take place. This was an opportunity for parents to share their concerns, questions, and engage in knowledge development around best practices for parenting. At the same time, at a moment in time in which our clients were most in danger of foregone and distant attachment, we were able to model healthy exploration of the world through Miranda's Puppet Show.

When I discuss creativity with other professionals, they say that they don't feel qualified to try new approaches to service or create new ways to reach children and families. While I advocate for the use of evidence-based practices in social work and other health allied fields, it is also important that practitioners with real lived experiences are given latitude to create and problem solve in the field. What follows are basic guidelines to creative thinking for social workers or other helping professionals:

Guidelines for Creative Thinking for Helping Professionals

STEP #1: To kick off a creative process, gather a group of trusted colleagues who represent diverse cultures, varied experiences, and different academic disciplines.

STEP #2 Explore the problem that you are trying to work on. Is it a community--based intervention at a women's shelter? An attempt to reach a particular community that is hard to interact with? Exploring the problem, the client, the community, and the environment is just as important as the solution and the creative process. Set a timer for 10 minutes, giving yourself an opportunity to define the problem, acknowledge the constraints of the problem, and focus on developing your critical thinking and creativity skills. Jot your ideas on post-it notes. Reflect for 10 min and place your sticky notes on a wall where everyone can see it. Refrain from discussing the sticky notes until the 10 min are up.

STEP #3: Explore the problem through more research. Libraries, online knowledge communities (often found on social media), and research scholars may be able to provide insight into the tough social problems that social workers and others face in the field. These important resources should help in discussing the group's ideas around the problem. Try reframing the problem several times.

STEP #4: Brainstorm the solution to the problem with your team. Suspend judgment; be playful and imaginative. Listen to each other. Reach agreement to try something out.

STEP #5 Create a test product or prototype. Test out your idea without investing too much time.

STEP #6 Take time to rehearse the finished product. Practice until you feel confident.

Conclusion

Miranda's Puppet Show demonstrates an attempt to set the framework for a world that isn't always friendly, warm, and endearing by creating a world that is a little less traumatic than the one that surrounds us. As a social worker or helping professional, you can foster creativity and healing with your clients. Building on the everyday cultural practices provides a template for creativity, healing, and identity building. Be curious, explore, and take action!

Reflective Questions

1. How can you bring an Afrocentric approach to your practice with Black children and families, using Talk, Touch, and Listen as a creative centerpiece for novel strategies to encourage positive parent–child interaction leading to a healthy attachment relationship?
2. What thoughts came alive for you as you thought about the pleasure that children and families enjoyed and what they learned watching *Miranda's Puppet Show?*
3. Reflecting on the art of storytelling that is at the center of Bradley's creative puppet show, what other stories about culture, ethnicity, race, or belonging could you tell that might capture the minds and hearts of children and parents and lead to healing?
4. How can you "think outside the box," and bring the creative arts, including music, dancing, drawing, and storytelling, into your social work or early childhood practice?

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