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## Culturally Competent Assessment of African American Clients

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As more African American families, clients, agencies, and organizations celebrate the values inherent in their cultural heritage, the strategies, methodologies, techniques, and instruments of assessment psychology are challenged to prove their appropriateness for the population on which they are used. These challenges have resulted in 2 major dilemmas for this domain of psychology. The first is whether to create race-specific norms for existing instruments. The second is the fundamental question of whether existing instruments measure the correct attributes, given the cultural differences. Both issues are discussed in this article.

Educational institutions, employers, and social and mental health services providers in the United States request and/or conduct assessments of individuals, parents, families, and other groups to obtain information on treatment direction, and to determine what services are needed or who should receive them. The number of tests available to complete these assessments is substantial. *Tests in Print* (Murphy, 1994) contains more than 3,000 entries, including achievement tests, educational tests, intelligence tests and scholastic aptitude measures, personality tests, and assessments of vocational interests and skills. The normative population for these thousands of tests is predominantly Caucasian Americans. In many instances they are college students, men, and/or middle class (Jones, 1991; Williams, 1991). When ethnic minorities are assessed using these norms, questions have been raised about whether psychopathology has been overdiagnosed, placement in remedial classes and/or classes for the mentally deficient was appropriate, test performance has any rational relation to job performance, and tests accurately predicted achievement potential. These questions have been debated in professional journals (Baskin, Bluestone, & Nelson, 1981; Brown, 1994; Gottfredson, 1994; Johnson, 1993; Malgady, Rogler, & Costantino, 1987; Mio & Iwamasa, 1993; Murray, 1996; Pedersen & Marsella, 1982; Sackett & Wilk, 1994; Zuckerman, 1990), and litigated in America's courts (cases addressing issues of language minorities, *Lau v. Nichols*,

1974; *Guadalupe Organization Inc. v. Tempe Elementary School District No. 3*, 1972; cases dealing with issues concerning ethnic minorities, *Hobson v. Hanson*, 1967; *Griggs v. Duke Power*, 1971; cases concerning ethnic bias and individual intelligence tests, *Larry P. v. Riles*, 1972; *PACE v. Hannon*, 1980; *Marshall v. Georgia*, 1984).

In this article, two narrow perspectives of these controversies are addressed. The first discusses the merits of establishing African American norms for many of the frequently used tests such as the Wechsler Scales, the Bender Gestalt, the Wide Range Achievement Test, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), the Rorschach, and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Tests such as these illustrate when African American norms would be helpful and, if creating such norms is agreed, how to correct some of the problems that exist in intelligence, achievement, personality, behavior, and/or context assessments.

The second question explores the issue of whether new tests should be created by African Americans for assessment purposes. Subsumed within this question is the issue of whether these new instruments will assess parallel constructs (e.g., intelligence, achievement, personality, behavior, context, etc.) or Africentric paradigms. Baldwin and Bell (1985) described the Africentric paradigm as follows:

This paradigm assumes that Black behavior is culturally based being derived from and reflective of the distinct social reality of the African American community. Thus, African American social reality comprises its own values, norms and standards undergirding Black behavior. This "Africentric" social reality therefore projects a normalcy referent for Black behavior that is independent of Euro-American culture and Western racism. In other words, the Africentric paradigm conceives of Black behavior as being in the service of the authentic needs and social priorities of the African community, i.e., towards its affirmation, enhancement, survival, positive development and fulfillment of its potential as a community. (p. 62)

In the preface to the *Handbook of Tests and Measurements for Black Populations*, Reginald Jones (1996) stated:

Many psychological practitioners, scholars, and the lay public have long been critical of the use of psychological tests administered to African Americans. ... Implicit in all chapters (where more than one hundred instruments and approaches are presented) is the view that tests and measures must be developed that have African American history, characteristics, experiences, behaviors and needs as their foundation. ... Many of the tests and measures presented herein represent well-known constructs such as self-esteem, stress, coping, etc., that have been developed on Whites. ... Other measures in the *Handbook* are specifically unique to African Americans. These include such measures as perceived racism, coping with racism, African American acculturation, African American identity development, Black personality and African self-consciousness, to name a few.

How should we proceed? Sattler (1992) presented this argument against creating national norms for ethnic minority children.

Pluralistic norms are potentially dangerous, because they (a) provide a basis for invidious comparisons among different ethnic groups, (b) may lower the expectations of ethnic minority children and reduce their level of aspiration to succeed, (c) may have little relevance outside the child's specific geographic area, and (d) furnish no information about the complex reason why some ethnic groups tend to score lower on intelligence tests. The renorming of tests to devise pluralistic norms is inappropriate because it does not involve test modifications, nor does it take into account whether the test should be used with ethnic minority children. And the use of pluralistic norms gives rise to new questions—what norms should be used for a child who has a Mexican father and a Hungarian mother? (pp. 569–570)

However, consider comments by Dana (1993), on the ability of nonethnic minority clinicians to provide culturally competent psychological assessments.

Learning about other cultures is a life-long task that is part and parcel of learning about oneself in a context with other persons who all differ in some degree. It is not sufficient to invite multicultural clients into a collaborative assessment relationship that provides education for the service provider. Although this argument may be based on good will, sincerity, and openness on the part of service providers, it minimizes the extent of world-view differences and the amount of training and experience required to provide culturally competent services. (p. vii)

#### THE CASE FOR ESTABLISHING AFRICAN AMERICAN NORMS ON EXISTING INSTRUMENTS

Despite legal challenges to the use of psychological and educational tests on ethnic minorities, such tests continue to be used. Issues surrounding the inappropriateness of those test results remain unresolved. Parents, educators, and activists complain that when such tests are used, ethnic minorities end up on identified tracks within school systems. Ethnic minorities are disproportionately placed in classes for the mentally handicapped, and where such curricula exist, end up in classes that prepare them for vocational careers rather than for admission to colleges and universities. This subject was a feature topic on the November 5, 1995 broadcast of the CBS News program *60 Minutes*, which described how Georgia has struggled with the problem of racial tracking. The Georgia example illustrates problems pervasive throughout educational systems in America. With the current challenges to affirmative action, "objective" eligibility requirements will continue to be assessed for purposes such as admission to educational institutions; Federal, state, and county contract awards; employment; access to mental health and social services; and so

forth. For the foreseeable future, many required assessments will be conducted by Caucasian examiners, using traditional testing instruments. Therefore, we indeed need to know how ethnic minority clients perform on those instruments, based on ethnic minority norms.

We have to create African American norms for the existing instruments being used. At the same time, we must continue to develop instruments from the Africentric perspective. The Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi), with national headquarters in Washington, DC, is the appropriate organization to coordinate the effort to create African American norms. The following proposal is suggested: The ABPsi should identify a calendar year for which the following study will be conducted. For example, in 1998, psychologists from urban and rural communities across the United States and U.S. territories can determine which tests should be administered. The test battery should be comprehensive, including intelligence, psychomotor, education, personality, behavior, and achievement assessments. Also, critically important is the extent to which the language in the existing administration manuals should be modified to reflect linguistic and idiomatic usage among African Americans. After the tests and customizations have been agreed on, the testing environment should also be standardized. The type of setting should be determined (e.g., examiners' offices vs. similar rooms within schools or other locations, time of day when exams will be administered, etc.) as well as examiners' experience, instrument versions, and any modifications that are acceptable for the assessment to be considered valid. Other issues should also be considered (e.g., whether psychologists are licensed, if they must be clinical psychologists, the quantity of examinations to be conducted overall and by each examiner, client demographics, etc.). This general proposal outline is suggested for the purpose of this article, and I do not suggest that it is exhaustive of all of the necessary research considerations.

Then, in 1999, the examinations would be completed, the data would be collected and analyzed, and the norms for African American clients would be published. The findings can be used to modify the aforementioned instruments, making their administration and usage meaningful for African Americans. For the reader who would like the most current and comprehensive research that has been conducted on African American norms for traditional assessment instruments, the Jones (1996) *Handbook* must be consulted.

#### OVERVIEW OF AFRICENTRIC CONSTRUCTS

Generally, traditional psychology assesses such attributes as IQ, cognitive functioning, personality, and achievement. Africentric theorists challenge the appropriateness of using such perspectives to understand African Americans' behavior and functioning. These theorists posit, instead, that the appropriate paradigms to be assessed for African Americans are attributes such as perceptions of racism,

responses to racism, acculturation, identity development and formation, and self-consciousness. Reginald Jones (1996) indicated that instruments to measure these constructs have been in various stages of development over the past 20 years. An increasing number of African American clinicians understand the importance of assessing Black functioning along these dimensions. The issue remaining to be resolved is whether one should assess African American clients using Africentric instruments or traditional instruments. Currently we do not have the luxury of an either-or choice. Understanding unique cultural perspectives, which arise from their experiences in the United States and African heritage, is quintessential to healthy development among African Americans.

This position, however, creates two challenges. Currently in American society, traditional assessment methodologies are highly valued. The Africentric constructs are inherently different from the attributes that existing traditional instruments measure. Although Africentric clinicians are capable of administering a test battery that includes Africentric and traditional instruments, very few other clinicians are able to do so at this time. Although having such a comprehensive assessment of African Americans using both sets of constructs is useful, most examinations will only include traditional means. To ameliorate this situation, Africentric psychologists should train other clinicians in the use of Africentric instruments. Although these two methodologies—traditional and Africentric—may be discussed after a combined comprehensive assessment, until widespread competency in administering, scoring, and interpreting Africentric instruments is accomplished, the two remain distinct. They are apples and oranges.

With that understanding in mind, consider the following perspectives that have been published in the psychological literature. Jake Milliones (1980) researched the psychotherapeutic implications of a Black Consciousness measure:

It is well documented that race of the therapist, experimenter, and tester can have a variety of influences on black clients, subjects and testees. What is much less clear, however, is the influence of one's Black Consciousness orientation upon psychological phenomena. ... Therapeutic gains may be maximized if consideration is given to the psychological location of a given individual along the Black Consciousness continuum. ... [The four stages of the Black Consciousness Continuum,] 1) Pre-Encounter, 2) Encounter, 3) Immersion, and 4) Internalization[,] organize and predispose one's perceptions, attitudes, and feelings regarding blacks, whites, and the self. ... Certainly, an appreciation of where a black client is located along the Black Consciousness continuum might prove to be critical in the context of treatment. ... Such difficulties, if understood within the Black Consciousness paradigm, might call for select stylistic, as well as interpretive adjustments on the part of the therapist. (p. 175)

An instrument for assessing an optimal Africentric world view was developed and validated by Montgomery, Fine, and James-Myers (1990).

This instrument, the Belief Systems Analysis Scale (BSAS), was developed to reliably and validly assess the degree to which one adheres to an Africentric world view as defined by optimal theory. ... Montgomery, et al., assert that "A world view is a structure of philosophical assumptions, values, and principles on which a way of perceiving the world is based. ... Assessments of world views are potentially useful in a variety of situations. For therapists, knowledge of a client's world view can facilitate that person's progress in therapy. The therapist who can enter a client's frame of reference will presumably have a greater sensitivity to the client's behavior, thinking, and feelings. ... Although a world view pervasively influences behavior and perceptions, relatively few measures that assess world views exist ... particularly those related to African cultural values." (p. 38)

In presenting an overview and framework for measuring racial identity, Burlew and Smith (1991) examined models of methods for measuring racial identity and for providing theoretical groundwork that stimulated development of other research instruments in this area. They provided an overview of the measures of racial identity that have evolved, and proposed a framework for conceptualizing the measures' differences and appropriate usage. They argued that, "First ... at least implicitly ... researchers should not employ a strategy of using only one measure of racial identity over all others. Such a strategy denies the multidimensionality of racial identity." Their framework "organizes the existing measures into the following categories: (1) developmental approaches; (2) Africentric approaches; (3) group-based approaches; and (4) measures of racial stereotyping." With developmental approaches, "the individual is initially in a state characterized by confusion of self-worth, degradation of Blackness, and a related need to be accepted as something other than one's true self." Regarding the second category,

Africentric approaches to personality assume that adherence to a set of beliefs consistent with an African world view is the optimal state for people of African descent. Moreover, those individuals who are more Eurocentric in their orientation will experience dissonance resulting from inevitable conflicts between their orientation and the natural order of the self.

#### Group-based approaches,

another type of research instrument, appear to be measures of affiliation or allegiance to one's own racial group. These measures do not fit in the developmental model because of the lack of focus on a changing definition of the self in the struggle toward achieving self actualization. Similarly, group-based measures ... seem to tap the presence or absence of a sense of affiliation with one's racial group, one's evaluation of oneself and others as members of that group, and commitment to the objectives of specific movements or activist organizations within the African American Community.

The fourth category “includes measures of racial stereotyping. Similar to the group-based scales, no personal identity themes or African-based philosophical orientations are involved. However, racial attitude measures do not tap the sense of affiliation characterizing the group-based scales either.” They surmise that

since the difference between these orientations is substantial, research studies that utilize one measure might have strikingly different results than similar research using a different type of measure. It is, therefore, incumbent upon researchers and scholars who review their work to consider the implications of the measure selected.

Stokes, Murray, Peacock, and Kaiser (1994) described the reliability, factor structure, and validity of the African Self-Consciousness Scale (ASC).

The ASC Scale conceptualizes African self-consciousness as a unidimensional construct composed of four additive competency domains. The competency domains are described as (a) awareness, recognition of one’s African identity and heritage; (b) general ideological and activity priorities placed on Black survival, liberation, and proactive/affirmation development; (c) specific activity priorities placed on self-knowledge and self-affirmation; and (d) a posture of resolute resistance toward “anti-Black” forces and threats to Black survival in general.

As reported in Stokes et al., “An individual’s use of such terms as Black and African American provides insights into his/her conceptual and contemporary links with African/African American history, and consequently his/her African self-consciousness” (pp. 63–64). (An analysis of the reliability and validity studies is beyond the scope of this article.)

Landrine and Klonoff (1994) developed the African American Acculturation Scale, the concept for which,

in recent years ... has emerged as a promising, nonracist model for explaining and understanding ethnic differences. Acculturation loosely refers to the extent to (and the process through) which ethnic-cultural minorities participate in the cultural traditions, values, beliefs, assumptions, and practices of the dominant White society (acculturated), remain immersed in their own cultures (traditional), or participate in the traditions of their own culture and of the dominant White culture as well (bicultural).

The eight aspects of culture that any acculturation scale should include are: (a) traditional African American religious beliefs and practices, (b) traditional African American family structure and practices, (c) traditional African American socialization, (d) preparation and consumption of traditional foods, (e) preference for African American things, (f) interracial attitudes, (g) superstitions, and (h) traditional African American health beliefs and practices. “The concept of acculturation thereby has the potential to ... bring culture into the foreground of psychology.” They maintain that,

acculturation scales are essential to a precursory understanding of cultural diversity in human behavior and so have been developed for a variety of ethnic groups including Chinese Americans ... Japanese Americans ... Asian Americans as a whole ... Cuban Americans ... other Latino Americans ... and Native Americans. ... The concept of acculturation ... has not been applied to African Americans; consequently perhaps, research on African Americans remains strikingly atheoretical relative to research on all other ethnic groups.

In "The Relationship Between Afrocentric Values and Racial Identity Attitudes: Validation of the Belief Systems Analysis Scale on African American College Students," Brookins (1994) explained that the BSAS "was recently developed as a paper-and-pencil assessment tool" that could be used for the following purposes:

(a) developing assessment techniques that can assist in therapeutic efforts aimed at promoting and maintaining psychological health, (b) identifying the key psychological variables that should be included in research studies examining the mental health of African Americans, and (c) developing interventions aimed at promoting psychological health throughout the life span.

According to Brookins,

developing an African-centered worldview has been promoted as the key to psychological health for African Americans. ... Accordingly, mental health and the subsequent behavior of African Americans are thought to be positively determined by a belief system that is spiritually based, holistic, and values interpersonal relationships. ... From this perspective, African Americans, unfortunately, exist in and are socialized into a society that operates from a "suboptimal" worldview. ... It is incumbent on African American psychologists and other social scientists to identify the components of an optimal worldview.

Finally, Stevenson's (1994) discussion of steps toward multidimensionality in his validation of the scale of racial socialization for African American adolescents ascertained that

the phenomena of family socialization processes that contribute to the healthy racial identity development of African American men, women, and children have been and continue to be of clinical and research interest. ... The process whereby children procure a sense of their unique ethnic and racial identity has been identified with several terms [including] racial socialization, cultural transmission, socialization environment, race-related messages, parental values transmission, cultural parenting, [and] ethnic socialization.

Assessing racial socialization includes investigating the following domains: (a) perception of education, (b) awareness of racism in society, (c) appreciation for

spirituality and religion, (d) promotion of Black heritage and culture, (e) appreciation of extended family involvement, and (f) acceptance of childrearing. "Although more research is necessary, this step toward a multidimensional understanding of adolescent racial socialization processes has considerable promise for broadening our vision within which African American adolescent psychology and perception can thrive."

## CONCLUSIONS

At this point in the use of psychometrics with African American clients, the concept of a conducting *culturally competent assessment* is a misnomer. Before the term can be considered valid, a sufficient number of practitioners must be capable of performing such culturally competent assessments as a matter of practice, but this is not the case. Relatively few examiners are able to achieve this aim. What we have in the absence of culturally competent assessments, are examinations where the performance of ethnic minorities on such protocols is interpreted against a nonreferent sample. This poses two problems. First, Caucasian clinicians are unable to administer examinations in a way that uses language and context in which some African American clients are able to perform their best. The second dilemma is that African American clinicians are unable to accommodate legitimately the performance of African American clients within administration and scoring limitations of the administration requirements of existing tests. Many suggestions to make the administration and scoring of such instruments more flexible for African American clients have been offered; however, they cannot be viewed as legitimate because they are not standardized, so consistency in their usage cannot be replicated. As currently designed, there is only one way to administer and interpret existing assessment instruments in a standardized manner.

All clinicians must be able to understand, administer, score, and interpret the Africentric constructs developed by African American psychologists. Although many may assert this is a premature demand given the early stages of development of these theories, more than 20 years of research provide a sufficient basis of support for cross-cultural training and use of these protocols. As African American students attend traditional graduate schools and learn the Stanford-Binet, Wechsler Scales, projectives as well as personality, educational, and achievement tests, clinicians of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, must partner with Africentric psychologists to learn the design and administration of Africentric assessment instruments. Although at some point a battery of tests that encompass both Africentric and traditional protocols may be devised, we must acknowledge that currently, the information obtained from traditional testing, as compared to Africentric testing, yields different data. For the immediate future, what we need are African American norms for traditional instruments, and cross-cultural training on the theoretical

development, administration and use of Africentric instruments. While these two objectives are being achieved, we should also explore what would be included in a battery that combines both domains. This, of course, will involve a great deal of collaboration, research, and publication. Johnson (1993) made two innovative suggestions: a new Axis VI within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* that reflects psychocultural functioning, and additions to Axis I that reflect legitimate psychological experiences (e.g., racial trauma) of African Americans. The new axis can be enhanced to (a) include African American children's cultural and developmental coping resources; (b) account for disorders that occur more frequently in some racial groups, which may be attributed to social problems and/or psychosocial structures; and (c) incorporate constructs that consider African Americans' experiences into guidelines that clinicians use. Johnson stated, "These concepts increase the potential for identifying and describing issues relevant to understanding the psychological functioning of African American children."

Another recommendation is that the ABPsi and the American Psychological Association appoint a joint task force (that may also include Asian Americans, Latin Americans, and Native Americans) to design strategies for cross-cultural training and development of a comprehensive battery for ethnic minorities. Although much work clearly remains, a celebration is certainly appropriate for the tremendous progress that has been made in the development of Africentric assessment resources. They will be most beneficial not only when all African American clinicians use them, but also when professional development for their use has been made available to clinicians of other ethnic and racial groups.

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