



Newsletter

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President's Message

by Jon Carlson

Prior to running for President of IAMFC, I wondered and pondered why anyone would want to be active in professional organization leadership. For the record, I still wonder. It seems the more one does, the more there is to do and the greater the likelihood that some people will not be pleased. I hope as you read about the recent undertakings of IAMFC you are one of those who is pleased. Either way, I would welcome your feedback.

Over the last six months, Robert Smith and I have been working directly with other professional organizations and accrediting bodies to develop increased professional recognition for counselors in general and IAMFC specifically. This work has been done with the full support and involvement of the IAMFC Executive Board. The following has been accomplished:

- As a result of attending meetings of the American Family Therapy Academy (AFTA), ACA was recently invited to join the Coalition of Family Organizations (COFO). Previous attempts at recognition had produced no

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Culturally Sensitive Counseling for African American Families

By Twinet Parmer, Ph.D.

Recently more attention has been focused on ethnicity in family counseling (McGoldrick, 1982). McGoldrick (1982) noted that ethnicity and family are linked such that each should be examined concurrently. However, there continues to be a lack of understanding of how to counsel families from different cultural groups (Arnold, 1992; Boyd-Franklin, 1987; Ibrahim & Arredondo, 1990; Wilson & Stith, 1991). An understanding of ethnicity in families is important for several reasons. First, there is an expected increase in counselor education programs offering training in marriage and family counseling (Gladding, Bruggaf, & Fenell, 1987). Secondly, the demographics, as a result of the browning of America, will require that counselors develop culturally specific family therapy approaches. Finally, the ACA Code of Ethics (1988) requires that counselors recognize their level of competence and provide the highest level of professional service.

Understanding family history is an essential element in a culturally sensitive counseling process. African American families in counseling can benefit from a therapist who is culturally sensitive. Family counselors lacking adequate knowledge and skills for working with a specific cultural group may allow faulty assumptions and prejudicial attitudes to influence clinical decisions. The purpose of this article is to outline four key assumptions about African American families that may impact the counseling process.

Assumptions About African American Families

Assumption of Homogeneity. A universal approach to the study of African American families is not supported. A



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caveat is in order when referring to "the Black Family." In fact, just as there is no one white family, there is no monolithic Black family or Black community. According to Staples (1974), "The white middle-class family is an analytical construct, an ideal type which does not fit the majority of white families in this country" (p. 66). Similarly, each African American family is unique, bound by their experiences, geographical origin, and skin color. A family counselor who can move away from Eurocentric (Asante, 1991) standards of comparison is likely to be more effective in working with an African American family.

Assumption of Pathology. There continues to be a great deal of interest in studying African American families (Allen, 1978; McAdoo, 1988). However, most of the research has focused on describing African Americans as culturally deviant or dysfunctional (Allen, 1978; Moynihan, 1965). For example, Moynihan (1965) described African American families as a "tangle of pathology." This negative perception has lingered for more than a quarter of a century and has generated

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numerous myths about African American families. McAdoo (1988) explained the significance of such generalization by noting that the demythologizing of negative images which have been perpetuated about African American families is likely to continue for years. Such negative images may interfere with a family counselor rendering effective service.

Assumption of Culturally Disadvantaged. African American families have been examined based on an inferiority model which conceptualizes differences as deficit (Sue et al, 1982). Consequently, because African American culture has not been viewed as legitimate, a strong association with culture tends to place the African American on the fringes of mainstream Eurocentric culture. An alternate approach suggests examining African American families from an Afrocentric perspective (Asante, 1991). Afrocentricity is defined as the process of retaining many of the traditional African values. According to Boykin (1983), some of these values include a sense of community, orality, rhythmic/music expression, affective emphasis, a social time perspective, and expressive individualism (p. 342). Therefore, understanding family problems in the context of the African American world view is essential. Absent an Afrocentric approach, any treatment is likely to be ineffective.

Assumption of Equality. Race and color continues to be used to control access and attainment. Equality implies a sense of fairness, however African American families are often impacted by the existence of inequality and inequities. Consequently, a different family socialization pattern exists for African American males and females (Peterson & Rollins, 1986). The differential practices dictate that African Americans become biculturally socialized. Although African American males are subjected to racism, females experience what Epstein (1973) termed the "double whammy." The "double whammy" of both racism and sexism exposes African American females to an additional social and psychological burden. In this society, males by virtue of their gender are often placed in more privileged positions. However, African American males realize that by virtue of being Black, full access to opportunity in society is unlikely. Staples (1982) elaborated on the position of the African American male. He stated:

It is difficult to think of a more controversial role in American society than that of the black male. He is a visible figure out there on the American scene, yet the least understood and studied of sex-race groups in the United States (p.1).

A competent therapist must recognize the significance of bicultural family socialization practices and its impact on African American males and females. A culturally sensitive therapist must recognize the subtle implication of inequities for African American families.

In conclusion, each of the above four assumptions influence perceptions about African American families. Faulty assumption may influence clinical decisions and interfere with a counselor's ability to render culturally effective services to African American families.

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