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African American Women Counselors, Wellness, and Spirituality

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Abstract

Given their tremendous professional responsibilities, professional counselors face daunting challenges to remaining healthy and avoiding role stress and overload. This article explores the intersection of race, gender, wellness, and spirituality in the self-care of African American women counselors. The authors give particular attention to culture, imbedded societal images of African American women, and the affirming role of spirituality.

Keywords: counselors, wellness, self-care, spirituality, and African American women

Counseling professionals—as reflective helping practitioners— have a tremendous impact on those they serve. Undisputedly, the profession places great demands on its practitioners. Although demanding, the rewards of establishing a helping relationship and effectively using helping skills can motivate counselors to stay in the profession. Appropriate application of theoretical frameworks has helped counselees cope, achieve goals, change behaviors, and in some cases, choose life. With so much hinging on the helping relationship, it is important that professional school counselors do what is possible to protect and nourish their lives. Self-care, then, remains critical to the effectiveness of professional counselors.

The potential for stressors to negatively affect the counseling relationship and undermine the work of counselors always looms. For African American female counselors, the cultural ethos of caring can add weight to professional responsibilities of empathy and compassion. The literature documents the need for self-care planning among counselors in general. However, the intersection between counselor preparation, health, wellness, and

spirituality seems to be a critical aspect of self-care for African American women. Knowles and Bryant (2011) found preliminary data that African American women counselors seem particularly susceptible to role overload and role stress. This paper explores issues of health, wellness, self-care, and spirituality among African American women helpers. The authors give particular attention to the implications of integrating spirituality to expand counselor competency related to self-care.

What is the role of spirituality and wellness in the self-care planning of African American female counselors? Drawing upon research from a number of disciplines including medicine, mental health, nursing, psychology, education, and counseling, the literature frames the answers to this question within the theoretical frameworks of constructivism, self-actualization, and self- efficacy and offers that wellness seems interrelated with spirituality, influencing total health, wellness, and self-care planning.

Background

Helping professions, particularly school counseling, have historically been dominated by women. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the majority of teachers are female. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 97.8% of preschool and kindergarten teachers are women. The total US population is comprised of more than 300 million persons. In estimated figures, this means that teachers comprise about 2% of the total US population. While the US is becoming increasingly a nation of people of color, the challenge remains in finding enough education professionals from diverse race and ethnic backgrounds so students will have positive racial and ethnic role models. In some states, teaching experience is required (or at least tacitly preferred) as a counseling credential, so this statistic seems particularly germane to discussions of self-care planning and African American school counseling professionals.

Concern for lack of adequate cultural representation is especially problematic in our public schools. African American school counselors may face or feel obliged to take on duties to counsel students of color in addition to their other responsibilities. Bryant et al. (2003) discussed the influence of professional expectations on African American women counselors and the implications for self-care planning.

Race, Gender, and Helping

Society's Colonizing Images

Pack-Brown, Whittington-Clark, and Parker (2002) note that there is a confluence between race, ethnicity, and helping for African American women and teasing out the most powerful influence remains difficult at best. However, for African American women in general, American society has deeply embedded colonizing images' that are consistent with images of African American women since their forced removal from Africa in the 1600's (Bryant, et. al., 2003). These images can distort expectations of African American women helpers and lead to the assignment of or taking on too many roles or responsibilities.

One such colonizing image, rooted in American folklore, is the Matriarch (historically called "Mammy"). Early professional literature also referred to this image as the Black Matriarch. This stereotypical character lived to serve others who expected the Black Matriarch to place their well-being to over her personal health, strength, and being. Moynihan's 1965 study of the Black community reinforced this stereotype and codified America's pervasive image of Black families as a having "tangle of pathology." Greatly influential, Moynihan's work shaped federal and state policies on poverty, welfare, and education for decades. Later scholarship by noted scholars such as Ladson-Billings, Edelman, and hooks debunked this myth of the inherently pathological African American family and took a strengths-based approach to understanding the African American community, family structure, and children; the term "at- risk" does not characterize the focus of this later research.

Another colonizing image rooted in American folklore is Sapphire. Sapphire was an African American female character from the 1940's Amos'n Andy show. Known for her loud brash manner, Sapphire's strong will trumped everyone around her and reinforced the stereotype of African American women as "strong" and fiercely independent. Not easily challenged or overcome, Sapphire demonstrated a tenacious will and fearlessness in her approach to dealing with others. While tenacity and independence are cultural values in the African American community, the stereotypical character presented by Sapphire does not demonstrate vulnerability, sensitivity towards others, and insight into self.

Meaning and Significance

While many members of this generation and even the previous one may not have conscious memories of Mammy' and Sapphire', the authors posit that African American women counselors do well to consider how these images may shape personal and cultural expectations, given their status as helpers. How do these expectations shape African American women's personal and professional lives given their responsibilities as professional school counselors? How do they negotiate personal cultural expectations in communities characterized by within and between group racial differences? Moreover, how do these counselors negotiate professional promotions in school environments they may perceive as sexist, racist, or non-affirming of cultural heritage? The authors note that these challenges may occur in schools and communities that are predominately African American; the struggle for healthy racial identity can be a lifelong developmental task for African Americans.

Spirituality and Wellness

Issues of health, wellness, and the role of spirituality in the self-care planning of African American women counselors seem to be of utmost importance for several reasons. The changing racial and ethnic complexity of the nation necessitates that counselors receive training that support health and wellness not only for clients in their care but also themselves. An important, if not primary reason this topic has such relevance to the counseling profession is a new call for integrating spirituality into professional practice and improving counselor competence in spiritual assessment (Oakes, K. E., & Raphel, M. M., 2008). While women can face health challenges such as breast cancer and high blood pressure, medical literature is clear that African American women with these conditions face higher mortality rates and tougher roads to recovery and wellness than other groups. Personal and cultural expectations that demand displays of strength and little to no demonstration of emotion can lead to role overload, unresolved stress, and physical illness.

Spirituality as Self-Care

Spirituality has long characterized African American women's lived experiences. For example, among the findings in a qualitative study, Mattis (2002) found that spirituality helped African American women interrogate and accept reality of their life circumstances (p. 309) and find existential meaning during difficult times. Roseboro and Ross (2009) and hooks (1994) noted that African American women who commit their careers and professional activities to the reduction of societal inequities and the mitigation of social injustices benefit from spirituality that facilitates an integrated life. African American cultural ethos values spirituality and recent cultural shifts distinguish this construct from religiosity evinced by church affiliation, attendance, or membership.

Sagely, Carl Rogers (1961) asserted that congruence and authenticity are necessary elements of counseling and noted that effective counselors have insight regarding their feelings, accept them, and can express them in constructive ways. Although Rogers did not frame his discussion on African American women per se, his perspectives support the premise of this paper, which offers spirituality as a culturally relevant support tool for African American women who may receive dissonant messages about their roles and responsibilities along the intersections of gender, race, and professional helper.

Conclusions

Cultural values can hold spirituality as essential to wellness. The authors do not suggest that other racial groups do not value spirituality and that this construct is limited to African American women. Rather, the authors suggest that because of the societal challenges African American women professional counselors can face, spirituality can be a culturally affirming tool that helps them manage the complexities of caring for others and navigate personal intersections of race and gender. Apparent gaps in the literature on this topic seem related to small samplings of African American women and limited inclusion of diverse populations of women who are counseling professionals. Further discussion on this topic raises implications of the integration of spirituality into counselor preparation programs. Kelly (1995) observed that wellness occurs because of the healing power associated with the interconnectedness of the human experience. Thus, the authors suggest that African American women counselors and their colleagues, who share this interconnectedness, benefit from critical thought and analysis of the intersection of gender, race, and spirituality in maintaining wellness.

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