

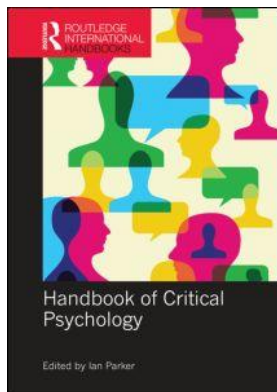
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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Handbook of Critical Psychology

Ian Parker

Black psychology

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315726526.ch19>

Garth Stevens

Published online on: 27 Apr 2015

How to cite :- Garth Stevens. 27 Apr 2015, *Black psychology from:* Handbook of Critical Psychology
Routledge

Accessed on: 25 Sep 2021

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315726526.ch19>

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Black psychology

Resistance, reclamation, and redefinition

Garth Stevens

This chapter traces the historical emergence and development of Black psychology as an alternative intellectual and applied tradition in the United States of America, and its attempts to offer a critical rendering of a psychology of *blackness* that acts as a counterpoint to a mainstream, Western *white* psychology. In so doing, the chapter highlights the historical, cultural, and material conditions involving the systematic marginalization of African Americans as a primary impetus for the development of Black psychology; explores the cultural and philosophical elements that have formed the foundational tenets of Black psychology; describes some of the manifest outcomes and influences of Black psychology on psychology as a discipline; examines some of the resonances with other *black psychologies* internationally; and concludes with a reflective critique of the strengths and limitations of Black psychology, especially in an era of transnationalism and globalization, in which cosmopolitanism and the increased marginalization and exploitation of minorities ironically coexist.

Historical emergence of Black psychology

The fundamental premise of Black psychology is the recognition and assertion that Western, Euro-American models of psychology have serious challenges around their applicability to understanding the experiences of black people, given their location and immersion in a normative culture of whiteness. In this context and using such models, the black experience is ostensibly characterized as an aberration, deviant, pathogenic, and driven towards the production of deficits in psychological functioning (Baldwin 1986; Guthrie 2004; Karenga 1996). The early roots of Black psychology in the United States of America can be traced back to the 1920s, when Francis Sumner became the first African American to obtain a PhD in psychology. African American psychologists started to conduct and publish research that contested claims of black inferiority (Karenga 1996), many of which had their basis in forms of racialized thinking that were premised on social Darwinism, instinct theory, the eugenics movement, and Mendelian genetics (Guthrie 2004). The 1930s witnessed a further development in this movement, with African American psychologists arguing for the importance of an appropriate and socially relevant psychology within educational settings, thereby promoting alternative models of human development, learner assessment, and impact on the training of educators (Karenga 1996). Not only did this

further advance research, but also focused on countering the inferiorizing effects of economic marginalization, political disenfranchisement, and racial segregation as embodied in the Jim Crow laws amongst a new generation of young African Americans in educational settings.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the influence of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, and Black Radicalism all further advanced the trajectory of this intellectual tradition. Independent publishing fora such as the *Journal of Black Studies* and the *Journal of Black Psychology* were established, and African American psychologists organized themselves into independent organizations, the most notable of which was the Association of Black Psychologists (Karenga 1996). Ontologically and epistemologically, this period also witnessed the consolidation of a thrust towards alternative philosophical and conceptual understandings of the black experience, and represented a more fundamental rupture with mainstream, Western psychological models that were considered Euro-American and submerged in whiteness. For this reason, Akbar (2004) notes that Black psychology has not been a homogenous intellectual tradition, and can be characterized by various developments, such as the 'traditional', 'reformist', and 'radical' schools of thought that Karenga (1996) describes. In the first instance, Black psychology, while critiquing the effects of racist segregation and white supremacist ideology, did so within the dominant epistemological frameworks of Western psychology and was somewhat reactive in attempting to combat charges of black inferiority.

While acknowledging many of the negative manifestations of racism within the black experience, several theorists directed their critiques at the white establishment for generating an incubatory environment for such negative manifestations amongst African Americans, while continuing to hold that the Western conceptual frameworks for understanding human development could still apply to blacks and whites, but that the optimal conditions for such development were not always present for African Americans (Grier and Cobbs 1968). The reformist school of Black psychology witnessed a tendency to similarly critique the deleterious effects of racism in the United States of America, but instead argued for the importance of community engagement within black populations, the development of self-reliance, the promotion of black pride, and emotional and psychological emancipation (Cross 1971). Here, connections to Black Consciousness as a psychological process amongst individuals and groups, as well as a political current that underpinned the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism (King and Washington 1992), are apparent. The radical school of Black psychology has more consistently argued for rupturing with knowledge systems that themselves are implicated in the production of difference and hierarchies, the importance of a psychology of liberation that emphasizes the contribution of pathogenic societies to psychological ill-health in contexts of racist oppression, the centrality of collective resistance to such systems of inequality, and the development of an Afrocentric psychology that relies on African conceptual and philosophical foundations to understand the black experience (Akbar 2004; Kambon 2004; Nobles 2004). This has ultimately led to more contemporary debates around the distinctions and connections between Black psychology and African psychology – a relationship that is addressed later in this chapter. Radical Black psychology's resonances with the works of Fanon (1967, 1968, 1970), Bulhan (1985), and Martín Baró (Montero and Sonn 2009), amongst others, are evident, generating linkages with the psychology of oppression, colonial and postcolonial psychosocial conditions, and liberation psychology.

A critical alternative to mainstream psychology

Throughout its evolution, Black psychology has embodied certain elements that are consistent with what we today consider to be critical psychology. It has variously attempted to provide a socially and contextually relevant conceptualization of the lived experiences of black people

within a cultural milieu through the use of standpoint methodology; has provided the basis for an empowering praxis amongst marginalized black communities; and is enabling of the restoration of humanity amongst alienated populations through offering new interpretations of their lived experiences as well as through centring social transformation and liberation within its broader project. In keeping with Jackson's (1979) 'reactive', 'innovative', and 'inventive' characterization of Black psychology, and Karenga's (1996) categorization of the schools of thought in Black psychology as being 'traditional', 'reformist', and 'radical', three broad characterizations of Black psychology's criticality can also be surfaced and illuminated. Bearing in mind that Black psychology has evolved over the past ten decades, and cognizant that how we define criticality is historically, temporally, and contextually contingent, it has (1) described the injurious psychosocial sequelae of racism, (2) re-appropriated, re-interpreted, and reclaimed aspects of the lived experience of blacks that have been systematically pathologized in mainstream, Euro-American psychology, and (3) begun the process of ontological and epistemological rupture and emancipatory redefinition.

In the first instance, the sequelae of living as a marginalized group within a racially segregated and racist social formation were clearly illuminated in the research conducted within Black psychology. Several key identified psychosocial problems that tended to be strongly associated, either literally or in the collective social imaginary, with black communities, were understood in relation to experiences of discrimination, oppression, and exploitation. Three seminal exemplars included a focus on the self-perception of African American children, the phenomenon of violence within black communities, and the proliferation of substances and their abuse within such communities. Clark and Clark (1939a, 1939b, 1940) undertook a series of research experiments with African American children, illustrating how segregation in particular had impacted negatively on patterns of racial identification, misidentification, disidentification, and preference amongst these children. Similarly, Grier and Cobbs (1968) suggested that high levels of violence within communities could be understood in terms of the rage that African Americans felt and enacted in response to their experiences and perceptions of racist discrimination within the United States of America. With regard to levels of substance abuse, authors such as Harper (1976) also articulated an argument that suggested that alcohol use and abuse amongst African Americans could be traced back to their experiences of an oppressive social system in which they needed to relieve their pain, muster courage, and overcome their sense of frustration (Harper and Dawkins 1977).

Much of this early descriptive research was seen as reactive (Karenga 1996), in so far as it spoke to the white establishment about the bedevilling nature of racism, and essentially suggested a reflective stance in which they needed to consider sacrificing white privilege, as the fate of black communities was both a source of potential strife for black and white America alike (Clark 1970). However, in relation to critical psychology, it is important to recognize that this kind of contribution made significant incursions into mainstream Euro-American psychology. Utilizing dominant epistemological frameworks and theoretical approaches, this research generated a legitimate intellectual argument outside of the formal political arena to give voice to the challenges experienced by African Americans in a racist society. Also, the impact of the work by Clark and Clark (1939a, 1939b, 1940) in no small measure contributed to the outcome of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* judgement by the US Supreme Court, which essentially integrated schooling in the United States of America and ruled that formal racial segregation in this context was in fact unconstitutional. This research also served as a platform for later, more radical, researchers and theorists in their arguments for liberatory approaches to psychology. Here, Bulhan (1985) utilized Harper's (1976) work in exploring the rates of substance abuse as a consequence of a psychology of oppression, through a reading of Fanon's work. Similarly, *Killing*

Rage, a seminal contribution by hooks (1996) on the hostile affective experience of blacks in response to feelings of powerlessness in contexts of racism, can also be read as a more sophisticated and nuanced expansion of the earlier work by Grier and Cobbs (1968), titled *Black Rage*.

In the second instance, Black psychology engaged in a form of re-appropriation, re-interpretation, and reclamation of certain aspects of the black experience that had been pejoratively evaluated in mainstream, Euro-American psychology. Much of the research on African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century had suggested that black children had a generalized exposure to overstimulated environments that were not conducive to intellectual enrichment, that their coping skills were a reflection of certain forms of cultural deprivation and were therefore underdeveloped, and that the non-nuclear nature of family organization and structure somehow predisposed these children to pathogenic environmental circumstances that resulted in deficits in psychosocial functioning (White 2004).

Euro-American psychology's preoccupation with developmental pathways and intelligence amongst minorities was also reflected in the research into African American children. White (2004) notes that the mainstream psychological gaze may have revealed higher levels of noise, multiple and cross-cutting conversational patterns, and apparently less access to reading materials amongst African American children in their early home environments – all of which seemed inimical to appropriate psychological development within the mainstream paradigm. However, he goes on to suggest that many of these children have the ability to discriminate information, to recall large amounts of information through their exposure to music, and acquire elements of an oral tradition at an early age. Similarly, both White (2004) and Akbar (2004) have noted how the behavioural repertoires of children within African American communities do not reflect cultural deficits in coping within a world that is dominated by white cultural normativity, but instead show a great deal of real-world 'street smarts' in having to cope with both the systemic and community threats and dangers to survival. They both cite the manner in which African American children in impoverished communities often have to navigate state intervention by welfare workers, the police, and even the psychosocial ills associated with gangsterism in many communities.

Furthermore, White (2004) also identifies how the black family has frequently been pathologized by virtue of its structural nonconformity to the middle-class nuclear family model. In utilizing this kinship structure as the normative baseline, researchers have often tended to over-exaggerate the apparent absence of paternal figures, the matriarchal nature of the black family, and the supposed encumbrances of the presence of the extended family network. However, White (2004), in the tradition of Poster (1978), highlights how exposure to multiple caregivers and role models may allow for greater role switching in rearing children, extend the emotional care provided to children, allow for more flexible social roles to emerge within these children, and reduce their susceptibility to the tense authority-love relationship between children and parents in classic, middle-class nuclear families. This specific element of criticality allows for the rejection of and resistance to certain 'enrichment' programmes directed towards addressing the 'intellectual impoverishment' of African American children, as well as those that strove to impose particular normative notions of 'family values' onto many black families. Instead, this form of criticality encourages forms of community interventions and mobilization that reflect an 'authentic' black experience, rejects imposed forms of pathologization, and emphasizes Black Consciousness-driven interventions as one such vehicle for countering the self-hatred associated with racism, with a greater degree of confidence and cultural revitalization (Poussaint 1966).

In the third instance, Black psychology more deliberately undertook to rupture with the ontological and epistemological foundations of mainstream, Euro-American psychology. In so doing, it has attempted to critique the solipsistic nature of this dominant worldview within

mainstream psychology, and to redefine it in relation to Afrocentricity (Akbar 2004; Baldwin 1986; Kambon 2004; Nobles 2004). In turn, this has impacted the very nature of the epistemic trajectory of Black psychology today, shaping its research foci and applied processes as well. This was largely determined by the fact that Black psychology's evolution was partly located as a reactive process in relation to the mainstream, or at its best, was linked to the appropriation and reinterpretation of the major tenets of Euro-American psychology in relation to blackness. This clearly raised a debate within Black psychology as to the very definition of this intellectual and applied tradition – was a Black psychology to be defined purely in relation to its focus on the black experience as a counter-ethnocentric enterprise in opposition to the white ethnocentrism of mainstream psychology; was it to speak only to an African American experience; was it to speak to a broader African experience; and to what extent was it to contest the very philosophical, theoretical, and applied underpinnings of mainstream psychology as a knowledge-power matrix that generated specific hierarchical knowledges in the service of valuing the white experience over the black experience (Baldwin 1986)? In attempting to define this alternative worldview of an African (Black) psychology, black psychologists invariably traced the history of Black America to the involuntary diaspora associated with the Atlantic slave trade, and consequently, to an Afrocentric worldview that they argued continued to influence the lived experiences of African Americans and Africans more broadly in contemporary society. Baldwin (1986: 243) defines African (Black) psychology as 'a system of knowledge (philosophy, definitions, concepts, models, procedures and practice) concerning the nature of the social universe from the perspective of African Cosmology. "African Cosmology" thus provides the conceptual-philosophical framework for African (Black) Psychology'.

Several key components of this African cosmological worldview can be distilled. The first is that the relationship between human beings and nature is characterized as interdependent and inseparable, and consciousness and well-being are therefore generated in a harmonious relationship to nature and others. As a consequence, the relational orientation within this worldview is seen to be socially affiliative, with an emphasis on group connectivity, cooperation, survival, and shared participation as a second component. Extended kinship relations are thus valued and seen to be integral to the development of a common humanity, with the individual as subject not existing separately from this connectivity. Third, social activity is not understood in terms of individual goals, but rather as a vehicle towards symbiotic functioning with others in the collective, in the service of this collective, and therefore as part of the process of becoming a human being within a social milieu. Fourth, the orientation to time is also not conceived of as linear, but rather as a cyclical process in which the past is always referred to in the present as we strive towards integrating historical lessons from others into a more harmonious way of living in the present and the future. Last, the generation and acquisition of knowledge is not considered an individual pursuit in which we amass skills to simply know and master the external world, but is viewed as being communally relevant, has a moral value, and is premised on the idea that the essence of human beings is not material, but is located in a spiritual metaphysics (Akbar 2004; Baldwin 1986; Kambon 2004; Nobles 2004; Mkhize 2004).

What is immediately apparent from this alternative worldview is that the effects on how we conceive of an African (Black) psychology, are quite profound, in so far as it critically challenges the dominant ontological and epistemological underpinnings of mainstream, Euro-American psychology. The nature and process of research itself has to be reconsidered, as the very objects and subjects of research are conceptualized as a unity, and therefore have implications for defining our research problematics and for conducting research. Similarly, conceptions of health are not situated within an individualistic, liberal humanistic frame, but are rather rooted within a collective interdependence. Interventions and forms of psychological practice therefore need to

accommodate this relational orientation. Finally, an orientation towards collective survival also means that this alternate worldview is likely to have at its centre an anti-oppressive orientation, especially in a global and historical context of white normativity and African (Black) marginalization and oppression.

Resonances with other Black psychologies

While the particular form of Black psychology discussed in this chapter thus far refers primarily to its historical emergence, evolution, and development within the context of the United States of America, this is by no means the only configuration of black psychology to exist internationally. There are indeed resonances with several developments in other parts of the world, that are variously referred to as decolonizing psychology (Sonn et al. 2013), postcolonial psychology (Hook 2012; Stevens, Duncan, and Hook 2013), liberation psychology (Nicholas and Cooper 1990; Seedat 1997; Stevens 2001; Stevens, Duncan, and Sonn 2013), indigenous psychology (Smith 1999), peace psychology (Wessels and Monteiro 2001), community psychology (Nelson and Prilleltensky 2005; Seedat, Duncan, and Lazarus 2001; Stevens 2007), and of course, African psychology (Manganyi 1973; Mkhize 2004). Importantly, these configurations of psychology are historically, materially, and contextually contingent, and have thus emerged under very specific and varied social conditions. Nevertheless, the resonances across these formulations of psychology will become apparent in several chapters later in this book, leading us to perhaps consider the idea of *black psychologies* that have similar critical objectives, but are nonetheless heterogeneous in character.

Revisiting Black psychology today – a reflective critique

From the above, it is evident that Black psychology's historical and ongoing presence on the landscape of international psychology has been premised on and sustained by its critical objectives and intentions to counteract the negative social, cultural, and psychological effects associated with racist prejudice, discrimination, segregation, marginalization, oppression, and exploitation. In this regard, it remains a critical alternative to mainstream, Euro-American psychology today, based primarily on its ability to utilize forms of strategic essentialism in a global context of increasing marginalization of black minorities. Spivak (1988) notes that this mode of organisation involves a recognition of the heterogeneity of affiliative groups, but the intentional essentialization of those groups in the service of their defence or advancement in particular political, social, cultural, or economic contexts in which they may be under threat. To this end, Black psychology has indeed deployed forms of strategic essentialism that have effectively defended the black experience in contexts of inferiorization, have promoted the uniqueness of this experience in a manner that renders it positive and constructive, and have also actively advanced the black experience as ontologically distinct and autonomous.

However, despite its contributions to critical psychology as an epistemic tradition, there are nevertheless several potential limitations to Black psychology that need to be taken cognizance of. The first relates to the fact that strategic essentialism itself may have a range of unintended consequences, such as the generation of narrow, insular, in-group, and inter-group relations. In highly racialized contexts, the defensive and advancing functions of strategic essentialism may regress into deep racialized divisions as group relations invariably draw on the most prominent ideological markers of difference in such contexts. Under these circumstances, strategic essentialism may have the inadvertent effect of re-inscribing racialized relations, rather than minimizing them (Alexander 1985). Second, while recognizing Bhabha's (1994, 1996) view that subalterns have the ability to challenge and subvert dominance within relations of power,

through engaging in counter-hegemonic practices to contest their social exclusion and marginalization as part of an organic liberatory praxis, there are also critical limitations to such practices. Spivak (1988) notes that there are significant dangers in re-inscribing the marginalized position of subalterns when they are assumed to be homogeneous collectives. Vahabzadeh (2008) also cautions that the voices of subalterns can quite insidiously and rapidly become ideologically appropriated and hegemonically re-grounded, thereby resulting in more complex and insidious ways of co-opting and subordinating those who are already subordinated. Gilroy (2010), for example, illustrates how opposition to the legacies of slavery, racism, and the associated negative constructions of blackness are easily appropriated into new modes of production and capital accumulation (e.g. the commoditization of black aspirational values in market economies).

Within Black psychology, this may in part also be evident in the manner in which certain epistemological orientations mimic and reproduce the very epistemological traditions of mainstream, Euro-American psychology when attempting to critique it. Finally, in the era of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, globalization, and voluntary diasporic communities, caution needs to be exercised around the ways in which identities may sometimes be constructed as unitary and stable. Rather, we see increasing manifestations of multifaceted identities that are not stable, but rather reflect intersectionalities (Crenshaw 1991), hybridities (Bhabba 1994), creolization (Erasmus 2001), entanglement (Nuttall 2009), and a cultural dynamism (Mkhize 2004; Said 1978) that all contribute to more complex identity configurations. In such contexts, Black psychology must be mindful of the potential for unwittingly reifying and romanticizing the black or African experience, and has to be responsive to these new formations of identity and subjectivity if it is to retain its critical edge.

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Website resources

- Apartheid Archive Project: www.apartheidarchive.org
- The Association of Black Psychologists: www.abpsi.org
- The Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association: www.indigenousspsychology.com.au
- The Journal of Black Psychology*: <http://jbp.sagepub.com>
- Task Force on Indigenous Psychology: www.indigenousspsych.org

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