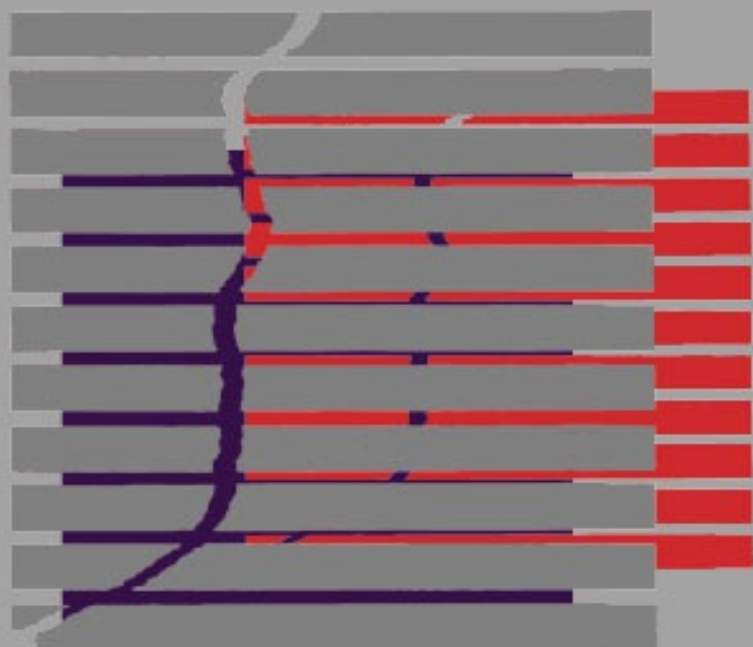# Counseling Black Men

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Handbook of Counseling and Psychotherapy with Men* by Murray Scher, Mark Stevens, Glenn Good, Gregg A. Eichenfield

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A Cultural Perspective

Men are leaders. Men are smart. Men are powerful. Men are breadwinners. Men are masters of their fate. Men are privileged. These are common assumptions that describe many white male Americans.

What are the characteristics of black men? Black men are dumb. Black men are lazy and shiftless. Black men lack a business sense. Black men are less motivated and often unemployed. Black men are docile and subservient. The black man's status in America is not envied!

An understanding of the black man's historical presence and his continued disenfranchisement in America is a prerequisite to understanding some of the unique issues the black man faces. Counseling black men requires a special sensitivity and knowledge of the black man's status since he is politically, socially, and economically thwarted from fulfilling his masculine role expectations.

Counseling men is a challenge. The ante is greatly raised however, when counseling black men. There are more walls, blocks, and barriers evident. He struggles not only with the cultural scripts that define manhood but with a true double-edged sword of gender-role constraints plus racism. The latter, racism, being more formidable than the first.

The barriers to the black man's successful interaction and self-fulfillment are intertwined with other's learned racist perceptions and male role expectations that foster myths of assumed deficiencies and stereotypes about black men. These myths and misconceptions about the black man continue to abound with little hope for change. The "male privilege," which assumes certain "rights" of passage for men, at the expense of women, is largely negated for black men. The black man encounters a hostile and oppressive society built on institutionalized racism, which works to maintain his low status and threatens his very existence. The black man is a victim. He, unlike his white male counterpart, has few masculine privileges. He too, like women in America, is oppressed.

This chapter on counseling black men focuses on some of the varied environmental stresses that hinder black men in their struggle to exhibit a positive masculine image and in their determination to realize a positive quality of life. I view the counselor as an agent of social change. The counselor's task includes a review of the client's dilemma with a sociological perspective and a systems understanding of the black man's situation. Systemic counseling (Gunnings & Lipscomb, 1986) is a theory of counseling that emphasizes changing dominant systems in order to meet the psychological and survival needs of black people. Both the sociological and systems approaches to assisting black men in counseling are used in this chapter.

The Stress Connection

Stress, defined as any interference that disturbs the functioning that is natural for the organism to avoid (Howard, 1960), is at such chronic unacceptable levels as to cause a sense of helplessness in the black male. The social and environmental conditions are so hostile that at least one writer questioned whether the black man was an endangered species (Leavy, 1983). Leavy outlined a list of societal conditions that are rapidly removing large numbers of black men from the civilian population. These conditions included homicide, enlistment in the military, imprisonment, suicide, unemployment, inadequate health care, drugs and alcoholism, and infant mortality. At present, accidents and homicide are the leading cause of death, with suicide being the number three cause of death. According to the FBI, the overall homicide rate for black males is 60 per 100,000, a rate higher than that of white males, white females, and black females combined (Leavy, 1983). Enlistment differences during the Vietnam War resulted in a disproportionately higher number of blacks than whites killed; and in state prisons around the country, black men represent 170,453 of the 345,960 total imprisoned (Leavy, 1983). These are indeed very stressful indicators of an oppressed group. Clearly, the American political system has generated and sustained a culture of power and privilege for Anglos and a culture of powerlessness and dependency for black Americans (Cook, 1977).

The social conditions discussed create a host of psychological, sociocultural, and economic stressors that interfere with the black man's ability to function in a natural way. These inhuman conditions of unemployment, limited educational access, high crime, high incarceration, high suicide, and high drug abuse steal the black man's ability to fulfill America's image of a man. These inhuman conditions lead to

negative psychosocial behaviors. Some examples of the effects of these unacceptable chronic levels of stress are:

- Psychological stressors that occur on intrapsychic, interpsychic, and interpersonal levels and are often experienced as alienation, powerlessness, helplessness, inadequacy, lack of self-esteem, cultural estrangement, and social isolation.

- Sociocultural expectations can often induce anxiety, guilt, conflict, suppressed aggression, and sexual tension, to the degree that the culture operates to bring about acute needs for adjustment to cultural norms.

- Economic stressors such as unemployment, underemployment, job losses, health catastrophes, loss of personal property, and gross indebtedness also exert an unacceptable level of chronic stress.

The observation that stressful situations are more frequent and more severe for blacks than for their white counterparts seems obvious. Such conditions as poverty, joblessness, and broken families are undoubtedly among the major factors contributing to high levels of stress, and are highly correlated with a range of physical, emotional, and behavioral problems among blacks, both male and female (Taylor, 1981).

The black man's passage to manhood is also filled with problems. Black males typically may create their own stylistic walk or "pimp"; the black male may exhibit sexual prowess, athletic skill, streetwise behavior, break-dancing skill, or their verbal facility by "playing the dozens" or "rapping." These masculine behaviors, which often establish one's self-esteem and confidence, are most often in conflict with white society's cultural expectations of the "normal" way for men to demonstrate their masculinity. White men can and are supported in establishing their masculine rite of achieving in education, sports, science, or joining their fathers in their businesses, or with their father's help, establishing their own businesses.

White men also have access to financial institutions, social clubs, and top organizational power positions. While white men assume the often burdensome role expectations of an Anglo culture, white men can choose to follow these male norms of behavior or to cast them off with minimal concern. In contrast, black men are not supported in establishing masculine strength through education, science,

engineering, or establishing their own business. Economic racist practices limit access to financial dollars; limit the establishment of a black financial economic base, and limit access to organizational power positions. In sum, stress is more than just the black man's imagination, it is the black man's reality; his back is "up against a wall" in America.

Therapeutic Issues

Counseling is a change process. Yet there is little expectation that black men will be assisted in a process of change since change must occur on a systemic level rather than an intrapsychic one. Black men are blamed individually for their station in life rather than being seen as victims of institutionalized oppression. "Colorblind" behavior on the part of non-black Americans maintains the power structure and the control with whites. The dynamics of this superior and inferior position have existed for decades in white people's relationship with Indians, Mexicans, Asians, and blacks (Katz, 1978), and it continues to dominate the counseling process today. In this dominant-subordinate relationship, subtle and not so subtle counselor expectations lend favor to the client to assimilate or adjust to the counselor's cultural perspective, or risk being seen as maladjusted, antisocial, or deficient in character. In my opinion, counseling has thus far failed as an avenue of psychic support for black men.

STEREOTYPING

Counselors must be aware of their clients' culture and history to function only adequately in a helping role. Every counselor interaction is a cross-cultural interaction, and as such, counselors who fail to understand their clients' racial, ethnic, and cultural norms can cause psychological damage to their clients. Counselors who limit their awareness of cultural differences to their own are not competent to counsel within a culturally diverse population. Conscious and unconscious stereotypes hinder the counselor's ability to provide effective assistance. If a counselor supports the black male's wish to pursue a career in sports or singing, he or she must also encourage the investigation of fields such as math, science, and engineering. The counselor should direct the client in a systematic exploration of the pros and cons of a career in sports. A counselor's decision only to encourage involvement in sports, based on the client's interest, may reflect the counselor's stereotypes about what black men can reasonably accomplish, or it may reflect the counselor's lack of information and ability to direct the client in making

constructive long-term life career choices. Since stereotypes often become the only knowledge base that many non-black counselors operate from, it becomes even more important that counselors recognize their values, prejudices, and racial biases prior to offering counseling assistance to minority clients. If the counseling process is to be successful with black males, counselors must get rid of or check their racial biases, stop their reliance on myths, and move from a subjective to a more objective and functional approach to counseling black men.

COUNSELOR-CLIENT SIMILARITY

One's race is a critical variable in the counseling process. Stereotypic beliefs, counselor encapsulation, and the specter of the black male sets up an almost impenetrable barrier. The counselor's lack of familiarity with the client's cultural background arouses many fears in the black client-counselor relationship. The importance of counselor preference has been related to variables such as counselor expertness, trustworthiness, and similarity. Generally, whether or not the non-black counselor can counsel the black male client hinges on both the client's overall perception of the counselor and the black client's level of racial awareness. The counselor can assume a credible status if characteristics of expertness and trustworthiness are present (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Clients often seek a counselor because they believe the counselor is an expert and possesses the necessary knowledge, skills, experience, training, and tools to help (Sue, 1981). Counselors will maintain credibility only if they can demonstrate proficiency and competence. Likewise, trustworthiness is earned by the counselor. A counselor who is perceived as trustworthy is likely to exert more influence over a client than one who is not (Sue, 1981).

Since counseling tends to be an interpersonal influence process, many black clients are attracted to and prefer counselors who hold similar beliefs, opinions, and world perspectives. Sue (1981) noted that interaction with people who are similar to us tend to be rewarding because it validates our convictions. Black clients seem to have indicated a preference for black counselors as the helpers of choice (Eiben, 1970; Harrison, 1978; Phillips, 1960; Wolkon, Moriwaki, & Williams, 1973). White clients demonstrate a preference, too, for white counselors (Carkhuff & Banks, 1970; Lehman, 1969; Tucker, 1969) which tends to reinforce and support that counselor-client similarity is an important factor in the selection of a counselor.

Men, regardless of race, tend not to seek outside emotional help from strangers. Black men follow this pattern, too, and tend to seek psychological assistance even less frequently than white men. When black men do seek help, they are more likely to choose a black man or a black woman to talk with when there is a choice. Black men also follow the cultural norm of seeking out sources of support in the community with religious leaders, family, close friends, or with the men down at the local barbershop. Most often, when black men are seen in therapy by non-blacks, it is because of referral by teachers, employers, courts, social service agencies, or for crisis-oriented situations, not personal growth. In these instances, a distrustful relationship is intensified and the black male client does not fully participate in the counseling session.

There are additional reasons why black men have not beaten a path to the non-black counselor's door. The black man's experience in working with and trusting non-black people has not been positive. Black men who are attuned to their long-suffering history of slavery, to America's continuing practice of racism, and to their continued oppression in American society are not likely to seek help actively from their oppressors. The non-black counselor, particularly the white counselor, is seen as the enemy. In fact, black men hold a genuine distrust of white people due to past and present injustices. These feelings of distrust have resulted from

- a lack of constructive experiences with white people;

- a lack of primary friendships with white people;

- a lack of understanding of and sensitivity to black people;

- continued employment and housing discrimination; and

- continued economic and political discrimination

The black man is also not likely to seek counseling from a non-black counselor because the goals of black clients are different from the goals of traditional counseling. Such counseling tends to focus on meeting the emotional and psychological needs of clients. The thrust of traditional counseling tends to be one that teaches coping skills and helps the client adjust appropriately to the social order. Black clients' needs are often different. Black clients seek more tangible, goal-oriented, and pragmatic rewards. Black

clients are often very skilled at coping with life's hardships and have little desire to learn how better to cope with or adjust to institutionalized oppression. The counseling interaction that follows demonstrates this difference between the goals of counseling and the goals of many black clients.

> Brian, age 35, lives with his family and four children. He comes to counseling out of despair and states, "I want you to help me get a job. I do not want my family to be trapped on welfare, and I do not want to do anything illegal to get money to support my family. I could move out and leave my family so that my wife could get aid for the children, but I do not want to do that . . . . Can you help me get a job?"

The counselor's response is likely to be something like:

> "You are feeling depressed because you're not able to find a job and support your wife and kids. You want to find a job so your family won't be trapped on welfare and so that you can support them."

This response is probably a good emotional response, but it falls short of a functional response for the client. The counselor is trained to respond to the client's emotional need and to encourage the exploration of the client's feelings. This process falls short for many black clients because their level of need is not satisfied by emotional support or personal achievement.

Their level of need is often basic, with needs for food, shelter, clothing, and employment. The counselor needs to be active in initiating a specific plan to assist the client; or to take direct responsibility for helping the client obtain his goal. This action on the counselor's behalf is often difficult because the counselor is taught not to take responsibility for the client. Counselors tend to be better trained to assist the client in looking inward, for personal or intrapsychic deficiencies. Counselors are generally inadequately prepared to work with clients who have physiological or safety levels of need, or who must confront the sociopolitical barriers of racism. Black counselors are often perceived as more helpful to black clients because there is the identification of similar emotional and physical experiences with racism, and more of a willingness to confront this external barrier. In contrast, white counselors often play the "colorblind" role or even deny that racism exists as a barrier.

The non-black counselor is likely to be more successful in counseling with black men if the counselor

- possesses specific knowledge about black racial and cultural history and norms;

- is willing to explore the potential effect of institutionalized racist practices on client success;

- is astute about oppressive structures that thwart the black man's potential for success;

- is honest with self-disclosures, is goal oriented, and is able to establish credibility; and

- actively intervenes into oppressive systems; calls for changes in unjust policies; and acts on behalf of the client as an agent of social change.

The non-black counselor can also seek out other black professionals or community role models to establish a mentoring or consulting relationship as a check for the counselor who works with the black male client.

The non-black counselor who works with the black male client or any culturally different client must come to recognize the varied, unique stresses not faced by white men or women. The counselor must acknowledge external discriminatory barriers. Counselors are urged to take a proactive stance against discriminatory inequities.

SELF-DISCLOSURE AND TRUST

And the message was, Be a man! And today, the message is, Be a man! And, men don't cry, and men control their emotions, lest they act and look like sissies! All men learn the cultural script of suppressing their emotions. The public display of emotions is incompatible to the masculine presentation of manly qualities. Disclosing one's feelings or investing emotional trust with another conflicts with masculinity. Sharing feelings and trusting are often seen as feminine traits. Counseling, then, a process with self-disclosure as an outcome indicator of positive mental health, may also be viewed as a feminine process. The counselor's attempt to encourage healthy rapport within a trusting relationship is clearly at odds with manhood training. These odds are heightened for black men. In order to survive, black men learn at an early age to limit emotional expression outside of the black community. Black mothers have reared their children to adapt to a segregated system in which they could physically survive. These children are taught to (a) express aggression indirectly, (b) read the thoughts of others while hiding their own, and (c) engage in ritualized accommodating—subordinating behaviors designed to create as few waves as possible (Willie, Kramer, & Brown, 1973). Self-disclosure also conflicts with the projection of masculine

strength and power to one's peer group. These protective behaviors, though often seen as resistance by non-black counselors, are the black male's defensive skills for survival, even though these protective skills leave the black male without an outlet for the healthy expression of suppressed feelings.

Counselor Preparation

The opportunity for all people of color to receive effective mental health counseling depends on the profession's proactive commitment to establishing effective counselor training programs. Counselor preparation programs, however, continue to be part of the problem. The traditional training approach incorporates the biases of Western culture and excludes the life experiences, concerns, theories, and needs of people of color (Washington, 1976). If counselors are to be responsive to the diversity of clients in America, then undergraduate and graduate programs must be designed to include the unique cultural variants of racial-, ethnic-, and gender-specific groups.

Hope

Beyond family, church, community resources, and trusted friends, there are few sources of help available to the black man to reduce chronic levels of stress in his life. Counseling, to a great extent, has failed to meet the black male's mental health needs. Counseling has failed to reduce chronic levels of unemployment; failed to challenge racist institutionalized practices that drive black fathers away from their families; failed to give the black man a sense of personal control or a sense of security; and has failed to inspire hope. With so much frustration and despair, hope becomes an important factor for motivating black men to maintain their continued struggle for a better life. Because their hope has been reduced, large numbers of black men have fallen into the ranks of burnouts and emotional casualties (Gardner, 1985). Hope is a valued asset, which when coupled with socially, culturally, and politically aware counselors, can increase the black man's chance for becoming a valued and important contributor to American society.

Summary

The crisis of the black male is real. There are real political, social and economic issues that must be

tackled by astute agents of social change. Counseling can become an effective support system for black men if counselors can learn to become effective cross-cultural helpers and proactive change agents.

Recommendations

Following is an outline that counselors are encouraged to follow for the promotion of mental health for black men.

1. *Engage in self-examination*

   • Become aware of their racial, ethnic, religious, and class factors and how they have an impact on clients.

   • Become aware of their values and biases and how they affect the black male client.

   • Review their counseling approach and goals as they relate to counseling black males.

2. *Increase self-education*

   • Seek education and training in cross-cultural counseling.

   • Learn the cultural heritage and history of blacks.

   • Study the impact of racism on the social, educational, economic, and political life of blacks.

   • Learn and incorporate culturally relevant theories and sources of knowledge.

3. *Learn the truth about racism*

   • Recognize the institutional barriers of racism that block the achievement of blacks.

   • Recognize subtle verbal and nonverbal racist behavior.

   • Recognize that the "problem with blacks" is a problem with socioeconomic and political injustice that is manifested in unemployment, underemployment, drug abuse, crime, poor housing, and inferior schools.

   • Recognize that the black man's burden is not his skin color but the burden of systematic and institutionalized racism.

4.*Be conscious of change agents and initiate institutional changes*

- Learn about racism, sexism, and culturally diverse people in counselor education programs.

- Promote the hiring of black counselors, administrators, scientists, engineers, and other role models.

- Work for the elimination of "tracking" policies in schools that exclude college access for blacks.

5. *Initiate activities that affect black academic achievement*

- Establish success groups to increase support of academic achievement for black youth.

- Develop groups where black men can discuss issues of black masculinity, black history, black male/female relationships, black esteem, and black values.

- Promote black male leadership in school-and community-related activities.

- Provide relevant black literature in the counseling/work environment.

- Organize periodic workshops or parent involvement groups where blacks can discuss important topics such as depression, suicide, and drug abuse, which will provide a forum for defining the characteristics of a positive black manhood.

- Maintain a resource file for those black men who would prefer to talk with a black professional or need guidance from a black counselor.

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