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assertive black...



puzzled white

A Black Perspective on Assertive Behavior

By Donald K. Cheek, Ph.D.

Foreword by Kenneth B. Clark, Ph.D., Author of *Dark Ghetto*

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Dedication

To the girl next door in Harlem who later agreed to live with me
anywhere — forever.

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D.K.C.

FOREWORD

In 1965 in my introduction to *Dark Ghetto*, I wrote that a respected friend accused me of not permitting "the facts to interfere with the truth." This accusation, which I have never denied, was made before computers became the dominant tool of many highly publicized social scientists. In a recent joint seminar at the City College of the City University of New York, my friend Gunnar Myrdal and I repeatedly insisted to our students that no amount of quantification of data could successfully disguise the fact that the social sciences are rooted in human values. Moral and ethical concerns can not be avoided in an objective study of human interaction. Any attempt to define social science objectivity in terms of a "balanced view" which seeks to evade or deny moral and human truths is transparent and neither objective or scientific.

In this book, my friend, Don Cheek, moves beyond a narrow view of quantifiable facts to the emotional content of being black in this society. He not only points out the questionable assumptions and neglected multi-cultural analysis of white professionals in the Mental Health field but he also offers a new approach based on the truth of the psychological totality of the Black Experience in an American society permeated with subtle and flagrant forms of racism. He draws on his own observations and background, being born and raised in the ghetto of Harlem, New York. He analyzes the behavior around himself as a sensitive social scientist, a systematic researcher and an astute observer of the frailties of mankind.

This book deals with complex racial and social psychological issues in a direct, forceful and straightforward manner. Dr. Cheek does not equivocate in his evaluation of white oriented theories and clinicians. He brings us back to basic human considerations in a penetrating examination of the meaning of being black in this society. As a result, he confronts his colleagues in the social science and Mental Health fields with some relevant issues and some profound ethical questions.

The contents of this work deftly reveal the sophisticated forms of racism contained in the assumptions and practices of the social sciences and helping professions. This book clearly presents a case that shows why a large segment of our society is not receiving adequate treatment or therapy. It shows how inadequate many ideas

about mental health are if the cultural and social psychological background of the client is ignored and not considered of value. Thus, the book's reference to the provocative concept of "culturally deprived whites."

Dr. Cheek proposes a test for those who are interested in treating and working with black clients. He particularly emphasizes the psycho-historical effects of the Jim Crow period of our society and points out how the implications of such an experience are more or less ignored in the training of current or future therapists and members of the helping professions. This book, indeed, gives us all a great deal to consider when we evaluate the meaning and relevance of a white dominated social and behavioral science for those members of society who have had non-white experiences. The hope within this book is its belief that if we improve the treatment, therapy and mental health services rendered to black clients, we will not only benefit all Americans, but we will also be well on our way toward remedying American racism.

Kenneth B. Clark

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CHAPTER I

What Is This Book About?

Why is there need for a book on assertiveness from a black viewpoint? How does this book really differ from other books written on assertive behavior? What are some of the basic points that I will be attempting to get across to you, the reader? Coming from an oral tradition, I think these and other pertinent questions can best be handled by an informal rap with you. Imagine you and I getting together to seriously discuss assertive behavior as it pertains to black people. You come to my home and we sit in the front room with a view of hillsides covered with toyon shrubs and wild grass. You relax with a glass of Cribari Vin Rosé and pick up on sounds of Quincy Jones playing in the background. We both kick back and start to rap.

Me: O.K., What would you like to know?

You: As simple as possible, what does your book try to say?

Me: Man, life's not simple. The black experience is not simple. In fact, that's just the point. I really started writing because I knew people (especially whites) didn't want to listen to anything complex. We create a big-ass racial mess in this society and then have nerve enough to ask for simple answers.

You: Why are you getting upset?

Me: (I sit back pause and smile and take a deep breath). I'm not really upset — just emotional and maybe somewhat frustrated. And let me say this — just because I use certain words differently from you — maybe words that you were taught not to use — that doesn't mean that I'm mad or upset — just that I am freely expressing myself — Is that cool with you?

You: (Hesitatingly) Yeah, that's O.K.

Me: Alright — let's take it from the top. There are a large number of black people who could be helped to improve their social and personal functioning. They need to be guided by an approach that is not just meant for white people or has a white orientation. Black clients or patients, or let's just say black people trying to improve on the way they live, need to have an approach that they can relate to — an approach that takes into consideration the things that they share with whites along with the things that make them different from whites. And in many important ways they are different — they have a unique lifestyle that has been talked about

and written about — call it the American Dilemma or the Mark of Oppression or maybe what John O. Killens calls the Black Man's Burden.

You: Can I interrupt?

Me: Sure, sure.

You: Why do you keep stressing this difference between blacks and whites?

Me: I am really not interested in stressing it; I am interested in placing the problem in a proper perspective. Well, maybe that sounds kinda corny. The truth is that a lot of white people, therapists, clinicians, professionals and all that, you know, so-called educated whites — well, they just don't want to hear it either.

I talk about racial differences because many blacks and particularly whites are exposed to education and training that covers up the shit of racial oppression in this society.

I talk about racial differences because black people are frequently exposed to white helpers who are puzzled — most of them, in fact, are basically ignorant (sometimes arrogantly so) and incompetent when it comes to treating, guiding or being therapeutically helpful to blacks.

I talk about racial differences because they exist, but are not studied, examined, analyzed and discussed by the professionals who claim they want to work with or help black clients. Most white people don't know a damn thing about the psychology of the black experience — do you?

You: I have gone to school with many blacks and I have some blacks whom I would consider my friends. We get along quite well and I don't think they are dishonest with me.

Me: That may be true, but the point is that I feel those who are in responsible helping positions and who provide professional service to black persons, should be aware of how impoverished their training has been (along with their formal education) as it pertains to the Black Experience. Just look at all the things that happened in this country that have ramifications for how blacks see themselves and how they see whites — slavery, lynching, Jim Crow laws, miscegenation, passing, religion, matriarchy, ghetto living, and disenfranchisement — along with all the routine segregation and

discrimination and the constant exposure to white symbols of beauty and goodness.

You: You sound bitter.

Me: In a way, yes. I have five black children that go to so-called good schools and they do nothing but study white people. Their white school mates never study black people in a normal, academic, routine way — they must wait for brotherhood week or Black History week or some old bullshit like that.

You: Why do you call it bullshit; isn't that type of racial recognition worthwhile?

Me: It's a band-aid on cancer. Black people have been part of this society from the very beginning. There shouldn't be the need for a special week to discuss their contributions — like Carver and the peanut.

You: You lost me.

Me: Just a joke — seems like the only thing white teachers seem to remember to discuss is George Washington Carver and his research with the peanut — dig that name, too.

You: I still don't get your point.

Me: Have you ever read the novels of Charles Chestnutt or James Weldon Johnson — the short stories of Langston Hughes and Jean Tommer — or the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Claude McKay or Countee Cullen — or say the essays of Horace Cayton, Ira Reid or Carter G. Woodson?

You: I've heard of Langston Hughes.

Me: Good for you. The point is that all of those mentioned are black writers and their names should appear on any school's reading list — but they don't.

You: Umm (quietly staring at me).

Me: You see, you asked me why I stress the differences between blacks and whites. Because of social conditions (better known as racism) those differences *do* exist. You expose a group of people to all those things that I mentioned — segregated armies, segregated schools, years of being told to sit in back of buses, to drink from separate water fountains, watching caricatures of yourself in movies, and being referred to as *nigger*, *boy*, *coon* and *spade* — you take the years of being told that white is right, of being told

your hair is bad, of hearing about uppity niggers being lynched, of experiencing white law and all white juries — you take all that shit as part of your roots and and part of the fears of black parents and grandparents and you have a group of people who are different in many ways from those who were not the targets of such action — I call those white people.

Then you have theories of behavior developed by whites who don't know a damn thing about this black lifestyle. You get Sigmund Freud, and Lewin and Skinner, Rogers, Jung and what all. Well, you get these "white oriented" theories — those dudes have never been in any black ghettos — except driving by quickly — and you get ignorance compounding ignorance as far as blacks are concerned.

You: You lost me a little with that last point.

Me: What I'm saying is this: you first have theoretical and therapeutic ideas that have little relevance for blacks. Then you get professionals who are trained and educated with little, if any, exposure to the meaning of the black experience as it relates to the behavior of black clients. And yet these are the people who apply the theories.

You: I follow you now.

Me: This is why I sum up the general reaction of whites as being puzzled. Based on the limited information most whites have about blacks, they find it difficult to make sense out of their behavior.

You: Isn't it difficult to make a statement about what all or most whites feel?

Me: Interesting point. Blacks have been collecting and sharing information about whites in this country for over three hundred years. Blacks have worked in their kitchens, cleaned their homes, raised white children, listened to their domestic problems and slept with frustrated masters and mistresses — if there is anything a black is an expert on, it is white people — if for no other reason than survival.

You: I see.

Me: So, when it comes to black behavior, you could say that some blacks see whites as curious, stupid, unaware, ignorant or

oblivious. But on a feeling level, blacks get the underlying message behind the question which most characterizes a white reaction when it is asked, "What do they want?" This is the traditional white response to ghetto burning, demonstrations, riots and black demands. Blacks see whites as puzzled by the rebellious behavior of "darkies" who were supposed to be happy — puzzled by blacks like Cassius Clay, Leroi Jones and Lew Alcindor who changed their slave names — puzzled by the emphasis on black studies (as if white studies was not good enough); by the insistence that black holidays and black national heroes be recognized. It is again anticipated that as blacks leave aggressiveness and become assertive — when blacks speak up, talk back and "don't remember their place," there will be cause for whites to wonder "What do they want?" Whites will face assertive blacks and be obviously or secretly puzzled.

You: Umm (intensely staring at me).

Me: So what do you have — a bunch of well-meaning (let's be optimistic) puzzled white folks, taking theories meant for white folks (excuse me — *they* say it pertains to the generic behavior of all people) and applying these theories to black folks about whom they know very little except what might be picked up from black friends, mass media or maybe sleeping with a black lover.

You: I see your point.

Me: This is why in my book I talk about the psycho-historical implications of the past, the Jim Crow Halo Effect and propose a test for therapists who desire to work with blacks.

You: But —

Me: Let me say this — I also know that there are some blacks who may not be able to pass my test for therapist. You see, our white brainwashing education is a bitch — it doesn't tell whites about blacks, but what is even more nasty, it doesn't tell blacks about themselves either. A lot of people wondered what the cry for Black Studies was all about — well, it may have died down but the need is just as crucial. I have occasion to talk with young people trained at the Masters and Ph.D. level who know nothing about miscegenation, Jim Crow laws or the phenomenon of passing and "the dozens" — yet they want to help black clients along with the

others. Man — these white folks are culturally deprived and so are the people who are teaching them.

You: Well, back to the book —

Me: Screw the book — you need to understand what I'm saying! The lives of many black people are in the hands of whites, and maybe some blacks, who are incompetent when it comes to really deeply picking up on where that black person is coming from. These are whites and blacks too (if the shoe fits, wear it) who are wrapped up in all the theoretical bullshit that is part of the western and European view of behavior. And I include myself. Baby, it is hard to extricate yourself from all that jargon and shit. But yet, we also can't throw out the baby with the bathwater. There are some basic ideas that can be modified and made of value to skin-color-stigmatized people. I use that phrase because Erving Goffman is a good example of a scholar that developed a meaningful theoretical position that has relevance for blacks — the concept of stigma.

You: So, everything white or Western or European is not bad?

Me: No, not bad, just white oriented or biased — some more than others. By the way, I'm sorry I cut you off earlier — I guess I get carried away with the need to explain the frustration of — well, look at this, it's an article by Herbert Hill, national labor director for the NAACP — "Blacks Still Lag in Jobs, Income." Just check out some of these facts — "After the gains of the civil rights movement of the 1960's, black income peaked in 1969-1970 at 61% of the income earned by whites. Since then, there has been a steady decline. In 1971 black family income fell to 60%: in 1972 to 59%; in 1973-74 to 58%; and in 1975 to 56% . . . At the beginning of 1976 the official employment rate in the nation was 7.6% for whites; 14.1% for blacks . . . there is a systematic undercount which especially distorts the official rate of unemployment among nonwhite workers . . . The more accurate unemployment figure would be 13.6% for whites; 25.5% for blacks." The article goes on to say — are you *listening* to this?

You: Yes, I'm listening.

Me: The article goes on to say "Data from the 25 major areas of black urban population show that in some communities black

unemployment is in excess of 30%, while black teenage unemployment is close to 50%. In 1933 the national unemployment rate was 24.9%, the highest official recorded unemployment rate in the history of the United States. The unemployment rate among black workers in many inner city areas now exceeds the general rate of unemployment for the entire nation during the Great Depression of the 1930's." (See Hill, 1970, in Bibliography.) Now I think that's some heavy shit — in this society if you don't have some coins, you are dead.

You: (Silently nod your head).

Me: I guess those are the kinds of things I have in mind when I talk about the black experience — when I stress the difference between blacks and whites.

You: But there are poor whites, too.

Me: Yeah, there are poor whites and I'm sure you may eventually mention the plight of women too — white women. But you see, white skin has been the traditional passport into the opportunity structure of this country. As for white women we have more female millionaires in this country than males. White women have not been subjected to systematic lynching, allowed to fight for this country but not to vote in it, segregated in all social activities from the cradle to the grave, with the display of degrading public signs providing evidence of their inferiority.

You: I think I could argue that point with you.

Me: Yes, that's another issue. I'll let the sisters preach on that one. Let me concentrate on the black perspective.

You: Can you come back to your book?

Me: Don't worry, I haven't forgotten. My book basically aims to do three things — first, take a look at a worthwhile approach (assertive training); second, suggest changes to make it of value to blacks; and third, provide black oriented information to those (black or white) who may wish to use assertive training with blacks.

You: How does your approach to assertive training differ from others?

Me: Glad you asked me that. In reading most of the popular works on assertive training — (or as some like to call it, assertiveness training, or assertion training, or assertive behavior training) I find

at least four areas that keep the material from really being of value to blacks:

First, the interracial implications of assertiveness are ignored. This is exemplified by what I call the “somebody syndrome” — questions and examples about somebody with no consideration for the possibility of a white asserter and a black assertee and vice versa.

Second, the stress on appropriateness of behavior with no mention that cultural background may affect what a person considers appropriate.

Third, a social class bias in that the examples are very middle class or above — problems about swimming pools and mothers being confused about child-rearing practices because of reading Spock, Gesell or Patterson. But nowhere any racial examples.

You: For example?

Me: Several current popular books about assertiveness. Most black parents are not that hip on Spock, Gesell or Patterson.

But let me get on one author’s case, a writer by the name of Fensterheim. He really would put black folks into a bind because on one hand he says “overassertiveness is often aggression and always inappropriate” on page 46, but on page 49 he says, “you have the right to maintain your dignity by being properly assertive — even if it hurts someone else — as long as your motive is assertive, not aggressive.”

Well, my *fourth* point is that most authors are not clear about *intent* while, for black clients *intent* is very important.

You: I’m not sure I understand why each point is so important for assertive training with blacks?

Me: Look. Let’s take point one as an example — the interracial implications. All of the popular assertive training books talk about doing things like asking for a date and introducing yourself to a stranger, right?

You: Right.

Me: Well, none of them say anything about a black dude being assertive and asking a white chick for a date or what about some assertive white dude introducing himself to a tough black fox — in Watts or Harlem. You dig where I’m coming from?

You: I'm beginning to get the picture. In other words there are other kinds of problems to be dealt with when — to use your words — the asserter is white or black and the assertee is of the opposite race.

Me: Right on. This is why I talk about the communicator and the target person. In reading the current books on assertiveness, you can just see from the examples cited and language used that both the communicator and target person share the same skin color — white. Most of the authors, I believe, would freely admit this. That's like the flesh-colored band aid.

You: The flesh colored band aid?

Me: Yeah — what color is the flesh-colored band aid?

You: Pink — oh, I see what you mean.

Me: Right on, baby. The man making flesh-colored band aids didn't consider my color — of if he did obviously he decided it wasn't that important.

You: That's an interesting point.

Me: So you see, assertive training has been developed like the flesh colored band aid — and what I'm trying to do is give it a little color — yeah, I guess it's just that simple. Come to think about it, I guess that's the most simple way of saying what my book is about . . . to give assertive training some *color!*

You: Why assertive training?

Me: You know, that's interesting. The way I see assertive training, *it is really of more value to blacks than to whites*. Look around at this society and who needs the most help in being accepted for their honest, open and direct expression? Blacks. You see, assertive training is ready made for blacks. Listen to this passage, "The person who fails to stand up for his rights has little freedom, feels uncomfortable and afraid, and, in his hunger for freedom, may sometimes turn 'vicious' with inappropriate outbursts. For such people, assertiveness training consists of teaching them to know their legitimate rights, how to stand up for them and prevent them from being usurped."

You: Who said that?

Me: Fensterheim, on page 25 of his book *Don't Say Yes When You Want to Say No* — a very heavy dude. You see what I mean —