

Second Edition

PSYCHOLOGY
AND
AFRICAN
AMERICANS
A HUMANISTIC APPROACH

ADELBERT H. JENKINS

Psychology and African Americans

A Humanistic Approach

Second Edition

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***PSYCHOLOGY AND
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Preface

Viewing the African American from a psychological perspective requires that one choose some theoretical position from among the various different psychological approaches to the human individual. My background is that of a clinical psychologist trained in a psychodynamic tradition—a tradition stressing the interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind. In recent years I have been influenced by developments in psychodynamic theory that emphasize the coping aspects of personality rather than the inevitable instinctual dramas that presumably befall personality. Like most other psychologists I am convinced that the coping characteristics are what must be developed if the human race is to survive and fully develop its potential. More specifically, however, the theoretical trends that emphasize coping and mastery seem to me to be sorely needed when choosing a psychological approach to the study of the African American. Giving more prominence to the positive and creative aspects of personality is especially needed because much of the psychological literature (in consonance with American society) paints a view of the Black American as being deficient in the mental and emotional qualities that lead to productive and creative living.

There is no question that Blacks as a group are still disproportionately numbered among the poor—especially during the decade of the 1980s—and that they suffer and have suffered personally and collectively in the United States. As an old mother says in Langston Hughes's poem:

Well son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare. [1926, p. 187]

Yet, to adopt the typical American view that Blacks as a group are unready for equal opportunity does a tragic injustice to the struggles of individual Black Americans and their collective efforts. One does not have to turn to a Benjamin Banneker, a W. E. B. DuBois, or a Marian Anderson; or to a Kareem Jabbar or a Michael Jordan—names the White community would recognize more readily—to look for competent Blacks. The evidence for nobility of the human spirit is seen in the everyday life of common Black folk, as with Hughes's old woman:

But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's
and turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.[p. 187]

In a similar vein, Alice Walker (Rosenthal, 1984) indicated in a radio interview that one of the main themes of her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* is that of *transformation*. That is, she intended the story to be an affirmation of the capacity of the characters, whose lives had been filled with violence and despair—especially the Black women in the novel—to transform themselves in positive and creative ways. Thus, Black heroes are special cases of the rule, not exceptions to it, notwithstanding the considerable social problems to which Blacks as a group have been heir.

Ralph Ellison noted some years ago that he set himself the goal as a writer: "To commemorate in fiction . . . that which I believe to be enduring and abiding in our situation, especially those human qualities which the American Negro has developed despite and in rejection of the obstacles and meannesses imposed upon us" (1964, p. 39). If psychology is to deal accurately with the African American, it must have a similar mission. But psychology has not been up to this task for at least two reasons. First, western psychology has been hampered by racist cultural biases; psychologists as men and women of their culture have not escaped these preconceptions. (Kamin, 1974; Thomas & Sillen, 1972; Willie, Kramer, & Brown, 1973). Second—and the point to which our attention will be directed in this book—in the main the reigning model in American psychology has been one proposing that drives and external events are the exclusive shapers of behavior. When this theoretical view is applied to Blacks, it encourages focusing on the deleterious forces that act on them. For when the human individual is not seen as a being who takes an active, coping

stance in life, then the tendency not to see active and creative features in the behavior of Blacks follows naturally.

Of course, the kind of psychological model one develops to understand Black people depends very much on what one considers appropriate for the study of any human being. I maintain that the "commemoration of the human qualities" in African Americans calls for a model that characterizes the human individual as one who can exercise some freedom of choice in life about self-conception even in the face of punishing circumstances. In this second edition I continue to have the goal of making a scholarly statement about the situation of Black people in America. Equally important, however, is my objective to encourage African-American students to see psychology as a discipline that can go to the heart of issues meaningful to them. The aim, therefore, is to contribute to their understanding of themselves and to their efforts on behalf of African-American people.

I have been gratified at the reception of the first edition of this work. It seems to have met the need of colleagues and students to put their own personal knowledge of neglected strengths of African Americans into a "user-friendly" orientation. At the same time, the framework I have proposed is not antithetical in principle to some of the directions that some Black scholars are heading in the search for the African roots of a Black psychology. (I have more to say about this in the epilogue.)

The structure of this edition is similar to that of the previous one. After an introduction to the humanistic psychological view I proceed to discussions of self-concept, cognition and school performance, and speech and language processes in children. I then go on to deal with assertion and identity development in young adults and to issues related to mental health among Black persons. The book ends with a new epilogue.

Some further words on the scope of this volume. First, while it is the intent of this edition to update the discussion originally presented, not all of the wealth of new material that has emerged in the last decade is covered. So my selection of new literature here, which is meant to build on the research and ideas presented before, is certainly not exhaustive. Second, in the last decade, immigration to the United States by people of color has increased dramatically. This includes Black people from Africa and the Caribbean. These people bring cultural issues that differ somewhat from those of Black Americans who are descendants of families that were brought directly to the United States from Africa generations ago (for example, see Gopaul-McNicol, 1993). To some extent, of course, the problems of all African-derived people in America have important similarities. But to keep the discussion more focused culturally this book continues to have African Americans who are generationally native to the United States in mind.

Third, except at certain explicit points I do not distinguish between psychological issues affecting Black women as distinct from those affecting

Black men. There is considerable emphasis these days on young Black men being an “endangered species” (Gibbs, 1988). This is a problem for society at large and for the Black community in particular (Wilson, 1987). On the other hand, I realize that Black women have their own sets of problems that cannot be dismissed or simply subsumed under those of men. However, in the space allotted to this revision it would take us too far afield to deal with gender differences at length, and so I continue to focus primarily on those issues affecting the Black community as a whole.

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About the Author

Adelbert H. Jenkins (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is Associate Professor of Psychology in the Faculty of Arts and Science at New York University. He has been Director of Undergraduate Studies in Psychology there and has received the College of Arts and Science *Golden Dozen* award for teaching excellence. A member of the National Association of Black Psychologists, he received its *Scholar of the Year* award in 1983. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Society for Personality Assessment. His publications explore philosophical issues in clinical psychology and relate these themes to ethnic minorities.

Introduction

Black intellectuals have long been discontented with the inadequacy of the concepts used by American behavioral and social scientists in their research on the Black experience in the United States. Their dissatisfactions gained renewed vigor as a part of the social protests of the 1960s. The concerns and criticisms have centered on two main points. First, the accumulating literature on the individual Black person, the family, and the community reflects the common practice of looking within the Black community and Black people themselves for the sources of social disadvantage affecting their personal and collective destinies. As a result, the victims of individual and institutional racism in the White society are made responsible for their own plight. Where the role of the White society in creating problems for the Black minority is analyzed, the onus is eventually placed on Blacks for responding inadequately to the situations they face.

The second distortion—one that I am going to make an attempt to correct and refocus in this book—is the tendency to describe the psychological functioning of the Black American in negative terms. This stems in part from the almost complete lack of interest in studying the effective and constructive aspects of the psychological functioning of Black Americans. The psychological literature has neglected almost totally a serious consideration of the competent and positive aspects of their personalities, almost as if these components of their make-ups did not exist. Instead, the emphasis is almost always on their personal deficiencies—their seemingly endless failings and inability to cope with life. Even where the data suggest strengths and capabilities, these traits are often interpreted as defenses to cover up the deficits and insecurities that are “really there underneath.” Blacks seem to be in a no-win position. Whatever their behavior, assessments of it in the literature usually turn out to be negative.

It is understandable that at the present time many Black scholars want to

reject the modern myths about Blacks, circulated under the guise of being scientific findings, for their incomplete, false, and dehumanizing characterizations of Black people. Indeed, there are now some Black psychologists who advocate scrapping the entire body of theory and research on Blacks and developing entirely new approaches and new sources of data to replace it.

New approaches to the psychology of the Black American have been put forward. It has been suggested, for example, that perspectives derived from African philosophy and culture might prove fruitful. Whether or not this turns out to be a productive route to take, it is my opinion that there are existing viewpoints in contemporary Western psychology that can also be used to make a fuller and fairer assessment of the African American. In other words, there are ideas in the social and behavioral sciences that should not be overlooked as promising alternatives to the main theories and body of findings about Black Americans. At least, I think this is true in the discipline of psychology.

What are these approaches and perspectives in contemporary psychology that might lead to broadening our understanding of the psychological functioning of Black Americans? They are the same ones that hold promise for gaining through the research process a fuller grasp of the personalities of all human beings. These more promising approaches look at the human individual from a "humanistic" perspective. They posit a distinctly different image of the human being from that being defined by "mechanistic" conceptions. In the mechanistic image—still the reigning one in American psychology—the human individual is portrayed as a passive being whose responses are primarily determined either by environmental factors or by internal physiological and constitutional states. Historically the behaviorist position can be most clearly identified with the mechanistic tradition. In this approach, behavior is seen as a function of innate or learned drives or as a function of controlling environmental "contingencies." (*Contingencies* refer to circumstances in the environment that reward or punish an event and thereby determine its likelihood of occurrence.)

Even though psychoanalytic theory is quite different from behaviorist theory in important ways, Freud's voluminous writing shows clear evidence of both mechanistic and humanistic trends (Holt, 1972). The mechanistic components reflect Freud's efforts, which were heavily influenced by the natural science of his day, to develop a "metapsychology" that would describe the basic forces governing human functioning. One aspect of Freud's mechanistic side was the positing of instinctual drives such as sexuality and aggression as the primary motivating forces in behavior. In this sense he was part of the psychological tradition of the first half of the twentieth century, which considered drive reduction as a primary aim of behavior. Much of Freud's thinking and observations about actual clinical situations led him to theorize in ways that were opposite to the prevailing mechanistic trends in science

(Cameron & Rychlak, 1985). Thus, he left important theoretical landmarks for humanistic conceptions of the person, as well. Still, in terms of his basic philosophical groundings it can be argued that he was something of a "mixed-model" theorist (Rychlak, 1981). Both mechanistic and humanistic trends are prominent in Freud's work, and the former perspectives have had a considerable influence on conceptualizations of the human being.

Counterposed against this portrayal of humankind in the passive mechanistic voice is a trend of thinking that is articulated, for example, by psychologists who could be called humanists. One such person, Isidore Chein, has described the humanistic view as one portraying the human individual as

an active, responsible agent, not simply a helpless, powerless reagent. . . . Man, in the active image, is a being who actively does something with regard to some of the things that happen to him, a being who, for instance, tries . . . to generate circumstances that are compatible with the execution of his intentions . . . a being who seeks to shape his environment rather than passively permit himself to be shaped by the latter, a being, in short, who insists on injecting himself into the causal process of the world around him. [1972, p. 6]

A number of other psychologists have developed outlooks with similar implications for the human image. Abraham Maslow, for example, took an early and prominent part in expressing the growing dissatisfaction with the reigning emphasis on drive-reduction theories of motivation. Maslow (1968) stressed the need for a "third force" in psychology to counter the position of the other two "forces" that were influential in American psychological thought, namely, psychoanalysis and behaviorism. He acknowledged that there were important "basic" physiological and psychological "drives" within human beings that directed their behavior. However, he felt that when these drives were satisfied, other sets of motivations emerged, such as strivings for personal growth and self-realization.

Robert White also leveled criticism at both experimental and psychoanalytic psychologies. He wrote, "Something important is left out when we make drives the operating forces in animal and human behavior (1959, p. 297)." To bring back what is "left out," White developed his view that organisms, particularly the higher mammals, possess the capacity to interact "effectively" with their environments. This, to White, implied the presence in human beings of a lifelong motivation to strive for "competent" living as a universal characteristic of human development and functioning.

More recently other psychologists have begun articulating views with humanistic implications for the human image. The psychoanalyst Roy Schafer has in effect countered the mechanistic themes in psychoanalysis by developing what he calls an "action language" for psychoanalysis (1976). His work

essentially develops the humanistic themes in Freud's work. (For a discussion of this point see Jenkins [1992].) Schafer sees individuals not so much as victims of instinctual forces and neurotic afflictions but as people who actively, albeit often unconsciously, construct the meanings, including the pathological ones, by which they interpret the world. "Action refers to all behavior performed in a personally meaningful, purposive or goal-directed fashion and includes all the forms of thinking and . . . feeling as well (1977, p. 61)." Schafer's emphasis on the human being as actor is basic to the humanistic conception of the individual.

Another psychologist, Joseph Rychlak (1988), reminds us that the opposing views undergirding the mechanistic and humanistic images of the human being predate by far the twentieth century in the history of philosophy. Rychlak argues, much as does Chein, that it is time to be explicit about the implications of including a humanistic perspective in accounts of human behavior. "The tie binding all humanists," he notes "is [the] assumption that the individual 'makes a difference' or contributes to the flow of events" (1976, p. 128).

The humanistic model I use here continues to develop (Rychlak, 1991) and it is one aspect of a growing antimechanistic trend in psychological theory and research (see, for example, Faulconer & Williams, 1985; Howard & Conway, 1986; Messer, Sass, & Woolfolk, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1990; Robinson, 1991; Sarbin, 1990; Secord, 1990). For that reason I think it can continue to make a contribution to understanding African-American people. It is interesting to note, too, that the "competence" notion that is a central construct in this book has also recently stimulated the work of a number of researchers (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sternberg & Kolligian, 1990).

Chapter 1 of this volume is devoted to laying out the theoretical stance and concepts used in the following chapters to evaluate critically the literature on the psychology of Black Americans. In my earlier thinking about psychological concepts as they related to Black Americans, Robert White's concept of competence seemed to me to be a good one in which to ground a more positive approach to the psychology of the African American. White's concept of competence implies that there is a lifelong process of self-development, one that he describes in rather straightforward psychological terms. While embodying criticisms of psychology, White's approach attempts at the same time to extend but not necessarily overturn all previous psychological work. In Joseph Rychlak's thinking I found a perspective that provided a framework for viewing most of the major personality theorists (see, for example, Rychlak, 1981) and that seemed also to subsume White's scheme. Rychlak's point of view seems to get directly to the heart of the question I wanted to address, namely, how can psychology make a contribution to a changed conception of the African American? Since space allows only a brief orientation to his thoughts, it is hoped that the reader will pursue his works more thoroughly.

At several points I illustrate how his humanistic approach can help orient our thinking about Blacks.

In Chapter 1 I introduce the key ideas of the humanistic psychological approach that I have used to examine the African-American situation. In the chapters that follow I use the humanistic perspective to review some of the psychological literature on African-Americans. I have selected studies from five areas of psychology and organized them around the topics indicated in the following chapter titles: Chapter 2, "African-American Self-Concept: Sustaining Self-Esteem"; Chapter 3, "The Active Intellect: Developing Competence"; Chapter 4, "The Black Speaker: Cherishing Pluralism"; Chapter 5, "The Assertive Self: Emerging of a New Identity"; Chapter 6, "The Wayward Self: Distortion and Repair." As mentioned, I close with an epilogue. Although the findings examined in these chapters are not exhaustive of the pertinent areas of psychology, they are important ones to address in relation to the psychological functioning of Black Americans. The extensive notes at the end of each chapter amplify issues raised in the text and provide further references and ideas that the reader can pursue.

Two final points before beginning. First, even though my attention is directed at what I affirm as universal principles in human psychology, I do not maintain that there are no differences in the psychological make-up of African Americans and Whites in the United States. For example, some of the difference in cognitive performance between African Americans and European Americans may reflect different psychological styles of approaching intellectual problems. These differences in turn may stem from the fact that different cultural heritages place different emphasis during development on one or another aspect of cognitive functioning. I discuss this issue briefly in Chapter 3.

Second, it is necessary to distinguish the term *humanistic* from the term *humanitarian*. The latter term refers to an attitude of benevolence toward humankind in general and a wish to see the best possible social condition and the highest level of personal development for all human beings. The term *humanism* as used here refers to a philosophical position that puts human individuals and their choices as central, determining factors in their fate. Such factors determine the human being's freedom and responsibility (Rychlak, 1979). Individual humanists may or may not be concerned with the broad welfare of humankind; in fact, some could be more concerned with their own welfare. By the same token, some mechanists who see the human being only as shaped by external forces might not take a back seat to anyone in their concern for bettering the human condition. Mechanists can be and often are humanitarian in outlook. My values are humanitarian (similarly to most psychologists) and humanistic. It is my belief, however, that the humanistic position articulates the potential for human development more effectively.

PSYCHOLOGY AND AFRICAN AMERICANS