

African American Women

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African American women are born into a social environment that is rich but also treacherous. Their lives are inextricably linked to a history of racist and sexist oppression that institutionalizes the devaluation of African American women as it idealizes their White counterparts. (This legacy is further complicated for African American lesbians by pervasive heterosexism, giving rise to a dilemma explored in Chapter 14 in greater detail.) The interrelationship between racism and sexism must be appreciated for its complexity and for its effect on the social and psychological realities of African American women. This chapter explores the cultural history of African American women in the United States, its effect on the development of their psychological resilience and vulnerability, and psychotherapeutic interventions that take into account their unique constellation of attributes and conditions.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

African Americans are one of the oldest and largest groups of persons of color within the United States. At the time of the first census in 1790, African Americans numbered 760,000 (Brown, 1990). In 1860, their numbers had reached 4.4 million, and of that number all but 488,000 were slaves. By 1990 that number had grown over 30 million—with females outnumbering males—is expected to grow an additional 6.6 million by the year 2000 (Henry, 1990).

In 1910, 90% of African Americans lived in the rural South (Ruiz, 1990). In the 1940s a great migration took place, with over one million African Americans moving from the South to northern and midwestern cities (Ruiz, 1990). Seeking better job opportunities in industrialized urban areas, they became competitors for jobs with Whites. Currently over 60% of African Americans live in urban areas (Ruiz, 1990).

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African Americans are descendants of the people of the tribes of the West African coast, who were the primary objects of the U.S. slave trade. Many African Americans also have partial Native American and European ancestry. Unlike other immigrants, who came to the United States seeking and often finding a more advantageous political climate or working conditions, African slaves entered the United States unwillingly, as pieces of property with no legal or human rights. Rather than improving their circumstances, the removal of West Africans from Africa resulted in countless deaths and loss of community, original language, and freedom itself for those who survived. The institutional racism that followed the abolition of slavery has continued the oppression of African Americans with over a century of legal racial discrimination and a legacy of discrimination that still must be overcome.

As slaves, African Americans were to provide free labor and were sold like any other saleable commodity. African American women had a special role in this because they bore children who became saleable commodities as well. A concrete example of the connection between an African American woman's value as a slave and her breeding capacity was the price she would bring on the auction block. The greater her childbearing capacity, the greater the price she would fetch (Berry & Blassingame, 1982). Her children were routinely conceived as a result of forced sexual relations with both African male slaves and white slaveholders. Her maternal attachment to those children was just as routinely ignored; they were taken from her, sold, and often never seen again.

From the outset, an African American woman's role in American society was synonymous with labor outside the home. This distinguished her from her White counterparts. For the most part in American society, traditional gender-role stereotypes resulted in social conventions that prohibited females from many forms of labor that were routine for males. This courteous protection of femininity was not, however, extended to African American women. By definition, one could not achieve the status of "woman" in society without first achieving the status of "person," and this was a status that African slave women conspicuously lacked. For the most part they worked in fields alongside African American males or performed any other manual labor required by slaveholders. Fox-Gonovese (1988), in her discussion of life in plantation households, notes that under slavery African American women were somehow exempt from the observance of traditional gender roles accorded their White counterparts (hooks, 1981; Lerner, 1972; Robinson, 1983). This has remained consistent throughout their history in the United States.

PSYCHOLOGICAL REALITIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

African American women face a range of cultural imperatives and psychological realities that may challenge, facilitate, or undermine their develop-

ment and adaptive functioning. There is a cultural imperative to maintain and integrate aspects of the West African cultures that can constitute an important and adaptive part of their heritage. This task is compromised by the hostility with which non-Western cultures and models are viewed in the United States, as well as by the history of distortions in Western cultures of African civilizations and their peoples.

Another important task involves both the integration and the mitigation of the influence of aspects of the dominant culture. The institutions of the dominant culture have historically denigrated and exploited African peoples, justifying that exploitation by means of a web of pernicious myths about the inferiority of African Americans when compared to their White counterparts (Berry & Blassingame, 1982; Friedman, 1966; Nobles, 1974). This can make it difficult for African American women to make use of beneficial aspects of the dominant culture because they must avoid internalizing its insidious devaluation of persons of African descent. Specifically, there are powerful and pervasive stereotypes that African Americans lack emotional control or are impulsive, lack sexual restraint, are of lower intelligence than their White counterparts, and harbor violent tendencies (Friedman, 1966; Thomas & Sillen, 1972). Such devaluation of persons of African descent complicates the formation of a positive ethnic identity. The development of adaptive mechanisms required to combat the routine reality of such devaluation is an additional stressor.

African American women must address the daily, mundane life stressors that all women face, in addition to the stressors of racism. Like anyone else they bring their own complex constellations of family history and individual biological, social, intellectual, emotional, and characterological determinants to any task. These determinants must be understood in the context of their interaction with the environment, with each shaping the other.

Jones (1985) has suggested viewing these realities as separate spheres that overlap in varying points in the presenting problem or symptom. The point or points of overlap and the relative importance of one sphere to the other will vary from time to time in treatment, as they will vary during different developmental periods of a client's life. They will also most certainly vary from client to client. The clinician's task is to determine the most important area of focus at a particular time.

African Cultural Characteristics

Derivatives of African cultural characteristics in African Americans do not appear as they might have 300 years ago. Certainly African Americans have been socialized within the dominant culture as well as within their own, and have absorbed some of the latter's values. Hence their practices reflect a combination of both value systems.

Akbar (1985) writes that derivatives of African worldviews may be observed in the statement, "I am because we are," rather than the Cartesian

view captured in the proposition, "I think, therefore I am." The former concept underscores an important value of tribe over individual, with emphasis on interdependence and collective responsibility. Individuals are encouraged to look beyond their own personal needs to consider what is in the greater interest of the group. This may conflict with the Western value of rugged individualism. Every member of the tribe is presumed to have something to contribute and is expected to do so. This expectation may be a causative factor in the observed flexibility of gender roles in African American families. While such flexibility is a function of the need to adapt to the effects of discrimination in the workplace against African American males, it has important cultural roots in the less stratified gender roles of many African tribes.

Boykin (1985) has noted that African cultures respond to the spirit rather than the letter of the law. From this perspective, laws, rules, or social structures do not exist as abstract entities with a life of their own. They are created as tools that may be modified or discarded when they no longer serve their purpose. Boykin goes on to elaborate on cultural characteristics of African Americans. Personal style and attributes are valued rather than status or office in the dominant culture. This is not uncommon in cultures where formal status or legitimized power is not available to members of a group because of institutional discrimination, economic impoverishment, or both. The valuing of personal attributes over material accoutrements also reflects African cultural roots. The appreciation of personal distinctiveness can be seen in the styles of Black music and dance, which highlight improvisation and originality.

Boykin (1985) and Hale-Benson (1986) observe a heightened sensitivity to nonverbal communications. This may also be a function of living in a hostile environment, where attention to subtle cues can mean the difference between life and death. The history of African people reflects a preference for oral or auditory, as opposed to written, communications. Akbar (1985), Boykin (1985), and Levine (1977) suggest that spoken words may convey deep textual meaning and affect in ways that may be lost in attempts to reconstruct them grammatically.

Unlike many of their White counterparts, African American women are not socialized to expect marriage to relieve them of the need for employment. Their financial contribution to the household is usually presumed necessary. The role of mother is an important one for many African American women, but is accompanied by tasks that are not required of their White counterparts (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Joseph & Lewis, 1981). In precolonial Africa, the roles of childbearer and child rearer were highly valued, a philosophical orientation that places a special value on children as representing the continuity of life (Bell, 1971; Ladner, 1971; Nobles, 1974).

In African American culture, family is defined as an extended kinship network rather than as the nuclear unit central to White cultural values. In this network, non-blood relations who have close affectional ties with

family members may be treated and experienced as family. Hence, African American children frequently have many people involved in their upbringing, who may not be natural parents. While motherhood is an important role for African American women, this concept is not limited to biological mothers. Many women in families play major roles in the raising of children who are not their biological children, but are the children of "kin." Boyd-Franklin (1989) observes that strong kinship bonds are perhaps the most enduring legacy of African heritage. Children are viewed as part of a communal network that extends beyond a child's natural parents. This may serve many adaptive purposes. The kinship network within African American families can provide children with alternative role models, both mothers and children with emotional safety valves, and mothers with respite from child care (Hill, 1971; Stack, 1974; Troester, 1984). The presence of grandmothers is a significant one in child rearing, and it is not uncommon for grandmothers to raise their grandchildren or live in multiple generational households (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Because their importance and status in the family is enhanced with age, African American women may encounter fewer "crises" related to the loss of youth than their White counterparts (Freudiger & Almqvist, 1980). In contemporary environments the absence of kinship networks may be keenly felt and if so, reestablishing them becomes an important aspect of the therapeutic work. Boyd-Franklin and García-Preto cover this more extensively in their discussion of family therapy (Chapter 9, this volume).

Despite its much maligned status, the African American family is a crucial barrier against the racism of the dominant culture. African American mothers are charged with the task of teaching their children mechanisms of mastery over racism. They must determine how to warn their children successfully about racial barriers in ways that do not minimize the challenge they pose, but do not overwhelm the children either. Family constitutes an important survival mechanism for African American women. Hill (1971) describes what he considers to be the major strengths and characteristics of African American families. He posits that these characteristics reflect both the derivatives of African cultural roots and the slowly evolved adaptations to a racist environment. As Boyd-Franklin (1989) has noted previously, Hill (1971) reaffirms the presence and importance of strong kinship bonds, a strong achievement motivation, a strong religious and spiritual orientation, and a strong work orientation or ethnic in African American families.

Cultural Characteristics Specific to African American Women

Despite flexibility in gender roles, African American women are clearly socialized to expect to be caretakers. Female children are given responsibility for child care and develop an early motherhood identification (Hale-Benson, 1986). This is observed less in the socialization of African Ameri-

can males, although their participation in child care is more frequent than that observed in cultures in which gender roles are more rigidly stratified. Conflicts may occur in African American couples as a function of both racism and sexism within the African American community. There is no evidence that African American couples divorce or separate more than their White counterparts, but their relationships operate under considerable pressure.

Traditionally, African American women have been blamed for family ills and problems that are really a result of institutionalized racism. The pervasive deficit approach to research with African American families has measured them against idealized rather than realistic concepts of their White counterparts. Despite this, African American women have demonstrated that they are competent mother figures in antagonistic environments.

In the dominant culture, the practice of subordinating women is associated with establishing a man's masculinity. When this value is internalized by the African American woman, she may be predisposed to forgive, or even feel she deserves, mistreatment. This is particularly salient for African American women, because their partners' frustrations with racism are so legitimate. For example, a client of mine lamented that although her live-in boyfriend was intermittently abusive to her, "He gets abused by White people all day . . . he doesn't deserve trouble from me too. . . ." Many women in these situations also observe that if they report an abusive spouse, he will be treated more harshly by law enforcement officials because he is Black. The sense of a conflict of loyalty between their own needs and the needs of others is a common problem presented by African American women in my clinical experience. Although there is doubtless some truth to the client's observation regarding law enforcement, the therapist must be sensitive to her feelings while assisting her both in protecting herself and in understanding that she is not to blame for the racial barriers her mate encounters, barriers that she encounters as well.

Another issue that surfaces for many African American heterosexual women is that of man-sharing. Many clients express considerable distress at what they perceive to be a paucity of available African American men and their consequent difficulty finding mates. Some complain of their partner's infidelity but suggest, "I guess I have to share him 'cause there're just not enough [African American males] to go around. . . if I don't there will be other women who will." While it is important that the therapist not underestimate the realistic aspects of the client's dilemma, it is equally important to determine whether or not her solution is a pragmatic one, consistent with her own values, or whether it reflects the client's low self-esteem.

Low self-esteem is an issue that arises routinely in my practice and is articulated by women from a wide range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Professional and educated African American women tend to view this problem as a consequence of their level of education. These

women may be particularly vulnerable to the charge that their status contributes to the oppression of Black males. For some, the requirement that a male be of the same educational level, regardless of other factors, can indicate problems with intimacy. They effectively avoid relationships by creating a list of characteristics that significant numbers of African American males have not had sufficient opportunity to develop. In this case, these clients fulfill their own prophecy of being alone or of being unworthy.

Influential Characteristics of the Dominant Culture

A major element of psychological reality for African American women involves integrating the influences of the majority culture without internalizing the accompanying devaluing messages that are a result of its racism and sexism. This leaves African American women with the challenge of developing coping mechanisms in response to racism and sexism, negotiating the discriminatory barriers that result from institutional racism and sexism, and addressing the full range of life's normal and catastrophic stressors.

Sexist Imagery Resulting from Racism

Racism is an ongoing part of routine life for African American women. It does not occur only in sporadic events in specific settings; rather, it surfaces in the most benign settings, with or without warning. Because of its ongoing nature, and its association with an unalterable, unconcealable physical characteristic, it can be considered a chronic stressor that requires ongoing management. Race operates as a powerful social variable that can intensify other social variables, such as class and education (Ladner, 1971). Therefore, the history of racism in the United States affects the experience of gender and may intensify the effects of sexism for African American women.

Coming down from the time of slavery there has been a range of stereotypes that suggests that African American women are sexually promiscuous, sexually aggressive, morally loose, independent, strong, and assertive when compared to their White counterparts (Christian, 1985; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981). There was also a companion image for African American women which was just the opposite: She is depicted as sexually neutered, reflected in the image of the mammy. The mammy was usually represented as obese, pitch black in color, unkempt, and dirty (in comparison to White maids), the opposite of the dominant culture's beauty standards, her sexuality could be denied (Christian, 1985; Fox-Genovese, 1988; hooks, 1981). The latter image took her supposed flaw as a woman, her innate assertiveness and strength, and rendered it safe as long as it was used to defend fiercely the interests of the plantation household (Collins, 1990; Fox-Genovese, 1988; hooks, 1981). Both images cast her as the

repository of the features and characteristics that the dominant culture in the United States and patriarchal cultures in general would view as abnormal for women. Their only redeeming feature is that these characteristics could be harnessed for a display of loyalty to the White upholders of the status quo.

These stereotyped images of African American women as the opposites of their genteel White counterparts did not evolve in a vacuum. Carby (1987) writes that the purpose of stereotypes is not to reflect reality accurately but to serve as a disguise for societal reality. The breeding practices of slaveowners could not have been maintained in a society founded on Christian and democratic principles had they been accurately depicted as the sexual exploitation of African American women by White males. Instead, blame was assigned to the victims, preserving the image of White planters as morally superior to Africans, especially in their capacity for sexual restraint (Greene, 1993). This disguise for societal reality served many purposes. It soothed the conscience of a society whose espoused ideals were blatantly contradicted by the behavior of its members. These stereotypical images of African American women further served to support the maintenance of social power in which African American men and women were subordinate to Whites, and women were subordinate to men.

Economic Subordination

It is fair to state that African American women occupy social and economic positions that are subordinate to their White counterparts and to their African American male counterparts, reflected in less access to positions of power and authority in the United States (Davis, 1981; Epstein, 1973; hooks, 1981; Joseph & Lewis, 1981; Myers, 1980; Robinson, 1983).

It should be noted that African American women maintained significant presence in the workplace long after the end of slavery and well into the contemporary era, despite the dominant cultural norm of women remaining in the house and men working in the outside world. Racism in the workplace made it difficult and at times impossible for African American men to find employment that would be deemed suitable for a male. Employment suitable for women, however, such as domestic work and child care, was more available. Hence, African American men were unable to assume the dominant culture's male ideal of the sole breadwinner in the household. African American women are still often required to bring essential rather than supplementary income into the family, although when they do so, they confront a legacy of both racism and sexism in the treatment of their success as workers, as proof of their inferiority as African Americans and as women. These realities make rigid gender-role stratification somewhat impractical for African American families.

Moynihan (1965) legitimized the stereotype of African American women as assertive and sexually aggressive and their continued economic

role in the family with the contention that African American families are matriarchal and that family ills could be attributed to the fact that African American families did not measure up to the patriarchal ideal (cf. Christian, 1985). It is important to note that the Western use of the term "matriarchies" refers to social systems in many different cultures that are, matrilineal and more egalitarian than patriarchal systems. They are *not* the mirror image of the patriarchal society—women assuming the financial burdens of households and men inhibited from participating equally in the broader society. Rather, they facilitate the contributions of all members of the group, based on the best interests of the group and its survival. Nonetheless, the stereotyped depiction of African Americans as matriarchal fueled the already distorted images of African American women. When internalized, these myths and distortions can have pernicious effects on the psychological development of African American women.

Reaction to Negative Imagery

African American women in both individual and group psychotherapies report concerns about the adequacy of their hair texture, skin color, body shape and size, and size of facial features (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Greene, 1985, 1990; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987). These concerns are not pervasive in all African American women, but there are few who do not report experiencing some degree of emotion regarding physical self-image, from mild dissatisfaction to shame. Physical attractiveness is an important social variable for women, and for some is a measure of their femininity and worth. (The dominant culture in the United States idealizes the physical characteristics of White women and measures women of color against this arbitrary standard.) (Mays, 1985; Neal & Wilson, 1989). When compared to the White female ideal as the norm, traditional African features, darker skin, eye, and hair colors, broad or thick facial features, and kinky hair textures are deemed unattractive and inferior by the dominant culture (Collins, 1990; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Okazawa-Rey et al., 1987). Hence there is pressure to approximate the ideal. To be womanly and feminine in American culture is to be White. This is problematic in African American women who have internalized this ideal, one which they can rarely approximate.

Because of the connection between physical attractiveness and feelings of self-worth in many women, discussing this connection constitutes an essential aspect of therapeutic inquiry. It is important to ask the client who was or was not considered beautiful in her family and why. It may also be helpful to determine whether she has childhood memories of a parent or parenting figure encouraging her to alter her physical appearance, as well as the kinds of messages she was given about its adequacy. This can give the therapist a sense of the extent to which family members internalized the dominant culture's standard, as well as how family members were

treated regarding their own physical appearance. It would be a mistake to assume that the cultural movement that asserted that "Black is beautiful" eradicated the centuries-old effects of these negative messages. A cursory review of media images and advertisements, particularly those targeting African American consumers, continues to advertise products that offer the promise of altering African American women's physical characteristics.

In a social climate where skin color becomes an important social variable it is predictable that skin color variations in African American families can be a source of conflict between family members. Skin colors within an African American nuclear family can vary from extremely dark to light. Because these physical characteristics are highly visible, they lend themselves to being used when disputes in families occur. It is important therefore to inquire about the skin color variations within the family, particularly those of family members about whom there are intense feelings. These variations may intensify a normal range of interfamilial and sibling rivalries. Some clients may have been idealized or scapegoated in their families based on skin color or other physical features. Many women may be left with a sense of shame or even guilt, reinforced or cultivated by the preoccupations and perceptions of family members about the relative "goodness" of physical characteristics of White women and the "badness" of those features more characteristic of African American women (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Greene, 1992; Neal & Wilson, 1989).

The therapist should not assume that the presence or absence of certain kinds of hairstyles or dress are automatic indicators of a client's feelings about these issues, although for some clients they may be reflected in these choices. Furthermore, just as darker skinned African American women are devalued for failing to live up to the American standard of beauty of light skin, long straight hair and keen rather than broad facial features, lighter skinned African American women may be similarly devalued by family members or peers for "looking" or "trying to look White." Many African American women who are clients in psychotherapy, who have lighter skin and straighter hair textures, report being treated either like a curiosity or a traitor, who is never quite "Black enough." This is often intensified for African American women who are biracial; issues facing these women are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 16. Feelings of anger, shame, resentment, and guilt may emerge during inquiries around this material, which must be sensitively explored.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES AND VULNERABILITIES

African American women, who have had to make psychological sense out of their historical and contemporary predicaments if they were to survive, continue to strive for fair treatment and to maintain hope, often in the face

of hopeless conditions. If African Americans as a group are to survive, they and their families have to teach their children to do the same.

Internalized Racism

Internalized racism is observed in African American women when they internalize both the negative stereotypes about African Americans and their cultural origins and the idealization of White persons and their cultural imperatives, negatively affecting their sense of self (Butts, 1971; Friedman, 1966; Gardiner, 1971).

Clinical manifestations of internalized racism may be observed in many forms and are likely to have multiple determinants. The client may harbor the fear that expressing any behavior that is associated with negative stereotypes of African American women proves that the stereotypes are valid. In this case, acting or attempting to act against or disprove the stereotype may be reflected in the client's inhibition, repression, or emotional constriction. This behavior clearly reflects the level of shame the client experiences for characteristics that she believes define her.

A corollary of acting *against* the stereotype is represented by the acting *out* of stereotypes. This compulsion may reflect the need to expose a feared part of the self that corresponds to the caricature of the way the client believes other people expect her to behave. This may leave her with a (false) sense that she controls when she is "discovered" or "found out." In either response the therapist must address the client's misperceptions about herself and other African Americans, as well as exploring the significance of the more complex dynamics of her plight.

Another example of internalized racism may be reflected clinically in the tendency for the client to express a sense of distance and/or disdain for other African Americans. Expressions of this sentiment in clients may range from their openly disparaging all Black people as a group to using derogatory racial epithets to describe or label certain types of African Americans when referring to them. Pinderhughes (1989) suggests that although this may represent a need for specialness or elitism within a group, it is nonetheless a distancing defense mechanism. Women who display this behavior may actually believe the negative stereotypes associated with African Americans, but of course they cannot deny their group membership. Hence they see themselves as essentially different from the group in salient ways, the exception to the negative rule. Clients who engage in this behavior may fear that they harbor the characteristics that they reject in African Americans as a group, and are thus simultaneously rejecting a part of themselves. By distancing themselves, however, they run the risk of isolation as well as being unable to correct distortions in their perceptions.

A combination of internalized racism and sexism may be observed in the "impostor phenomenon." Clance and Imes (1978) conceptualize this phenomenon as an internal sense of intellectual phoniness or of generally

feeling like a fraud or failure, despite repeated successes. It is frequently observed in African American women, as a result of early family dynamics and the internalization of the dominant culture's gender-role and racial stereotyping. Francis Trotman (1984) observes that the client may be unable to appreciate her realistic accomplishments or activities despite evidence of her ability. She may express (1) a preoccupation with failure or the potential of failure, (2) her perceived flaws or worthlessness, (3) a readiness to accept the negative perceptions that others hold of her (with a conspicuous resistance to accepting positive feedback), (4) the perception that her successes are fraudulent and are the result of "fooling" or "tricking" others, or (5) a persistent sense of dread that she will be caught or found out when presented with the next challenge.

Many African American women internalize the stereotype of the ubiquitous strong matriarch. In the tradition of the mammy, she acknowledges no personal pain, can bear all burdens, and will take care of everyone. Consequently, many African American women feel deficient if their burdens are too heavy, and will resist asking for help. On entering therapy these women express great reluctance at the prospect of "wasting time" talking about their problems when they have "so much to do." When questioned about their reluctance even to enter therapy, a common response is that it will mean that they are "weak" or "couldn't take it." The therapist may in fact find that the client has endured some very stressful events or has assumed the role of caretaker for numerous family members over an extended period of time. When asked why they have finally considered a solution that they consider extreme (therapy), some common responses are "I'm having a nervous breakdown," or "I had a break." In psychodiagnostic parlance a "break" or "nervous breakdown" usually implies the presence of serious psychopathology. Such pathology is marked by seriously impaired reality testing as well as an inability to function. For these women, the nature of their "breakdown" is not the same. (Descriptions of their "breakdown" include variations on the theme of "I cried" or "I just cried and cried and couldn't stop.") The clinician who does not inquire about what the client means when using this and other terms may misunderstand and incorrectly diagnose the client's condition. This reasoning reflects the level at which many African American women do not feel entitled to be cared for or even to take care of themselves, but rather see their self-worth as rooted in being a caretaker. This may also be reflected in behavior in which these women make it difficult for others to care for them, leaving them in a cycle of frustration, exhaustion and anger. It is important to address these issues with clients, particularly its connection to the internalization of a convergence of stereotypes about African American women.

Many women express additional concerns that therapy will make them "dependent" and will somehow control them. Given their history of being taken advantage of and being denied the luxury of dependence on benign

or helpful figures, such concerns are understandable. These concerns, however, may mask African American women's difficulty in requesting and accepting help, thereby prolonging their involvement in situations that are routinely stressful or overwhelming.

Any specific client will likely present one or many of the aforementioned dilemmas. Other manifestations in African American women in professional occupations or in training for such may be expressed in unrealistic levels of anxiety or panic at the prospect of board, bar, or licensing examinations, promotions or the possibility of any new challenge. Some clients may consistently delay or procrastinate at critical career stages to avoid their feared discovery as a fraud.

Another example of internalized racism may be expressed in the client's unconscious assumption of responsibility for the discomfort that may be present when interacting with her White counterparts. In this case the client may attempt to engage in behavior designed to make herself appear as nonthreatening as possible. This behavior qualitatively goes beyond being socially engaged and pleasant; rather, it includes the client's inappropriate and often unconscious assumption of blame if White counterparts experience discomfort in the interaction. The client may engage in this behavior if she assumes—even when the assumption is accurate—that as an African American female she elicits fear, and if she thus maintains an illusion of control in a situation where there is potential for victimization. The therapeutic goal in working with such a client involves assisting her to examine both the assumptions that would lead someone to fear her and the validity of such assumptions. Clients who engage in this behavior may use it with the therapist as well. The therapist must therefore be careful not to encourage this behavior by inadvertently communicating his or her own anxiety about race to the client, or by accepting overly compliant behavior too readily.

Internalized racism can be understood as a maladaptive result of the need to develop coping mechanisms in response to racism. To understand this as a major piece of psychological work in the lives of African American women, the therapist must acknowledge that African American women are forced to be aware of themselves racially in ways that their White counterparts are not. The need to learn how to manage the anxieties and prejudices of the dominant culture is an important aspect of their socialization, an ongoing aspect of their reality. Clinical manifestations of this phenomenon must be addressed as a part of the therapeutic work.

Adaptive Strategies

Problematic adjustments to racism are prevalent, but they are only a part of the story. Despite the ubiquitous realities of racism, African American women should not be understood as passively reacting to racism and its sequelae or as blindly accepting the dominant culture's values or views of

them. There is ample evidence of a variety of adaptive and resourceful strategies utilized by African American women throughout their history.

Each generation of African Americans, usually but not exclusively parenting figures or family members, prepares the next generation for the challenge of being African American in a society that devalues them. African American mothers face a range of unique challenges in socializing their daughters to make psychological sense out of the racist and sexist messages they receive on a routine basis. Despite having to function in environments where there may be little if any physical or emotional safety, African American women have made healthy adjustments that are neither deniable nor accidental. Their psychological flexibility is often a reflection of an active socialization process that takes place within their families and communities to prepare its members to confront institutional barriers. Adaptive responses to coping with racism may be observed in the processes of "armoring" (Faulkner, 1983; Sears, 1987), "healthy cultural paranoia" (Grier & Cobbs, 1968), and "racial socialization" (Greene, 1992b).

Sears (1987) and Faulkner (1983) use the term "armoring" to describe behavioral and cognitive skills used by African Americans and other persons of color to decrease their psychological vulnerability in encounters where there is a potential for racism. It is important that therapists understand the need for such behavior and do not regard as pathological the complex attitudes that give rise to wariness and the interpersonal reserve that may accompany it.

The sensitivity of many African Americans to the potential for maltreatment and exploitation by Whites has been referred to by Grier and Cobbs (1968) as "cultural paranoia." This term, despite the use of the word "paranoia," encompasses an appropriate level of vigilance. Like armoring, it might be better understood as a physiological or psychological predisposition, perhaps based on past direct experiences or observations, to perceive a wider range of environmental stimuli as potentially dangerous and/or stressful and to react to them accordingly.

Racial socialization is a complex process that has three major components. The first phase is that of learning to label racism accurately and to acknowledge its extent. This includes identifying it correctly when it occurs. This phase makes major use of cognitive skills in the identification and accurate labeling of the phenomena (Greene, 1992a). A second phase involves the presence of role models or demonstrators in a young woman's life, usually adults. By their actions, adult figures—often but not exclusively mothers—can model appropriate responses to situations and demonstrate the importance of self-advocacy. The third phase encompasses understanding the experience, which may be fraught with feelings of difference, rejection, and confusion. The provision of emotional support for the predictable feelings of anger and impotence that often emerge when anyone experiences direct or subtle confrontations with racism and sexism is a critical component at this stage of this process.

When working with a client, the therapist should assist her in accepting such feelings and validate the client's appropriate response to this reality. Finally, if the client is a parent, she should be assisted in understanding the legacy of negative images that her children will encounter in the world. It will be incumbent on her to take an active role in mitigating the effect of those stereotypes by means of positive images, rather than reinforcing them (Greene, 1992c).

These maneuvers represent a few those that African American women use to make sense out of their institutionally disadvantaged position and to negotiate and deflect the hostility of a racist and sexist culture in healthy and adaptive ways. There is a noteworthy paucity of information in the psychological literature about how these adaptive phenomena work and how they might be utilized in psychotherapies to assist persons who experience difficulty coping with both personal and institutional barriers. Comer (1988) observes that understanding the strategies and strengths of survivors will tell us more about obstacles and their circumvention than will the traditional exclusive focus on the victims.

THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

In psychotherapy with African American women it may be helpful to assist them in identifying the conscious and unconscious methods they employ in confronting and responding to racial as well as other personal difficulties. This process cannot take place if the therapist believes that problems that result from racism are of minimal importance or that they are limited to African American women in the lower economic and/or educational strata. One may then compare the client's strategies with a range of available options, helping the client make conscious and active choices, compatible with her own personal and cultural values and goals (Greene, 1992b).

Therapy may also be useful in helping the client set priorities regarding which conflicts and issues to respond to, when it is most important to respond to them, and how to do so. In a racist and sexist culture, an African American woman who feels compelled to respond actively to every suggestion, potential incidence, or actual episode of racist behavior will have little energy available to address other life issues.

Introducing or responding to the issue of race within the treatment situation presents therapists with a dilemma that training has often ignored. While our culture has always and still continues to make important distinctions between people on the basis of race and ethnicity, it is often considered impolite or inappropriate to discuss those distinctions openly. In this context it is not unusual for a client to assume that she will offend, alienate, or make the therapist anxious if she initiates an inquiry. This underscores the importance of the therapist taking the responsibility for raising the issue of race if the client does not do so. It is important that the therapist

communicate to the African American woman that she or he recognizes the extent to which race and racism may play a significant role in her life, and that she does not have to protect the therapist from her experiences or feelings about it.

It may be appropriate to ask an African American woman if she feels that a White (or African American) therapist can understand her, and to determine the reasons for this feeling. While such questions may appear to be of obvious importance when the therapist is White, it remains important when the therapist is African American. An African American therapist cannot assume that an African American woman necessarily prefers having a therapist of the same race. Similarly, African American therapists, when preferred or requested, cannot presume that they know why they are preferred without exploring the issue with clients. The therapist must take care not to patronize an African American woman by questioning whether race is an important issue if the therapist has not seriously thought through its relevance. Therapists who do not feel that race is an important area of scrutiny should utilize peer and other forms of supervision to explore racial issues before raising them with the client.

The client's choice or preference for the race of the therapist should always be accepted, but must be understood as well. Such a choice may represent the hope for or the avoidance of a certain kind of relationship, fantasized about or realistic, arising from expectations or images. It is reasonable to assume that the preference may always have more personal meaning, which should be explored regardless of the race of the therapist.

Because of the pressure to deny racial identity and difficulties encountered in the face of racism, many African American women may deny the significance of race even when asked directly. The therapist should not assume that such a denial means that there are no conflicts present. It is helpful to listen for metaphors about lightness, whiteness, darkness, and blackness in the client's communications, particularly in dreams. Black and White figures may appear as polar opposites with respect to their status, roles, feelings, impulses, or behavior. Furthermore, Black or White figures may serve as repositories for the client's unwanted or unacceptable feelings or impulses. Metaphorically, White persons may represent the client's grandiose self and African American persons may represent or be associated with the client's self-loathing or shameful self. When the issue of race is conspicuously absent, the therapist should consider whether or not such material is being avoided, and if so assist the client in understanding her need to avoid it (Greene, 1992b).

The therapist should not use social class as an excuse for failing to consider seriously the impact of race in African American women's lives. It can be suggested that, just as poverty interacts with racism and affects its victims in particular ways, middle-class and educated status among African American women also interacts with racism in particular and equally problematic ways. The notion of privileged status must be reexam-

ined. Money and education, privileges that normally enhance one's chances in life, may not do so for African American women in the ways that they may for White women, and for African American and White men. Well-educated and middle-class African American women may be confronted with situations in which few or no African American women preceded them and in which they remain unwelcome. These women may face tremendous isolation and despair at the same time that they are told that they have somehow "made it." In addition to these issues, African American women who have been successful financially are often among the minority in their families. In African American families, there is frequently a clear and explicit expectation that those who have some measure of success will help to "bring others along." This may impinge on a woman's financial resources in a way that it does not for her White counterparts. There may also be issues of ambivalence or regret about leaving others behind.

High income or position should not obscure for the therapist the extent to which many of these women feel and in fact are devalued as African American persons and their achievements disparaged on a daily basis, while they are simultaneously depended on by many of their families to share whatever resources they may have. Many of these women will require assistance in setting priorities regarding the demands of their own lives, the demands of their extended families, and the maintenance of a sense of connectedness with their families. It is predictable that such women will have feelings about these matters that should be respectfully explored.

It is essential to remember that we live in a society that still maintains double standards based on racial identity in judging the same phenomena. Middle-class status for African American persons has always been based on levels of income that are significantly lower than incomes for middle-class Whites. Furthermore, those income levels are often based on one income in White families, as opposed to two incomes in African American families.

It may be difficult for therapists to distinguish between legitimate racial anger, race used in the service of resistance, and race as a metaphor for intrapsychic conflict. Certain aspects of an African American woman's racial heritage and experiences with racism may be superimposed on or interact with structural and characterological dynamics and defenses in particular ways. It is therefore important that the therapist listen for the intensification of characterological conflicts that may be triggered by racial realities. If the therapist can be sensitive to what precedes the initiation of a focus on race, it should be helpful to decide whether or not there is a pattern to this initiation. In this situation, the identification of a pattern can help determine whether or not race becomes easier for the client to discuss than issues that may be even more painful, and whether or not race is used to avoid exploration of other issues.

Families are of cultural significance and importance to most African American women. Assisting them in identifying and understanding the

racial tradition in their families and how they carry on or do not carry on that tradition may be helpful as well. This may be understood as a generational issue. The therapist may want to raise the client's curiosity about what her family members instructed her to do when confronting racism, how to determine if it was present, and what she can recall about how her family actually behaved in such situations. It is important to be attuned to discrepancies between the woman's parents' actual behavior and what they instructed their daughter to do. Further exploration of the client's extended family and her relationships with them should be explored as well (Greene, 1992b, 1993a).

Managing racism is one of many issues whose importance will vary from client to client and will be a function of the multiple factors that help shape the client's psyche. Many environmental factors contribute to molding the psyche of African American women on many levels, but those factors always interact with characterological aspects of who she is. Early life experiences, familial relationships, and biological factors are among those that contribute to the shaping of her core self. Individual factors, societal stressors, and cultural contexts all help determine what resources or vulnerabilities any woman brings to her situation. The therapist must avoid the temptation of using racial oppression to explain all of a client's problems. To do so can prevent her from understanding any role she may play in her own dilemma, and limit her options for making changes. Simultaneously, therapists must be careful not to romanticize her successful struggles to overcome oppression without an awareness of the costs (Greene, 1992b, 1993a).

While African American women share many group characteristics, an individual will attempt to cope with racial life stressors with the same characterological and defensive structures she uses to respond to other life stressors. This does not mean that African American women are to blame for their victimization or its legacy. Rather, it is suggested that the requirement to routinely manage racism for African American women, particularly in the context of a racist society, is a dimension, that can make life more difficult. Her ethnic heritage, on the other hand, can be a source of support and enrichment central to her life. Therefore, both the difficulty of coping with racism and the richness of a woman's ethnic identity should be a routine part of treatment considerations.

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