The Pros and Cons of Counseling in the African American Community:
Is Life Coaching a Better Alternative?
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Pros & Cons of Counseling in the African American Community:

Is Life Coaching a Better Alternative?

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University of Wisconsin-Platteville

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by

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Abstract

There is no denying that counseling psychology within the African American community has not been fully embraced. Whereas most counselors claim to be culturally sensitive, most African Americans still feel that deliberately and respectfully addressing issues of race, culture, and ethnicity, especially among people of color, has not been given the attention it deserves. Empirical research has suggested that addressing issues of race and culture improves the experience of clients and also increases the chances of favorable counseling outcomes. The assumption that all African Americans are alike and the tendency to overlook group variabilities and overgeneralize are some of the most significant challenges in exploring counseling psychology within the African American community. This study included a literature review to examine the challenges and opportunities of counseling psychology in the African American community. The study also sought to examine life coaching as an alternative to counseling psychology. This study used critical race theory in its research approach. As a result, this research identified four main reasons that counseling has not been fully embraced by members of the African American community. The literature suggested that having candid and open discussions about racial and ethnicity issues in counseling between people of color and counselors will go a long way in addressing these challenges. Additionally, the findings suggested that life coaching can be used as an alternative to counseling therapy in instances where counseling has proven futile.
In 1920, Dr. Francis Summer, received a Ph.D. in psychology. He was the first African American known to do so. A century later, more African Americans have graduated to become professional counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists. The number has significantly grown and continues to grow with the increasing demand for therapists and psychologists, especially among African Americans (Smith & Roysircar, 2010). This demand is a result of the growing need for mental health support among Americans of African origin. While the number of African American mental health professionals had significantly increased following Dr. Summer in 1920, a lot still needs to be done regarding cultural diversity within the helping professions. According to the statistics from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2015), only 3 percent of psychiatrists in the United States were African American as of 2010. In the same period, only 3 percent of the practicing psychologists and 5 percent of social workers were African American, (Grant, 2014).

Anxiety and nervousness are common reasons for people to seek therapy or counseling for the first time. There has not been exhaustive research on mental health among African Americans because many African Americans are reluctant to participate in mental health assessment. According to a study by Ross (2016) on the use of mental health facilities among the Caribbean Blacks and African Americans, only 11 percent of those surveyed were found to have used mental health services in the previous year, in the United States. These low numbers indicate that there existed a number of challenges for African Americans in seeking mental health services. Additionally, there were needs of African Americans in regards to their mental health that remained unmet. Some believe that African Americans have been stereotyped by the media and are therefore unwilling to open themselves to having more “stigmas” placed on them
Some members of the African American community associate mental illness with factors other than medical problems. A contributing factor to the reluctance of African Americans to access mental health support is that there are too few African American mental health professionals.

The literature indicated that there are concerns about members of the mental health professions among African American communities. Avent and Wong (2018) highlighted an assumption that all African Americans are alike as a significant challenge in African Americans feeling understood by helping professionals. Carlson, Parnham, American Psychological Association, and Governors State University (2005) believed that further work was needed to examine the issues of race and ethnicity in counseling, particularly among people of color. More research still needs to be done in this area to bring light to this issue. Some professionals have suggested alternative approaches to mental health support rather than counseling. Life coaching is one of the alternative methods that have been put forward to address this challenge. This research aimed to identify the challenges of connecting African Americans with mental health services. Another aim was to identify available opportunities to enhance the client experience for positive counseling outcomes for African Americans. Finally, life coaching was explored as a possible better alternative to counseling.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problems to be addressed in this research are the pros and cons of counseling in the African American community and to evaluate life coaching as an alternative approach. Is there reluctance among African Americans in seeking counseling services? What are the stereotypes associated with mental health and therapy from African Americans' perspective, and finally, what are the opportunities that can be explored to address the mental health needs of African
Americans? African Americans often feel distressed about the quality and standards of the counseling and mental health care they receive. According to Hazlip (2012), part of this challenge is attributable to the underrepresentation of African Americans in the helping professions.

Significance of the Study

Mental health issues are not subject to open discussion among many African Americans (Avent, Cashwell, & Brown-Jeffy, 2015). According to a study by Ross (2016) regarding counseling with African American males, White American males were twice as likely to seek treatment for depression as compared to African American males. Whereas variation existed on the prevalence of specific disorders, causes of mental disorders were common to African Americans and Whites.

It is intriguing that despite evidence of disparities, little research has been done to identify what the real issue is from the people affected and to come up with remedies. The African American community has not been given enough opportunities to give their opinion on concerns about accessing mental health services and what their solutions are. African Americans might be more comfortable sharing their aversions on mental health with one of their own community members. However, such avenues of having open one-on-one discussions with practicing African American therapists are very limited. Studies have identified several reasons for this aversion to therapy by African Americans. Lack of trust by African Americans of the White mental health practitioners is one of the findings of this research (Lipford & Bradley, 2002). Additionally, racism and the attitudes of African Americans about therapy are the other reasons for this aversion (Lipford & Bradley, 2002).
Some mental health professionals are aware of these challenges and are devising ways to make therapy more acceptable to African Americans. A lot of research is still needed to be done to find out ways of having African Americans enrolled in treatment and bolster their efforts. A survey on the challenges facing African Americans in seeking treatment conducted by Constantine (2007), revealed several limitations. Among these limitations from the study was the denial of mental health problems, the high costs of treatment, the challenges of fear and embarrassment, and the lack of information about mental health. Some also indicated an unwillingness to seek treatment due to hopelessness. From this survey, it is clear that many African Americans are held back by stereotypes and the stigma associated with mental health issues. Dispelling these stereotypes is an important goal in order to make mental health services more appealing to the African American community.

Historically, the African American community is a collectivist society. This collectivism is reflected in their thinking and way of life (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vine, 2008). Compared to Americans of European origin, African Americans were found to have more of a collectivist mindset. The culture of collectivism is one that gives priority to a group or society over individuals. The culture of collectivist thinking among African Americans has been used to profile them as being similar and those who think differently are viewed as strange and abnormal. It is crucial to understand the influence of culture in the African American community regarding the decision to attend or not to attend therapy.

**Purpose of the Study**

Given the challenges that African Americans face in seeking counseling and therapeutic services and the nature of racial and cultural factors for clients of color, the purpose of this study is to explore the challenges facing African Americans regarding counseling psychology and how
counselors can overcome these challenges. The findings of this study will help develop a conceptual framework for counseling among people of color.

**Delimitations of the Study**

The scope of this research was limited to the specifically defined objectives of the study. Research for this paper was conducted using the UW-Platteville Karrmann Library database search tool from 2018-2020. Peer-reviewed articles from the early 2000s to present were included.

**Method of Approach**

The study began by looking at a brief history of African Americans and counseling psychology from the 1920s when the first African American graduated with a Ph.D. in counseling psychology. The study then defines the problem of the study which also informs the significance of the study as well as its purpose. A detailed review of literature relating to the history and experiences of African Americans with counseling psychology is traced from the 1930s using the available literature. The literature review also included an examination of the perception of African Americans of therapy, approaches to therapy, and the use of life coaching as an alternative to counseling psychology among Africa-Americans. Some of the search terms used for this research are as follows: counseling psychology in the Africa-American settings; challenges of counseling psychology in the African American community; and the perception of counseling psychology and mental health among African Americans. This research used both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included books, journals, and other internet
sources. The results and findings are synthesized in Chapter Three of this paper followed by a discussion of the conclusions of this research.

**Definition of Terms**

*Race*: A social construction without any biological significance but serves as a reflection of how systems of supremacy intrude on persons from visible ethnic groups (Thompson, 2009).

*Culture*: a set of behaviors, customs, and traditions that governs a social group of people (Lee, 2013).

*Ethnicity*: Is a group of people who shares the same characteristics such as origin, language, religion, ancestry, and culture (Thompson, 2009).

*Clients of color*: Refers to people of racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds other than Caucasian or Euro-American origin such as African, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American, etc. (Constantine, 2007).

*Life Coaching*: the process of advising people to help make decisions, set and reach goals, or deal with problems (Williams & Justice, 2010).

**Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has captured a detailed introduction of counseling psychology with particular interest to African Americans from the first African American psychology Ph.D. graduate in 1920 to the current African Americans in the profession. The limited number of African Americans identified in this study illustrates one of the challenges of acceptance of counseling psychology in the African American community. Accordingly, the research problem was identified as the analysis of the pros and cons of counseling psychology in the African American community, and to also evaluate life coaching as an alternative form of therapy. The significance of this research is to identify the challenges of counseling psychology in an African
American setting and to add to the already existing knowledge of the best therapy approaches that might appeal to more African Americans. Purposely, the findings of this study will help develop a conceptual framework for counseling among people of color. The chapter concluded by defining terms as used in this study. The next chapter focuses on the review of various research that has been done in this area and other relevant literature. It also highlights the limitations of the available literature that served as the basis of this research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Our culture primarily influences our decision making. In respect to this study, culture is a defined set of behaviors, customs, and traditions that governs a social group of people (Lee, 2013). Our environment and ethnic values shape our beliefs, opinions, and actions. This is true for both the clients and the professionals in the field of mental health. Constantine (2007) observed that mental health professionals struggled with how measures to dispel stigma and stereotypes impacted the response to therapy. Some African Americans had found themselves in situations where they didn’t feel safe because of their race. A White therapist might not have been comfortable discussing race issues with African Americans, and this might have made a client reluctant to reveal their personal stories (Constantine, 2007).

Historical and Cultural Perspective

Becoming familiar with the general history of African Americans and the health field is the first step in understanding counseling psychology from the African American perspective. This history can be traced to 1932 when the US government implemented a health policy dubbed the Tuskegee Experiment (Greenawalt et al. 2011). This policy was investigating the natural spread of syphilis if not treated. The men involved in this study did not know that they had syphilis. The study continued for the next four decades until 1972 when it attracted media attention. This study was conducted with four hundred African American males. When this study was halted, only 74 out of the original 400 men were still alive. Advanced syphilis killed at least 100 men who would have been helped by penicillin that was made publicly available in 1946. This was a blatant mistake, and an atrocity willfully meted on study participants, yet no apology was offered. It took 30 years for the U.S. government through President Bill Clinton to provide a public apology to this effect. While people were dying, the researchers published their reports
and continued to benefit from the research for over 30 years. The message that this action sent to African Americans is clear to everyone. This unethical study was probably not the only one conducted at that time.

Another historical problem can be traced to the period of racial segregation. African Americans were subjected to some of the most inhumane treatments in the field of mental health. African Americans received their treatments the basements and newborn babies were kept in rooms used for sterilization and emptying bedpans. Williams and Justice (2010) recorded that untrained maids and aids to nurses were allowed to perform some operations that only practicing and licensed medics could perform on the Whites. Because of these experiences, African Americans have a lot of reservations and distrust for medical and mental health professionals. Some surmised that African Americans were treated in this manner as a measure of reducing their population. This treatment has been described as an attempted genocide of African Americans (Williams & Justice, 2010). The message passed down to generations is that medical and mental health professionals do not care about African Americans.

**African American’s Perception of Therapy**

The experiences of African Americans with healthcare have historically not been positive, and mental health experiences were not any different. African Americans were forced into psychiatry institutions and subjected to psychiatry tests against their will. This mistreatment was even more pronounced in 1911 following the official launch of Crownsville Hospital which was initially known as the Hospital for the Negro Insane of Maryland. In this facility, African American patients were chained in dingy places and they slept on straw. As if this was not inhumane enough, patients were required to help with daytime tasks such as working in the construction site of another building within the hospital. There were no separate wards for
African American patients with infectious diseases and many were exposed to tuberculosis. As this was going on, the Caucasians had special departments and received better treatments (Haizlip, 2012). This mistreatment is best illustrated by the story of Godfrey, an African American admitted to a hospital in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1870. Godfrey was forced into the facility and diagnosed with being a homicidal maniac. Among the characteristics of this condition as recorded by the medic was the desire to kill White people.

This analysis is vital in understanding how the history of African Americans has shaped their current view of the health care system in the country and the therapeutic services that they are expected to embrace. This history has generated constant fear of discrimination and innate suspicion of the health care system by African Americans that requires a unique approach from counselors (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2008). It is possible that many African Americans might have developed aversive psychology to the healthcare system following their history with it. Addressing the race question is an essential step in building a comprehensive therapeutic system that addresses the fears of the African American community. Avent and Wong (2018) describe this as historical fears that inform the collectivist thinking of African Americans. Both the current and historical injustices are what cultivate African American consciousness. Generations of African Americans are naturally assimilated into this consciousness based on what they read in books, the music they listen to, movies that they watch, religious rituals, cultural values, perception, and the general discrimination they have experienced.

Perhaps the starting point in correcting some of these mistakes and creating an attractive environment for therapy for African Americans is interviewing them on how they are affected by race without going into the historical details of it. The perception African Americans have about racial problems is deeply influenced by a range of factors that cannot be covered in this study.
Some of these factors include personal experiences, media coverage, and historical events. These are ways in which African Americans are faced with questions about their race.

However, this aversion to mental health counseling is not unique to African Americans. Caucasians in rural settings also have attitudes against mental health treatment. The reason is that seeking mental health services can make neighbors view one as being “crazy.” Burlew, Montgomery, Kosinski, and Forcehimes (2013) observed that the Hispanic communities in rural areas also considered seeking professional counseling services unnecessary. African Americans, mainly male, find seeking counseling services as being weak; they feel that mental health issues should be handled alone.

Consequently, some seek alternative ways of dealing with their issues as opposed to seeking therapeutically helpful services. Most prefer to seek help from family members, religious leaders, and social workers within the community (Avent, Cashwell, & Brown-Jeffy, 2015). This practice is influenced by the belief that family matters are best handled at the family level. African Americans sometimes consider it an unpopular idea to open up about personal and family secrets to strangers even if they are professionals. For a long time, they have remained skeptical about seeking therapy because they think it can diminish their pride as a people. At family levels, African American women are considered the source of strength, and most of these issues are left for them to handle.

Lack of exposure and inadequate knowledge of mental health care is another reason attributed to the reluctance of African Americans to seek therapy. Many might view therapy as an expensive undertaking rather than the health need that it is. This view is informed by a lack of knowledge about the availability and affordability of mental health services. Many people continue to get carried away by rumors of exorbitant clinical fees without inquiring about the
costs. Besides, some individuals are not able to recognize when therapy is a necessity or when the situation is so dire that a professional therapist is needed. It is a clear indication that the many cannot recognize the signs of mental illness.

**Approaches to Therapy**

There are several approaches to therapy that can be applied depending on different theoretical perspectives. It is, therefore, the duty of a therapist to understand better which method is relevant to assist the client in staying engaged. A growing number of researchers have also proposed life coaching as an alternative to counseling psychology among African Americans. For example, Lee (2013) suggested that life coaching can be used as an alternative in areas where counseling is not producing positive outcomes. There is also a popular view that person-centered therapy is the best approach to counseling for African Americans. In this approach, a safe space for worry, fear, and problems is created without letting it take over the whole session. The client takes the lead to allow the counselor to get to the root cause of the problem and establish a therapeutic relationship with them. This section of the literature review highlights life coaching and person-centered therapy as possibly effective approaches to counseling among African Americans.

**Life coaching.**

Professional life coaching and counseling psychology are interlinked since they both fall in the same category of “assisting professions.” Many experts in the field of psychology agree that they can co-exist with life coaches and even complement each other. Both life coaches and licensed mental health professionals can provide effective support for clients. However, it is advisable to seek advice from accredited and professional coaches if pursuing life coaching.
services. Qualified life coaches are also advised to seek accreditation from recognized bodies such as the International Coaching Federation (Williams & Justice, 2010).

Life coaching and therapy are considered as step-siblings because they both aim at achieving the same goal using different techniques and approaches. The bottom line in both cases is to help an individual to move forward (Jangha, Magyar-Russell, & O'Grady, 2018). Therapy focuses on resolving historical, emotional issues to help an individual progress. In contrast, life coaching focuses on helping an individual create a new path in life without focusing on causation. Perhaps the approach taken is less important; what is essential is that a client can connect with an effective professional and get the help he/she needs. Life coaching can be more desirable to African Americans since it doesn't focus on past emotional problems. By focusing on the future, it lessens the burden of having to talk about historical race issues that could create new challenges for the client. Life coaches encourage clients to be accountable to the coach, making it possible to overcome life barriers.

**Person-centered therapy.**

Person-centered therapy is an approach to therapy that is structured around the client. It is a type of talk therapy where the clients are given the lead role in each session to talk about the issues affecting them and subsequently find solutions to their problems. In this approach, the counselor’s role is to listen, offer support, and ensure that the client positively progresses towards their healing. Counselors working in a culture they are not familiar with should be free to ask questions to help them have a better understanding of the issues with which clients are dealing. Allowing the clients the opportunity to take charge of the sessions not only allows the client to discover solutions to their problems but also to take charge of their lives (Grant, 2014). In these sessions, the client talks about the issues they want to talk about and the counselor
assists to keep the conversation going and to add what the client has not covered. This process of listening to one’s self talking about one’s problems gives the client a better understanding of his/her issues and also allows one to craft better solutions to overcome challenges. Person-centered therapy was a brainchild of American psychologist Carl Rogers who was driven by the desire to create a more supportive environment- an environment that allows clients and counselors to develop more meaningful relationships. Since its inception in 1940s, person-centered therapy has registered tremendous success in counseling psychology. It is a break away from the traditional therapy where the counselor was the leader and expert and the client was only required to listen and ask questions. Ross (2016) suggested that this approach could be more suitable in dealing with African American clients.

**Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed several bodies of research studies that have been done in exploring counseling psychology among African Americans. From the review of literature, it can be observed that several research studies have been conducted in this area of study, an indication that it is an area of interest to the profession of psychology. The literature review began with the historical perspective of counseling psychology and mental health in the African American community. The history of African Americans with mental health services and psychiatric institutions is marred with many traumatic experiences. It is this agonizing experience that has continued to inform their perception of counseling psychology decades later. The literature demonstrates a generally negative attitude towards counseling psychology among African Americans. This reluctance to seek counseling and mental health services among African Americans is connected to perceptions about race, ethnicity, and culture. Further, the review of literature focused on alternative approaches to counseling psychology among African...
Americans. Person-centered therapy and life coaching were identified as possible alternatives.

To follow are the study’s conclusions and recommendations.
Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

In a review of the literature, two factors came out as the significant reasons for aversion to participation in mental health counseling in African American communities. First are the cultural norms that have influenced the collective thinking of African Americans regarding health professionals and, secondly, the fear of stereotypes and stigma associated with counseling. Second, most African Americans do not consider seeking counseling services because of the cultural norms in the communities where they grew up. This finding confirms the hypothesis that cultural norms are a significant determinant of the decisions that individuals make. Besides, it is one of the reasons that deter African Americans from seeking professional counseling (Patterson, Stutey, & Dorsey, 2018). However, as Smith and Roysircar (2010) noted, medical interactions between people of the same race are often more productive than interracial. Many participants confirmed this except that they felt it was a minor issue in the current health system in America.

In conclusion, this research has been very insightful in navigating through the cultural issues that hold back African Americans from seeking therapy. Life Coaching and other standard forms of therapy could be helpful if issues that prevent African Americans from accessing these services could be addressed. The recommendation based on this study is that further research needs to be conducted to explore alternative ways to address the mental health concerns or issues of African American clients. This study provided information to help African Americans better understand their culture as it relates to mental health services and provided suggestions that further examination of cultural views and norms is needed related to the area of counseling psychology.
References


