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Cultural Psychology of African Americans

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Abstract

The cultural psychology of African Americans involves the evolution of African patterns of thought, feeling and behavior and their utilization as adaptive mechanisms in a context of racism and oppression. Assumptions about cultural psychology as the intersection of psyche and culture, and African American psychology as the multidimensional response to dehumanization and psychic conflict are discussed. Time, Rhythm, Improvisation, Orality, and Spirituality (TRIOS) are proposed as psycho-cultural mechanisms of adaptation, innovation, and psychological control for African Americans. Sources of variability among African Americans (both psychological and societal) are a basis for black subcultures within Black Culture. TRIOS is offered as a way to understand the psyche-cultural interactions for African Americans, and to provide a framework for their cultural psychology.

Introduction

In *Prejudice and Racism* (Jones, 1997), a multi-level analysis was employed to describe the persistent effects of dehumanizing and oppressive relationships between Whites and Blacks. Racism defined beliefs about the naturalness of white domination and black subordination. *Individual racism* captured micro-level psychological processes by which individuals internalized and acted upon their beliefs about race. *Institutional racism* was found in the instruments of society that dictated divergent social and economic outcomes on the basis of race. *Cultural racism* represented the cumulative set of beliefs, symbols, meanings and values that defined the meaning of race in our cultural worldview, informed institutional structure and practices and set the context for individual beliefs and actions.

Cultural racism produced the most pernicious racially biasing effects because it was through cultural mechanisms that the meaning of race was defined and implemented. However, "race" was viewed as a biology-based entity created by some naturally ordained force in the universe. As a result, the culturally-determined meanings of race defined a social hierarchy of human groups based on observable physical features and presumptive psychological attributes. These core assumptions about "race" established a normative set of beliefs and expectations about the superiority of whites and the inferiority of blacks that have been handed down over centuries.

Anti-racism activities have been carried out *within* the racism paradigm. Challenging racist assumptions leads anti-racist activities to eliminate *both* the "superiority" assumption for whites and the "inferiority" assumption for blacks. As a result, the arguments against both assumptions are based on the premise that differences between blacks and whites are trivial. These differences, however, have been measured by human characteristics that are validated on the beliefs that emanate from a western, Anglo-American cultural worldview. Within this perspective, Blacks are validated only to the extent that they are believed to be similar to whites.

The aim of this paper is to consider the implications of this cultural racism analysis for African Americans. Specifically, the possibilities that adaptations to racism both create and reflect racial differences in psychological processes are considered. Psychological differences among racial groups derive from different cultural origins, and evolve along different pathways as a result of different experiences with race. Blacks were dehumanized within American culture, and their adaptation to and liberation from that experience required the utilization and evolution of psychological mechanisms founded in their African cultural origins.

This article is not a comparative analysis of Blacks and Whites in America, nor is it an attempt to use an analysis of African Americans to make claims for universality of behavioral principles, or human attributes. Rather, what follows is a discussion of the psychological consequences of a situated human experience of a visible group of people that are socially, psychologically, politically and culturally significant in the United States. In the following pages, we will first summarize the basic working principles of cultural psychology, and then the working assumptions of African American psychology. We will then describe the core features that a cultural psychology of African Americans entails.

Assumptions about Culture and Cultural Psychology

Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) define culture as

> ...patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols ... [and may] on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, conditioning elements of future actions. (p. 181).

The basic elements of this definition suggest several critical features of culture:

1) the importance of symbols;
2) the distinction between, but dual validity of implicit meaning and explicit behavior;
3) the historical influence on contemporary events and their meaning; and
4) the dual nature of culture as a template for and a consequence of behavior.

Triandis (1994) describes the subjective psychological nature of culture as the way cultural groups view the man-made part of their environment. For Triandis, subjective culture is characterized by two important features that are derived from human interaction:

1) an individual's view (expectation; interpretation) is influenced by one's experiences *as well as* the interactions *others* in the group may have; and
2) an individual may hold *symbolic representations* of the group's values and experiences, which affect behavior at a given moment in time.

That is, the interpretative framework of meaning depends not only on the experiences one has directly with others, but what one believes about the experiences others in his or her group have had at various other times. These symbolic and identity-based beliefs play a critical role in what a person thinks, feels, sees or experiences.

Shweder and Sullivan (1992) define cultural psychology as the "...comparative study of the way culture and psyche make each other up." (pp. 497-498). Since culture and psyche are interchangeable, changes in one imply changes in the other. Culture evolves over time as it influences the outcomes of adaptation-coping sequences and is transformed by them. If Blacks and Whites evolved in different cultural circumstances prior to their contact with each other, and continued to have divergent experiences during their interactions over several centuries, it is certain that they would evolve divergent cultural psychologies as a consequence of these circumstances.

Fiske, Kitayama, Markus and Nisbett (1998) offer three specific objectives of cultural psychology:

1) to characterize varied cultural meanings and practices and the psychological structures and processes to which they are linked;
2) to discover the systematic principles underlying the diversity of culturally patterned societies and psyches;

3) to describe the processes by which psyches and cultures construct each other.

In consideration of these cultural approaches, we take cultural psychology to be those *symbolic representations that condition and follow from behavior, giving rise to characteristic ways of perceiving, understanding, anticipating, valuing and behaving for members of a socially defined group*. Culture evolves over time, defining the challenges its members must address and providing the interpretative schema and behavioral orientation to do so. Moreover, culture affects the thinking patterns, preferences and performances that, if not taken in cultural context, will be poorly understood.

Assumptions about African American Psychology

Our *first assumption* is that African Americans comprise a multidimensional cultural group; characterized by diversity of experiences around a common core of cultural belief and origin. A more or less common template of cultural heritage, interacting with a diversity of experiences by virtue of one's place in or outside the system of slavery, and over the years, the cumulative consequences of a variety of factors including skin color, regional socialization, educational opportunities and gender. To talk about African Americans in the singular is in some ways to essentialize them in much the same flawed way the concept of race has done.

Our *second assumption* is that the driving force behind the cultural psychology of African Americans is the fact of their systematic dehumanization over centuries, and their continued presence in the society that has dehumanized them. Adaptations to oppression call upon psychological tendencies and capacity to guide their deployment. Since African Americans continue to live within the society that has victimized and dehumanized them, the adaptations are ongoing, and their consequences are cumulative.

Our *third assumption* is that psychological identity mediates the cultural adaptations to the dehumanizing forces and prescribes the means by which humanity is reclaimed or asserted. Psychological identity is not simply a psychological variable or a sense of worth or esteem, but a dynamic organization of the self in relationship to one's cultural group. Psychological identity has the capacity to influence perceptions and judgments, endorse values and rationalize beliefs. In this sense, the psychological processes of African Americans are derived from their socio-cultural context.

Our *fourth assumption* is that the domains within which critical elements of the cultural psychology of African Americans evolve can be represented by TRIOS (Time Rhythm, Improvisation, Orality and Spirituality). These domains comprise the adaptations and expressions of behavior that are fundamental to experience, and give rise to basic cultural psychology as defined by experience-near concepts. Shweder and Sullivan (1992) describe 'experience-near' as those psychological processes that occur so automatically or routinely that the boundary between psyche and culture is obliterated. The following section will briefly elaborate on each of these four assumptions.

Toward a Cultural Psychology of African Americans

A cultural psychology must account in some way for the interplay between psychological processes and cultural dynamics. For African Americans, this means that the cultural symbols, tendencies, values, beliefs, patterned ways of thinking and feeling interact with the psychological adaptations to the experiences of oppression and "otherness" (the quality or condition of being other or different, especially if exotic or strange; American Heritage Dictionary, 2000), in a racialized world. An individual's experience will, to some extent reflect the distinctive pattern of his or her representation and internalization of these complex forces. The following account will describe how this dynamic interplay may aggregate toward a systematic pattern of culture-psyche interaction for African Americans.

African Americans comprise a multidimensional cultural group

African American cultural psychology is necessarily multidimensional in at least three ways: First is the joint function of Africa-originating cultural effects and the adaptive, reactionary mechanisms demanded by slavery and the experience in the Diaspora. Second, the social structure of slavery created multiple levels of African American society first distinguishing slave from free, then among slaves, the field and house slaves. Third, the regional context presented additional dimensions for divergence including North and South distinctions as well as variations caused by western expansion.

African Americans, then, can be characterized by diversity of experiences around a common core of cultural belief and origin. There is evidence that the Africans who came to America had a more coherent cultural system than many believe (Morgan, 1998). For example, Pidgin, a functionally restricted language employed by speakers of different languages usually for trading, emerged among indigenous coastal peoples of Africa. Once established, Pidgin evolved into Creole, which was a unifying language of West coast Africa in Senegambia even before slaves left Africa. According to Morgan (1998)

> Africans retained elements of their grammars, phonology, and even parts of their lexicon in the unique languages that they created and bequeathed to their descendants.... Because, therefore, it is inappropriate to speak of the total dismantling of the slaves' indigenous languages, it is equally inappropriate to expect the total destruction of their cultural heritage. In part, at least, the powerless can appropriate a dominant language on their own terms (p. 580).

Sidney Mintz argues the point with respect to the culture-psyche connection in these terms: "The glory of Afro-Americana depended-had to depend-on creativity and innovation more than on the indelibility of particular culture contents" (cited in Morgan, 1998, p. 657).

A cultural psychology must be able to integrate the African cultural origins with the adaptations in the American context. With an emphasis on syncretic processes (merging of two different cultural traditions), and creativity and innovation, African American culture

is necessarily context-rich and diverse. Moreover, it is fluid and changeable by virtue of the ongoing mechanisms of adaptation and evolution.

In 2007, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 37 percent of Black Americans agreed that Black people in the United States could not be thought of as a single race ("Optimism about Black," 2007). Eugene Robinson (2010) argues that Black Americans have been splintered into four groups:

1) **Mainstream –** comprised of the middle-class majority with a full ownership stake in American society;
2) **Emergent –** comprised of individuals of mixed-race heritage and communities of recent black immigrants;
3) **Transcendent –** small elite group with massive wealth, power and influence; and
4) **Abandoned –** a minority with defeatist dreams and pessimistic hope.

In the words of Robinson, "…these four black Americas are increasingly distinct, separated by demography, geography and psychology …… leading separate lives" (Robinson, 2010, p. 5). Often, the only time the divergent black Americas unite is in times of publicized blatant racial predicaments like that of the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. but importantly, for his analysis, these four groups may comprise different subcultures of Black culture [Eugene Robinson discusses his book on The Colbert Report http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/360916/october-04-2010/eugene-robinson]

Touré (2011) goes well beyond Robinson's four groups to suggest 40 million ways to be Black He questions the idea that there is an "authentic or legitimate form of Blackness." Touré says we are in a post-Black era where

> …the number of ways of being Black are infinite...the possibilities for an authentic Black identity are boundless…and what it means to be Black is so staggeringly broad, unpredictable and diffuse that Blackness itself is indefinable. (p. 20). You cannot "do Blackness" incorrectly.

Cultural psychology of African Americans is critically affected by their systematic dehumanization over centuries

One constant in the ever-changing context for African Americans has been the systematic dehumanization and stigmatization they have experienced for centuries. Racism is a psychological reality at any given point in time for African Americans and it consists of their personal racial past and future, and their understanding of the racial nature of their immediate experience (Campbell, 2010). The motivational goal of African American behavior and perception could be described as re-humanization and self-esteem protection and maintenance. The Universal Context of Racism (UCR) proposes that historical targets of racism and racial discrimination are constantly sensitized to the possibility that their racial status may contribute to unjust outcomes and experiences

(Jones, 2003). The UCR may be explained in terms of properties that express the degree to which racism is salient and accessible and is used to explain race-relevant events. The UCR can promote a general motivation to transcend its negative or inhibitory effects to maintain sustained goal directed behavior. High accessibility of the UCR can lead African Americans to view daily situations as having more negative racial intention (Campbell & Jones, 2005).

For example, in a large-scale survey of African American college students, UCR Salience was highly correlated with self-reported experiences with racial hassles, depression, and anxiety, and negatively correlated with self-esteem. By contrast, TRIOS scores were uncorrelated with racial hassles, negatively correlated with depression and anxiety, and positively correlated with self-esteem. These divergent representations and correlates of racial experience may reflect differences in psycho-cultural adaptation to dehumanization (stigma) and racism (Jones, 2005a).

We suggest the UCR as a monitoring system for the detection, interpretation or avoidance of racism based on two types of motivational consequences: self-protection and self-enhancement. (Jones, Engelman, Turner & Campbell, 2009). The UCR monitoring system makes racism *more* accessible, and perhaps undermines psychological well-being by virtue of the negative emotions aroused by witnessing or feeling one to be a target of racist acts. The psychological literature is filled with other illustrations of the psychology of dehumanization, and contains models of psychic conflict.

Mark of oppression (Kardiner & Ovesy, 1951)

The "mark of oppression" analysis argues for the inevitability of degraded sense of self. "The Negro, in contrast to the white, is a more unhappy person; he has a harder environment to live in, the internal stress is greater by "unhappy" we mean he enjoys less, he suffers more. There is not one personality trait of the Negro the source of which cannot be traced to his difficult living conditions. *There are no exceptions to this rule*. The final result is wretched internal life" (p. 81). However, there is no contemporary empirical evidence that supports this damaged self-esteem hypothesis.

Double Consciousness (DuBois, 1903)

The societal systems of racial dehumanization and promises of individual liberty and opportunity created a deep-seated psychic conflict which DuBois (1903) described thus:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 7).

As psyche and culture are intertwined, the duality of this psychic conflict drives the mechanisms of adaptation and coping. [You can hear an audio recording of *The Souls of Black Folks* that discusses Double Consciousness in the following site starting at 4:30 http://deimos3.apple.com/WebObjects/Core.woa/Feed/usf.edu.3265669624.03265669630]

Bifurcation of Self (Jackson-Kalb)

When Jesse Jackson ran for the democratic nomination for president in 1984, he had an exchange with Marvin Kalb, then host of NBC's *Meet the Press*, that symbolizes what I call the bifurcation of self. Like double-consciousness, one's racial and American identities are pitted against each other in what appears to be a win-lose scenario (excerpted from Meet the Press, February 13, 1984).

> Kalb: The question ...[is]...are you a black man who happens to be an American running for the presidency, or are you an American who happens to be a black man running for the presidency?

> Jackson: Well, I'm both an American and a black at one and the same time. I'm both of these...

Identity bifurcation is likely to occur when the benefits of such domain identification in terms of the individual's sense of self outweigh the costs of disavowing or abandoning particular in-group characteristics – especially while the individual is present in the valued domain (Pronin, Steele & Ross, 2004). Pronin and colleagues (2004) demonstrated that women in a stereotype threat situation regarding math performance, were able to "bifurcate" their gender related identity by dissociating themselves from "feminine" characteristics thought to be the basis of a negative math performance stereotype. The complication for African Americans is the duality of simultaneously valuing those characteristics associated with being African American, as well as those associated with success in mainstream America.

Efforts to find a psychological space, what Purdie-Vaughns and Walton (2011) call "identity safe" environments, in which they feel comfortably human, African American, a sense of belonging, and a legitimate opportunity to be successful, is an ongoing psychological struggle to be explained by cultural psychology. Beverly Daniel Tatum, President of Spelman College, framed this issue in "*Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria*?" (Tatum, 2003). The answer offered is to affirm their racial identities in a safe space in a predominantly White environment. Culture is multifaceted – black/white; European/African; good/bad – and in our cultural psychology analysis, psyche must necessarily be also. The duality pits instrumental goals of well-being against expressive goals of life satisfaction. The psychological goal is to merge the two, not to have the psyche "torn asunder."

Psychological identity mediates the cultural adaptations to dehumanization

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) stipulates the close link between one's psychological well-being and his or her identification with a group. If psyche and culture make each other up, how then does the culture of racism, stigma, freedom and opportunity conjoin in psyche? Research suggests it is a tricky union.

Fordham and Ogbu (1985) suggested that it is possible that racism and oppression may be joined with freedom and opportunity such that opposing one (say racism) may cause one to oppose the other (say achievement). Thus doing well in school may in some situation be interpreted as "acting white." Arroyo and Zigler (1995) demonstrated that indeed, retreating from one's racial identification was associated with improved performance in school. However, they also showed that it was associated with lowered mental health status (e.g., depression).

Steele (1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) has shown that mental representation of the culture of negative racial stereotypes regarding academic performance could lead otherwise prepared and capable Black students to perform poorly. Even prepared and privileged racial minority students have an extra, identity-related pressure working against their achievement due to stereotype and identity threats (Steele, 2010). [See Claude Steele discuss Stereotype Threat at http://youtu.be/PY9ESojSw7Y].

Other research shows that racial identity has been shown to mediate self-esteem, interaction patterns in interracial contexts and utilization of mental health facilities. Measures of racial identity (cf., Baldwin & Bell, 1985; Cross, 1991; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley & Chavous, 1998; Taylor & Rogers, 1993; Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Fhagen-Smith, 2002) capture the tension caused by processes used to protect and maintain esteem when they conflict with racism and prevailing principles of freedom and equality.

TRIOS

TRIOS represents the critical elements of the cultural psychology of African Americans and provides the means by which African Americans employed African cultural origins in their adaptations to the context of slavery and dehumanization. TRIOS provides the degree of flexibility, creativity and innovation that helps one adapt to changing and unpredictable circumstances, and gain control over the conditions and qualities of one's life (cf., Jones, 1999, 2003). We contend that TRIOS provides the mechanisms of coping and adaptations, and has, over time, become the cornerstones of African American Cultural Psychology. Each TRIOS dimension will be briefly described below.

Time

Time is the substrate of life and consciousness (Ornstein, 1977). More importantly, perceptions of time take on values, which dictate behavior and the valuations of human affairs. The valuing of time has been referred to as "temponomics" (McGrath &Kelly,

1986). In temponomic societies, time may be saved, wasted or invested much as any valued resource. When time is not of value in its own right, none of these attributes pertain. Thus time is not simply a reference for the unfolding of behavior, but constitutes a fundamental value that organizes and dictates societal structures, perceptions and beliefs.

There is an expression in Trinidad, West Indies, that "any time is Trinidad time" (Jones, 2005b). What this means is that time has no independent status or value and therefore does not dictate behavior and choice. Rather, time is a derivative concept, responsive largely to the feelings, desires and behaviors of individuals. Time is controlling in a temponomic society, but not in a non-temponomic one.

The psychological story concerns preparation for the future (what we may call future orientation) by conserving capital and not squandering it – what McDougall (1921) called Providence. Orienting to the future requires psychological restraint, denial of preferences, and emotional suppression. One of the most conspicuous losses of freedom impelled by slavery was the loss of temporal freedom, and the disconnection of soul and behavior. The psychological liberation from slavery is the liberation from control in all of its aspects. TRIOS offers specific mechanisms of regaining personal control in a society were external control is difficult to come by. Controlling time is, in its essence, psychological liberation.

Rhythm

Rhythm defines a recurring pattern of behavior within specified time frames. Time is necessarily implicated in rhythms. Behaviors occur within temporal units. The regularity of the behaviors and the values of the temporal units (an *adagio* has broad and an *allegro* narrow time values) create the rhythmic experience. One may gain control over rhythms by changing the temporal units and adjusting the behavior accordingly.

Racism often introduces asynchronies or disharmonious connections between internal and external states. Gaining behavioral control over the environment may require adapting rhythmic control either through accommodation (adjusting the internal aspects) or assimilation (adjusting the external aspects). At its core, rhythm is an ecological variable conceived in a transactional framework with psychological properties and consequences. Following on the Gibsonian model of perception (Gibson, 1979; McArthur & Baron, 1983), environmental affordances merge with psychological attunements to create the rhythmic behavioral act. These acts are significantly affected by the cultural context in which they occur, and the personality characteristics of the acting parties.

Improvisation

Improvisation is "...a combination of *expressiveness* and *invention*, or *creativity*, which occurs *under time pressure"* (Jones, 1997, p. 488). Again, we find freedom at the core. Improvisation is inherently free by virtue of its spontaneity. But it is not random and it is not haphazard. Improvisation is inherently "problem-focused." That is, we are inventing or creating toward a purpose. Improvisation takes an underlying foundation, say grammar or musical structure, then, under the constraints of time (a rhythmic order) configures a text or specific scale to make some coherent statement that expresses a point. Because the

improvisation is done "on-line" it is unique and bears the signature of the author. This improvisation is necessarily a fusion of the author and performer in the same person. Characteristic patterns of time-based problem solving are expressive and can rise to the level of a "self-signature" we may call style.

Orality

Orality is used here like the term Orature is used by Asante (1987) to describe, the sum total of the oral tradition (vocality, drumming, storytelling, praise singing and naming). We use the term Orality to include the orature concepts, but to also introduce other psychological dimensions. Orality captures human creation and life itself. The crucial aspect of Orality is its immediacy. Orality means that all meaningful behavior, values and beliefs are defined by context. It becomes important, then, to share in experience in order to understand it. Experience cannot be abstracted, out of context, in a meaningful way. Morality, even value, is bound up in context.

Another consequence of the context-rich nature of Orality is that it allows for creative freedom in the expression and decoding of the meaning of things. Cole, Gay, Glick and Sharp (1971) found that the Kpelle of Liberia were reliably poorer than Americans at memorizing lists of words. This was true even when the researchers tried to encourage categorization as a mnemonic device. However, when the 20-items to be recalled were embedded in a folk story, the Kpelle subjects not only remembered them all, but in the order in which they appeared in the story. Context gave the words meaning that they did not have independently. Further, additional research has found that African American student performance is enhanced to a greater degree in contexts that emphasize either communal or vervistic learning than in individualistic or competitive contexts (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Bailey & Boykin, 2001; Boykin, Coleman, Lilja, & Tyler, 2004).

In African American culture, language is also used as an avenue of control through privileged meanings and neologisms. From the Trinidadian influence of *mamaguy* (positive comments with negative implications—"nice hair"…NOT), to playing "The Dozens" in the States (*picong* in Trinidad-- ritualized insults) and witnessing the evolution of rap and hip hop culture through battling around the world, language has often expressed power and in modern vernacular, swag (i.e. swagger). In the words of Sean "Jay-Z" Carter hip-hop can be used as a tool of expression "for lots of kids, like me, who couldn't always find the language to make sense of our feelings (Jay-Z, 2010)" The use of "ill" or "sick" could undoubtedly signify good or greatness in the context of wordplay. The use of language in slavery times required neologisms and privileged uses to hide collective action from slave owners and overseers. Over centuries it has become one of the most stable means of asserting self-control in a potentially hostile or at best indifferent context. Battling or verbal sparring in "the cipher" speaks to the oral tradition of storytelling with the focus on the griot as the narrative unfolds. People give power to words (Jay-Z, 2010). These mechanisms of self-control and personal freedom have the capacity to bond individuals together in concerted reality, and also distance oneself and one's group from others who are potentially harmful.

Spirituality

Finally, spirituality can be defined as the belief in nonmaterial causation in human affairs (Jones, 2003). That is, what happens to us is determined in some measure by forces or energies that are beyond our control. Those forces are not haphazard but are part of a system of meaning and energy that determines human events. According to Jahn (1961) the basic force is *Ntu*, and influences human beings (*muntu*), all things (*kintu*), all places and all time (*hantu*), and modalities of existence (*kuntu*). A person who is spiritual shares cause-effect agency with *ntu*, and does not claim it all for him or herself.

In U.S. society, control is a defining property of well-being. In McDougall's (1921) description of the races of Europe, "will" and "introversion" were positive properties, and "extraversion" and "gregariousness" were negative. Self-Actualization implies that the pinnacle of selfhood can be achieved through personal agency. Those who fail to accomplish this actualized state may be thought of as "pawns" rather than "origins" (Decharms, Carpenter & Kuperman, 1966), or external as opposed to internal in their locus of control (Rotter, 1966), or field dependent rather than field independent (Witkin, Dyk, Paterson, Goodenough, & Karp, 1962). Moreover, research shows that having control can confer better physical health among nursing home patients (Langer & Rodin, 1976), or that the illusion of control can cause people to overvalue things over which such control is exerted like playing bingo cards (Langer, 1983). Recent research shows a strong link between preferences and choices among North Americans, but not East Indian students. They propose a *disjoint* model of agency in which individualist cultures prescribe that people should be free to choose among options based on their preferences (Savani, Markus & Connor, 2008). The corollary is that failure to choose according to one's personal preferences indicates lack of control, and weak personal agency.

Spirituality liberates one from the expectation of personal responsibility in a world that denies the full range of options and opportunities. Thus one can also claim spirituality among the mechanisms that liberate one from the dominance of cultural expectations and constraints. Whether this shared responsibility is seen as a kind of self-handicapping, or a legitimate cultural belief, it is one of the important elements of the psychological evolution of persons of African descent.

Through various studies, we have begun to explore the positive effects of TRIOS. For Ghanaians, individuals who endorsed the values and beliefs of TRIOS lead less stressful lives than those who did not (Jones, 2003). When TRIOS is accounted for within the UCR, African American college students were less likely to view situations as largely racial (Campbell, 2010). For African American college students who were attending a predominately white institution, TRIOS was able to interact with their individual levels of racial identity to maintain their self-esteem (Campbell, 2010). This is just one of the first steps towards TRIOS as a novel coping strategy of primary appraisal of stress through a secondary appraisal coping process.

Importance of TRIOS for African Americans

It is possible that by empowering the attitude and way of life of TRIOS, African Americans may be able to maintain a greater sense of well-being in day to day life.

Yet, there is still another concern that needs to be addressed for African Americans. Earlier, we introduced DuBois' thoughts on double consciousness were he explored the duality of African Americans. At times, this duality has been overly simplified into ideals of "acting white" or "acting black." Recall that interchanging these acting processes can improve one aspect of life while negatively affecting others. A larger question that needs to be address is what does it mean to "act black" or "act white" and why does it create such a tremendous responds if others do not perceive an individual as racial authentic?

In a recent surge of comments, Dr. Cornel West has questioned President Barack Obama's racial authenticity. One most ponder why in the midst of war and economic turmoil, a question of racial authenticity would appear as an important consideration. Nevertheless, this is commonly seen in the African American community. Once Herman Cain, an African American business man, declared his candidacy for the Republican nomination for the 2012 Presidency, questions arose about his affiliation with the black community and how much he personally identifies with it.

Aspects of racial authenticity in the African American community are often referred to as "blackness." This concept is regularly discussed in conversations across class and generations nevertheless it is not easily defined. Does blackness encompass style of dress, linguistics, material lifestyle choices or is it more complex in terms of beliefs, values and ideology? Some people regard President Obama's style of walk as a feature of his power, while other perceive it has swagger identified from his blackness perhaps it's just an old basketball injury. One style of walk elicits several interpretations with one possibility being blackness. How is blackness determined and can it be quantified?

Blackness is not mutual exclusive from black racial identity however the concepts are not the same. Racial identity refers to the attitudes and beliefs regarding the significance and meaning that people place on race in defining themselves (Sellers et al., 1998). Shelby (2005) conceptualizes black identity in terms of "thin" or "thick" distinctions. A thin conception of black identity explains blackness as a vague and socially imposed category of racial differences that serves to visually distinguish groups. A thick identity positively promotes black cultural autonomy, and defines one's blackness by these standards. Blackness speaks more to the unity and solidarity of African Americans and the assessment can be variable depending on the individual and characteristics of comparative Black others (Wilson & Jones, 2007, April). In other words, while blackness is a common term, its definition and appraisal often vary and fluctuate across different situations.

These findings raise the question of how an African American evaluates his or her level of blackness given the challenge of making comparative judgments of blackness? – In a recent study, Salter (2008) found that African Americans were better able to distinguish true and false knowledge statements concerning historical representation of black culture on a "Black History Test" than their white counterparts. Does this finding

demonstrate blackness as knowledge of black cultural project and history? If a white student majoring in Black American Studies took the same test and performed well would it mean that they personify blackness? With such issues surrounding blackness, the possibility to appear racial authentic and function successfully in mainstream society appears challenging.

If Robinson's claim is true and there are four distinct groups comprising African American, how would we describe the cultural psychology of African Americans? Perhaps the psychology is much more complex than the overly simplified believe that there is one common link among all African Americans. More multi-dimensional constructs are needed to explain African American cultural psychology. African Americans must deal with the duality of an identity that places them in various social, psychological and cultural categories simultaneously. Is a cultural psychology of African Americans even possible? We say Yes! By following the evolution of racism and charting psychological manifestations of adaptations to and consequences of its effects on the groups that comprise African Americans. In order to understand the whole, we must first understand the parts.

Conclusions

TRIOS describes psychological processes and tendencies that provide an "experience-near" template of cultural difference. The mechanisms of TRIOS provide psychological control and affirm the self as well as the collective in a societal context that devalues them both. The challenge of racism for its targets is the creation and preservation of a positive self and an instrumental identity. The historical evolution of African American culture has resulted in large part from the coping-adaptation sequences that derive both from African origins (evolutionary) and challenges of racism in the American context (reactionary). As a result, the psychology of African Americans is heavily context dependent. The psychological manifestations of TRIOS also serve to strengthen the bond within the group and protecting group members from assaults. The cultural psychology of African Americans promises to be an interesting and important study that will expand our understanding of the range of human psychological capacity.

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Suggested Videos and Links

Race: Are We So Different? by UnderstandingRace.org via YouTube
http://www.youtube.com/user/UnderstandingRace#p/a/u/1/8aaTAUAEyho

Thandie Newton TED Talk Embracing otherness, embracing myself
http://www.ted.com/talks/thandie_newton_embracing_otherness_embracing_myself.html

Eugene Robinson discusses his book on The Colbert Report
http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/360916/october-04-2010/eugene-robinson

Audio of Ch. 1 of The Souls of Black Folks with Double Consciousness starting at 4:30
http://deimos3.apple.com/WebObjects/Core.woa/Feed/usf.edu.3265669624.03265669630

Claude Steele Defining Stereotype Threat at the Diversity Inc's March 2010 Event
http://youtu.be/PY9ESojSw7Y

Jones interview from *Discovering Psychology: Volume on Cultural Psychology. WGBH;* P.G. Zimbardo narrates. Jones discusses the TRIOS concept.
http://www.learner.org/discoveringpsychology/26/e26expand.html#

About the Authors

James M. Jones received his Ph.D. in social psychology from Yale University in 1970. He is currently professor of psychology at the University of Delaware where he also directs the Center for the Study of Diversity. He has written widely about race and racism most notably in his book, *Prejudice and racism* (McGraw Hill, 1997). He has developed the TRIOS concept as a model for coping and adaptation of African Americans with race related stress. He also served as Director of the Minority Fellowship Program at the American Psychological Association.

Santiba D. Campbell received her Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Delaware in 2010. She is currently on the faculty at Connecticut College where she teaches courses in research methods and social psychology. Her research focuses on racial identity of African Americans and perceptions of and sensitivity to racial discrimination. She also studies the role of TRIOS in coping with race-based stress

Discussion Questions

1) This article links culture and psyche. It also connects current psychological processes to historical events and narratives. Do you believe that the historical past of African Americans has any influence on contemporary thoughts or feelings or behaviors? How can past affect the present? If it does, will African Americans ever get over the history of slavery and dehumanization?

2) UCR is linked to sensitivity to racism. This may be self-protective. But research shows that the higher one is on UCR sensitivity, the worse their psychological well-being. How would you explain that?

3) Robinson (2011) among others describes a fractionated black group, but Touré (2011) argues that there are no groups, only 40 million people who are black and do blackness in their own way. . If blacks are so diverse among themselves, how can you even talk about a black culture? What are the arguments for and against the idea of black culture? And what does it mean to be "authentically" black if there are so many different ways to be black?

4) The duality of being Black and American is highlighted in several different theories (double consciousness, bifurcation of self, etc.). Compare these different approaches.

5) TRIOS is linked to many positive outcomes for Blacks. What do you think is the reason why embracing the dimensions of TRIOS is so strongly related to psychological well-being? If you knew that whites who embrace TRIOS show similar positive effects (which they do), could TRIOS be a general psychological model of mental health? What does that say about where psychological concepts come from and how they are used to explain human behavior?