

# **Afrocentricity Theory Revisited: An Alternative Framework for Assisting Black Youth**

*Husain Lateef, MSW*

## **Abstract**

*The current paper explores Afrocentricity theory as an alternative non-western framework to guide social work practice with Black American youth. Very little research has been conducted in recent years concerning Afrocentricity, one of few non-western African theoretical frameworks employed by social work practitioners. This paper provides clarity on what is the theory of Afrocentricity, by providing an overview of the theory's historical foundations and assumptions. This paper concludes with an application example of the use of Afrocentricity theory within a prevention program for Black youth.*

**Keywords:** Black youth, Afrocentricity, Non-western

## **Introduction**

In 1997, Jerome Schiele, a pioneer in discussing the need for alternative non-western theories in social work, published an article on his former theory of education. Schiele (1997) remarks that throughout his undergraduate instruction, no matter the enrolled course, the theories employed to assist Black American concerns and community needs were entirely based on those developed by western scholars ethnically and culturally removed. He also comments that by the time he pursued doctoral studies, nothing had changed. The dominant theories used to interpret and engage the Black American communities were still based largely from White American and European developed ideas (Schiele, 1997). As a Black doctoral social work student, I find Dr. Schiele's words to remain true.

As a field of study, social work maintains a commitment to education about diverse frameworks on social diversity and oppression with respect to race (Code of Ethics, 2014). However, Afrocentricity theory as an alternative western framework to guide social work practice remains largely untaught. This was observed in a study by Pellebon (2012) who found 90% of social work faculty participants were unfamiliar with Afrocentricity, and 84% did not teach Afrocentricity theory in their social work courses. Given the current unfamiliarity of social work with Afrocentricity theory, the purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the theory's historical foundations and assumptions. This paper will then conclude with an application example of how Afrocentricity theory has been used within a prevention program for Black youth.

## **Historical Foundations**

Molefi Kete Asante first coined the theory of Afrocentricity during the early 1980s. According to Asante, "Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interest, values, and perspectives predominate" (Asante, 2003). To this aim, Afrocentricity theory relies on the concept of Njia, which is defined as the collective expression of the Afrocentric worldview, grounded in the historical experiences of African people (Asante,

2003). Njia, which is at the core of Afrocentricity theory, has been developed over centuries by people of African descent to redefine themselves and their experience. Rising from a collective contribution, various Black thinkers and scholars have contributed to forming the pathway to Afrocentricity's theoretical development (Asante, 2003).

## **Theoretical Assumptions**

### **Assumptions on Human Identity, Spiritual Nature, and Affective Knowledge**

There are three major assumptions of human beings proposed by Afrocentricity theory. One is that human beings are seen to be representative of a collective identity developed over time (Schiele, 1996). Afrocentricity views each person as belonging to an interconnected web of people both living and deceased. This concept is central in African-based worldviews where the connection to one's ancestors and community is seen as a permanent relationship that is circular in direction (Funseki, 2001; Some, 1999; Mbiti, 1970).

In addition to the assumption of communal connectedness, Afrocentricity proposes that all human beings are not only connected to each other, but to a Supreme Being or Creator (Schiele, 1996; Nobles, 1980). Afrocentricity maintains that the soul of human beings is not based in time or space but plays an important role in the lives of people. No attempt is made by Afrocentricity to quantify the existence of the soul, but instead, acknowledgment is given that it plays an important role in social science related inquiry (Schiele, 1996).

Another key assumption of human beings as proposed by Afrocentricity is the concept of affective knowledge. Under this theoretical framework, affect is seen as a valid source of knowing human behavior (Schiele, 1996). For this reason, scientists and practitioners' emotions and life experiences allow them to connect to their research or clients and are thought to be vital in the furthering of knowledge development and practice (Schiele, 1996). The place of affect as an important source of knowledge is thought by Schiele (1996) to be in alignment with many social work professionals' views of practice wisdom as an important component of client and practitioner interactions. Yet, this framework is at odds with the tendency of western scholarship to separate cognition from affect, and to view cognitive reasoning as more mature and developed than affective experiences.

**Sources of Human Social Problems.** The first of two main sources of human social problems as proposed by Afrocentricity is oppression (Asante, 2003; Schiele, 1996; Steward, 2004). Within this theoretical framework, oppression has been viewed as a systematic strategy to suppress the potentiality of people (Schiele, 1996). For example, when considering youth violence within the Black American community, Afrocentricity theory contends this phenomenon stems from a genesis of restriction of resources and opportunities for Black youth within the United States since the early enslavement of African people (Steward, 2004; Akbar, 1992).

Under the legalized institution of slavery in America, the ancestors of Black people were subjected to violent treatment by plantation owners, which often resulted in death or long-term, negative psychological and physical outcomes (King, 1997). This violent behavior towards Black people continued beyond emancipation, with the mass lynching of Black men (King,

1997). To date, the Tuskegee Institute records the lynching of 4,742 predominantly Black men between 1882 and 1968 within the United States (Doss, 2010). Within the framework of Afrocentricity, this behavior is seen to have continued in the current behaviors of police brutality. Under situations of brutality, Afrocentricity proposes that coupled with forms of oppression such as poverty, Black youth exposed to excessive violence begin to develop a sense of hopelessness that leads to the devaluing of their lives (Asante, 2003; Schiele, 1996; King, 1997).

The second cause of social problems proposed by Afrocentricity for the issues facing Black youth is spiritual or metaphysical alienation. According to Afrocentricity theory, the cause of spiritual alienation occurs with the acceptance of negative theoretical assumptions on the value of Black lives. Afrocentricity proposes under frameworks of racial hatred and superiority, the practice of denigrating groups of people based on shade of complexion and other phenotypical characteristics has been used historically to exclude groups from participations in society (Asante, 2003; Schiele, 1996; King, 1997). Utilizing youth violence as an example, youth who perpetuate crimes against other youth are seen to do so as a result of a detached identity of self (King, 1997). This detachment allows them to see the victim as a separate entity from themselves instead of seeing themselves and people they victimize as interconnected beings sharing equal importance in their community (King, 1997; Schiele, 1996).

### **Application of Afrocentricity Theory**

Very few empirical studies are available to evaluate the impacts of an Afrocentric theoretically based prevention program for Black youth (Washington, Barnes, & Watts, 2014; Washington, Johnson, & Jones, 2007). This is largely because most programs that apply an Afrocentric framework tend to outline the concepts and themes covered by the theory, but fail to provide a step-by-step program implementation process or a method for evaluation of their program (Whaley & McQueen, 2004; Washington, Barnes, & Watts, 2014). One exception to this was research conducted by Whaley and McQueen (2004), who conducted a pilot study utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the impacts of an Afrocentric program utilizing a cognitive cultural model of identity. To do so, the Imani Rights of Passage Program (IROP) was utilized. IROP, located in Brooklyn, NY, provides various educational and cultural enrichment activities and programs to youth utilizing an Afrocentric framework. The program operates Monday through Thursday 3:00pm to 7:00pm during the academic school year. For the first portion of the program, children are provided with an hour of free time to allow them to transition into the program after arriving from school. Thereafter, 10 to 15 minutes are spent making libations and remembering ancestors and deceased loved ones (Whaley & McQueen, 2004). Following libations, participants spend 75 minutes committed to homework and tutoring, which is then followed (after a 15-minute break) with an hour of activities to promote cultural awareness and identity (Whaley & McQueen, 2004).

To complete the qualitative evaluation of IROP, Whaley and McQueen (2004) recruited three Black youth participants whose backgrounds were similar to other participants within the organization's activities. Participants were asked several questions to identify what impact the program contributed to their feelings and attitudes toward their sense of cultural identity, attitudes about education, and academic success. All three participants reported that the programs at IROP helped them to develop a more serious attitude toward education and learning, be a

more responsible person, and that it exposed them to African-based cultural principles that promoted positive outcomes in their lives (Whaley & McQueen, 2004). For example, one participant commented about the program, stating “It took me back to the Motherland, Africa. It showed me that the Black man is strong. As a Black man, we have to live up to that...you know, responsible. Taking responsibility for your actions and not making excuses” (Whaley & McQueen, 2004).

To complete the quantitative portion of the evaluation, 25 students between the ages of 9 and 12, who were beginning the IROP program, were followed over the next two years of participation to observe their outcomes. Of the participants, 15 out of 25 were retained for the duration of the evaluation, and, at the end of the evaluation, participants were between the ages of 11-14. Results indicated that there was an improvement in academic performance as indicated by participants’ math and reading scores, positive changes in overall GPAs, increases in positive behavioral reports from schoolteachers, and reductions in aggressive behavior (Whaley & McQueen, 2004).

### **Critiques and Future Research**

Within the literature few attempts have been made to objectively critique the usage of Afrocentricity as a framework to guide social work practice. To date, Pellebon (2008) has been among the few social work scholars to do so. He argues that Afrocentricity lacks empirical rigor to be seriously considered a theory for the purpose of social work practice. In response, many theories implemented within social work such as systems theory cannot be directly tested empirically (Slife, & Williams, 1995). Despite this, theories such as systems theory remain useful for assisting diverse populations. This predicament is the same for Afrocentricity. However, there is a need for future research on Afrocentricity’s application abilities and limitations.

Currently, whether Afrocentricity’s usage is impacted by the ethnicity of the clinician is unclear in regards to evidence. In addition, it is unclear whether Afrocentricity can be applied to all forms of social work. Moreover, it is unclear why few programs that apply Afrocentricity theory do not have clear outcome measures as noted within the literature. Future research is also needed to identify if known outcomes are significantly affected by the outcome measurement values of the communities applying Afrocentricity.

### **Conclusion**

The theory of Afrocentricity has been proposed to be useful in forming intervention and prevention programs for Black youth (Greene, Smith, & Peters, 1995; Moore, 2001; Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Moore, 2003; Schiele, 2000; Setter, & Kadela, 2003). A strength of the Afrocentricity theoretical framework is that the importance of Black/African derived cultural experiences are placed at the center of its conceptualization of the issues facing Black Americans (Asante, 2003; Washington, Watts, & Watson, 2008; Gilbert, Harvey, & Belgrave, 2009). It is from this perspective that the root causes of social problems for Black people are proposed to stem from oppression and disconnection from their culture’s spiritual/metaphysical assumptions (Asante, 2003). Applying these assumptions to the issues of Black American youth, various

academic scholars have noted that the non responsive nature of certain prevention and intervention programs in reaching Black youth may be due to the lack of an Afrocentric cultural framework (Stepteau-Watson, Watson, & Lawrence, 2014). As a result, an additional strength of the Afrocentricity theory is that it may provide an alternative framework for reaching Black youth who are previously unreachable by programs using traditional western derived models of intervention and prevention.

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Husain Lateef received his bachelor's degree in Psychology from historically Black College Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA. He completed his MSW training at the University of Michigan and is a current doctoral student within Arizona State University's School of Social Work. Husain is interested in studying Black Adolescent Male development applying diverse perspectives.