

# Qualitative Review

## Reality TV Therapy: Implications for Mental Health Stigma and Service Utilization among African-American Adolescents

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### Abstract

*The literature has documented the presence of mental health stigma in African-American communities. Researchers have investigated the impact of this stigma on treatment seeking behaviors for different sub-groups of African-Americans. Recently, a number of reality television (RTV) programs with African-American casts have broadcast episodes where their main characters engage in mental health counseling to address a range of concerns. While there have been some investigations into the impact of television programming on a number of youth behaviors, research has not yet explored the impact of these RTV programs on mental health stigma and service utilization among African-American teens. This paper suggests that examining the influence of this form of RTV programming may have noteworthy implications for addressing mental health stigma and African American adolescent mental health service use, and references some implications for social work practice with this population.*

### Introduction

In the United States, less than 25% of children and adolescents who need mental health services receive them (Hammack, LaVome Robinson, Crawford, & Li, 2004). There are particularly low rates of mental health treatment for psychological issues in low-income communities where mental health needs are reported to be high (Thomas, Temple, Perez, & Rupp, 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2001). African-American adolescents' patterns of mental health service use have been given significant attention in the literature (Alicea, Pardo, Conover, Gopalan, & McKay, 2012; Chandra et al., 2009; Husky, Kanter, McGuire, & Olfson, 2012). Some of this discourse focuses on mental health stigma and has specifically examined how stigma deters African-American adolescents' from accessing treatment (Lindsey, Korr, Broitman, Bone, Green & Leaf, 2006). While discussion has focused on family, community members, and peers as sources that help perpetuate stigmatized beliefs regarding mental illness and mental health treatment (Breland-Noble, Bell, & Burriss, 2011; Lindsey et al., 2006; Lindsey, Joe, & Nebbitt, 2010), an investigation into other sources of influence may contribute additional perspectives to this conversation. This paper suggests that research is needed to examine the impact of reality television (RTV) programs on mental health stigma and treatment seeking behaviors among African-American adolescent viewers, and to explore the implications of this programming on social work practice with this population.

### Background

As detailed by the Surgeon General's Report (SGR) (USDHHS, 2001), "racial and ethnic minorities bear a greater burden from unmet mental health needs and thus suffer a greater loss to

their overall health and productivity” (p. 3). Other literature suggests that African-American adolescents are among youth of color whose mental health is likely to be further threatened by poverty (Brown & Grumet, 2009). Given these presenting risks, there is an increased concern about the relationship between mental health stigma and patterns of untreated mental health issues among African-American teens. There is also a concern about this group’s vulnerability to negative outcomes (i.e. poor school performance, distressed family relationships, delinquency, and engagement in sexual risk taking behaviors) as a result of African-American adolescents’ untreated mental health needs (Chandra et al., 2009; Schwarz, 2009).

### **Mental Health Stigma**

Several factors have been discussed in the literature as discouraging African-American youth and their parents from seeking mental health care, including experience of racism, discrimination, and oppression within the health care system (Willie, 1995); lack of knowledge about mental illness (Brown & Grumet, 2009; Chandra et al., 2009); financial barriers to accessing care (Kapphahn, Morreale, Rickert, & Walker, 2006); distrust in clinical treatment modalities and professionals (Kapphahn, et al., 2006); absence of community-based, culturally competent services (Alicea et al., 2012); reliance on informal social networks and religion/spirituality for mental health support (Parks, 2007; Pratt & Brody, 2008); and stigma associated with mental illness and mental health treatment (Breland-Noble et al., 2011).

Among these factors, the presence and impact of mental health stigma has been repeatedly investigated with African-American teenagers (Breland-Noble et al., 2011; Lindsey et al., 2010). The results show a complex and dynamic picture of how stigma presents and influences attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to mental health service use. For example, based on focus group discussions with African-American caregivers, Breland-Noble and colleagues (2011) described African-American parents as being “concerned that if an African-American teen was identified as having a depressive disorder, he or she would automatically be exponentially stigmatized” (p. 231). The authors suggested that a resulting “unfortunate consequence of this perspective is that families may allow a depressed teen to suffer in silence as a means of ‘protecting’ the teen from mental health stigma associated with seeking care” (Breland-Noble et al., 2011, p. 231). Researchers examining the perspectives of African-American adolescents have reported similar discussion of mental health stigma, but also suggested that African-American adolescent’s peers reinforce this stigma and sometimes indirectly discourage youth from accessing care (Lindsey et al., 2010). However, aside from stigma generated through social networks, Anglin, Alberti, Link, and Phelan (2008) indicated that other factors may also play a role and suggested that more research is needed.

### **Media Exposure and Adolescent Behavior**

Media has been highlighted as one powerful sphere of influence for adolescents in the United States (Martin, 2008). The literature suggests that youth potentially internalize what they observe on television, computers, music videos, video games, and other forms of media based entertainment, and that these materials directly and indirectly influence their behaviors (Villani, 2001). Particularly for adolescents engaging in the complex tasks of identity formation and development, television may be used as a “toolkit of possible ways of being” (Brown & Witherspoon, 2002, p. 155). Recently, reality television has become a dominating force in media programming that attracts adolescent audiences. Research is just beginning to examine the implications of this particular type of television show on viewers.

## **Reality television programming**

Reality television has been defined as television programming that involves everyday people and their real life experiences as opposed to strictly using actors and scripts (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004; Stefanone & Lackaff, 2009). Orbe (2008) describes different forms of reality programming, including celebrealty, which chronicles the lives of celebrities; documentary style reality shows; competition shows; and transformative improvement programming, which follows individuals as they actively work on making-over some part of their life. RTV has existed in the form of news programs and biographical and historic shows; however, contemporary adaptations of this form of television programming have helped RTV become a significantly popular genre of entertainment over the past few years (Orbe, 2008).

Rose and Wood (2005) proposed that the ability to see one's self in reality television characters creates a potentially powerful dynamic between these programs and their viewers: the appeal lies in observing “common people engaging in uncommon (wilderness survival, international travel) and common (dating, home redecorating) tasks, giving viewers a chance to compare and contrast their own lives with those of the show's ‘protagonist’” (Rose & Wood, 2005, p. 284).

## **Mental health related RTV programming**

Some recent reality shows with African-American casts have included mental health messaging in episodes where reality personalities engaged in individual, couples, and/or family therapy. These shows documented African-Americans seeking services to address domestic violence related trauma, marital discord, parent-adolescent conflict, and adolescent behavioral issues, among other challenges (see Table 1). In many cases, African-American reality stars from these shows openly discussed reservations about going to therapy; some of the cast members directly referenced mental health related stigma in the African-American community as playing a significant role in their ambivalence about treatment. As a result of their clinical experiences, some of these RTV stars ultimately televised the journey of pushing past this stigma to get help, and they used segments of the show to directly articulate their transformed perception about the utility and effectiveness of receiving mental health support. (*Table 1 on next page*).

Table 1

*Examples of African-American Reality Television Programs\**

<b>Network</b>	<b>Show</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Program Description</b>	<b>Mental Health Content</b>
<b>BET</b>	Keyshia & Daniel	Celeb-reality	Documents the marriage of R&B singer Keyshia Cole and NBA player Daniel Gibson.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Couple attends marriage counseling</li> <li>2. Couple shows the emotional impact of dealing with a substance abusing parent</li> <li>3. Couple shows the process of helping a parent access substance abuse treatment</li> </ol>
<b>TVone</b>	Save Our Sons	Transformative Improvement	Documents the efforts of African-American families hoping to change the negative behaviors of their African-American sons.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Families receive counseling to address adolescent defiance and delinquency, communication and trust issues, residual trauma, substance abuse, single parenting, and other concerns</li> <li>2. Adolescents engage in talk therapy to address anger and aggression, insecurities, and problem behavior</li> <li>3. The show depicts positive transformations and adolescents and families grappling with denial and resistance to change</li> </ol>
<b>TVone</b>	R&B Divas	Celeb-reality	Documents the experiences of five award-winning singers working on a tribute album and entrepreneurial endeavors.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Celebrities deal with domestic violence and related psychological trauma</li> <li>2. Celebrities document ambivalence around accessing mental health treatment Celebrities directly discuss mental health stigma</li> <li>3. The show documents celebrities changing their outlook on the effectiveness of mental health counseling</li> </ol>

*Table continued on next page*

Network	Show	Genre	Program Description	Mental Health Content
WeTV	Tamar & Vince	Celeb-reality	Spin-off of reality show documenting the marriage of music producer Vincent Herbert and Reality TV Breakout Star/R&B Singer Tamar Braxton.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Couple receives counseling for communication issues</li> <li>2. Episodes document the impact of childhood grief and loss</li> <li>3. Show documents an African American male grappling with ambivalence about self-expression and engaging in a healing process</li> <li>4. The show depicts a cross-cultural clinical relationship</li> </ol>
WeTV	Mary Mary	Celeb-reality	This program follows the life of sister, celebrity gospel duo Mary Mary and their families.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Singers who identify as having a strong Christian faith articulate value in accessing mental health service in addition to their faith to help work through life issues</li> <li>2. The singers use counseling support to address issues of family discord and balancing gender roles and celebrity status</li> </ol>

*\*List is not exhaustive*

Cultural studies have examined African-Americans' presence on reality television and addressed the ways in which RTV reinforces stereotypes about people of color and encourages viewing audiences to engage in negative behaviors (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Tyree, 2011). Scholars have argued that there is much less media promoting positive health and health related behaviors than there are glamorizing health risks (Brown & Witherspoon, 2002). However, as discussed here, African-American reality television programming with mental health related contents might be offering a positive portrayal of African-Americans in the media and endorsing constructive messaging about mental health and service use.

Considering RTV viewing as a reflexive process (Rose & Wood, 2005), this mental health messaging may be particularly significant for African-American adolescents who are described as avid consumers of this form of television and who have been exposed to mental stigma in their community (Martin, 2008; Villani, 2001). Having celebrities and RTV personalities that these adolescents look up to, and identify with, expose their vulnerabilities and openly acknowledge the clinical process as a helpful alternative for addressing these concerns may be laying the groundwork for transforming African-American adolescents' mental wellness related attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, research in this area can help identify whether or not RTV provides a useful platform for promoting positive mental health messaging and for reducing mental health stigma among African-American teens. While there will also be a need to examine the quality and accuracy of the messaging being transmitted through these RTV shows, developing basic knowledge about whether or not the presence of mental health contents on

these programs is having an impact on stigma and African-American adolescent service use may be an important first step in this research.

### **Implications for the Social Work Profession & Practice**

Social work is among the top providers of mental health services in the nation (Dworkin, 2010). The literature documents some of the presenting challenges associated with connecting people with mental health needs to clinical treatment programs, and particularly highlights this struggle among members of the African-American community (USDHHS, 2001). Research investigating how reality television influences mental health concerns for vulnerable communities can provide important information for wellness goals and initiatives of the profession, including efforts to reduce mental health stigma and unmet mental health needs among African-Americans teens.

Martin (2008) outlined the importance of understanding the effect of television programming on African-American youth and specifically highlighted the contributions of this awareness to culturally competent practice with this subgroup of African Americans. The research on reality television suggested in this paper may similarly support more effective clinical work with African-American teens; if reality television is beginning to shape African-American adolescent's expectations for the clinical process, this information may be important for practitioners attempting to engage these youth in mental health treatment. Furthermore, Villani (2001) suggests that knowledge of a patient's media history helps clinicians gain a more comprehensive understanding of all the sources of influence on their client. The proposed research may offer an additional use for the inclusion of media history in assessment, and may identify reality television programs as a tool for helping to engage a hard to reach population in the clinical process. In this way, this research may inform intervention and service delivery practices with African-American adolescent clients.

### **Conclusion**

Supporting healthy growth and development is extremely important during the critical phase of adolescence. While the literature commonly documents abundant risks that threaten the well-being of African American youth, it is equally important to recognize the resources and protective factors that support healthy, holistic development for adolescents from this racial group. In spite of skepticism about its authenticity and quality, reality television is emerging among the genres of media that attracts the attention of adolescents and influences the minds of impressionable teenage viewers. When the content of these shows addresses an important social issue as mental health, it proves imperative for the profession to be aware of the impact of this phenomenon and its implications for practice. Future research in this area may prove important to burgeoning dialogue about reality television and may be extremely beneficial for helping to address critical mental health issues with an underserved population.

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