

Locating African Personhood Theory and Praxis: Filling the Gap in Social Welfare Programs

by

Colita Nichols Fairfax, Ph.D.

cnfairfax@nsu.edu

Associate Professor, The Ethelyn R. Strong School of Social Work
Norfolk State University, Norfolk, Virginia

Abstract

The unequal socio-economic terrain in American society yields the daily intervention of social welfare programs in the lives of African Americans. Government social welfare programs are stopgap measures for temporary support, as families struggle to enter the mainstream of American society. Yet, there are cultural developmental needs and human potentiality that often remain unchallenged. African personhood, a philosophical concept, articulates such a manifestation that organizes ideas of ontology that frame the definition of a person in society. This paper explores the need for better community programming that envelope the very best in cultural developmental theory in understanding a modern African person.

Keywords: African personhood theory, social welfare programs, cultural identity

Introduction

The need for African-centered cultural programs in the African American community continues to be a necessity. Despite significant benchmarks of individual African American progress in areas of government and corporate leadership, education and other arenas in American society, African Americans in poverty continue to subsist daily to exist with scarce resources. These scarce resources are not only absolute resources in the form of sufficient housing, nutritional foods and environment, but relative resources including institutional, economic and cultural factors (Miller-Cribbs & Farber, 2008), which deprive those who live in traditional neighborhoods created in segregation, that are now referred to as ‘the hood’, from reaching their full potentiality.

This deprivation creates a need for poor people to be preoccupied with seeking substantial resources. "African Americans and Hispanics, disproportionately experience poverty, [thus] they are more likely to be the consumers that human service practitioners serve, especially in public settings or agencies," (Schiele, 2000, 10). This paper explores the need for better and more applicable developmental and community programming that envelope the very best in cultural developmental theory that could create a modern African person.

Poor African American families needing monetary support is a reality that Black Studies must pay caring and deliberate attention to. Becoming a client within city local Departments of Social Services (DSS) mean that families must prove that they are poor. Families must show that their annual income is below the poverty level, established by the Social Security Administration. It is due to absolute poverty factors that persons seek social services. Yet the article will show that none of the social welfare programs provide cultural and developmental uplift or instruction, so vital in the self-understanding of African Americans. None of these programs speak to African personhood, as introduced by Kwame Gyekye, which is a philosophical idea of being, in virtues and conduct of who one is and how one understands themselves in relationship to their racial/cultural group (Fairfax, 2008). Personhood describes the behavioral capability of a person and his/her responsibility to the community. This capability mandates the interactive nature of the relationships and the accountability of those relationships among the Akan people, as a prototype of how (Gyekye, 1992), African personhood is manifested among continental ethnic groups. These programs are not created to coerce people to understand themselves as a human being, because the goal of these programs is to target income assistance. For example, the Zulu of southern Africa teach that "To be a human being is a social practice; it requires one to co-operate with others by doing good, thereby, promoting the balance that is thought to characterize the universe. It requires human beings to live in solidarity with fellow human beings, their families, their communities, God, and the rest of the world in which they find themselves," (Mikhize, 2008, 40). Arguably, African Americans who face quality of life issues on a daily basis, such as food insecurities, housing, stable and progressive employment, insurance, finances, are not engaged in rituals and programs that clarify who they are as cultural beings in this space and time.

African Americans experiencing poverty could benefit from more cultural developmental theory and praxis that would retool their thinking and actions that clarifies who they are as cultural beings. Currently, the systems and personalities in power continue abusive labels and definitions about who they are. Labels such as thugs, whores, single parent, 'the hood, inner city, are impacting the sensibility and cultural understanding of the most disadvantaged African Americans. When seeking refuge through governmental public welfare programs, as a result of quality of life issues, families are labeled, are defined by others, and are told what their goals should be. Freeman writes, "The emphasis on individual self-sufficiency by many political leaders is based on their worldviews and value orientations, and their proposed restrictive reforms are punitive toward individuals who do not achieve their prescribed goals," (Freeman, 1996, 523).

Freeman continues to explain that policymakers do not admit that social and economic infrastructures impacts the vicissitudes of life, but attributes the failure of upward mobility to lack of motivation or will and to value and cultural deficits, (Freeman, 1996). Yet, cultural strengths that have endured in the African American community are not utilized in social welfare programs, (Gilbert, Harvey & Belgrave, 2009), are not endorsed and are not generally funded. Conversely, the United States devotes relatively few resources to help the disadvantaged and the minimal redistribution system of social support is shrinking, through public policy which tolerates intolerance of inferior housing, schools, 'services for others', etc, (Eitzen, 2000). For example, the Center for American Progress documents the poverty rates of African Americans. "The percent of African Americans living in poverty increased from 2000 to 2006 by an average of 0.82% per year, after having declined by an average of 1.35% per year in the 1990s. The percent of African Americans in poverty jumped from 19.3 percent in 2000 to 24.2 percent in 2006, an annual increase of 0.8 percent. In 2006, only 8.2 percent of whites were in poverty, compared to the 24.2 percent of African Americans," (Logan & Westrich, 2008, available at, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/04/minorities_economy.html, April 29). Often, impoverished African American often reside in government housing, commonly referred to as 'the ghetto,' or Section 8, while receiving support from welfare and income maintenance programs. "...the low-income minority community is disadvantaged not simply by cyclical economic stagnation but by profound structural economic changes" (Wilson, 1987, 121). In addition to decades of economic tragedies, there are very few social service resources devoted to appropriate cultural development.

After several decades of public welfare intervention, the African American community subsists as a small deprived country. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., assessed in 1967 that "the ghetto is a domestic colony that's constantly drained without being replenished." Furthermore, welfare programs are fragmented and disparate, as efforts to develop a holistic family policy have foundered, (Axinn & Stern, 2005, 3). Yet, there have been a multitude of innovative, relevant and culturally-applicable theories and models, developed by African American social scientists that haven't reached this population of Black America. It is suggested that local (DSS) should be the initial point for African-centered social scientists and practitioners to connect with this population in formulating a process of cultural understanding. This article provides a discussion of African Personhood and recommendations for why local departments of social services need to be permeated to reach African Americans besieged by systems that are not interested in their cultural well-being and overall survival. This application of traditional African philosophical concepts for applicable social work practice models continue to be vital in efforts to reach a historically oppressed population (Schiele, 1996). Furthermore, this article seeks to pay attention, "to the pedagogy of community service on the part of scholars in Black Studies, as important for intellectual inquiry, as well as impactful of political and economic issues facing Black communities in America," (Jennings, 2004).

Black Studies or African American Studies is an African-centered discipline to process methods to further understand and emancipate impoverished African Americans. African American Studies concentrates on the distinctiveness of Black people through a field of study that systematically treats the past and present experiences, characteristics, achievements, issues, and problems of people of African descent in the United States and throughout the African global world, (Anderson & Stewart, 2007). Unlike other social science fields, the African-centered approach begins with an articulation of African philosophy and culture as the basis of inquiry. Methodologies continue to be negotiated within this field, yet it is understood that the structure of norms, theory and theorizing, values and assumptions are used to form knowledge relevant to the discipline (Outlaw, 2001). Norms, theories, how one theorizes, values and assumptions are proliferated among those examined ethnic groups of Africa, and the manifestation of those ethnic groups of African culture in other parts of the globe, the Caribbean and the Americas. The exquisiteness of this discipline is the breadth of provocation or at least the hope of provocation of “normative agendas relative to the goals and objectives of the particular people in question” (Outlaw, 2001, 454).

There are vast quantities of normative agendas in African-centered thought, ranging from discourses to perspectives to methodologies and can be strengthened by forthright intellectual engagement, intervention and arbitration with those committed to the field. An example is the use of broad textual analysis and counter-observation within Afrocentric principles to describe race and ‘post-racial’ discourse in dramatic texts (Temple, 2010). A second example is found with Afrocentricity, the predominant theory that has largely shaped and influenced discourses in the discipline. Afrocentricity is essentially a meta-theoretical framework that examines all phenomena from specific philosophical and cultural perspectives of African ethnic groups, (Asante, 2001). In other words, Afrocentricity comprises of several premises of African culture and history within ideas of location in theory and research. Yet another example, is found with discourse perspective, which is the criticism from within, for more theoretical articulation and methods of knowing about contemporary systemic realities upon African sensibilities, “more Afrocentric scholars will need to confront the economic disparities that afflict peoples of African descent in the contemporary sense,” (Christian, 2007, 362).

A criticism of African American Studies is the lack of ongoing engagement of ideas of self-understanding. “African and Africana studies are deficient in engaging questions of spiritual existence, the parent of the ideational and material dimensions of reality,” (Konadu, 2004, 36). Spiritual existence is how one may understand who they are, from ideas of 1) identifying oneself as a racial and cultural person, and 2) behaving as a racial and cultural person, (Fairfax, 2008), in the contemporary reality that North America offers.

Social order, kinship, community and social affiliation, moral and ethical temperament, and spirituality provide a system of developing the African American person to behave in a manner that informs the person of their responsibility to the system that nurtured them. This system then provides the African American with these ideas of self-understanding. This bridge or nexus between African philosophy is the exploration and development of the African being through self-understanding among Africans in America [African Americans]. (Fairfax, 2008, 16).

The expression *Motha wa Batho* which means, person of persons or belonging to persons, reflects an ontological conception among the historic Xhosa people in Southern Africa. One's person or personhood describes the behavioral capability of a person and his/her responsibility to his/her respective community, which defines the essence of being (Fairfax, 2008). As theoretical knowledge should be advanced, earlier theories describing African self-concepts have evolved over the duration of African American studies including Nobles' Extended self theory (1976), Kambon's (Baldwin) African Extended Self-Orientation Model and African Self-Consciousness Theory (1984), and Akbar's Community of Self (1985). Additionally, Schiele's Afrocentric Human Services Paradigm (2000), which fosters spiritual and moral development of within social and human service systems is a paradigm that deserves far more attention, because it focuses on the lack of attenuated needs of the most oppressed and invisible in American society. Theoretically, this article explores an initial research inquiry by using the Akan conceptions of personhood, extending the parameters of discourse regarding African American self-understanding allows for specificity of African culture in the articulation of self-understanding of African Americans. As most ethnic groups have linguistic connotations for personhood, the limits of this article doesn't allow for full inclusion of all researched definitions. In regards to praxis, a second research question is, "How would one produce *Motha wa Batho* which directs African Personhood among its most vulnerable persons in the African American community?" African personhood is far more relevant to all vicissitudes of life; education, community, fiscal, industry, with regards to how African Americans understand and inform their ideas of self.

Social Welfare Programs

A premise of the field of African American Studies is to evaluate contemporary realities in order to postulate models that answer research questions that respond to African cultural experiences. The research question about the production of *Motha wa Batho* among the most vulnerable of the African American community begs an articulation of how that social organism exists. Further empirical examinations with poor African Americans to explore their ideas and concepts about who they are prior to receiving are warranted, in every aspect of life. Data is needed to locate the Africanity and agency of those who must turn to the government. The poverty rate for African Americans increased significantly in the 21st century. Thus the rate of African Americans involved with social welfare programs have increased. Although the African American community is roughly 13% of the U.S. population, major economic indicators – income, wages, employment and poverty, reveal that African Americans are worse off now, than in the last decade of the 20th century.

“In 2008, the poverty rate was 24.6% for African Americans,” (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2009, 2). In 2008, “26.5% of African American women were poor, as poverty rates for males and females are the same throughout childhood, but increases for women during their childbearing years and again in old age,” (Cawthorne, 2008, 1). Furthermore, more women are paid less than men, even when they have the same qualifications and work the same hours, are segregated into low paying occupations, spend more time providing unpaid care-giving than men, are more likely to bear the costs of raising children, are unduly adversely affected by pregnancy, which affects their work and educational opportunities and, if victimized by domestic and sexual violence, can be pushed into a cycle of poverty (Cawthorne, 2008). African American women affected by these statistics often turn to local DSS for relief.

Major federal programs providing social welfare aid and services to poor families are income assistance, food and nutrition, health, education, child welfare services, and social services (Segal, 2010, 240). Income assistance programs merely function as providing the basic fiscal necessities of rent, food, utilities each month. Welfare reform was enacted in 1996 with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which had three main goals: work enforcement, marriage promotion and decreasing the welfare state. Abramovitz writes that all goals focused on changing the behavior of women, welfare clients and welfare workers (Abramovitz, 2000). This Act created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a monthly income assistance program that is designed to keep families above the poverty level. Yet, women must either be engaged in an educational training program earning a high school diploma or GED, or must be engaged in a work assignment (Abramovitz, 2000). TANF does not include activities of human potential. African personhood is also not included in these activities of work and GED training.

In this new century, poor African American families continue to experience food insecurity in America. The lack of food is based upon very low wages, segregated housing where grocery conglomerates refuse to do business, poverty-influenced nutritional habits, and lack of knowledge of African cultural foods and preparation, prohibit families from purchasing and engaging in wholesome nutritional and cultural routines. For families that cannot engage in appropriate nutritional meals, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly referred to as the Food Stamp program is available for groceries. Yet, SNAP doesn't allow for the purchase of other non-perishable household items. WIC (Supplemental Food Programs for Women, Infants and Children) is designed to provide nutritional and health assistance to expecting mothers and their children up to age 5 years (Segal, 2010, 241). Food is an essential ingredient in quality of life issues. “...there is a food crisis due to higher prices hides the human suffering in the crisis and its fundamental source in the savage impositions and effects of globalization and its destruction of the lives, economies and ecosystems of its victims,” (Karenga, 2008, A-7).

Responding to a participant study where a 44-year old mother of two daughters making \$30,000 per year lost her Food Stamps because of an increase in her wages, described that she would skip meals because she could not afford enough groceries to feed herself and her family, Prenovost and Youngblood concluded that a parent working full-time should not have to go without enough food-no family should (2010, 66).

The racial divide of health issues are perpetuated onto this population has been well documented. “The much bewailed racial health gap is not a gap, but a chasm wider and deeper than a mass grave. It has [characterized] our nation so dramatically that it appears as if we were considering the health profiles of people in two different countries – a medical apartheid,” (Washington, 2006, 20). Federal and state health programs such as Medicaid, SCHIP (the State Children’s Health Insurance Program), and Maternal Health Care services are designed to serve financially needy persons. For those persons receiving TANF, and SSI (Supplemental Security Income), Medicaid coverage is the health insurance that is used. SCHIP covers children whose parents’ employers do not provide health insurance. Maternal and Child health is available for low-income mothers and children to receive prenatal and postpartum care, and preventive care to poor children. SSI supports persons who are 65 or older, who has a disability. However, chronic health disparities exacerbate the quality of life of those in poverty. Chronic illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, substance abuse and alcohol, Alzheimer’s, diabetes, hypertension/heart disease, obesity are not effectively abated by the health programs available to those in poverty. The other debasing issue about health programs in America is the politicizing of this issue. “Indeed, there are no deep discussions about the sacredness of human life, preservation of human life as a moral imperative, or our moral obligation to reduce and end suffering, and our responsibility toward the vulnerable,” (Karenga, 2009, A7). Karenga’s point about health suffering can be located in how medically indigent people are mishandled in urban hospitals, which has been debated in public policy arenas for years.

Public educational support programs such as Head Start and No Child Left Behind have intended to provide support for better preschools and educational environments, there is a plethora of scholarship and research to show that these programs have not been effective. Although No Child Left Behind was based upon performance based standards to raise the educational levels of children, it has not altered public education in poor neighborhoods. Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin evaluated No Child Left Behind, and surmised that “For [President] Bush, no other factors (such as economic inequities or the geographical segregation of high poverty communities) intrude on his narrative: failure is a result of not being held accountable. The failure is contained entirely within the schools themselves, as if they existed in a separate dimension completely independent of the other obstacles children face when they leave the school grounds,” (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006, 153). She continues by explaining that although economic factors are important to examine the performance of schools, schools are located in communities that carry the legacy of segregated inequality because “the racial gap dominates, minimizing the very real economic inequities that cross racial boundaries,” (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006, 154). Several scholars have postulated that culturally-competent curriculums are vital to close the achievement gap, (Coggins & Campbell, 2008).

This assertion is empirically solvent however the reality is that segregated poverty cannot escape poor school systems, and a medical, criminal justice and social welfare service bureaucracy (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). As victims of governmental bureaucracies, neighborhoods may be economically disempowered, but still maintain the spiritual capability of producing *Motha wa Batho* which directs African Personhood, the article's research question.

Segal writes that major social welfare programs are tied to economic conditions, for if economic conditions were equal and equally enforced, then social welfare programs would not be as perverse, "The concern for social welfare policy in relation to employment and economics rests with current and future service needs of work and people without work," (Segal, 2010, 220). Assistance that families require are not fully met and the unfortunate preoccupation to make ends meet on a daily basis consumes many African Americans. Housing assistance, Medicaid, Food Stamps (SNAP) and child care assistance are the most troublesome benefits (Prenovost & Youngblood, 2010). Economic conditions affect employment, crime, affordable housing and mortgage protection; generate more vulnerable people and maintaining vulnerable people in the low-income class. "Inequalities in education, employment, health care, and housing, are owed to long-standing political and economic disparities, but client empowerment, human capital, and asset development are not significant in social welfare programs" (Schiele & Hopps, 2009, 196). Economic conditions have become the defining variable of the lives of those dependent upon those social welfare programs, thwarting the potentiality of people to not only meet quality of life issues, but cultural development that prescribe their personhood development. Yet, social policy ideas have failed to keep up with economic growth (Axxin & Stern, 2005).

"Social service providers [not all social service workers academically trained social workers] offer valuable services, resources, opportunities, and counsel to individuals who often have multiple vital needs to be met and challenges to be overcome," (Prenovost & Youngblood, 2010, 73). Yet these items are often short-term supports without long-term rewards. In a participant study, social service providers navigate a disjointed system that compels them to give recipients advice that goes against their traditional practice and/or personal convictions (Prenovost & Youngblood, 2010, 73). Many social welfare providers are not capable of providing cultural interventions to those who could benefit from them. Even providers that are African American who benefit from economically-stable communities often underestimate fragmented resources that have traditionally been available. "In and around communities with a high concentration of very poor families, the capacity of kin and other informal social networks to provide members with relationship-based resources that might ameliorate the stressors from poverty-let alone lift them up from poverty by enhancing future achievement-also is limited," (Miller-Cribbs & Farber, 2008, 46). For example, decade-long issues such as drug and alcohol addiction, overrepresentation of African American children in foster care, HIV and AIDS, health disparities, high rates of incarceration, unemployment, and poverty are severe and complex (Waites, 2008, 279).

Therefore, a cultural development theory which focuses upon organic strengths are important to maintain in communities, because they commonsensical. “Strong kinship ties, intergenerational support, faith, and coming together during times of need have been effective resources for African American families,” (Waite, 2008, 279), yet these traditions and resources elude poor families fragmented by decade-long employment tragedies, remnants of health issues, and environmental hazards that are no longer under community control has subverted cultural development. This discussion justifies the utility of African personhood theory and praxis.

“From an Africentric perspective, the etiology of negative outcomes for African Americans lies in individual and structural barriers (for example, discrimination, institutionalized racism), as individuals lack cultural knowledge, self-appreciation, and positive racial identification but internalize negative views, myths, and stereotypes, they become engaged in a constellation of coping responses that are not self-enhancing,” (Gilbert, et al, 2009, 245). There exists a multiplicity of Africentric curricula, interventions, rites-of-passage programs, pilots, unity circles, yielding immense positive outcomes, yet they are available through community networks, public schools, community/private institutions, and funded programs. Rarely are African-centered programs funded through departments of social services to reach the adult population that needs them desperately. More concrete philosophical interventions that appeal to identity, self-concept and personhood that will target structural, family and community dynamics and individual well-being are necessary. Strategies to wrestle African Americans from the ravages of impressions that social welfare programs bestow are pertinent to produce African personhood.

As a cultural development theory, and a philosophical theory, African personhood is the behavioral ability to exude one’s humanity unto others. Exuding one’s humanity is how one strives to reach that ultimate potential as a human being. Schiele writes that “the belief that humans lack a core or essence that transcends time and space limits human potentiality because human potential is restricted to what one does in the current material plane (2000, 63).” One’s humanity is not just in the today moment with what they materially own, it is in how one conceptualizes and showcase their *Motha wa Batho* unto others in all spheres of interactions, within depraved economic and environmental circumstances. Infusing African Personhood theory into praxis will help to effectuate the serviceability and appurtenant of persons enthralled with social services.

African Personhood Theory

Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye is the preeminent architect of African personhood theory for three decades. Though this theory continues to be surveyed by other prominent philosophers, Gyekye’s pioneering contribution to vet African philosophy on the global stage has helped to create more wakefulness about its relevance and authenticity is important and should be included in every homily pertaining to African-centered culture and personality.

“An African being represents a system and an orientation inextricably connected to the infrastructure, community or ethnic group,” (Fairfax, 2008, 83). “The embodiment of an African person is the essence of the organization of being, which is inherent in the organization’s ontology, directing the understanding of how a person conceives of him/herself,” (Fairfax, 2008, 83-84). Gyekye teaches that African personhood is a larger-than-self conception, encompassing more than the physical being (1984).

It determines how a human being should conduct him/herself in relationship to a collective responsibility. It delineates standards that promote moral and ethical behaviors that are practiced amongst persons. African personhood is evidence of the responsibility one has toward others (1984, 199).

To that end, it is not based in ‘identity,’ but how one demonstrates an understanding of a personal humanity, affect or sensibility through one’s conduct, such as mutuality, priority of social and group relationships, generosity and benevolence, respect for others, spirituality/morality. African personhood directs the conduct of oneself as a human being, as Gyekye uses the Akan conceptual scheme to define it:

One is a person because of what he is, not because of what he has acquired...Implicit in this judgment is the assumption that there are certain basic norms and ideals to which the behavior of persons...ought to conform, and that there are moral virtues that the human person is capable of displaying in his conduct...these norms, ideas and moral virtues can be said to include generosity, kindness, compassion, benevolence, respect and concern for others...any action or behavior that conduces to the promotion or the welfare of others. The pursuit or practice of moral virtue is held as intrinsic to the conception of a person...the human person...should be treated as a morally responsible agent (1992, 109).

Personhood is putting into practice an African-centered idea of a human person, so that if a person does not exhibit moral and ethical behaviors, or exhibit behaviors that are negative, than that person’s behavior is an aberration of personhood (Fairfax, 2008). Violence, abuse, criminality, neglect, corruption, and other deviant forms of behaviors that negatively impact the community, are considered aberrations of personhood behaviors (Fairfax, 2008, 37). Another component of personhood is the ontological aspect of personhood, further informing one of metaphysical ideas of self.

The metaphysical component of personhood is that material which is passed through the body, by the Creator and ancestors (Gyekye, 1984). The metaphysical component is a spiritual or intangible statement of personhood, which is inherited in the body and is passed down from generation to generation (Fairfax, 2008). The body is then viewed as a vessel of African personhood, connecting the person to the community of the ancestors, the living, and the not-yet born (Fairfax, 2008, 80-81). For example, Gyekye explains the incorporeal elements of the Akan people are the following: "...the soul (okra, ba) given to the Creator (Nyame), the spiritual force of conscience: personality, disposition, character, (sunsum, akhu, okan); thought/perception (adwen, akhu): personality/lifeforce (ntoro), transmitted through the father's sperm: blood/bloodline (mgoya) transmitted through the mother; and the material body (human, ara)" (Gyekye, 1995, 99-101).

Each physical element has a function for personhood to be carried out. This is important because it shows that in Akan culture, the body is viewed as transmitting behavioral values and sensibilities. Behaviors are not just the actions of a person, but the manifestation of one's ancestors which gives them an awareness of who they are and how they should respond to their respective environments. The metaphysical essence is the relationship between the person, and the physical and spiritual environment, which is actually defining an African being as a system (Fairfax, 2008). Inherent in this system is that a person conceives of him/herself as a system within a social infrastructure of community, surrounded by a larger metaphysical infrastructure of the Creator and one's ancestors. Ogbonnaya explains, "The person is a community of selves (ancestors, living community, those not yet born) which requires that aspects of the person work together and depend on each other without loss of the specificity of each particular aspect or self," (1994, 82). African personhood is exemplified when one hears, 'This is not the way of the Akan,' or 'This is what a person of our clan would do,' or 'A real [culturally conscious] brother would not do that,' (Fairfax, 2008, 91). Rules of behaviors are marked by the attributes of personhood as outlined earlier - mutuality, priority of social and group relationships, generosity and benevolence, respect for others, spirituality/morality should be exemplified in how one represents their system (the Creator, ancestors and social infrastructure (ethnic group/community)). Yet, a fragile economic base threatens this system. African philosopher Kwasi Wiredu has made similar observations as previously cited social work scholars, that the well-known crime rate in the cities is proof of the limited capabilities of that moral equipment [African personhood], (1995). This observation speaks to a greater need of cultural development that speaks to ontological instruction, so that persons may have a greater understanding of their system of human beingness in the face of abject poverty. It speaks to how we inform what the modern African person should look like.

Answering the Research Question

The initial research inquiry explored the Akan conceptions of personhood (Motha wa Batho), and suggested that the parameters of discourse regarding African American self-understanding allow for specificity of African culture in this area of cultural development theory. As noted by earlier proponents of African-influenced theories explicating self-concept and cultural identity, there is more depth and clarity of these theories than paradigms that relegate ideas of human beingness to racial identity (Akbar, 1985; Kambon, 1984; Nobles, 1973). Those clients of social welfare programs are not exposed to this theory, as their personas are judged by income maintenance and requirements of obtaining a GED and/or engaging in job training. It is proposed that exposure to African personhood would yield a different outcome of self-understanding that is necessary for cultural validation. Yet, this discourse is predominantly found in African-centered studies dialogue. Future interdisciplinary exchanges between social service providers and African-centered social scientists will help not only advance this dialogue, but widen the possibility of providers learning the theory, and applying it during contact time with clients.

The second research question of this inquiry, asked how would one produce Motha wa Batho which directs African Personhood among its most vulnerable persons in the African American community? Such production is in praxis. Praxis is empowerment on all levels of activity. The praxis of African personhood rests in the ability of African-centered scholars to gain access to those involved in social welfare programs. Heads of local departments of social services, advisory board representatives, agency directors, liaisons to city councils, block captains, ward representatives, recreational/community center directors, must be appraised of theories that are more culturally appealing and normative to those who should be validated for their very existence through training and pledging a commitment to embracing a theory that is unique, different, therapeutic and interrelated. More persons in decision-making power should be exposed to this theory and the possibility of client-enlightenment, as a result of exposure. Area universities that offer social science majors, and personnel of local independent African-centered schools, could be trained to provide the training to social welfare providers and administrative staff is a suggestion that may be explored. As scholars articulate the modern African person, those personnel involved in their lives should have knowledge about their cultural developmental needs.

Other Considerations

There are other considerations for Motha wa Batho to be applied. Further exploration outside the scope of this analysis, is to capitalize upon the increased numbers of continental and Caribbean African immigrant populations. "There is a need for a systemic strategy to interweave the identity construction processes of domestic and immigrant African-descended collectives to produce a collective transformation stage of shared identity," (Anderson & Stewart, 2007, 196). Such peoples bring their cultural philosophy and traditions that have proven sustainable in the United States.

Africans in America could profit from how these populations manifest African personhood. Secondly, this analysis has focused upon indigent African Americans. Nevertheless, middle and wealthy African Americans would also benefit from exposure to African personhood theory and other African-centered theories. Although these persons may not be economically vulnerable, they are products of the systems that besiege the sensibilities of disadvantaged Blacks. Next, the fragile economic infrastructure of impoverished communities has undermined some levels of moral and social judgments. More partnerships with business leaders, buy-in with city officials for tangible resources should be involved in African personhood praxis. Fourth, violence and family disorganizations cannot be underestimated in discourses of culture, social uplift and praxis (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Eitzen, 2008), pan-Africanism and Afrocentricity, in the discipline (Konadu, 2004; Temple, 2010), with regards to those subsisting on social welfare. African personhood theory can address areas of understanding and being, which initiates the question of potentiality. Lastly, and the most controversial consideration, is that the growing divergent social values that are permeating the African American community should not be under-estimated in navigating and testing African personhood theory. There are lifestyles in the African American community that are not commonly accepted and acknowledged, such as same-sex families, and transgender persons. Although drug users and abusers are frowned upon, they do not exist in exile as other lifestyles. All of these areas are respectable and critical consideration for future inquiry as we try to understand what a modern African person is.

Final Thoughts

As a preliminary analysis, African personhood theory requires more theoretical and empirical investigation. It is a cultural development theory transcends racial identity. Yet, there is a lack of empirical data revealing how impoverished African Americans understand themselves and their realities with poverty and environments that encourage inhumane behavior. Social welfare programs such as TANF, SNAP, WIC, Section 8 housing, Head Start, No Child Left Behind, and others only provide stopgap measures for temporary support as families struggle to subsist. A monumental mistake of seventy-plus years of social welfare policies of ignoring policies that support cohesive family systems, and only those family systems absent of fathers are now abated in new fatherhood and marriage programs. Yet living a full quality of life continues to elude these families, as does ideas of the self, cultural developmental needs and human potentiality remain unchallenged. Cultural development which is compromised is manifested in a lack of engagement in African personhood as it relates to relationship development and marriage, contributions as community personnel, sharing community resources and assets. It articulates a cultural sensibility that informs the African person of who he/she is and how they should engage a society that refuses to honor who they are. African personhood theory and praxis has possibilities to give African Americans a spiritual, ontological and metaphysical framework and programming that can withstand the vestiges of the racial identity mantra.

An ideal African personhood program would incorporate the organic strengths of intergenerational families, retooling grandmothers (Jiminez, 2002; Waites, 2009), and the male principle (Connor & White, 2006), found in fathers, grandfathers, uncles and godfathers to transmit African personhood to their families, as they have traditionally occupied the leadership role in families. Each family would engage in intervention groups that would re-train families how to behave out of African personhood in their fragile communities, coupled with enrolling in an economic development plan that equips them with immediate meaningful employment with health insurance. These types of programs would need to be evaluated through program and process evaluation and outcomes, (Gilbert, et al, 2009), which would inform reliability. These ideas offered will circumvent the racial identity mantra, moving us closer to the modern African person that the next level of struggle requires.

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