VIEW POINT

**COMMENTARIES ON THE QUEST TO IMPROVE
THE LIFE CHANCES AND THE EDUCATIONAL
LOT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS**

The African American Culture

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THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

Culture

       We come into this world naked—physically, socially, and culturally. An instinct is a form of behavior that occurs in all normal members of a species without having been learned. The human infant is born with few fixed, inherited patterns of behavior—primarily the automatic responses called reflexes, sucking, grasping, blinking, and so on (Chinoy, 1965). Unlike other living creatures humans need social experience to learn their culture and survive (Macionis, 2002-04). Only humans rely on culture rather than instinct to ensure the survival of their kind (Harris, 1987). What is "natural" to humanity is the capacity to create culture. Humans have no innate or instinctive knowledge that allows them to sustain themselves in the struggle for survival. Culture has to be learned; it is not part of our biological makeup, but our biological makeup makes culture possible (Eitzen & Zinn, 1998). We do not inherit habits and beliefs; we acquire them during the course of social experience. We come in this life without a language, without values and morality, with no idea about love, hate, religion, race, and social class, and so on; without none of the fundamental orientations that we take for granted and that are so essential in determining the type of people we are (Henslin, 1995). It is through human contact that people learn to be members of the human community (Henslin, 1995). The raw human material, the biological organism, is transformed into a social person capable of participating in the life of his or her society only in the course of social experience (Chinoy, 1965).

       Culture is the values, beliefs, behaviors, and material objects that together form a people's way of life (Macionis, 2002-04). Culture is the sum total of human creations—intellectual, technical, artistic, physical, and moral (Stark, 2001). Culture is the knowledge that members of a social organization share. Culture refers to the totality of what is learned by individuals as members of a society; it is a way of life, modes of thinking, acting and feeling, Our culture provides our social heritage and tells us which behaviors are appropriate and which are not (Lindsey & Beach, 2002-04). Culture interprets our surroundings for us and gives them meaning and allows us to express ourselves (Stark, 2001). The values of a culture identify its ideals—its ultimate aims and the most general standards for assessing good and bad, desirable and undesirable. To learn a culture is to learn people's values, their ideas of what is desirable in life. Values are the standards by which people define good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Values underlie our preferences, guide our choices, and indicate what we hold worthwhile in life (Lindsey & Beach, 2002-04). Values help define the character of a culture, but they do not provide specific courses of action. Values generally tell us what we should do, but not how actually to do it (Lindsey & Beach, 2002-04) Since values offer viewpoints about ideals, goals, and behaviors, they serve as standards for social life (Lindsey & Beach, 2002-04). All groups no matter their size have their own values, norms, and sanctions (Henslin, 1995).

Human beings are group animals who live in societies in order to confront the trials and tribulations of survival. Society refers to any relatively self-contained and self-sufficient group of human beings who are united by social relationships (Stark, 2001). A Society is a relative self-contained and organized group of people who interact under some common political authority within a specific geographical area; societies exist over an extended period of time, outliving the individual people of which they are composed (Farley, 1994). Society and culture are two sides of the same coin (Thompson & Hickey, 1994). Every society, large or small, has a culture and a social structure; social structure refers to the organization of society—its social positions and ongoing relationships among these social position (Farley, 1994). A society is a network of social relationships among members of the society who respond to the overall culture of the society itself, as well as to the particular culture of their own ethnic group. In America, people identify with the general culture of the society itself, but tend to use their ethnic culture to guide and give meaning to their social relations. In many respects, America is a nation of minorities with each minority attaching some emphasis on its race, its language, its culture, its national origin, or some combination of these (Howe, 1980).

A subculture is a segment of a culture sharing characteristics that distinguish it from the broader culture. The term subculture describes groups that share many elements of the dominant culture but maintain their own distinctive customs, values, norms, and lifestyles (Thompson & Hickey, 1994). However, most groups are microcosms of the larger society to which they belong and thus reflect its values (Henslin, 1995). An ethnic group is a group of people who perceive themselves and are perceived by others as sharing cultural traits such as language, religion, family customs, and preferences in food (Light, Keller, & Calhoun, 1989). Race and ethnicity are commonly and erroneously used interchangeably in reference to African Americans. Race is based on the perception of physical differences; ethnicity is based on the perception of cultural differences (Scott, 1994). Racial distinctions are a way of classifying people with certain characteristics. Although racial categories operate as if they were real, there is no such thing as biological race (Eitzen & Zinn, 1998). Race is a social construction used by societies to rank people in a hierarchy, claiming that some are inherently "better" than others, although no sound scientific evidence supports this claim (Macionis, 2002-04). Race, racial classifications, racial stratification, and racial ideology rather than being a part of our biology are a part of the American culture (Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003). African Americans because of their physical and cultural characteristics are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and consider themselves as objects of collective discrimination (Wirth, 1945). Race and social class are so closely intertwined in everyday social interaction in the United States that they have no independent existence (Kanjiranthinkal, 1990).

Unlike a subculture in which a group carves out its own identity, but remains compatible with the dominant culture, the values of some groups set their members in opposition to the dominant culture (Henslin, 1995). Sociologists use the term counterculture to describe such groups. Countercultures reject the conventional wisdom and standards of behavior of the dominant culture and provide alternatives to mainstream culture (Simpson & Yinger, 1965). A counterculture exists when a subculture adopts values and beliefs that are primarily in opposition to those of the larger society (Farley, 1994). Black-directed proposals for self-determination—the need for African Americans to participate more meaningfully in the decisions affecting their life chances—fall somewhere on a spectrum that has assimilation on one end and separation on the other. The assimilationist tradition maintains that a society in which racial differences have no moral, political, or economic significance is both possible and desirable; the separatist tradition denies this, with some separatists claiming that a color-blind society is not possible and others believing that it is not desirable (Boxill, 1993). Most African Americans are neither "absolute assimilationists nor hard core separatists." Many African Americans who cannot be classified as assimilationists or separatists can best be identified as non-committal individuals engaged in the challenge of survival in a racist society. More likely than not, most African Americans are cultural pluralists. Cultural pluralists desire to retain their racial, cultural, and ethnic identity and their pride in being Black Americans. They place emphasis on societal arrangements that make it possible for Blacks and Whites to express the similarity and uniqueness of their personal and group lives in institutions that belong to all Americans (Committee on Minority Life, 1986).

The African American Culture

African Americans are drawn from a diverse range of cultures and countries in Africa, later from the Caribbean and from Central and South America. They share a history of enslavement, acculturation, and racial oppression which give relevance to the initial bond of African heritage. There is an African American culture in America, and this culture is unique, rich, and distinctive. Culture is the sum total of the artifacts which accumulate as a group of people struggle for survival; survival includes the preparation of one's people and one's self, the reproduction of one's people and one's self, and the care of the progeny which results (NABSE, 1984). Culture serves certain vital psychological and social functions; it is the material and source of a group's identity. Culture includes the basic conditions of the existence of a people—their behaviors, style of life, values, preferences, and creative expressions that emanate from work and play (Billingsley, 1974). The ways of life for Blacks in America are different in major aspects from the ways of life for Whites. The history of African Americans prior to their being shipped to the shores of America and the Black experience in America have produced an African American culture.

The importance of African American culture does not depend on its differences from other people, but simply for its own reality. Culture is a peoples total way of life; this includes everything—ideals, religious beliefs, manner of dress, language, folklore, customs, sense of time, humor, tools, and material products and leisure pursuits (Young, 1972). On the subject of African American culture, Charles E. Farger (1967) noted:

> The American Negro is different from American whites. He has his own history, centering around the experience of slavery and its effects, and more recently including the rediscovery of his African heritage. The Negro has distinct cultural patterns—patterns of speech, patterns of music and dance, patterns of self-expression and relationship—which may have been produced by this history, but which have outlived it and are now surviving on their own creative energy and integrity. These like white ethnic characteristics will not and should not disappear in the future. It is indeed insidious "subterfuge for white supremacy" to expect blacks to abandon this heritage as the price explicit or implicit for integration via assimilation into America's "mainstream."

African American culture is a synthesis of African culture and American-European culture as they interacted under slavery. There are aspects of American-European culture that African American subscribe to and have incorporated into their communities, but there are distinctive characteristics in major aspects of Black life that set them apart (Young, 1972). African American cultural and social heritage have had a profound and enduring impact on the lifestyles and institutions and ideational systems produced by African Americans (Henderson & Washington, 1975). While enslaved Blacks from Western, Central, and Southern Africa in the 17th and 18th centuries were diverse in experience, language, cultural practices, and many other aspects, it was their common experience as slaves in America that served as the foundation for the "cultural value system" that was handed down from Africans to their American-born offspring, the African Americans (Franklin, 1992). The African American ethnicity was derived from the cultural synthesis of the population's African heritage and its experiences in American society (Marable, 1991). Because more than one generation of African Americans was victimized by enslavement in America, certain values remain relevant from one generation to the next and became the "core values" of the African American experience. From a synthesis of contradictions in America, a unique African American culture evolved. Being largely excluded from White society and institutions, African Americans developed institutions and practices that served their specific needs.

While Blacks in America are African, they are also an American people. Thus, in being American, African Americans are also, in part, a European people. Each of these three streams of civilization—African, African American, and American—is complex and varied within itself, but each is also highly interrelated

to the experience of Blacks in America (Billingsley, 1974). African Americans have been a part of the American scene longer than most other groups in America and have paid a very high price in their nearly 400 years of struggle to become accepted as first-class citizens. Be it ever so racist, America is "home" to African Americans. It is critical to a development of a sense of self for African Americans to understand that they are fundamentally Western in terms of their culture and values (Howard, 1992). For almost 400 years, African Americans have lived in a Western society and have been shaped by its numerous cultures and values. Self-knowledge for African American entails having a working knowledge of Western civilization. African Americans who reject their Western heritage and influence, reject important parts of their own cultural heritage (Banks, 1993). African Americans have helped shape Western values and have been major torch bearers in the struggle to close the gap between Western ideals and practices (Howard, 1990). African Americans have related to the West, not merely as victims or as the oppressed but have been major contributors to making this nation the world's most important nation. An acknowledgement of a Western identity by African American does not entail a reputation of self, but to repudiate, dismiss, or traduce their Western heritage would be to cut African Americans off from a part of what they are, to the detriment of the possibility of a coherent sense of self (Howard, 1990).

The American society is undeniably rooted in the Western tradition. Thus, the ideals and values of the Western tradition constitute the foundation for curricula in the public schools. Some intellectual familiarity with—not necessarily adherence to—the philosophies of the Greeks and those of the European tradition is required of African Americans. This does not mean that African Americans or any other group of Americans needs to accept the precepts of the Western tradition as absolute truths. It is important that African Americans recognize that a Western identity does not preclude or exclude an appreciation of an African past and heritage. There is an important body of scholarship by Black and other scholars of impeccable academic quality that contributes importantly to an understanding of Black life and culture which should be available to African Americans in the nation's schools, colleges, and universities (Howard, 1990). However, as consequences of the subjugation of Africans who were forced into slavery, their past has been distorted or simply omitted from the libraries and curricula (Alkalimat, 1990). Scholars represent the prejudices of their own lives and that of their culture and class (Gould 1982). Many, if not most, White scholars have either patronized the experiences and suffering of Black Americans or they have all but ignored the Black presence, treating Blacks as an appendage to American history rather than an integral part of it (Butterfield, 1968). No group of scholars were more deeply implicated in the mis-education of American youth and did more to shape the thinking of generations of Americans about race and Blacks than historians (Litwack, 1988). James W. Lowen (1995) in Lies My Teacher told Me, wrote: "When textbooks make racism invisible in American history, they obstruct our already poor ability to see it in the present." African American Studies evolved, in part, because Black scholars wanted to

correct the errors, distortions, and omissions that had been generated about Black people by White scholars (Harris, 1989).

Public education for most African Americans has delivered the message that the history and culture of African Americans are not integral to the real learning that goes on in educational institutions: real knowledge is perceived as the domain and heritage of Whites (Halcon & de la Luz, 1990). Thus, most African Americans are both uninformed and misinformed about their ancestors and ancestral roots in Africa. Also, most African Americans are uninformed about the role that Blacks have played in American history. The fact that most African Americans have a poor sense of their past does not mean that African Americans do not have a past. John H. Clarke (1972) noted that history tells people where they have been and what they have been, and most important, where they still must go and what they still must be. Vincent Harding (1973) warned that African Americans must not ignore the reality that the acquisition of knowledge and the affirmation of self are the beginnings of the long battle against the systems that have created the domination of African Americans. Manning Marable (1991) reminded African Americans that an oppressed people who abandon the knowledge of their own protest or fail to analyze its lessons, perpetuate their dominance by others. African Americans need to be educated to understand their culture from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. African Americans must be placed squarely on the stage of human drama. In the overall efforts to improve the life chances and the educational lot of African Americans, the reclamation and restoration of African American history and culture must be priorities that are equal in importance to all others (NABSE, 1984).

It is not the role of public education to function as a "melting pot" for the purpose of seeking cultural sameness. Public education needs to rethink and revise the intellectually generalized homogeneity of the "Western narrative" and the traditions of the United States through the formal study of themes regarding race, gender, and non-Western culture. The pluralist ideal in American education requires a broader interpretation of the American society. The pluralist ideal rejects any "hierarchy of cultural values which places the achievement of Europe as some classical apex and relegates those of other cultures to a lesser status" (Nettleford, 1989). By what it elects to include in its curriculum, an educational institution implies something about what is worth knowing. Educators need to be more appreciative of and adaptable to the acquired experimental backgrounds that African American students bring with them when they enroll in schools, colleges, and universities and should accommodate and capitalize on the life-styles of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Integration is pluralism rather than assimilation with respect for differences and is not a desire for amalgamation. Being a "good" American does not require African Americans to forfeit their history and culture and become facsimiles of White Americans. For African Americans, access to knowledge of their history and culture and the appropriate inclusion of the contributions Africans and African Americans in the

mainstream of curricula are not "pleasant luxuries," but the very "marrow" of survival of African Americans in a racist society.

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