

African-American Traditional Healing Beliefs and Practices in the United States

Creencias y Prácticas Afro-Americanas Tradicionales de la Salud en los Estados Unidos

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The diagnosis and treatment of psychological distress with ethnic minority clients require clinicians understand the role that culture and ethnicity play when non-western based beliefs and practices are used. African-Americans have maintained for generations traditional folk beliefs and practices for healing physical illness and psychological distress. This system, grounded in West African traditions, is known, among other names, as rootmedicine. Transforming West African cultural traditions and adopting to New World conditions, rootmedicine was developed as a response to the need for social structure for enslaved africans during the 18th and 19th centuries. It is a system that integrates West African culture and religions, Native American and European folk traditions, and Christian religious expression. Rootmedicine offers explanation for misfortune and illness and a means by which those who believe can gain control over forces affecting their lives.

El diagnóstico y tratamiento de problemas psicológicos en clientes que son minorías étnicas, supone que los proveedores de servicios psicológicos tienen que entender el papel que la etnia y la cultura juegan cuando se aplican creencias y prácticas que no son del oeste. Los afro-americanos en los EE.UU. mantuvieron por generaciones creencias y prácticas de salud tradicionales para curar enfermedades físicas y psicológicas. Transformando tradiciones culturales del oeste de África y adoptando condiciones del Nuevo Mundo, los afro-americanos desarrollaron sistemas o métodos curativos típicos o tradicionales, como una respuesta ante la necesidad de tener una estructura social mientras eran esclavos, durante los siglos decimonavo y decimonono. Este sistema curativo integra la cultura y religiones del oeste de África con tradiciones típicas indígenas y europeas y con expresiones religiosas cristianas. Es una medicina tradicional que ofrece explicaciones para el infortunio y la enfermedad, a quienes creen en ella, dando medios para obtener control sobre las fuerzas que afectan sus vidas.

Within the painful and bewildering captivity of slavery, a process for healing physical illness and psychological distress evolved among Blacks. Grounded in West African based belief systems that were holistic in the approach to healing, folk healing provided coping strategies. There were ways of defining illness, prescribing treatment, and procedures for selecting and training practitioners. This holistic approach to healing included physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of illness. It was the foundation from which treatment was prescribed. Although the influence of native american and european beliefs and practices were evident, they were blended into african-american traditions known as rootwork, conjure, and hoodoo medicine. European settlers, native americans, and africans suffered from contagious and often fatal illnesses. Folk practitioners emerged because plantation societies were unhealthy places

where endemic diseases existed. Rootdoctors and hoodoo doctors were healers in the community; they provided treatment for both physical illnesses and psychological distress. Although not always effective, folk healers used their knowledge of herbal remedies and spiritual rituals to prescribe treatment for a variety of diseases and illnesses. For two primary reasons Blacks relied heavily on folk medicine and indigenous healers. First, they mistrusted Whites. Plantations were cruel places and Blacks understood that White owners were not interested in their well-being. When sick, slaves were frequently worked to death or punished for not working hard enough; they might even be killed if their illness or disease was determined to make them less valuable. Second, Whites denied slaves access to developing medical practices which served White society. Folk healers provided an indigenous process for recovery and preservation of health among slaves.

Among slaves from various West African groups, to name a few, Mandinke, Yoruba, Bambara, and Mende, belief systems provided a common thread for the development of african-american beliefs and practices. Enslaved africans shared common

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principles and patterns of religious ritual. These were blended with Christianity, Native American, and European traditions to create African-American folk healing. At the foundation of this practice is an assumption that acknowledges good and evil as inherent to humankind. This duality forms the bases of folk healing which explains the why of illness as opposed to western medicine which focuses on how illness is acquired.

With this underlying assumption, definitions of illness have three dimensions. As described in earlier writings on folk healing, these dimensions distinguish between illnesses caused naturally, those caused by occult powers, and those that are spiritual in origin. These are extremely complex phenomena with rather blurred lines of difference. Social connections, conflicts with family, friends, or enemies are important to examine. Religious beliefs and practices and social conduct play an important role in diagnosis and treatment. Consequently, treatment of physical illness and psychological distress takes into account a person's physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Folk healing has three concepts of causation of illness. The following concepts of causation of illness are explanations grounded in spiritual beliefs about the inherent nature of humankind (Kiev, 1964; Mitchell, 1978; Snow, 1993; Watson, 1984).

Natural Illness

Environment plays an important role as a cause of natural illness. Healers attribute natural illness to physical causes such as virus or environmental factors. These illnesses are often cured using natural herbs and roots. An herbalist or rootdoctor prescribes teas or other preparations in accordance with physiological symptoms described by the sufferer and known pharmacopoeia. In addition, herbal remedies are often used as home remedies. A specialist may not be consulted because such remedies are often well-known home preparations.

Occult Illness

When natural herbs and remedies are not effective, the explanation of occult illness may be used. Using this explanation, illnesses are attributed to supernatural forces such as evil spirits and their agents. While natural causes are attributed to most physical illness, occult activity (conjunction or hoodoo) is known to affect the physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of the person. The conjurer uses their own power to conjure

or call up illness and misfortune by using certain words and/or objects.

Symptoms attributed to conjure (also called hexing) include physical illnesses and asocial behavior. A psychological dimension is added to the diagnosis. A person may be described as acting crazy or insane. Treatment usually requires a healing specialist. A conjurer or rootdoctor gives amulets or hoodoo hands to the sufferer to ward off evil.

Spiritual Illness

Spiritual illness is ascribed to two causes. The sufferer has deliberately violated a commandment of God (e.g. adultery) or is suffering from the effects of pure evil. Symptoms include those previously described in occult illnesses. In addition, a person is believed to be suffering from spiritual poverty. In this case, spiritual healing must occur. Spiritual healing is most effective when provided by a healer thought to be a channel for the healing powers of God. Healing involves the laying on of hands, anointment, and verbal blessing. Spiritual renewal results in a person's sins being cleansed away and evil influences being cast down. The power of God restores health and well-being.

Selecting and Training Folk Healers

Folk healers were usually selected and trained in three ways: Through a calling, a relative, or an apprenticeship. A person might be called at birth, marked by being born with a caul or veil (a thin membrane over the face believed to indicate a gift of an ability to communicate with the spirit world). A relative or older more experienced practitioner provided training through an apprenticeship. Apprenticeship has been an essential way of providing healers to the community through the generations. Prayers, rituals, and herbal remedies were taught by oral tradition. Folk practitioners studied for years to gain competency, credibility, and a reputation in the community.

Men and women were healers. Doctor women, midwives, and spiritualist were significant and important resource. Particularly important were spiritual mothers known as "maum" or "mauma". These women were highly respected by members of the community, who were said to bow their heads and lower their voices in her presence. In an 1896 folklore journal account, maum is described as the matriarch of the plantation, second in authority to the white mistress and full of supernatural powers.

An observation made during an interview with old Maum' Sue of the South Carolina low-country on the subject of dreams reads: "The Society for Psychical Research might gain some information by interviewing Maum'Sue on the subjects of dreams and ghost. None of her dreams are without significance; they are either warnings given for wrongdoing in the past, or omens of future events" (Hawkins, 1896, p.131). Practitioners provided a variety of services. With roles often overlapping, from herbalist to midwife, doctor men and women provided health services.

Transgenerational Belief Systems

Transporting thousands of enslaved Africans to the Sea Island rice and cotton plantations resulted in the development of the Gullah communities off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. These communities maintained many West African traditions. Researchers observe West African traditions in language, food ways, art, music, religion and burial customs (Creel, 1988; Holloway, 1990; Twining & Baird, 1991). Folk traditions continued to be maintained as African-Americans migrated throughout the United States. While Gullah folk traditions provided a basis for many of these beliefs and practices, it is also important to point out that Africans from the Caribbean brought related forms of folk traditions to the United States as well, primarily the Louisiana region. Having laid the foundation for some understanding of the definition, origin, and history of African-American folk healing traditions, the question is how do these beliefs and practices exist today?

I use the concept of transgenerational belief systems as one way to organize and explain ethnocultural belief systems that continue to be maintained generation after generation. My desire was to develop this concept within the psychological context. The term transgenerational is rooted in family systems theory. Family systems theory is based on the concept of the family as a system that transmits learned patterns to an individual (Napier & Whitaker, 1978). Within the context of my research, using the term transgenerational defines family systems as conduits through which traditional patterns are communicated.

As defined in Merriam-Webster (1991), belief is the mental act, condition or habit of placing trust or confidence in the truth or actuality of something. To operationalize belief, I use it interchangeably with

knowledge or information as Farina and Fisher (1982) did in their study on beliefs about mental disorder. Thus, a transgenerational belief system is knowledge or information of ethnocultural traditional beliefs which are communicated through the social network of the family generation after generation (Parks, 1998).

Method

Sample Description

The sample consisted of 200 adults. Participants were located in the following states: Illinois ($n = 63$), Ohio ($n = 14$), North Carolina ($n = 21$), South Carolina ($n = 57$), Georgia ($n = 20$), and Florida ($n = 25$). Most of the participants were African-American (92%). Other race and ethnicities included Latino/a (2%) participants whose ethnicity includes Spanish, European, Indian and African descent. Those who identified as "other" (6%) were still largely people of African descent (e.g. West Indian).

Seventy-two percent of the sample were women and 28% were men. Participants ranged in age from 17-80. Most participants (76%) were between 17-35 years of age. Education wise, 43% of the participants had at least some college, were college graduates, or had a graduate/professional degree. While education serves as only one indicator of socioeconomic status, it appears that many in the sample were middle-class. Christianity was the primary religious preference identified for self and family (79% and 88% respectively). Eleven percent of the participants reported "none" for religious preference for self and 4% "none" for family religious preference. Some participants (8%) indicated another religion other than Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, or Judaism. These religions included Bahai Faith, and several forms of West African religion (e.g. Yoruba religions).

Empirical Data

Four factors were derived from a 42 item survey and developed into scales with scale reliability range from .66 to .80: Spirituality, Ritual/Protection, Power of Words, and Dreams. These factors define the construct of African-American traditional healing for this study. Additional results include 38% of the sample reported knowing someone in their family who believes in folk healing. When participants were asked if they know anyone who practiced folk healing, only 11% ($n = 21$) answered the item. Of the 21 responses, 14 were women who identified their grandmother as a practitioner. Results show significant gender differences on the spirituality scale. Women were significantly more likely than men to agree to items about spiritual beliefs and practices associated with folk healing. For example, praying is a valuable method for solving life problems.

There is evidence to support the influence of West African traditions on the form of African-American traditional healing. The strongest is linguistic evidence. 15% of the respondents indicated knowledge of words that refer to African-American folk healing known to be derived from West African languages. Words such as "mojo", "juju", and "voodoo" were identified.

Findings of the study also show the family system is one way that these beliefs and practices were communicated generation after generation. 51% of participants reported hearing relatives tell stories about folk healing. Specifically, women in the family (grandmothers, aunts, and mothers) were identified as important communicators of folk traditions via storytelling.

Table 1
Traditional Healing Concepts

Traditional Healing Concepts	
<i>Spirituality:</i>	This reflects an awareness of a transcendent dimension. To value spiritual beliefs and practices means using them as a guide in one's life.
<i>Ritual/Protection:</i>	This is an importance ascribed to rituals as acts or systems of ceremonial acknowledgment of the spiritual realm. For example, honoring ancestors is demonstrated by including them in the present through ritual acts such as burial customs.
<i>Power of Words:</i>	This reflects belief in the power and authority of the spoken word as a way to connect with a higher power. This requires belief in the power of the spoken word to influence well-being. For example, a prayer may be a part of the prescription for illness along with herbal remedies.
<i>Dream:</i>	This is a belief in the significance of dreams in finding solutions to problems. A sense of a "personal soul" is related to an awareness of dreams as a process for connecting with the "spiritual self." Dreams are a way of reflecting and sometimes provide signs of future events.

Discussion

Results from this survey support that knowledge and practice of folk healing traditions continue to exist among African-Americans today. The terms most often identified were "voodoo" and "rootwork". Other terms identified were "hoodoo", "conjure", "mojo", and "juju". When asked to identify the terms used to refer to folk healing practitioners, they were most often known as "faith healer", "spiritualist", "rootdoctor", "hoodoo doctor", and "conjure doctor".

Participants were also asked if they knew of anyone in their family who believes or tells stories about folk healing. Over a third of the sample (38%) indicated they knew a family member who believes in folk healing. Additionally, half the sample (51%) reported knowing family members who tell stories. When asked if they knew of anyone in their family who practices, however, only twenty participants responded. Of those who did respond, all identified their grandmothers as practitioners.

The use of words such as voodoo, mojo, and juju is consistent with evidence of the transformation of African continuities in African-American culture documented by other researchers (Creel, 1988; Holloway, 1990; Jones-Jackson, 1989). "Voodoo", "mojo", and "rootwork" are often identified as a part of the traditional healing and religious practices of West Africa. And faith healers and spiritualists are identified as a part of christian traditions. Outcomes of this study provide additional support that African-American traditions constitute a blend of transformed elements of west african culture.

Transgenerational belief system explains the process for communicating traditional beliefs. Family is a primary communicator of knowledge of folk traditions. As earlier mentioned, women in the family play an important role in maintaining cultural traditions. Consistently women (specifically grandmothers, aunts, and mothers) were identified as primary communicators. Through storytelling, they hand down valuable coping strategies and folk traditions to the next generation. Storytelling is a long standing practice among Blacks. Storytelling is a well known African traditional form of communication. It is highly valued as a skill in the community. Moreover, elements of West African religious tradition were suggested by the factors which make up the construct of traditional healing. By analyzing survey responses, four factors emerged which describe the construct of folk healing.

Spirituality, which is based on the acknowledgment of a transcendent reality and a higher power, is a cornerstone of folk healing beliefs and practices. One form of the transformation of spiritual practice for Africans in the New World was Christian religious expression. Although Christianity is the religion of most African-Americans, other religions are also practiced. Therefore, the focus of understanding the importance of spirituality should be how it provides meaning in one's life.

Spirituality is a very significant part of African-American women's belief system. From birth to death, spirituality is emphasized through beliefs and practices that provide a foundation for organizing life events. For example, among African-American women naming a child at birth is believed to be important to the spiritual nature and character of that

child. Children are often named after deceased family members. As a child's personality develops his/her behavior and/or temperament might be characterized as being similar to a family member, living or deceased. By contrast, the Bambara in West Africa believe in reincarnation. A child born in a Bambara family is believed to have the spiritual elements of the recently deceased family member. Another example of the importance of spirituality is its use in problem solving. These beliefs and practices provide strategies for finding solutions as well as peace and comfort during stressful times. Participants in the study agreed there is a relationship between spirituality and psychological health.

Interestingly, the use of ritual for protection from evil intent was not likely to be agreed to by most participants in the survey. However, they did agree when asked if it is important to honor ancestors through prayer. They also moderately agreed that honoring ancestors provides a believer with spiritual protection. These responses support the common thread of African beliefs and practices which stress the importance of family relationships (living and deceased) to one's well-being.

Likewise, participants in the study agree with the notion of spiritual life after physical death. Ancestors are an important part of this tradition too. Deceased family members continue to be remembered and acknowledged through prayer and other ritual activities. Awareness of the significance of this provides some insight into the importance of burial customs, such as grave decoration, that continue to be practiced by some African-Americans, especially in the south. Broken material that looks like scattered junk (e.g. broken pottery) on or around a grave site were often favorite items or items it was believed the deceased person might need. Another burial custom was the passing of younger children over a grave sight by elders. No longer a common practice, this ritual was believed to protect the child from being visited upon by spirits. For a time in the black community, membership in burial societies was an important social practice. These societies were a place where community support was available to help families through this transitional time.

Another belief in folk tradition is the power of words. This basic belief among African-Americans can also be attributed to a West African origin (Jahn, 1969; Jones-Jackson, 1989). A practice in religion is prayer. Prayer is an assertion of the power and authority of words. Prayer is believed to be a meaningful way to communicate with a higher

power. Elders in the community refer to this as "hav' in a talk with God." This is a well documented strategy for stress relief and problem solving used by African-Americans (Neighbors, Jackson, Bowman, & Gurin, 1983).

In addition, the concept of dreams is used as a helping and coping strategy. Dreams are also relevant to spirituality. Dreams function as a method of divination. Dreams are seen as a way to ascribe meaning to life events and to prepare for future events; through them solutions to problems can sometimes be found. There is a relationship between dream experiences and the belief that there is a personal soul within all beings (human and animal). This is referred to as "soul talk" (Jahn, 1969). For instance, dreaming about fish is commonly interpreted to mean that someone close to the dreamer is pregnant. According to folk interpretation, this is usually a family member. Dream books are often consulted for interpretations and associated lucky numbers. For those who ascribe to it, this is a valued helping and coping strategy.

Clinical Implications

The diagnosis and treatment of clients with non-western based beliefs and practices should be approached with caution. It is argued that an understanding of subjective culture is important to the development of cross-cultural psychological theories and clinical techniques (Triandis, 1974). Therapeutic approaches such as family systems can be helpful when developing an understanding of African-American clients' belief system. Techniques such as genograms can provide a conceptualization of the family system (living and deceased) and can assist in an understanding of the social network of the family. By using this counseling technique, valuable information about traditional family beliefs and practices can be revealed and may prove to be useful culturally based helping and coping strategies.

As suggested by other researchers and practitioners (Hines & Boyd-Frankline, 1982; McAdoo, 1988; Pinderhughes, 1989), the conceptualization of the family for African-Americans often includes the community (e.g. church, community elders and advisors). There may be a community healer or advisor that has an important influence and is providing service along with a conventional practitioner. The important emphasis for a cross-cultural counseling relationship is acknowledging a client's cultural traditions in a holistic conceptualization that includes physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.

In summary, understanding folk healing traditions of clients is important for those in the helping professions. Reality orientations are the underlying assumptions that motivate how we think, feel, and respond to the world around us. As with any other group, beliefs vary. Not all African-American ascribes to folk traditions. My hope, however, is that the work presented here will aid in understanding its practical relevance to those who do.

Research and Training Issues

The need for further research regarding beliefs and practices for healing among cultural groups is very important to the development of relevant theory and clinical techniques in psychotherapy. It is essential that researchers study the various roles and possible uses of alternative forms of treatment for psychological distress. More importantly, the concepts that promote psychological health and healing in a community need to be further explored. These processes provide culturally sensitive ways to facilitate well-being.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by the year 2000 approximately 33% of the United States population will be minorities. It should be expected that this change will have an effect on many aspects of American life. If our goal is to incorporate all people into a healthy society, it is important that psychology researchers study further the ways that helping and coping strategies are communicated and how personal characteristics, environment, family, and culture influence this process (Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs (OEMA), 1979).

Conclusions

During the 18th and 19th centuries, enslaved Africans need for new social structures resulted in the integration of West African culture with Native American and European folk traditions and Christianity, forming strategies for coping with physical illness and psychological distress. This holistic approach to healing included physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects providing the foundation from which treatment was prescribed. Prayers, rituals, and herbal remedies were taught by oral tradition. An underlying assumption to this process was the interplay between the spiritual and material worlds.

A recent survey of how folk healing exist among African-Americans shows this underlying spiritual and material world assumption still provides useful

helping and coping strategies. For example, the use of prayer for stress relief and herbal remedies (usually home preparations) are handed down through the generations. Family elders (primarily women) communicate folk remedies via storytelling. When illness occurs, social connections, conflicts between family, friends, or enemies, religious beliefs and practices, social conduct-all play an important role in restoring a person's well-being.

For many, folk healing co-exist with conventional medical approaches. Often, a healer's spiritual negotiations are viewed as more important than medical remedies. An ability to summon supernatural authority provides psychological autonomy and a sense of power and control unavailable in less spiritual domains of Black life. This socio-psychological phenomenon includes internal organization, roles, and relationships often misunderstood by outsiders. Not unlike psychotherapy, folk healing coping strategies enable believers to approach problems with increased self-confidence and other self-sustaining changes.

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