
Book Review

Psychotherapy with African American Women: Innovations in Psychodynamic Perspectives and Practice. Edited by Leslie C. Jackson and Beverly Greene. New York, Guilford Press, 2000, 298 pp., \$35 (hardcover).

Anyone who has pursued clinical training has encountered people who hold fast to two axiomatic convictions: First, African American clients are neither interested in, nor appropriate for, psychodynamic therapies. Second, African American doctoral trainees do not, in general, have the intellectual acuity needed to fully master the principles of psychodynamic training. Many individuals who have pursued dynamic training are familiar with the countercharge that psychodynamic theories while useful, fail to adequately account for the social, political, and cultural conditions and contexts out of which people emerge. Critics of these theories assert that intrapsychic dynamics are not produced in a vacuum; instead they are produced and sustained within particular micro-, meso-, and macro-level systems of meaning and practices of power. The challenge facing theorists and practitioners, then, is to transform psychodynamic theorizing into a sociological, historical, and ethnographic event. From the perspective of their critics, the choices facing theorists and practitioners are simple: (1) engage in critical, interrogative theorizing about the link between social location and intrapsychic dynamics; (2) play at critical theorizing by carefully deploying words like "gender," "race," "sexuality," and "class" without rigorously examining how these dimensions of identity function; or (3) fully embrace the seductive fallacy of the universality of psychodynamic theory. Leslie C. Jackson and Beverly Greene position their new edited volume, "Psychotherapy with African American Women: Innovations in Psychodynamic Perspectives and Practice" (Guilford Press, 2000), as an effort at critical theorizing.

This text is intended to provide a useful set of considerations and guidelines for working effectively with African American women clients who are in psychodynamic therapy. The authors address a range of issues related to identity including biracial identity, lesbian and bisexual identity, acculturation, and class. The authors also tackle a range of topics that have particular

relevance for African American women clients. These include racialized notions of beauty (as metaphorized in skin color, hair texture, length and style, and body structure) and stereotypes about the strength and responsibilities of Black women. The text covers individual as well as group interventions with African American women. Further, the authors represent a range of theoretical orientation including self-psychology, ego psychology, and feminist psychodynamic therapy.

This book varies in the extent to which it meets its intended goal. Michele Owen-Patterson's chapter, "The African American Supervisor: Racial Transference and Countertransference in Interracial Psychotherapy Supervision," is superb. The chapter provides a masterful analysis of the ways in which sociopolitical, sociocultural, and individual-level factors combine to both inform and complicate the transference and countertransference responses that emerge in various triadic configurations of supervisors, therapists, and clients. Patterson provides a useful set of considerations and guidelines for working through these various complications. This piece should be essential reading for all therapists and supervisors. Judith White's chapter, "Psychoanalytic Group Psychotherapy with African American Women: The Bad Mother in All-Female Groups," provides a thoughtful and provocative exploration of the ways in which images of the bad or inadequate Black mother may emerge at various stages of group work. Regina Romero ("The Icon of the Strong Black Woman: The Paradox of Strength") does a skillful job of deconstructing the iconography of the "strong black woman" and outlining the complicated ways in which African American women may deploy this staple image of Black female identity. She correctly argues that iconography does triple duty—it serves to uplift communities and members of social networks, and it creates predefined roles that come to feel "natural." However, this image of strength also helps women to defend against real or anticipated narcissistic assaults or both of these. The chapter offers strategies for working effectively with these images in therapy.

There are problematic essentialisms embedded in Yvonne Jenkins' chapter, "The Stone Center Theoretical Approach Revisited: Applications for African American Women." Jenkins correctly notes that because of their preoccupation with pathology, psychodynamic theories traditionally have failed to focus on what might be indices of psychological health. She outlines a relational/cultural theory that posits that relationships are the primary loci through which to understand (and perhaps theorize) healthy female psychological development. The chapter does not address critiques offered by feminist writers who suggest that the tendency to examine women's lives through relationship continues a key practice of patriarchy. Relational/cultural theory, as described in this chapter, draws a direct and fairly uncomplicated line between "connection" and positive mental health (e.g., "growth

and healing”), and “disconnection” and psychological dysfunction. Further, the chapter provides little in the way of discussion of the specific ways in which relational/cultural theory can be used in practice with African American women. Nor is there an explicit effort to outline the links between relational/cultural theory and existing psychodynamic approaches.

If there is one shortcoming of this book, it is that many of the chapters provide no explicit, critical interface with psychodynamic theories, or that they do so in a way that is perfunctory. For example, Greene, in her chapter entitled “African American Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Feminist Psychodynamic Psychotherapies,” provides an extremely thoughtful and fantastically integrative discussion of the factors that must be considered in working therapeutically with African American LB clients. Although Greene points to feminist psychodynamic theory as the intellectual frame for her analysis she does not explicitly or systematically connect the tenets of this chapter with the tenets of the canon of feminist psychodynamic theory. The same is true of Jessica Daniel’s chapter, “The Courage to Hear: African American Women’s Memories of Racial Trauma.”

In the end, however, the authors have produced a text that will prove to be quite useful to theorists and practitioners. Those who have worked with African American women clients (and those African American women who have entered into therapy) will find that the points raised by many of the authors resonate deeply. More important, because the sociopolitical groundings and the particular theoretical integrations offered by the authors are substantive, “Psychotherapy with African American Women” will be useful to those teachers and supervisors who are looking for a text to do the weighty job of stirring meaningful discussions about the link between theory, practice, and the lived experience of African American women.

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