

Using the H.I.S. Model in Counseling African-American Men

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The H.I.S. (History, Identity, and Spirituality) model is a three-step approach to working with African-American men. Information from both the Biopsychosocial and the Affirmation models forms the basis of the H.I.S. model. However, this conceptual framework takes on a more holistic approach, incorporating universal concepts that are essential to effective counseling. Although the model has not been empirically tested, the implications are believed to be helpful for practicing counselors.

Key Words: African-American men, counseling, counseling techniques

Will I ever feel what freedom is supposed to feel? Will I ever be able to remove the shackles from my feet that keep me stagnant? Will I ever be given the chance to use my voice without the fear of reprisal? Will I ever be able to seek professional help without the fear of preconceived judgments or the fear of being misdiagnosed, misunderstood, and/or mistreated? Will I ever know what it is like to be free from emotional and psychological pain that seems to consume my body, mind, and soul? African-American men are often faced with these and many other questions when they search for ways to overcome obstacles that sometimes limit their capabilities.

In America, racism, discrimination, and oppression have stripped many African-American men from fully accessing and achieving the social and economic rewards of their society. Although some have been successful in achieving the “American

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dream” or at least pieces of it, this accomplishment does not come without psychological and emotional distress. Such distress would make anyone, including an African-American man, feel uncertain about himself, his society, and how he measures up to others’ standards. More important, this distress could hamper his ability to function effectively in today’s technologically advanced society.

Although much has been written on counseling men, little has focused on the specific needs of African-American males (Lee & Bailey, 1997). Lee and Bailey state that in light of the issues common to counseling all men, the life experiences of African-American men are quite different from European-American men. Within the African-American culture, significant differences exist in educational attainment, socioeconomic status, morals, and values (Madison-Colmore & Moore, 1999; Moore, 2000). However, one common issue that seems to be shared by all African-American men is the reality of racism and discrimination (Bell, 1996; Jones & Gray, 1983; Moore, 2000; Priest, 1991). Although the type and reaction to an experience may vary from individual to individual, both racism and discrimination can hinder one’s personal growth and development (Jones & Gray, 1983).

Because of the limited resources that address the specific needs of African-American men, the life experiences and cultural differences of most counselors from their African-American male clients, and the negative stereotypes and myths associated with African-American men in general, many counselors may have difficulty working effectively with African-American male clients. One can argue when counselors have limited information, training, and experience working with African-American male clients, the counseling session may appear awkward and, perhaps, even challenging. However, the authors believe that counselors can overcome these challenges when they are willing to do the following: (1) carefully assess their own belief system; (2) develop a positive therapeutic relationship with the client; (3) address the client’s unique experiences (e.g., racism and discrimination); (4) identify the client’s specific needs; and (5) assist the client in assessing his own lifestyle. The History, Identity, and Spirituality (H.I.S.) model is one method that might be helpful for counselors who work with African-American male clients. In validating this assumption, the article begins with some of the factors counselors need to be aware of when counseling African-American male clients. First, we present an overview of several different counseling models that have been developed specifically for minority clients. Next, we describe the History, Identity, and Spirituality (H.I.S.) model and how to apply it when counseling African-American male clients. We conclude our discussion with a case study using the H.I.S. model. Although this conceptual framework has not been empirically tested, it draws from the literature on counseling African-American males.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN COUNSELING AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE CLIENTS

There are a number of factors that counselors must take into consideration when counseling African-American male clients. Although it is not within the scope of this article to detail every factor, we believe three factors to be especially noteworthy: (1)

historical hostility, (2) the client's level of self-disclosure, and (3) trust issues (Vontress, 1988; Vontress & Epp, 1997).

Historical hostility refers to the resentment and negative feelings African-Americans harbor toward European Americans because of "three centuries of slavery, discrimination, and the constant fear of unequal treatment by the majority culture" (Vontress & Epp, 1997, p. 170). This hostility or rage can become quite volatile, particularly when issues are raised that are beyond the "comfort zone" of the African-American male client. Another important factor is *self-disclosure*. As a means of protection and survival, most African-American men do not self-disclose or "air their dirty laundry" in the public, much less in a therapeutic setting (McDavis, Parker, & Parker, 1995; Matthew & Peterman, 1998). The fear of self-disclosure is historically and culturally rooted in slavery (Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Hilliard, 1985; Willis, 1990). During slavery, African-American men were often forbidden to exercise certain freedoms (e.g., freedom of speech, the right to vote, etc.), which were granted to European-American men. Those who chose not to follow protocol or abide by the rules suffered severe and unpleasant consequences. As a result of the historical experiences and contemporary social injustices, some African-American men have difficulty trusting the process of counseling as an entity independent of the therapist. "Many African-American men do not trust therapy because of its presumed 'magical' powers to control and influence the mind" (Franklin, 1992; p. 350). However, rapport and trust can be established if the counselor has the proper knowledge, skills, and techniques. Without rapport and trust the counseling process is not likely to be effective.

COUNSELING MODELS

Since multiculturalism has become an essential focus in counseling, several models have been developed to assist counselors with clinical conceptualizations and interventions. Six models worth mentioning are: (1) the *Deficit Model*; (2) the *Medical Model*; (3) the *Conformity Model*; (4) the *Biopsychosocial Model*; (5) the *Systematic Model*; and (6) the *Affirmation Model*.

According to Riley (1995), the *Deficit Model* conceptualizes minorities as being intellectually flawed, socially disadvantaged, and culturally deprived. Counselors who embrace this ideology or worldview tend to have lower expectations of minority clients. Lower expectations often lead to little, if any, progress in counseling. The *Medical Model*, which has dominated the helping profession, views psychological problems as a disease. Although this model has become quite popular, little attention is focused on how the environment impacts one's behavior from a counseling perspective (Riley, 1995). This area in the literature needs to be more carefully examined because African-American male clients frequently attribute the difficulties in life to racism and discrimination rather than personal shortcomings (Priest, 1991). The *Conformity Model* contends that problems can be normally distributed, thus excluding one's cultural background (Riley, 1995). In other words, traditional models of counseling can be applicable to all cultures, not just members of the dominant culture. The *Biopsychosocial Model*, which is used quite frequently in the counseling profession, focuses on the whole person (e.g., physical, psychological, social, and

emotional well-being). All aspects of the client's life are taken into consideration when counseling the individual. The *Systematic Model*, a more active, innovative approach to counseling, is designed to "help Black people provide for themselves, rather than receive traditional treatment which causes them to be dependent" (Gunnings & Lipscomb, 1986, p.22). The model consists of seven steps: (1) identification of systems; (2) exploration of problem causation; (3) discussion of problem-solving strategies and techniques; (4) selection of problem-solving strategies and techniques; (5) implementation of selected strategies; (6) evaluation of effectiveness of problem-solving process; and (7) expansion of client's use of model (Gunnings & Lipscomb, 1986). Finally, the *Affirmation Model* focuses on the characteristics of the counselor, such as responding in a non-threatening manner, being genuine and empathic, paraphrasing, using open-ended questions, building rapport, and becoming an advocate for the client (Larrabee, 1986). These characteristics of a more traditional approach are important ingredients to the counseling process.

THE HISTORY, IDENTITY, AND SPIRITUALITY (H.I.S.) MODEL

The *History, Identity, and Spirituality (H.I.S.) Model* is a three-step approach to working with African-American male clients. Unlike some of the models previously discussed, the H.I.S. model does not believe African-Americans are intellectually flawed (e.g., the Deficit Model), attribute psychological problems to a medical disease (e.g., the Medical Model), see all problems normally distributed (e.g., the Conformity Model), nor presume that African-American males should avoid professional help (e.g., the Systematic Model). Similar to the Biopsychosocial and the Affirmation models, the H.I.S. model focuses on the whole person and incorporates basic counseling skills. The H.I.S. model also focuses on the specific needs of African-American males and their unique experiences.

The first step in the H.I.S. model begins with the counselor having a good understanding of the cultural history of African-American males (Madison-Colmore & Moore, 1999; Moore, 2000). Hilliard (1985) states, "any understanding of African-American men is predicated on an understanding of African-American history and culture" (p. 72). Several resources are available to assist counselors in finding information about the cultural history of their African-American male clients. Counselors may peruse the research literature, attend special seminars and conferences, go to cultural events, and/or seek special training in working with African-American males. One tool that has not received much attention in the literature and is rarely used in therapeutic settings is the *cultural genogram*. Similar to the traditional genogram, which gathers information on the basic structure of the family, the demographics, the functioning level, and the relationship among members of the family of origin, the cultural genogram takes this process a step further by including the extended and unrelated family members (e.g., friends in the community, neighbors, church members) and by asking questions pertaining to the client's cultural history. Paniagua (1996) states that the extended genogram serves two major purposes: (1) the role of individuals beyond the family of origin is emphasized, and (2) it identifies individuals who can provide both instrumental and emotional support. Gathering insight on the structure of the family and the culture helps counselors to under-

stand the family dynamics and the barriers that have prevented the client from achieving his full potential. This knowledge base not only makes counselors more cognizant of historical factors, but also helps them reduce perpetuating stereotypes (Moore, 2000).

The second step is *identity*. For African-American males, developing an identity has been incredibly difficult because of the negative stereotypes imposed on them by society. These negative stereotypes often contradict their beliefs about who they are. They also create a sense of invisibility, which is characterized by feelings of anger, confusion, anxiety (Yen, 1999), life-long struggles of self-esteem (Franklin, 1992), and feeling unworthy and devalued.

Several identity models have been developed to assist African-American male clients with identity issues. Examples of these models include Jackson's *Black Identity Development Model* and Atkinson, Morten, and Sue's *Minority Identity Development* (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989). One model that has received much attention in the literature is *Cross' Model of Nigrescence*. This conceptual framework consists of five stages describing attitudes and behaviors demonstrated by African Americans (Ford, 1997; McDavis, Parker, & Parker, 1995). This model sets out the following stages:

Stage 1: Pre-encounter. In this stage, the thoughts of African-American men tend to resemble European cultural perspectives rather than African-American cultural perspectives.

Stage 2: Encounter. Positive or negative events increase the awareness of African-American men as a racial being while decreasing their pre-encounter attitudes.

Stage 3: Immersion-Emersion. African-American men begin to rid themselves of raceless identities and construct a new frame of reference—often immersing themselves into a world of blackness. In this stage, African-American men also search for role models from which they can learn and develop a deeper understanding of Black issues.

Stage 4: Internalization. African-American men develop a new sense of identity that includes a high salience to blackness.

Stage 5: Internalization-Commitment. African-American men, in this stage, put their thoughts into actions and develop a commitment to Black affairs.

The goal of counseling is not to help the African-American male client progress through the stages, but to (1) help him identify what stage he is currently in, (2) determine “how” and “why” he is in this stage, (3) figure out what stage he wants to work toward, and (4) assist him with developing a plan of action to achieve his goal(s).

The third and final step in this model is *spirituality*. In the African-American community, spirituality, typically, is synonymous with the church and the African-American culture. Although the Black church extends to others in the community because of its overlapping extended families (White & Cones, 1999), not all African-

American males are churchgoers or Christians. The experiences that some African-American males have had with the Black church may not have been positive. Therefore, counselors must exercise caution when applying this concept. However, failure to address the issue of spirituality and religion may result in unsuccessful outcomes (Richardson & June, 1997).

CASE STUDY

John is a 29-year-old, African-American male and the elder of two siblings. John grew up in a large metropolitan city where his father, Joseph, worked in law enforcement and his mother, Mary, worked as an educator. Throughout his upbringing, John attended private Catholic schools, which enrolled predominantly white students. John was a bright and intelligent student who maintained a 4.0 grade point average throughout his high school years. At the beginning of his junior year in high school, John took advantage of an opportunity to tour several historically Black colleges and universities. Although John had toured several predominantly white colleges and universities and was aware that his parents wanted him to go to a predominantly white college or university, he decided to go on the tour to learn what other colleges and universities were like and what they had to offer. John became particularly interested in a predominantly Black, all-male university. He was so impressed with this particular university that he could not wait to get home and tell his parents about his experience. Surprisingly, John's parents, who are both African American, were neither interested in his excitement, nor pleased with his decision of wanting to attend a predominantly Black university. They were determined to send John to a predominantly white university.

As John approached his senior year in high school, he decided to send his application to a predominantly Black, all-male university that he admired. A few months later, John received a letter of acceptance. Against the wishes of his parents, John accepted the admission's offer.

John's first semester at the university was a bit unsettling; he had difficulty fitting in with his African-American peers. Despite his difficulty, John was an avid learner and determined to make his college experience both worthwhile and memorable. By the end of his first year, John became increasingly uncomfortable and incredibly angry because of his enrollment in a course titled "The History of African Americans." For the first time John learned what it was like for Black men to survive in this country.

John attempted to speak with his parents about his college experience during the summer break. Unfortunately, John's parents were not interested and offered little feedback. John believed that the lack of communication between him and his parents was attributed to his decision to attend a predominantly Black university.

One day while attempting to discuss his college experience with his father, John became extremely angry. The anger was so intense that John decided to leave home. As he drove out of the driveway, leaving traces of tire marks in the road and driving way beyond the posted speed limit, John was pulled over by a white police officer a few miles down the road. Before the police officer could ask John for his license and registration, John immediately denied speeding and began raising his voice at the

police officer. John states, “You know damn well I was not speeding. You [the police officer] simply pulled me over because I am a Black man.” As John continued to argue his point, the officer became quite annoyed with him and decided to arrest him for reckless driving. The next day, John appeared before a judge. All charges were dropped, and John was ordered to seek counseling for his anger.

John met with three different counselors: a white male whom he despised and two white females who were judgmental and failed to listen to what he had to say. Finally, John met with Kim, a 33-year-old, white female.

Counselor: Hi, John! My name is Kim. (Kim extends her hand to shake John’s hand). John, sitting in a slouch position, refuses to shake Kim’s hand and suggests that they get on with the session. Kim smiles at John and thanks him for coming in.

Client: (John is feeling quite angry). Once again, can we just get on with this stuff? I know you are going to ask the same stupid questions as all the rest, so rather than me being redundant, why don’t you just get the information from them and we can move on?

Counselor: John, what’s the rush?

Client: I have things to do, places to go, people to meet!

Counselor: Sounds like you are a busy man. So, John, what is it like for you to work with me, being that I am a white female?

Client: (After a 30-second pause) Wow! No one has ever asked me that before. I don’t know what it is like. I haven’t worked with one long enough to find out. But I am sure you are all the same.

Counselor: Well, John, I think that is a misnomer. You see, just like some people think that all Blacks are the same, some seem to think that all whites are the same. But just for the record I, too, attended a predominantly Black college and was perhaps one of about 20 white students on campus. I learned what slavery was like for African-Americans, how people felt when they were discriminated against, and why people still, to this day, feel angry about those events. I am wondering if the events of slavery and the activity that took place between you and the police officer are causing a lot of anger for you. If so, I certainly would like to help you work on your anger.

Client: (John sits upright in his chair). I think we might have something going on. Let’s get started!

Counselor: Let’s start with you. Tell me a little about you, your

upbringing, where you attended school, and your relationships with your family.

Using the cultural genogram format, Kim proceeds to gather information, learning more about John, his family, and his culture. She learns that John lived in a predominantly white neighborhood most of his life and attended predominantly white Catholic schools and churches. Holidays and special events were spent mostly at home with family and neighbors. John's paternal uncle, who resides in New York and is an ordained Baptist preacher, has been estranged from his [John's] father since the death of his [John's] paternal grandfather. John's maternal aunt and uncle, who reside in the same town, have little contact with his [John's] mother. Dr. Isaac, a professor at the university John attends, has developed a special interest in John. In fact, John frequently refers to him as Uncle Ike.

As John got closer to his high school graduation, he had this inquisitive need to learn more about himself and his African-American culture. Against the wishes of his parents, John enrolled into a predominantly Black, all-male university. As John continued discussing his family and family dynamics, Kim learned that there seemed to be a pattern of perception in his [John's] family that may have contributed to John's anger. John's paternal great-grandfather, son of a former slave, was killed by a white man for failure to do what the white man wanted him to do. As a result, John's paternal grandfather had the belief that if you wanted to make it in this world you have to do what the white man tells you to do. This belief appeared to have been passed down to John's father who tried to instill these thoughts in John. Kim shares her thoughts with John.

Counselor: So John, it sounds like you have had an interesting life. One thing that seems to stand out for me is a pattern of perception that appears to have been triggered by your great grandfather's death.

Client: What do you mean?

Counselor: Well, your great-grandfather was killed because he failed to obey the white man. Your grandfather felt that in order to survive, one must obey the white man. Your grandfather passed this message along to your father, who felt the need to educate you in predominantly white schools and limit your interaction with other African-American children for fear that they would somehow influence you to do things that are deemed inappropriate by society or by the white man. So, what it sounds like to me is that your father wanted you to learn and live by the rules of the dominant culture.

Client: No way! There is no way the white man is going to tell me what to do. (After moments of silence, he began realizing that the perception could, in fact, be true).

Counselor: (Silent)

Client: I can't believe my father could be so stupid. I think I now know why I had so much difficulty trying to fit in with other Black men this past year. Boy, not having knowledge can be rather painful.

Counselor: Painful! What do you mean?

Client: Well, I know what the textbooks say about my culture, and I know I have learned a lot about slavery, segregation, racism, and oppression, but now it seems so real. Reality is finally smacking me dead in my face. I think I know why my father and his brother do not get along. My Uncle Paul is very "Afrocentric." He is a Baptist Preacher with one of the largest congregations in New York. I attended his church with my roommate, but I didn't know that he was my father's brother until after I had left. At any rate, the service was wonderful. I had never seen so many Black people in one place care so much about each other. They were so friendly toward me. I just can't stop thinking about that experience. When I returned to campus, I immediately began searching for predominantly Black churches. I found two that I really enjoyed. I miss going there now that I am here at home for the summer. I can just imagine what my father would say if I said, "Dad, I'm going to the Black church over on the south side." He would probably disown me. Boy, this has really opened my eyes to a lot of things.

Counselor: It sounds like you care about what your father would say and do if you make choices that he does not accept. I am wondering at some point during our future meetings if it would be helpful for you to bring your father in and maybe your mother for a session or two.

Client: That would be great!

John's statement about wanting to attend Black churches, his previous upbringing, and the struggles that he experienced his first year of college leaves Kim to believe that John is still searching for who he really is. With this in mind, Kim decides to shift the session to focus on John's *identity*.

Counselor: John, I hear that you have learned quite a bit about your culture, but somehow I get the sense that you are not sure where you fit in.

Client: You're right! I guess I don't know where I really fit in. At school, I can be Black, and at home it seems like I have to be

white to please my father.

Counselor: John, there has been quite a bit of work done on racial identity. In fact, a couple of models have been developed and used in counseling sessions. One model that I tend to use is *Cross' Model of Nigrescence*. According to the model, one's identity is incorporated into five stages. Based on what I have heard you say so far, it seems to me that you are in stage three, Immersion-Emerision. In this stage, people begin to let go of their raceless identities and reconstruct a new frame of reference. When I hear you speak about your desire to attend Black churches, I hear a need to develop an identity that is reflective of your African-American heritage.

Client: Yes, you're right!

Counselor: John, you mentioned a desire to attend Black churches. I'm wondering if you would be willing to continue attending Black churches and look for role models that you can really connect with. From what I hear, I sense that spirituality is important to you, and what I learned throughout my training is the church is like a family for many African-Americans. In fact, it is the one place African-Americans can go and express their feelings and thoughts without the fear of reprisal. Once you find these role models, I would like for you to list as many characteristics as possible that makes this person an "ideal" role model. Then, I would like for you to spend some quality time with this person and discuss with him or her their upbringing and what kind of cultural or racial issues they have had to endure and how they overcame these issues.

At this point Kim believes that the more John finds out about his culture, the more he will find out about himself and where he fits in. Kim uses the concept of *spirituality* in the counseling process as John introduces the importance of attending Black churches. As mentioned earlier, spirituality is typically synonymous with the church.

Several weeks have passed, and John continues to meet with Kim and implement her suggestions. He has now become very connected with one particular church and has developed wonderful relationships with many of the parishioners. John has also gained insight into his own identity and where he fits in. As John puts it, "I am in the Internalization Stage." Moreover, John has learned the importance of forgiveness. As John continues to work on his anger, he learns it is his father's faulty belief system that angers him, not his father.

CONCLUSION

Racism and discrimination have profound effects on African-American men. Some of these negative experiences are so painful and so overwhelming that it necessitates the need for counseling. However, the uncertainties, fears, and unpleasant life events have prevented many African-American men from seeking professional help. As a result, they never feel real freedom. Moreover, they never feel what it is like to live without fear of reprisal, preconceived judgments, or misrepresentation.

For the few African-American men who do take the risk and seek professional help, the authors suggest that counselors consider the H.I.S. model as a conceptual framework. Unlike other models, the H.I.S. model is a holistic approach that focuses on the history, identity, and spirituality of the African-American male client and his specific needs.

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