

AFRICAN-CENTERED RITUALS: REFLECTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE STUDENTS

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This narrative describes the author's use of interactive teaching methods in order to broaden students' knowledge and skills in the cultural diversity aspect of social work. The activities specifically focused on African-Centered rituals.

It is extraordinary to have instant feedback regarding the extent to which students in my classes understand the concepts and skills that are being taught. Even as an avid user of interactive teaching methods, I was unprepared for the electrifying responses from students in my Spring 2002 generalist practice course to content on diversity. Class members enthusiastically shared rich personal stories! Their stories enthralled me, amply rewarded my personal commitment to interactive teaching, evoked some of my favorite childhood memories, and provided impetus for this narrative.

An objective of the course was to broaden students' knowledge and skills regarding various aspects of social work, including how to best work with diverse populations. Because of the school's emphasis on the Black Perspective, special attention was devoted to African/African American population groups. The ensuing class discussion and vivid stories of students illustrated that many class members not only understood the concepts but also could share relevant experiences. Methods by which I presented the concepts and the highly descriptive stories of class members are related in this narrative.

Lifting the Voices of Students

An article on Afrocentricity provided a conceptual framework for discussing African/African American populations (Schiele, 1996). Afrocentricity can be defined as having Africa at the center of thought and actions. Because over ninety percent of the students

in the course were African, Caribbean, or African American, it was predictable that each would bring life experiences, personal definitions, and other content to enrich the class discussion. I began the short didactic presentation by defining Afrocentricity and introducing the concepts of informal support groups or natural helping systems (Daly, Jennings, Beckett, & Leashore, 1995; Waller & Patterson, 2002). Examples of natural helping systems are unlicensed barbers, hair stylists, and transportation providers. I also provided content about other aspects of African/African American populations such as communality or liberal sharing among members; respect for elders, ancestors and fictive kin; the importance of blood ties; the high value placed on education; and the nurturing role of the black church (Billingsley, 1992; Carter, 1997, 2000; Karenga, 1995).

The didactic segment was followed by a slide presentation of my previous trips to Western and Southern Africa. During the slide presentation, I disclosed certain similarities between my experiences in West Africa and in America. One example pertained to hair grooming. While in Africa, I noticed that some mothers, similar to my own mother, sat on a chair to groom their daughters' hair, while the daughters sat on the floor between the knees of their mother. Another example was food preparation. I pointed out to the class that recipes such as *gumbo*, a soup containing generous amounts of meat and/or seafood, were commonly prepared using several of the same spices, e.g., cayenne and file, used by my Southern parents and grandparents.

Students were also informed that many villagers continue the practice of using informal support groups for such services as childcare, transportation, barbering, and hair styling.

Many Voices, One Class

After the slide presentation, the class discussion took on a life of its own by becoming lively, personalized, and protracted. Class members, many of whom had been nodding and smiling during the earlier didactic and slide segments, excitedly shared childhood experiences of having grown up in various African, Caribbean, and American communities. A student, for example, eagerly, humorously, and in great detail recalled a member of his community who provided informal bus transportation once weekly to people in the community who did not own a car. Several students remembered having their hair combed as a child in the sitting position described previously. Almost everyone in the class voluntarily narrated a scenario, often vigorously reinforcing the comments of a classmate.

As the two-and-one-half hour class period came to an end, it was evident that the students were not ready to bring the topic to a close. I, therefore, invited them to bring to the next class a paragraph or more describing their relevant African-centered experiences. A week later, most students brought one-to-two page narratives relating even greater historical information than had been shared during the class period. After reviewing the written material during office hours, I subsequently commended class participants on the richness of their work and mentioned how practitioners and other students might benefit from the material if it were published. The idea of having their narratives published intrigued some of the students, who readily gave me written permission to develop the work into a manuscript. Following are excerpts from some of the narratives,

beginning with a student named D (*not his real name***).

While touting an informal transportation system, D articulated the a) utility of informal support systems and b) bonds that develop among members of helping networks over time.

"Living downtown, we had access to a terrific transit system and the need for a vehicle was minimal. But living in the suburb... life was nearly impossible without [a car]. [The community] pulled together to make life easier for one another.

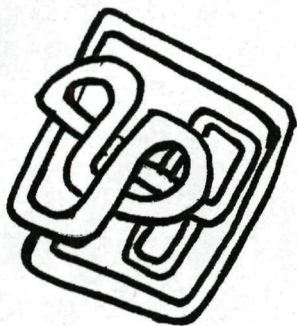
"I can remember the way we coped with our transportation issues as a community. The [Jones] were one of the families who lived in the complex and owned a car. Not only did they own a car, they also owned a school bus.... a big bright blue school bus. That bus was a Godsend.

"I have fond memories of bus rides to church on Saturday mornings. We would all wait, some thirty of us, until we saw the big blue bus as if it came out of thin air. There were some Saturdays we would all go out after church instead of going straight home (depending on the disposition of the driver).

"There was also the Thursday night shopping trips to... the very large grocery store. Every second Thursday, the big bright blue bus pulled up to the corner and [we] would enter the... bus. Don't miss it [because] unscheduled trips were very rare.

"As time wore on, one by one families started to get cars. Some even had two. Eventually, the bus rides were fewer and

****Note:** To ensure anonymity, letters were randomly assigned to replace the name of each student.



further between. Twenty-two years later, I have my own car. I was recently talking to a good old friend of mine.... He and his family rode that same bus. We reminisced about that bus and the many people that rode it. It's funny, most of the riders of the bus I still keep in contact with today; however, I have no idea what happened to the big bright blue bus."

S connects D's narrative to African experiences by describing communal or resource sharing she observed while residing in West Africa.

"In the African tradition, having female children was not very appreciated because it was generally thought that girls could not be next of kin [when girls marry, they generally relocate to the village of their husband's family]. My mum had six girls [consecutively] before my father retired to ... village. The only boy we had was ten years old when we went to the village, which means that [my mother] didn't have male assistance with her work [e.g.] bringing wood from the forest, fetching water and so forth.

"The other women in the village felt sorry for [my mother] and decided to help her in their own way. Some of the women would assign one of their sons each vacation to help my mum with her farm until the end of vacation period. Another woman [would] assign her son to...split wood...to get wood for cooking. Others [would] assign their sons for different purposes and at different times. All of these my mom found so very helpful and [showed] appreciation by cooking food for these guys. Sometimes, my father [would] pay part of the [male helpers'] tuition and buy clothes for some of them. This is the kind of love and assistance that was shared in the community where I grew up."

The experiences of the two students above, one raised in North America and the other in West Africa, exemplify similarity and the continuity of certain practices across members of the African Diaspora, e.g., communality and using informal support systems. Similarities among class members were also demonstrated in the following excerpts concerning hair grooming. For example, F said:

"Some of my earliest memories of comfort and loving assurance came from my mother combing my hair. The combing [ritual] was to get the step stool, then run [to] get the comb and brush. The one with the comb and brush in hand got [her hair combed] first. There were many times I did not want to finish breakfast [so as to] beat my sister to the bathroom where the comb and brush was kept.

"The stool [on which we sat] was a short wooden one ... [placed] in front of the couch...mom [sat] on the couch and [we sat] on the stool between her knees, halfway up her thighs. As she would gently comb, she would talk to us, mostly about how we were expected to behave in school, how we could do better at something that had not gone so well before. No matter what the subject, the feel of gently pulling the hair or the brush massaging [our scalp]...was a real comfort softly working the hair and the soul at the same time [and] encouraging [me] to grow with the love of my mother.

"When I had my own children, probably very [sub]-consciously, I remembered the good feeling associated with hair and talk; so as I combed my children's hair, I talked to them of values and morals, plans and pitfalls. Hair combing was a time of love and sharing. Even my son, who wore cornrolls, was part of the cycle.



"Everyone is grown now ... my daughter combs my [granddaughter's] hair between her knees and talk... of life and expectation, of love and the future, not knowing how much of the past they show me. ... I will always remember the goodness, not of the hair, but of the act of love that hair combing is in my family."

G, a student who grew up in West Africa and lived in a polygamous family, where her father had several wives, remembered hair grooming in this way:

"As kids, our mums were responsible for washing and grooming our hair. They would wash with ordinary bars of soap [and] towel dry or we would sit somewhere sunny and let [our] hair dry. We would then sit on praying mats on the floor, resting our heads on our mum's lap. They would apply a kind of hair food (palm oil processed) and then braid [our hair]."

Following is R's hair grooming scenario.

"We sat in the kitchen waiting to get our hair done. Moma heated the comb on the stove. She would comb and press... We talked and sometimes I whined 'You burned me.' She would say 'sorry.' When [the grooming] was over, I went to the mirror proud as a peacock ...proud of my new 'do.'"

While H recounts hair grooming quite differently than her classmates, she, too, demonstrates the long-term memories associated with the ritual.

"[The] traumatizing experiences of getting my hair done as a little girl... was a chore for me and the person doing it. My mother wasn't a "hair person." When I was 5 or 6 years old, at least two people [were required] to wash my hair. Usually,

my mom held me down while my aunt washed my hair. Even though I grew out of my temper tantrums, I am still whinny when I go to hairdressers and have to sit under dryers too long!"

Students remembered other aspects of growing up in Afrocentric families, such as the value placed on educational enrichment, even among parents with limited formal education. Ironically, the semester following R's (referred to earlier) enrollment in my class, she proudly gave me a copy of a recent article written about her mother's life. In the article, captioned "An Oral History from Sumter County, South Carolina," R's mother's description of the mother's life paralleled some the experiences she made available to her children, e.g., exposing them to outdoor activities and insisting that they get the best education possible. R stated:

"Now that I look back on life, I wonder how Moma, [who was] born in the South, and received no more than a sixth grade education was so resourceful. Moma would find ways to expose her children to what was going on in the world. There were incentives for attending church regularly [and] those who attended church 10 Sundays in a row would get [a chance] to attend...camp for a week. Moma made sure we were on the bus every Sunday so we could receive our 10 Sundays in a row. The camp was surrounded by a lake. We enjoyed horseback riding, archery, arts and crafts, canoeing and other activities."

A common theme in the narratives was the pleasure of visiting the homes of relatives, especially grandmothers. Pleasurable aspects of sharing, eating rituals, and respect for elders are prominent in I's narrative.

"My grandmother on my father's side [had a] tremendous impact on me as a

child. She lived in Harlem, where both my mom and dad grew up, [and] was a strong, short, attractive, neat...woman. She and Grandpa owned a little store where all the kids used to hang out. She always made [room] for company [and babysat] us while my parents worked. Her home was always fun. My grandmother could make the best cakes in the world. For my birthday, she'd make double Dutch chocolate cake for me. [She] always had Sunday dinners and holiday feasts. My grandmother liked to lean out of the window and observe the people on...street. I did this with her and learned so much about life and people.

"[When we had] informal family reunions at Uncle B, my grandmother always...packed a truck full of food and clothes [although] we were only going for one day. Besides, Aunt M, his wife, always had enough food to feed armies. The other women also brought food. Friends and families swarmed in and out of that house. Every time I went to my Uncle B's house, I met new cousins."

The following student, J, also reflected on Afrocentric family gatherings. She prepared separate narratives regarding her paternal and maternal grandmothers, identifying them mainly by the state in which they lived. Similar to the narrative above, sharing among relatives and eating rituals are described. Also shown are the close relationships among blood relatives and extended family, or fictive kin. Extended family is uniquely defined among some traditional African Americans as anyone who has made a significant contribution to the family or has been accepted as a family member. Examples are church members, godparents, and neighbors.

"Granny lives in a row house in North East [Washington] D.C. [Row houses]

aren't that big, but at holidays they were always big enough. Seems like everyone congregates in her home especially at Christmas time...family, friends, and anyone else that's been invited from the church, schools, work, anywhere. People come in with gifts for the regulars and their invitees. Some [family members] come in with a few extra [gifts] to ensure that no one [gets] left out.

"There's always heaps of food and everyone [is] sure to go home with a plate at the end of the evening. Seating can get crazy with so many people but a system has...developed. Older folks and middleagers eat in the dining room and living room, kids [eat] in the basement, adolescents [eat] on the [stairs] and young adults and older teenagers [eat] in the rooms upstairs.

"After dinner, it's gift time. Usually a poem, or story or song is shared,...the sleigh bells are rung, and gift calling begins. Everyone opens gifts, showing them off while sipping homemade eggnog, having a dessert, or a second helping [of dinner]. As the evening winds down, people gather their gifts and...plates, while shouting goodbyes, see you later, call me, and yuletide greetings."

Following is a portrayal of family gatherings at J's second grandmother, who lives in the state of Louisiana.

"Grandma...lives in a totally different side of the world... After being raised in the Washington, D. C. metropolitan area,...the dust roads and lack of streetlights [where grandma resides] are a shock. [My grandparents] got to name their own street;...[so] did my aunts and uncles,...whose streets bear the name of my cousins. It was wonderful being down there. Everyone lives in walking distance of [each other]. Extra beds [are]

everywhere so there [are] always plenty of places to crash for the night....my great, great grandma[‘s]...house is set up for any out of town family to...stay.

“It’s like the land of no worries for me. Everyone is on your side and so close knit. You [can] go to one house and talk to your aunt while she washes your hair. After you [are] all braided up, to dry [your hair], you may walk over to another aunt’s house where she’ll [groom] your hair while you [and other relatives] all talk.

“After you have been all ‘done up,’ your soul [has] been soothed [and] you may bump into an uncle working on his car. As you stop to talk, he gives you the details on fixing ‘whatever,’ after which you may go in to play a few games of pool before you head back to your original destination. [When you arrive] grandma may have called leaving a message for you to come for dinner. You go [and receive]...good food and spiritual healing/nurturing. All in all, you are cared for by family close in spirit and proximity.”

K recalled the adult supervision associated with visiting her grandmother, whose neighbors also helped to “keep a watchful eye” on K.

“When I was younger, I spent all of my evenings, days from school, and vacations with my grandmother. She lived in an apartment building [that] is populated mostly by seniors ... of the same Southern background as my grandmother. [Because] my grandmother was acquainted with or [a] friend of nearly all of the [residents], they, of course, [knew] me. They would watch everything I did and tell my grandmother. [This meant] there was nothing I could do and get away. They would tell my grandmother when (and where) they saw me and especially [with whom] they saw me. So, my grandmother

was rarely in the dark about anything I did while I was in her care.”

While several narratives alluded to religion, church involvement, and spirituality, the following one by L provides greater detail.

“As I was growing up, I was raised to believe that there was a God. Every Sunday morning, my mother would gather us together to attend a church service. I participated in church worship service, i.e., leading prayers, [making] opening remarks, youth choir, and...Sunday school. [When] I became an adult, I had to understand for myself. This understanding came from a religious instructor who believed in [God]. This old woman and I would pray...together and she encouraged me to re-establish my faith. The experience gave me confidence, meaning, and a sense of purpose....”



Transferring Experiences to Practice

Students’ skills and knowledge of diversity were enhanced in meaningful ways by reading relevant literature, viewing slides, and actively participating in class discussions. Some class members’ definition of Afrocentricity became more global to include individuals of Caribbean and African ancestry. Perhaps the most valuable change was the vicarious knowledge class members gained from listening to the voices of each other. For example, class members learned that although African-centered families bear many similarities, they are not monolithic. By examining the heterogeneity of African, Caribbean, and African American families, students were better able to understand the

diversity within other ethnic families at their field agencies. Hair grooming was touted as a parenting skill that could improve the relationship between clients and their children of various ages, as well as students and their own family members. In that the black church had enhanced the emotional as well as spiritual development of a number of class participants, they deemed assessment of client's religious background important to practice. The interns assigned to child welfare agencies articulated greater confidence in such skills as locating fictive kin when placing children. Students also mentioned how becoming skillful at using informal helping networks could supplement scarce resources of agencies. Members of the class were grateful for a course module that reviewed ethnicity in a manner that was nostalgic, esteem-building, conceptual, and applicable to practice. They were ecstatic that their personal experiences might contribute to social work practice literature.

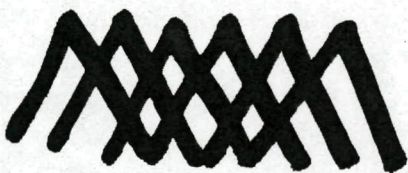
I wish to thank the former MSW students, now graduates, who enriched this article by allowing their narratives to be included:

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