The Role of Proverbs in African-Centred Psychology

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Abstract

African-Centred Psychology is grounded in the philosophical foundations and wisdom traditions of African societies. The African penchant for using proverbs is a direct manifestation of analogic thinking (a way of identifying relationships or similarities among experiences). Proverbs make explicit the purpose of one's existence, the natural order of things and the way we should relate to each other. As such they represent a people's general disposition toward the world. Proverbs also represent strategies for dealing with life situations. In this paper the authors discuss the nature of African-Centred/ Black Psychology, the way in which proverbs have served as a foundation for a more authentic African Psychology as well as the critical role that proverbs play both in the theoretical sphere and in the therapeutic process.

Keywords: Proverbs, Proverbial knowing, African-Centred/ African-Centered Psychology, African Philosophy, Analogical thinking, Analogical abstraction, Clinical intervention

Iqhaza Lezaga Kusayikholoji Egxile Kokwase-Afrika

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Iqoqa

Isayikholoji egxile kokwase-Afrika isekelwe ezinzulwini zefilosofi kanye nobuhlakani bezinqubo zemiphakathi yase-Afrika. Uthando lwama-Afrika lokusebenzisa izaga luyindlela eqondile yokucabanga ngokuqhathanisa izinto (indlela yokuhlonza ubudlelwano noma ukufana phakathi kwezinto ezenzekile). Izaga zicacisa ngokusobala inhloso yokuba khona komuntu, ukuhleleka kwezinto ngokwemvelo kanye nendlela okumele sixhumane ngayo. Zimele ubunjalo bomuntu uma ebuka umhlaba. Izaga zibuye zimele amasu okubhekana nezimo zempilo. Kuleli phepha ababhali bakhuluma ngobunjalo besayikholoji egxile kokwase-Afrika/isayikholoji yabamnyama, indlela izaga ezelekelele ngayo ukuba yisisekelo sesayikholoji yase-Afrika engenakuphikiswa kanye neqhaza elisemqoka elibanjwa izaga kwezenjulalwazi kanye nohlelo lwezokwelapha.

Amagama asemqoka: izaga, ulwazi lwezaga, isayikholoji egxile kokwase-Afrika, ifilosofi yase-Afrika, ukucabanga ngokuqhathanisa, izingabunjalo lokubhekana nokwengqondo ngokuqhathanisa, ukungenelela kwezokwelapha

Introduction

The Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi) was born in 1968 when students and professionals walked out of the American Psychological Association (APA) convention in San Francisco. This act of defiance was reflective of the social, cultural, and political vortex of the civil rights and Black power movements occurring in the United States. The ABPsi defined its mission as the liberation of the African mind, the empowerment of the African character, and the enlivenment and illumination of the African spirit. Although claiming its own independent existence, there was no formal theory, concept, or idea of Black psychology in 1968. Over the 50 years of its existence Black Psychologists have created the discipline of African-Centred/ Black Psychology.

African-Centred/ Black Psychology

While western psychology is purported to be the study of human behaviour and mental processes, Holdstock (2000: 6) argues that this definition is short-sighted because it fails to consider the extent to which psychology ‘is embedded in the ideologies of the Western world’. Psychology, then, can best be understood as a Western abstraction, a construct invented in the West to characterise the study of the various ways – the decision rules, interpersonal styles, theories of causation, expressive behaviour, perceptual capacities, reaction times, and information-processing – persons meet their daily needs for survival (Holdstock 2000). Black psychologists’ initial critique of western psychology centred on the denial and neglect of culture in its formulation and suggested that the psychology connoted when using the term is both biased, and incomplete for addressing the majority of humans (Bulhan 1985; Nobles 1986; Guthrie 1998; Kambon 1998; Parham, White & Ajamu 2000).

As part of the critique of Western psychology, early Black psychologists were often in disagreement about what constituted Black psychology, what is the nature of Black psychology, what should be the paradigm/grounding for Black psychology. According to White (1970: 45), ‘It is vitally important that we develop, out of the authentic experience of Black people in this country, an accurate workable theory of black psychology’. Later, Nobles (2004: 66) expanded on this definition by adding cultural perspectives and African philosophical principles to the experiential

perspective: ‘African (Black) Psychology is rooted in the nature of black culture which is based on particular indigenous African philosophical assumptions’. He further suggested that ‘the task of black psychology is to offer an understanding of a behavioral [sic] definition of African Philosophy and to document what, if any modification, it has undergone during particular experiential periods’ (Nobles 2004: 70).

Traditional African Psychology has been defined as ‘a place – a view, a perspective, a way of observing’ – seeing humans as spirit, resilient and capable of restoration (Akbar 2003, p. ix); as a framework for understanding the nature of human beingness grounded in collective African cultural principles (Nobles 1986); and, as a combination of dynamic knowledge and ancestral experience (Grills 2004). It includes practices and processes, is grounded in observation and practical experience, and is passed down from generation to generation, either orally or through symbols. Therefore, African Psychology should include: 1) a theory of human beingness; 2) a set of practices and processes aimed at connections; and 3) a system for determining and facilitating human functioning.

Earlier, Nobles (1986: 109) had argued that the efforts to articulate African Psychology are still in flux. As such,

‘the work we do is constantly changing and we continue to inform our efforts by the need to transform psychology’ [Current efforts] ... should not be taken as an example of ‘the African (Black) Psychology, at least not in the sense of the complete or developed African (Black) Psychology. Most of the work of Black psychologists should be seen as African (Black) Psychology becoming’ (Nobles 1986: p110).

It is not complete.

In an effort to create a common framework for the understanding of Black psychology, the Association of Black Psychologists accepted the following as the official definition of Black psychology:

Black/ African centered psychology [sic] is a dynamic manifestation of unifying African principles, values. It is the self-conscious ‘centering’ of psychological analyses and applications in African realities, cultures, and epistemologies. African centered psychology [sic], as a system of thought and action, examines the processes that

allow for the illumination and liberation of the Spirit. Relying on the principles of harmony within the universe as a natural order of existence, African centered psychology [sic] recognizes [sic]: the Spirit that permeates everything that is; the notion that everything in the universe is interconnected; the value that the collective is the most salient element of existence; and the idea that communal self-knowledge is the key to mental health. African Psychology is ultimately concerned with understanding the systems of meaning of human Beingness, the features of human functioning, and the restoration of normal/ natural order to human development. As such, it is used to resolve personal and social problems and to promote optimal functioning (Rowe 1995: 10).

Philosophical Foundations

According to Nobles (1998: 190),

African centeredness represents a concept which categorizes [sic] a ‘*quality of thought and practice*’ which is rooted in the cultural image and interest of people of African ancestry and which represents and reflects the life experiences, history and traditions of people of African ancestry as the center [sic] of analyses.

Nobles’ definition is critical because it shifts the debate from merely conceptual issues to the meanings and methods of African-Centred Psychology, since it places emphasis on the *quality* of thought and practice (Rowe & Webb-Msemaji 2004). As such, psychology centred in African thought and practice reflects African people’s intimate knowledge of their subjective human experiences as they interact with the world – nature, the cosmos, geographical location, others and one’s self.

Rowe and Webb-Msemaji (2004) further suggest that the term *African-Centred* best reflects how to encapsulate the various efforts for discussing the psychology of persons of African ancestry at this point in history. By ‘centred’, they suggest that the current level of understanding is not sufficiently informed to have formal distinctive boundaries for what explicitly constitute African cultural thought and practices, and that scholars examining these issues should intentionally *locate* their theories, methods and practices

within the ever-deepening investigation into and reclamation of African cultural ways. They suggest four criteria for assessing parameters of African-Centred Psychology, as follows: 1) utilises African cultural patterns and styles for understanding human behaviour; 2) reflects the various ways African peoples have sought to understand, articulate and project themselves to themselves, others and the world; 3) emphasises values that are more dynamic, circular, collective and situational, assumptions that are more integrative or 'diunital', and methods that are more symbolic, affective and metaphorical; and, 4) relies on African sources, i.e., oral literature (proverbs, songs, tales/stories), praise songs and moral teachings, spiritual system 'scripts', prayers, and the dynamic interdependence of community, nature and spirit.

In terms of African philosophical principles, Africans believed that everything is spirit or force. This is best captured in the proverb '*whatever is spirit*'. African philosophical foundation understands that everything is imbued with spirit and that elements in the universe are different manifestations of the same spirit. According to Akbar (1976: 175),

African people throughout the world have a worldview that is conceived as a universal oneness. There is an interconnection of all things that compose the Universe.

The African cosmological understanding of the universe as essentially the same led to the formulation of the ontological principle of consubstantiation (Nobles 1986). As such, the natural order of relations within the universe was one of harmony and interdependence. According to Kamalu (1990), the African philosophical system conceived of the world as being ordered according to the principles of the co-existence and interaction of opposites on all levels of understanding. Africans understood their beingness in relation to others; as Mbiti (1969) stated, 'I am because we are and because we are, therefore I am'. This concept of unity undergirds the African moral and ethical codes of conduct that are based on the concept of collective moral responsibility. That is, we are each responsible for our actions, but collective moral responsibility indicates that our actions have consequences for the entire community consisting of the living, the dead and the yet-to-be born (Mbiti 1969; Kamalu 1990).

Thus, there is a clear link between the articulation of African-Centred Psychology and reliance upon African sources, of which proverbs are a critical aspect. As Nobles (2004) had suggested, African-Centred psychology must

address the oral tradition in terms of the way in which beliefs and traditions are handed down from one generation to the next. As a result, we contend that an additional domain of African Psychology can be discerned through a descriptive analysis of moral language; the sanctions used to enforce morality; and a review of proverbs, tales and myths, which refer to the moral beliefs of the peoples. The examination of traditional African and diasporan African proverbs as a framework for depicting the psychology of Africans in Africa, the United States, and throughout the diaspora is critical (Grills & Rowe 1998).

Proverbial Knowing

Opoku and Mbiti (1997: xviii) suggest that proverbs,

are encapsulations of the accumulated wisdom and experiences of past generations ... and they constitute an authentic mirror of the mind and philosophy of the ... people.

They continue by suggesting that proverbs enrich conversation, demonstrate good education and wisdom, and have significance only within the particular contexts of their use. According to Opoku & Mbiti (1997), proverbs are deeply rooted in this [African] culture and almost everyone who grows up in a village, becomes a living carrier of proverbs. They are interwoven in local languages. At the same time, they constitute a sub-language of their own; the language of proverbs is a whole way of seeing the world, a way of speaking with other people, a way of feeling the atmosphere in society in which they live. Knappert (1989: 2) has stated, 'proverbs are short expressions of wit, containing the wisdom of past generations in condensed form'. They express the essence of African wisdom. He further suggests, 'many proverbs are simple and clear in meaning and can be universally applied' (Knappert 1989: 3). According to Mayers (1976: 198) 'proverbs involve implicit generalizations or observations presented in connection with particular events'. She goes on to distinguish between two types of proverbs based on the form in which they are expressed, where she notes,

The form includes a specific observation, implying a general truth which bears on a particular event. An alternative form is a general observation referring to a specific event (Mayers 1976: 198).

African proverbs have poetic, didactic and aesthetic qualities such that what is emphasised depends on the speaker's intent and the capacity of the hearer to grasp the speaker's thought system (Monye 1996). Implied in Monye's insights are powerful considerations for grounding our understanding of African-Centred Psychology in proverbs. Dzobo (1992: 94f) describes proverbs as 'normally short and pithy sayings ... very popular devices used to state metaphorically certain general truths about life'. A Yoruba proverb states: 'A proverb is a horse which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas'. This proverb demonstrates the overall function of proverbs, that is, to apprehend the essence of human relationships, situations, happenings, and behavioural patterns of people.

Dzobo (1992) notes that as elsewhere, in Africa, proverbs are highly effective for facilitating communication, and that the proper use of proverbs signifies maturity, wisdom, education and cultural insight. Furthermore, he suggests that proverbs have multiple uses and meanings, as follows: 1) as observations on human behaviour – to provide insight into the nature of human beingness or personhood; 2) to convey values – to reflect values that promote health and well-being, from the moral, spiritual, humanistic, economic, and intellectual to the material; and 3) as guides for conduct – as bases for determining the unacceptability of certain forms of behaviour, towards promoting sustainable interpersonal relations.

Examples of proverbs to provide insight into the nature of human beingness/ personhood, include: *it is usually the insect in your cloth that bites you* – the idea is that sometimes it is the people to whom one is closest – relatives or friends – who will most inflict hurt; *it is the coward who says, 'They are insulting us'* – the suggestion here is that only cowards are afraid to defend their own honour and leave it to others to stand up for them. Thus, proverbs that are centred in personhood development focus on improving the character of the person. For example, for young people, the proverb '*some of us are born great, some born to be great*' promotes positive aspirations for young people. Examples of proverbs used to convey values are: '*there is no wealth where there are no children*'; '*it is one's deeds that are counted, not one's years*'; and, '*goodness sells itself, badness walks around*'. The point of the first proverb is self-evident; the second suggests that one's life's work is the measure of one's life; and finally, the last proverb indicates that the value of a thing is in the inherent power that it has to satisfy human needs. Thus, these

proverbs teach strategies for improving the mind, body and spirit, and it is this power that attracts people to it.

Piper-Mandy and Rowe (2010) argue that personhood theory is the study of the journey (development) of the known, knowing, and knowable human spirit, since a person is a known, knowable, and knowing spirit, from an African worldview. Furthermore,

since personhood is defined in terms of knowing, learning theory for African people must be the study of the development and processes of the knowing that defines spirit journey (Piper-Mandy & Rowe 2010: 14).

While a fuller discussion of personhood theory is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to point out that, for the African, personhood is represented by the collective being, what Nobles (1976b) called the ‘extended self’. In this sense, proverbs can distil the way in which this ‘extended self’ becomes inculcated into the person, and allows them to function within the community from a collective perspective.

Lastly, examples of proverbs that can be used as guides for conduct include: *‘if you visit the country of frogs and you find them squatting, you must squat too even though you may find it inconvenient’* – emphasising both the need for adaptation and adjustment in life, as well as the requirement to respect the rules of the peoples whom you visit; *‘you do not use the left hand to point the way to your father’s village’*, where for most Africans, the use of the left hand is disrespectful, thus this proverb emphasises the need to admire and appreciate what you have in life; and, *‘once you have made up your mind to cross a river by walking through it, you do not mind getting your stomach wet’*, emphasising maintaining resolve in decisions, no matter the consequences. Similarly, we have *‘when spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion, a man alone cannot push a dhow into the sea’* indicating the power of cooperation and unity, *‘the strong person builds a path for the weak one to walk on’*, reflecting the need for personal responsibility for the welfare and well-being of others and the community. These proverbs teach strategies to maintain good relationships e.g. *‘you must hear and be deaf, blind but not see’* (teaching discretion, and at times, the imperative not to embarrass another in public).

Proverbs make explicit the purpose of one’s existence, the natural order of things, and the way we should relate to each other. As such they

represent a people's general disposition toward the world. Proverbs also represent strategies for dealing with life situations (Mayers 1976). Nussbaum (1998) had suggested that proverbs could be considered the distilled genius of oral cultures. As such they can identify and dignify a culture, bringing life into wisdom and wisdom into life.

Nwoga (1975) indicated that three levels of meanings can be discerned in proverbs: literal meanings, philosophical meanings, and contextual meanings. Nwoga emphasises that proverbs must always be examined both for *what* they say, and how *they* say it. The *what* and *how* situates the proverb such that it can always be relevant and meaningful across situations, contexts, and persons. Gyekye (1995) provided a more limited role for proverbs by contending that proverbs are fundamentally experiential, such that they can only really be grasped within the situational contexts or experiences under which they arose. Our framing of the value of African/ African American proverbs is that they represent a way of understanding African human behaviour within its broad context, as grounded, historic, interdependent, ongoing events.

According to Knappert (1989: 7),

the purpose of the proverb is not a fixed function in every recurrent identical situation ... they are flexible parts of human understanding of this world, ready to be adapted and applied to suit a particular, unique situation.

Mayers (1976: 198) has stated that 'proverbs also represent strategies for dealing with life situations'. As such they are a critical and vital tool to be used in the therapeutic process by Black psychologists trained in the discipline of Black psychology.

We contend that key features of African Psychology can be determined through an exploration of the moral teachings embedded within the analogical process of proverbs – the decision rules, interpersonal styles, theories of causation, expressive behaviour, and perceptual capacities – handed down from generation to generation, which serve as essential sources of insight into how both historic and contemporary African subjective realities are captured in time and space and across spirit.

Analogical thinking is a thought process that utilises a reference system as an aid to conceptualisation and focuses on the identification of

relationships and/ or similarities among experiences or phenomena. Thus, animal life is analogous to plant life; thinking is analogous to living. According to Mayers (1976: 197),

analogies can be identified among all experiences. Analogies identify and reinforce connections toward the objective of integrating all phenomena in an interdependent scheme (synthesis).

By doing so, analogies reveal the ‘synthetic’ and ‘synergistic capacity’ of all phenomena. The analogical process provides thinking with an ever-moving and ever-flowing quality, as well as the ability to produce a greater effect than the sum of the individual thoughts (ideas) connected by either inductive or deductive linkages. Mayers (1976: 197) further suggests that,

proverbs reflect the use of analogy as both content and process ... [T]he content is the specific message, the process is the reasoning system which relates a general observation to a specific event (deductive reasoning) or a specific event referring to a general truth (inductive reasoning).

This conceptual system she calls ‘analogical abstraction’, a sophisticated system of logical deductive/inductive reasoning that is not based on abstract generalisations, but rests on the application of the generalisation to a specific situation or the application of the specific event to the general truth. ‘Analogical abstraction is both a mechanism for and an illustration of intuitive synthesis’, according to Mayers (1976: 199). Analogical thinking provides the African with a mode of analysis that is grounded in their lived experiences and their philosophical foundations.

Analogical thinking, as discussed above, is also similar to figurative speech, which has served as a useful clinical tool to guide clinicians’ conceptualisations of presenting problems and subsequent interventions (Varra, Drossel & Hayes 2008); with adages, allegories, analogies, metaphors, maxims, and similes found across various therapeutic interventions (Blenkiron 2005). Proverbs reflect both analogical thinking and figurative speech, contextual metaphors that stress the nested, historical, and ongoing nature of human action, while focusing on a historically situated, purposive action context (Verra *et al.* 2008).

Problem-solving and Clinical Interventions

Proverbs often communicate problem-solving strategies such as used by the clever spider Ananse or Brer (Br'er) Rabbit. This can be an informal and subliminal way of teaching children and young people strategies for navigating the system of white supremacy. In therapy, these stories with proverbs attached can be called upon to help the client find their own solutions. In terms of proverbs, the most common one used in problem solving is '*what goes around, comes around*'. As a general statement applied to a specific situation the client has to determine (i.e., remember) what action could lead to a situation that would require understanding this particular proverb. In relation to health and well-being the proverbs, '*he who conceals his disease will never be cured*', and '*many people suffer most, the suffering they fear*', speak to the need for the client to be open to the healer in order for change to occur.

Proverbs have always been used by African (Black) people. For the most part, African (Black) people used proverbs to specifically reinforce the installation of certain values, attitudes, and ethics in our children, or to deal with general life situations. As a tool in the healing process, proverbs can be used to reveal the underlying principles that govern behaviour. The proverb makes explicit the purpose of one's existence, the natural order of things, and the appropriate behaviours that promote health and well-being. The healing process for people of African ancestry is necessarily complex, and has not been well addressed by Western models of psychology. While there has been increased attention to 'multicultural' models of treatment, there is need for further explication of an African-Centred model that more fully addresses the lived experience of African peoples. Addressing therapeutic implications for African-Centred psychologists, Rowe and Webb-Msemaji (2004: 713) noted,

[The] well-being of the community must be seen as being dependent on the health of its members, since illness and recovery are affected by an imbalance in social relations, the restoration of harmony, reduction of worry, and creation of order in the group constitute health. Disorder, then, has moral, social and psychological components that must be added to the diagnosis and analysis of human problems. Health and illness are not isolated phenomena; they include spiritual, physical, social, and psychological processes.

Black psychologists have been both socialised as well as trained in Western psychology. The prevailing mode of healing is ‘talk therapy’, in which the person engages in dialogue with the therapist and through this process of engagement, somehow healing takes place. As a healing modality, talk therapy in and of itself does not represent a meaningful process for people of African ancestry. Connectivity is the basis of all human relations. One has to be connected to other in order for meaningful interaction to take place. In traditional Western psychology, the goal is predominantly to remain disconnected with the person. In his critique of Western science, Akbar (1984) implies that the desire to remain objective and detached leads to a disconnect between the knower and the object that could be considered empty perceptual space. In the African-Centred paradigm, the knower and the object are interconnected in an intimate relationship. There is no empty perceptual space between the two. In the process of healing the knower (the healer) and the client (the other), both change simultaneously. While the healer is helping to change the patient, the interaction between the healer and the patient leads the healer to change at the same time. The therapeutic process is a relational situation, where the therapist has to establish a meaningful relationship with the person and it is this relationship, that includes the significance of proverbs in the vernacular, that represents the healing methodology.

Proverbs are critical in this healing methodology, as they ground both parties in the traditional African philosophical foundations and wisdom-truths. It gives the healer and the one who seeks illumination of their spirit via therapy a common language often rooted in Black vernacular language (V. Nobles 1996). It allows expression of concepts and experiences common to black folk (those colonised), rarely reflected in the language of their oppressors (the colonisers). The task of healing for people of African ancestry is to speak the truth of our traditional cultural principles and wisdom-truths in present day contexts. According to Nobles, Baloyi, and Sodi (2016: 47), ‘restoration or healing must involve the experience of being human; the expression of being human, and the essence of being human itself’.

Proverbial knowing as speech (i.e., talk) provides the cultural foundation and wisdom-truths for understanding African behavioural practices and the gateway to the illumination and enlivenment of the African spirit. Proverbial knowledge serves as an effective tool in the engagement process in that it provides insight into the spirit of the client; serves as a tool for instigation for reflective analysis by the client; acts as a mechanism for inspiring the spirit

of the client to seek and produce its authentic self in the healing process. Healing for the African is achieved through inspiration of the spirit to activate its own self-healing potential and produce wellness. This healing methodology is different from traditional ‘talk therapy’ in Western psychology that seeks to ‘manipulate’ the client to some resolution of a presenting problem without altering the basis of their beingness.

For example, during assessment in therapy, adding the use of cards with proverbs written on them, relevant to the client’s particular Afrikan culture (such as ‘*Things mama used to say*’ cards by Lorlett Hudson) can facilitate the healer finding out what is important to the one seeking further healing (the client). This is because the proverb(s) they choose in such an activity may indicate what is important to them. This can be useful particularly for traumatised clients who early in therapy may find it difficult to put their experiences into words, but can point to a card with a proverb which sums up their feelings. Likewise, Adinkra Symbols (symbols with meanings from Akan and Ashanti people of Old Kingdoms in Ghana and neighbouring regions in West Africa) have a proverb attached and can be used in therapy to explore the self and aid exploration. Furthermore, the transfer of proverbs across the diaspora to islands such as Jamaica (West Indies) is revealed when the concept of Ananse is found both in Jamaican proverbs and the Adinkra symbol of Ananse Ntontan (symbolising wisdom from the clever spider Ananse of African folktales).

McInnis (2018) in therapy with an adolescent black girl of African-Jamaican heritage, who was unsure of the meaning of the word ‘resilience’ offered the proverb ‘*rain a fall but dutty tough*’ (meaning that although it rains, if the ground is tough, the water will not get through). The young person instantly knew the meaning conveyed by the proverb (as indicated by her body language) and went on to list many examples of resilience relevant to her and family members. Furthermore, she allowed the healer to know a need for resilience was common within her family, which could later be explored in therapy and be built upon as a strength.

Proverbs contain sayings and indeed teachings about human experiences, events, and/or methods of dealing with daily endeavours. Thus, proverbs can be utilised in therapy to transcend superficial meaning of daily life occurrences by providing a context and shared cultural meaning of an experience. This heightened level of understanding can be carried across future life experiences, dilemmas, and relations.

Because proverbs are by nature ambiguous and numerous in their interpretation (Lieber 1984), this allows for the personalisation and examination of multiple analogic interpretations that can initiate personal change (Whaley 1993). Thus, while paradox has been noted in proverbs, there is subjective meaning in every experience. Proverbs then provide an opportunity for therapists to process and elicit heightened understanding of cultural truths and guiding principles of behaviour. Crucially, they may provide the one in search of healing a language to express their experiences, which the African therapist is likely to understand (or have tools to explore). Therapists can also use proverbs to make behavioural observations, convey observed inner conflicts, or cloak anxiety-laden communication in a more abstract manner (Nguyen, Foulks, & Carlin 1991). Thus, in the use of proverbs in the counselling process, therapists/healers must be willing to be more direct and clear about insights instead of being tentative and ambiguous as is often taught in Western models of psychology (Rowe & Webb-Msemaji 2004). Moreover, proverbs teach moral imperatives. While traditional Western models of thought promote objective positivism, the utilisation of proverbs allows a unique opportunity for African-Centred healers to educate ‘clients’ about indigenous teachings, which may have been lost or distorted in the assimilation process, while restoring health. To this end, Whaley (1993: 131) notes that proverbs’ potential efficacy as an agent of change lies in its ‘undisputed validity as a means of influence’.

African proverbs call forth the imperishable power of the ancestors who live on eternally through the generations. To know and speak our story is to preserve the motion of the ancestors, a rhythm essential to the life force. Proverbs therefore provide us with insight into the structure of the universe, if we know how to see, to hear, to smell – to know. But, just as importantly, African proverbs provide us a framework for living – in the fullest sense of the Word – in body and Spirit. African proverbs are distinctive– they are the source, spirit and manifestation of an African-Centred or Black Psychology. African Psychology has been developed through proverbs; it is not a de-contextualised and de-spiritualised artificial system of knowing. The system is simple elegance in its design, usefulness, and applicability. Our position is that our proverbs are the manifestation of such a system. Thus, African proverbs are both the symbols and forms; are real and magical; exoteric and esoteric; they are both substance and essence. African proverbs are thus, the unique creation of people for whom Spirit is Real!

Conclusion

Proverbs represent part of the tool-kit, the knowledge base, and skill set, the range of resources that the Black psychologist trained in African-Centred psychology brings to the therapeutic process. Through a process of establishing a healing relationship with the client the healer can use proverbs to engage in a dynamic, rhythmic and wholistic experience that produces healing through the remembering of the authentic way, the way it was when people of African ancestry had mastery of their own thoughts and actions. The form and content of the proverb enable the healer to take the client on an interactive journey of self-discovery grounded in the connectedness with others with the ultimate goal of re-centring the person positively in the community. Positive re-centring implies a sense of confidence, a belief that whatever the task they are capable of doing it; a sense of competence, a belief that they can do something; a sense of consciousness, an awareness of who and whose they are; a feeling of commitment, being connected to something greater than themselves; and a contributor, a recognition that they can make the time and space where they are better than it was before.

Through the process of analogical abstraction, the person can engage in an African-centred system of reasoning to arrive at a conclusion, a change in knowledge, attitude, belief and behaviour, that produces health and well-being. It is our contention that proverbs in various forms in the African diaspora represent one of the major keys, a necessary and sufficient condition, in the healing of the African community.

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