

Cultural Expressions of African Personality

Interaction vs. Reaction

Another pattern of considerable prominence found in the African-American life experience is the interactional pattern of "call and- response." This pattern has its most dramatic example in fundamentalist churches in which one finds the preacher's speech transformed into a litany of sentences and responses from the listeners. The spontaneous reactions and supportive statements of encouragement involve the speaker and listeners in a dynamic interactional dialogue. This stands in contrast to the traditional Euro-American speaker/audience setting in which the speaker or expert dispenses wisdom and the audience listens attentively and reacts only at appropriately defined moments.

This pattern, though most colorful in the speaker setting, is a pervasive occurrence within African culture. This on-going system of interaction and social reinforcement maintains relationships between people in almost all settings. Even a brief observation will reveal a considerable difference in the classrooms of many African-American teachers (if they are true to their cultural forms) will have much more of an interactional relationship with their students. This is an alternative to the more passive requirement of the traditional classroom where the child is expected to quietly and passively absorb and react only in some systematic and pre-defined form.

The passivity requirement of the traditional classroom probably accounts for one of the most common complaints of behavioral problems among African-American children. This complaint is one of hyperactivity and general classroom disorder. The hyperactivity has been attributed to everything from broken homes to brain damage. More often than not, such hyperactivity is an adaptation to boredom. The boredom is in direct response to the excessively low activity level of the classroom that so sharply contrasts with the home environment with which they are familiar.

The use of instructional methods that would maximize student response and involvement are likely to be much more effective in reaching African-American children. The teacher benefits from the direct and immediate feedback and the student gains a sense of connectedness with what is being presented. Singing activities often stimulate such resounding interest because they involve the kind of group participation that reaffirms the sense of oneness, which is such a critical cultural motif among African people (Nobles, 1978).

African Thought

Another distinctive characteristic of the African-American child is the form of thinking and problem solving that they have acquired from the conditioning of their cultural and life experiences. This characteristic is a strong reliance on internal cues and reactions as a means of problem solving. This is in contrast to the enforced reliance on external cues that is required for most problem solutions in a classroom setting. This form of problem solving receives very little respect in Western culture because it is viewed as too subjective. Objectivity is considered as the hallmark of scientific enterprise. Though objective observation is critical in the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge, it is not the exclusive means of acquiring knowledge.

This form of thinking has been called the function of "intuition" by Carl Jung (Jacob, 1963). He is one of the few European theorists who has described this characteristic in some detail. As observed by Dr. Jung, this particular thought function does not have any considerable prominence in the West though it is a highly developed function among African and Asian peoples. We might add that it has persisted as an essential dimension of African-American thought. There is a cultural respect for internal cues and "hunches" as a means of acquiring information. Despite the scientific unreliability of this form of information getting, it offers some advantages that reliance on the external simply cannot produce because of its limitations in time and space.

Because of this affective component to cognition for the African-American child, he is particularly vulnerable to his emotional reactions interfering with his learning. His sense of being disliked by a teacher can devastate his intellectual performance. On the other hand, his sense of being liked and respected by the teacher can wrought wondrous improvements in his intellectual performance. This probably accounts for the frequent observation of rather extreme fluctuation in performance between classes for the same student. His subjective reaction to the teacher can have a rather severe effect upon his performance.

This reliance on intuition is very adaptive in an environment where learning and problem solving usually occur in relationship to people. Such inner processes are very informative about inner processes of other people and provides information beyond the particular information that is verbally communicated. However, in a setting where the focus and the orientation is on objects, then there are predictable difficulties when such objects have no inner reality nor is there a medium between the object and oneself that has such an inner reality.

Many African-American children reveal previously unexpressed psychomotor and reasoning skills when object manipulation is placed in an interpersonal context. When the object manipulation is done as a means of interacting with another person, the task that previously received little effective attention from the child suddenly takes on new significance for him. It seems that African-American children are not as disposed to manipulation of objects for manipulation sake as Euro-American children. Even very young children show a decided preference for human rather than object interactions.

Reliance on intuition makes African-American children particularly adept in social relations because such a facility relies heavily on empathy. In fact, many African-American children are so adept at getting people to do what they want them to do that they have frequently been described as "psychopathic manipulators." In fact, this is only applied empathy and it utilizes the primary social skill that we learn as human beings and that is: how to get people to act, as you want them to act.

So long as the setting is an interpersonal setting, as we observed above, the child is comfortable and efficient. When the learning situation is devoid of human involvement, then frequently, the African-American child experiences difficulty.

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