Cross-cultural Differences in Preferred Forms of Address: Implications for Work with African American Adults

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Abstract: *Using an individual's last name indicates respect and contributes to positive interaction with African American clients and adults of African descent. This paper discusses the importance of using social titles as a proper form of address during, and sometimes after, the initial professional relationship. Two case vignettes will highlight potential difficulties that non-African American practitioners may experience when using first names with African Americans within the professional realm. The vignettes include a scenario for a supervisor and a client.*

Keywords: African American, social titles, professional relationship, social work

Generally, people who are of African American heritage understand the importance of addressing African American adults with formal forms of address. This paper focuses on providing non-African American social work professionals with information regarding the intricacy of *initially addressing* African American clients and others of African heritage by their first names during the helping relationship. The current cultural trend is the over familiar use of first names by virtual strangers. Salespeople seem to embrace this gesture as a way to help individuals feel relaxed and closer to them or to express a level of ease and general friendship.

Likewise, the social work community is a microcosmic reflection of larger social practices. Because of the historical, political, and sociological context of slavery and racism, many African Americans, especially the older generation, still prefer the titles of Mr., Miss, Mrs., and Dr. In light of this history, many African Americans experience disrespect and feelings of invisibility. Franklin (1999) defines invisibility as an "inner struggle with the feeling that one's talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognized because of prejudice and racism" (p. 1).

As social workers prepare to work in a variety of practice settings, their effectiveness in developing rapport will depend on their success in fostering practical client, community, and professional relationships during the helping process. Similarly, social work schools should prepare students to understand how negative

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interactions can originate from casually addressing African Americans by their first names. In many instances, this blunder, which usually occurs during the initial phase of introductions and information gathering, may impede the worker's ability to effectively engage and establish a helping relationship. This paper highlights the benefit of addressing African American adults, especially clients, prior to establishment of the worker/client relationship, by the appropriate title and surname unless otherwise granted permission.

Two case vignettes will highlight potential difficulties that practitioners may experience when using first names with African Americans in a professional context. The vignettes include a scenario for a supervisor and a client.

THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NAMES AND SOCIAL TITLES

Modes of address for African American families have historical, cultural, and psychological significance. Whether social work professionals use the first, last, nickname, or name with title should be evaluated in relation to the impact of establishing positive interpersonal and professional interaction with clients and community emissaries within the professional setting. It is helpful to understand the day-to-day challenges of feeling invisible, against the backdrop of slavery and racism, to maximize practitioners' success in conveying respect and dignity to African American clients (Bean, Perry & Bedell, 2002).

Research by Leissner (1997; 1998) exposes the practice during slavery of denying slaves fixed names, because they were legally defined as chattel with no civil or social rights. In a show of control and power, slave owners often withheld naming a slave until the slave was bought and took the name of his or her master. In many instances, slaves were assigned names that were meant to demoralize and humiliate them. For example, names such as Sambo, Gamesome, and Lies reflected slave owners' perceptions of the name-bearer's character (Leissner, 1997; 1998; King, 1998). Irrespective of age, and as another form of disavowing dignity, slaves were referred to as "boys" or "girls." For example, young white girls were addressed as Miss and slaves senior in years were called "boy" or "girl" as a way of stripping them of pride. In some cases, slaves were expected to answer to any name that suited the temperament or humor of the slave owner. The standard action was to give slaves only a first name. By stark comparison, white males and females were respectfully addressed formally and informally as Mr., Miss, or Mrs. (Leissner, 1997; 1998).

Jim Crow Era

Following the Civil War, slavery was replaced by other forms of subjugation called "Jim Crow." This quasi-legal system segregated and discriminated against black people from reconstruction through the mid-1960s (Rosenberg, 2002). It was based on the lead character in 19th Century minstrel shows whose style of dance mimicked a prancing crow. Jim Crow was a system enforced with threats of jail or lynching that sheltered whites with impunity, while black Americans were deprived of basic legal rights and dignities (Parker, 2002). Analogous to the established practices of slavery, the perpetuation of language that reinforced the inferior status of black people was equally promoted during this era. White people did

not address black people with the customary courtesy titles of respect. The standard protocol was to address blacks by their first names. Routinely, white children referred to older African Americans as "uncle" and "aunt" or by their first names. The youthfulness of the white child and the advanced years of the black person demanded of blacks a deference in the presence of whites that whites were not expected to reciprocate. These time-honored practices were vivid reminders that Jim Crow was slavery in everything except name (Yardley, 1998).

Professional Respect

Using the last name and appropriate title with African American clients is a way to set the stage for showing respect and increases the likelihood of positive interactions and satisfaction among social work personnel and clients. A level of awareness and understanding regarding proper deference and respect can enhance the helping relationship and increase workers' effectiveness. Thwarted interventions, slow starts, and tense communications can be significantly curtailed in favor of greater client flexibility and cooperation.

Most experts agree that when you respect someone, you recognize and acknowledge their worth and value on some level. Respect involves treating people in a way that reflects kindness and politeness. It means treating others as we would wish to be treated. Buss (1999) explains that what makes someone valuable is not whether he or she is a member of a privileged class, but that he or she is a person. Therefore, because human beings are worthy of being treated with dignity, treating them rudely undermines their belief in their own intrinsic worth. When a person is treated with disinterest, contempt, or a lack of respect, it conveys the message that the other person's concerns, feelings, and point of view do not matter (Buss, 1999). That is, that they have no intrinsic value.

In examining respect from the perspective of good or bad codes of etiquette, it is suggested that the system of manners plays a pivotal role in one's moral life, which helps us to avoid being discourteous, impolite, rude, inconsiderate, offensive, or insulting (Buss, 1999). Bad manners "undermine people's ability to acknowledge one another's dignity directly; it makes it difficult, if not impossible, for each person to assure every other that he appreciates the other's intrinsic value" (p. 804). This was the problem with the racist code of behavior. According to Buss (1999), the racist code of bad manners instructed whites, before and after the emancipation of slaves, not to acknowledge blacks as worthy of respect.

Carter's (2001) article on rudeness also supports the point of view that respect is a right due to each person by virtue of his or her humanity. Commenting on the informality of using first names, the following remarks were shared. "I was raised with the belief that calling a stranger by his first name is a privilege, not a right, and it is available only if bestowed. Calling people we have met by their first names is said to be part of the new informality of our day. But it is, I think, actually part of the new incivility, or perhaps what we ought to call the new rudeness" (Carter, 2001, p. 1).

The Helping Relationship

In general, the purpose of the client-social worker relationship is to help the client with identified needs and problems (Biestek, 1994). With the diversity of today's

client population, empathy and good casework relationship skills are stressed by schools of social work as a way for graduates to establish openness and bring coherence to the task of cultural sensitivity (Dyche & Zayas, 2001). As in other human endeavors, the social work literature is replete with publications that promote the importance of worker relationships that foster warmth and cooperation with clients. Social workers are taught to assume unconditional respect for the uniqueness of each client and the context of the client's life. The worker and the client reflect on experiential history, biological propensities, and the community of shared meanings embedded in the language of the client's everyday life. From this perspective, the use of first names may be social workers' response to building strong working relationships by creating friendliness and an environment to help ease any anxiety related to problem-solving.

CASE VIGNETTES

The following vignettes include a scenario of a supervisor and client with a person of other than African American heritage. These examples may help to clarify conceptualizations that have been previously discussed. These examples are based upon real experiences that have been shared with the authors.

Vignette #1—The Agency Supervisor

Mrs. Jeanette Wilson, age 60, has been a supervisor at a faith-based social service agency for the past 17 years. This agency operates under the auspices of the church of which she is a member. She manages a staff of 12 and has won numerous professional and community awards for her work in the area of children's services. She serves in various capacities within her church, such as head of the Women's Department, which is primarily responsible for the Christian education of the females who attend her church. There are 300 women from her congregation who participate in the Women's Department. Mrs. Wilson is regarded as a respected elder within her church and community. She has also been a field supervisor over 10 student interns throughout the years. The interns have come from various counseling professions such as social work, psychology, and counseling.

Amanda was assigned to Mrs. Wilson as a social work student intern. Amanda interned with her for one year during her senior year in college. After receiving the student's name from the field placement coordinator, Mrs. Wilson contacted Amanda by telephone for introductory purposes. She introduced herself as Mrs. Wilson and referred to Amanda by her surname. Amanda quickly replied, "My surname is not necessary Jeanette. Feel free to call me Mandy." Mrs. Wilson did not request to be called by surname but thought that if she referred to herself repeatedly as such throughout the remainder of their conversation that the student would catch on, but this did not happen. At one point in the conversation, the student requested Mrs. Wilson's agency address to send her some correspondence. As she repeated the address back to Mrs. Wilson, she began stating her name by spelling Jeanette. Mrs. Wilson interjected "Mrs." to which the student did not reply. Several days later, Mrs. Wilson received the correspondence. There was no "Mrs." preceding her name. She decided to address this with the student during their first supervisory meeting. Although she had never had this problem with any African American student, this was not the first time that this issue surfaced with non-African American interns.

This case poses several issues for consideration as well. Social work internships are designed to engage "the student in supervised social work practice and provide opportunities to apply classroom learning in the field environment" (CSWE, p. 7, 2001). Although helping students to link social work theory with practice is the primary objective of social work internships, the practicum provides the students an opportunity to demonstrate "that they are capable of integrating and applying the theoretical material that they have learned …to a diversity of practice situations and populations" (Moore & Lott Collins, p. 173, 2001). The African American church can provide a student with a wealth of learning experiences, among which is the opportunity to broaden his or her understanding about the customs, beliefs, and traditions that exist among African Americans.

Although the services were provided in an African American religious environment, the student's practicum supervisor was very instrumental for both secular and non-secular activities, for which her community applauded her. Adullah (1998) noted that those within the counseling professions "must be able to appreciate the personal strength of Black women, who have historically survived the physical enslavement period, the psychological enslavement and the self-preservation strategies of survival through assimilation" (p. 203). Therefore, the practice of addressing African American adults by surname or title has a much deeper meaning within the African American community. It is done, in part, to symbolize the recognition of the numerous contributions that the elderly have made to the community. These contributions have been and are manifested in such ways as rearing grandchildren in the absence of biological parents and making their homes available to blood and fictive kin. They worked tirelessly towards the abolition of Jim Crow Laws and during the pre-Civil Rights era in which they often lost their lives due to race-hate violence that was perpetrated against them. Because of the great role that African American women have historically and presently play within their families and community, they are traditionally held in high esteem within their communities (Dhooper & Moore, 2001).

That the student's practicum occurred within an African American church is significant relative to the enormous social support that is provided by this institution to those it serves. Second only in importance to the African American family, the African American church is a place where African American people are affirmed and where the elderly are treated with respect and dignity (McRae, Carey & Anderson-Scott, 1998). For instance, as Head of the Women's Department and superior of the faith-based initiative of her church, Mrs. Wilson may likely have direct and frequent contact with her pastor and other church officials. As such, she may be influential in programmatic and civic decisions that are made by church leaders. Her voice may be important regarding the type of social work initiatives that her church supports. It could have proven beneficial to the student had she been made aware of this information by the person who coordinated her field experience prior to her initial contact with her practicum supervisor.

The authors have been careful to qualify that this social blunder could possibly have been avoided. Had this student's lack of sensitivity been based on an assumption that she may have made about the value of her supervisor based on race, then the issue is one of her not respecting an African American person who

assumes a supervisory role. Or, the student's behavior may have been demonstrating poor manners or a general practice of rudeness. This is an issue that she and her practicum supervisor need to explore.

Vignette #2—Family Services Client

Mrs. Ellen Nance is a 69-year old grandmother with four grandchildren. Faye and her six-year old son, Jason, reside with Mrs. Nance, because Faye has a debilitating physical disability. Her disabling condition results in limited mobility and reduced physical energy for day-to-day activities. However, Mrs. Nance maintains primary responsibility for her grandson.

Because of Faye's deepening depression and reduced parental involvement in school activities, Jason's grades declined. Seeking a hardship waiver, Mrs. Nance requested assistance from the school's social service unit so she could enroll Jason in the after school-reading program. Her request was two weeks past the deadline for applications. Alvin, a 25-year old school social worker with six years of social work experience, was assigned to assess the family's eligibility. Although this was a self-referral, the social worker expressed exasperation in working with Mrs. Nance during his monthly supervisory conference. Since supervisory conferences are utilized to foster professional growth, Mrs. Hendricks, a Caucasian supervisor, requested that the social worker discuss his concerns with the intention of helping him to process some likely reasons behind Mrs. Nance's terse response to questions during the home interview.

The case review supported that the family met the eligibility requirements and were appropriate for the program. However, Mrs. Nance's curt and passive engagement during the home interview created unnecessary delays in processing the paperwork for final approval. The assessment indicated that Mrs. Nance had retired from a job of 15 years as a housekeeper. The worker recalled that during his first contact Mrs. Nance referred to her former employers as those "so-called educated people that I worked for." She continued by remarking, "I gave them the best of my years but to them I was just another black person . . . there to clean up their mess and to act invisible to their superior acting ways."

Mrs. Hendricks probed further for information regarding the initial stages of the interview, the kinds of questions asked during the information gathering process, and the type of closure displayed at the end of the home visits. Mrs. Hendricks further explored the manner in which the social worker had addressed the client during the first visit. The worker acknowledged that Mrs. Nance was referred to as "Ellen" and considered that this might explain the communication barrier.

Following consultation with the supervisor, the worker used the final home visit to determine if the supervisor's assumptions were plausible. Practicing active listening, the social worker discovered that while Mrs. Nance referenced her employers as Mr. & Mrs., she instead was addressed as "Ellen" even by the three children in the home, who ranged in age from three to twelve. Inadvertently, in trying to show himself as being friendly, the social worker had created a replication of the same disrespect Mrs. Nance incurred in her employment with Caucasian employers. Verifying these perceptions with the client, the social worker was quick to offer a sincere apology for any unintended disrespect. This gesture reportedly lessened ten-

sion towards the end of the home visit. Because of these experiences, the social worker gained an understanding about historical and cultural social protocols from an African perspective.

Although Alvin introduced himself by his first name, Mrs. Nance silently objected to him assuming that he could also call her by her first name. To take such prerogative was a flashback to her years of "invisible" existence at the home of her employers. Although she was old enough to be a grandmother, her employment experiences relegated her to the role of a child. Especially infuriating was the fact that the children in her employer's home were not expected to show deference to her maturity and older age. Therefore, she resented a younger white male acting so familiar as if to dismiss her struggle and entitlement to be treated in an esteemed manner. From her cultural perspective, as a senior citizen, her age should serve as a mark of reverence and honor. Alvin's reference to her as "Ellen" sounded flip, informal, and lacking in dignity. Mrs. Nance openly shared that as a child she was taught to address all people over 18 by social title and surname and by "Yes, Sir, No, Sir—Yes, Madam, No, Madam." She also said that by virtue of their greater life experience, wisdom, and maturity, adults should be accorded respect by word and demeanor. From this point of view, Mrs. Nance attributes disrespect to moral and social decay tainted by racism. But other factors could have contributed to the way in which the social worker addressed the client, such as a lack of understanding about the importance and use of surnames when addressing African American clients, or again, as in the first scenario, a demonstration of poor manners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Among the basic ethical principles of the profession of social work is the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. To that end social workers are to "treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity" (Longress, 2000). Included in cultural differences are a group's customs, traditions, and patterns of social interaction. As has been discussed, the use of surnames by African Americans when referencing one another, particularly the elderly, has its roots in a history of being marginalized and purposeful humiliation by members of the dominant culture. It is an empowering gesture that signifies respect and value for the humanity of the individual.

With respect to this issue, the task for social work educators is to: (1) educate themselves about the values and practices of diverse groups, (2) move students beyond being politically correct in their expression of "cultural sensitivity" to practicing cultural sensitivity wholeheartedly, and (3) convey to clients that difference does not mean deviant. Martinez-Brawley (2000) asserts, "While we have sought to teach 'cultural sensitivity,' we have often failed to make it more than 'a bag of tricks' or a cloak we carry around but do not necessarily apply from the heart" (p. 198).

Basic to the issue of the failure or refusal to address an individual in the manner in which he or she requests is lack of etiquette. "Good etiquette means knowing the rules that apply in any situation" (Masson, 2001, p. 18). Etiquette or the lack

thereof among college students is an issue that has been discussed for decades (Trout, 1998, A40J). A number of factors have been attributed to this. They include the lack of collegiality that students sometimes observe among faculty, the examples set for them by parents, the lowering of educational standards, and the effects of living in a capitalistic society where individuality and the preservation of self are esteemed over collectivism (Damon, 1995, Owen, 1995). Whatever the reasons for this insensitivity, it becomes the task of social work educators to make students aware of the cultural expectations of the clients with whom they work, provide them with avenues to experience the culture of others, and make them aware of the consequences of their behavior for both their clients and themselves. Clients may feel demeaned by a worker who shows limited understanding about their traditions. This can subsequently lead to negative perceptions about social workers and an unwillingness to enter into a helping relationship. The fact that this task is not easy cannot be overstated.

However, the challenge remains. If the profession is to produce individuals who can work effectively with a diverse array of populations, then "Social work in the academy must take more seriously the link between character and everyday behavior" (Martinez-Brawley, 2000, p. 208). Practitioners should therefore recognize the value of respectfully addressing African American adults, especially since such actions can build intercultural connections to African American clients, community networks, and professional stakeholders in culturally acceptable ways.

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