# An African-Centered Approach to Domestic Violence

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**ABSTRACT**

African-centered social work offers a set of principles upon which to develop a culturally competent response to domestic violence as experienced by African American families. Finding creative and relevant solutions for addressing domestic violence can keep family members safe, identify and address abuse, and keep children in the home when appropriate. Such efforts can promote greater awareness of healthy family relationships and the empowerment of individuals to shape their lives in a healthy and safe manner. In this article, in addition to examining principles of the African-centered paradigm, the author offers specific ways in which the paradigm can be applied to domestic violence.

Domestic violence impacts people across race, class, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. No group can claim immunity from this problem, which is universal in scope. Domestic violence can be defined as "a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners" (Schechter & Ganley, 1995, p. 10). Although both men and women are abused, 85% to 95% of survivors are women (Rennison, 2003; Tjaden &Thoennes, 2000). Reported estimates suggest that over 5 million women experience domestic violence annually (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003).

Domestic violence has been described as more prevalent among African American and American Indian families (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The accuracy of this assertion is questionable because of methodological shortcomings, low numbers of people of color in domestic violence research, and difficulty getting people of color to seek assistance from formal authorities (Asbury, 1993; D. W. Campbell, 1993; Hampton, Carrillo, & Kim, 1998; Hampton, Gelles, & Harrop, 1989; Hampton & Yung, 1996; Lockhart, 1985). Yet there are statistics related to African Americans that cannot be ignored. Compared with all other groups, African Americans are more likely to be killed or sustain a serious injury because of domestic violence (Fagan, 1996; Hampton et al., 1998; Hampton & Yung, 1996; Rennison & Welchans, 2000). African Americans are also more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated because of domestic violence (Mann, 1987; Richie, 1996; T. Roberts, 1994). African American children are more likely to be removed from the home because of domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2004a), and the contraction of HIV among African American women is higher compared with other women when involved in a domestic violence situation (Wingood & DiClemente, 1997; Wyatt, Axelrod, Chin, Carmona & Loeb, 2000). Yet African Americans resist requesting support from formal systems of care, such as the criminal justice and social service systems (Bent-Goodley, 2003; Joseph, 1997; Peterson-Lewis, Turner, & Adams, 1988; West, 1999).

In spite of the knowledge of domestic-violence challenges experienced by African Americans, there are limited culturally competent remedies offered to secure change regarding this issue (Asbury, 1987; Bent-Goodley, 2005; D. W. Campbell, 1993; Gondolf, Fisher, & McFerron, 1991; Sorenson, 1996; West, 1999). Thus, African Americans are often revictimized by service providers because of negative stereotypes and a lack of cultural understanding (Allard, 1991; Hampton & Gelles, 1994; Joseph, 1997; Kupenda, 1998; Richie, 1996; Wyatt, 1997). In this article, I will discuss how to apply cultural competence through an African-centered approach to domestic violence and provide implications for practice with African American families.

## The Need for a Culturally Competent Approach

The ability to engage diverse populations according to cultural nuances and understandings can result in more relevant solutions and successful outcomes (Fong & Furuto, 2001; Green, 1999). Without a culturally competent approach, practitioners often create misinformed assessments, ineffective interventions, and faulty evaluations (Bent-Goodley, 2005). The African-centered or Afrocentric approach provides a culturally competent alternative to respond to domestic violence in the African American family.

Williams (1992, 1999) stressed that the lack of a culturally competent approach in batterers' intervention programs has resulted in low participation and completion rates for African American men. African American men often question the credibility and capability of non–African American practitioners to address their issues. Williams (1999) stated that practitioners must have (a) knowledge of themselves and their culture; (b) knowledge of the history, strengths, and challenges of African American families; and (c) the ability to engage the community to sustain advances in the family. Finally, the practitioner must also be cognizant of and prepared to address issues of social justice and oppression.

Gondolf and Williams (2001) asserted the need for culturally focused counseling, defined as "specialized counseling for racially homogenous groups that explicitly identifies and addresses cultural issues that may reinforce violence or prevent barriers to stopping violence" (p. 284). They provided specific recommendations as to how to engage African American men who batter from a culturally competent perspective by exploring, for example, issues of discrimination, experiences with violence, and past relationships with women. Reporting promising results, the authors assessed

> … the practitioner would work toward helping the abusive partner connect with his or her strengths and motivations to reinforce change.

evaluations of culturally competent approaches among batterers' intervention programs. The results point to the importance of having a culturally competent approach when engaging African American men who batter.

Barnes (1999) provided important recommendations for using cultural competence among African American families experiencing domestic violence in an article largely written for nurse practitioners and researchers. She stressed the need to understand the historical experiences and contemporary inequities experienced by African Americans when providing domestic violence services. The author asserted that theories and interventions must embrace the diversity within groups of color, recognizing that the African American community is not homogeneous but instead composed of many ethnic groups. She further recommended that studies should include researchers from diverse populations and that practitioners must be willing to engage in self-examination that exposes their stereotypes and biases.

D. W. Campbell (1993) outlined the need to use an Afrocentric approach to engage women who have experienced abuse in another article written primarily for nurse practitioners working with African American families experiencing domestic violence. She emphasized principles of interconnectedness, spirituality, and unity as a basis for engaging African American women. She suggested that practitioners be aware of internalized stereotypes, the perception that she is capable of sustaining abuse, and her motivation to maintain racial loyalty despite its negative impact. Racial loyalty is when "the African American woman may withstand abuse and make a conscious self-sacrifice for what she perceives as the greater good of the community but to her own physical, psychological, and spiritual detriment" (Bent-Goodley, 2001, p. 323). It represents a major reason why African American women do not report abuse. Deadly in its consequences, the silence of abuse is substantiated on the basis of the need to protect African American men from further discriminatory treatment and to not feed into negative stereotypes about African Americans. Awareness of this reality can help practitioners better address domestic violence experienced by African Americans.

These articles point to the need to develop culturally sound practices for the formation of assessment, intervention, and evaluation. This article will add to the literature by offering a means of applying African-centered theories to the problem of domestic violence to better assist African American families struggling with this issue.

## Definition and Components of African-Centered Social Work

African-centered social work (ACSW) can be defined as "a method of social work practice based on traditional African philosophical assumptions that are used to explain and to solve human and societal problems" (Schiele, 1997, p. 804). ACSW incorporates values, knowledge, and skills that encourage the development and self-definition of African American communities, families, and individuals. Thus, social work is not separated by macro or micro distinctions but instead is viewed as a mechanism for social justice on behalf of people of African ancestry and humanity. Graham (1999) had the following to say on this subject:

> The African-centered worldview goes beyond the issues of historical oppression and draws on historical sources to revise a collective text—the best of Africa—to develop social work approaches and patterns which support the philosophical, cultural, and historical heritage of African people throughout the world. (p. 258)

The African-centered paradigm is not offered in response to other cultural orientations. Instead, it is a worldview rooted in the common values of ancient African cultures established long before Africans were taken to America (Akbar, 1991; Graham, 2000; Nobles, 1986; Schiele, 2000).

The use of African-centered principles to aid in healthy identity formation, positive self-worth, and culturally competent intervention planning has been noted by several researchers (Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990; Harvey, 2001; Harvey & Rauch, 1997; Jackson & Sears, 1992; A. Roberts, Jackson & Carlton-LaNey, 2000). For example, Harvey and Hill (2004) empirically evaluated the use of African principles among at-risk African American youth, finding that the African-centered approach positively impacts self-esteem and leads to a decrease in violent behavior. In Monges's (1999) evaluation of a rites of passage program for female college students, she found evidence of increased self-esteem and greater feelings of connectedness among the women at the end of the program. Although they did not apply the African-centered approach to domestic violence, these scholars have documented the importance of using African-centered principles in social work practice. Scholars have noted the importance of using an African-centered approach when addressing domestic violence in the African American community (Bell et al., 1990; D. W. Campbell, 1993; J. C. Campbell & Campbell, 1996; Myers, 1988). This article represents one step to operationalize how African-centered principles can be applied to domestic violence. Eight African-centered principles are described below: fundamental goodness, self-knowledge, communalism, interconnectedness, spirituality, self-reliance, language and the oral tradition, and thought and practice. Although each of these principles is presented individually, they are connected as part of the larger African-centered paradigm. Collectively, the principles help individuals "understand and respect the sameness of self and of other individuals, and to have a high sense of responsibility for the well-being and harmonious interconnection between self and community" (Harvey & Hill, 2004, p. 68). For a full discussion of the principles and how they are connected, see Akbar (1991) and Nobles (1986), or to understand how the principles connect with social work practice, see Graham (2000), Harvey and Rauch (1997), and Schiele (1996, 1997, 2000).

### Fundamental Goodness

An important principle of the African-centered paradigm is that each person is fundamentally good. It "encourages the belief that human beings have a proclivity toward goodness and construction rather than evil and destruction" (Schiele, 2000, p. 32). They are not genetically or socially predisposed to hurt others. Instead, people are inherently good and have the propensity to become better.

### Self-Knowledge

A fundamental social work principle is to begin where the client is. However, the African-centered principle of self-knowledge encourages the practitioner to begin where the practitioner is . As Myers (1988) said, "Self knowledge is the basis of all knowledge" (p. 76). In essence, it is through the practitioner's self-consciousness that one can most effectively engage and assist someone else in his or her transformation process. Martin and Martin (2002) documented that traditional African helpers were greatly respected and completed many years of education and personal growth before they could practice in the helping profession. These years of development centered on self-reflection, healing, and growth. Encouraging exploration and resolution of issues so the practitioner fully recognizes his or her vulnerabilities, limitations, and strengths is central to the helping role.

### Communalism

Communalism is a key component of the African-centered paradigm. Communalism is defined as "sensitivity to the interdependence of people and the notion that group concerns transcend individual strivings" (Harvey, 2001, p. 227). This principle promotes the significance of the extended family and the larger community in the development of African American families and individuals. The community can be a source of support and strain (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Hill, 1997), yet the collective takes priority over the individual's needs (Monges, 1999; Schiele, 2000).

### Interconnectedness

An additional component of the African-centered paradigm is that of interconnectedness, which recognizes that people "are dependent upon each other; they are, in essence, considered as one" (Graham, 1999, p. 258). The

principles of interconnectedness and collective struggle are evident throughout the African American experience (Akbar, 1991; Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Woodson, 1933). Valuing this perspective, the practitioner understands that people and systems are interrelated and that the worker's existence is tied to that of the client; thus, the client's outcome and the worker's effectiveness are connected to the community and society's success.

### Spirituality

Spirituality is another critical component of the African-centered paradigm. Spirituality can be defined as "the sense of the sacred and divine" (Martin & Martin, 2002, p. 1). Social work has only recently embraced the importance of understanding spirituality for social work practice (Bullis, 1996; Ellor, Netting, & Thibault, 1999). From an African-centered perspective, the ability to connect with the spirit force is fundamental to the helping process (Graham, 1999; Harvey, 2001). The client's sense of spirituality interprets, defines, and brings meaning to life events (Smith, 1997). It is recognized as a source of strength, a form of healing, and a viable coping mechanism (Harvey & Rauch, 1997; Martin & Martin, 1995). Consequently, spirituality is not seen as an afterthought but is central to effectively engaging the client system.

### Self-Reliance

Another essential component of the African-centered paradigm is self-reliance (Fanon, 1963; Karenga, 1993; Myers, 1988; Nobles, 1986). Teaching the client to be self-reliant by providing opportunities to develop concrete skills is critical. Although the collective experience is always at the center, members of the community are expected to make a contribution to the community and society. Thus, they must have the life and social skills to ensure this ability. Social work is then an option-building profession that is about more than resolving a problem; it is also about creating opportunities for advancement and securing resources for change (Bent-Goodley, 2002). The social worker then does not empower the client; through self-reliance, the client empowers herself. The social worker uses her knowledge and skills to help the client develop a range of tools to progress in a healthy manner.

### Language and the Oral Tradition

Language and the oral tradition are also a part of the African-centered paradigm (Asante, 1987; Harvey, 2001; Karenga, 1993). Language brings people together and develops a basis of understanding, but it can also create confusion and dissonance. Consequently, the social worker must not only know the client's language but also the meaning ascribed to language. The flow of communication or rhythm is also a part of the oral tradition (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1987; Diop, 1991). Rhythm determines when it is appropriate to be silent and when to use other forms of communication during an encounter. Consequently, the oral tradition is

inclusive of language, the meaning ascribed by the ethnic group to language, and the rhythm of the interaction.

### Thought and Practice

The principle of thought and practice is primarily from the Black feminist tradition (Hill-Collins, 1991). However, this principle is relevant to the African-centered perspective in that it emphasizes combining knowledge with social action. The idea of having knowledge of an injustice without engaging in planned change to eradicate the problem is antithetical to the African-centered paradigm. Practitioners are expected to engage in social change to ensure a fair and just society.

## Application to Domestic Violence

Applied to domestic violence, the African-centered paradigm provides a foundation for engaging clients and meeting their needs from a culturally competent perspective. These principles form the basis for rethinking how to engage African Americans experiencing and perpetrating domestic violence. The African-centered principle, its meaning, and corresponding domestic violence application are illustrated in Table 1 and described below.

### People Can Change

Using the African-centered paradigm, the practitioner would believe that the abusive person has the capacity to change. In this context, the practitioner's challenge is to connect with the fundamental goodness of the client and use it to promote healthy behavior. In terms of the survivor, despite the number of times she may have sought assistance because of abuse or may have left the abuser and returned, the practitioner would understand that she has the capacity to make a different choice. Understanding this capacity, the practitioner would work with the survivor from this perspective and continue to provide nonjudgmental services that reflect the possibility for change. In terms of the perpetrator, the practitioner would believe in the capacity of the person to change his or her behavior and way of thinking. Understanding this capacity, the practitioner would work towards helping the abusive partner connect with his or her strengths and motivations to reinforce change. By exposing survivors and perpetrators to their individual options, by providing them with examples of individuals that have changed through assigned mentors and peer interaction, and by engaging the client in a nonjudgmental manner, the practitioner can facilitate the individual's understanding that she or he can make a different choice.

### Start Where You Are

Relevant to domestic violence, one must be fully aware of how previous experiences may impact the ability to effectively work with this issue. Issues of racial and gender oppression must be personally examined. One must carefully examine sex-role perceptions, unresolved issues of

**TABLE 1.** *An Application of African-Centered Principles to Domestic Violence*

| AFRICAN-CENTERED PRINCIPLE | MEANING OF PRINCIPLE | APPLICATION TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE |
|---|---|---|
| Fundamental goodness | People are inherently good. | Everyone has the capacity to change. |
| Self-knowledge | You must understand and know yourself before you can help someone else. | Begin where you are. |
| Communalism | The extended family and community are central to the development of the individual. | Community and extended family influence can impact and sustain efforts to change. |
| Interconnectedness | People are interrelated and their existence is tied together. | The survival of one is linked to the other. |
| Spirituality | Connecting with the spirit force is essential. | Healing through spirituality and faith-based intervention is necessary. |
| Self-reliance | You are expected to make a contribution to the community and society through self-expression. | Develop new definitions and build institutions. |
| Language and oral tradition | Meaning ascribed to words and expression are as important as how one communicates. | Develop new language, enhance culturally-based communication, and appropriate use of timing. |
| Thought and practice | You are expected to combine knowledge with social action. | Engage in advocacy to address systematic oppression and discrimination. |

abuse and oppression, and the need to control others. Thus, the practitioner must start with herself before she can start with the client. The idea that social workers leave their feelings at the door is largely underestimated, as reflected in the increasing numbers of ethical violations around maintaining professional boundaries. Perhaps the emphasis should be on connecting with these issues, finding ways of managing them, and ensuring that they do not impact practice, as opposed to working from the premise that trained helpers are able to put these issues aside. Practitioners are also encouraged to examine their positive experiences and how they impact their ability to engage survivors and perpetrators in the healing process. For example, the practitioner may have experiences of succeeding through adversity, or the practitioner may have experienced some form of oppression that has been reconciled. These types of positive success stories can aid working with clients. It becomes critical for practitioners to start where they are before they engage a client.

### Community Influence

Community approval, through silence or action, can help to prevent, maintain, or perpetuate violent behavior. Rooted in the African experience, community is very powerful as a means of identity formation and regulation of behavior. Working with the individual is important; however, engaging the community around group norms that support violence is equally as critical. Changing the way communities think about and intervene with this issue could serve as a powerful deterrent to violence and can allow for those not connected to professional institutions to be served. The communal approach emphasizes that the solutions start in the community and extended family. The development of community-level media messages and integrated service delivery in comorbid areas, such as child welfare or substance abuse services, allows communities to craft interventions that speak to the specific needs of the population, emphasizing that abuse is unacceptable. Working with extended families to find creative ways of supporting the healing of the survivor and perpetrator, along with reinforcing that the perpetrator be held accountable for the violence, can provide a strong message from those connected to the individuals that domestic violence is unacceptable, will not be tolerated, and can be changed with support from family, the community, and professional services.

### Collective Survival

The African principle of interdependence stresses that all people are connected. Consequently, the fate of the professional is linked to the success or failure of the client; the fate of the man is connected to the circumstances of the woman. If every practitioner worked with a client with the orientation that their fate was linked, it is possible that some practitioners would work harder, provide more informed assistance, follow up more intensely, better engage clients from diverse backgrounds, and provide an overall better service. Although practitioners may be under certain types of time and fiscal constraints, it is still permissible to value the interconnection between worker and client. In these restricted conditions, the practitioner may connect the client to other resources that can better serve or complement service provision. The emphasis of this principle is on helping the practitioner feel connected to the outcomes of the client; consequently, the practitioner can work with the community and extended family to support change with the client as opposed to simply attempting to be the sole provider for the client.

If more men fully understood that domestic violence is not a woman's issue but is linked to the overall well-being of the family and community, then it is possible that more men would stand up against domestic violence and work toward its eradication. Fostering equality among African American women and men as a means of ensuring interdependence is critical. Connecting the historical contributions of ancient African women to contemporary contributions is another means of fostering that sense of equality (Monges, 1993, 1999; White, Potgieter, Strube, Fisher, & Umana, 1997). Helping individuals to connect how domestic violence impacts the African American family with their collective survival depends on this understanding of interdependence.

### The Central Role of Spirituality

Recognizing the central role of spirituality, the faith-based community must be engaged and invigorated to serve as partners for peace in the home. Through open discussions, ministries designed to address domestic violence, and regular messages from the pulpit that denounce domestic violence, faith-based communities can be better educated to aid in stopping abuse.

In addition to the necessity of a faith-based response to domestic violence, the spirituality of the client must be recognized not only to sustain safety but also to transcend toward healing (Smith, 1997). Helping the person to heal is central to the African-centered approach (Martin & Martin, 1995). Smith (1997) wrote, "African American spirituality [is] a way to redefine one's situation, transcend dehumanizing conditions, and affirm God, self, and others while facing cruel oppression" (p. 100). As part of this process, the practitioner should be aware of her or his spiritual beliefs and practices, not as a means of changing others, but to better understand the self in order to engage the client.

### Encouraging Self-Reliance

As part of the principle of self-reliance, people of African ancestry should be encouraged to develop their own definition(s) of domestic violence. Some research has documented the need for African Americans to develop a more culturally relevant definition of domestic violence that is inclusive of the nuances of the African American experience (Bent-Goodley, 1998, 2001). African Americans have described the need for definitions of domestic violence to be more culturally relevant and inclusive of the historical and contemporary realities of communities of African ancestry (Bent-Goodley & Williams, in press). The definition then needs to be translated into specific actions and alternative behaviors. An additional domestic violence response on an individually based level is to clearly define healthy relationships. Although using principles of equality as the basis of a healthy relationship is important, there is a need to redefine a healthy relationship from a cultural perspective inclusive of the realities of oppression and discrimination. Helping individuals to identify healthy relationships provides specific criteria for what is acceptable within the confines of a one-on-one relationship.

Creating institutions from within the community as a form of self-reliance is also important (Bent-Goodley, 2002). Many domestic violence services are often located outside of the community, making geography a barrier to receiving services (Asbury, 1993; West, 1999; Williams & Becker, 1994). Institution-building from within the community is necessary for encouraging self-reliance and sustained endeavors. The development of culturally grounded institutions is a form of self-reliance. The organizations provide an array of culturally competent domestic violence services rooted in the community and inclusive of diverse treatment modalities.

### Importance of Language and the Use of Timing

Language and oral tradition have particular meaning related to domestic violence. Research has documented African American's unease with terms such as *batterer* or *battered woman* (Bent-Goodley, 2001, 2004a; Gondolf & Williams, 2001; West, 1999) because it appears to define the person as opposed to identifying the situation. African Americans have recommended finding other language, such as *survivor,* to identify someone who has experienced abuse (West, 1999). Thus, language can deter a person from obtaining services for fear of being labeled or misunderstood. Practitioners must be sensitive to this and change their language, both verbal and written, to meet the needs of the client.

Appropriate use of timing is equally as important as culturally competent language. Recognizing the importance of rhythm, practitioners can begin to determine when a question may be best asked. Many agencies use screening materials that ask pointed and private questions that the person may not be ready to answer so early in the assessment process. Ascertaining the appropriate times to ask questions is key to the interview's success and, ultimately, the client's outcomes. One way to address timing in the interview process is through the use of storytelling. As storytelling is commonly used within the African American experience (Martin & Martin, 1995), it may be more useful to encourage storytelling as part of assessment. Although it may initially be more difficult to categorize content, practitioners can use storytelling to acquire a broader perspective of the identified issue, to develop trust with the client, and to acquire more needed information than what may be requested in a standardized assessment form.

### Thought and Practice

The principle of thought and practice encourages practitioners and scholars to use their knowledge and experiences to generate new information that informs more relevant practice and changes in policy. For example, there are often smaller or less established agencies or faith-based institutions that are providing quality services, yet they lose funding opportunities to larger, more established agencies

that have the ability to employ development directors or grant writers. Policies should be developed to fully support competent, less established programs as opposed to having them compete with more established institutions with greater resources. Local communities could participate in deciding who receives funding in their community, ensuring that those that are trusted get the support needed to become structurally stronger and even more effective.

Advocating for social policies that impact people of color and the poor are also critical as part of the domestic violence response to thought and practice (Bent-Goodley, 2004). For example, advocating for policies that support increased employment with livable wages is necessary, particularly as the unemployment of African American men has been linked to increased violence (Sampson, 1987). Formulating and advocating for policies that reinforce the creation of community-based and -led institutions to better serve this population is another point of advocacy. Advocating for equitable treatment within domestic violence cases across systems of care is also a critical policy issue.

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Finally, the practitioner is encouraged to practice what she or he preaches. One cannot preach nonviolence and equality yet be abusive and unjust. An agency is ill advised to say they are concerned about women if it has administrative policies that do not support the development of strong families. A church is wrong if they say women are equal but use Scripture to justify the subordination of women. Such inconsistent messages fan the flame of violence despite what may be verbally articulated.

## Implications for Practice With African American Families

Preserving and maintaining safe and healthy families in the African American community requires a culturally rooted approach. There is a need to rethink the philosophies and ways in which domestic violence services are provided. The African-centered paradigm is relevant to providing domestic violence services that are culturally competent for families of African ancestry.

### Creating Culturally Competent Responses

One needs to begin with a belief that people can change because they are inherently good, and that self-knowledge forms the foundation for how one thinks and acts. Acknowledging the importance of language and the oral tradition, and the use of timing in practice are also ways of creating culturally competent responses to domestic violence. The African-centered paradigm provides a set of principles upon which to build culturally competent assessment tools and interventions. Developing interventions that can be tested and validated are critical to responding to the needs of African American families dealing with this issue. These interventions should be developed through comprehensive needs assessments, community feedback, and the feedback of family members experiencing the cycle of abuse. Developing practices across disciplines allows practitioners to address the intersection of domestic violence with other issues, increasing the likelihood of addressing abuse and keeping families safe. For example, in addition to developing tools specific to domestic violence, culturally competent assessment tools and interventions could also be developed within child welfare agencies to address domestic violence. This comprehensive approach allows domestic violence to be addressed across populations, increasing the potential for stopping the violence.

### Community Education and Accountability

Understanding the significance of community influence and the nature of communal spirit, knowing the importance of self-reliance and interdependence and the need for collective survival can help to strengthen community education initiatives, and reinforce accountability for behavior. When one recognizes some of the unique ways that African Americans are impacted by domestic violence, diverse responses that are inclusive of the community are essential. Utilizing culturally competent media messages, such as the "It's Your Business" campaign developed by the Family Violence Prevention Fund (n.d.), is needed. Although advocacy for progressive social policies is needed (Bent-Goodley, 2004b), there is also a need to encourage communities and extended family members to hold abusive partners accountable and keep women and children safe.

Creating new community-based and -led institutions and culturally relevant interventions is also necessary to create change and to help communities empower themselves. African Americans should be encouraged to develop their own institutions that are geographically based in the community and rooted in culturally competent interventions. Such institutions can be vehicles to hold individuals accountable for their actions and to provide alternatives to criminal justice intervention. Protocols should be established to determine what is appropriate for community-

based intervention and when it is best to reach out to more formal systems. The family, nestled within the community, must be aware of these options and encouraged to use them. In addition, families need support and knowledge of when and how to intervene when a family member is experiencing or perpetrating domestic violence. Family members should also be given information on how to stay safe and how to identify their perceptions and beliefs about domestic violence.

### Faith-Based Intervention

Understanding that spirituality is a cultural cornerstone of the African American experience, practitioners need to engage faith-based leaders and congregants. The faith-based community continues to be an anchor for African American families. Practitioners can motivate faith-based leaders to develop ministries in domestic violence, preach on the issue of domestic violence, and examine church culture to ensure gender equity. The practitioner can examine resources within the faith-based community to assist the family and keep the survivor and children safe.

The faith-based approach is not limited to working with faith-based communities. In addition to engaging faith-based communities, practitioners can utilize spiritual assessments as part of the assessment process to ascertain the family member's spiritual experiences and isolation as a basis for intervention (Bullis, 1996; Martin & Martin, 2002). Examining the family member's sense of spirituality and spiritual development is an important consideration when engaging African American families who often turn to their faith-based communities or spirituality for sustenance (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, under review). Practitioners must be willing to explore their spirituality, ideas about religion, and comfort with negotiating this issue with clients if they are to be effective.

### Policy Advocacy

To support self-reliance and in the spirit of moving from thought to practice, practitioners must consider policy advocacy. Holistic policy advocacy is needed to address matters both specific to domestic violence and inclusive of issues connected with domestic violence. Progressive social policies are needed to increase equality in employment opportunities within African American communities. Funding streams should be established to support culturally competent practice and to remove funding from those programs that insist on providing care that does not reflect the cultural dynamics and needs of the population. Policies that remove barriers to equity and provide equal access to opportunities are also needed. These policies should include provisions for enhancing and increasing geographically based services.

Policies are also needed to reinforce equitable treatment in the child welfare and criminal justice systems. Child protective service programs need to demonstrate that African American children are not disproportionately removed when

domestic violence is found in the home. This exploration should also include an assessment as to whether these families are offered the same services and alternatives as White families. On the basis of these results, administrative policies should be established to ensure that African American families are treated equitably and that they are provided with the same intensity of services as other families.

Policies that examine the inequitable treatment of African American families experiencing domestic violence in the criminal justice system are also necessary. Policies are necessary to force the unbiased investigation of these situations, document the inequity, and provide creative solutions to address the problem. It is recognized that the criminal justice system can be an effective alternative in some situations; however, the inequity upon which policies are implemented is what is in question. These matters must be resolved, in part, with policies that protect populations that have experienced discrimination yet also ensure the safety of family members experiencing abuse.

## Conclusion

African-centered social work offers a set of principles upon which to develop a culturally competent response to domestic violence as experienced by African American families. Finding creative and relevant solutions for addressing domestic violence can keep family members safe, identify and address abuse, and keep children in the home when appropriate. Such efforts can promote greater awareness of healthy family relationships and the empowerment of individuals to shape their lives in a healthy and safe manner. In this article, in addition to examining principles of the African-centered paradigm, I have offered specific ways in which the paradigm can be applied to domestic violence. In addition, recommendations are offered to practitioners in the form of community education and accountability, faith-based intervention, policy advocacy, and the development of culturally competent responses. A Ghanaian proverb states that "the ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people." Addressing domestic violence can protect the lives of African American family members and encourage the development of healthy future relationships.

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