

Vickie M. Mays

Even the Rat was White and Male: Teaching the Psychology of Black Women

The education of psychologists and mental health specialists has long been inadequate in its attention to the unique experiences of Black women. Historically, the psychology of Black women has been buried either within Black psychology, in which race relations assume primary importance, or in feminist scholarship, with its emphasis on sexism (Zinn, Cannon, & Dill, 1984). In this chapter, I shall discuss some of the issues involved in teaching in the newly emerging area of the psychology of Black women.

The study of Black women needs to emphasize the interrelatedness of gender and ethnicity (Mays, in press). Black women should be studied and taught about as Black women, not as individuals separately experiencing being Black and female. This then raises such fundamental questions as, How does the inclusion of Black women's experiences change our understanding of psychological theories of socialization processes, moral development, autonomy or attachment? The task is not simply to add race to the female experience or gender to the Black experience. Instead the intent is to uncover the complex diversity of Black women's psychological experiences resulting from interdependent systems of oppression.

Developing a Course

Curriculum development is hampered by the paucity of empirical research on Black women. Examining the research literature, I found that until 1983 only 50 articles on this subject had been published in all the American Psychological Association (APA) journals (Mays, 1988a). The majority of these were race comparative rather than interactionist in approach.

Initial work on this chapter was funded by a National Institute of Mental Health New Investigator Research Award to the author at the Program for Research on Black Americans, Institute of Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan. The inspiration for the title came from Guthrie's (1976) reexamination of the history of the field, *Even the Rat Was White: A Historical View of Psychology*.

An additional difficulty is the lack of organized curriculum materials, though there have been recent efforts to remedy this. A bibliography on Black women by the APA Division 35's Task Force on Black Women's Concerns, compiled into a forthcoming book (Mays, in press), contains more than 2,000 references on Black women. Drawn from the social sciences and the humanities, these resources examine the psychocultural behaviors of Black women from an African American perspective. For example, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (Moody, 1968) can be used to teach the psychological theory of social movements, although it is a biographical account.

Course Content

Currently, I teach a course titled *The Afro-American Woman in the United States*. The confluence of oppression experienced by Black women results in a social consciousness differing from that of Black men or White women. This consciousness, in turn, yields a different experience of work, love, growth, change, time, and cooperation (Aptheker, 1981). It is this consciousness and the factors that have given rise to its development that the course attempts to illuminate. Topics covered include (a) social movements; (b) ethnicity, gender, class, and caste; and (c) interpersonal roles (see the schedule for lecture topics listed before the references at the end of this chapter).

The course begins with a focus on social movements, including the early abolitionists, Black women's clubs, Seneca Falls, the civil rights movement, and the recent women's movement. Although historical and sociological reading dominate this section, students learn about racial attitudes from a psychological framework. An organizing framework I use is the question of whether there is a national Black women's movement and, if not, what conditions would be likely to produce one.

In the second section, we examine each social status separately and then in combination. I often ask students to make comparisons with other gender or ethnic groups, as a way of discovering similarities and differences. Although the aim is to get students to understand the contribution of each status to the unique experiences of Black women, it is also important to discover those values, attitudes, or motivations that hold across gender, ethnic group, age, or class. My current reading list in this section includes Morrison's (1970) *The Bluest Eye* (ethnicity); Chafe's (1977) analysis of social class and control; selections dealing with color and caste from Washington's (1977) edited book *Black-Eyed Susans* ("The Coming of Maureen Peel" and "If You're Light and Have Long Hair"); and the excellent Zora Neale Hurston essays edited by Walker (1979).

In the final section, we explore interpersonal roles in the lives of Black women, examining each of these roles for its demands and provisions of support. Age, gender, ethnic group, and class differences among the students help to highlight diversity of experiences. The goals are to delineate differences in expectations of Black women's behavior in specific roles and to uncover the biases associated with those expectations. Students read *Tar Baby* and *Sula* by Morrison (1974, 1981) to explore family roles and female-female relationships, respectively. I have also

used selections from Rodgers-Rose's (1980) edited book *The Black Woman*; however, the relationships described in these articles are outdated in that they are no longer representative of relationships in the 1980s.

Selecting material for this last section is a sensitive issue. There are few scholarly articles on Black heterosexual or homosexual close relationships (Mays, 1988b), and these often take biased positions. In addition, discussions of sexual relationships outside of marriage, or lesbian relationships, at times present difficulties for some class participants.

Method of Teaching

In teaching the course, I use group dynamics principles. The classroom is viewed as a large group, learning about the psychology of Black women through personal exploration and guidance from the instructor. As such, it is essential to establish an atmosphere of openness and trust. Explicit guidelines for students' behavior are clearly specified at the beginning. Women students are reminded that the men in class are not there to represent all men, and their presence in class indicates some interest in better understanding Black women. Men are reminded that they are not authorities on women's experiences. Similarly, Black students are not allowed to blame non-Black students, while White students are cautioned that the class is not interested in any demonstrations of "liberalism."

The size of the class can vary, but 60 seems a good upper limit in order to maintain an intimacy within the class. The course is offered simultaneously on a graduate and undergraduate level with minor differences in workload. In the undergraduate curriculum, it is offered to juniors and seniors through three majors: psychology, Afro-American studies, and women's studies. The result is a diverse group of students.

Each class begins with a lecture and is followed by a lengthy question and comment period. During the lecture, I raise several questions for the students to contemplate and address in the latter part of the class session. Over the years, I have decreased my use of guest lecturers. My interactionist perspective precludes devoting an entire class period to only one aspect of an issue. Instead, because of the time constraints, videotaped interviews and television specials integrated into classroom presentations have been more useful.

Course Requirements

I assign three take-home essay exams, one for each section, and encourage cooperative work, although the final product must be an individual one. Exams can be a source of conflict. Some students will be quite articulate in class, have a good grasp of the answers for the exam, but be hampered in their performance by poor writing ability. For ethnic students, it is a shock to be told by an ethnic minority professor that they have writing problems. Many previously had attributed such comments to racism on the part of Anglo professors. To encourage work on writing skills, I sometimes allow students to raise their grades by rewriting answers to the exam.

Students also are required to do a group visual medium project for a 15-minute class presentation, which they often use subsequently during Black History Month or International Women's Week. Projects have included calendars highlighting important Black women's events, a prosocial comic book with a Black woman heroine, board games, a play, and surveys. Students work in groups and meet with the instructor prior to presentation. Grades for the projects are assigned by the class members, who evaluate each project on the three dimensions of new information, ability to teach, and creativity.

Schedule of Lecture Topics for Course Titled The Afro-American Woman in the United States

Section 1: *Social Movement*

Course introduction—Development of a social movement. Book: Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*.
 Development of a social movement/civil rights movement.
 Civil rights movement/women's movement.
 The creation of a Black women's movement.
 The Black women's movement and feminism.

Section 2: *Ethnicity, gender, class, and caste*

Ethnicity/race/culture. Book: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.
 Gender.
 Class.
 Caste/color.

Section 3: *Interpersonal roles—supportive and conflictual functions*

Family roles. Book: Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*.
 Grandmother/mother/daughter relationships.
 Mate relationships.
 Male-female relationships. Book: Toni Morrison's *Sula*.
 Alternative relationships/celebrity-singlehood-polygamy.
 Female friendships.
 Alternative relationships/lesbian relationships.

References

- Aptheker, B. (1981). *Strong is what we make each other: Unlearning racism within women's studies*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Chafe, W. H. (1977). Sex and race: An analogy of social control. In W. H. Chafe (Ed.), *Women and equality: Changing patterns in American culture* (pp. 81-113). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mays, V. M. (1988a). *The psychology of Black women: A view from mainstream psychology journals*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

- Mays, V. M. (1988b). *The impact of perceived discrimination on Black women's relationships*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Mays, V. M. (in press). *The Black woman: A bibliographic guide to research materials on Black women in the social sciences and mental health*. New York: Praeger.
- Moody, A. (1968). *Coming of age in Mississippi*. New York: Dial Press.
- Morrison, T. (1970). *The bluest eye*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Morrison, T. (1974). *Sula*. New York: Knopf.
- Morrison, T. (1981). *Tar baby*. New York: Knopf.
- Rodgers-Rose, L. F. (1980). *The Black woman*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Walker, A. (Ed.). (1979). *I love myself when I am laughing . . . & then again when I am looking mean and impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston reader*. New York: Feminist Press.
- Washington, M. H. (Ed.). (1977). *Black-eyed Susans*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Zinn, M. B., Cannon, L. W., & Dill, B. T. (1984). *The costs of exclusionary practices in women's studies*. Unpublished manuscript, Memphis State University.