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Epistemology from an Afrocentric Perspective: Enhancing Black Students' Consciousness through an Afrocentric Way of Knowing

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"Within the framework of Afrocentric epistemology ist he idea of African American liberation. The implications of Afrocentric epistemology in higher education are critical."

Examined in this presentation is Afrocentric epistemology, a modern way of knowing based on ancient African experience. African epistemology is discussed within the context of Afrocentricity because the two concepts are co-dependent. Afrocentricity is based on African epistemology; specifically, the reality, culture, and behavior of ancient African people. In turn, African epistemology has been introduced in contemporary thought through the concept of Afrocentricity. Thus, the presenter will provide a thorough discussion on African epistemology and Afrocentricity as they emerge to establish the concept of African epistemology.

The concept of Afrocentricity was introduced in the 1970s as a response to the historical oppression of African Americans. Acknowledging the negative and destructive consequences of 400 years of oppression, African American scholars developed the concept as a theory of social change. The objective of the scholars was to reconstruct the African American identity. Four hundred to 500 years of cultural and psychological destruction had severed African Americans from their true cultural identity and sense of purpose.

African Americans, through the system of chattel slavery, had been physically separated, culturally obliterated, and spiritually disassociated from all that was familiar. The prohibition of relating to anything African was much more destructive than the physical inhumanity Africans suffered under the system of chattel slavery. Afrocentricity is an attempt to recapture and reconstruct the cultural, social, economical, political, and spiritual well-being of African American people. Afrocentricity is a critical reconstruction that dares to restore missing and hidden parts of the African American historical self-formation. Particularly, Afrocentricity seeks to restore the African identity of African people.

Some Black social scientists and psychologists had attempted to create an awareness of African American reality even before the development of Afrocentricity. Unfortunately, the parameters of the definition of what constituted knowledge about reality has been culturally defined according to the European conceptions of reality. African American scholars had been trapped in an European cultural epistemological dilemma. The dominant feature of this dilemma was to assume that the behavior and ways of knowing of Black people were the same.

Over the years, African Americans began to learn more about African history and culture. African identity has become so strong within the past 20 years that each year, a growing number of tourist companies sponsor trips to Africa to accommodate the increased interest by African Americans. Changing European names to African names has been a popular trend for African Americans. In addition, many African Americans now wear traditional African clothing in both casual and professional settings. Each year there is growing interest in the celebration of Kwanzaa, a celebration of African/African American culture and values. All of these initiatives by African Americans express their desire to reaffirm and restore African heritage, culture, and identity.

Uncovering African Epistemology

The research on ancient African civilization also suggests that Africans perceived the world differently than the world view imposed on them by European oppressors. A strong interpersonal relationship with others as well as harmony, peace with nature, communalism, and spirituality characterized African epistemology.

Evidence of African epistemology dates as far back as 4000 B.C.E (Before the Common Era). Although much of African history had been passed down by oral traditions, there were many scripts which gave clues to ancient African epistemology. They included the three scripts of ancient Egypt: hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic; Meroitic and Coptic scripts of Nubia; Sabean and G'eez scripts of Ethiopia; the Toma and Vai scripts of Liberia; and the Mum script of Cameroon. A strong emphasis was placed on the Egyptian scripts and history because Afrocentric scholars concluded that the greatest world achievements have come out of Egyptian civilization.

As early as 4000 B.C.E., the Egyptians had established a spiritual system of law, order, truth, and righteousness. The social-historical setting for Maatians ethics reaches back to the period 4000-3500 B.CE. Thus, African epistemology places great emphasis on ethics and morality, spirituality, symbolic imagery, science, self-awareness, and tradition.

African epistemology placed great emphasis on spirituality and involved an understanding of the world through a spiritual source. No reality existed without a spiritual inclination. The universe, nature, humans, and the spirit were all considered one. African epistemology also involved the use of symbolic imagery. The use of symbols was the means for conveying a precise rationale. The symbols were the objectification of the subjective subliminal nature of Africans. However, this focus on symbolic imagery did not prelude recognition and use of rationality or scientific logic. Rather, symbolic imagery as a means of knowing offset the use of rationality. The great achievements by the Egyptians indicated an undeniable appreciation for rationality and scientific logic.

Afrocentric Epistemology

Afrocentric psychologists and sociologists agree that African epistemology already existed at the base of African American culture. Afrocentric scholars cite a definite continuation of the African orientation which helps to define the general design for living and the patterns for interpreting reality for African Americans. Somehow, the African

ancestors' ways of knowing and understanding filtered through the chaos of slavery and oppression and became embedded in the spirits, hearts, and souls of their descendants. Most African Americans simply failed to recognize the historical context of their own behaviors.

Afrocentric epistemology is rooted in spirituality, communalism, cooperation, ethics, and morality. However, Afrocentric epistemology also recognizes science as a primary way of knowing. Scientific knowledge is critical because it is from the basis of science that Afrocentric scholars have been able to demonstrate the inferiority of African civilizations. This emphasis on knowing through logic, reason, and science is a major thrust of Afrocentric epistemology because as slaves, the use of this knowledge was limited.

Within the framework of Afrocentric epistemology is the idea of African American liberation. African Americans experience a collective conscious will when they become completely committed to a conscious level of involvement in the struggle for their own mind's liberation. African Americans with the collective conscious will have the strength to eradicate every trace of powerlessness. Strength comes from being centered in African tradition, thought, and behavior.

The implications of Afrocentric epistemology in higher education are critical. Student development professionals who thoroughly understand Afrocentricity and Afrocentric epistemology are more likely to utilize student development models which are culturally relevant, thereby more useful to African American students. Afrocentric epistemology is important, not necessarily as a universal application for all students but as an alternative to the predominant European epistemology, which does not fully accommodate the historical development of African American students. Universities must recognize the strengths of Afrocentric epistemology and Afrocentricity, and embrace them as a means to foster a positive environment for African American students.

PRESENTER

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