



African American Behavioral Health

CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

Essay: Limitations of Research and Evidence-based Practices with Black/African American Populations

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Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are widely acknowledged across a variety of healthcare disciplines (e.g., psychology, public health, social services) as the gold standard for effective clinical solutions. In mental health, an evidence-based practice is "an approach to treatment that is grounded in the best available scientific evidence. It involves utilizing modalities and interventions that have been proven effective through research studies, clinical trials, and meta-analyses" (Behavioral Health Network, 2023, p.1).

For behavioral health systems, providers, and practitioners who serve African Americans, an essential limitation of this approach lies in the fact that a considerable portion of the research has been shaped to cater to the evolving needs of predominantly White communities (Sue, & Zane, 2009). Life circumstances and experiences often differ widely across racial and cultural groups, calling into question the applicability of data gathered on one population to the needs and realities of another.

This disconnect is particularly challenging when the groups that are underrepresented in study populations have endured significant hardship, deprivation, and trauma, narrowing their resources and complicating the progression of their illnesses. Many EBPs overlook the impact of systemic inequities, historical and racial trauma, and a variety of negative social determinants of health, which disproportionately and adversely affect Black communities (Williams, Lawrence, & Davis, 2019; Geronimus, 2023). Despite these significant challenges, there is too little critical examination of the safety, effectiveness, and relevance of specific evidence-based practices to the behavioral health needs of African Americans.

Given the limitations in funding for behavioral health research, and the field's own limited voice in setting the research agenda, what should our priorities be as we work toward a more ethical, equitable, respectful, and effective research response to the needs of African Americans?

Following are some suggestions:

- Find and use our voices as advocates of equitable and effective research agendas and practices, including the promotion of studies that will test the effectiveness of culturally appropriate practices and adaptations of culturally generic practices.
- Promote the development and study of practices that employ culturally relevant elements such as family and community engagement, connections with communities of faith, and body-based methods of addressing the effects of racial and historical trauma.
- Review current ethical standards for research on behavioral health practices and determine (in collaboration with researchers) whether or not additional standards should be defined given the needs and vulnerabilities of Black study participants.
- Educate the behavioral health and research fields on the diversity within Black communities, including the wide variation in socioeconomic status, geographic location, tradition, and historical background, and the influence of all these factors on health outcomes and the utilization of interventions.
- Influence the development of research methodologies to address the effects of factors such as systemic racism, implicit and explicit bias, and traditional mistrust of healthcare service providers on the safety needs of Black research participants (Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006).

Addressing the challenges associated with scientific research and the needs of Black communities is a vital task, if we are to improve our healthcare system, advance social equity, and enhance overall health and well-being. These efforts will continue to align EBPs with cultural values, shared beliefs, and preferences that reflect the Black lived experience and address the unique needs of African Americans.

References

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