

# A CLASSIFICATION OF BLACK-AMERICAN SELF-ESTEEM

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A classification is probably the simplest method of discovering groupings and order in different aspects of the world. Its three basic generic processes are: 1) synthesizing a structure out of chaos, 2) breaking down that structure for analysis, and 3) resynthesizing the analyzed parts for practical usefulness. A fundamental step in synthesis is discerning and naming similarities between the numerous distinct items in the chaos and fashioning them into one class or kind. This accomplishes the reduction of "the many" into a rough sense of "the one." Next, the reverse process of division breaks down a class into all its subclasses and these into their subclasses, and so on, until individual members are reached. Then, an analysis is done to open any subtle potentialities leading to insights regarding "the whole." On resynthesis, every analyzed piece is reassembled into a higher-level systematic grouping. Each piece is given a proper placement and is arranged purposefully, so that relevant materials can be selected by the clinician for use in diagnosis and treatment. Because this process opens the door to principles relating to classes of things, it is a basic method of science.

A similar process is used in this paper to classify Black-American self-esteem syndromes (Table 1). In synthesizing out of chaos those "props" which cause, shape, and maintain each self-worth and self-value building block of the self-esteem structure,

only materials out of the "Black Experience" are selected. Self-worth means one's degree of bonding with the immaterial or the intangible-like love, peace, harmony, unity, beauty, and perfection. Self-value means one's degree of bonding with the tangible (matter that can be physically possessed and defined)-like money, possessions, or anything to which a marketplace "price tag" can be added. The benefits of a Black-American self-esteem structure focused only on the "Black Experience" means that a great deal of complexity can be eliminated as the structure is being synthesized and then broken down for analyses. Obviously, the closer the analysis gets to the truth, the more beneficial the resynthesized product.

Ideas pertaining to classifying Black-American self-esteem took form early in the 40 years of my orthopedic surgery practice—a practice largely oriented toward industrial medicine. The entire classification process began out of the need to know whether a patient's orthopedic complaints stemmed from organic or nonorganic causes. Preparation for answering this question involved (among others) personally evaluating and reviewing a patient's psychological, psychiatric, and other medical records. In the course of assessing several thousand patients and acquiring insights into certain trends, a workable orthopedic classification, consisting of three major groups, emerged.<sup>1</sup> One of those trends was that Group I—the honest and straightforward patients—had elevated self-esteem, while Group II—the Self-Deceivers (The Somatoform Disorders)—and Group III—the Conscious Deceivers (the Malingers)—had deflated self-esteem. Another trend noted in evaluating black and nonblack patients was that the application of standard medical thought led to confusing differences in diagnostic and therapeutic opinions. A prominent reason was that not all clinicians gave due consid-

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eration to the fact that the system of values, types of experiences, and lifestyles of black patients are almost unique. Besides such intercultural variations, there are wide intraclass variations within the black community. In fact, subgroups on each rung of the social class ladder are so vastly different from each other that the only common bond connecting every rung is the failure of Black Americans to be accepted as first-class citizens.

Thus, even before starting the synthesis process, it was essential to remove all Black Americans from all Eurocentric theories of causation and effects regarding self-esteem, from all diagnostic self-esteem related check-lists, and from all methods of testing self-esteem. Another essential was to consider every synthesized and analyzed self-worth and self-value item pertaining to Black Americans within the historical context of ancient Africa (where Black Americans' ancestral traditions originated); of African-American slavery (which shattered the solid mental health as well as civilization and culture customs of Africans); of postslavery racism (which stifled blacks' mental health and well-being recovery); and of today's environmental conditions (which perpetuate certain "throwback" patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving). Once Black-American self-esteem is understood in its own black community cultural setting, this sociological piece of the self-esteem puzzle can be put back into the total American society context for further study.

The second step contributing to this classification occurred over a period of several years from teaching all ages of black innercity youth and observing their interactions in workshops.

Step 3 was researching black history for the purpose of obtaining the glue to tie bits and pieces of scattered historical information together. This almost-daily research over the past 10 years has been aimed at discovering the philosophical and psychology approaches, methods, and techniques of ancient Africans (particularly before 2,100 BC), African-American slaves, and the descendants of slaves throughout the Americas.

A fourth step spans a lifetime of close personal contact with Black Americans on all rungs of the class ladder. This contact has made clear the complexity present in Black-American diversity. The story of this diversity started in the subgroups of Africans long before African-American slavery.

Table 1. A Classification of Black-American Self-Esteem

|      |                              |
|------|------------------------------|
| I    | Mature Self-Esteem           |
| II   | Super Self-Esteem            |
| III  | Good Self-Esteem             |
| IV   | High Self-Esteem             |
| V    | Normal Self-Esteem           |
| VI   | Low Self-Esteem              |
| VII  | Inferiority Complex          |
| VIII | Superiority Complex          |
| IX   | The Apathetic Enslaved Minds |

those subgroups were as culturally different as are today's subgroups throughout Europe. With slavery came the prismatic-like effect of furthering the number of, deepening the depth within, and expanding the distance between subgroup and individual differences. These tremendously increased complexities came about through slaveowners deliberately creating or enhancing friction among slaves as part of a divide-and-conquer method. Echoes from this method remain prominent in certain of today's Black-American subcultures.

Naturally, these and other types of diversities greatly obscure the discerning of pertinent information and the naming of similarities so necessary for synthesizing a structure of Black-American self-esteem. For instance, there are problems in selecting criteria to form a given syndrome; in the grouping and placement of each syndrome into a classification; and in the arrangement of appropriate syndromes to aid medical analysis and synthesis. Nevertheless, to put a frame around these problems, let us look briefly at their historical background

### The Geographic Roots of Black Americans

The bulk of the African-American slaves taken to the Americas were picked up from along the Slave Coast (Nigeria, Benin, Togo), including the old Ivory Coast (Gulf of Guinea) and the Gold Coast (Ghana). However, many of these slaves came out of the interior, probably a distance of a thousand miles away. Examples were those from the Moslem empires of the Western Sudan. These Africans were quite well educated, intelligent, cultured, and in possession of pride and noble character. Large numbers of slaves were from several places in Guinea-principally of the Mandinka (or Malinke), Fulari, and Susa ethnic groups. Of par-

ticular interest were the Gullahs of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and in areas east of the Niger delta. In pre-colonial days their secret societies were largely responsible for law and order. Once in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, their language was fundamental in the development of American-style Black English.

The prevailing culture of the communities from which all African slaves came were kin-group and age-set oriented.' Kin-group membership established formal rights and obligations-both between members and as collectivities in relation to the rest of society. Age-sets and secret societies provided friends who supported each other through thick and thin. In an example of the Kenyan culture, Carothers' stated that each member has a definite place and role as well as a clear idea of what is expected of him/her under all situations and at each period in his/her life. Of greatest significance is that a member's behavior in all major aspects is group-determined rather than a matter of individual choice. Furthermore, each member, from being part of a larger organism, has utter stability and security. Thus, self-devaluation is not a factor, and self-esteem is sound.

The community dispositions of the various African cultures were suggested by the reaction of their members to slavery. According to Woodson, the Coromantees of Ghana frequently rebelled against the yoke; but the Whydahs, Nagoes, Pawpaws, and Gambians proved to be submissive. The Gaboons were physically weak, while the Congoes, Angolas, and Eboes of Nigeria ran away or committed suicide rather than be enslaved. Slaves from the Gold Coast, particularly the stiff-necked and turbulent Fanti of Ghana, were warrior leaders. So were the Ghana Ashanti. In Joseph A. Bailey Sr's (my Dad) unpublished manuscript: "From Africa to Black Power," he stated that the Senegalese were preferred slaves, because not only were they among the most intelligent but they were valued for their work as mechanics and artisans.

In elaborating on those mentioned above by Woodson, Bailey said the Coromantees were hearty and stalwart in mind and body and not revengeful when well treated; the Whydahs, Nagoes, and Pawpaws were lusty, industrious, and cheerful. The Wolof from Senegal and Gambia and the Mandingo of the upper Niger River valley were musically inclined and became prominent in developing jazz in New Orleans. It is from: 1) the inter

mingling of these geographic African personalities with the divide-and-conquer methods of their captors, 2) the interweave of racism into the Black-American postslavery recovery process, and 3) the empirical comments and research mentioned above that background for the classification information to follow (Table 1) is derived.

## Analyzing Black American Self-Esteem

Let us assume that Black-American self-esteem is composed of a "real self" and an "environmental self"-the latter being subdivided into a "black community self" and a "society-at-large self." As a major component of one's self-consciousness, the real self develops before and is more pervasive than the acquired selves. Immediately upon coming into existence, the real self starts creating and assessing its own realizations and thereby fashions a foundational self-esteem that remains prominently present from birth to death. If the real self is like the stem growing out of a planted apple seed, the environmental self is like the cambium layer just beneath the bark on the stem. We know that cambium cells add a layered ring around the stem each year. Its human equivalent is socialization (one's acquisition of common-sense cultural traditions). Agents forming the black community self-from which a black community self-esteem component derives-include the family, relatives, friends, "the Black Church," social groups, and the immediate environment. Agents forming the society-at-large self-from which a society-at-large self-esteem derives-are any nonblacks, the government and its agencies (e.g. the legal system, police force, school system), the media, and big business. The black community self is extremely strong in its influence on the real self, while the society-at-large self is quite weak.

When the trunk of an apple tree is cut across, successive rings will be seen in a configuration that radiate out from the center. Whereas the real self is in the center, the black community self, starting with the family, is positioned around it. The next and outermost sets of rings represent the effects of society at large. In going from the center toward the bark, the environmental-self socialization "rings" become progressively more superficial, less enduring, less tenacious, and less potent when it comes to influencing the real self. Nevertheless, the individual decides which ring(s) and which self-esteem

component will dominate in power. Let us now look at how these concepts might apply to certain self-esteem syndromes.

### Discussion of Self-Esteem Syndromes

Under the assumption that even a relatively clumsy first step out of chaos starts the synthesis process of progress, Black Americans can be roughly grouped into: 1) the elite-those of the upper classes; 2) the omnibus group-those whose life's operations extend beyond the "Black Experience"; 3) the Mainstream-those closely linked to their African traditions; 4) the enslaved minds-those who are waiting to die; and 5) the criminal element. Inside these five groups can be found nine prominent self-esteem subcategories. From top to bottom they are the mature; the super; the good (or all worth-based type); the high (or all value-based type); the normal; the low; the inferiority complex; the superiority complex; and the apathetic, represented by the enslaved minds. In progressing from the mature downward, there is increasing self-esteem disorganization and decreasing self-confidence.

Mature self-esteem, by reflecting a healthy mind, has no stereotyped content or context distinctions concerning the races. Each person is judged on his/her own merits. Mature individuals are so proportionately balanced regarding their self worth and self-value traits as to have deep inner peace and self-satisfaction. Contributory to this balance is their recognition of most, if not all, of their selfworth and self-value traits—a recognition known during the 15th century as regard.<sup>1</sup> A second recognition is proper respect for all that they regard. Back then, respect meant the ranking of each one's own significant self-worth and self-value traits on the ladder of importance. Third is that they "appreciate" and derive a sense of self-confidence from those traits situated above the middle of the ladder of importance. Otherwise, they constantly work to improve any flaws. These three—regard, respect, and appreciate—are what make up the word "esteem." Typically, the mature have good character, compassion, prudence, and a sense of "how much is enough" in things of value. Their problems, although similar to others, are handled so as to maintain a predominant mental state of happiness.

"Super self-esteem" refers to people who are actually superior in acquiring and possessing effective tools for developing self-worth and self-value traits. Super esteem is to be distinguished from a

superiority complex whereby people do anything to feel superior. The single most distinguishing super esteem feature is a willingness, if necessary, to leave the crowd in order to follow one's beliefs or dreams. Urged on by an alive curiosity to explore, starting in childhood they find great pleasure in creatively solving problems and taking on bigger and bigger challenges. Each achievement builds self-trust and self-confidence. They eagerly allot a proper amount of energy for the job at hand, stay focused, persevere in the face of great difficulties, work with a sense of urgency, persist to the end, and view failures as opportunities to learn. By being high achievers, they often find themselves alone. Yet, they are driven to continue down their chosen path until the task is completed.

Good self-esteem is characterized by many traits of the mature.<sup>6</sup> For example, they practice honesty and fair-play regardless of what dishonorable things others do. Consistently, they are generous with what they own. But usually they own very little because their channeled focus on things of worth creates problems in things of value. Yet, those value problems are typically viewed as tests from God that are designed to determine their fitness for redemption—tests they are willing to accept. Prominent examples of good self-esteem can be found in the decent black ghetto people who frequent "the Black Church." By contrast, people with high self-esteem have problems related to self-worth. Their self-confidence comes from great successes in acquiring money, possessions, and power over people. To a small and confined extent, high self-esteem can be seen in black ghetto street leaders." Whereas good self-esteem is probably second in frequency to normal self-esteem, high self-esteem seems to be uncommon among black people.

Normal self-esteem refers to individual selfworth and self-value traits clustered closely around the average.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it overlaps portions of the elevated as well as the deflated forms of self-esteem. Many blacks on the lower rungs of the social ladder struggle with low-grade dissatisfaction from the disparity between their actual accomplishments on the one hand and their dreams and talents on the other. However, a carry-over African tradition that helps them maintain normal is a primary life's focus on harmonious fellowships, even at the expense of not acquiring things of value. This worth focus, known by Afrocentric people as an essential part of good character, is about having the right relations with

and behaviors towards others. Inside this framework, many ghetto blacks put forth great time, energy, and effort to creatively develop stylish skills, particularly in playground sports, so as to earn an honored nickname from their peers. Nicknames serve as markers of the African presence in the sound sense of Black Americans!

Low self-esteem is personal dissatisfaction stemming from an awareness of falling short of some significant self-determined standard. Though considered common in blacks, the more likely diagnosis is one of the masqueraders of low self-esteem. When low self-esteem is present, it is most often of the "black community" type and arises from being disrespected in the black neighborhood." The individuals likely to be adversely affected by society at large are the very young, the mentally weak, and those vulnerable enough to be overwhelmed by internalizing the daily messages of inferiority showered upon them by society at large. An especially terrible cause involves those children who are chronically abused by childish parents. Those parents, burdened with their own overwhelming problems, neglect the nurturing and the physical needs of their children. Otherwise, the three effective shields that blacks have against being personally destroyed by society at large are a strong belief in God, a traditional sense of community, and a real self that says, "deep down, I know I'm okay."

An inferiority complex is distinguished from low self-esteem by: 1) the belief that one is a failure as a person, 2) a self-destructive personal attack, and 3) a malignant emotional dismantling of one's existing self-esteem. By contrast, people with low self-esteem derive a sense of inadequacy in a more confined and more thoughtful manner. In my practice, a diagnosis of an inferiority complex in a Black American was a rarity. However, when present, those bad emotions springing out of fear, chronic rage, and frustration seem to spread throughout scattered areas of one's self-meaning/identity/image/concept complex." The dominating perception is that the cumulative effects of perceived failures outweigh the sum total of one's constructive self-worth and self-value traits. This misguided perception causes self-dissatisfaction, diffidence, and extremely low levels of the "American Dream" aspirations.

A superiority complex is the donning of an egotistical persona mask by people burdened with an inferiority complex, low self-esteem, or even those having a normal or a high self-esteem. This mask is a facade of arrogance that shows as a reality of

aggression. But caution is called for in applying this label to those blacks who, as a result of cultural style, are freely expressive. Examples are speaking in a loud voice, displaying an air of bravado, having a tell-it-like-it-is approach, and behaving in ways that are different. Such differences in style may be objectionable to certain judgmental outsiders. Many ghetto blacks show the bad temper and emotional explosion of the egotistical, but typically both are reflections of chronic anger and frustration. Thus, on the same day, different clinicians may diagnose a black person's emotional reaction as egotistical, anger, or frustration. This is an example of how mental classes of things can overlap each other, cause confusion, and thereby violate one of the basic rules of classification.

Today's enslaved-mind group is characterized by apathy from hopelessness. Because their intellectual activity and talents are dormant, they have the lowest possible level of self-esteem with respect to their real self and society-at-large self. Contained inside their hopelessness is the absence of any desire expectations, almost complete damage to their mental capabilities and mental flowering potential, and the abandonment of their entire self to fate. The enslaved-mind hopelessness originated from those slave ancestors who, as a result of extreme rage, malignant fear, and ever-present emotional pain, gave up the fight for their selfhood. The steps that followed included exchanging their system of values for those dictated by their captors, believing in slavery to the point of taking pride in it, and assuming there could never be anything else.' Their attitudes and associated self-destructive habits were handed down within the ghetto from one generation to the next and maintained by a depressing ghetto environment. Seemingly, those habits have been absorbed almost intact by today's enslaved-mind members. For them, life has been reduced to (non-neurotic) compulsions directed toward superficial pleasures while waiting to die.

In conclusion, this classification (Table 1) has brought into one place the presently known Black-American self-esteem syndromes. Although most of the classification categories apply to people of any culture, the nature of the contents in each category is significantly different for Black Americans. Also emphasized are those factors which create, enhance, maintain, and protect the self-esteem of ghetto blacks. However, the main focus is on the enslaved-mind blacks. By possessing the lowest

level of Black-American self-esteem, they are in need of the greatest understanding, because their mind-set prevents them from having a clue as to how to rise above any type of poverty. Neither can they pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, because they have internalized the ideal slaves' prejudices against educational achievements, employment opportunities, money management, and striving toward the "American Dream." For these reasons, interested clinicians who are unaware of Black-American problems would benefit from the following: 1) understanding the BlackAmerican system of values. 2) viewing a black individual's personal problems from multiple angles within the "Black Experience" so as to observe the subtle details in each angle, 3) analyzing all pertinent details in relation to the whole. For a given patient, "the whole" includes personal problems; experiences from and problems within the black community; and problems inflicted by the society at large. The reason for considering the whole picture at once is that the Afrocentric view considers synthesis as more productive than considerations of analyzed details! By thinking in terms of a unified whole when dealing with Black Americans, meaningful therapeutic principles for the design and refinement of approaches, methods, and techniques can be discovered and more effectively used. The benefits could be the explosion of a tremendous amount of untapped talent into the black community

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