

The Trans-passages Theory of Change

Jerry Watson, Ph.D., M.S.W.

Chair of Graduate Social Work Programs & Associate Professor,
Jackson State University
School of Social Work

Desiree Stepteau-Watson, L.C.S.W., Ph.D.

Associate Professor – University of Mississippi
Department of Social Work

Abstract

The Trans-passages Theory of Change (TTC) emerges as cultural wisdom from the healing traditions of African societies and is proposed as a paradigm to understand and promote positive change among African American individuals, families, and communities. This article introduces TTC as a value-based, culturally specific, integrated set of concepts utilized for the development of programs and curriculum targeting African Americans.

Key words: African Americans, cultural wisdom, theory of change, trans-passages, rites of passages, human development.

Introduction

Using the foundation supplied by the integration of the historical principles emanating from ancient Egypt along with West African (Ghanian) philosophy, and the values of Kwanzaa, the author proposes a theory of change to describe how the Trans-passages Theory of Change works. The primary components of TTC are presented along with how TTC can be applied to manhood and womanhood development and mentor training. This article represents the early conceptualization of TTC with descriptive narrative recognizing a clear need for continued development, research, and testing to solidify the theoretical framework and ensure the viability and practicality of the theory. TTC is hypothesized as a mechanism to support and promote group or collective consciousness and facilitate the healthy individual identity development of African Americans in particular. TTC may also be employed as an important vehicle to transport cultural education by transmitting the healing wisdom and values originating from the rich African traditions of African Americans to adults, children, families, and the community.

The Problem: The Need for TTC

Historically, as a result of tri-continental chattel slavery, African Americans have suffered tremendous physical, cultural, psychological, social, and economic trauma in the United States. Ani (2003) references this experience as Maafa. The Maafa is the horrendous and catastrophic African disaster beginning in Europe and brutally moving Africans to North and South America and Caribbean Islands.

Millions of Africans perished from the trauma of kidnapping, enslavement, war, and the unimaginable conditions they were subjected to while being transported to different countries during the months long journey on ships crossing the Atlantic ocean. Untold numbers of Africans committed suicide and were murdered because they rebelled (Mims, S., Higginbottom, L., & Reid, n.d.).

One must not forget the multi-generational impact of chattel slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the continuation of the Maafa in subtle but real ways currently called micro aggressions (Sue, 2010). African American families and communities face many structural inequities that impact their status in American society. Unfortunately, inequities such as lack of access to health care, safe housing, and educational opportunities have made it more likely that African Americans will experience worse outcomes on many measures of health and wellbeing. Data from nationally representative samples reveals that the median income for African American families was \$32,068 compared to \$54,620 for non-Hispanic White families (US Census Bureau, 2010). Although African Americans are 13.6 percent of the US population, 27.4 percent live at the poverty level (US Census Bureau, 2010). The unemployment rate for African Americans is 15.8 percent in comparison to 7.5 percent among non-Hispanic Whites (US Census Bureau, 2010). Just above 20 percent of African Americans have no health insurance (US Census Bureau, 2010). Sixty-six percent of African American children live in single-parent families, and twenty-six percent of the children who entered foster care in 2009 were African American (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010).

Despite what appears to be a bleak portrait of African American family life, it is also true that resilience and cultural strength has enabled members of the African American community to withstand historic and current social forces such as oppression and racism (Hill, 1992). Cultural values that include collectivism, spiritualism, a common worldview, close ties to a glorious and ancient history of community building, along with a system of facilitating human development (rites of passages) have together supported African Americans in surviving and successfully thriving (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Therein lies the genesis and sustaining importance of the Trans-passages Theory of Change. (Figure 1.)

Trans-passages Theory of Change

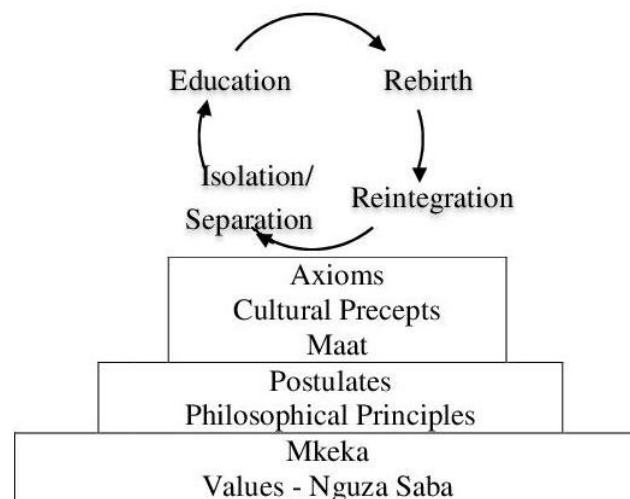


Figure 1. A pictorial representation of the Trans-passages Theory of Change

At the onset of the explanatory discussion of the TTC model, it is instructive to note the significance of the pictorial image of the Figure 1. The symbolic significance of the Sun atop the Step pyramid replicates the remarkable example set by ancient Kemet (Egypt) of innovation and the sudden utilization of new ideas and new techniques (Ani, 2003). J. H. Breasted (1912) writing about the sacred significance of the king's tomb reminds us that the Step Pyramid's form was sacrosanct, revered, and consecrated. The king was buried under the very symbol of the Sun-God, which stood in the holy of holies in the Sun-temple at Heliopolis, a symbol upon which, from the day when he created the gods. It was the loftiest object which greeted the Sun-god in all the land and his morning rays glittered on its shining summit long before he scattered the shadows in the dwellings of humbler mortals below (Edwards, 1955). It is important to note, however, that Figure 1. is a simplified exemplification of a complex social, educational and cultural process. Similarly, TTC is an iterative, cyclical, and regenerative value-based model exemplifying a complex and complicated process. The values, postulates, and axioms replicate the Step pyramids as a fitting structural foundation for TTC's set of guiding principles.

The cycle of life and phases/stages of the rites of passages experience (VanGennep, 1960) are symbolized by the sun. Similar to the depiction of TTC, Gabriel (2002) reports that in ancient times the sign of the sun god was the top point of the pyramid. By the New Kingdom the sun god was often portrayed as a sun disc. Egyptians easily understood this ancient symbol. Akhenaten's Aten (the Sun) is not a portrayal of god in the traditional sense to which Egyptians were accustomed. The disc is not the incarnation or indwelling of god. Aten is a symbol of god and his power, not an image of god himself. To grasp the breadth and depth of TTC it is incumbent to understand the meanings that lie beneath the surface of the model's visual representation.

The base or bottom layer of the pyramid structure in the TTC model consists of the values. TTC is a value-based paradigm consistent with Karenga's (1977) seven values of Nguza Saba. This Afrocentric set of behavioral guidelines provide the matrix and minimum set of values by which Black people must build their relations, conduct their affairs, and live their lives, if they are to liberate themselves and begin to transform a new world and a new people to inhabit it. Karenga developed Kwanzaa and drafted the NguzoSaba, the seven principles, between 1965 and 1966 as a form of pledge of allegiance and a proclamation statement of basic and fundamental values. Defining success and self-efficacy for individuals, families, and communities in material and nonmaterial terms, Karenga's Kwanzaa philosophy is the Swahili name (translated as reason and tradition). Kwanzaa and the Nguza Saba bring message speaking to the significance of what it means to be African in the fullest sense.

The Nguza Saba allows for the collective pursuit of visions, dreams, and needs (Asante, 1988; Hochschild, 1995; Karenga, 1977). Consequently, the Nguzo Saba are affirmations of positive change and were created to combat a legacy of oppression (Otnes & Lowrey, 2004).

Chambers (1992) presents the seven principles of the Nguzo Saba in detail:

1. Umoja (unity) to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race;
2. Kujichagulia (self-determination) to define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves;
3. Ujima (collective work and responsibility) to build and maintain our community together and make our sisters and brothers' problems our problems and solve them together;
4. Ujamaa (cooperative economics) to build and maintain our own stores, shops and other businesses and to profit from them together;
5. Nia (purpose) to make our collective vocation the building of our

community to restore our people to their traditional greatness;
 6. Kuumba (creativity) to do as much as we can to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it; and
 7. Imani (faith) to believe with our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle. Underlying the seven principles is a root theme of celebrating and building family, community and culture. (p. 96)

Utilizing the principle of faith (Imani) empowers individuals, families, and communities with the capacity to embrace a sense of positive self esteem and group pride. The principle of Imani applied in the struggle against oppression for the right to self-determination, autonomy, and the ability to control their own destinies is an invaluable resource and asset (Assante, 1990; Bennett, 1993; Billingsley 1992; Fraser, 1994).

The second layer of the Step Pyramid consists of the postulates or philosophical principles. Postulates are assumed to be the truth and consist of African centered philosophical principles. A sampling of the postulates are presented in an unpublished manual *Preliminary Materials for the Development of A Rites of Passage Course* by Dr. Anthony J. Mensah (circa 1993) as the African Philosophy of Existence and include, but are not limited to the following eight philosophical principles:

1. Existence- We are all children of God. We one with nature. All of the people are born to succeed, no one is born to be left behind.
2. A Person's Unity with the Universe – A person is the seed of the universe - a microcosm of the universe. Human beings are formed from the blood of the mother (mogya) and the spirit of the father (ntoro). The mother's (mogya) spirit emanates from the ancestral spirit – the sunsum; and the father's spirit (ntoro) comes from the original God-spirit, the okra.
3. The Principle of Twinness – Everything is good for that for which it was made. In moments of need, one can see an apparent failure and also the opposite view, success that can replace the failure.
4. The Notion of Unity in all Things – Everything is functionally connected. A few well developed human beings have the ability to tap into, manipulate, and use the energy associated with all things being connected to a limited degree.
5. The Concept of Time – We are concerned with two dimensions of time: the past and the present. Time is meaningful at the point of the event not at the mathematical moment.
6. The Nature of the Future – There is no future. There is present (Sasa) dimension to the past (Zamani) dimension. Zamani is the graveyard of time. Sasa is the sense of immediacy, of nearness or newness where or when they exist.
7. The Notion of Death and Immortality – After physical death, as long as a person's personality, character, words and incidents in life are remembered and recognized by name and stories, by relatives, friends, and fellows who knew him/her, he/she will continue to exist in the sasa period. When the last person who knew him also dies, the former passes out of the sasa period, in effect becomes completely dead. A person survives after death as an ancestor.
8. The Ancestors - Ancestors are given food and drink through libation. The ancestors provide direction and guidance; they are listened to and obeyed. There is life after death. A great deal of the communal activities and social institutions are inextricably tied to or bound up with the spirit world. The person is deeply religious in nature. The secular and the sacred are seen as complimentary ways of looking at reality not alternatives or conflicting. (Mensah, 1993, p. 33-38)

The third and top level of the Step Pyramid in Figure 1. represents the axioms or cultural precepts. The axioms are universally accepted principles and truths in African centered cultures deemed to be true with no need of proof. The cultural precepts have been developed from the dawn of time, literally from the

first civilization thousands of years ago. The axioms, Maat are self-evident or universally recognized truths; maxims. Maat is an Egyptian word referring to living a virtuous and moral life (Karenga, 1987; Harvey & Coleman, 1997). The laws of Maat provide a moral development framework to govern and guide individual and communal behavior.

Maat consists of self-evident principles revealed over time without proof as the basis for argument; postulates. Resnick & Dennis (2007) report that the importance of Maat was to denote a state of order, stability, truth, justice, or well-being. Maat represents a close association with moral behavior and social order, as well as, an elaborate and interconnected sense of truth and order in all aspects of life. Individuals were responsible for maintaining Maat through appropriate behavior, action, and truth (Faraone & Teeter, 2004). One can envision the importance and value of the implementation of Maat into programs, models, and processes seeking to positively change the social behavior of oppressed individuals, families, and communities.

Discussion

Here the authors have presented TTC as a framework or structural vehicle to support and promote the healthy and positive development of African Americans. In response to the trauma experienced by African Americans as a result of chattel slavery, TTC is important and useful as the basis for building curriculum in womanhood and manhood development initiatives and mentoring programs targeting African Americans. The utilization of cultural elements in these types of programs have confirmed that reclaiming, maintaining, and reaffirming an individual's or group's culture of origin is critically important to their positive development across the life course, as well as, their health and well-being (Newman & Newman, 2012).

In many vulnerable African American communities receive negative initiation by gangs and other destructive groups into beliefs, rules, and subsequent behaviors that are contrary to healthy functioning (Okwumabua, 1996). On the other hand, self-development and mentoring programs have recognized the significance of using history, rituals, and education in helping to facilitate the successful transition from one stage of human development to the next (Watson & Harden, 2013; Wells-Wilbon, Jackson, & Schiele, 2010). TTC is important to African Americans as it promotes cultural education and the transmission of the healing wisdom and values originating from the rich African traditions (Moore, Geryard, King-McClearly, & Warfield-Coppock, 1990). TTC represents a continuation of the healing wisdom, spirituality, and cultural traditions that have sustained African Americans through hard times. Modern western society does not offer a comparable formalized experience that teaches how to understand one's role and purpose in the family and in society.

This article is limited by the early explanatory and exploratory nature of TTC without empirical testing to produce research proven evidence. This limitation exists because of the recent origination and emergence of TTC as a model of change. This limitation points to the need to put the theory into practice and the need for further research to affirm or deny the credibility of TTC.

Conclusion

This article has given an account of TTC to address the unresolved issues and subsequent dysfunctional and destructive behavior experienced by African Americans resulting from the great African Holocaust, the Maafa. In due course, leading to the emancipation and advancement of an oppressed people, the struggle fundamentally is to affirm the traditions, history, and humanity of the oppressed by validating and promoting their culture (Schiele, 2000). Furthermore, despite its exploratory nature, this article offers some insight into a value-based approach integrated with history, philosophy, and cultural precepts can be used to develop curriculum for manhood and womanhood development projects and mentoring programs

(Brookins, 1996). Notwithstanding these limitations, the article suggests that an early conceptualization of TTC represents a structural mechanism to educate, support and promote the positive and healthy individual or group development of African Americans (Madhubuti & Madhubuti, 1994). Considerable practice-based research is needed to determine and assess the impact of programs and initiatives utilizing TTC as a model of change or intervention aimed at African Americans.

References

- Assante, K. A. (1988). *Afrocentricity*. Trenton, NJ: African World Press.
- Bennett, W. J. (1993). *The book of virtues*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Billingsley, A. (1992). *Climbing Jacob's ladder: The enduring legacy of African American families*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Fraser, G. (1994). *Success runs in our race*. New York: Avon Books.
- Ani, M. (2003). *Healing the African community*. Paper presented at the National Association of Black Social Workers, National Academy for African Centered Social Work Institute, Temple Hills, MD.
- Brookins, C. C. (1996). Promoting ethnic identity development in African American youth: The role of rites of passage. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 22(3), 388-417.
- Breasted, J. H. (1912). *The Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.
- Chambers, V. (1992). Kwanzaa. *Essence (Essence)*, 23(8), 96.
- Edwards, I. E. S. (1955). *The Pyramids of Egypt*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex. Penguin Books
- Faraone, C., & Teeter, E. (2004). Egyptian Maat and Hesiodic Metis. *Mnemosyne*, 57(2), 177-209.
- Gabriel, R. A. (2002). *The God of Our Fathers: The Memory of Egypt in Judaism and Christianity*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Harvey, A. R. & Coleman, A. (1997). An Afrocentric Program for African American Males in the Juvenile Justice System. *Child Welfare*, January/February 1997
- Hill, P. (1992). *Coming of Age: African American Male Rites of Passages*. Chicago, IL: African American Images.
- Hochschild, J. L. (1995). *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Karenga, R. M. (1977). *Kwanzaa: Origin, Concepts, Practice*. San Diego, CA: Kawaida Publications.
- Karenga, M. (1987). *Towards a sociology of Maatian ethics: Literature and context. Reconstructing Kemetic culture: Papers, perspectives, projects*. Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press.
- Madhubuti, H. & Madhubuti, S. (1994). *African-Centered Education: Its Value, Importance, and Necessity in the Development of Black Children* (p. 12). Chicago, IL: Third World Press.
- Mensah, Anthony, J., (circa 1993). *Preliminal Materials for the Development of A Rites of Passage Course*, (unpublished manual).
- Mims, S., Higginbottom, L., & Reid, O. (N. D.) *Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder*. Retrieved December 16, 2013 from http://www.pyramidbuilders.org/pdfs/PTSD_Manuscript.pdf

- Moore, M., Geryard, G., King-McClearly, K., & Warfield-Coppock, N. (1987). Transformation: A rites of passages manual for African American girls. New York: STARS Press.
- Moore-Thomas, C. & Day-Vines, N. L. (2010). Culturally Competent Collaboration: School Counselor Collaboration with African American Families and Communities. *Professional School Counseling*, 14(1), 53-63.
- Newman, B. M. & Newman, P. R. (2012). Development through Life: A Psychosocial Approach. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Okwumabua, T. M. (1996). Let the Circle Be Unbroken; Volume 1. Facilitator's Manual for Rites of Passage Activities and Programs. Memphis, TN: Nia Psychological and Health Consultants, Inc.
- Otnes, C. C. & Lowrey, T. M. (2004). Contemporary Consumption Rituals: A Research Anthology. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, New Jersey.
- Resnik, J. C. & Dennis, E. (2007). Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society Representing Justice: From Renaissance Iconography to Twenty-First-Century Courthouses.
- Schiele, J. (2000). Human Services and the Afrocentric Paradigm. Binghamton, NY: Hayworth Press.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2010). U.S. Census Bureau Population Survey.
- VanGennep, A. (1960). The Rites of Passages. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Warfield-Coppock, N. (1990). Afrocentric theory and applications, Volume 1: Adolescent rites of passage. Washington, D.C.: Baobab Associates.
- Watson, J., Harden, T., & Washington, G. (2013). Themes or topics in rites of passages curriculum. *Black Child Journal*, Summer 156-163.