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# African American Social Work Pioneers' Response to Need

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*This article discusses the fundamental values and principles that guided African American social work practice at the beginning of the century. The elements and dimensions that were a significant part of this practice repertoire are also discussed. As African Americans claimed their place among social work pioneers, the primacy of their mission improved the collective social functioning of their communities. For these pioneers social work was both "cause and function." Their legacy is a strength-based practice model on which contemporary scholars and practitioners can build.*

**Key words:** African Americans; community practice; history; pioneers

African American pioneer social workers of the Progressive Era (1898–1918) were at once concerned about the private troubles of individuals and the larger public issues that affected them. They also were acutely aware of their relationship to the community residents they served. There was very little physical, social, and economic distance between the workers and their clients. They lived in the same communities and by virtue of race shared many of the same societal problems and issues of concern. Their work at the beginning of this century reflects contemporary community practice. For these African American pioneers, community practice had both a macro- and a micro-orientation. These individuals "directed intervention designed to bring about planned change in organizations and communities"—macropractice (Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 1993, p. 3) while "developing, locating, linking with and managing community resources" in a way that helped to improve individual social

functioning—micropractice (Hardcastle, Wenocur, & Powers, 1997, p. 2). Progressive-Era African American social workers' community practice was essentially "race work," which personalized problems to alleviate human suffering and concurrently organized and developed private organizations to change the system. The "race men" and "race women" who engaged in the emerging social work profession were among the "talented tenth," the educated elite of the African American community (DuBois, 1908). Self-help, race pride, mutual aid, and social debt became part of the underpinning that guided their practice. These principles and values were neither exclusive nor sequential. Instead they were each part of the foundation on which social work and social welfare services were developed to meet the needs of the African American community.

This article will briefly discuss these fundamental values as they were reflected in African American social work at the beginning of the

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century. The elements and dimensions that were a significant part of their practice repertoire are also discussed. As African Americans claimed their place among social work pioneers, the primacy of their mission to improve the collective social functioning of their racially segregated communities became clear. For these pioneers social work was both “cause and function.”

## Values and Principles

### Self-Help and Mutual Aid

As noted the values and principles fundamental to African American social work practice were self-help, mutual aid, race pride, and social debt.

The focus on self-help and mutual aid became an institutionalized part of the African American community. Overwhelmingly excluded from full participation in the U.S. social system and at the same time receiving limited responses to individual and social problems from white social workers, African Americans developed a dogged determination to take care of their own. A review of the *Proceedings* of the National Conference on Charities and Corrections from 1874 through 1945 revealed only brief and infrequent expressions of concern about the many social problems and inadequate social conditions that were the lot of African Americans during the early decades of the 20th century (Lide, 1973). On the other hand, the *Southern Workman*, the literary organ published by Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute for Negroes and Indians (now Hampton University), was devoted entirely to improving the economic, social, and political conditions of African Americans. The journal's mission was to expose problems and to suggest and examine strategies for planned change. During the early part of the century, the journal provided a publishing outlet for many African American social work pioneers, artists, business men and women, and others. Like many others, Sarah Collins Fernandis, a settlement house leader and pioneer in the public health movement, relied heavily on the *Southern Workman* as a tool for communicating information about settlement work, interracial activities, health,

housing, child care issues, and the need for African Americans to help each other. Furthermore, in an effort to chronicle social services within the African American community, W. E. B. DuBois, through the Atlanta University surveys, published *Some Efforts of American Negroes for their Own Social Betterment* in 1898 and *Efforts for Social Betterment among Negro Americans* in 1909. Although the data included in these two publications were incomplete, they nonetheless reflected the self-help work that was taking place throughout the country at the beginning of the century.

Mutual aid, a fundamental part of the African tradition, was perfected in this country during the African American enslavement. It was through mutual aid that the slave community and later the emancipated freedmen and women engaged in their greatest form of resistance—survival. By the turn of the century, mutual aid had taken on the character of “community action” (Peebles-Wilkins, 1994). For example, Lawrence Oxley, a pioneer in social work training and public welfare work, relied on his belief in the importance of mutual aid and embraced the idiom of consciousness of kind. For Oxley, African Americans helping each other was the most effective method of ameliorating desperate social conditions in a racially segregated country (Burwell, 1994). In an effort to ensure open communication, to persuade, encourage, organize, and cajole, African American reformers established their own literary organs that included newspapers and journals or magazines such as the *Crisis*; *Opportunity*; the *New York Age*; a womanist publication, *Women's Era*; and A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen's socialist magazine, the *Messenger*. The *Women's Era* and the *Messenger* were both critical to the work of national organizations. The National Association of Colored Women's (NACW) clubs relied on the *Women's Era* as a source of news about the activities of the growing network of clubs throughout the country. Initially established in 1894 to serve the Boston clubs, the *Women's Era* became the official organ of the NACW two years later (Kennedy, 1993). Similarly, through the initiative of A. Phillip Randolph, the *Messenger* played a pivotal role in the creation of the

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Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a labor union serving African American male porters who worked on Pullman cars (Harris, 1977).

The services and programs that African American social workers and reformers initiated were racially sensitive, modeled behavior deemed appropriate for upward mobility and taught suitable and necessary life skills. Their schools, churches, businesses, fraternal groups, and social welfare organizations inculcated the themes of self-help, mutual aid, and solidarity (Meier, 1969). Consequently, as African American pioneer social workers embraced the new social work profession, the ideals of self-help, racial solidarity, and mutual aid set the thematic parameters for their work.

### **Race Pride**

Race pride, race consciousness, and racial uplift were also hallmarks of African American social work and reform during this period. African American social workers had a significant role to play in the elevation of the race. They encouraged, taught, mentored, and role modeled race pride. In so doing, they brought tremendous power to their social service work. Their work seldom began and ended with the provision of some concrete social service. Rather it encompassed the “whole person” in his or her environment. Racial uplift, for example, was inseparable from efforts to combat sexual exploitation (Gordon, 1991). Hine (1990) found that African American social work reformers’ efforts to provide recreational programs for boys was a twofold strategy to both give boys safe and healthy recreational outlets and to protect girls from assault. As Chandler (1995, p. 507) noted, “Race pride among recipients was anathema to social service institutions.” Race pride also served as a mechanism for group solidarity and helped to undercut class differences between the social workers and the people they served (Chandler, 1995).

### **Social Debt**

Among African Americans, achieving economic and educational success carried a moral, monetary, and service obligation. The educated African American was a member of a privileged group and was expected to use her or his educa-

tion to help the race. In his essay entitled “The College-Bred Negro,” DuBois (1908) said, “The best of us should give of our means, our time and ourselves to leaven the whole” (p. 99). Essentially education had particular meaning for African Americans and was integrated into campaigns for the welfare of the race (Gordon, 1991). Many of the pioneer social welfare leaders taught school at some time in their careers. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a prominent political activist and journalist, began teaching at the age of 15 to support her younger brothers and sisters after her parents were killed by a yellow fever epidemic. Elizabeth Ross Haynes, a labor expert and wife of Dr. George Haynes, taught high school immediately after college graduation and before she began her career with the YWCA. Others like Lucy Laney, Anna Julia Cooper, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and Mary McLeod Bethune established schools for African Americans. Education and teaching were so critical to these pioneers that they were built into most programs and services of which they were a part. African American social settlements, for example, included programs to teach sewing, dressmaking, and child care and public lectures and literary clubs to stimulate intellectual and political discourse (Carlton-LaNey, 1994; Neverdon-Morton, 1989). Furthermore, the colleges and universities with which these pioneers were affiliated advocated education for service and racial uplift. Unlike some who eagerly accepted their obligations to serve, Janie Porter Barrett complained about her social indebtedness saying, “I did not love my race! I didn’t want the responsibility of it. I wanted fun and pretty things. At the [Hampton] Institute, we were always hearing about our duty to our race, and I get so tired of that! Why, on Sundays I used to wake up and say to myself, “Today I don’t have to do a single thing for my race”” (Barrett, 1915/1989, p. 105). Although Barrett protested loudly, her social reform deeds were much more powerful as she became a prominent and successful organizer in the social settlement and women’s club movements. Through her club work, Barrett helped to raise enough money to create a rehabilitation center for African American girls—the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls. In addition to the

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indoctrination that was part of the collegiate experience, McCluskey (1997) noted that these social welfare reformers' leadership was grounded in religious conviction, which they viewed as a "call to service by those blessed with an education" (p. 424). Although class consciousness was an accepted consequence of their achievement and elitism a constant hallmark, these social welfare pioneers nonetheless embraced a mandate of service-oriented leadership.

### **Elements and Dimensions of Practice**

The following elements and dimensions were part of community practice among African American social work pioneers: race lens, holistic approach, Africentric paradigm, creating organizations and institutions, web of affiliation, philanthropy, and "we specialize in the wholly impossible."

To varying degrees they included all of these elements as they forged a place for themselves in the profession and worked to deliver racially competent social work services.

#### **Race Lens**

A "race lens" was used to assess carefully problems and issues that confronted the African American community. The race lens reflected racism as a powerful part of the life experiences of African Americans. Both public and private archival data on African American social work/welfare leaders are replete with emphasis on working for the "race" or racial uplift. There was no question among these pioneers that their race was central to their well-being or lack thereof. Gaining respect from white people claimed a good deal of attention from the leaders of the African American community. Working with white people through interracial cooperation was deemed necessary and in some cases desirable. It was not uncommon, as Simon (1994) noted, for members of oppressed groups to assume that "wisdom lies outside themselves and that it resides in others who are as little like themselves as possible" (p. 12). For many, it was not "white wisdom" that encouraged interracial cooperation as much as it was the reality that therein lay the "power" to change systems. Many of these pioneers, on the other hand, genuinely valued interracial coop-

eration as the only mechanism through which racial progress could take place (Giddings, 1984). Still others like W.E.B. DuBois (1935) believed that interracial cooperation was patronizing and meaningless and failed to address the major social problems of racism. Although there was disagreement on the role of interracial cooperation among African Americans, social workers and social welfare leaders continued to tout the importance of race pride and "self-reclamation" and to maintain a constant struggle to dispel myths and to establish powerful social institutions and strong role models for African Americans. Although much of the work that these social welfare leaders did was to promote inclusion of African Americans into the larger society, their building of private institutions and developing of social service programs to serve the community further encouraged segregation.

The NACW organized in 1896, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded in 1910, and the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, founded in 1911 and renamed the National Urban League (NUL) in 1920, were three of the most significant social welfare and social reform organizations for African Americans during the Progressive Era. Issues of racial oppression and discrimination, racial uplift, and self-reclamation, as well as culturally appropriate social services delivery, were part of these organizations' *raison d'être*. Essentially, the welfare of "the race" was central to all of their services and programs.

#### **Holistic Approach**

Social work practice took a holistic approach. The movement toward professional training of African American social workers embraced a holistic approach to social work practice. The NUL is credited with the first organized social work course of study for African Americans developed at Fisk University in 1911. Dr. George Edmund Haynes, co-founder and first executive director of the NUL, was a leader in the emerging social work profession. His work helped to introduce hundreds of young men and women to formal social work training through the National Urban League Fellowship

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program. Confident that a knowledge and an appreciation of African American history was essential for any African American who planned to engage in social work practice, Haynes developed the first courses in African American history to be taught in any U.S. university. These courses, along with the courses in economics and sociology, became part of the social work certificate program (Carlton-LaNey, 1983).

During the 1920s two social work schools were established for African Americans: the Atlanta School of Social Work and the Bishop Tuttle School in Raleigh, North Carolina. Although it was recognized that most of the individuals practicing social work were not trained professionally, training was nonetheless deemed preferable. Eugene K. Jones (1928/1978), second executive director of the NUL, accorded professional social work among African Americans powerful status when he stated that, “effective social work among Negroes will tend to raise the level of intelligence, of physical vigor and industrial status of the group” (p. 463). For Jones social work encompassed all aspects of African American life. Forrester Washington (1926/1978), director of the Philadelphia Armstrong Association, believed that professional social work required a “humanitarian impulse” along with the ability to see “the causes of certain problems and [to] know the proper treatment of these problems.” Moreover, Washington believed that seeing “the bigness and oneness of social work, and yet the complexity of it” (p. 448) was essential for competent practice. Washington also noted that a social worker’s “failure to see social problems in the large” results from a lack of perspective, which is characteristic of the untrained worker. For him, training involved the development of a curriculum that would prepare men and women to “accelerate human progress.” In sum, Washington stated that “to be master of the process by which social change takes place is the function of the social worker” (p. 449).

### **Africentric Paradigm**

This holistic perspective also illustrates that pioneer African American social workers were enmeshed in the Africentric paradigm. The Africentric paradigm emphasizes a collective

conceptualization of human beings and their group survival. Although individual uniqueness is valued, the Africentric paradigm rejects the idea that the individual can be understood separate from others in his or her social group (Ak’bar, 1984; Nobles, 1980). The fact that African American pioneer social workers spoke of and wrote about “the race” as a national community (as well as a local neighborhood) suggests that a sense of the collectivity was axiomatic to their thinking. The Africentric paradigm counteracted the deficit approaches to dealing with African Americans and insisted on practice that takes into account the cultural uniqueness of the group. Derogatory images of the group that negatively appraised their political, economic, and social worth are replaced with positive images of strength and resourcefulness. In the early 1920s, Dexter (1978) discussed the deficit model of practice that white workers applied to their African American clients in the following excerpt. He noted that white workers commit one of two mistakes.

They either insist on the standards of family and social life which they consider those of normal white people; or they believe that because their clients are Negroes they cannot be expected to have much in the way of standards...The first group of workers are very liable to fail in their attempt and admit finally that the second have the correct attitude. The second method, carried to its logical conclusion, means that there is literally no constructive work done with colored people, and that the ideals of family and community life, economic and moral alike, are uncultivated and unknown. (Dexter, 1921/1978, p. 427)

Dexter’s (1921/1978) idea of preferable practice reflects the Africentric approach. He noted that the African American worker “knows her people’s background. She does not impose on them a standard which is at present impossible; nor—and this is even more important—does she believe them non-moral or unimprovable” (p. 427). Similarly Jones (1978) believed that effective social work would “help to produce a hearty race, a self-contained group, a resourceful people from whom [would] emerge outstanding characters whose special contributions

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to the welfare of man [would] tend to bring more respect for and more confidence in the Negro as a people" (p. 463). Essentially, Jones saw social work as having the capacity to focus on the collectivity with emphasis on sharing, cooperation, and social responsibility—features endemic to Africentricity (Ak'bar, 1984; Daly, Jennings, Beckett, & Leashore, 1995).

### **Organizations and Institutions**

Creating organizations and institutions as mechanisms for service and empowerment was also crucial to Progressive Era African American social work. Fannie Barrier Williams, community activist and social welfare reformer, was influential in several initiatives to create new institutions for African Americans. In an article published in *Charities*, Williams (1905) stated that in her opinion, "the Negro individual does not like to be alone in good works. His bent for organization is a sort of racial passion" (p. 41). Williams further noted that "indeed, no race of men and women feels more strongly than we do the force of the maxim that in union there is strength" (p. 41). Although African American male social workers and social reformers were instrumental in establishing numerous organizations and institutions (for example, the NUL, NAACP, the National Negro Business League, and the Anti-Slavery Society), African American women played the major role in creating social, educational, religious, and economic institutions designed to improve life in the African American community. Unlike their white counterparts who, according to social reformer Mary White Ovington, focused on cultural activities instead of philanthropic work (Salem, 1990), African American club women concentrated on self-improvement and community improvement with an omnipresent emphasis on race pride and race advancement (Lerner, 1972). By 1920 African American women had established homes for elderly people, schools, hospitals, sanitariums, orphanages, settlement houses, libraries, and training schools for every representative community (Carlton-LaNey, 1989; Neverdon-Morton, 1989; Hine, 1990). Like white clubs, African American clubs were lead by middle-class women, but dissimilarly, the African American club members included

working-class women, tenant farm women, and poor women (Lerner, 1972). These African American institution builders were engaged in a movement for self-reclamation. Although the institutions and organizations with which African American pioneers were associated sometimes appeared to reflect conservative U.S. mores and the status quo, there existed what Hine called "a palpable undertone of muted defiance of racial and gender inequalities pervading virtually every aspect of American society" (p. 88).

### **Web of Affiliation**

African American social work pioneers were involved in myriad organizations and community service programs. Their reform work was done through a "web of affiliations" (Gilkes, 1988). The complexity and multiplicity of their careers reflected an obligation to service and a commitment to social betterment. In describing the social worker of the early 1900s, Dexter (1921/1978) recounted the need for them to be involved in the many aspects of the African American community to be effective. In 1921 he stated that "various movements are on foot among the Colored (sic) people for their own improvement and a social worker who is not in touch with them is probably not of the sort to serve the community best" (p. 439). Dexter, General Secretary of the Associated Charities in Atlanta, expected that social workers should exercise some discretion in the ways that they chose to spend their time and indicated that they "should be familiar with those activities which are working toward the advancement of the colored people and be ready to lend every possible assistance to the sound and constructive movements" (p. 439). There are numerous examples of reformers and social welfare workers who divided their time between various worthy causes. Mary McLeod Bethune, for example was the founder of Bethune-Cookman College, an institution that was initially established for female students. She served as president of that school from 1904 to 1942. Bethune was also a founding member of the NACW and served as president of that organization as well. Her affiliations were not disparate and fragmented; instead her involvement reflected what McCluskey (1997) called a

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“multileveled struggle for gender and racial empowerment” (p. 424).

Social orders were also significant in the work of African American reformers. Secret in ritual, but benevolent in purpose, these groups claimed large memberships and were recognized as acceptable social outlets and important service channels. In discussing the social bonds in Chicago’s African American community, Williams (1905) indicated that secret orders were second only to the church in influence among African Americans. The Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and the True Reformers were listed as some of the most prominent, with the Masons and Odd Fellows having the largest number and being the most influential. Williams felt that in “no other form of organization do the terms brotherhood and mutual obligation mean so much.” She further indicated that “fifty percent of Chicago’s better class of Negro men are enrolled in some secret order” (p. 42), with many men holding membership in as many as four or five at a time.

### **Philanthropy**

Philanthropy was essential. The term philanthropy usually suggests large monetary contributions. Philanthropic work among African American social workers during this time in history usually took the form of small-scale giving. Burwell (1995) used the phrase “pennies, nickels and dimes,” to connote the relatively small-scale fund raising efforts in the African American community. Burwell also advocated, however, that we shift paradigms to better understand the extent of charitable work that emanated from the African American community at the turn of the century. Although individual giving may have produced small amounts of money, philanthropy was, nonetheless, great enough to support many organizations and charities. Furthermore, Hine (1994) noted that philanthropic work involved personal assistance and that people usually knew the families, individuals, or groups to whom they contributed. Both financial contributions and volunteer service must be included in our definition of philanthropy. Philanthropic work was not done out of a desire for social control; rather, the goals were individual improvement,

organizational maintenance, and planned change. African American club women, for example, engaged in philanthropic work in several ways and were noted especially for their initiatives to care for indigent elderly people. Women’s clubs mobilized to provide homes for elderly people in many major cities throughout the country. The women donated monies to specific old peoples’ homes and sometimes taxed each club member an annual fee as part of their fund-raising obligation. This was the rule of the Tent Sisters Old Folks’ Home in North Carolina, which required that each sister in the order give a pound of food per month and at least 25 cents per year to maintain the home. Various women’s clubs managed endowments left to operate homes for elderly people. In many cases daily responsibilities for running a home were left to club women volunteers (Carlton-LaNey, 1989). Many African American social work pioneers fulfilled the role of philanthropist through both time and money.

### **Wholly Impossible**

Perhaps the phrase, “We specialize in the wholly impossible,” is the slogan that aptly captures the womanist consciousness that these African American female pioneers embraced. These women engaged in efforts to serve women and girls, but issues of race took priority. Elise McDougald (1925) supported this when she said, “In this matter of sex equality, Negro women have contributed few outstanding militants. Their feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization of the equality of the races, the sex struggle assuming a subordinate place” (p. 691). Furthermore, McDougald indicated that the African American woman faced a discrimination in which she was “figuratively struck in the face daily by contempt from the world about her” (p. 691). Although most of these women were socioeconomically prominent, they were not spared the humiliation to which McDougald referred. Even with their educational achievement, property ownership, poise, and eloquence, these women were still thought of and treated like “washerwomen”—a pejorative image that was politically and economically expedient. It is probably this awareness that kept them attuned to the deplorable

conditions to which their less-fortunate sisters were subjected.

These pioneers, nonetheless, moved forward in their efforts to mentor, educate, train, and protect younger women. Their womanish consciousness allowed them to recognize the political nature of sexism long before their white counterparts. And unlike their white sisters, these pioneers faced the fact that sexual exploitation and violence were perpetuated by both African American and white men. Politicizing sexual exploitation and harassment for African American women placed it squarely within the context of race. Combating sexual exploitation, therefore, was inextricably linked to race uplift (Gordon, 1991; Hine, 1990). In accomplishing this “double task”—sex and race emancipation—McDougald (1925) said of the African American woman: “She is measuring up to the needs and demands of her family, community and race and radiating...a hope that is cherished by her sisters in less propitious circumstances throughout the land. The wind of the race’s destiny stirs more briskly because of her striving” (p. 691). Acknowledging the mammoth nature of this “double task,” Nannie Burroughs, founder of the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, DC, summarized the African American social reformers’ commitment when she said, “We specialize in the wholly impossible” (Hine, 1990). This declaration carried overtones of defiance, determination, and dedication, qualities that characterized African American Progressive Era social work and social reform.

### **Implications for Practice**

Many social workers today know very little about their African American clients and fail to see the importance of immersing themselves in African American history and culture. Martin and Martin (1995) contended that social workers must understand that African Americans are “both creatures and creators of history in that history has placed them where they are right now and has shaped their point of view, their identity, and their aspirations” (p. 252). Martin and Martin further noted that historical understanding fosters sensitivity to the plight of African American people in contemporary society

by providing a sense of historical continuity that helps one to see the relationship and the parallels between the past and the present.

The same elements and dimensions of practice that emerged during the early part of the century continue to be useful in practice today. The “race lens” is certainly important in addressing practice issues for which racial tensions continue to impede professional helping (Proctor & Davis, 1994). According to Allen-Meares and Burman (1995), the social work profession maintains a discomforting silence when viewing inequalities and social conditions that affect African American families. A similar silence exists when schools of social work participate in perpetuating these inequalities through differential treatment of African American faculty and students. Where this is true, the social work profession is helping to sustain societal oppression and facilitating the unequal distribution of power and resources. Swigonski (1996) maintained that “all forms of oppression result in privileges for the oppressors” (p. 156). A denial of privilege and a denial of racism go hand in hand. Unearned privilege supports and maintained the unequal distribution of power and resources that confronts us daily (hooks, 1990; Swigonski, 1996). People who have privilege but deny it are likely to misinterpret the lack of privilege as pathology when they encounter oppressed groups. The privilege serves to distance them from others (Penderhughes, 1989). If social workers are to be effective, they must develop greater self-awareness, engage in activities to alter patterns of social privilege through the “habit of resistance,” and work to change the social structure.

Embracing the Africentric paradigm encompasses the holistic approach to practice. This should continue as essential to competent practice with African Americans. The Africentric paradigm places an emphasis on personalizing the professional relationship that encourages the worker to participate emotionally with the client. It also emphasizes reciprocity in the helping relationship (Schiele, 1996). From this perspective, social workers must be knowledgeable of and engaged in the communities in which they work. Detachment and lack of knowledge convey indifference. Reciprocity

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within the helping relationship suggests that both the worker and the client have something valuable to contribute to the process. In this sense, the Africentric paradigm is not elitist. It presupposes, instead, that the knowledge and expertise that the client has is equally valuable in the helping process. The social worker must acknowledge the clients' abilities and relinquish power while allowing the client to serve as the cultural guide.

Organizations and institutions in the African American community serve an important empowerment function. It is critical for social workers to tap into these existing organizations and institutions as resources. Social workers must learn as much as possible about community resources and the ways that community residents use those resources. The African American family is the major social institution and continues as a significant resource in the community. Billingsley (1992) noted that the African American family "remains a resilient and adaptive institution reflecting the most basic values, hopes, and aspirations" (p. 17). Martin and Martin (1995) indicated that the African American extended family provided a model for early social welfare services and that elements of the extended family such as mutual aid, social class cooperation, and the prosocialization of children could be carried into the social welfare institution. Fictive kinship and racial and religious consciousness served as conduits for carrying these elements to the larger African American community. The church, the most prominent social institution second only to the family, continues as a major source of support for the African American community. Historically black colleges and universities are increasingly important resources for strengthening African American families and revitalizing communities (Hill, 1997). Philanthropy, which continues in the form of small-scale personal service and giving, also has become more formalized through organizations like the National Black United Fund. Other formal groups such as sororities, fraternities, benevolent groups, and grass roots organizations are important to the African American community as well.

Informal groups also abound in these communities. African American women, for ex-

ample, have formed numerous informal clubs to meet various needs. Such a group, for example, may have been formed to provide a discussion forum for people who enjoy reading; however, as group members suffer personal crises the book clubs have provided the supportive network of women that members needed. Essentially, these women formed groups out of needs for support and nurturance, personal and communal growth, socialization, and self-sufficiency (Carlton-LaNey & Andrews, 1998). Tapping and building on community strengths is another essential element. Community leaders are part of that base of strength. Local and national leadership efforts, such as the Pugh Initiative, provide avenues for grass roots leaders and others recognized as having valuable leadership potential to become involved in civic and political training programs. Social workers must analyze the ways that such groups and organizations may benefit or hurt clients, learn the clients' relationships to these types of groups, steer clients toward such groups, or help the client to form similar self-help groups.

Government entities could be helped to better serve the local community in creative ways. Local county Departments of Social Services, for example, could establish formal linkages with organizations that have national program mandates to serve the disadvantaged, such as the Masons, the Links, Inc., and the Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta sororities. It is also important for social workers to be as active in these groups as possible. The web of affiliation is empowering and gives its members leverage. Furthermore, because social workers have a unique sense of their clients' socio-political positions, they should feel compelled to use the personal and professional leverage gained through affiliations or membership to help to improve the social environment that affects their clients and ultimately themselves. As Simon (1994) noted, there continues to be a need for social workers "[to] join[ing] with each other and with their clients in pressing and pushing governments, schools, health and mental health institutions, corporations, and professions to reduce their collaboration in the perpetuation of American patterns of inequity and injustice" (p. 167).

## Conclusion

Today we continue to confront many of the same social problems that plagued our ancestors, while racism and discrimination remain stifling, painful, and cumulative (Feagin & Feagin, 1996). The social workers of the Progressive Era engaged in practice that has helped us to better understand society and its response to people of color. Their work also has provided a model for practice and service delivery. Many scholars (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994; Gary & Gary, 1994; Hill, 1997; Hodges, Burwell & Ortega, 1998; Martin & Martin, 1995; Penderhughes, 1989) are building on the work that our pioneers began. Their work is valuable and important, but it is not enough. Like our African American pioneers, contemporary scholars who have committed themselves to this area of study challenge the larger social work profession to confront the hegemony of systemic oppression as it exists on all levels. The profession's ability to respond to the problems that continue to face African Americans and other people of color will be a testimony to our pioneers' legacy. ■

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