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Personality problems in social case work among negroes

Marguery A. Davis
Atlanta University

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PERSONALITY PROBLEMS IN SOCIAL CASE WORK
AMONG NEGROES

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL
OF SOCIAL WORK IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

BY
MARGUERY A. DAVIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Study

One clear principle which emerges from anthropological study of the life of different peoples is that in certain respects all human beings are more alike than they are different. For that reason, varying cultures, though superficially different, have very much the same elements. It has been said that one outward attribute commonly possessed by cultures is stability.

Fundamentally, cultures proceed in much the same manner as they always have unless some new and sudden change in the socio-economic order takes place. Just such a change took place in this country during the early part of the seventeenth century, which was destined to alter the course of the rising American culture and set the stage for many of the problems facing America as well as the Negro today. This event was the introduction of Negro slaves in America.

Because certain customs, ideas, attitudes, and finally mores were built upon this change, the Negro, after some three hundred years in America, has never been able to take his rightful place as a full-fledged American citizen entitled to all the rights and privileges accruing thereto. For

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the same reasons, the social case worker among Negroes has often been unable to treat her cases with the same facility as social case workers with white clients.

A vast amount of literature has been written to explain the Negro's problem of adjustment to American life. Some of the writers have set forth ideas which were entirely unfounded and erroneous, others have made half-hearted stabs at the roots of the problems, and still others have honestly endeavored to fully understand. The great majority unfortunately have seemed to fall far short of their objective.

The object of this study is not to solve the so-called "Negro problem" but rather to attempt to find and to explain some of the personality problems which handicap persons attempting to integrate the Negro into the main stream of culture through social case work. The term "main stream of culture" as used herein means all the institutions, habits, concepts, folkways, mores that go to make up life in this country, and which when viewed as a whole, establish the degree of civilization attained by the United States.

This study also attempts to give social case workers some insight into the reasons for the Negro's frequent inability to accept or carry through treatment programs, and to suggest ways in which the case worker may better understand and treat the social situation facing her client.

Scope

This study deals with some of the personality problems which confront the Negro client and possibly the case worker, thereby hampering treatment plans. It will include only those personality problems encountered in social case work.

It must be borne in mind that many of the personality problems
service at the clinic, the worker began to concentrate on Miss T.'s hesitation. Miss T. brought out that she dreaded and feared contact with whites. She had been born and reared in the South where her father had met an untimely, but accidental death, at the hands of a white man. After moving to this border city, she had taken a job as dish-washer in an Episcopal hospital. While there she heard persons refer to the Negro employees as "niggers." She had thought that this did not happen "up north." Later, she overheard a conversation between the employment manager and another white man in which he remarked that the "$\text{nigger}$ who washes dishes here now is too thin for the uniforms, anyhow, and for all I know she could have T.B." Soon after this incident, Miss T. was discharged. During the interview she mentioned that her mother has always told her that the only way to get along with "white folks" is to keep away from them unless you're working.

Treatment plans for Miss T. were definitely blocked by her own rejection of white people and her fear of being rejected by them. She was no more able to accept the friendliness of the white worker than she was the services of the clinic which was manned by whites. She had feelings of hostility toward white people because she still blamed the white man for her father's death. Her past work experiences with whites only served to deepen her hostility and rejection of whites. Miss T.'s work history gave validity to the fact that she was willing to work, but anxiety, fear of denial, and hostility blocked all efforts at taking the step which would help her in finding employment. Thus, it was the case worker's job to help Miss T. bring out her feelings and thereby gain some insight into her own personality problems.

Negro clients themselves very often tend to reject Negro professional workers. This is a personality difficulty which frequently grows out of a cultural pattern which has sanctioned white superiority and Negro inferiority. The case of a Negro World War Veteran will serve to illustrate this type of problem.

Mr. H. became ill while working on a W.P.A. assignment. He went to the United States Marine hospital where he was advised that recovery would be more certain and rapid if they
transferred him to the Veteran's Hospital at Tuskegee, Alabama. Mr. H. refused to go there, because the physicians are Negroes. He expressed the feeling that "the poor colored doctors" know little or nothing about treatment. He had understood and believed that the doctors give every patient a spinal puncture. "If the doctor misses the vein, you are paralyzed for life. The government pays the doctor so much for each spinal puncture."

Mr. H. decided to take his treatments at a white clinic in lieu of receiving institutionalized care at the colored Veteran's Hospital.

In spite of the fact that Mr. H. was suffering from an illness which required institutional care for thorough recovery, he refused such care because of his rejection of and lack of faith in the ability of Negro physicians to give proper service and care. In this case, we can also see the problem of regression. Mr. H. had all faith in the abilities of white doctors and depended upon their knowledge and technical ability to the exclusion of the Negro doctors.

Very often in doing case work with a Negro client we find that when he rejects the Negro worker, he also projects upon her any difficulty he might have in carrying out his wishes.

Mr. D. had been receiving relief from the public agency for seven years. In the last year, the white worker was replaced by a colored worker. Mr. D. had often expressed his resentment concerning this change. From time to time, Mr. D. failed to use the relief money in accordance with the plans, and it was found that he was spending it for liquor. Finally, the worker arranged with Mr. D. to put the money in charge of his sister-in-law. Mr. D. resented this greatly and began to blame the colored case worker for the humiliating change. His indignation became so strong that he sent a letter to President Roosevelt stating that the colored workers were unfair to him as well as inefficient at their jobs. The letter never reached the President and was referred back to the Department of Public Welfare.

Mr. D.'s past experiences with white case workers had been particularly satisfying to him, because they had acquiesced in most of his wishes.

When the white worker was replaced by a colored worker, Mr. D. feared that
the latter would not comply with his wishes and had feelings of hostility toward the person who he believed was threatening his security. Mr. D.'s hostility was increased when the colored worker gave the keeping of his money into the hands of someone else. However, he had feelings of guilt concerning this, because he knew that this own actions had brought about the introduction of such a procedure. In order to resolve his guilt, he projected his misfortune upon the worker and attempted to punish her by writing to the President of the United States.

The problem of regression is one which occurs repeatedly in case work with Negroes. It is a very serious personality problem because if it is not recognized and treated by the case worker, it may become a deep-seated psychiatric problem which responds only to psychiatric treatment.

During Slavery, Negroes took all of their problems to their masters, because they had few if any resources for working out their own solutions. Even after slavery and until today many white people continue to retain a paternalistic attitude toward Negroes which encourages regression. A case illustration of regression can be seen in the following case of an old Negro woman about seventy years of age.

The woman, known to the community as "Blind Mary" was daily found roaming the business sections of the city, often narrowly escaping injury as she attempted to cross the streets regardless of traffic. Usually, she refused aid from passers-by. The Negro public welfare worker, summoned by the police department, found the woman living alone in an old shack. In the worker's attempt to establish rapport, she mentioned the fact that she was a Negro. The woman replied by asking, "Who are you, what's wrong with you that you want to help me? Get away from me. I am afraid of you. The white folks and the Lord helps me." A few days later the same worker met the woman attempting to cross the street at a very busy intersection. When she offered to help, the woman asked "Is you a white lady?" The worker, feeling justified in telling the lie to save the woman from danger, replied in the affirmative. At that, the woman took the worker's arm and commented that "I thank you to help me across, 'cause I only have white folks and the Lord to help me."
This woman presented a serious personality problem because first of all she had regressed so far that she was almost completely dependent upon white people for help. She was so confident in their ability to help her that she identified them with God. Blind Mary’s feelings of hostility toward Negroes was so intense that she actually feared them in spite of the fact that she herself was a Negro. There is a question as to whether or not a solution to such a problem could be found in a case work relationship. However, it is one which case workers do meet, and it is their job to know whether or not the solution to such a personality problem can best be affected in this area or in the area of psychiatry. This illustration reveals a problem which is found in other groups, but it was precipitated by the fact that the woman was a Negro.

The type of regression as seen in the following case illustration was very definitely an outgrowth of the cultural pattern.

Mrs. J., a resident of a home for the aged, sold her farm after the death of her husband, and left the proceeds from the farm in charge of a white man with whom she had recently become acquainted. The worker suggested that Mrs. J. use some of the money for her immediate personal use. It was also suggested that she hire a Negro lawyer and draw up a will. Mrs. J. pointed out that she had implicit confidence in the white man’s ability to manage her money, because he had already helped her transfer her account from one bank to another. He was someone on whom she could depend. She brought out her feelings that Negroes make too much “fuss” over handling and inheriting money and she did not intend to have this happen over her dead body. To support her argument, she pointed out certain Negro insurance companies that did not live up to their promises when the insured parties died. “The white race is the race that knows how to handle business.” Finally Mrs. J. explained that all her life she had known certain white people on whom she could always depend and carry her troubles to.

Mrs. J. was unable to give up her habit of depending upon white people to help her in working out her problems. Her preference for
having white people handle her personal affairs had become so much a part of her behavior pattern that she was unable to see the necessity for protecting herself and her relatives by making a will.

The Negro's idea of the shame which is connected with tuberculosis is one of the causes of the problem of repression. An illustration of just such a problem is the case of an eleven year old Negro boy.

John was a playground problem; he disrupted any of the playgroups and was extremely nervous. He was undernourished, nervous, and generally irritable. All of the techniques for maintaining order were useless in John's case. An investigation of John's home revealed that his mother who was thirty years of age, was suffering from tuberculosis. John's maternal grandmother, aunt, and two cousins composed the rest of the family. The grandmother regarded tuberculosis as a dreaded, shameful disease and kept the mother confined to one room. Close friends and neighbors were seldom allowed to see her. The case worker's suggestion that John's mother be placed in an institution met with instant opposition from the grandmother. She maintained that she "didn't want it to get out, what her daughter had." There was constant bickering between the child's mother and aunt. John had a deep affection for his mother. The public health officer took no steps to alleviate the poor health conditions existing in the home. After the death of his grandmother and mother, John made his home with his aunt and cousins and began to make what seems to be a satisfactory adjustment.

John's grandmother and aunt were so shamed by the fact that his mother had tuberculosis that they more or less blamed her as the cause of their humiliation. John, on the other hand, because of his affection for his mother had hostile feelings toward his grandmother and aunt which he found it necessary to repress. However, the hostile feelings were projected upon his playmates on the playground which made him a problem there, according to the theory that "the individual 'projects' his hostile impulses to the outside world."¹

The circumstances which were causing John's personality problems were relieved only after the death of his mother and grandmother.

There are numerous other personality difficulties with which case workers must contend when doing case work with Negroes, but which because of their complexity do not lend themselves to placement in any one category.

There is one case in which the death of an eight year old child came as the result of the mother's rejection of medical care and her involvement in a questionable religious sect.

The services of the family agency were requested by a neighbor of Mrs. F. Mrs. F.'s eight year old daughter had been seriously ill for two weeks with a high fever, and had received no medical attention. When the worker visited and explained her mission, Mrs. F. became very insulting and told the worker that her daughter needed no help from any kind of relief agency or hospital. She refused the services of a physician on the grounds that doctors and medicine were no good, because anything can be done through faith. One needs only to "ask God's help and wait on him," because he will do whatever is necessary. She felt that if "God takes her home, no one else has anything to do with it." Mrs. F. had left her husband in Virginia and had taken her daughter to a small town in Maryland where a certain group of people devoutly held to the religion of "faith cure." A few days after the first visit was made Mrs. F. phoned the agency asking the worker to visit. She found the child in a state of delirium and the mother praying in a hysterical fashion. A physician was called and it was found that the child was very ill with pneumonia. Two days later the child died. Mrs. F. was very much upset over the child's death, and blamed the case worker and the doctor stating that "if he had not come in with all his medicine, her child would have lived." The Lord was punishing her for doubting his word.

The personality problems involved in this case were particularly complex. Mrs. F. refused to face the reality of the illness of her child, because her feelings had become so entangled in a fanatical religious denomination. On the one hand, she was devoted to her child as was seen when she phoned for the case worker, but on the other hand, she
had a fear that if she did accept the services of a physician, she would be going counter to her religion; she was torn between conflicting desires. To cling to one was to reject the other. Mrs. F.'s upset condition after her child's death was the result of her feelings of guilt. She really felt that she had caused the child's death, but she projected these feelings upon the doctor. This case brings out a combination of personality problems namely, rejection, ambivalence, projection.

We are cognizant of the fact that certain groups of whites do hold to certain extreme religious faiths, but the social worker who deals with Negroes seems to come into contact with situations which make for such personality difficulties more frequently than in case work with white clients.

Another instance of the difficulties which may be encountered as a result of a belief in fanatical religion will be seen in the case of a Negro woman of about sixty-five years of age.

Mrs. M. lived in a very unwholesome neighborhood and was responsible for the care of her mute, feebleminded, and deformed sixteen year old granddaughter. Mrs. M. belonged to a religious sect which called for her presence at all church services. These meetings kept her away from the home at least three or four evenings a week. The granddaughter was the mother of three illegitimate children none of whom was normal. The eldest child, aged three had never walked, the second child, aged two, was clubfooted; and the youngest, aged one month, was blind. The mother of the children was unable to make it known who the father or fathers of these children were. Mrs. M. refused boarding home care for her granddaughter, because she felt that people would think she was trying to get rid of the girl. The worker tried to help her talk through the situation and suggested that she make arrangements to remain at home more often to care for her granddaughter in order to guard against an increase in the family. Mrs. M. felt that it was no sin to have these children and that "the Lord would not suffer the children to be born if it was not his will."
Mrs. M. had no conflict within herself concerning her granddaughter and her illegitimate children, because she had no feeling about it except when the worker suggested that something be done about the granddaughter. Mrs. M. however, rejected any outside aid for the girl and anything that seemed to encroach upon her religious beliefs. Because Mrs. M. was receiving relief from a social agency, it was the worker's job to help reeducate Mrs. M. and to help her see that these children were destined to be dependent all their lives, and an increase in their number would only increase the misery of all concerned. Mrs. M.'s religious obsession hindered the progress of treatment plans and added to the complexity of their situation.

The following case illustrates a problem which is peculiar to the Negro group although the outward manifestations are seen in other groups as well as the Negro.

Mary T., a girl of fourteen was referred to the family agency by the juvenile court for help in securing part-time work after school. She had been brought into court because of truancy and immoral conduct. In the beginning, the worker was unable to establish rapport with the girl. Juvenile court records were extremely inadequate. When the worker visited the girl's home, Mrs. T. expressed her dissatisfaction with Mary and her inability to demand obedience from her. She mentioned that of her four children, Mary was the worst. She never does "any work around the house, runs around with a rough crowd, plays hookey from school, and stays out late at night." Mrs. T. remarked with much feeling that "she's yellow and no good just like her father." After sometime, the worker succeeded in gaining the girl's confidence through her interest in secretarial work. Later, in a discussion of her difficulties at home, Mary brought out her hostile feelings toward her mother by saying, "Mother hates me because I am fair like my father. She always blames me for everything that is done at home and tells me that she always knew yellow Negroes were no good anyway." I don't blame him for going away and staying a long time. I feel like doing that myself sometimes." The girl and her father were very much devoted to one another. He had deserted his wife at intervals all during
their married life. Whenever he returned home, he always had a present for Mary. She brought out her feelings that her father was the only one who loved her. She wished that her mother was the one who would go away instead of her father.

Mary T.'s personality problems were numerous, because the conflicts in her feelings were many. First of all, Mary had feelings of inferiority because she had been definitely rejected by her mother and was given no sense of belongingness in her home life. Her need for affection was answered in the home only at short intervals when her father returned from his wandering. For that reason, she sought and found the attention of other youngsters who answered her desire for affection. Mrs. T., on the other hand, felt that Mary had taken the place of herself in the affections of Mr. T. For that reason and because of the fact that Mr. T. and Mary were both of fair complexion, Mrs. T. tended to identify Mary with her father. Mrs. T. constantly brought out her feelings of hostility concerning a fair complexion which were really based upon her idea that Mr. T. had rejected her. Mary, however, bore the brunt of her mother's hostility when she remained at home, and constantly reminded her that having a fair complexion was nothing to be proud of.

The personality problems which present themselves in this case are basically not peculiar to the Negro group, but the fact that they were brought into being and nurtured because of a conflict growing out of a difference in skin coloring gives them the distinction of being types met frequently in social work among Negroes.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Formerly, it was taken for granted that the personality of the Negro is conditioned by the same factors in American culture which condition personality growth in other groups, but the fact has been overlooked that the growth of the Negro's personality is determined to a great degree by the organization of this country along caste lines. Although the Negro has attempted to assimilate the culture of the majority group, he is still set apart by the customs and mores in this society made easier by his more or less different physical appearance.

From the information gathered and presented in the preceding chapters, it can be seen that there are immeasurable factors which figure prominently in the breakdown and disintegration of Negro personality.

First of all, the consistent exclusion of the Negro from the equal benefits to be derived from a system of Democracy is the most potent factor in hindering the normal development of Negro personality. The influence of the idea of the inferiority of black people has manifested itself in the thinking of Negroes themselves. Class and color distinctions have served to set off certain groups of Negroes from others within the Negro group itself.

Second, the migration of the Negro from rural or urban southern areas to the urban areas of the North and East has had a tremendous influence on personality disorganization because of the conflicts.
encountered after the clash of the simple, agricultural culture and the complex, urban culture.

Third, the conflicts between the Negro and other ethnic groups within the American culture also contribute to the personality problems of Negroes.

The personality problems of Negroes are chiefly an outgrowth of their exclusion from the main stream of culture and find their origin in the American cultural pattern.

Social case work provides the ideal setting for the recognition of the Negro's personality problems on the basis of individual contact. Personality problems are dealt with in segments and give clear indication of the larger problems faced by the Negro group as a whole.

The cases presented in the foregoing chapter are significant because they show the defense mechanisms growing out of underlying personality problems which have been precipitated or aggravated by the factor of race and which hinder treatment plans.

The case worker in the area of social case work with Negroes must ever be on the lookout for those personality problems which have special meaning for Negroes. However, she must guard against placing undue emphasis upon the search for such problems in order not to make the mistake of seeing special problems which are not present. It must always be remembered that the pressures placed upon Negroes by society do not have the same effect on every Negro. While some permit themselves to become personally involved because of the pressures, others develop methods of substitution and compensation which offset the deteriorating effects of the various restrictions and conflicts.
Social work in general, and case work in particular, if it is
to do its duty in aiding the Negro client in his own rehabilitation
and adjustment to his social situation by helping him to solve his
personality problem, must accept the challenge of endeavoring to inte-
grate the Negro as a group into the main stream of American culture.
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