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## **Black Existentialism: Extending the Discourse on Meaning and Existence**

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# Black Existentialism: Extending the Discourse on Meaning and Existence

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*The authors provide an exploration of the philosophical concepts of Black existentialism. Black existentialism is presented as a philosophical alternative to European existentialism to inform humanistic practices in addressing racial and social inequality. Implications for scholarly discourse are provided, and areas for future research are explored.*

*Keywords:* Black existentialism, European existentialism, humanism, meaning



The foundational principles of professional counseling, and more specifically humanistic counseling, are grounded in concepts such as personal agency, well-being, and a universal ideology that all beings have meaning in the world (Gerig, 2013; Vereen, Hill, Aquino-Sosa, & Kress, 2014). For Black people, these aspects of humanism have not always been afforded to them, as evidenced by the disproportionate numbers of Black people unemployed or underemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), incarcerated (Lyons & Pettit, 2011), and living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). These factors led to what Vontress and Epp (1997) referred to as historical hostility and cultural mistrust, which in turn challenge how existential and humanistic thought are able to offer a place of solace to the Black individual.

The premise of a universal agency is disrupted when applied to Gerig's (2013) assertion that the historical underpinnings of professional counseling contradict its claim to provide for a realistic, philosophical, or metaphorical

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place of safety. As such, what is needed for Black individuals is a philosophical way of seeing, acknowledging, and exploring their experiences and meaning making. In addition, such a philosophical orientation must challenge inequity and provide opportunities to fully realize the fundamental values of a humanistic philosophy.

According to Gordon (2000, 2013), Black existentialism provides the philosophical grounding to explore the struggle to live within inequity, racialization, and historical oppression as experienced by Black people. This grounding calls for an investigation of how to enact a philosophy that translates its central tenets into active reflection and meaningful scholarly discourse. According to Bassey (2007), Black existentialism is concerned with the liberation of a people who have historically not been viewed as human. Bassey went on to illuminate where the similarities and differences between Black existentialism and European existentialism emerge. One example of similarity lies in the valuing of agency and liberation, whereas a difference is evident in the belief that all individuals have equal access to systems that support agency and liberation. Black existentialism acknowledges the inequity of access for all and challenges the axiom that prior to agency there must first be liberation. Liberation can be seen as the precursor and necessary foundation to accessing agency, which also has not been historically afforded to Black people.

From a humanistic perspective, Black existentialism is the lens through which one can begin to see where inequity, racialization, and marginalization are situated as Black people search to experience agency in the world. This is because Black existentialism has roots in advocacy, social justice, and radicalism as major tenets (M. Brooks, personal communication, July 7, 2016). As a school of thought, Black existentialism has emerged out of the hardships that were experienced by people of color from many corners of the world (e.g., France, Haiti, and Algeria) who were subject to colonization, marginalization, and inequity. Black existentialism has potential to move beyond traditional counseling philosophy and theory, which have been criticized for ignoring the unique experiences of Black individuals (Dowden, Gunby, Warren, & Boston, 2014). In addition to reestablishing Black existentialism within the counseling literature, we illuminate the underlying differences between Black existentialism and European existentialism. We provide insight into how Black existentialism as a philosophy fosters thought and dialogue to investigate the relationship between Black existentialism and humanistic thought. In this manner, we hope to challenge and engage further scholarship that explores the connection between humanism and the promotion of a meaningful Black existence. At the same time, we want to avoid a myopic conclusive discussion that would be reductionist and dishonor the experiences of those reported to be equal citizens, yet not treated in that manner (Jules-Rosette, 2007).

## BLACK EXISTENTIALISM JUXTAPOSED TO EUROPEAN EXISTENTIALISM

Black existentialism demands an exploration of the phenomenological world and engenders a deconstruction of the misconceptions of society. One misconception is that Black people share the same lived experiences. At the heart of this narrative is a central element interweaving the human stories and histories of the Black collective struggle to define identity and find meaning in life. For the European existentialist, the human being is born, therefore immediately exists, and subsequently chooses direction in life creating meaning of self through experience. As a result, self-definition is inherently derived through choice. These basic premises fail to consider the influence and dynamic of social constructions, such as marginalization and racialization, on the individual's developmental understanding of self and others. Black existentialism emerged in reaction to the unrealized edicts of universal agency and meaning making (Jules-Rosette, 2007) and is, thus, cultivated on the momentum of advocacy, social justice, and radicalism (M. Brooks, personal communication, July 7, 2016).

The discourse exploring Black existentialism compared with European existentialism, along with their place within humanistic philosophy, has been lacking in the field of professional counseling. What is missing is a dialogue illuminating how the European existentialist suppositions of identity, freedom, free will, and existence do not critically apply to the lived experience of the Black individual or the Black collective. What does exist is what Fanon (1967) referred to as an existential deviation, where as a result of the removal of language and culture of origin, the Black individual and the Black collective have had to simultaneously define and redefine identity, culture, and existence. This task is difficult in the absence of liberation, and in turn, engenders what Baldwin (1961) defined as issues of perceived lower status toward Black people by others who are not Black. In the absence of liberation and agency, Black individuals and the Black collective are not viewed as possessing equal social status, which creates a negative power dynamic. In direct contrast to these realities, Black existentialism finds the Black collective situated in growth potential, thereby rejecting the deficit model as has often been presented within the scholarly discourse.

European existentialists (e.g., Kierkegaard, 1983; Sartre, 1967) established that there is not an inferred, universal significance or meaning to being for all humans, whereas American existentialists (e.g., Bugental, 1965, 1976; May, 1953, 1975) expanded and applied the theoretical concepts of European existentialism to humanistic psychology. This allowed for the philosophy to be utilized as a psychosomatic tool to construct and establish subjective value and worth onto an otherwise insignificant and futile existence. In comparison, Black existentialism (Gordon, 2013) challenged the inauthentic identity and status imposed on marginalized groups of Black people, while simultaneously sustaining their empowerment (Gordon, 2013). This

can disrupt the inauthentic perceptions of identity and status while at the same time empowering the individual. In this instance, it is critical to gain an understanding of the intersection of existentialism and humanism, in conjunction with affirming the identity and lived experience of Black people. Webber (2010) wrote,

Existentialism, as Sartre define[d] it, is an ethical theory and a form of humanism, which means that it takes humanity as the central ethical value. But it [existentialism] is distinguished from other forms of humanism in the way it understands humanity. . . . What distinguishes . . . existential humanism as an ethical theory is its view that all that is intrinsically valuable is the nature or structure of our existence, the kind of thing that we are. The relationship between existentialism and existential philosophy therefore justifies the similarity of the two terms: existentialism seeks the flourishing of the human individual, where this is understood as the unfettered realization of our most fundamental nature. (p. 232)

Sartre's definition of humanity as the central ethical value provides insight into why European existentialism may not be best suited as a philosophy congruent with a Black identity.

Historically, the humanity of Black people has been in question and has not been universally valued. This highlights the need for an alternative lens and sensitivity for attending to the unique personhood of the Black individual and collective. While European existentialism is a philosophy intended on the meaning of being in the world, Black existentialism is a philosophy grounded in the meaning of existence and being for the individual and collective. Black existentialism is foremost about the capacity to enact freedom while seeking to empower transformative dialogue and inquiry regarding a way of being in the world. The task of Black existentialism is to merge both individualistic and collectivist representations and dimensions of the respective self, in such a manner that the real and constructed selves are intricately bound with the social circumstances human beings find themselves situated within. Consider that if the European existentialist creed is closely aligned with individualistic concepts such as Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" and Sartre's stance that existence precedes essence, the Black existentialist creed is "I am because we are." This is grounded in the African Ubuntu philosophy espousing the collectivist perspective of humanness. This perspective honors the humanity in others revealing the interconnectedness of all that is, was, and will be (Biko, 1978/2002).

Black existentialism and European existentialism share analogous interests and themes such as existence, consciousness, anxiety, meaninglessness, despair, and fear; however, there are significant differences between them. Black existentialism is grounded in the emancipation of all Black people and addresses the matter of Black struggle and suffering. More importantly, Black existentialism acknowledges the resiliency and agency exercised in reclaiming voice, while seeking meaning in the world (Biko, 1978/2002; Gordon, 2000, 2013). Kane (2007) pointed out that racism and racialization coexist as organizing principles within society, reminding us that race and

class derive their significance from each other. This notion provides the rationale for the exploration of inequities within Black phenomenology. Another powerful rationale for the exploration of inequities lies in the symbiotic relationship brokered by Sartre (1967) and Fanon (1963, 1967) built on the premise that each person would purposefully address areas of injustice and inequity of the human condition for Black people where their social position in life afforded opportunity (M. Brooks, personal communication, July 7, 2016; Jules-Rosette, 2007).

## BLACK PHENOMENOLOGY

The pursuit of a self-defined collective identity has been a historical theme for Black people. Scholars and writers such as Aimé Césaire (1972), Frantz Fanon (1963, 1967), Audre Lorde (McHugh, 2007), W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), Lewis Gordon (2000, 2013), bell hooks (1989, 1990, 1999), and Patricia Hill-Collins (1998) explored, postulated, and expanded upon various concepts of Black thought and existence. The pursuit of identity is due in part to a lived experience of hegemony (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2010) and the colonization of Black people (Fanon, 1967), intersecting with the denial of physical and psychological freedom. Within this vacuum resides an experience of existential deviation (Fanon, 1967), whereby all recognized notions of language, culture, and identity are imposed by the dominant culture. This practice fostered a duality of existence, which Du Bois (1903) described as double consciousness and Fanon (1967) referred to as two systems of reference. In this state, Black people first exist in the world as a non-White person, and second, as a Black person in relation to a White dominant society. Here, Black existentialism provides a pathway to foster examination of personal experience of language, culture, and identity within the frame of the present life experience.

It is interesting to consider various myths and analysis of self for Black people, given that early philosophy in humanism did not consider Black people to be fully human (Mills, 1997). Therefore, Black people were not considered to be in possession of their personal selves, but rather were defrauded and treated as property with attached characteristics and attributes. Because the self is socially and culturally constructed (Jenkins, 2001; Vontress, Woodland, & Epp, 2007), Black people often lacked a consistent homogeneous environment due to their existence in a Black world, White world, and human world. As a result, the potential for confusion could emerge as a by-product of the erosion of cultural homogeneity. This, in turn, has potential to create multiple fractures of the self into different, yet interdependent entities. What then comes in question for Black people is their essence and the freedom to choose. These constructs are basic elements of existentialism and humanism that can be denied when living in an anti-Black world, yet are challenged through a Black existentialist perspective. What occurs through the lens of Black existentialism is a focus on existence

in the world to provide insight into how the intersecting identities of the individual are affected from a personal and community perspective.

### *An Anti-Black World*

Black existence in an anti-Black world begs response to the question: What does it mean to live in a world where Black people are, in the words of Fanon (1967), “overdetermined from without” (p. 116). The exploration of social and racial inequity and oppression for Black people deserves response. The only clear explanation for the inhumane treatment of Black people was to institutionalize the notion that these people did not belong to the human race. Seeing Black people as inhuman justified the use of forced labor and, at the same time, provided the basis of an inferior ideology about people of African descent.

Davis (1983) noted that while Whites perceive freedom as inalienable, Black people have historically struggled to be seen as deserving of this same ontology, thus experiencing alienation. According to Davis, Black people experience alienation in a practical sense and exist as nonpersons in an anti-Black world. Despite this, Black people continuously strive to make meaning of their existence when historically blackness is associated with racialized suffering. The silencing that occurs in regard to racialized suffering adds discord because while racial suffering is not unrecognized, it is ignored and minimized, perpetuating a sense of invisibility (Franklin, 1999).

Distorted ideologies of Black people are continuously created and rearticulated in an anti-Black world. Yancy (2008) commented that Black people customarily encounter images, symbols, and discourse that are not accurate representations of their lived existence. The objectification of Black people includes the deployment of what Hill-Collins (1998) referred to as controlling images, which are the distorted representations of blackness. These debasing images become part of public knowledge and must be combated on a consistent basis. Although progressive academic circles seem to have transcended biological notions of Black racial inferiority, the idea that Black people are culturally inferior continues to hold sway. Morrison (1992) elucidated how Black people are often depicted as lacking innocence, devoid of integrity, unintelligent, and dependent on others. The immediate question is: How and through what lens do Black people negotiate liberation, agency, and identity in a world where they have been categorically distorted? In this instance, Black existentialism serves as the lens for exploring the negotiation of liberation, agency, and identity to foster the development and growth of self.

### *Invisible Collective*

To begin to conceptualize the uniqueness of Black people first requires a belief in agency within the world and existence as a unique life experience. A view outside of this is myopic and simultaneously outside of the realm



of humanistic philosophy and practice. Second, the Black individual must be seen as a whole being external to and separate from the being who experiences systemic racialization and marginalization and is seen as a compartmentalized set of parts. The Black individual, through the lens of Black existentialism, is an individual who is whole and agentic, all while navigating existence in a racializing society. Black existentialism, in this instance, serves to provide context and an avenue to understanding of the racial and historical oppression suffered by Black people (Vontress et al., 2007). A Black existentialist perspective allows for the confrontation of inaccurate and inauthentic historical representations of Black lives.

The concepts of historical hostility and cultural mistrust (Vontress et al., 2007) are rooted within our history of existence and correspond to Fanon's (1967) dialogue regarding the lack of transformation within the dominant society and culture. According to Fanon, for transformation to occur, a conscious awareness and thorough questioning of racial inequalities are needed. It is here where Black existentialism can guide and foster this questioning through critical analysis of the lived experiences of Black people. In addition, Black existentialism can engender what Vontress et al. (2007) stated is a recognition of the impact of idiosyncratic ethnic considerations within a marginalized population. Dowden et al. (2014) articulated that an inability to see Black people as racialized beings has resulted in feelings of both invalidation and invisibility. Hill-Collins (1998) purported that when not seen for who they are at a fundamental level (agentic), Black people then become outsiders, thus engendering isolation from the world. For example, disregarding or avoiding the cultural uniqueness of being Black fosters alienation, leading to a major aspect of existence being ignored and invalidated, thereby creating invisibility. Invisibility does not suggest that others cannot see them (Franklin, 1999), yet at the same time, it does, because Black people are not seen as whole, agentic, or being humane. The amalgamation of these outcomes can best be summed up by Ellison (1947/1990), who stated in his seminal work, *The Invisible Man*,

I am an invisible man . . . I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . .When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 3)

History has taught us that, at times, the frustration of being seen as the invisible outsider has led to a revolt in search of a revolution (Bassey, 2007). What has occurred within the context of some communities is a revolt against the perceived inauthentic self that is not desired in a hegemonic society (Bassey, 2007). The result in this scenario could be a condemnation of the undesirable self through positive acts of rebellion. Black people have a rich history of replacing the undesirable and inauthentic self with positive versions of self, as evidenced in Black music, art, education, and other creative

venues. This provides an example of a social context of condemnation that, on one hand, can foster isolation and, on the other hand, is combated in a manner that fosters a resistance to marginalization and a healthy image of self. Black existentialism as a philosophy provides a pathway to construct a Black *homeplace* (hooks, 1990) where exploration of the struggle to exist and be in the world can occur. Homeplace as a construct is a place of shelter where healing is possible and resistance to oppression is fostered.

## HOMEPLACE

Black well-being is predicated on the ability to develop what hooks (1990) referred to as a homeplace. Hooks wrote that Black people hold faith and belief in a safe place for the freedom to challenge inhumane treatment against them. This homeplace offers the possibility of recovery from oppression, functioning as the site where essence, identity, and an exploration of resistance to marginalization are explored. Black people have historically fought marginalization and oppression and learned to live and negotiate their identity and existence. Thus, homeplace is a shelter providing retreat from the demands of racialization, and its creation is an act of political resistance (hooks, 1989). The notion of a homeplace is grounded in a Black existentialist philosophy and humanistic orientation, and it challenges the construction of Black people as less than human and offers a place for philosophical struggle from the moorings of racialization. The need for self-exploration and healing has been addressed in the work of Bell (1987), who equates racial healing with decolonizing the mind. Hooks (1999) commented that given the continual onslaught of anti-Black sentiment through imagery and ideology, the very act of loving blackness is perceived as radical. This idea makes homeplace critical for Black existence, because it simultaneously resists disparaging representations of blackness and provides for exploration through engagement in truth-telling, affirmation, and the development of self without pretense in growth-producing ways (Bohart, 2003). Furthermore, engagement with homeplace affirms that (a) Black individuals are self-actualizing and actively constructing meaning in their lives, (b) Black lives matter and possess dignity, and (c) Black individuals should develop the methods and goals to achieve their own wellness.

Historical and present-day society have taught us that healing is not possible when racial pain and suffering are silenced. For this reason, current theoretical discussions should include a Black existentialist voice. It is through this voice that homeplace is constructed and grounded in truth-telling. Affirmation of the experience of Black people is not simply the construction of Black as beautiful but requires acknowledging and giving voice to the reality and mattering of Black lives. This is where Black existentialist and humanistic exploration and dialogue have the opportunity to disrupt the reductionist narrative of oppression and racialization. This is particularly important given how denial exists about global racialized

phenomena. Lorde (McHugh, 2007) reminded us that “the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation” (p. 42). The discovery of homeplace facilitates Black people’s resistance to oppressive constructions of themselves, their communities, and the dismissal of their potential. Through the philosophical lens of Black existentialism, the enactment of homeplace is where Black oppressive constructions of self, communities, and dismissal of potentiality are questioned and challenged. Fanon (1967) suggested that transformation and uplifting occur through questioning the intrinsic racial paradoxes, drawing attention to the need to liberate the mind from anti-Black sentiment. Undoubtedly, the movement of uplifting Black people has been crucial to the emergence of a Black political identity, which guides commitment and understanding of the root causes of social outcomes while shaping the analysis of daily experiences and understanding of the relationship of those experiences to group dynamics.

Black existentialism represents one pathway to a philosophical sanctuary and liberating space to confront the distorted images of Black humanity. Similarly, Black existentialist thought gives voice to the collective experiences of Black people as a group while acknowledging how the social construction of race has denied Black people the experience of individual freedom in the world. Homeplace is where an affirming Black identity is defined that can engender the assertion of individual humanity. The development of an affirming Black identity is centered in the raising of consciousness. This point is articulated by Du Bois (1903), who asserted that consciousness rests on a rearticulation of Black identity and that Black people possess the agency to develop a resilient radical consciousness. In this context, the authentic dialogue of truth-telling serves as a catalyst for exploration and the expansion of thought. Black existentialism serves as the voice calling to action the pursuit to investigate the struggle of an authentic, individual self that also exists within a larger Black community. In addition, the processes associated with that navigation and reconciliation of self are called to life (Haymes, 1995). This presents homeplace as being at the epicenter of thought, reflection, and the unending notion of the irreducibility of the Black individual.

## IRREDUCIBILITY

The concept of irreducibility has particular significance within the discourse on Black existentialism. Perepiczka and Scholl (2012) noted that humanistic philosophy, while having diverse elements, is united by the concept of human irreducibility, or that humans can only be understood as whole beings. Fanon (1963) posed three critical questions, from a Black existential framework, to guide humanistic praxis that seeks to foster and construct a pathway to homeplace. Still relevant more than 40 years later, Fanon’s questions to explore Black existence were: Who am I? Am I who I say I am? Am I all I ought to be? Permission, space, and support

to reconcile these questions help enact homeplace for Black individuals. It is within homeplace where Black individuals can acknowledge and embrace their varied and intersecting identities and embrace a healthy Black existence. These existential questions also explicitly promote the notion of irreducibility for Black individuals, in that the diverse expressions of Black existence and identity (Du Bois, 1903; Fanon, 1963) cannot be reduced to symptomatology of racialized oppression (Howard, Flennaugh, & Terry, 2012). Black existentialism challenges assumed cognitive realities inherent in European and American existentialism by first constructing space to explore the global social conditions and associated plight of Black individuals that facilitate an awareness of their perceived social status (Baldwin, 1961). Prior to an exploration of existence, self, or essence, a location must exist for this to occur.

## CONCLUSION

Black existentialism provides a pathway to phenomenological exploration of Black people's lived experiences that disrupts deficit models of the personhood of Black people. Therefore, Black existentialism is the antithesis of a formulaic method of intervention and problem solving. A problematic aspect of viewing Black people through the lens of European existentialism is in the presupposition of individual self-determination and accessibility, which, in turn, functions as an impediment and limits potentiality across racial contexts. In order for the articulated tenets of existentialism to operate effectively, power and social positionality (Foucault, 1980) must be present. If the act of freedom is denied to the individual, the very premise of existentialism is lost. Within the context of an individual residing in contemporary society, the concepts of European existentialism operate in a vacuum. Within European existentialism lies a lack of awareness and contextualization of the impact of social and racial inequity on an individual's ability to self-determine, which are basic tenets of humanistic philosophy. The Black individual, then, cannot be fully understood or embraced by the doctrine of European existentialism.

According to Gordon (2013), Black existentialism addresses problems of meaning born out of the formation of those problems in an anti-Black world. The intersection of a socially constructed ideology of humanness and complications of individual agency in the world contributes to the need for discourse through the lens of Black existentialism. This is compounded through the lived experiences of Black people in a world slow to embrace social change or challenge conditions of freedom, meaning, and existence. Many scholars (e.g., Basse, 2007; Ellison, 1947/1990; Fanon, 1963, 1967; Gordon, 2007, 2013) have illustrated how Black existentialist traditions have influenced the social sciences and humanities. Through this, we have the opportunity to more fully understand Black phenomenology. Scholars such as Du Bois (1903), Fanon (1963, 1967), Gordon (2007, 2013), and Vontress

(1988) are among those who have explored this phenomenon. At a fundamental level, Black existentialism presents an opportunity to confront through exploration and dialogue the racial and social inequity and their impact on meaning and existence.

For humanists to effectively see the uniqueness of the Black individual, they must first confront the lack of universality in the meaning of existence and how the social construction of race has affected that process of individuation and meaning. This can be followed by discourse that confronts the past with the present and by acknowledging the varied lived experiences of Black people. This inquiry must first begin with an investigation of the broader phenomena of Black existence in the world. An intentional focus on the individual and community experience is needed to serve as a guide to explore a felt sense of being and agency, fostering an opportunity to gain insight into the varied lived experiences of Black people. This includes the reality that not all persons of color share the same life circumstances, which can vary by origin, locale, and felt sense of liberation and agency. Humanistic thought through the lens of Black existentialism provides opportunity to explore meaning making of lived humanity, resiliency of the individual, and perceptions of the Black collective. Furthermore, the lens of Black existentialism also can serve as the philosophical guide to unearthing the strength of discourse and dialogue to create pathways of exploration. These aspects are vital and require scholarly exploration to further one's understanding of the relationship between Black existentialism and humanism. What is needed is further discourse and examination of how the philosophy of Black existentialism in contemporary society can guide this area of discourse within the counseling literature. In addition, a scholarly discourse on meaning and existence in contemporary society for Black individuals is warranted. The profession of counseling stands at a precipice of forward thinking and being. Failure to pursue the fundamental principles of Black existentialism with Black individuals will relegate us as a whole to stagnation.

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