

The Black Church As A Therapeutic Community: Suggested Areas For Research Into The Black Religious Experience

ABSTRACT

Recent developments in radical therapies for dealing with mental disorders bear an overwhelming similarity to some of the instrumental and expressive aspects of the black religious experience. This paper suggests areas of the church which might prove fruitful for systematic research. Four possible therapeutic functions of black religious activities are discussed: the articulation of suffering; the location of persecutors; the provision of asylum for "acting-out"; and the validation of experiences. Within the framework of sociological concepts of "labeling" (Scheff) and the radical critiques within psychiatry (Laing) the importance of such research is discussed with consideration of the relatively low rate of mental illness, and particularly within certain diagnostic categories, of the black community in the United States (Blackwell).

Traditionally the concern of social scientists with the problems of the black community has focused on the pathological aspects of black social life. Some more significant works have focused on the black family (Moynihan, 1965; Rainwater, 1970, Schulz, 1969). Concern has been expressed over the *higher* rates of one parent families in the black community than in the white community; the *higher* rates of crime, the *higher* rates of unemployment, and the *higher* rates of welfare dependency. As a result of these concerns, "the external image of the black community is that it exists in perpetually uncontrollable social pathology." (Blackwell, 1975:244)

However, in their concern over deviance within the black community, social scientists tend to focus on the more troublesome or problematic differences between blacks and whites. Because of their traditional ideological concern — "Why can't they be more like us," most sociologists have failed to focus on non-pathological differences within the black community. Since these positive differences are not social problems — in that people do not express concern that something should be *done* about them — they are often overlooked as research interests. Most "black pathology" and "poverty" research has been financed by the federal government which has been an added political element influencing what has and has not been studied.

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One positive difference between black and white behavior which is reflected in the various indicators of social disorganization lies in the area of mental health. According to the study by Hollingshead and Redlich (1958) relating social class and mental illness, the concentration of blacks in the lower socioeconomic strata should lead to a predictably higher rate of mental illness. However, black rates of mental illness are lower than expected and it is an anomaly not explained by social class.

Besides the black failure to conform to the social class predictions concerning mental illness, other problems in determining who is mentally ill and who is not mentally ill should intrude to raise such statistics. According to Blackwell:

Our knowledge of the prevalence and distribution of emotional health problems within the black population is seriously limited. This problem stems largely from inconsistencies in interpretations of what behavior actually constitutes psychotic and psychoneurotic behavior. It is embedded in our confused understandings of the relationship between socioeconomic status and social behavior. Furthermore, rates of some forms of mental disorders among blacks often result from *overdiagnosis* (labelling a disease more severe than it actually is), particularly by white psychiatrists. The tendency among white psychiatrists to overdiagnose psychoses among blacks is a manifestation of one way in which cultural bias impedes objective perceptions. It also shows the inability of white psychiatrists to understand the various nuances of black culture and the persons socialized in the American black culture. If there were more than the 100 known black psychiatrists in the United States and if they, by virtue of their being black, could comprehend the nuances of black culture, perhaps prevalence and incidence data relative to the types of emotional health problems among blacks would be more reliable. (1975:264-5)

However, social class and the cultural bias of white psychiatrists¹ notwithstanding, blacks have been able to resist incarceration in mental hospitals more successfully than whites. It has been shown that poor individuals are more likely to be admitted to mental institutions (cf. Fried, 1969). "Thus one would expect the rates of nonwhite or black mental illness to be higher than rates for whites when data from state hospitals are analyzed." (Blackwell, 1975:265) But when the data on hospital admissions are reviewed:

rates of mental illness, both psychotic disorders and psychoneurotic behavior, are highest for whites in private institutions and Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals. White admissions for psychoneuroses in private and VA hospitals were at the rate of 62.29 per 1,000, while the rate for blacks was 27.35 per 1,000, but the overall rates of admission of psychoses for whites and blacks were 9.46 and 7.04, respectively. However, the most remarkable disparity occurred in the analysis of noninstitutional data. Here, Pasamanick observed that the rate of serious mental illness among whites at 5.20 per 1,000 is ten times greater than that of blacks at 0.5 per 1,000. (1975:265)

Social scientists have not systematically explored the anomalies in the data on black and white mental health.

It is my purpose here to propose some directions for research into the black community and black culture in order to begin to explore this

¹The various "talking" therapies require that a certain amount of rapport be developed between therapist and patient. Therefore, patients with a background somewhat similar to the therapist are likely to do better. Patients who do not seem highly motivated and who are unable to establish verbal rapport with the therapist are more likely to receive shock, drugs and more severe diagnoses.

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significantly non-problematic situation concerning black mental health. Specifically, I intend to focus on the possible functions of the black religious experience.

Recently, traditional conceptions of mental health, psychiatric diagnosis, and the sources of rates of mental illness have come under attack from both sociologists committed to the labeling concepts within the field of deviance (Scheff, 1966, 1967, 1974, 1975; Perucci, 1974; Goffman, 1961; Brown, 1973) and from psychiatrists committed to a radical critique of psychiatric evaluation of practice (Laing, 1960, 1961, 1969, 1976; Laing and Esterson, 1964; Laing in Evans, 1976; Fanon in Geismar, 1969; Cooper, 1967). There is also a growing body of literature concerning the social politics of the social institutions of mental health, especially the writings of Thomas Szasz² (1961; 1970; 1970b; 1973). Emerging from both the labeling approaches of the sociologists, the radical critiques of the psychiatrists, and revolts in writing from ex-patients and concerned scholars (Glenn, 1973, 1974; Chesler, 1972; Huesler, 1970; Ruitenbeek, 1972; Agel et al., 1973; Boyers, 1971) are new and unorthodox approaches to therapy and an attack on the monopoly of psychiatrists and other "professionals" on the tasks of dealing with mental disorder (Speck, 1973; Barnes and Berke, 1971; Laing, 1976; Agel et al., 1973). Some of the radical approaches to therapy combined with the linkage drawn between socio-political conditions and mental disorders have raised significant questions concerning "who is sane?" and "who is competent to treat the 'insane'?" In fact, some of the new therapies developed by the radical critics possess overwhelming similarities to the activities of the black church for nearly two hundred years.

It is my informed³ suspicion that the social process of certain forms of black religious practice act as a deterrent to specific psychiatric symptoms within the black community and a depressant on rates of mental illness. The black church as the major institution of black culture and social organization acts, not only as a crucible for political ideology and political organization and confrontation (Hamilton, 1972; Barrett, 1974; Frazier, 1964; Wilmore, 1972; Lincoln, 1970, 1974), but also as a true asylum⁴, a

²Although Szasz is highly critical of the social politics of psychiatric diagnoses and the "perhaps" unintended social control functions of the mental health establishment, his policy projections are quite conservative. His desire to de-institutionalize psychiatry is based upon an ethic of "rugged individualism" and unlike the "radical" critics (Laing) he does not question the fundamental structure of Western capitalism. This criticism is a core assumption of the radical psychiatrists such as Laing and Cooper.

³I am drawing upon my own experience within various black religious organizations. Raised as a black Baptist, I was (and am now) a member of my church choir and my church usher board. I participated in city-wide, state-wide, and regional associations for both choir members and ushers. I also travelled with a local "free lance" gospel group and have attended, and sometimes performed in, numerous city-wide gospel choir festivals. My activities resulted in visiting every black Baptist and Methodist (including A.M.E.) in the Boston area as well as a large number of the smaller denominations and a few Episcopal churches. I have attended one convention of the National Association of Gospel Choirs and Churches (Heilbut, 1971). These activities and organizations are interdenominational. Denomination is much less relevant than social class in discussions of the black church. (Drake and Cayton, 1962:611-57)

⁴Asylum is used within this paper to mean an inviolable place of refuge and protection; a place of retreat and security, a shelter.

regular setting for group therapy, and an objective mediator between the perceptions of experience of black people and the messages of the wider social system.⁵ An understanding of the therapeutic function of the black church would be beneficial not only for advancing an understanding of the essence of black culture but also for an understanding of how the healing functions of institutions of mental health can be better explained.⁶ The aspects of black religious experience which are most directly therapeutic also provide a significant "negative case" in support of the labeling theory of mental illness as formulated by Scheff (1966, 1975).

"EARTH HAS NO SORROW THAT HEAVEN CANNOT HEAL"
Redefining Black Religious Experience As Therapeutic

There are several practices unique to the black religious experience either in form or in content. These practices can be organized into four possibly therapeutic functions: (1) articulation of suffering; (2) location of persecutors; (3) provision of asylum for "acting-out"; and (4) validation of experiences. Also, the social organization of black religion provides for an alternative set of positions which provide self-esteem and role continuity (especially for women and the aged). The rest of this paper will highlight some practices which should be systematically researched in terms of their effects on the participants in the black religious experience.

"BEEN IN THE STORM SO LONG"
Speaking And Singing About Suffering

The songs of the slaves (spirituals) and the songs of the children of the slaves (gospels)⁷ have been criticized for their "Pie in the sky" emphasis. They have been characterized by some black activists briefly quoting Marx as "opiates of the people."⁸ However, besides speaking of the better life

⁵William Newman in *American Pluralism* (1973) develops a theory of intergroup conflict which defines various "scientific" theories and media stereotypes which depict minority groups as inferior (e.g. I.Q. and race) as ideological weapons (intended or unintended) used by dominant groups to keep subordinate groups in subordinate positions. The black church provides counterideologies and counterimages to this at several levels of social organization (Comer, 1972:15-20).

⁶The conservative critic Szasz along with the radical critics and sociologists such as Goffman (1961) have forced professionals to distinguish between the social control activities and the healing activities of the mental health professionals and institutions.

⁷According to Cone (1972) gospel music and the blues are post-emancipation phenomena which speak to the problem of emancipation dislocation and later urban dislocation. The blues and the gospels represent two parallel cultural developments dealing with the dialectic of despair and hope: blues fall within the secular experience and gospels fall within the religious experience. A good discussion of the division between the religious and secular audiences within the black community can be found in *The Gospel Sound* (Heilbut, 1971).

⁸Marx's statement is often taken out of context.

A study of the experience of black men in America gives vivid confirmation to the words that Karl Marx wrote, "Man makes religion. . . . Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its general basis of consolation and justification. . . . Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." (Drake, 1970:23)

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in heaven, there are a few other themes contained in the spirituals which provide black people with a shared perspective on the world and its troubles. If social life is constructed from a collective conversation of gestures and symbols from which shared meanings are derived creating a situational culture then the spirituals and the gospel songs represent a base for communication upon which black folks have built a collective perspective on their situation as oppressed people in America. Linguistic and moral duality ("stealing" vs. "taking") (Holt, 1972:154), deception ("the drinking gourd") and resistance ("let my people go") were part of the culture which emerged from the slave songs. Another function of these songs, a function which has survived into modern times and remained in the gospel songs, is the legitimate collective expression of the suffering experienced by black people in America. It is this articulation of suffering through music and speech which seems to have a major therapeutic function within the black community.

In attempting to reconcile the labeling theory of mental illness with the reliability of mental stress and personal and social change, Scheff, in *Labeling Madness*, links the repression of emotion to the creation of an adult who is well adjusted to the social situation in which hierarchy, order, and predictability are emphasized (1975:83). For black culture to produce an adult who is well suited to this type of human situation would be to produce a people unwilling to struggle for change and therefore willing to accept their downtrodden and oppressed lot in American society. In support of his corollary to the labeling theory of mental illness, Scheff describes a "Speak Bitterness" session in the People's Republic China:

People confessed, not their sins, but their sorrows. This had the effect of creating emotional solidarity. For when people poured out their sorrows to each other, they realized they were all together on the same sad voyage through life, and from recognition of this they drew closer to one another, achieved common sentiments, took sustenance and hope. (Belden in Scheff, 1975:86)

Scheff also mentions that this type of social form can also be found in fundamentalist churches and in black churches in the United States. (1975:85) Such meetings "stimulate collective catharsis in such a way that the needs of individuals to release tension or distressful emotion are met. At the same time, this collective catharsis gives rise to heightened solidarity and a sense of cultural community within the group. As long as this form leads to genuine and spontaneous emotional release, it serves a vital need for the members and develops an extremely cohesive group." (1975:86)

In many black churches, this type of session occurs in the Tuesday or Thursday evening prayer meetings.⁹ Members of the church recount sources of suffering in their life and ask for prayers by the membership to

⁹Powdermaker's discussion of the black church and "getting religion" (1967:223-285) is valuable because of the ethnographic description of religious experience in the rural south of the 1930's. Drake and Cayton, in their study of Bronzeville, also provide ethnography and analysis of the social functions of religious experience in the urban north of the 1930's and 1940's (1962:412-429, 611-657).

alleviate their sufferings. They ask for help in bearing their burdens in the same manner that Jesus did in order not to be crushed by them. Prayers by deacons recount collective situations of suffering, many times referring to the south and the tiredness of body that overtakes blacks because of the types of occupations in which they work. The songs sung are also accounts of suffering which symbolically represent the suffering of blacks. Cone (1972) describes how Jesus and God are not distinct entities within the black church. It is not that He is just "the deliverer of humanity from unjust suffering" (Cone, 1972:47) or a "comforter in time of trouble," but He is someone to whom blacks can tell all about their troubles because He also suffered. "Jesus is pictured as the Oppressed One who could 'do most anything'" (Cone, 1972:50).

When various members in prayer meetings or revivals testify or pray, the congregation usually shares the account of their suffering with numerous "amens" and "tell Jesus."¹⁰ It is at once a communication to fellow members that they understand their troubles and a way of communication to the Lord that this brother or sister's trouble is like their own.

Besides the Sunday morning church service and its collective representations of suffering through prayer, song, and sermon, there is the gospel choir concert which parallels another type of group device witnessed in the People's Republic of China and used by Scheff to support his theory of emotional catharsis. "Dramatic scenes depicting the oppression of the old society caused mass weeping." (1975:86) William Hinton describes such a scene in *Fanshen*:

. . . the women around me wept openly and unashamedly. . . . tears were coursing down their faces. No one sobbed, no one cried out, but all wept together in silence. The agony on the stage seemed to have unlocked a thousand painful memories, a bottomless reservoir of suffering that no one could control. . . . Men were weeping, and I along with them. (1966:314-315)

Choirs and gospel singers also depict the past and present suffering of blacks in the rural and the urban setting. Not only do men and women weep at these concerts, but a good number of them also faint, shout, and cry out "thank You's" to Jesus for helping them to endure. The singing is a representation of both the accounts of suffering endured personally and collectively; the insults — "everybody talking 'bout me"; and the scorn are sung about. Besides the endurance of suffering, there is an expression of the aloneness that blacks have endured, overcome, and will overcome.

It is this ability to collectively talk about their troubles within the context of the church that may account for the low rates of depression found among black psychiatric diagnoses. According to Blackwell, rates of manic-depressive behavior and involuntional psychoses are lower among blacks. Combined with a lower suicide rate, these positive differences may be accounted for by this function of the church. No matter what the

¹⁰Many times the person giving the account will pause and interject the phrase "Can I get a witness" or "Can I get a witness here tonight" and will continue after hearing an "amen" or "Yes!" from a fellow member of the congregation. Preachers will also do this during sermons and prayers (cf. Holt, 1972b).

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political or ideological stance of the church, these structures — the prayer meeting, the gospel chorus-choir, and the area wide and professional gospel festivals — exist at all levels of religious life within a black community. These aspects of black social organization have not been the subject of much research. Considering their similarities to the healing ceremonies of many other cultures, an exploration of them with an eye to their therapeutic value may prove fruitful.

“AND THE WICKED WILL CEASE FROM TROUBLING” Locating The Persecutors

When lecturing several years ago on the politics of psychiatric diagnosis, Dr. R. D. Laing commented that it was interesting that psychiatrists had a word for people who believed that they were being persecuted — paranoia. He went on to say that it was also interesting to note that they did not have a word* for people who were being persecuted and did not know that they were. Even more interesting, he continued, was the lack of a word for the person who persecutes and does not know that he is persecuting and more importantly the person who persecutes, and knows that he is persecuting. Along with delivering accounts of suffering, black religious practice provides a setting for accounting for the causes of both personal and collective suffering.

Black women, particularly, are able to avail themselves of the forum of the prayer meeting to talk about their troubles with their husbands and sons (Holt, 1972b:191-5; Powdermaker, 1967:253-273). They ask not only for the collective support of the membership in helping them to endure their personal trouble — an arrest, a lost job, a drinking problem, a drug problem, and even adulterous affairs — but they also ask the prayers of membership in changing the behavior of the person or persons responsible for the trouble. It is a very pragmatic form of prayer and testimony. The prayers toward the end of the meeting rendered by the Deacon or preacher in charge can range from pleas for effecting a change in the erring son or husband's behavior to a prayer that a family be able to endure and struggle against “that racist policeman” or “that racist store owner.”

Not only are prayers offered up against the offender, plans of action may be formulated to attempt to change the offending behavior. Ministers and deacons may pay visits to the offending spouse. Peer pressure, therefore, can be an extra benefit. Bail money may be raised. If the problem is no food on the table because of a welfare worker, food may be provided, as well as clothing. There is the notion and belief that suffering accounted for is caused by the acts of real persons in the real world and the right to “tell God all about our troubles” means just that — ALL of our troubles.

Students in my Sociology of Mental Health courses who work as aides in state hospitals have told numerous stories of women on their wards whose

*Meaning an official psychiatric diagnosis.

feelings of persecution stem from troubles with their husbands. Their suffering in silence emerges in the form of symptoms which become the province of the psychiatrist, while the offending husband is left with more freedom than ever to continue his behavior. The hospital is left trying to rid the wife of her symptoms, but it is impossible for the hospital personnel to attempt to control the husband. He is usually the chief complainant against the wife. Within the context of the church, people are able to give accounts of some of the saddest and most troubling aspects of their personal lives without fear of punishment. In my experience within the church, I have personally witnessed these types of accounts and the intervention of ministers and deacons in order to attempt to alleviate the situations.

When problems such as unwed motherhood and divorce arise, the prayer meeting is both a forum for announcing the impending trouble and for gathering the social supports necessary to endure and actively cope with the situation. Church members may render various forms of social support besides prayer. Church members may organize "showers" for the offending daughter, thus removing some of the punitive social pressure from the stricken parents. Also, ministers in the black church regularly christen or bless the illegitimate child, including the grandparents in the ritual so that the child is made a member of the community and the grandparents are socially supported in their new responsibility. Although these practices may not depress the rates of social disorganization, they do have the effect of alleviating the personal disorganization which can attend these occurrences. Black divorce, separation, and illegitimacy rates, may be public issues, but they are not personal troubles to be suffered through and endured alone.

Many black churches are used as forums for dealing with community problems and civil rights issues. Prayer meetings and gospel singing were an important ritual before many of the civil rights demonstrations. Sermons and testimony both speak directly to the structures of oppression which cause black suffering. Prayers delivered by black ministers during the Civil Rights movement and at various church services occurring during local community crises usually include the naming of the people responsible for the specific or general problem faced at the moment. Generally depending upon the specific political context of the moment, certain aspects of religious practice within the black church help to keep an accurate account of just who the enemies of black people really are. At some times and under some conditions, churches provide an organizing base for action against these named enemies.¹¹

*"THERE IS A BALM IN GILEAD,
TO MAKE THE WOUNDED WHOLE"
The Church As An Asylum*

There are very few appropriate settings in American society where one can go specifically to discuss one's personal troubles. The affluent have

¹¹Hamilton's *The Black Preacher in America* (1972) gives a good survey of the variety of roles played by the black church and its clergy in racial uplift as well as keeping the *status quo*.

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access to various kinds of therapy groups. Again it is the affluent and the medically insured who can avail themselves voluntarily of the services of a social worker or an out-patient psychiatric clinic. Studies have shown that Alcoholics Anonymous works best with middle class populations (Trice and Roman, 1975). Private social agencies tend to screen out those personal troubles with which they may have the least success. Given the overall economic status of the black population in the United States, therapy is an expensive solution to private troubles with a limited availability. Where economic factors do not intervene, cultural factors such as language barriers, divergent life experiences, and family background are also countervailing forces limiting access to therapeutic facilities.

Within the context of the labeling paradigm, a major factor in the labeling process is the society's overall view that having a psychiatric personal trouble is shameful (Scheff, 1966:55-101). Besides mental illness, other aspects of personal disorganization such as alcoholism, illegitimacy, criminal involvement, and marital troubles are also considered shameful and the "fault" of the person involved.¹² In middle class America, seeking help for personal troubles, therefore, holds socially punitive overtones. Suburban ministers, when counseling their parishioners, sometimes exchange offices with ministers in another town so that the neighbors of the church member will not know that he or she is seeking help. William Ryan (1971) has shown how the inability of blacks to hide or disguise their personal pathologies in the same manner as whites had led to the distorted view of the black population as pathology ridden and therefore somehow inferior.

It is the punitive aspect of treatment for the mentally ill that has given rise to many of the radical critiques of psychiatric diagnostic categories and the structure and function of institutions for the mentally ill.

One of the most outspoken critics of the punitive and possibly damaging aspects of the mental health treatment setting is R. D. Laing. His theory of mental illness and particularly schizophrenia maintains that what is now called a disease should possibly be redefined. His research (1964) combined with studies "conducted at Palo Alto, California [Bateson] . . . [and] the Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute [Speck] . . . have shown that the person who gets diagnosed [as schizophrenic] is part of a wide network of extremely disturbed and disturbing patterns of communication." (Laing, 1967:114) Laing later suggests (Ruitenbeek, 1972) that schizophrenia may be the natural analogue to a 6-12 hour LSD experience. He suggests that this natural analogue be called, instead of schizophrenia, "a *metanoiac* voyage (from *metanoia*: change of mind). The nature of the *metanoiac* voyage may be "good" or "bad," largely depending on the *set* and the *setting*." (Laing in Ruitenbeek, 1972:12) He goes on to say:

¹²The "blaming the victim" ideologies enumerated by William Ryan (1971) reflect a Protestant American value system that sees humans as "ruggedly individual" masters of their fate. This problem of "shame" and "guilt" over personal troubles is just one consequence of growing up in a society built upon the ideologies of social Darwinism. To some extent it affects everyone, not just minorities.

Mental hospital defines this voyage as *ipso facto* madness *per se*, and treat it accordingly. The *setting* of the psychiatric clinic and mental hospital promotes in staff and patients the *set* best designed to turn the metanoiac voyage from a voyage of discovery into self of a potentially revolutionary nature and with a potentially libertating outcome, into a catastrophe: into a pathological process from which the person requires to be cured. (1972:12)

Such treatment, given the nature of the organization of the treatment of the mentally ill, becomes punishment for personal failure.

Laing goes on to ask the question "what would happen if we began by changing our set and setting, to regard what was happening as a potential healing process through which the person ideally may be guided and during which he is guarded?" This was Laing's idea of the asylum and has been expressed by the famous Kingsley Hall experiment and seven presently functioning community households in London. Laing also describes the similar function of the "rebirthing experience" made famous by the Elizabeth Fehr Natal Therapy Institute in New York City (1976:72).

I maintain that some black churches, those characterized by extreme emotionalism, provide a similar asylum (read "refuge" or "shelter") which is a non-punitive setting within which blacks are able to act-out and work-through whatever happens to be troubling them on Sunday morning or prayer meeting evening. This "change of Mind" which occurs in the church setting has several names within the black community. In the community in which I was raised it is called "getting happy." Churches characterized by this type of behavior were known to us as "a shoutin' church" and those not characterized by this behavior were called "a dead church."¹³ For the white or the black person socialized in the Episcopal or Catholic faiths, entering one of these churches can be a frightening experience.¹⁴ Men and women scream and cry and leap about. Bodies seem to be wracked by uncontrollable spasms of both grief and joy. People, both young and old, leap about in the aisles, dance at the altar, and fall out on the floor. Those not engaged in such behavior usually attend to those who are to guarantee that they do not hurt themselves or others while expressing their feelings. A pair of elderly women can lead a young woman through her first experience of "getting happy" by forming a little circle around her with their arms while lending both physical and emotional support, verbally encouraging her on with phrases like: "Tell Jesus" — "Let it all out, child!" — "Tell your troubles to God" — "Shout" and other encouragements. Members of the congregation develop predictable patterns of acting-out, such that other members move to assist them before they actually begin to shout. When certain church members begin to cry, people can be seen changing their seats so that friends can provide comfort and remove infants from possible harm. Choir members who "fall out" during the performance are supported by

¹³These perspectives on audience styles of churches arise from the variety of inter-church organizations which exist at local, regional, and national levels within the black community. In my own community gospel singers would comment upon just how hard they might be required to work at any particular concert or service.

¹⁴Members of my Baptist Youth Fellowship and I took a black Catholic friend with us on one of our many Friday night visits to a local "shoutin'" Baptist church. A short while later she ran out of the church with a look of extreme terror on her face. She later told one of the members that she had never been so frightened in her life.

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other choir members and I have personally witnessed choirs singing six or seven choruses of a song until the lead singer regains consciousness in order that she may finish the song with the choir properly. No matter how severe the pandemonium within the church service, I have never witnessed a church service in which every single person's episode of "getting happy" or "shouting" was not resolved, worked through, or finished before the singing of the final hymn and the recessional. When the participants leave, they usually appear as unruffled as they did when they came into the church.

In the process of the service, church members become therapists for their fellow church members in that they attend to their shouting, encourage them in their feelings, and guard and protect them from possible harm.¹⁵ Every person takes responsibility for the person nearest him or her. Ministers, taking their cues from the congregation, act and speak in ways which encourage the behavior. Choir directors¹⁶ also gauge the length of a song or the number of songs according to the amount of shouting and clapping that is taking place. Sometimes a choir will finish a song, and the congregation will keep up a steady rhythm until the choir starts up again. It is a collective therapeutic experience. Those not actively engaged in shouting speak about "I feel full" or "the spirit gets over me" or "it gets over me." The congregation is actively encouraged to lay its burdens on the altar, and it does.

Songs such as "Come Ye Disconsolate," "There is a Balm in Gilead," "Precious Lord (Take My Hand)," "It is Well With My Soul," "Amazing Grace," "How I Got Over," and "I've Decided to Make Jesus My Choice" are particularly effective in rousing the congregation. During the 1960's, a song called "Peace Be Still" was particularly popular for ending a concert or a prayer meeting.

The entire experience is defined as "good." With this, church members speak of the process of becoming members of the church as being "reborn," "saved," or "redeemed." There is the feeling that a person is "new." There is also the notion that a person may re-enter or be "reborn" an infinite number of times. Testimony concerning members' not always being a "child" of God is often heard as they "rededicate" themselves to being "reborn." In effect, certain black churches have become institutions in which a person possesses an infinite amount of social resources so that it is almost impossible to become defined as an "outsider." The wayward child or the persecuting husband who shows up on Easter Sunday can be greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm, even though it may be well known that he won't be seen again until Christmas or next Easter.

Participants are guarded, welcomed, and sheltered. A person's shouting is rarely discussed outside of the church, although impersonal

¹⁵In large churches black nurses and nurses aides form voluntary associations for this specific purpose. Church ushers are expected to perform this role as well.

¹⁶The National Association of Gospel Choirs and Choruses maintains a director's bureau as well as holding seminars and competition in order to train directors at these conventions. Choir directors often build up their very own following. They occupy an extremely important but unresearched role within the black church. Some of them are divinity students or assistant ministers.

gossip or particularly legendary episodes may travel about the community and across generations. Legends abound concerning particular incidents associated with famous gospel singers (Heilbut, 1971). However, the folklore (including memories of older relatives concerning particular colorful shouters) supports the social institution of shouting and defines it as good. The cultural supports of shouting within the black church function in much the same way that Scheff maintains that the imagery and stereotypes of insanity in American society function to define the mentally ill as outsiders. However, the imagery and folklore surrounding the social institution of shouting within the black church functions to define the participants as "insiders" and good people.

Laing in discussing his idea of the non-punitive therapeutic setting comments that "No age in the history of humanity has perhaps lost touch with this natural *healing* process that implicates *some* of the people whom we label schizophrenic." (1969:127) He suggests that "Instead of the mental hospital a sort of reserving factory for human breakdowns, we need a place where people . . . can find their way further into inner space and time, and back again. Instead of the *degradation* ceremonial of psychiatric examination, diagnosis and prognostication, we need, for those who are ready for it . . ., an *initiation* ceremonial, through which the person will be guided with full social encouragement and sanction into inner space and time, by people who have been there and back again." (1967:128) In this place of healing, Laing suggests "Among physicians and priests there should be some who are guides, who can educt the person from this world and induct him to the other. To guide him in it and to lead him back again." (1967:139) The ministers, choir directors, singers, nurses, ushers, and fellow church members who aid the "shouters" in their "getting happy" seem quite similar to the personnel in Laing's true asylum. Some of the newer therapies such as primal scream and Rash Neesh Meditation therapy bear similarities to church activity.

"ASK THE WATCHMAN HOW LONG"
*Validating Black Experiences*¹⁷

The feelings of suffering and persecution experienced by black people in America are not successfully experienced or shared by the wider society.

¹⁷Laing in "The Family and Invalidation" (1969) notes that public family events and internal experience do not always match.

["Jack and Jill were married in 1960. There were over 100 wedding guests. . . . But Jill was not satisfied. She does not want a pretence of a marriage. . . . One night she started to say in front of the children that he wasn't a real husband. That she was married to him, but he wasn't married to her. He became upset and phoned the doctor in the morning. *People are sent to psychiatrists and into hospitals if they persist in such statements* (1969:68-69)"]

Laing in distinguishing between the experiential structure (A) and the public event (B) asserts "To preserve convention, there is general collusion to disavow A when A and B do not match. Anyone breaking this rule is liable to invalidation." (1969:68) The invalidation of the individual's experience by others is the beginning of one's career as mentally ill. At the societal level, the ideologues of equality spoken by American society (public event or B) do not match the experience (A) of oppression suffered by blacks. It is my feeling that the church provides a counter-collusionary force validating the mismatch of American ideology and the black experience.

The Black Church As A Therapeutic Community

What blacks in American society experience as normal every day racism is hardly noticed by whites or if noticed is denied. According to Comer:

Much of white America does not see, feel or think that a wrong has been done and is still being done. It does not understand that compensation, justice, and change are necessary. . . . In Homestead, Florida, after a black student protest, the South Dade High School voted 1,010 to 47 to keep the symbols of injustice that angered blacks: the nickname "Rebels," "Dixie" as the school song, the Confederate flag as the school emblem, Confederate uniforms for the band, blue and gray as the school colors, and the name "Rebel Review" for the student newspaper. . . . Few things could be more insulting to black students.

A white girl asked the leader of the black student group why he was so angry. The black student told of his feeling as a band member, There I was, wearing the uniform of the man who fought to the death to keep my ancestors in slavery. That I looked ridiculous was not important. It actually hurt. It really does mean a lot to me. (1972:113)

This and the protestations of white Bostonians that there was no racism in Boston prior to busing are only some of the examples of the different definitions of the situation by a white majority with which black people are forced to contend in their every day lives. According to Laing, "If we deny official definitions of public events, we are regarded as mad." (1969:68) In order to maintain their sense of reality in American society, blacks must continuously disregard the official definitions of public events which affect their lives. Sometimes feelings of self-blame can only be blocked by some sort of public, yet in-group, accounting of troubles.

The black church represents the most stable and resourceful institution for providing this function. Ministers are usually notified concerning community crises, and they have the stature and the authority to get to the truth of a situation when others in the community cannot or when the media has seriously misrepresented the matter. When a black neighbor of mine was charged with murder while defending his home against the attack of a white teenage gang, black ministers in the community all took time to announce the facts of the matter to their congregations because the media had seriously misrepresented the matter. The family's ability to bear the death threats and the cost of legal defense was greatly aided by the material and emotional support that came to them after that Sunday morning. Members of the various churches in which ministers had given a true account of the incident called, visited, and raised money for the family. At that time the family held no church membership.

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE *Conclusions*

According to Hamilton:

One of the most crucial facts about black people in the United States is that they have been subjected to . . . traumatic experiences involving abrupt cultural transformations. . . . these occurrences [have] had serious implications for the disruption of social institutions of the race and for the ways in which black people have attempted to meet and adapt to these abrupt changes in their lives. . . . The one institution the blacks had to rely on in bridging these transitional periods were the church and the preacher. The preacher became, then, a linkage figure, having to link up the old with the new, the familiar with the unfamiliar, tradition with modernity. . . . The black church was an adaptive institution. It was not wholly African, and it was by no means entirely Anglican or Western. Improvisation was required, and the black preacher was the master improviser. . . . He knew his people, and he came to know the many new obstacles and forces with which they

had to cope in order to survive — not to mention thrive. . . . The black preacher linked up things. And for a people who had had their lives and their cultures shattered, fragmented and torn asunder so often and so abruptly, this linkage figure was important. . . . By their mere presence and continued leadership, the black preachers offer a steady figure with which their people can identify. They represent continuity and, in an important sense, stability — the only stable strand in the lives of many people who have been wracked by instability and abrupt changes. (1972:32-36)

To be able to know that their troubles are not the result of personal defects; that their inferiority is not a certified fact; and that people in certain positions in white society are actively persecuting them prevents for black people the disjuncture between personal experience and feelings and the realities with which they are coping which for many other people renders them vulnerable to incarceration within institutions for the insane.

The black church validates the experiences and feelings that the media of the wider society attempt to invalidate. The black church because of its differential social organization provides a sphere of activities in which black people can perform, function, feel, and express themselves without the invidious distinctions which white judgments bring to bear (Comer, 1972:17). If positive mental health is defined, as Jahoda found, as mastery of the environment, self-actualization, self-esteem, integration of self, autonomy, and adequacy of perception of reality, then the black church represents a social institution which acts as a support to black sanity. Given the crisis in the delivery of mental health care in America, and the miracle of black survival in America, sensitive and systematic exploration of the possibly therapeutic functions of the black religious experience is indicated.

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