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Recreating the Circle: A Collective Vision for Radical African Healing in Community

Cheryl Grills[1], Enola Aird[2], Evan Auguste[3, 4], Florence Adibu[2], Sharon Bethea[4, 5], Tarik Endale[6], Kristee Haggins[7], Ruby Mendenhall[8, 9], Lisa Zakiya Newland[10, 11], Annelle Primm[12], and Kamesha Spates[13]

[1] Department of Psychological Science, Loyola Marymount University
[2] Community Healing Network, New Haven, Connecticut, United States
[3] Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Boston
[4] The Association of Black Psychologists, Inc., Washington, Maryland, United States
[5] Department of Counselor Education, African American Studies, Northeastern Illinois University
[6] Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, Teachers College, Columbia University
[7] Safe Black Space, Sacramento, California, United States
[8] Department of Sociology, Carle Illinois College of Medicine, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
[9] Department of African American Studies, Carle Illinois College of Medicine, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
[10] Black Family Summit, Inc., Durham, North Carolina, United States
[11] Department of Social Work, Molloy University
[12] All Healers Mental Health Alliance, Baltimore, Maryland, United States
[13] Department of Africana Studies, University of Pittsburgh

As attacks on Black people have become more visible, key Black organizations have been building a grassroots movement of culturally grounded healing circles. African-centered healing circles address historical and contemporary racial stress experienced by Black people. They privilege culture and function as community-driven medicine, promoting collective healing and protecting against the effects of ongoing racism. The growth of these circles signals a shift away from Western methods of healing and toward indigenous practices. This article describes their growth, underlying theories, common elements, and evidence, and sketches a vision for national and international expansion.

Public Significance Statement
The present article shares the history and growth of contemporary African-centered healing circles—a people's healing movement that is reshaping approaches to mental health in Black communities.

Keywords: African-centered psychology, racial trauma, healing circles

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Evan Auguste https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1526-6568
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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Evan Auguste, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Boston, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125, United States. Email: evan.auguste@umb.edu

Cheryl Grills

I Am Because We Are

—The African Principle of Ubuntu

Dating back millennia, African peoples have devised and depended on methods of care involving self-exploration, communal purpose, and spirit knowledge (Bynum, 2020). African-centered practices were among the earliest inquiries into what it means to be well at the level of self, culture, community, and spirit (Nobles, 2023). They were also among the earliest and most radical rejections of Western colonialism, land dispossession, racial capitalism, and enslavement (Robinson, 1983).

In the modern day, African-centered approaches to caring for the mental health of Black people developed, in part, as a response to the need to decolonize mental health care and to provide an alternative to mainstream Western-centric clinical approaches (Holdstock, 2000; Malherbe & Ratele, 2022). Moving beyond the Socratic roots of modern talk therapy, African-centered healing is a key practice that has often taken place in community settings in the form of ritual, ceremony, and circle (e.g., Stevenson, 1999). Healing circles for Black people have in general been described as "sacred … a lifeline to mental health, … the first step to creating the blessed community we all want to live in" (T. M. Williams, 2009, p. 297). This article articulates an African-centered framework for healing circles. African-centered healing circles are a grassroots, community-based practice of healing and visioning that leverages contemporary and historical African and African diasporic traditions to address the lived and historical psychological, spiritual, and political needs of people of African ancestry. The circles have been recognized for their grounding in ancient practice and preservation of African culture. The circles resonate with liberation psychology, but they are rooted in the cross-generational transmission of African healing practices as outlined by Henderson et al. (2021). The circles function as a conduit for collective healing and community revitalization (Grills et al., 2020). African-centered healing circles have the potential to change the way community members care for themselves and one another. In this article, "Africans" and "people of African ancestry" refer to ethnocultural groups that claim indigeneity to or are diasporic of the continent of Africa. "Black" refers to the racial group that experienced extraction, from and/or domination within, Africa as well as historic oppression, human trafficking, and enslavement through Western racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983).

African-centered healing circles serve as sites for the cultivation of collective Black consciousness, and, within that, Black wisdom (Anyiwo et al., 2024; S. P. Harrell, 2022). S. P. Harrell (2022, p. 171) defines Black wisdom as:

> A transformative, liberatory, and healing resource with particular applications for disrupting the five dynamics of oppression—dehumanization, disconnection, destruction, delusion, and disempowerment.

Similarly, Anyiwo et al. (2024) described collective Black consciousness as not only knowledge of oppression but also a reconnection to and sustenance of indigenous African and African diasporic cultural practices that support the thriving of Black communities. African-centered healing circles are understood to be tools for fostering the types of Black wisdom and thus consciousness necessary for well-being in the form of transcendence, inner peace, mutual aid, resistance, and collective healing (Anyiwo et al., 2024; S. P. Harrell, 2022).

Historically, the urgent need for African-centered healing circles has arisen as a result of racially traumatizing attacks on Black people (Grills et al., 2020; Neville & Cross, 2017). These collective racial assaults have caused vicarious trauma and exacerbated unhealed racial wounds (Pryce et al., 2021).

The multilayered stress and harm of chronic racism has a pernicious weathering effect on physical and mental health and leads to disproportionate rates of morbidity and premature death in Black communities (Geronimus et al., 2006). Community responses, in the form of healing circles, reflect a fundamental African principle that we are each other's medicine. We serve as each other's medicine, not only in response to the collective grief and trauma that senseless killings have caused but also in response to the unrelenting racism that Black people experience every day.

We, the authors, come to this article as people of African ancestry who have endured anti-Black racism, borne witness to anti-Black racism, and embarked on our own efforts to heal from anti-Black racism. We are a multigenerational coalition personally invested in the global grassroots liberation of African peoples. We represent parts of the African-centered healing circle movement with deep commitments to supporting Black mental health and resilience. We have been both the

Enola Aird

beneficiaries and leaders of African-centered healing circles. We believe that these circles are a potent protective factor that can buffer and counteract the accumulated historical and contemporary harm of anti-Blackness.

As increasing numbers of Black people become disillusioned and frustrated with the limitations of Western-based mental health methodologies, we are creating our own approaches based on indigenous practices that speak to our history and cultural worldview and current contextual realities.

In the following sections, we (a) explain the foundations of African-centered healing; (b) describe the European disruptions to African life and the attendant psychological damage; (c) summarize the common elements of African-centered healing circles; (d) outline four distinct African-centered healing circle interventions that have gained prominence, along with evidence of their effectiveness; and (e) sketch a vision for scaling up African-centered healing circles globally. We ground this article, as we ground our circles, in African-centered cultural and ancestral wisdom in the form of proverbs that have been passed down over generations, as well as words of wisdom offered by African and African diasporic scholars and movement leaders.

The Foundations of African-Centered Healing

> The stick that is to save you is found in your hand.

Africa is a continent of 54 countries, each with its own ethnicities and cultures, and yet, an "African" metaculture and "African" identity exist that extend beyond the limits of national cultures and diasporan localities. It is this metaculture that defines African and African-centered psychology (Grills et al., 2018). Within this metaculture, there is both unity and diversity. Unity can be found in the centrality of spirituality, a belief in life after death, the veneration of the ancestors, a communal orientation, and notions of family and community that are not centered solely around the nuclear family. Diversity can be found in the people's relationship to land and water, articulation of spirit systems, and political configurations that African peoples resist, cocreate, and negotiate. Variations in the surface-level details found in the expression and manifestation of these principles reveal the level of distinction within the metaculture. As noted by Grills et al. (2018, p. 802):

> Like patches in a quilt, Africa and its diasporan kinfolk are a diversity of national and regional cultures, stitched together by a common history—a shared, unifying single-fabric backing—a cultural underpinning that unites the disparate patches.

Contemporary African-centered healing circles are situated within the perspective of African cultural wisdom and practice. They provide the tools needed for people of African ancestry to be whole, well, and vibrant. Its outgrowth, African psychology, our wellness stick, has origins dating as far back as 3400 BCE in ancient Kemetic (i.e., Egyptian) and Nubian sciences (Nobles, 2023). This science taught that consciousness is the goal, self-knowledge is the basis of all true knowledge, the purpose of education is to bring out what is already there, and the objective of psychology is to gain awareness of the full dimensionality of the soul (Akbar, 1994; Kambon, 1999; Nobles, 2023).

> No matter how long a crocodile lives in water, it can never turn into a fish.

African-centered approaches permit people of African ancestry who carry both the genetic and spiritual memory, and the lived experience, of their ancestors to be whole. This helps them to be their authentic selves, heal in ways informed by their wisdom traditions, and cultivate holistic, affirming lives and communities.

> You cannot bring light to your neighbor when it is dark at your home.

Concerns with ethical behavior, character, and values and leading a principled life are central to African culture and African psychology. Many African cultural principles and values emphasize the rules by which society maintains harmony, balance, order, and predictability and align with the fundamental cosmological beliefs of African people related to the ongoing evolution of the soul and a communal preoccupation with human welfare and well-being. African psychology attends to (a) spirit, a foundational animating principle that includes the ancestors and spiritual forces; (b) nature, which provides rules for living; (c) the metaphysical interconnectedness of all things and a rhythm to life; (d) communal order and self-knowledge as essential features of what it means to be human and to be well; and (e) a

Evan Auguste

teleological orientation toward existence (Nobles, 1986). This worldview proceeds from the assumption that human beings are capable of knowing in ways not limited to intellect, conscious mind, or physical senses (Grills, 2004). This point is aptly reflected in the African proverb: "A single tree that is left to endure the force of a windstorm is liable to break."

Emerging from this cultural wisdom is a conceptualization of the human being as a biopsychosocial–spiritual entity. What makes a person human is the multidimensional interplay of components of the self, which include (a) mind, body, spirit, soul, life force (e.g., *moya*, the life force of goodness), connection to ancestors, connection to others (Ubuntu), bioluminescence (luminescence luminosity), interconnectedness of all things in life, reincarnated self, life purpose, and destiny (Baloyi & Ramose, 2016; Fu-Kiau, 1991; Gbadegesin, 1998; Gbodossou & Floyd, 2005; Grills, 2004; Mkhize, 2004; Nwoye, 2017; Shutte, 1995). Sentience represents a veil to be removed so that deeper knowledge can be revealed (Ajei & Grills, 2000). The human being is also a vital force in close and continuing contact with other vital forces, influencing and being influenced by them (Hallgren, 1995). These vital forces are found in people, animals, plants, ancestors, and elements of the inanimate world. They are not time bound, so past and future forces are important to human functioning. These vital forces are in constant participation with all living and inanimate things such that social relationships are critical. One's humanness can be fully realized only by integration and participation in the community. Not all vital forces are equal. Some are stronger. They can be different in quality and impact. It is through a person's relationship with other forces that one's essence is determined, nurtured, or inhibited.

In the context of vital force, consciousness is central to the African conceptualization of human functioning. Consciousness is a dynamic process of acting and being acted upon. It is energy, vibration, vigor or power in action, available power, and the source and capacity for action. Human consciousness is the source of vitality and intensity of human behavioral expression. From this perspective, human functioning can be understood as energy matching energy and vibrations synchronizing.

Sunsum, to Ashanti and Akan people, is one's spirit, which connects body and soul. A person is not always aware of this dynamic, but it is the call of one's sunsum to connect with the sunsum of others that is a driver of change and transformation in a healing circle.

African psychology asserts, then, that we are relational beings imbued with energy, potential energy, and vibrational resonance, a fact that became abundantly clear under the duress of COVID-19 and its impact on people's ability to be physically with each other. This relationality is evident in the simple African practice of pouring libation. Consider the Akan word for libation pouring, *mpaebo*, which is derived from two words *pae* and *bo*. *Pae* can mean to open, as in *dua no mu apae* (the wood is split/open), or it may mean to shout or call, as in *pae me din* (call his name). *Bo*, on the other hand, means either to beat or to sound. Therefore, *mpaebo* means to prod your personal sunsum to sound a call to sunsum external to you. Power or energy encased in sunsum and the consciousness of another person is enervated because their energy is set into vibration, directing it to interact with other energies in the universe. Sunsum therefore is conscious energy in pursuit of self-definition and fulfillment through interaction with other energies. Sunsum therefore is the energy from which consciousness erupts. The healing experience in a circle is ignited by the interaction of personal sunsum with other sunsum (Ajei & Grills, 2000).

> If the young are not initiated into the village, they will burn it down just to feel its warmth.

In the African worldview, relational ties are a cornerstone of well-being. Failure to nurture and protect them undermines the integrity of the community. This is the case for all generations and sectors of the community. These are among the implicit and explicit principles underlying the design of many African-centered healing circles.

African-centered healing circles are deeply rooted in African and African diasporic peoples' cultural practice (Stevenson, 1999). People of African ancestry, throughout Africa and the Diaspora, have always used their cultural and spiritual beliefs, rituals, traditions, and practices to define, create, celebrate, sustain, and develop themselves (Bethea, 2018). Supporting and fostering deep relational ties (i.e., a sense of connection to others), recognizing the connection to something greater than oneself (spirituality), connecting to one's ancestral line, recognizing one's power, respecting and supporting the needs of others, and living a principled life are central features of

Florence Adibu

African-centered praxis born out of our communal ethos and conceptualization of what it means to be human. These are hallmarks of the capacity to experience and express humanity. Ultimately, healing capacity is the result of humanism (Adelowo, 2015), as well as shifts and changes in forces like energy, vibration, spiritual attunement, and communal connectedness. As a science of human behavior, African psychology offers perspectives and guidance that can raise an intellectual, moral, and spiritual awareness of humanity and promote self-healing and development of a just, sacred, and sustainable world (Myers, 1993). African psychology also provides the foundation for a more unified global movement for freedom from global anti-Blackness and its root cause: the lie of White superiority and Black inferiority (Grills et al., 2020). It is this psychology born out of African cultural wisdom that has helped us survive the relentless assault on African life and will help us chart a path to healing from the centuries-long European assault on African people.

The Disruption of African Life and Its Psychological Effects

> A climate of alienation has a profound effect on the Black personality.
> —Cheikh Anta Diop

The *Maafa*, or Great Disaster, refers to the centuries of violent assault on the physical, cultural, social, and spiritual coherence of African peoples (Ani, 1994). This assault is rooted in a Manichean psychology that spreads throughout the world (C. J. P. Harrell, 1999). Conceptions that lightness and whiteness represented goodness, sanctity, and superiority and that blackness and darkness represented an opposing force of evil and inferiority informed the inherent valuing of peoples and, eventually, the process of racialization that subsequently developed across Europe (Gordon, 2022). European imperialism weaponized conceptions of racialization to justify a project of racial capitalism that systematically dehumanized African peoples (Robinson, 1983). European nations and colonies oversaw centuries of kidnapping, trafficking, torture, and genocide aimed at strengthening their positions in the world, enriching the political and economic elite, and spreading a worldview of White European superiority. They constructed that worldview, or *asili* (Ani, 1994), in direct opposition to the cultures and traditions of African and other indigenous peoples. This lie of White superiority and Black inferiority paved the way for the multigenerational subjugation of African people (Aird, 2022).

African people were ripped from their civilizations and communities and endured centuries of intentional physical, psychological, and spiritual trauma designed to erase African conceptions of being (Ani, 1994). Simultaneously, African societies across the continent faced colonial and imperial efforts by European nations meant to disrupt, weaken, and subjugate local cultures and communities (Rodney, 1972). African identities, worldviews, and value systems were assaulted and, in some cases, diminished. It is important to note that many of those who were captured never surrendered their internal connections to their homeland. Millions sought to recreate their African cultural structures within the Americas by finding solidarity with indigenous First Nations people, creating diasporic African coalitions and spiritual identities (Brown, 2020; Casimir, 2020; Robinson, 1983). Indeed, the history of maroon communities and revolts by enslaved people illustrates the undying and deep-rooted culture that guided African peoples to maintain value systems and worldviews informed by their ancestral traditions (Kambon, 1999; Kelley, 2002). On the continent, diasporic and intercontinental coalitions were fostered and lucidly named the White supremacist roots underlying much of the destabilization throughout Africa (Biko, 1978; Nkrumah, 1963). Hence, cultural connections and ancestral traditions became a foundation for the healing practices of the colonized and enslaved.

There is a strong and growing body of evidence showing a strong, consistent association between experiences of racism and a variety of mental health consequences including psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and more (Lewis et al., 2015; Salter et al., 2018; D. R. Williams, 2018). These contemporary consequences have been understood through frameworks such as racial trauma, complex racial trauma, and race-related stress (Bryant-Davis, 2007; S. P. Harrell, 2000; Roberson & Carter, 2022). These concepts provide a way to understand how the continued communication and expression of racism reinvigorates the torturous history of anti-Blackness in ways that range from the seemingly innocuous to the blatantly lethal.

Many within the profession of Eurocentric psychology have outwardly expressed concern about the health and

Sharon Bethea

well-being of Black people while at the same time justifying disproportionate levels of violence and harm against us (Auguste et al., 2023). Inequities persist, with Black people more likely to receive lower quality care (Breslau et al., 2018) and to discontinue treatment (Maura & Weisman de Mamani, 2017). Given the historical medical racism and psychology's role in perpetuating anti-Black biases, mistrust of health care systems and providers is understandable.

Consistent with Gómez's (2015) conceptualization of this type of institutional betrayal, pioneering Black professional organizations such as the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi), Black Psychiatrists of America (BPA), and the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) reconceptualized psychological, psychosocial, and psychospiritual healing in ways that acknowledge the history and continued harms of anti-Blackness (Grills et al., 2018; The Black Family Summit, 2014). The work of pioneering theorists like Fanon (2018) exposed European psychology's collusion with anti-Blackness, mass incarceration of Black people (Auguste et al., 2023), racist policing, the protection of Western-centric worldviews that culturally destabilize African people across the diaspora (Ani, 1994), and harmful paradigms, such as resilience, which impose individual solutions onto oppressed and excluded populations facing systemic problems (Suslovic & Lett, 2023). A reimagining of the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry, and social work cannot simply involve revising or culturally adapting existing practices born from White supremacist values but must draw from indigenous practices that these European disciplines attempted to annihilate (Legha & Martinek, 2023). ABPsi, BPA, and NABSW provided the intellectual underpinnings for a people's mental health movement in which emotional well-being can be derived from peer support and community-building efforts that (a) promote life-affirming interventions (Klukoff et al., 2021), (b) build upon a cultural paradigm rooted in the wisdom tradition of African deep thought (Baldwin, 1986), and (c) integrate crucial tenets of radical healing (e.g., collectivism, critical consciousness, radical hope, strength, resistance, cultural authenticity, and self-knowledge; French et al., 2023).

Common Elements of African-Centered Healing Circles

> If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.
> African Proverb

African-centered healing circles are trustworthy spaces in which Black people come together to share stories, process their experiences, and heal from the historical and contemporary impact of anti-Blackness in our lives. The overarching aim is to create a culture of wellness in which Black people across generations can thrive. Healing circles help strengthen commitments to resistance and self-determination, both of which are essential for us to flourish as a people.

In the United States, there is a long history of formal and informal healing circles including those rooted in Black women's intimate practices of healing and resistance. For instance, Phillips (2014, p. 192) wrote about the transcendent healing circle work that Black Panther leader Ericka Huggins engaged in while incarcerated:

> We braided each other's hair and curled each other's hair and over the hair-doing, we had all kinds of conversations about how we wanted the world to work and unfold. It looked so harmless to the prison guards, but it was revolutionary.

Similarly, sister circles enhanced the mental and physical well-being of Black women across the lifespan (Boyd, 1998). These networks build upon Black women's preexisting friendships, fictive kin, and community members. They have alleviated feelings of isolation (Gaston et al., 2007) and promoted educational and professional advancement among Black women (Croom et al., 2017). Facilitated by nontherapist Black women, participants benefited from the opportunity to articulate their core fears and developed actionable plans to address their concerns (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011).

We, as representatives of several pioneering Black organizations, believe that African-centered healing circles are key to creating and sustaining an ecosystem for optimal Black wellness. We have identified several common elements of African-centered healing circles. They are (a) grounded in African values, (b) designed exclusively for people who have had the unique lived experience of being Black in an anti-Black world, (c) grassroots and offer opportunities for collective work and community building, (d) focused on storytelling, and (e) committed to imparting skills to promote emotional wellness.

Tarik Endale

Grounded in African Values

In keeping with the principle of Sankofa (go back and fetch your traditions to provide a way forward), African-centered praxis is about resistance and reclaiming what is known as well as gaining new knowledge (Bethea, 2018). African-centered healing circles seek to reconnect us with fundamental indigenous and culturally congruent community healing practices that are not therapy but sacred safe spaces and support systems where people of African ancestry come together to connect and commune with one another (Taylor, 2018).

Essential to the process is the interconnectedness between a person, a power greater than oneself, nature, and others, including elders, ancestors, and children—all of which are central to well-being and wholeness (Johnson & Carter, 2020). Participants are called to work together to embody these values, both inside and outside the circles. In striving to live by these values, we can shed the vestiges of the Eurocentric narrative of Black inferiority, reconnect with our African origins, and fully embrace our humanity as African people.

Designed for People Living While Black in an Anti-Black World

African-centered healing circles are specifically and unabashedly designed for people who have had the unique lived experience of being at the bottom of the false hierarchy of human beings in which Black skin became synonymous with subjugation. We are keenly aware that in the current political climate, legal challenges to programs to help Black people abound. Nevertheless, we insist that these protected spaces are essential for our healing. These African-centered healing circles are not about the distribution of a benefit but rather about alleviating the distinctive burdens borne by Black people as a result of centuries of anti-Blackness. African-centered healing circles are designed to provide a respite from the dehumanization and devaluing of Black lives and the conditioned negative responses that arise for us in the context of constant racial macro- and microaggressions. It is a natural consequence of a lifetime of dealing with the aggressions and other traumas caused by anti-Black racism that Black people are inclined to be hypervigilant, especially in the presence of White people (D. R. Williams, 2018). To create the optimal conditions for healing from the multigenerational trauma caused by anti-Black racism, Black people need, deserve, and are entitled to spaces where we can be with each other to heal.

Grassroots Collective Work and Community Building

As people who adhere to Ubuntu (the collective, the community), we heal in the community. A core element of the circles is that they are grassroots, facilitated by people from and for the community. Facilitators and participants benefit from the collective energy of the group where everyone is helping each other heal and grow. The circles provide a supportive space to learn and practice culturally affirming values, promote self-determination and cultural accountability, and activate the power of individual and collective healing. A central feature of African-centered healing circles is that they are community defined and community specific. Some circles incorporate music, dance, or other culturally embedded art forms. Many circles choose to honor ancestors in the form of rituals such as libation (calling out the names of ancestors to bring them into the sacred healing space).

Healing circles create nonhierarchical environments encouraging all participants to interact on an equal plane without competition. They foster a culture of reciprocity, complementarity, and collective work and responsibility. Whether in person or virtual, at the heart of the healing circle is the process of being seen, heard, and, therefore, affirmed. In the embrace of the circle community, participants let go of harmful patterns developed because of the lie of White superiority and Black inferiority to free us, to be transformed, and to come into the fullness of our African selves.

Importance of Storytelling

Storytelling about the experience of and resistance to destructive systems of oppression provides a healthy response that cultivates opportunities for community healing (Chioneso et al., 2020, p. 103). One of the most important stories in the circles is the true story of Africa and how the *Maafa* damaged Africa's agency and identity. The true story corrects the miseducation about who we are and our place in

Kristee Haggins

history and establishes a new narrative to guide us toward an empowered future.

The sharing of our personal stories is central to the circle experience. In the safety of the circle, we can be honest about our feelings, assured that because of our common commitment to confidentiality, what happens in the circle stays in the circle. This facilitates open dialogue, often liberating thoughts and feelings that we have held inside for years and confirming that, in this shared experience, we are not alone. This African-centered storytelling often results in cognitive and affective shifts. In the circles, participants practice together how to be more loving, kind, and caring to ourselves and to each other, operating from a stance of communal coexistence, mutual respect, and justice, upending the foundations of the toxic patterns that the lie of White superiority and Black inferiority set out to establish.

Sharing Skills for Emotional Wellness

In healing circles, we employ tools that promote stress reduction, resilience, and emotional wellness. Breathing, visioning, meditation, and other techniques help reduce individual and group racial trauma and stress. Participants learn (a) how racial stress impacts physical and mental well-being, (b) how it operates, (c) that self-care is important, (d) there is something they can do about stress and their response to it, (e) that this is necessary for personal well-being, (f) this is necessary to maximize the effectiveness of culturally based resilience tools that we have as people of African ancestry (i.e., the communal ethos of African culture), and (g) that stress and resilience are necessary for us as people to have the wherewithal to exercise agency and fight for the right to be seen and treated as fully human (Circles, 2019).

Examples of Healing Circles and Evidence of Effectiveness

> Let the sky and God be our limit and eternity our measurement.
> —Marcus Garvey

Black-led organizations conducting African-centered healing circles have often used community-defined evidence practices (CDEPs) to assess the success of our healing modalities and practices. CDEPs are:

> A set of practices that communities have used and determined to yield positive results by community consensus over time and which may or may not have been measured empirically but have reached a level of acceptance within the community. (Martinez, 2008, pp. 9–10)

In this section, we highlight healing circles that are leading examples of CDEPs.

Emotional Emancipation Circles: Attacking the Root Cause of Black Pain

> Take a day to heal from the lies you've been told, and the ones you've told yourself. (Founding Chair, Board of Advisors, Community Healing Network)

The Emotional Emancipation Circle (EE Circle) is a specific kind of healing circle designed to inspire people of African ancestry to do the work necessary to heal from, and extinguish, the most destructive lie ever told about Black people—the lie that we are inferior.

The EE Circle, originated by the Community Healing Network (CHN) and developed in collaboration with ABPsi, is a self-help support group process grounded in the principles of African psychology. It was designed to empower us as African people to free ourselves completely from the lie of White superiority and Black inferiority. That lie is the root cause of the dehumanization of Black people and the unique challenges we face everywhere in the world.

The EE Circle is CHN's signature initiative for building a global grassroots movement for emotional emancipation—for complete freedom from the lie. From the start, CHN's goal was to equip and dispatch an international network of local circle leaders to be catalysts for freedom from the lie. According to CHN's founder, Enola Aird, "the lie has essentially cast people of African ancestry out of the circle of humanity. Our movement is mobilizing Black people to reclaim our rightful place in the circle" (Aird, 2022, p. 2). The basic premises of the movement are as follows: (a) unless we, Black people, extinguish the lie, it will persist, and the assaults on our dignity, well-being, lives, and humanity will continue, and (b) freedom from the lie is an indispensable foundation for healing, wellness, and empowerment for Black people.

The first EE Circles were held at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in New Haven, Connecticut, in 2007, with the intent of creating spaces in which people of African ancestry could,

Ruby Mendenhall

as outlined by Grills et al. (2020): (a) share our stories and our feelings; (b) deepen our understanding of the impact of the lie of White superiority and Black inferiority on our emotional lives, our relationships, and the well-being of our communities; (c) free our minds and spirits from the lie and heal from the historical and continuing trauma it has caused; (d) tell ourselves a new and empowering story, grounded in the truth of our humanity, about who we are as a people; (e) learn and practice essential emotional wellness skills; (f) revitalize ourselves and our relationships with each other; and (g) address the root cause of the devaluing of Black lives by developing strategies to extinguish the lie once and for all.

In its quest to ensure that the EE Circle process was developed in ways that were psychologically sound, culturally grounded, and evidence informed, CHN was led by God and ancestors to ABPsi. In 2011, CHN requested ABPsi's help in fleshing out the EE Circle process and building a diaspora-wide network of EE Circles. Dr. Cheryl Tawede Grills (then President-elect) and Dr. Benson Cooke (President), of ABPsi, responded generously to CHN's request, laying the foundation for what has been a strong and ongoing collaboration.

From 2012 through 2023, the seeds for the EE Circles were planted in more than 75 cities in the United States, the Caribbean, the United Kingdom, Ghana, and South Africa. The essential elements and processes have been maintained while the consciousness-raising component of the Circles has been tailored to participants' local context and historical trajectory (e.g., pathways of colonialism, enslavement, and multigenerational sociopolitical oppression).

Qualitative data from 113 one-on-one interviews conducted in 2017 found strong evidence of the EE Circle's positive impact on participants. In particular, respondents noted that they (a) had an increased awareness of how racism operated in their lives; (b) felt affirmed, inspired, revitalized, engaged, and culturally grounded; (c) experienced increased openness, acceptance, self-worth, confidence, identity, and connectedness; (d) felt more prepared to communicate and act more effectively for themselves and for their community; and (e) felt seen, heard, and more empowered or inspired to help their community after meeting and deeply connecting with other Black people (Grills & Aird, 2017).

As a mechanism to address psychospiritual responses to anti-Blackness among individuals of African ancestry, the EE Circles have grown into a prominent global healing initiative. Participants have described the EE Circles as "transformative catalysts for reclaiming our human dignity as people of African ancestry" and "the most significant, tangible, and scalable development supporting the mental health of Black people in decades" (Grills et al., 2020, pp. 183, 185).

South LA Healing Circles

> If you think you're too small to make a difference you haven't spent the night with a mosquito.

In the Spring of 2019, shootings and homicides spiked in South Los Angeles (LA), including the death of famed rapper and community advocate Nipsey Hussle. Concerned that a 5-year reduction in local violence was falling apart, LA City Councilmember Marqueece Harris-Dawson, local community intervention workers, and residents opted for a short-term infusion of community-based de-escalation tactics. Primary among them were the South LA Healing Circles (SLAHC), community-driven circles designed to address trauma from exposure to gun violence. Community interventionists worked with two African-centered psychologists to create and implement a community-based healing circle process grounded in African cultural values. The circles provided stress reduction tools to address individual trauma and safe spaces to be in a community, share stories, and offer mutual support. They served as both a vehicle to address community-level trauma and foster connections to build relationships among South LA residents impacted by community violence.

The SLAHC is grounded in African-centered psychology and community-based participatory practice. Circle philosophy is based on the central teachings of African traditional spiritual, psychological, and social systems for renewal and resurrection. Consistent with S. P. Harrell's (2015) model, the circles employ three change processes to promote positive wellness and stress reduction: a communal process wherein the change mechanism is relatedness, a contemplative process wherein the change mechanism is increased awareness, and an empowerment process wherein the change mechanism is agency.

More than 30 community leaders and advocates were trained in the SLAHC model. In a coordinated strategy, 110 healing circles, averaging 17 unique meetings each week,

Lisa Zakiya Newland

reached 1,355 South LA residents. Rates of community violence decreased that summer as based on administrative data collected by the City Councilman and his staff. In a survey of 182 participants, people reported increased hopefulness (77%), a stronger sense of their spirituality (66%), more ability to calm themselves when stressed (65%), a greater connection to their culture (63%), and a sense of relief (60%). The same participants rated the healing circles as excellent with regard to respect for their cultural beliefs and values (75%), their gender identity and sexual orientation (75%), their race and ethnicity (75%), their religious and spiritual beliefs (72%), and the circles' ability to make participants feel welcomed and safe (68%). When participants spoke about their experiences, they said they learned concrete tools to help manage stress and strengthen interpersonal relationships and that the circles provided a trusted, safe space where community members felt connected, supported, and loved (South Los Angeles Community Safety Initiative, 2019).

Safe Black Space Community Healing Circles

> The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.
>
> —Maya Angelou

In April 2018, Stephon Clark, an unarmed Black man, was killed in his grandmother's backyard by Sacramento police. Safe Black Space (SBS) Community Healing Circles were born in response to that tragedy. SBS emerged in response to increased racial tensions and trauma and provided a space for Black people to process the rage, shock, fear, and sadness that so many of us felt and feel.

SBS was developed from groundwork laid by CHN and ABPsi and is grounded in African principles of wellness. The SBS Community Healing Circles counteract the negative impacts of racism and anti-Blackness and provide culturally specific strategies to help Black people heal from the stress and trauma of racism while reengaging through resilience, joy, and strength.

SBS provides culturally specific strategies and mental health resources to help Black people heal and transform. We acknowledge racial stress and trauma while celebrating and remembering who we truly are. Self-care and community-care practices are integral to each circle. These circles foster social connectedness and belonging and harness the group's collective energy to empower each individual and the community at large.

SBS Community Healing Circles help stabilize Black individuals and communities in crisis. They serve as a first response after a traumatic incident, whether local, national, or global, and provide ongoing support for individuals experiencing daily racial micro- and macroaggressions that negatively impact the Black community. SBS Community Healing Circles help Black people not just survive but thrive.

SBS has touched more than 2,000 participants from all over the world. Over a 3-year grant cycle, participants were asked a series of qualitative questions aimed at understanding why they were there, how they felt about being a person of African ancestry, how they had been affected by racial trauma, and what they took away from SBS Community Healing Circles. Each question garnered an average of 600 responses. Results indicated that people attended for a sense of community; that they found the space to be healing, safe, and supportive; and that, for many, attending the SBS Community Healing Circle was an act of self-love. Ultimately, attending these circles helped Black people feel less alone (Ollison & Haggins, 2023).

SBS Community Healing Circle attendees had varying expereinces of racial trauma, and the overwhelming majority reported feeling exhausted by it. What is clear from our data is that after people attend SBS, they feel better about being Black. They feel more pride, love, empowerment, and gratitude. They feel less alone and are appreciative of the healing space and sense of community SBS cultivates as evidenced by the following participant quotes:

> "I can use strategies to deal with my stress at work in a mostly white space." "I feel more confident in expressing my authentic self." "It's easier for me to meet [confront] stress and racism." (Ollison & Haggins, 2023, p. 6)

Sawubona Healing Circles

> Sawubona–I see you.

ABPsi consulted and collaborated with the Black Family Summit to develop and pilot the Sawubona Healing Circle (SHC) initiative as a rapid response aimed at interrupting trauma responses, providing cultural grounding, and affirming

Annelle Primm

Black people. Sawubona is an isiZulu greeting meaning "I see you/we see you" and represents the collective nature of being. Using an African-centered worldview, the SHCs were initially designed to recognize and validate the challenges of Black first responders at the onset of COVID-19 and equip them with African-centered healing strategies. The SHC's focus eventually expanded to address the emotional and psychological responses to anti-Black violence and other racially driven factors. SHC provides virtual healing, support, and validation for Black people navigating life, mental health, and other health challenges while dealing with the stress and trauma of racism in its various manifestations.

Wherever racial stress is identified, the SHC initiative is ABPsi's response to the mental and emotional health needs of Black people. Since its launch in 2020, SHC has served more than 1,000 participants nationally and internationally and trained more than 200 community members. Two examples of success in engagement and outreach are the replication and implementation of the virtual SHC healing circles by state mental health and addiction administrations. SHC circles have been delivered in Connecticut, sponsored by the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addictions Services through a collaboration with the Yale School of Medicine, Yale Program for Recovery and Community Health, and ABPsi. The initial funding came through the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addictions Services via the state's COVID-19 response funds. ABPsi developed and trained Black providers and community members to be SHC facilitators. The Sawubona groups met twice a week virtually over the past year to support Black essential workers, first responders, and frontline health care workers due to the disproportionate negative impacts of COVID-19 and ongoing health and racial disparities. In addition, New York State selected the SHC as a method to address the mental health needs of Black people. As a result, the New York State Office of Mental Health launched a partnership to help Black New Yorkers heal from the Buffalo Tragedy and increased rates of trauma.

Since the launch of the program, SHC has been used in response to an array of racial and cultural traumas and stressors including police killings in the United States, community violence in Haiti, and the African refugee crisis following the invasion of Ukraine. Of the first 289 attendees to complete the SHC postcircle questionnaire, 100% endorsed the experience as helpful, and 100% expressed a desire to attend another (Auguste et al., 2024). The authors also conducted a thematic analysis using the first 99 attendees' responses to the circles, concluding that the experience elicited feelings of gratitude, praise, healing, and a desire for more (e.g., more circles, longer circles, more exposure to African-centered solutions). Two quotes reflecting community desire characteristic of the responses to the SHCs follow:

> [My hope is] that the healing circles continue as long as possible they are very much needed. (Auguste et al., 2024, p. 29)

> I appreciate the fact that all of the participants felt welcome to cry and let out their emotions in a space of people who can relate to their experiences. (Auguste et al., 2024, p. 29)

In addition to the examples listed above, several groups have been active in the healing circle space. These include Black Emotional and Mental Health's Heart Space, Black Unity and Spiritual Togetherness, Coalition of Urban Resource Experts, Prime Time Sister Circles, All Healers Mental Health Alliance, the BPA, and CHN's Ubuntu Healing Circles. All these groups have either provided circles for general healing and wellness for a specific population within the Black community (such as the Coalition of Urban Resource Experts after Hurricane Harvey in 2017) or engaged in collaborations with other organizations such as the Black Family Summit, ABPsi, BPA, and NABSW to launch healing responses, for example, to the Buffalo mass shooting in 2022. This list is incomplete, but suffice to say, healing circles are increasingly used to address the needs of people across Global Africa. Transformation, liberation, and healing are happening. We are each other's medicine. And we are the evidence.

Our Vision for the Future: A Global Network of Healing Circles

> We have a beautiful history, and we shall create another in the future that will astonish the world.
>
> —Marcus Garvey

Zora Neal Hurston said, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." Consider what we lose when our stories are buried deep within and the only ones bearing witness is our bodies—to our detriment. Imagine what we gain when we embrace our stories of pain and

Kamesha Spates

resilience. Everyone benefits. Black people benefit as our default becomes: "In the darkest of darkness, if the other does not see me, I do see myself. And surely do I shine" (Sembene, in Shiri, 2024, p. 1). But how do we get there? Not likely through one therapy session after another. This is where African-centered healing circles can serve as the way forward.

Imagine a world sprinkled with African-centered healing circles available in every neighborhood. On any given day, you can find a circle—a place where the never-ending incidents and structures associated with racism can be named, examined, and expelled from one's mind, body, spirit, soul, family, and community. If we were to actualize this, we would in fact be creating spaces for both intervention and prevention. We would be replacing the false narrative of our inferiority with the truth of our humanity. We would be modeling a more just and humane world. African-centered healing circles are an invitation to tell our own stories for growth, liberation, and direction.

Whether designed as a rapid response, an ongoing series of sessions focused on freedom from the lie of White superiority and Black inferiority, a drop in de-stress opportunity, or a population-focused circle (e.g., for youth, for men, for parents), we need African-centered healing circles to help Black people across Global Africa address fundamental questions such as: (a) What happened to me and my people? (b) How has it affected me, my family, workplace, school environment, neighborhood, and Global Africa? (c) How have my people and I been able to survive and thrive? (d) What do we need to do to heal and empower ourselves?

By answering these and other questions in the context of community (the circles), we will be able to restore (a) psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being, (b) agency, and (c) community well-being and the ability to see and be with each other from a place of compassion, connection, and genuine freedom.

We must ensure that healing circles are community based, with training available to a wider range of the Black community working to support the mental health, wellness, and liberation of Black people throughout the world. We must also incorporate healing circle models into curricula in undergraduate and graduate schools for Black clinicians. Stakeholder engagement, capacity building, and service delivery must be key drivers in scaling up and scaling out (Endale et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021; Qureshi et al., 2021).

We envision scaling up and scaling out the work by building on our existing relationships across Global Africa, refining existing models, applying healing circles in ways that align with local ethnocultural contexts, and continuing to gather evidence of effectiveness. While scaling up and out are important, so too is continuing to do the work of Sankofa—that is, continuing to retrieve African cultural wisdom about what it means to be human, how to promote health, how to recognize and address psychological distress, and how to build strong communities to move forward.

Inspired by Marcus Garvey, "We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind."

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