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1979

## Style And The Black Experience : Implications For Social Action

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STYLE AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL ACTION

Aubrey Bonnett  
Frank L. Douglas

In recent times, Blacks in the United States of America have come to be known for their coolness, their poise under pressure.<sup>1</sup> The sociologist has defined coolness as an exhibition of a definite form of expressive control during the performance of a role.<sup>2</sup>

Another significant characteristic among the Black minority community is, we contend, style. We shall define style as a custom or plan, characteristic of a given group and followed by them in pursuit of set goals. Sociologists have even gone as far as describing and cataloguing life styles peculiar to certain ethnic groups in pursuit of social and allied goals. We contend that style has two main components; namely, technical style and expressive style. Primarily, technical style is substantive in content and relates to the performance of specified roles; whereas, expressive style focuses on the manner in which the roles are performed and is more audience or clientele directed.

Style is not limited to any one group, ethnocentrism notwithstanding. However, despite the ubiquity of style in the contemporary United States, its implications may be better understood if attention is paid to the consequences for those who are relatively permanent outsiders in this society. Minorities - <sup>Frank L. Douglas</sup> more especially Black Americans - whose status is both marginal and precarious, have manifested a remarkable propensity to build a subculture, resting, in large part, on the artful development of stylistic forms.<sup>3</sup>

The sociological implications become obvious when it is observed that the

majority group, in its focus on elements of style altogether different from the minority, tends to contribute to the perpetuation of already existing inequalities between the two groups. Cultural pluralism notwithstanding, White Americans still demand that their standards be the norm by which other groups in this society are judged. This is increasingly important, since this group also controls access to the major social institutions in this society and, by a successful screening process, virtually has locked out minorities from meaningful participation in these institutions.<sup>4</sup>

If Whites, therefore, focus on one aspect of style, technical style, which leads them to successful social and economic goals, and Blacks focus on another aspect of style, expressive style, which fails to deliver as much as the technical style of Whites, then several questions arise.

One question which arises is whether Blacks should adopt the stylized pattern of Whites. In effect, should Blacks attempt a special type of resocialization? At what level and with what speed?

This paper is an attempt to explore the aforementioned issues by focusing on observations of the authors in undergraduate and medical education. Although no attempt is made to draw stringent conclusions, it is felt that some lessons may be learned.

## Style and Education

Throughout the Black community, one finds that the cultural idols are recognized for their expressive style. Technical style is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for acclamation as a culture hero. Examples of this abound and to mention a few is in order.

In politics, the colorful Adam Clayton Powell was revered in the Black community, not only for his technical style (important, knowledgeable Chairman of the Labor and Education Committee in the House of Representatives), but also for the colorful way in which he effected legislative change. In sports, O. J. Simpson, the "juice," is not only a good football player - technical style -, but is known for his fantastic moves as he slides from the 15 yard line to touchdown. Joe Frazier was a great heavyweight champion, possessing technical style, but it was Muhammad Ali who became the culture hero for his expressive style. He is a master of the skills of boxing and shows his skill with even greater finesse.

But then, there is an added dimension. The Black culture hero, who uses his expressive style to better demonstrate his possession of technical style, is, at once, posed with the dilemma of survival from the onslaught of the majority group. Whites, who see themselves as the sole possessors of technical style, with all the power that it entails, consider it to their advantage to eliminate these heroes. In their attempt to withstand this onslaught,

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Education always has been viewed, by White ethnic groups, as a channel for upward social mobility. More recently, Blacks have been gaining access to this channel as a means of creating a larger middle class of Black Americans. However, as one reads the indicators, the most recent statistical evidence leads one to be less sanguine about prospects. Despite enormous gains in the percentage of young Blacks in colleges, the Black intellectual infrastructure remains exceedingly frail. Black men and women hold about 1% of the country's Ph. D.'s, and Black faculty, as a percentage of total college and university faculty, have moved from 2.2% in 1968 - 1969 to 2.9% in 1972 - 1973.<sup>5</sup> Less than 3% of all medical students are Black, and the percentage of Black lawyers hovers just around 1.5. Economists estimate that the total Black equity in this country's industrial and agricultural enterprise stands slightly above 1%. And, the number of Black intellectuals, who now make a national contribution through the communications media, whether mass or professional, or through publishing and literary works of wide appeal, remains infinitesimal.<sup>7</sup> Even though we agree that institutional racism has contributed to this deplorable situation, we have detected some significant differences between Blacks and Whites.

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The authors observed that Black students were increasingly absent from the lectures of a renowned professor, who was, undoubtedly, an expert in his field. The proportion of White students who attended regularly was always high. In response to our queries from Both Black and White students, two trends were evident. The Black students seemed more concerned with the expressive style of the lecturer than were their White counterparts. They were more interested in how the lecturer delivered his information than in the information *per se*.

The following are responses from a Black and a White student, respectively. For the Black student, it was:

"Man, he may be a Fulbright-Hays Fellow and all that, but he comes on dry! He knows his stuff, but he ain't comin' across right."

For the White student, it was:

"Well, his accent is hard to follow at times. Must be European, I guess. But, look, he knows his material; he is always well prepared, and I'm going to stick it out, 'cause I may learn something."

These two responses were not only typical, but, in our view, very illustrative. The Black student focused on the teacher's lack of expressive style,



cut classes, and possibly jeopardized his life chances in this society.

The White student focused on technical style, attended classes regularly, and, thereby, enhanced his life chances.

Another example is seen in the attitudes of Blacks and Whites toward the first two years' curriculum at one, predominantly White, medical school.

The White students endure, with resignation, the rigors of hours of lectures and laboratories and the repetitious teaching mode. Their interest is focused on Part I of the National Board examinations, which conclude the study of the Basic Sciences. They will memorize every detail with an intensity that diminishes little with the number of repetitions. Their crucial concern is placing first on the Boards, both individually and as a university class.

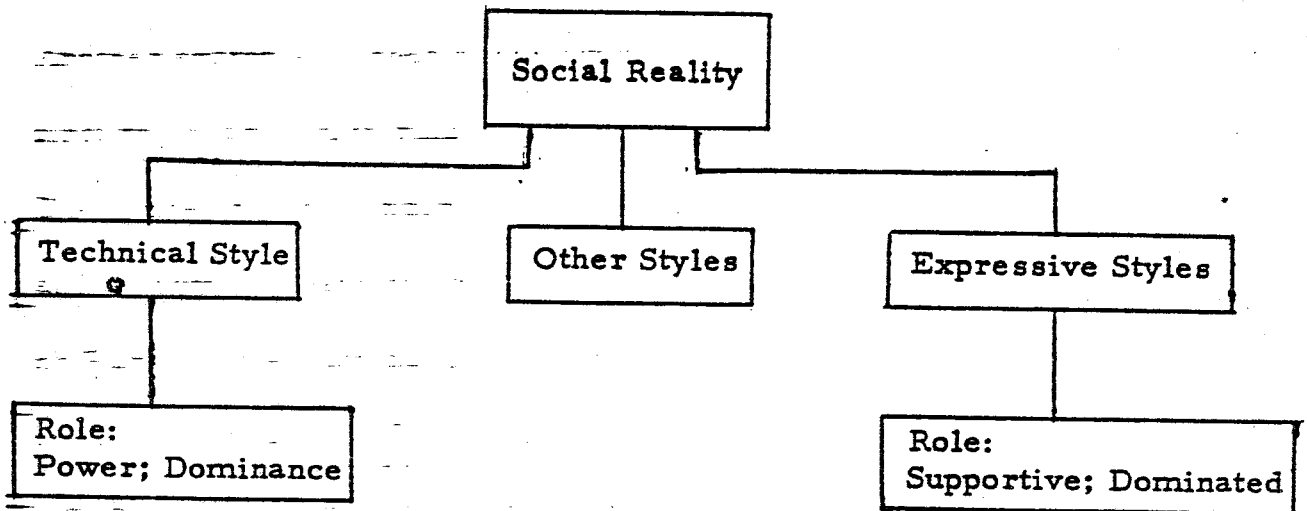
The question of the relevance of these examinations as predictors of competency as physicians is secondary to this concern. It is best expressed as the Edisonian ethic, i.e., genius is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration.

Black Americans, on the other hand, question this relevance and find the repetition and memorization of details unacceptable as an end-point. Non-attention to expressive style, in their view, has the following effects:

1. A heightened sense of personal isolation/alienation;
2. The fear of dehumanization through assimilation as a result of substituting technical style for expressive style; and,
3. The ultimate inability to relate to his community, for whom expressive style is also important.

## Styles and Social Reality

What then are the implications of this clash of life styles in the American society? We would like to discuss this within the confines of the following schema.



As implied above, the social reality for these two groups is quite different.

It is this historically unaltered fact that makes the evolution of these two different styles significant. Whites have marched through feudalism, mercantilism, and into capitalism, re-enforcing the importance of substantive or technical style in the pursuit of world domination. During this drive, Blacks became, and continue to be, subjugated by the Whites. They have been deprived of opportunities to seek technical style and, even when it was partially obtained, have been denied the power it promised. The result is that the survival of this group has been dependent on the exercise of expressive style to disguise the possession of technical style. Whites have no such dilemma confronting them.

It is important to note that expressive style was not solely developed as a reaction to White domination. We feel that the history of Blacks, as a people,

demonstrates a natural evolution of expressive style. Our contention is that the conditions of their social reality re-enforced it as a survival mode. Similarly, the social reality of the Whites reinforced their technical style.

### Summary and Conclusions

The dilemma of the Black American is now apparent. Since the end-point of technical style is power and dominance, and this is the character of the majority group, expressive style relegates the minority to the role of the dominated, or, at best, supporting actor. To survive as equals, Blacks are, thereby, faced with the prospect of substituting technical style for expressive style. This, however, should be seen as no more than an expedient (ad hoc) measure. Further, the substitution should not be complete, because of the inherent tendencies of technical style to lead to a dehumanized condition. In addition, there is no guarantee (as the history of Blacks' attempts toward integration indicate) that complete embracing of technical style will give them their requisite share and exercise of power.

Clearly, to avoid becoming victims of the social Darwinism which has justified, to Whites, the exclusive use of technical style, Blacks have the awful, but necessary task of doing three things simultaneously:

1. Temporarily employ technical style;

2. Maintain the elements of expressive style; and,

3. Escalate the pressure on the White majority to evolve  
a style that is intrinsically egalitarian and humane.

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2. Ibid., p. 93.
3. Ibid., p. 100
4. Many important studies document this fact; among one of the recent is Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Washington, D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 1968), pp. 1-13.
5. G. W. Bonham, "How Separate? How Equal?" Change, September, 1972, p. 12
6. Of the nation's 325,000 lawyers only 3,845 (1.5 per cent) are Black. See A. Poinsett, "The 'Whys' Behind the Black Lawyer Shortage," Ebony, December 1974, p. 95. Also G. W. Bonham, op. cit., p. 12.
7. Bonham, op. cit., p. 12.

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