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Americans: An Interview with Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Ph.D.
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Jonathan Singer: Today's Social Work Podcast is on incorporating religion and spirituality into social work practice with African Americans. Or at least that's the official title. The unofficial title is, "If my client brings God into the conversation, what should I do?" I spoke with Nancy Boyd-Franklin, best-selling author, multicultural researcher, family therapist and clinical trainer, and recipient of awards from the American Psychological Association, Association of Black Psychologists, and the American Family Therapy academy.

　　When I was a social work intern, I worked with an African American mother who had AIDS and whose 6 children were HIV+. The father of her children had been an IV drug user who had died of AIDS. The mother was in poor health, and rarely sought her own treatment. I had a hard time tracking her down because she spent most of the day, every day, on public transportation with one child or another taking them to and from medical appointments. I remember being on the bus with her one day (because that was only place I could meet with her), listening to her talk about how she had successfully fought hospital administration to get treatment for one of her kids. Being the eager social work student that I was, fully prepared to acknowledge my clients strengths and resources, I told her that I was in awe of her strength. "How do you do it?" I asked her. Her response totally caught me off guard. She said, "The good lord will give me only as much as I can handle." I had no idea how to respond. See, I was expecting her to say something like, "a parent will do what a parent has to do," or maybe, "I don't know either – I sure could use a vacation." I expected her response to be much more... textbook? You know, the kind of response that I had read about in my textbooks so that I could follow up with, "and so if you took a vacation, what would be different?" Which really makes no sense at all since she was obviously not about to zip off to the Dominican Republic for a week at the beach. Not so textbook. In that moment, on the bus, I found myself completely at a loss for words. Not that I didn't have a million things running through my head – I did. I just thought they all sounded stupid. On one level I was trying to figure out what she meant: "ok. She said that the good lord will give her only as much as she can handle – does that mean that when she can't handle any more, she'll die? or that the good lord knows exactly how much she can handle and then when she can't handle any more the good lord will stop giving her things to handle, or is there a third option I'm just not thinking about. I mean, I'm just a social work intern, I'm not sure what I can offer above and beyond what the "good lord" can offer her, so what now?" Ok, so in case you got lost in all of my self-talk here's a quick recap. I asked my client a question. She responded. That's it. What should have come next was me saying something intelligent. Instead, what I said was, "Wow."

　　So why did I have such a hard time coming up with an appropriate response? Well, for one, I thought that as a social worker I should know what my client meant, and I should understand what she meant... Another thing was that I had a different belief system from my

client and it didn't seem right to disagree with her, nor did it seem right to agree with her, because that wouldn't be genuine. My social work education did not prepare me to deal with issues of religion and spirituality. My textbooks didn't provide me with templates for how to respond when my clients brought up the issue of God. Prior to 2001, accreditation guidelines from the Council on Social Work Education didn't require schools to include spiritual assessment in the biopsychosocial assessment, which I talk about in more detail in Episode 2, Bio-psychosocial-spiritual (BPSS) assessment and Mental Status Exam (http://socialworkpodcast.com/2007/02/bio-psychosocial-spiritual-bpss.html). Another reason is that there has been a long and contentious relationship between religion and the helping professions. Religion was either the answer or the problem. On one hand, the social work profession is in part rooted in the Friendly Visitor movement which believed that the right version of religion was the answer to poverty. On the other hand, you have Freud's legacy of religion being considered an "obsessional neurosis." So for many providers, the only safe middle ground was "Religion is not within my scope of practice and therefore I'm not going to deal with it at all."

Well, today's guest, Nancy Boyd Franklin, would say that when religion or spirituality is part of a client's life, the effective provider has to be able to deal with and be willing to engage in conversations about it. "Wow" just won't cut it. She would see this mother's belief in the power of the good lord as a sign of strength and resilience, not weakness or pathology. She would also say that I could have simply responded to the mother's statement by saying, "tell me more." In today's interview, Nancy spoke about the heterogeneity of beliefs among Black Americans. She and I talked about the difference between religion and spirituality, what a church family is and why it is so important, whether or not social workers should ask about religion and spirituality if clients don't bring it up, and what the role of religion and spirituality is in traditional African American families.

I interviewed Nancy at Temple University's School of Social Work. She was the invited speaker for the school's lecture series on social work research. For more information about Temple's School of Social Work, or the research lecture series, please visit their website at www.temple.edu/ssa.org. And now, without further ado, on to episode 59 of the Social Work Podcast. Incorporating religion and spirituality into social work practice with African Americans: Interview with Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Ph.D.

Interview

Jonathan Singer: Nancy, thanks so much for being here today and talking with us about African American families and religion and spirituality. I know that you're really concerned about perpetuating stereotypes and I wanted to give you an opportunity to address that before we start the questions.

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Yeah, I guess the first thing is that there is just tremendous variability and diversity in the Black community and that's true of religion and spirituality too. You know, there are historically Black churches that are Christian, there are African Americans who are not Christian, there is a growing Muslim community both nation of Islam, Sunni Muslim, and other Muslim, there are a growing group who are very committed to African religions and I don't

think we talk enough about those in the field. I'm going to talk primarily, though, about traditional African American churches, so, Baptists, African Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, because we're going to run out of time quickly.

Jonathan Singer: Why are religion and spirituality important issues for social workers to be aware of when they're working with families that come from these backgrounds?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Absolutely. I think the biggest challenge in the field is that clients come in in pain. They don't come to see us because they're happy and everything's wonderful. So they present first with their problems and our challenge, should we decide to accept it, is to figure out how to tune into their strengths. And in African American families, some of the biggest strengths are the family itself, the extended family and the church family. Now, that's clearly not true of every African American client or family but there are many, many families in which these beliefs are very strong and very powerful and can be used to help people overcome adversity, racism, loss, trauma, death, dying, issues in their lives.

Jonathan Singer: And so, in the African American community, is there a distinction between religion and spirituality or are they seen as the same thing?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Yeah, actually there's research that's been done where individuals have been asked are they religious or spiritual, and they've said religious and spiritual. Religion really refers to church involvement. Spirituality is a more general concept; it's about a belief in God, or a higher power, or the Creator, and just a belief in spiritual action in one's life. What I find is that there are just many situations in which social workers or practitioners in general in the mental health field now know they need to ask about religion, so they'll ask, "Well are you involved in a church or a religion?" People say "no" and they go on to the next question. They don't go after, "Well, would you say you're a spiritual person, is spirituality a part of your life?" You get a much wider response to that kind of question.

Jonathan Singer: So, you mentioned the "church family." What is the church family? In Black churches, what is the role of the church family?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: In Black churches, we often describe our churches as church homes and, it follows, our churches are also our church families. It is hard for practitioners who haven't experienced it to understand what an all-inclusive support network that is. You not only have the minister, the minister's wife, the deacons, the deaconesses, but you have activities and supports for people at every stage of the life cycle. So you have things like the nursery where young parents can take their children and be a part of church services. You have Sunday school and all kinds of youth activities where many African American parents who live in very dangerous areas, in urban areas, have used churches as a socialization option for their kids. The strategy of many of the parents and grandparents I've talked to is tie up their time so they get them involved in after school tutoring programs. And people think vacation Bible school is just about spirituality, no, it's a way to occupy kids in a very positive, spiritually focused activity during the time they're off from school. But the other area for any social worker working in

gerontology, this is a huge area because research has shown that African American women and older African Americans, both men and women, really rely on religion and spirituality to get them through the rough times, experiences of racism, trauma, loss, and so that issue becomes huge. There are tremendous services in the African American churches for the elderly. Reaching out to the folks who are homebound, folks in nursing homes, reaching out to families who are homebound because they have a family member, reaching out to hospitals when people are going through cancer and other life-threatening illnesses, so it's an all-inclusive piece. The other issue, though, in today's economic crisis, African American churches are like many social service agencies, services for the homeless, services for food banks. When the lists are so long for things like Big Brothers and Big Sisters, I will often turn to churches in the community for mentors or tutors for youth and people don't think of these things in times when a lot of the services are drying up.

Jonathan Singer: So if I were working with an African American family and I knew they were involved in their church, could I say, "Is this something that your church family could help out with?" I mean, is that the phrase, "church family"?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Yeah, that's one of the ways you could go but you first want to ask about, particularly if you're not particularly religious yourself, or you're not of this culture. You want to say, "You know, just curious, do you have a church family? Have you ever had one?" and "What kinds of things do you count on them for?" Even Black families, particularly single parent families who are isolated, who are not members of church families, may in fact find services for their kids offered through the churches, or for their elderly.

Jonathan Singer: So I can understand why it would be important to check in with a family to find out what their church involvement was, to find out what the norms are. I also know that there are African American families, any family, that might not be involved in churches, and yet, particularly in the African American community, you're saying that churches are a huge resource. Are churches a resource for folks who aren't members of that church?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Absolutely. Particularly in terms of services, services for youth. You have many African American families who get their kids involved in tutoring or mentoring or various activities, not because of their religious significance but because it keeps them off the streets. Also, there are a number of churches that have done excellent work, my own for example, on gang summits and trying to take kids back from the streets in that regard. There are some churches that have twelve step programs, a substance abuse ministry. There are numerous churches that have services for the elderly. So if you have a very isolated client or family, it may be a way to connect them.

Jonathan Singer: And I know that there's a researcher out of the University of Pennsylvania who has been doing work on developing suicide prevention programs through churches.

> Molock, S.D., Barksdale, C., Matlin, S., Puri, R., Cammack, N., & Spann, M. (2007). Qualitative Study of Suicidality and Help-Seeking Behaviors in African American Adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 40*(1), doi:52-63.10.1007/s10464-007-9122-3

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Excellent.

Jonathan Singer: Which I thought was a very creative view of combining this issue of religion and spirituality as a protective factor with the environment that might be most stigmatizing around issues of suicide.

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Definitely. And Kaslow, as you know down at Emory has looked at religion and spirituality as a protective factor in terms of suicidality in African American women who've experienced domestic violence.

> Kaslow, N., Price, A. W., Wyckoff, S., Grall, M. B., Sherry, A., & Young, S. (2004). Person factors associated with suicidal behavior among African American women and men. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*(1), 5-22.

Jonathan Singer: And we'll put the link to those studies on the website for folks who want to hear more about that. So I'm sure there are folks listening to this podcast right now saying, "Ok, sure, Dr. Boyd-Franklin can talk about this but I don't really know what to say." Should social workers ask about religion and spirituality, and if so, how? And how might these issues emerge in therapy if they're not asking directly?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Absolutely. I think one of the issues is that if you ask and you simply say, "Would you describe yourself as religious?" And they say, "Yeah, I'm a member of a church," or ask "Are you a member of a church?" if they are, you're going to have a hard time getting out of the room because you'll be there two hours. If they say "no" you'll want to ask, "I know there are a lot of folks who are not religious but they may be spiritual. Would you describe yourself as spiritual?" "Tell me a little about your spirituality," or "Tell me a little about your church" if they acknowledge that they are church members. I get concerned because there are many people who know to ask the first question but the important thing is to encourage people, I think the most important thing you can say is, "Tell me more about it," so you get a sense of how much is this a part of their lives? If it's not, it's not, but if it is, for those African Americans for whom it's important, it's huge.

Jonathan Singer: Are there resources out there for folks who want to learn more about how to address issues of religion and spirituality?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Absolutely.

Jonathan Singer: What are some of those?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: I would recommend my book *Black Families and Therapy.* There's a whole chapter on religion and spirituality. Also, a book by Froma Walsh on spiritual resources and family therapy. I have a chapter in that book with actually one of my graduate students who did research on this issue in African American families and I would strongly recommend that as a possibility.

Jonathan Singer: I know that students and educators listen to this podcast and I was wondering, what are some of the implications for training in both the field and in the classroom?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Yes, I firmly believe that this is an issue of cultural competency, that so often our courses that have a multicultural focus are very limited. And I really feel this needs to be a part of the training of social workers, psychologists, mental health professionals in general, family therapists, because for the families for whom it's important, and obviously it's not important for every family, but for the families for whom it's important, it's central and it is a strength, it's a survival mechanism. If you ask somebody who's just had an incident of racism, "How do you get through it?" they talk about their spirituality or their religious beliefs. I've done research and interventions, as you know, in the Gulf region after Hurricane Katrina, and in New Orleans, Louisiana, Mississippi, I've been so impressed with the spiritual beliefs of the people, even if they had family that helped them, you asked, "How did you get through?" they said, "God saw me through," and that piece is central to their resilience, to their survival. And so, it is such an important area. When you do an assessment with an African American client or family, it's got to be part of the assessment. Now, I want to remind you, though, that if it doesn't fit, it doesn't fit. I like the analogy of the camera lens, you know, it's necessary to take the picture but you've got to adjust it for each new client and each new family that walks in the door, otherwise you create a stereotype.

Jonathan Singer: So, coming back to this example that you were talking about, folks from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when you talked about spirituality and religion as a resource. If my client starts to talk about that, and let's say I'm not particularly religious or I have a different religious belief, how should I go about being there for my client and going down that path without stepping on the toes of ministry?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Ok, all right. That is a marvelous question. Therapy is not missionary work. I think the most important ethical issue is not imposing our own spiritual or religious beliefs on our client. What I've found as a practitioner for years and years and in training other practitioners is, if you ask, "Are you religious? Are you a member of a church family?" remember that you may get, "Yes, I'm religious and I'm a member of a mosque." The challenge is that if you don't ask, you miss the opportunity to do strength based work. And what I've found is that even if you spend five, seven minutes asking about these issues, and all you have to say is, "Is it important in your life?" if they say "yes" say, "Tell me more about it," you'll be there for two hours, trust me. That is the important part of the work. What's important is to recognize that you don't have to know all the little details. Cultural competency means being able to ask the question and then do reflective listening, "So you're saying that this is really like your family. This is really central to your life," so you're saying, in a different client, "You're not particularly religious but you're saying spirituality is sort of who you are, tell me more about that. How might you use spirituality when you're feeling depressed or when you're dealing with issues in your family or in your life?" So it opens up the dialogue in a way that can be very powerful. And then it can be incorporated into therapeutic interventions.

Jonathan Singer: So it makes sense that you're saying use your basic clinical skills to expand and explore this issue of religious or spiritual involvement even if it's different from your own.

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: And let me add, since we may have researchers tuning into this too, Black churches are tremendous bases for both the development of intervention programs and for reaching a population in the African American community that you wouldn't reach otherwise. Black churches do a great deal of education and prevention, you know, "Stop down after church and get your blood pressure checked." Those kinds of interventions are very, very powerful also. The other thing is that it can be incorporated into interventions. For example, in suicide prevention, I have had clients, and I've supervised my students' clients, who have had a history of suicidality, they've been hospitalized in today's managed care world, it's a short-term hospitalization, so you have to support that person after they are released from the hospital and they may still experience moments of suicidal ideation. So for example, one of the things that can be very powerful is to have, for a person with a church family, that comes with a whole bunch of prayer warriors. You can ask, "Have you ever had a prayer partner? Would you consider having a prayer partner who can be an additional support for you when you're feeling depressed so you don't get to that suicidal point?" so that person can pray with them daily. In addition to therapy, it's a phenomenal intervention, but if you don't know about it, you don't know to ask. So I would recommend the reading, those two chapters alone would give the reader tremendous ideas. Also, African Americans use spiritual metaphors in treatment. My favorite is the issue of spiritual warfare. I can't tell you how many suicidal clients have described their struggle around suicidality as an example of spiritual warfare between the part of them that wants to adhere to their spiritual beliefs and the part of them that wants to end it all.

Jonathan Singer: So, Nancy, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today about religion and spirituality with African American families.

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Thank you, Jonathan. I'm looking forward to listening to the podcast and I'd really be excited to hear more from your listeners about their interests.

Jonathan Singer: Along those lines, if they have questions, is it ok to contact you?

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Absolutely.

Jonathan Singer: Alright, we'll put your contact information on the website, ok.

Nancy Boyd-Franklin: Wonderful.

Jonathan Singer: Great, thanks so much.

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Bio
        Nancy Boyd-Franklin's special interests include multicultural issues, the treatment of African-American families, ethnicity and family therapy, home-based family therapy, marital and couples therapy, the multisystems approach to the treatment of poor inner-city families, issues for women of color, the development of a model of therapeutic support groups for African-American families living with AIDS, and issues in working with African American children and adolescents. Her publications include numerous articles and chapters on the above topics. She has written four books including: Black Families in Therapy: A Multisystem Approach; Children, Families, and HIV/AIDS: Psychosocial and Therapeutic Issues; Reaching Out in Family Therapy: Home-Based ,School and Community Interventions, with Dr. Brenna Bry; and Boys Into Men: Raising Our African American Teenage Sons with Dr. Anderson J. Franklin. In 2003, the second edition of her book Black Families in Therapy: Understanding the African American Experience was published. Her honors include receipt of the award for Outstanding Contributions to the Field of Ethnic Minority Psychology and to the Mentoring of Students from Division 45 of the APA (2001), the award for Outstanding Contributions to the Theory, Practice and Research on Psychotherapy with Women from Division 35 of the APA (1996), the Distinguished Psychologist of the Year Award from the Association of Black Psychologists (1994) and the Pioneering Contribution to the Field of Family Therapy Award from the American Family therapy Academy.

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