

"Follow Your Passion": An Interview With Thomas Parham

By Miguel Gallardo, PsyD Publications Committee Chair

The following excerpts are from an extended interview I conducted with Dr. Thomas Parham on March 27, 2002.

Q: Your previous work and research in the field of Psychology centers around counseling African American and multi-cultural counseling in general. Why is this work important and how is it different from training most students receive in more traditional programs today?

A: First, as an African American male it was always difficult to look at some of the theories of psychology and the way psychology was practiced, and to find myself where my people were not affirmed. Secondly, I would say that psychology has been based on theories and constructs developed primarily by white psychologists to explain the behavior of white people. In and of itself there's nothing wrong with white people speaking on their own reality, the problem is that the eurocentric psychological perspective assumes that they set the norm against which everybody else is measured. Thirdly, the norm is generalizable to every cultural group irrespective of whether or not they were included in the samples around which the theories were developed. The most important, is the idea that eurocentric orientation has a propensity to employ a difference equals deficiency logic, meaning that things are seen as being pathological or deficient to the degree that they differ in some way, shape or form from that norm created by the larger white society. So when you use Eurocentric norms, African people always come up looking more pathological than is true. Part of what we try to do in cultural psychology is to create for ourselves norms, customs, standards that allow us to more accurately conceptualize the life space of African people and to more accurately portray mental, emotional, physical and spiritual debilitations that we suffer from in a psychological way.

Q: Oftentimes psychologists perceive their roles as being confined to the therapy office, classroom, mental health centers, etc. You in turn seem to have expanded your roles beyond these realms. Why is this important for you and what recommendations do you have for others entering the field today?

A: I would say that perspective comes out of two things. The first is a question for mental health providers, which says, "Do you define your role in terms of function or do you define your role in terms of meeting the needs of the client?" Most of us I think define our role in terms of meeting the needs of clients, except what we really do is to define our role in terms of function. For me, it is important to define my role in terms of meeting client needs, and that role takes me outside of the individual office. The second piece that is very important is that traditional psychology assumes oftentimes that the etiology of client distress is always an intrapsychic phenomenon. What I'm clear about particularly for people of color and African American people in particular, is that some of the problems that they have are in fact social, cultural and environmental, not intrapsychic. And so, if I don't make systemic interventions I do my clients a disservice. For example, if a black man is angry because he's being racially profiled, or students are angry because they have been harassed on the college campus or belittled by a professor in class, what should our role be? Even if we can facilitate healing in our offices for that person, all we've really done is help the person heal and then send them back out in a world still vulnerable to the same social pathologies that bring them into our office in the first place. I think we have to be able to expand roles that not only work on intrapsychic kinds of issues, we have to also be able to provide a level of social advocacy that allow us to address the inequities that exist in society. So my job at some point is to help address defects in society that ultimately not only help clients to heal but also create a just and more humane society.

Q: In your role at UCI you engage in administration, clinical work, academic instruction, and manage to stay productive in your scholarship. What statement are you making about the value of each of these functions within the context of your identity as a psychologist?

A: I think it was probably Allen Ivey back in 1979 who wrote in one of his pieces that Counseling Psychology was one of the broader based applied psychological specialties.

I have very much taken that to heart, not only in training but in my career.. I've always liked five functions. They include therapy, teaching, consultation, research, and administration. I usually engage in all five functions concurrently, with the only thing changing being the proportion of time I spend in each category. For me that's important, because I want to contribute my skills and expertise in ways that I think do the most good.

What's also true about my work is that I'm relatively critical about some of the things that exist in life, particularly as they relate to people of color. For example, I haven't been tenure track faculty since I left the University of Pennsylvania, but I still publish a fair amount. The reason is because I'm so critical about things that get written about African American people. I like moving us in ways that allow us to be more culturally competent.

Q: You mentioned some of the challenges in trying to involve yourself in an association like APA. How do you find the balance between choosing to be involved with such associations and choosing not to be involved?

A: The answer varies. The exercise of judgment and the utilization of people's energy are unique to everybody. So every person has to make their own individual decision about not only what their spirit will tolerate, but what is most in line with their particular worldview. So the advice I would give is to follow your passion. In the African tradition we have a concept that is called Ori-Ire; this means "one whose consciousness is aligned with one's destiny." What I have to make sure is that my own particular life space is in congruence with my passion, my destiny and that my behaviors support those particular ideals. There are some times when engaging in a tug of war makes sense, but sometimes spending that kind of energy is probably unnecessary in that realm. There are sometimes I think when the advice that I can provide is probably more important than me being able to do some of the work. For example, the responsibility to make APA more culturally relevant, more culturally diverse, should not be the responsibility of the underrepresented people. It really is the responsibility primarily of the white people in charge who perpetrate that kind of stuff on people. And so if I can encourage my white brothers and sisters in those organizations to say "Let us come and clean up our own house.", then the house becomes more inviting to the people. Each professional has to decide for themselves what is their passion, what is their destiny and how does that play into having to work within organizational climates.

Q: In this issue we talk about diversity. Psychologists generally try to diversify institutions and struggle on operationalizing diversity and implementing it. What advice do you have about this?

A: Diversity is still an important topic and one that we all struggle with as professionals and individuals. Part of the struggle has to do with our inability or difficulty in really defining the construct. Some people think diversity is relegated to demographics. The problem with demographics is that it allows us to set what I call "low bar" markers for whether we achieve diversity progress. If you define diversity by race or gender, then we assume that if we have 5% of this or 10% of that category, that somehow makes us diverse. The difficulty with that kind of short-sided analysis is that agencies and individuals have not learned the difference between desegregation and integration. Desegregation basically says we have the right to occupy the same geographical space, no different than when people fought for a seat on the bus we were fighting to be able to occupy the same space. Having one woman or one gay/lesbian person on your staff, means you have a desegregated agency, that doesn't mean your agency is different if it still responds in the same way that it always has. What our colleagues need to consider is not so much do you have demographics, but rather do the policies and practices of your institution change as a function of the changes in the demographics.

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