

**Cultural Sensitivity Series  
Tilden Street OPC  
Bronx, New York**

The Cultural Sensitivity Series is an ongoing monthly discussion that combines an examination of a clinical challenge and the role of culture. For the purposes of these discussions

“cultural phenomena take their form in the dialectical tension that exists in the asymmetrical power relationships between groups and within groups. From this viewpoint, culture is constructed as the more powerful and the less powerful segments of society contend for positions of power and privilege between themselves.”

–Makunga Akinyela  
*De-Colonizing our lives,  
Divining a post-colonial Therapy*, pp.32-43;  
The International Journal of Narrative Therapy  
and Community Work, 2002, no. 2

**02/26/07 “Who has power in the room?”**

Vignette presented of a family session where the staff psychiatrist was invited into session without preparation. This upended the power relationship within the family session, led to its abrupt end and triggered important conversations between the mother and therapist and psychiatrist leading to improved understanding going forward.

**03/26/07 “How does our experience of gender and sexual orientation impact our understanding of problems?”**

Vignette offered to illustrate how therapist's self awareness of “other ness” led to increased sensitivity in conversations with adolescent African American youngster as he wrestled with increasing awareness of his homosexuality.

**04/23/07 “How does spiritual knowledge impact on an understanding of and the possible cures for the problems?”**

Two vignettes presented that illustrated how a family's deep spiritual beliefs and understanding of the problem (an “evil spirit”) impeded engagement in therapy and led to premature termination with help sought elsewhere (in a religious setting).

**10/01/07 “What are client reactions to the use of medication?”**

Vignette presented that illustrated therapist's attempts to remain considerate of Caribbean cultural background of a family while also supporting consultation with a psychiatrist to secure additional information about possible benefit of medication for a child. This led to an interesting discussion of several staff members' deeply held belief that they would personally never use psychiatric medication.

**11/05/07 “How does the therapist's personal identity (race, ethnic background, cultural identity) impact on our work?”**

Vignette presented on an intact Dominican family where therapist's white ethnicity is deconstructed with each family member to understand therapist's ability to support traditional Dominican values versus “liberal white values.” This led to discussion of values around independence, sexual exploration, and gender roles.

**12/10/07 Staff discussion of the impact of “Collaborative Practice” on Outpatient Clinic paperwork.**

Examples of treatment documents that use the *client's voice (words)*, both parent and child, were reviewed. Staff concerns about obstacles or drawbacks to this practice (professionalism, audit acceptability) also reviewed.

**01/07/08 “The role of women in the family and the world as therapist—how do we engage with this concept on the personal and professional level?”**

The overwhelming feminization of the field of mental health and children's services was discussed and linked to the low status, salary and importance this area of practice holds in society. "Empathy" was discussed to be more than a female characteristic—rather it is a group of carefully developed professional skills and includes demonstrations of respect, and the intent to understand and build 'common ground' together with clients.

02/11/08 **"Making Culture Relevant at Every Stage in the Treatment Process"** Parts 1 and 2

Exploring the cultural nuances present in assessment, conceptualization, and treatment Strategies to adapt traditional organizational practices

04/28/08 **"Hair texture, length and style as a metaphor in the African American mother-daughter relationship."**

Discussion led by a white psychology intern and an African American staff member of Jamaican descent with the use of contemporary music to stimulate dialogue.

11/10/08 **"Gender Identity Disorder is complex and draws forth responses both personal and professional that are embedded in the belief systems of therapists who treat these children. How can embedded beliefs be openly discussed with parents in order for the parent voice to be heard and remain central in determining the direction of treatment? Are the challenges of this diagnosis unique or similar to other diagnoses?"**

DSM IV diagnostic criteria reviewed. Different schools of thought in treatment were reviewed. Complicated therapist responses were discussed.

12/08/08 **"How can different viewpoints of professional partners be openly discussed when they impact upon a case that is shared? How might this be complicated when a treatment impasse is reached that appears to be culturally-related? Are there general principals that might aid us as we begin our collaboration?"**

01/12/09 **"Implications of skin tone variation among people of African Descent."**

Discussion led by two staff members with African heritage.

02/09/09 **"Children in foster care or adoptive homes may live in families with multiple ethnic, racial and cultural heritages. How can parents be supported to ensure that all heritages are celebrated and honored?"**

General principles were discussed.

04/06/09 **"The influence of culture on boundaries in the therapeutic relationship."**

Staff viewed "The Gift," a discussion between an African client and a clinic therapist at the time of termination. Staff broke into small groups to discuss the interview from one of three positions: that of the client, the therapist and the code of ethics.

*Discussion format devised and facilitated by a psyche intern and social work student.*

11/16/09 **"Racism and Invisibility: Race-Related Stress, Emotional Abuse and Psychological Trauma for people of Color," by Franklin, et al.**

Staff offered personal definitions of "racism" and named the relevance for their personal clinical practice in community mental health.

11/23/09 **"The Psychological Residuals of Slavery,"** —film by Ken Hardy.

Staff identified emotional and behavioral reverberations of the legacy of slavery that may be present in the communities we serve. They then stepped back to name possible manifestations of these reverberations in their own clinical practices.

03/01/10 **"Ethnocultural Variable in Youth Suicidality—African American—Asian American—Latino Perspectives."** —Report from staff on New Jersey College of Medicine & Dentistry training.

Key cultural underpinnings identified: the contexts of oppression, "learned voicelessness," the aggravating factor of rage. Unpacking the acculturation process and

raising generational questions: "What are society's intentions for our children?"

05/10/10 **"Uncommon Strategies for a Common Problem: Addressing Racism in Family Therapy,"**  
article by Tracey Laszloffy and Kenneth Hardy.

Reviewed the concepts of racial awareness versus racial sensitivity. The authors note the importance of recognizing that racism impacts the client view of the presenting problem. It is essential to join with the client's perspective and begin clinical work by affirming and validating the client.

*Pending* **"Including Jews in Multiculturalism,"** article by Peter Langman

Can a therapist's insider knowledge as a member of a minority culture (with significant experience of oppression and discrimination) provide helpful ground to stand on as they support client discussion of vulnerabilities and unseen identities?

How much of the hidden but relevant facets of personal identity might a therapist share with clients?