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WHEN YOU NEED A FRIEND: SNAPSHOTS OF THERAPISTS STRUGGLING WITH CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND LARGER SYSTEMS ISSUES

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In this article, we look at three examples of therapists struggling with cultural competence issues and involvement with larger systems. In each situation, the concept of the cultural broker is relevant. Kelly and Hudson (2016) advocate for therapists taking the role of a cultural broker, assisting the family to intervene with the oppressive dominant culture in culturally syntonetic ways, as well as advocating for the family; this can be described as walking alongside the client through the intersection between cultures (McDowell et al, 2017). In our first example, Alseead and Spencer worked together as cultural brokers for each other, balancing each other's cultural biases. In our second example, Boros provided translation to the larger system of an experience shared by herself and her client. In our final example, Corrington turns to elders within the community to help her better serve her clients. Rambo provided consultation for all three situations.

In this article, we look at three examples of therapists struggling with cultural competence issues and involvement with larger systems. In each situation, the concept of the cultural broker is relevant. Kelly and Hudson (2016) advocate for therapists

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taking the role of a cultural broker, assisting the family to intervene with the oppressive dominant culture in culturally syntonetic ways, as well as advocating for the family; this can also be described as walking alongside the client through the intersection between cultures (McDowell, Knudson-Martin, & Bermudez, 2017, p. 232). In our first example, Alseead and Spencer worked together as cultural brokers for each other, balancing each other's cultural biases. In our second example, Boros provides a bridge between a cultural experience shared by both therapist and client, but not by the larger system. Finally, Corrinton asks elders within the culture her clients share to help her be a better therapist. Rambo provided consultation for all three situations.

These clinical examples illustrate the importance of relationship: between therapist and client, but also between therapist and therapist, therapist and larger system, and therapist and community. Cultural sensitivity, in our view, begins with the historically important family therapy value of prioritizing relationship (Gosnell, McKergow, Moore, Mudry, & Tomm, 2017). By honoring the perspective of both therapist and client, and the cultural contexts in which those perspectives are imbedded, we feel we are more able to open space for change (Gosnell et al., 2017).

MUTUAL CULTURAL BROKERING: TWO VOICES ARE BETTER THAN ONE

Diversity issues are often assumed to relate to differences between therapist and client; however, a therapist and client from the same or similar backgrounds can also experience discomfort. In this instance, the therapist, Alseead, is a Saudi therapist from a traditional background, studying in a family therapy doctoral program in the United States. Her client was an Arab American, who she will call Adam,¹ with a longer residence and more assimilated into the dominant United States culture than Alseead. Adam identified as a gay male. At the first session, he discussed whether or not to reveal his sexual orientation to his family.

After the first session with Adam, Alseead felt emotionally drained. She found herself having a difficult time with her own ethical, cultural, and religious beliefs, while questioning her ability to work with this particular case. It was hard for her to take a stance of not knowing, as she wanted to do from her postmodern solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) perspective (McDowell et al., 2017). She found herself frightened and unsettled about the ramifications for Adam with his coming out, knowing as she at least thought she did, the possible rejection he might face from his family and community. She was aware there could be considerable difficulties (Rahman, 2010). She was very sympathetic, but felt she was too emotionally invested to be clinically useful.

Alseead pondered the case and decided, even with supervision, that she only had two options. The first was that she could refer the case out to someone more LGBTQ qualified, washing her hands of it entirely. The second option was that she could

¹Clients' names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

reach out to someone more familiar with this demographic and bring that person on as a potential co-therapist. She asked her friend and colleague in her doctoral program, Spencer, who identifies as part of LGBTQ culture, to consult with her on the case. Spencer and Adam in one sense were in the same social context; yet, in another sense, by virtue of cultural background, Alseead and Adam had more in common. Spencer and Alseead decided this play on differences could create a safer space for the client (Heron, 2005).

When introduced to the idea of the two therapists, each one sharing an aspect of his identity, the client seemed to resonate with the idea:

ADAM: Well, I really needed to talk to someone. And both of you, having the familiarity that hits so close to home for me, it just makes perfect sense that I'm here—with both of you.

Later in the same session, the client reported a greater sense of optimism now that he felt both sides of his dilemma were represented by the two therapists.

ADAM: Both of you together are helping me in different ways. [Alseead] being Muslim really can identify with my culture and religion and know how serious it is to be gay and Muslim . . . she understands my stress, I think. And [Spencer] understands it in a different way being LGBTQ also. I'm getting pressure from my gay American friends, with the assumption that I'm going to tell my parents and that it's no big deal at my age. I'm so scared of the rejection I could face in coming out to them. My non-Muslim friends just don't understand.

Sadly, some mental health professionals are active participants in the discrimination of the LGBTQ community over the years (Kim, 2014). A major component of ethical and competent practice in this regard is ensuring an intercultural approach to counseling. This can be an acknowledgement of ways that LGBTQ couples and families communicate, based on their cultural background. It is an effort to describe intercultural issues about which psychotherapists should have awareness. Using their knowledge and skills, they can most effectively work with the wide range of multicultural identities and resulting social justice issues that LGBTQ couples and families often face (Singh & Harper, 2012). Discrimination can happen in a multitude of ways. One of those ways might include, the lack of education regarding LGBTQ client's culture. Sometimes, a therapist might not understand the dynamics of an LGBTQ relationship, as they identify as heterosexual, and have only worked with heterosexual clients (Mitchell, 2013). Alseead was concerned she had this lack of awareness; Spencer in turn, lacked knowledge of traditional Arab culture. Together they could ask different kinds of questions of Adam, to create an open space (Gosnell et al., 2017).

Spencer's Reflections

Through this process of working with Adam, I resonated with the commonly felt pressures and expectations that sometimes come from within the gay community. Unlike Adam, I had no religious affiliation to consider. I did however, see similarities within the struggles Adam and I had. The major difference was that I was not worried at all about my *coming out* [emphasis added] story when it was time for me to tell. I had no pressure from my parents, or anyone else, for that matter. The expectation was that I was going to be *straight* [emphasis added], and when I was not, life just went on.

Through Adam's story, I became more respectful of the experience of a gay Muslim male (Rahman, 2010). I did not want to be like his non-Muslim friends who just did not understand. Throughout sessions, I was cognizant of letting Adam lead the way as the expert while I was able to take a step back and understand the differences in our cultural contexts.

Alseead's Reflections

Deciding to work with Adam was a very challenging decision to make. As a Muslim therapist, I was aware of how sensitive it could be to work with an LGBTQ Muslim client. Not only was I challenging my own beliefs, I was also aware of how complicated this might be for Adam wanting to talk about an issue that is not accepted by his family. The challenge involved confronting my own biases. Asking Spencer to work with me on this case was very crucial as she is someone with experience on the LGBTQ community as well as a skilled solution focused therapist (Ouer, 2016).

This experience allowed me to learn more about myself as a therapist. To work in a society where many ideas are very different from what a certain culture or religion is raised to believe could be difficult. The story of Adam is happening everywhere not just here in the United States. Giving our clients the chance to talk in a context of safety about who they are and how they feel is so important. Having Spencer as a co-therapist helped create a space where I could feel safe as well as my client, and new created possibilities.

Rambo's Reflections

Throughout this process of Alseead and Spencer working together as a co-therapy team, both sides of Adam's experience could be honored. A creation of safe enough space allowed for positive change (Richardson/Kianewesquao & Reynolds, 2014). This case illustrates that coming from the same cultural background as a client, does not necessarily mean the cultural broker's need becomes invalid, as it is all too easy for a therapist to simply reproduce existing biases within a culture.

CULTURAL BROKERING WITH A DEFINED SUBCULTURE: PROVIDING TRANSLATION OF PERCEIVED DANGER

Our second case example reflects the contrasts between military and civilian culture. Boros served 8 years in the military, and it was this experience which led her to become a marriage and family therapist (MFT). She saw families desperately trying to hold it together and wondered how she could help with this process. After two combat tours, she tried to lead as normal a life as possible, even though her mental state had worsened, and her physical limitations increased. As she began to make her transition back into civilian life after separating from the military, she learned the nonmilitary culture was plagued with stigmas, ideas, and beliefs which surround military members and their families. She began her clinical work in a clinical research project with at-risk youth, while completing her doctoral studies in family therapy.

As a veteran, medically separated from her military career with a variety of physical and emotional disabilities, she now found herself consulting with students from military families and young people who in some cases wanted to join the military. Other therapists saw her as the expert in these situations. In her clinical work, Boros often talked to young people about the benefits of joining the military. Boros realized she lived in a world with more experience of danger than the typical therapist or guidance counselor. This helped her, when the time came, to have a uniquely helpful perspective on Sean's² situation.

The Experience of Danger: Threats and Being Threatening to Others

Sean was an eighth grader referred to counseling for a threat made on social media to his school. Taken seriously, by school officials concerned about school shootings, are threats and perceived threats, especially those on social media (O'Toole, 2000). Sean had warned "there may be danger tomorrow." At first, this was a potential threat by officials at his home school, and got Sean referred to counseling. O'Toole (2000) describes an understandable sense of frustration, helplessness, and compulsion to take quick action by educators, mental health professionals, legislators, law enforcement officers, parents, students, and the rest of the public to prevent future school shootings.

Upon learning that Sean's father, Derrick,³ worked for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Rambo asked Boros to consult on the case given her background in military culture. DHS is an organization under the Department of Defense (DOD) and is made up of 22 organizations (<https://www.dhs.gov>). Since the military also falls under the DOD, both the DHS and military share a similar structure and culture. Sean continually worried about Derrick and the job he did.

² Clients' names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

³ Clients' names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Sean's relationship with his father was described as distant. This distance created an idea in the school officials' minds about the relationship and was a factor in how the threat was perceived (Romano, 1984). Derrick was often away from home or continued his work while at home. This amount of working put a strain on the father-son relationship. Boros learned this relationship distance was due in part to the nature of Derrick's job, which allowed for the counselor assigned to the case and Rambo to see a different perspective on the situation.

DHS's focus is to neutralize threats to the United States and its people (<https://www.dhs.gov>). Based on the level of responsibility Derrick seemed to have, Boros deduced he required a top-secret security clearance, meaning he was entrusted with the highest levels of confidential information. In other words, Derrick would often have to consider threats no matter how large or small as part of his daily task. When Sean overheard a threat, he thought he was being helpful to warn his friends and their families of these threats through social media.

Through the consultation provided by Boros, the school officials came to have a deeper understanding of the DOD culture and how this might be influencing Sean. It became clear Sean was attempting to protect his friends and their families, just as his dad was doing. Without Boros' cultural brokering, the incident could have resulted in the student being charged and getting a criminal record. Instead she helped to calm the situation while at the same time, helped Sean to process his dad's work on a different level.

Boros's Reflections

The above case may seem unique to civilians (nonmilitary) and yet familiar to military families. Military families become exposed to situations, information, and environments that the average family is not. The misunderstanding of this population is common (Everson & Figley, 2011). A bias I did not know I had, until I was working with students preparing to transition into the military included, on the one hand, military brought me some great advantages. Yet on the other hand, left me with a lifetime of physical and mental complications. I had to further explore my own personal meaning of serving and not use it to influence students in their decisions, one way or the other. As an MFT and veteran with physical and emotional disabilities, my experiences and training in systemic relationships allowed me to both serve this population and help others to serve this population.

Rambo's Reflections

I was grateful to be working with a doctoral student whose background allowed us to translate this client's experiences to the larger system. This case illustrates how subcultures within a larger dominant culture may also be confusing to outsiders, and clients will benefit from a therapist's sensitivity to such subcultures and willing to provide translation.

ASKING FOR CULTURAL BROKERS WITHIN A COMMUNITY: LEARNING FROM BEING WITH

Corrington obtained her master's degree in family therapy from the program in which Rambo is faculty. Corrington is now a Registered Clinical Counsellor in Ladysmith, British Columbia, Canada. She serves members of the Penelakut tribe or community members living on Penelakut Island. Over time working in this context, she has learned the importance of being deeply imbedded in social context (Heron, 2005). Therefore, in telling her story, she would first like to acknowledge the traditional territories of the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose land it is upon which she has settled. She also wishes to acknowledge the Seminole Tribe of South Florida whose traditional land is where she was raised. Lastly, she raises her hands up to the Coast Salish family, particularly the Penelakut Tribe, who have trusted her with their stories, and whom she feels it is her honor and privilege to serve in their healing journey. She makes this statement as a reminder to herself—an explicit commitment to always strive to be aware, and to challenge the ways she is implicated in the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples not only where she is located but across the world.

How is it possible to work with others, when the history of oppression is so intense, and the cultural divide so sharp? Corrington feels she has learned from the community itself, and from asking for guidance from community members. The Penelakut Tribe is a small semi-remote tribe whose traditional unceded, lands span much of Central Vancouver Island. They now have formal ownership of only a fraction of this land. Samantha serves community members who live on the reserved lands of Penelakut Island and a small parcel of land known as Tsussie Road. Penelakut Island is accessible only by ferry, and as far as formal buildings, has a band office, adult education center, elementary school, child care center, longhouse, and a health center. It is also referred to as Kuper Island which was the name of the White settler that landed there. It is also known as the location of Kuper Island Residential School where, from approximately 1890 until the mid to late 1970's, indigenous children were housed and systemically abused by the Residential School staff responsible for caring for the children. The atrocity of their actions permeates the experiences of the residents on Penelakut (Richardson/Kianewesquao & Reynolds, 2014). In this context, the conclusion is inescapable that the personal is political.

Samantha's Reflections

These reflections lead me to a piece that has come up time and again when my mentor, an elder on Penelakut, and I talk about what makes me a *good fit* in his community. You see, many counselors have come and gone. He and his wife often say it is because I understand, that is why I am still there. I think this understanding is more than just empathy. It includes an active engagement in the community. If I saw *my work* [emphasis added] as being for the 60 minutes

a session with a client in my office I do not think I would truly understand. Not in the way he is speaking of. When I arrive at the ferry, I walk on and see this as a chance to understand what might be going on for community members. I talk with community members travelling over. Ferry workers now recognize me after these years as the White Lady Counselor who is *not* [emphasis added] going to Thetis Island, the neighboring island that shares ferry service, but is going to Penelakut. I carry the groceries of elders. I talk to patients waiting for medical appointments. I walk to the school and say hello to the children. I eat the fry bread or other baking of the women elders in the kitchen at the health center. I see my work as building presence and being present.

This job requires *growing moss*. I need to sit still and show that I am not going to abandon the community. Community members pay very close attention to the comings and goings of outsiders, particularly White Settlers offering *help* [emphasis added]. Sometimes I have many clients, and other times there are few formal clients. I must be flexible and see my *work* [emphasis added] as being present in the community. The *work* [emphasis added] happens in line for the ferry, walking to the health unit, or sometimes just sitting on the couch in the reception area. This job is about serving the community. Whatever they need and following their lead in what that looks like. I must be very intuitive and often work with little direction, culturally and otherwise. I am very aware and respectful of working alongside of cultural traditional practices and try to gauge when to be more invisible or silent. How and when I take up space is important in how I understand how I am implicated in colonialism.

The Penelakut community, and many aboriginal communities, is distrustful of the *White* [emphasis added] systems and of the ongoing colonization that continues to impact community members. As much as I would like to pretend I am somehow different, I recognize that I do represent this system to many and am implicated in the current and historical transgressions and atrocities committed against First Nations peoples. I remember being privy to an email which said, "I hope she doesn't plan to swoop in gun's a-blazing to fix all of our problems." I always remember this.

Rambo's Reflections

Corrington feels taking the time to be present with the community is crucial to her work, and I would agree this has been central. As Richardson/Kianewesquao and Reynolds (2014) note, establishing relationships which are at least trusting enough for work to begin is not a preliminary to the work of therapy; it is often the most important work of therapy. This is especially true when entering a community from outside.

THE MANY FACES OF CULTURAL BROKERING

In these case examples the therapists do well to seek help with cultural sensitivity whether the cultural background of their clients is familiar to them, but also at points

troubling to them (as with Alsead and Spencer); familiar to them, but unfamiliar to the larger system (as with Boros); or different from their own experience (as with Corrington). Cultural brokers may be therapists, colleagues, or members of the community in which the therapists serve, who are willing to share their experience pertaining to one's own cultural community including subcultures with colleagues and others as they discuss their different experiences. All three of these case examples point to the importance of cultural understanding and relationships. The experience of multiple viewpoints becomes a key to opening space for change (Gosnell et al., 2017).

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