

COMMITTEE REPORTS: MULTICULTURAL CONCERNS

COMPETENCE IN DELIVERING SERVICES TO CULTURALLY DIVERSE POPULATIONS: THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE OF NEW AMERICANS

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The fall issue of this column addressed cultural competence in delivering service to culturally diverse patients by highlighting fundamental concepts from the "Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice and Organizational Change for Psychologists." This current issue will further our understanding by exploring the dynamics of working with an immigrant population, focusing on those who have come after 1965, called "New Americans." We review a conference entitled, *Walking the Bicultural Tightrope: Psychoanalytic & Literary Perspectives on the New American*, that was presented by the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis in conjunction with the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute, New York University. Its aim was to explore the impact of the immigrant experience on the cultural self through the perspective of psychoanalytic theory and the literature of immigrant and second-generation writers. Chaired by Alan Roland, an impressive interdisciplinary dialogue was brought forth. Through historical commentary, personal narratives, and emerging analytic theories, panelists discussed ongoing struggles in walking a tightrope between two cultures. The following highlights served as a framework for consideration when working with an immigrant population:

John Kuo Wei Tchen and Salman Akhtar opened the conference. Tchen provided a historical overview on immigration in New York City emphasizing the importance of increasing socio-political awareness of the federal legislation and practices that impact immigration policies. He pointed out that without knowledge of the "collective experience of the historical trauma of immigration," it is impossible to truly understand how exclusionary immigration laws became the defining factor in shaping the Chinese American history, culture, and community. Along these lines, Dorothy Yang, in her remarks, stressed that familiarity with the historical context of an immigrant's experience, such as war or trauma of the homeland, is important to a richer understanding of patients.

Akhtar examined identity conflict and transformation upon immigration. He posited that immigration is a trauma, and leaving one's homeland in many instances is a hostile aggression towards the homeland. The physical and psychic violence that necessarily accompanies transformation for the immigrant must be appreciated and understood. Akhtar

also stated that the nostalgia the patient experiences is for the topography and inanimate objects such as sounds, images and objects of the homeland which is different from what many view as homesickness and nostalgia for the people of their homeland. These emotional memories must be accessed using mementos from the homeland to alleviate the feeling of loss. The concept of cultural neutrality in treatment was also underscored, wherein the therapist maintains a distance from the values, ideals and mores of the patient's culture as well as those of the therapist thus, avoiding countertransference pitfalls.

Psychoanalytic therapy with immigrants and the second generation was explored in an informative roundtable discussion that included Salman Akhtar, Rosemarie Perez Foster, Nasir Ilahi, Paola Mieli, Loveleen Posmentier and Dorothy Yang, with Alan Roland as the moderator.

Nasir Ilahi argued for paying attention to working within a cultural context of the patient's experience rather than simply expressing empathy for the patients' experience. He spoke about pre-verbal and non-verbal communication as a means for the patient to convey meaning. Foster advocated that every psychologist should take an ethnology of the patient and aim to engage in a learning process within the dyad. Therapists should make themselves aware of differences in communication styles exhibited by patient from diverse cultures. Roland emphasized that the understanding of high-context communication styles (indirect communication common in eastern cultures), body language, emotional expression, and customs is integral to developing an alliance and understanding idioms of distress. Roland's concept of "the contextual self" is key, which states that people can behave differently in different contexts without violating a core self. This was a reminder to us that motivations are not always expressed in the western way.

Foster and Yang discussed the importance of bilingually balanced therapists in working with immigrants. This bilingual mode refers to the use of heritage and the English language with equal proficiency, and has been correlated with a balanced bicultural identity. Such therapist competence is critical because bilingual patients may possess different experiences of the self, which are organized around their respective languages, where different emotions and psychologies are conveyed.

Akhtar emphasized the dialectical nature of biculturalism, which may not and perhaps should not, lead to a unidimensional identity resolution when exploring questions of belonging and transformation of cultural selves. The developmental stages of cultural identity formation are neither linear nor discrete.

Literary perspectives on biculturalism were discussed in two roundtables with Frederick Feirstein and Luis Francia as the respective moderators. Literature and poetry advance our understanding of diverse populations through a glimpse into the dynamics of having different cultural selves. Novelists humanize "the Other." What these writers express in their work resonates through the use of metaphors, imagery, and socio-political context, which speaks to the unconscious of the reader, as framed by Salman Akhtar. Through exposure to the literary works of Bharati Mukherjee, D. H. Melhem, Luis Francia, Meena Alexander, Nelly Rosario, Ved Mehta, Frederick Turner and Annecy Baez, the audience was at once an insider and an outsider to a cultural narrative of the immigrant experience. Mukherjee made the observation that contemporary writers have an obligation to probe and challenge stereotypes of first- and second-generation immigrant experience and not affirm them.

This conference was groundbreaking in representing the advances within the psychoanalytic community that embraces multicultural awareness. This one-day interdisciplinary dialogue on contemporary immigrant mental health and literature was an ambitious and admirable effort. Critiques of the conference stem primarily from the scope of the New American theme, as the psychoanalysts and writers were from South Asian, East Asia, Latin American, Mediterranean European, and Middle Eastern origins. Broader inclusion of different ethnicities, including African, may have brought in the aspect of cultural struggles among immigrant groups. As well, expansions of this theme to second and other generation experiences may facilitate dialogues that are multiculturally responsive and address intergenerational conflicts. More opportunities for audience participation and integration of the literary and psychoanalytic dialogue may have further enhanced this significant conference.

Practitioners must strive to better understand the dynamics of having different cultural selves through learning the history of immigration trends and engaging in open dialogues about cultural conflict and identity transformation. As more and more of our patients are impacted by the challenges of living in a diverse society, we must meet them with a sensitive working framework for their unique emotional experiences. The interested reader is encouraged to refer to the following selected bibliography, which explores the history, psychology, and experiences of becoming a "New American."

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