

Using Non-clinical Readings to Promote Cultural Attunement



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My graduate studies in marriage and family therapy (MFT) left me feeling as though I did not quite belong. The models we studied were based on white middle-class people, which did not reflect my experiences as a Black woman. Often, I wondered how therapy works for Black people and other communities of color. These thoughts remained with me throughout my doctoral studies and as I entered academia as a professor. Educating marriage and family therapy students is part of my life's work and purpose, and I did not want my future students of color to experience the same feelings of disconnection I did.

In my master's degree program, we were introduced to the various family therapy models using Nichols and Schwartz's (2004) *Family Therapy Concepts and Methods*. Solution Focused Brief Therapy intrigued me, but I was not sure the model captured how I wanted to serve clients. In addition, I wanted to learn more about Satir's ideas, but there was no chapter dedicated to her work, and some in the field did not consider her work to be a true therapeutic model. I was drawn to Satir's work because she was the only female theorist in a field dominated by men. Over the course of my doctoral work, I was able to dive deeper into Satir's model and finally found my theoretical home. Like Satir, I had once wanted to become a teacher before eventually finding my way to the helping professions. Her curiosity and willingness to get to know people on a level that I had not seen in any other MFT model I had studied impressed me. She seemed warm and genuine, and I felt connected. The other theorists seemed distant, as if they were above me. Trying to fit myself into a white male therapist's role did not work. Now it makes sense since I am well past the point of trying to fit into a role that does not work for me. While becoming a therapist, however, I did not know how to be me and a therapist; I was

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not sure if the authentic me would be welcomed by the professional world I was attempting to enter. The lack of representation made me doubt I belonged in the MFT field.

When I was developing my clinical voice – a reflection of myself steeped in Satir’s work – I studied my master’s program’s own model, which combined a structural and strategic approach to treatment. My experience with this model was both excellent and limiting, as it seemed to suggest that there was only one way to be a therapist. While I appreciated both the structural and strategic approaches, there were some aspects of both that I did not like. I struggled with what felt like a demanding or dominant position as a therapist. It was important to me that clients had a voice in the direction of their healing. Clients needed to know that they had exactly what they needed to heal, so my role was more of a support than that of an all-knowing director.

Through these experiences, I was inspired to provide students with the opportunity to cultivate therapeutic alliances that reflect the personhood of both clients and therapists. I drew from my pre-clinical training in Human Resources Management (BAA) and Adult Education (MEd), which emphasized the importance of an integrative or multidisciplinary approach to teaching and learning. To facilitate my students’ curiosity, learning, and capacity to engage with their future clients, I began incorporating non-clinical nonfiction or literature, from outside of the field of family therapy, into my classroom (e.g., autobiographies, non-fiction works on cultural dynamics).

The use of non-clinical texts that centered Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) voices and emphasized cultural experiences was missing from my marriage and family therapy training, which focused on systemic therapy and practice without fully taking racism, equity, and inclusion into account. To promote cultural sensitivity, I require my students to read nonfiction texts about real life experiences and potential solutions. Learners encounter real world stories of living in inequitable spaces (Stevenson, 2014) and how to be an anti-racist (Kendi, 2019). Since family systems theory taught me to value a multitude of perspectives, it only makes sense that I should include a wide range of readings in my theory and practice classes. Mental health issues are not the only issues clients bring to us, they also bring educational concerns, employment concerns, and legal concerns. Though I appreciate and understand the ethical mandate to stay within my scope of practice, I cannot ignore the impact of these varying issues on the work that goes on in therapy. When I think of the history of family therapy, I am intrigued by the various disciplines that the founders represented – anthropology, medicine, social work, among others (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). The multidisciplinary perspective influenced the way we work as family therapists today, but we may have lost sight of this perspective somewhere along the way. I see my integration of reading material from outside family therapy as a way to re-engage with our roots, our past.

Humans are also valuable simply because they exist (Satir, 1972). With this value guiding me, it is my personal responsibility to ensure that students I train approach treatment from a socially just perspective. I fully agree with Bryan Stevenson (2014) who emphasizes the importance of justice in all areas of life. Justice must be at the

center of everything we do as systemic therapists. If it is not, I am unsure of what we hope to accomplish as liberation is at the core of our work with clients. Including non-clinical texts when training MFT students is important in developing clinicians with a socially just lens, because these texts connect the real-world experiences that clients bring into therapy and the clinical understanding that students are developing in training.

1 Examples of Non-clinical Texts That Promote Cultural Attunement

A non-exhaustive list of texts I use in clinical education to promote cultural attunement include Stevenson (2014), Tatum (2017), DiAngelo (2018), Steele (2010), Takaki (2018), and Kruse and Zelizer (2019). Through the work I highlight in the following text, my students and I have expanded our perspectives on becoming therapists. Additional readings are provided at the end of this chapter.

Beverly Tatum, B. D. (2017). *Why Are All of the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, focuses on identity development. Tatum (2017) highlights how we are racially socialized in our families of origin, and she gives voice to the influence primary caregivers have on racial identity development of young people. One of my students who identifies as white found the information Tatum shared particularly poignant; so much so that this student shared what the reading meant to them after finishing it and reported passing the book on to a family member. Another student expressed a desire to pass the book on to their children so they could learn about the development of white identity at a young age and become allies. Additionally, this student expressed frustration with not having been taught about these topics prior to attending graduate school. They stated, “I was initially annoyed about having to read an additional text in a course already packed full of readings, but this material is important. Not only will it help me be a better therapist, it’s helping me become a better person.”

Just Mercy highlights Bryan Stevenson’s (2014) work with men, women, and children on death row. Although Stevenson is an attorney, his method of engaging clients and advocating for their interests is an important skill for new therapists to learn and hopefully adopt. Stevenson (2014) tells the story of incarcerated people and their relatives: a group that is often forgotten in society. Many therapists work with those who are or have been incarcerated, or their families, but often do not receive training in this area. I wanted my students to complete their masters training with some knowledge of potential clients who have had contact with the criminal justice system.

Stevenson’s text introduces students to challenges within the criminal justice system and details his family history and his journey to law school. Throughout his story, he offers a glimpse into the journey of a first generation, low-income student to higher education. Stevenson’s life and the lives of his clients are case studies of

how families influence systemic work. With each of the stories he shares, the reader can see the systemic impact on both the individual and the family. Stevenson's own history of racism and justice shed light on how Black people can be seen by the justice system through a singular viewpoint – as criminals (Stevenson, 2014). His treatment by judges, prison guards, and the local police illustrates the plight of Black men in America; even those with advanced degrees from Ivy League colleges are not always protected (Stevenson, 2014). I believe that this information is crucial to helping new clinicians recognize the systemic nature of racism in the United States. For new clinicians, Stevenson's example of getting close or proximate to those many see as untouchable is invaluable. He demonstrated how important it is to see, listen, and really get to know his clients. I emphasize to new therapists the importance of doing the necessary work to get to know, see, and understand clients so that clinicians can provide culturally attuned care.

The revised edition of *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* provides a perspective on America through the eyes of the diverse groups that make up this nation (Takaki, 2008). Clinical students may gain historical knowledge they may not have otherwise acquired such as hearing directly from Native Americans, Chinese Americans, African Americans about their lived experience in the United States. This text shifts from the Anglo historical perspective of the United States to a BIPOC historical perspective. I believe this shift in historical perspective is important to learning because it allows students to appreciate the difference in the story when the storyteller is the one on the receiving end of injustice. Like Stevenson (2014) this work provides stories and examples for training clinicians to deepen their understanding of the role of culture in the United States and in the lives of clients they will serve.

In Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974, Kruse and Zelizer (2019) offer a historical perspective that clinicians in training should read to deconstruct their ideas of dominant cultural norms. It provides an expanded perspective on racial, gender, and class divisions and highlights the systemic nature of oppression. The text also emphasizes the importance of zooming out or exploring a broader perspective when attempting to understand information. Developing this skill is essential for students as they prepare to become clinicians. Students gain a better understanding of the past's role in all aspects of the clients' lives by reading historical accounts with present-day significance. Studying the past can assist in understanding the present and identifying entry points for change in the future. Systemic therapists may use these strategies to work with clients to achieve the changes they want.

2 Using Justice-Oriented Texts in Clinical Education

The first time I used the non-clinical text, *Just Mercy* (Stevenson, 2014), to promote cultural attunement was in a group therapy class. The text was included to support a learning objective: students will be able to demonstrate knowledge of working

effectively with diverse populations and understand the ethical and legal implications of meeting in groups. In class, the students were required to read the text and engage in discussion of the book using the discussion guide that can be downloaded from the authors' website.

In addition to class discussions the students were required to complete a reflection paper. To adequately prepare for the reflection paper students were encouraged to take notes on things discussed in class including their own insights, questions, curiosities, frustrations, etc., with reading the text. The students were required to write a two to three page reflection. The reflection paper was described as a self-reflective and introspective assignment, not a book report. Students were invited to consider how they might use the information from the text in service to their future clients.

For a pre-practicum course I taught, I incorporated bibliotherapy in a couple of different ways. First, students read texts based on being in a "book club." Several texts were provided as books for the book club. Students self-selected the book of their choice. Next, all students were required to read Tatum (2017). The course learning objective that aligned with this assignment was: Students have the basic core competencies to display both interpersonal and professional competence within clinical activities, service, scholarship, as well as collaborate with colleagues to practice in a variety of settings and with diverse populations.

The books included in the book club discussion groups were: DiAngelo, R. (2018), *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*; Steele, C. M. (2010), *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Cues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*; and Kruse, K. M., & Zellzer, J. E. (2019), *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974*. The assignment invited students to discuss the book the group selected highlighting their expectations, anxieties, and concerns/questions related to the material in the book. Students were also invited to discuss ways the material will impact their work with clients.

Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria was used in the required readings at several points in the semester. The students would include their insights, reflections, new knowledge learned, and implications for therapy in the weekly discussion time. An alternate format for incorporating these texts in a pre-practicum course was via a weekly podcast. The same text from the book club described previously was used as well as Tatum (2017). For this format students were placed into groups of three to four, and each group was assigned one of the books listed in the preceding text. Students were invited to set a time to meet with their group to record a video or audio podcast where they discuss the readings. Students could record their podcast with the format of choice.

To complete the podcast, students were asked to work collaboratively to develop an outline of the major conversation points/topics they planned to discuss. The conversation needed to focus on the students' reactions and responses to the assigned readings for the week. The key areas of focus for the discussion were on demonstrating they had read the material and reflected on the implications for their future work with clients. All students in the groups were expected to contribute to the conversation. The students rotated the moderator for each conversation and the

conversations were approximately 50 minutes in length. The students needed to record the conversation and submit one recording for the group.

3 What Have Been the Outcomes of Bibliotherapy?

The inclusion of these texts has broadened students' perspectives, both personally and professionally. Students expressed frustration at not having been exposed to this information until graduate school. Several people shared how the new knowledge has affected their interactions with family and friends. As shared earlier, some have shared the books with family, others plan to use the books to teach their own children, and others shared having a deeper understanding of the challenges their minority family and friends experience.

After reading *Just Mercy*, my students and I have a debriefing discussion about their thoughts and the aspects of the text they will use during their future client contacts. In my experience, most students were initially annoyed and confused by my inclusion of the text. I have used this text several times, and the initial debriefing discussion always focuses on the students' lack of awareness surrounding the criminal justice system. They are often shocked to learn that children are held in adult prisons and tried as adults, and many are surprised by the way women and people with mental illness are treated. Future therapists need to recognize the negative effects of these types of imprisonment on the family. One student shared that she had found a new area of professional focus. The student, like Bryan Stevenson, wanted to dedicate their life to serving families involved in the criminal justice system. It is exciting to watch students transition from frustrated to curious to engaged to passionate based on their required reading.

I was surprised by the response of the students from minoritized backgrounds when I used DiAngelo's (2018) *White Fragility* as part of the texts for the book club. The students selected the book but were unhappy that I allowed them to select the text instead of requiring their white classmates to read it. When I asked why they felt this way, they responded, "it's for white people and the author is trying to help them understand their issues." My question to them was, "Did you learn anything that will help you better understand the response of your classmates, other white people you know, and white clients in your future practice?" The students said they did, but they felt that white students in the program needed the information more than they did. As someone who encourages people to make choices, I reminded the students they were free to make the choice in their book just like every other student in the class. However, the consequences of our choices are not always up to us, even though we have some agency in our choices. In our class discussion time, I encouraged the students to be very intentional about how they discussed the text while in class and as they created connections outside of the classroom.

4 Future Directions

At the time of this writing, I am teaching a course focused on human diversity to master's level mental health students. The course, designed by a colleague, had limited space for additional texts. I have incorporated videos of Bryan Stevenson discussing his work to expose students to material outside of the required reading. For example, one video focused on the development of the Legacy Museum and monument. Another video focused on the importance of hope and proximity. Although I was not able to assign the texts, I appreciate videos that relate to the content of the texts as those videos allowed my students to make connections to the material. I also include a book recommendation almost every week to encourage them to be independent learners.

In future classes, I plan to share portions of Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1963) "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" with the students to deepen their understanding of race and racism. I believe the content of this letter is relevant to the state of the world today and therefore will be useful. This letter written by Dr. King while in a Birmingham jail highlights his commitment to nonviolence and social justice. We will discuss Dr. King's role as an agitator after listening to portions of the letter, since it is often overlooked when discussing his work. We will also discuss how the information will help the students better serve their future clients, what they notice about the content of Dr. King's letter today, and how they see themselves advocating based on what they learn from Dr. King's letter. Through their answers to these questions, they will be able to consider where we have been, where we are headed, and what role they may play in shaping our future. I also hope that the reading will encourage them to gain a deeper understanding of Dr. King beyond the "I Have a Dream" speech.

Continually exposing students to knowledge beyond their field is my goal beyond this course. Since I am a systems thinker, I believe that understanding client needs should not be limited to marriage and family therapy. I believe that just as systems theory taught us to look beyond individuals to understand the problems clients bring to therapy, we also need to look beyond our field in order to understand the lived experience of the clients we get to serve.

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