

MULTICULTURAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

PSYCH. 80103

Professor: Peter Fraenkel, Ph.D.

Day and Time: Thursdays, 2:00 p.m. – 3:50 p.m.

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 10:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. or by appointment

Course Description

Research in developmental, personality, social, family, and clinical psychology have increasingly examined the role of culture and social location in shaping persons' relationships, behavior, beliefs, and emotional experience. Concordantly, the theory and practice of psychotherapy has increasingly underscored the importance of therapists enhancing their sensitivity to the role of culture and social location in patients' psychological difficulties, in their sources of resilience, and on the therapeutic relationship. Although there are a range of definitions of these terms, "culture" is generally defined as the set of beliefs, values, signs, aesthetics, rituals, verbal and nonverbal languages, and behavioral conventions shared by a group; and "social location" refers to aspects of identity affected by one's as race, class, education, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, primary language, relationship status, age, ability/disability, and the many other "dimensions of difference" that are sometimes referred to as "background factors" or "demographic characteristics." Persons are born into some of these aspects of social location as either physical attributes or familial traditions; others are selected. Culture and social location are in turn interrelated. Cultural groups and subgroups are often defined by one or more aspects of social location; and the experience of one's social location in the broader society, including the degree to which one's social location affords one privilege or oppression, may shape aspects of the group's culture. Consideration of the complexities of individuals' membership in multiple intersecting cultural groups is essential to understanding not only the material, systemic realities of their lives, but also their intrapsychic world.

Although it is important for psychotherapists to be familiar with research findings on the "nomothetic" or group-level characteristics of culture that influence experience and behavior, psychotherapists in training also need formal, regular opportunities beyond case supervision to refine their personal comfort and sensitivity in reflecting on and talking about these dimensions. A focus on the "person of the therapist" in regards to culture and social location is essential for "tuning the instrument" of therapists' culturally-sensitive understanding and empathy. This course is designed to provide just such an opportunity, as well as a forum for discussing how to apply this enhanced sensitivity to issues of culture and social location to the practice of psychotherapy.

Course Format

This course combines experiential exercises with discussion of relevant clinical theory, research on the impact of therapists' and patients' social location on the therapeutic process, and case material. After a first class in which we will identify the wide range of dimensions of difference, the first hour of each class meeting will start with a student's

presentation on an object, selected from her or his home, representing some aspect of her or his location on one or more of these dimensions. Over the years, students have selected such diverse objects as pieces of art or music, religious texts, clothing, household utensils, sports equipment, photos, and others imbued with personal cultural meanings. Students are asked to describe how they came to select that particular object; what other objects they considered but decided not to select, and why; how they have been influenced in their identities and relationships by this aspect of their social location; and how this aspect of their social location has afforded them certain resources or privileges, challenges, or both. Other students then pose questions to the presenting student, designed to understand in greater depth the nuances of her or his experience with this aspect of culture and social location. This process of inquiry provides opportunities for students to practice framing questions that they might utilize in clinical work to explore patients' culture and experience; provides opportunities for the "presenting student" to experience being asked about this aspect of him or herself; and provides the basis for a more general discussion of how and when to engage patients in discussion of cultural issues.

In the second hour of each class, the presenting student describes a short vignette that illustrates how their chosen aspect of their social location has entered into their clinical work. The student also briefly summarizes, and brings to bear on the case material, relevant points from two articles which she/he located in preparing her/his presentation. One article will explicate clinical theory relevant to the challenging life circumstances and/or therapeutic issues for patients or therapists inhabiting this particular social location; and the other article will be a piece of research (quantitative or qualitative) that explicates how inhabiting this particular social location affects the therapeutic process. Class discussion will follow. A major focus of the discussion of case material, clinical theory, and research is on how to attend to, conceptualize, and work with differences and similarities between therapist and patient in culture and social location.

Assignments

1. In-class presentation (described above)
2. Ten-twelve page (double-spaced) paper summarizing your in-class presentation, including brief summaries of the central relevant points of the selected articles on clinical theory and research, and a description of at least three specific ways in which creating the presentation and the process of being questioned about culture-based identity and experiences will inform your clinical practice

COURSE GRADING

In-class presentation: 40%

Paper: 30%

General quality of in-class participation: 30%