

Alliance and Socio-Cultural Attunement In Psychotherapy
Silvina Irwin, Ph.D.

The following article was written for the San Gabriel Valley Psychological Association Newsletter and speaks to one element of sociocultural attunement. It was written for the psychotherapy community at large and not specific – though certainly relevant – to EFT.

Most psychotherapists agree that a strong therapeutic alliance is a necessary ingredient for successful treatment. Our clients come to us because they are stuck in their suffering, and as we make sense of their struggles, their stories unfold. The stronger our alliance with our clients and the more safety we build, the more clients reveal of their experience and the more they feel seen and known.

A solid alliance rests on the foundation of the well-known construct of attunement. Erksine (1998) beautifully defined attunement to be ‘a kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others knowing their rhythm, affect and experience by metaphorically being in their skin.’ Daniel Siegel once shared a story about a very depressed client who told him upon termination that what helped her heal in the therapy with him was essentially his ability to exquisitely attune to her. She said, “When I am with you, I feel felt. I know that I am known.”

Attunement can encompass many different elements of seeing and being with our clients. Given current understandings of the ways in which people are shaped by intersecting and overlapping social and cultural identities, we may ask what does it mean to be socio-culturally attuned? That is, the ability to attune to the various identities our clients hold and how those identities have shaped them. In the spirit of seeing our clients in their full humanity, ask yourself: How often have I brought a sense of genuine curiosity to my clients’ experience of living in their many identities within the various social systems that they are a part of – including (but not limited to) race, gender, culture, religious practice, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, education level, age, physical ability, neurotype, family status, and immigration status?

Most of you reading this column have invested, or are in the process of investing, a substantial amount of time and resources to develop your knowledge and craft as a psychotherapist. You likely have studied particular models of psychotherapy in depth and care deeply about being a good therapist and healer. That said, most have not invested much energy in developing knowledge about the ways in which culture, race, power dynamics, and societal structures strongly influence a person’s experience of themselves in the world and shape their internal working models. These internal working models reside deeply within as one’s implicit sense of value and worth, sense of safety and belonging in the world, and expectations of others. If we are to meet our clients in their full humanity, it makes sense that we make space to see our clients

within the multiple sociocultural contexts they are a part of and in all of the important identities that they carry.

Where to begin? As is a common theme in many psychotherapy training programs, it starts with you: the Self-of-the-Therapist. Self-inquiry and exploration of the various identities that you hold is necessary for you to bring your full self and your identities into the process. How can we explore fully with our clients that which we have not explored within ourselves?

Many of us already begun this work in graduate school and various workshops. The task being to recognize the various identities and relational contexts that have been formative to us. A crucial component of this process is reflecting in earnest on how these identities are intimately connected with our experiences of being in positions of power or oppression, part of the majority or minority group, experiences of relational comfort and discomfort, feelings of self-worth, safety, woundedness and distress (Hardy, 2016). Explore for yourself: what are your most important identities? Reflect on moments when that identity made you feel like part of the majority group and comfortable. What did this say to you about your sense of belonging? Were there moments when an important identity you carry made you feel ashamed or less than or judged? What did this experience say to you about YOU? How did this impact your sense of belonging? What did you do with your discomfort?

Bringing an awareness of the various identities and associated experiences that you carry into the room with your clients, provides you with a more expansive lens through which to attend to, understand, and resonate with your clients' range of layered identities. And you will bring with you a personal reference to help you better appreciate the ways in which your client is complexly shaped by their societal contexts and form their working models. Importantly, these working models are at the heart of the psychological distress and problems in living that brings them into treatment.

As it pertains to the therapist-client relationship, socio-cultural attunement offers an incredibly rich exploration of the mix of identities in the room. Dr. Kenneth Hardy says that while "there is no script, only a conversation to explore thoughts about how the mix of similarities and differences may work for the therapy or hinder it at times" (Hardy and Bobes, 2016).

Being socio-culturally attuned may be seen as part and parcel to being a culturally-sensitive psychotherapist, and deeply enhances common factors theory in psychotherapy. When taken on in earnest, these are often uncharted waters for therapists and clients alike, and can be anxiety-provoking and riddled with fear of making mistakes, offending, or getting it wrong. When unaddressed, these very understandable fears and discomforts place us at risk of limiting the self-explorative process described here and lowering the ceiling of the subsequent clinical work.

Being a culturally sensitive expert in counseling is a constant process of evolution and growth – one does not "arrive". Heide A. Zetzer, Ph.D. (2019) notes that it is a process

that is punctuated by the reality that “as soon as you feel culturally competent, conditions will change. New clients, trainees, contexts, and identities will emerge as the culture shifts. Hence, it is essential that we treat ourselves and our trainees with the loving-kindness we afford our clients.” This is a journey best taken with others at your side. Connecting with others to discuss these ideas, seeking consultation, attending workshops, reading literature on socio-cultural attunement and culturally sensitive psychotherapy are wonderful resources to support your development in this arena.

R. G. Erksine, (1998) Attunement and involvement: therapeutic responses to relational needs. *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, Vol. 3 No. 3,

Guillory, P. T. (2022). *Emotionally focused therapy with African American couples: Love heals*. Routledge.

Hardy, K. V., & Bobes, T. (2016). *Culturally sensitive supervision and training: Diverse perspectives and practical applications*. Routledge.

McGoldrick, M., & Hardy, K. V. (2019). *Re-visioning family therapy: Addressing diversity in clinical practice*. Guilford Press.