

# INTRODUCTION

It is important to situate this book in its particular social, historical, and political context. I have written this book during a time of war, terrorist attacks, intense national debate concerning immigration policy and same-sex marriage, ongoing racial profiling and violence and gender-based physical and sexual violence, and a growing income gap between the wealthy and the poor. This is also a time in the United States when children and adolescents are exposed either directly or indirectly to alarming rates of school and community violence and when many young women and men assume that the word “feminist” refers to women who “hate” men. The president of the United States is a biracial, African American and White man, and yet we continue to witness injustice around racial lines. On a global scale, we are witnessing an unprecedented rate of internal and external displacement (due to war, poverty, and ethnic and religious conflicts), human trafficking, and violence against women and girls. There is tremendous innovation in information technology, which

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*Psychoanalytic Theory and Cultural Competence in Psychotherapy*, by P. Tummala-Narra  
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simultaneously has provided needed access to information to an extraordinary number of people globally and has become a space for voicing hatred and prejudice toward other human beings. With an increasing demand for delivering more services in a briefer amount of time, the mental health professions have been losing ground on the ability to adequately address the needs of individuals who face serious challenges, many of which are rooted in social injustice. We are sorely in need of theory that reflects the lived realities of individuals and communities who are typically not heard in the mainstream and that explicitly recognizes the impact of social oppression and the complexity of identity and relationships in the contemporary world.

The influence of psychoanalytic concepts in the United States and elsewhere is pervasive. Across many parts of the world, we witness this influence in our day-to-day lives when we hear people talk about the unconscious, Freudian slips, or defense mechanisms. Yet, everyday use of psychoanalytic language is typically not associated with issues such as race, gender, culture, sexual identity, social class, and dis/ability. Even within the mental health professions, sociocultural issues are associated with feminism and multiculturalism, not psychoanalysis. However, over the past two decades, there have been significant developments in the conceptualization of sociocultural issues within psychoanalysis, many of which are largely unfamiliar to the public. When we conduct clinical practice or research or when we teach, we are faced with realities of individuals and communities that are far more complex than what is described in existing psychological frameworks. While recognizing the historical neglect of social context within psychoanalysis, this book draws on the contributions of psychoanalytic scholars, particularly relational and intersubjective theorists, to present a culturally informed psychoanalytic perspective that addresses the complex realities of people in the contemporary world.

Drawing on different perspectives within and outside of psychoanalysis (multicultural, feminist), this book presents a culturally informed psychoanalytic perspective. I come to this perspective as an Indian American woman who immigrated to the United States as a child; a multicultural, feminist, psychoanalytic psychologist and practitioner; a researcher in the areas of immigration, race, and trauma; and a professor in a counseling psychology graduate program. As a practitioner, I have worked in a variety of clinical settings (e.g., community-based outpatient clinics and inpatient units in hospitals, day treatment, independent practice) and community-based interventions (e.g., schools, outreach). These experiences have informed my conceptualization of cultural competence in practice, research, and teaching, which integrates multiple perspectives within psychoanalysis and psychology to examine the inextricable connection between the individual and his/her sociocultural context.

The book is composed of nine chapters. The first two chapters situate psychoanalytic approaches to sociocultural issues in historical context.

Chapter 1, drawing from historians (e.g., Nathan Hale, John Demos) and psychologists (e.g., Philip Cushman, Lewis Aron, and Karen Starr), provides an overview of the history and migration of psychoanalytic conceptualizations of social context in the United States. The chapter explores the movement of a revolutionary psychoanalytic discipline in Europe to a more socially conservative and medicalized discipline in the United States. It also presents the views of psychoanalysts of the Cultural School, such as Harry Stack Sullivan, Eric Fromm, and Karen Horney. Chapter 2 involves an exploration of the psychoanalytic perspectives of Sandor Ferenczi, Donald Winnicott, and Heinz Kohut, particularly their influence on relational and intersubjective theories. This chapter focuses on contemporary approaches to various aspects of sociocultural context and identity, including gender, race, immigration, social class, sexual orientation, and religion/spirituality, and emerging areas of study (e.g., dis/ability).

The next six chapters present a psychoanalytic framework of cultural competence, drawing from the contributions of contemporary psychoanalysis to the study of diversity. Chapter 3 examines the overlaps between psychoanalytic and multicultural perspectives and introduces a framework for culturally informed psychoanalytic psychotherapy, which contains five areas of focus. Chapters 4 through 8 provide detailed descriptions of these five areas of emphasis in culturally informed psychoanalytic psychotherapy: (a) attending to indigenous narrative; (b) considering the role of language and affect; (c) addressing social oppression and traumatic stress; (d) recognizing the complexity of cultural identifications; and (e) expanding self-examination. Collectively, these chapters emphasize the experiences of people on the margins, the role of social injustice and privilege in identity development, relational life and psychological health, the dynamic and hybrid nature of culture, and the client's and the therapist's self-inquiry. Chapter 9 explores the implications of a culturally informed psychoanalytic perspective for practice, training, and research in psychology. The final chapter focuses on some contemporary challenges within psychoanalysis and the disconnection between psychoanalytic theory and academic psychology. Looking toward the future, I offer some ideas for new directions in addressing these problems and highlight some important applications of psychoanalytic theory in nonclinical domains.

This book is intended for mental health professionals across disciplines (e.g., psychology, social work, psychiatry), educators, and graduate students interested in clinical practice. This book also would be of interest to researchers who are interested in examining culturally informed practices in psychotherapy, the therapeutic process, and psychotherapy outcome. Throughout the book, I present illustrations from my clinical practice and from my interactions with colleagues and students to demonstrate the direct relevance of theoretical concepts and of dilemmas that we all may struggle with in

our work. All of the case examples in the book have been anonymized. The clinical illustrations are not meant to be comprehensive accounts of my work with my clients, but rather highlight certain aspects of the therapeutic process that are connected with particular aspects of theory.

Attending to cultural competence in psychotherapy encompasses the experiences and worldviews of all communities. In this book, I aim to describe the experiences of multiple communities, but these communities by no means compose an exhaustive list. It is important to recognize that although I focus primarily on issues of race, culture, gender, sexual identity, social class, religion, and dis/ability, I do so with varying degrees in each chapter. It is important to realize that what defines the term “minority” is contextual, and, as such, I want to be clear that I am using the United States as a reference point in this book. My intent is not to present an exhaustive review of experiences of each U.S. minority community but rather to engage the reader in thinking, witnessing, and struggling with me about the complexity that is inherent to the interaction among the intrapsychic, relational, and sociocultural and its implications for conflict, identity, and well-being.

In his essay *Criteria of Negro Art*, published in 1926, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote the following:

What do we want? . . . We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals? (as cited in Napier, 2000, p. 17)

Du Bois’s words still resonate today, as minority groups in the United States continue to struggle with the marginalization of their voices, and an entire society is marked by a painful legacy of social injustice and by the challenge of having honest dialogues across the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, social class, and dis/ability. This book is an attempt, within the mental health professions, to move beyond dominant narratives that disenfranchise some communities while privileging others and toward an engagement with multiple narratives. Such a movement is essential for understanding the lived realities of people who are socially marginalized. At the same time, this book is not intended only for majority status (e.g., White, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied) mental health professionals who provide psychotherapy to minority status clients or for therapeutic dyads in which the therapist and client differ on one or more sociocultural dimensions. Rather, the book speaks to the experiences of professionals of all sociocultural backgrounds and calls attention to the importance of examining their practice with all of their clients.