

Resource Guide to

Culturally Alert Counseling: Working With African American Clients

A Training Video for Counselors

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I. Introduction to the Series

This Resource Guide is part of the companion material for four training videos.* The Guide aims to help viewers be more active learners. The accompanying videos aim to teach learners how to incorporate culture into everyday counseling practice. This guide includes explanations of the skills that are demonstrated in each of the videos and suggested activities for trying out the skills. The viewer, informed by this resource guide and other reading, will, with practice, be able to try some of these skills soon after viewing the videos.

*Note that there are two additional videos that make a complete set. Those videos are, respectively, *Counseling Gay and Lesbian Youth: A Multiethnic Demonstration Video* and *Key Practices in Culturally Alert Counseling: A Demonstration of Selected Practices*. This last video is a guide to overall multicultural counseling skills. The other five videos, including the four in this set, are focused on methods for working with particular groups. Resource guides accompany each of the other videos and are available through Sage Publications (www.sagepub.com).

Definitions: Culturally Alert Counseling and Culture

Culturally alert counseling is defined as a *consistent readiness to identify the cultural dimensions of clients' and counselors' lives and to integrate culture into counseling work.*

There is no one method for doing culturally alert counseling. Instead, culturally alert counseling consists of intentionally adapting existing ways to help clients (1) understand their socially constructed worldviews through culture, (2) appreciate their various cultures, (3) to make choices about adherence to cultural norms, and (4) to

recognize and respond to external bias relating to their cultural group membership. From this definition it is clear that such counseling attends to cultural strengths as well as barriers related to culture. It should be noted that culturally alert counseling is a sensibility and a set of skills. The counselor must first inquire and understand the cultural dimensions of a client's life and then act in ways that are culturally attuned.

Culture itself is broadly defined here. Culture consists of *the attitudes, habits, norms, beliefs, customs, rituals, styles, and artifacts that express a group's adaptation to its environment—that is, ways that are shared by group members and passed on over time*. All human endeavors, from attitudes toward health and sexuality to everyday communication styles, are affected by culture, as are expectations about relationships, career aspirations, and self-esteem. What is especially important for counseling are these subjective expressions of culture: attitudes, habits, norms, and beliefs. Culture tells clients what to be ashamed of, unaware of, proud of, and what to aspire to. It tells them whom and how to love and whom and how to disdain. Both counselors and clients might benefit from knowing their cultural assumptions and manners.

General Introduction to the Demonstration Videos

(Key points are in bold font.)

Welcome to these demonstrations of **culturally alert counseling**. The upcoming sessions are guided by the assumption that **we are always influenced by our cultures**, whether they are our gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, or disability, to name some examples.

Those and other cultures affect us in at least two ways: **our own worldviews** and **how others** see us and treat us. On the other hand, it is important to remember that clients are also always **individuals**, with their unique temperaments, interests, and personalities. At any one time, **culture** may take center stage, as it does in the sessions that you are about to view. At other times, culture waits in the wings while clients explore their individual emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Even there, however, culture is intertwined with a person's emotions, hopes, and doubts.

The culturally alert counselor's **task** is twofold: to help clients know and appreciate **the impact of culture in their lives** and to help them **act in empowering ways**, by challenging unhelpful cultural assumptions and external societal biases. Counselors must be ready to welcome culture into the work, and at times **invite** it.

In the four sessions that you will see here, culture is **foregrounded**, as clients confront **external bias, internalized cultural rules**, and importantly, **cultural strengths** in order to fashion the lives that they might imagine, with the counselor's help.

These demonstrations highlight some, but not all, ways to infuse culture into counseling. Viewers are invited to study these demonstrations and complement them with parallel readings from the book *Culturally Alert Counseling* in order to become more complete and ethical counselors.

May you do the good work of empowering clients so they can live the lives that they have imagined.

How to Get the Most From Watching the Videos

Complementary Reading

It is best to read material on each specific cultural group topic before, or after, viewing the videos. Each of the four videos in this set is based on material from related chapters in the book *Culturally Alert Counseling: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Those chapters are the following:

- *African Americans* by Kathy M. Evans and Rebecca George
- *East and Southeast African American Americans* by Bryan S.K. Kim and Yong S. Park
- *Latino/Latina Americans* by Edward A. Delgado-Romero, Nellely Galvan, Melissa R. Hunter, and Vasti Torres
- *Religion and Spirituality* by Karen Eriksen, Shelley A. Jackson, and Chet Weld

What to Look for When Watching the Videos

A. Spoken Introduction to All Videos

After viewing the overall introduction by Garrett McAuliffe, K.C. Dunlap-Joachim, and Ulrisi Green, respond to the following questions:

- Does “culture” refer to only ethnicity and race? What else might be considered cultural? Why would those other groupings also be considered cultures?

- What are two ways that culture affects a person? Name an example for each of those two ways.
- Does culturally alert counseling mean that you can know enough about a person only by knowing her or his cultural group memberships? Why or why not?
- What are two tasks of culturally alert counseling in working with individual clients? Explain and give an example from one of your own cultural group memberships.
- Should the counselor wait for the client to introduce culture-related issues in a counseling session? If not, what might the counselor do to include culture? Give an example of how a counselor can include culture in her or his work.

Some of the answers to these questions will be clearer after you have viewed and reflected on the demonstration videos.

B. Areas to Reflect On

As you view each of these videos, consider the following issues: What are at least two common values shared by many members of the cultural group in the particular video?

II. Work With African American Clients

(Material partially drawn from "African Americans." In G. McAuliffe, Culturally Alert Counseling: A Comprehensive Introduction, Sage Publications, 2008.)

I. Background/Key Considerations

African Americans and European Americans share many values and norms, as do individuals from many other cultures. However, there are particular factors that should be accounted for in working with many African American clients. It must also be noted that African Americans are a diverse group and that individuals vary by social class, religion, region, education, and biculturality. It is important that each client be seen as an individual, with the following factors kept in mind.

- **Spirituality and religion** are highly important and integral for most African Americans.
- **Family** is often broadly defined as **extended networks** of family members and friends.
- **Communication** is often **expressive**, highly animated, and creative.
- **Language** is sometimes the **dialect** variously called African American Vernacular English or Black English, and is a means of bonding with other African Americans.
- **Discrimination** is a societal reality for many African Americans.

II. Points to Consider for Counseling Practice

These worldviews and values may manifest themselves during sessions with African American clients. While many counseling methods used with European Americans apply to work with African Americans, all counselors should consider four specific guidelines.

- **Acknowledge societal bias**, sometimes by introducing the issue and inquiring about the client’s understanding of prejudice.
- **Include family and ancestors** as sources of pride and support.
- **Advocate** for the client and the group by supporting and empowering the client. For example, encourage networking with supportive others and taking affirmative actions.
- And, if you are not African American, proactively **build trust** in intentional ways. For example, be genuine and broach the cultural differences in the room.

You will see these and other guidelines demonstrated in the session that is coming up. Also note the blending of solution-focused, client-centered, cognitive-behavioral, and narrative elements in the session.

III. Ideas on How to Use the Video “Culturally Alert Counseling: Working With African American Clients”

1. **Narrator Overview of African American Cultural Characteristics.** Before viewing the narrator’s overview of traditional African American cultural characteristics, the viewer might first write down the cultural characteristics that she or he associates with African American cultures. Here is space for such a description or list:

My current understanding of important traditional and contemporary African American values:

If this is a group viewing, the leader could then ask for those understandings and write them on the board. Upon viewing the opening narrative to this video, the learners might then compare their current understandings.

2. **The Counselor's Pre-Session Comments.** After viewing either (a) the counselor's (Garrett) opening description of her aims in the session with Gwen and/or (b) the session itself, respond to the following:

- What particular factor might make Gwen's adjustment to a new job and new setting especially difficult? Why might a person such as Gwen, who is accomplished, experience self-doubt in this new job?

- o Answer: being culturally different from most of her colleagues; historical legacies of oppression and mistrust; not being "networked" or mentored

- What might be done to help a client such as Gwen recognize her abilities and gain confidence in the contributions she can make?

- o Answer: helping her remember past achievements, encouraging her to act in positive coping ways that she has done before in similar situations, helping her to meet successful models who are like her

- Think of a time in which you were new and different in a setting, whether it was a new job, an athletic environment, or a new school, to name some examples. In what way were you different?

- Was this experience related to culture, such as ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, or religion?

- How did you feel during the early phases of this experience?

- What happened to make it work better for you, if it did work better?

- How did you talk to yourself about it?

- How did you act?

- How does it affect you today?

3. **The Session**. Respond to the following either (1) while viewing the session, pausing the video periodically, or (2) after viewing the whole session.

- What is “cultural” about Gwen’s situation that influences her feelings of isolation?

- Might there be factors that are at least partly not culture-related?

- o Answer: other aspects of personal history, such as family attitudes, peer relationships, her personality and temperament

- What part does empathy play in the counselor’s thinking and response to Gwen?

- o Answer: As a white male, he must “lean in” empathically to hear another’s experience. He must avoid being defensive as a white male. He can be an ally.

- What special pressures are on Gwen as a member of non-dominant groups that might not be on members of the dominant group in her situation?

- o Answer: to prove herself as competent, to represent the whole group

- How is the counselor proactive in engaging cultural issues in the session, in contrast to treating the client as a non-cultural being?

- o Answer: He presents himself as an ally through his naming oppression, including subtle exclusions and informal networks.

- What is your response to the counselor's here-and-now broaching of cultural differences between himself and the client? Do you see it as helpful? If so, how?

- What does the counselor do to show advocacy and alliance with cultural groups?

- o Answer: (1) he does outreach through speaking on diversity issues to staff; (2) he represents recognition of culture through office décor; and (3) he shares his understanding of continuing oppressions that affect non-dominant groups

- How does the counselor introduce positive assets into the discussion?

- o Answer: He reflects and evokes the client's enthusiasm, energy, achievements, and competence at various times.

- What are Gwen's fears that are related to cultural differences?

- o Answer: the pressure to be all-competent, to speak the dominant dialect at all times; the concern about being different

- What cognitive counseling strategies does the counselor employ to help the client?

- o Answer: asks her to pay attention to her moment-to-moment cognitions; normalizes her thinking; challenges thinking distortions; proposes more adaptive thinking; uses modeling by asking her to think of, and meet, successful African American women

- How does the counselor utilize solution-focused approaches in the session?

- o Answer: asks her to name achievements, competencies, and strengths; points out contradiction to her negative perceptions; asks for the

foundations in family and others for her strengths; challenges her to bring her past successes and current competencies to the current situation; suggests that she can be like the positive models she names; suggests actions

- How does the counselor empower the client?

- o Answer: He encourages her to generate her own solutions rather than telling her what to do; he helps her think of positive cultural models and past successes and coping strategies; he suggests beginning actions.

4. **The Counselor's Post-Session Comments.**

- How does the counselor balance cultural and individual dimensions of the client's life?

- What might the session have been like without mention of race or gender?

- What might have been left out of this session that you would suggest be done?
