

# PSYCHOTHERAPY AND CULTURE

Weaving Inner and Outer Worlds



Zack Eleftheriadou

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Outer Worlds

*Zack Eleftheriadou*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Beverley Costa** was born in London and raised in a bicultural family surrounded by various languages and religions. Her father was Greek Cypriot and her mother was the daughter of Polish–Russian

refugees. After training as a group and individual psychotherapist and psychodramatist, she worked in a multi-cultural educational organization in Reading. During this time, she encountered many people trying to cope with distressing situations with no appropriate outlet for expression. Beverley is the Director of Mothertongue, a culturally sensitive therapeutic support service for people from black and minority ethnic communities, which she founded in 2000. In 2007, Mothertongue won the National Charity Awards, in 2008, the Award for Excellence in the Practice of Counselling and Psychotherapy from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and in 2009 received the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. [beverley@mothertongue.org.uk](mailto:beverley@mothertongue.org.uk); [www.mothertongue.org.uk](http://www.mothertongue.org.uk)

**Zack Eleftheriadou** was born in Famagusta, Cyprus. After the war in 1974, she moved to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and then to London, UK. She holds an MSc in Child Development, MA in the Psychology of Therapy and Counselling, Diploma in Eating Disorders (NCfED), Diploma Infant Mental Health, is a HPC Registered Psychologist (BPS Chartered Counselling Psychologist and a Chartered Scientist and a member of the BPS 'Register of Applied Psychology Practice Supervisors'), as well as an integrative psychotherapist, a psychoanalytic psychotherapist (UKCP registered), Professional Member of BACP, Regent's College, School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and Nafsiyat: the Intercultural Therapy Centre (London). She has lectured since 1990 and has written extensively in the area of cross-cultural work/refugees, including the book *Transcultural Counselling* (1994). She has a private practice in North London, working clinically with children, families and adults and supervising students. She has worked as a visiting lecturer/consultant at the Tavistock Clinic, The Anna Freud Clinic, The British Association for Psychotherapists, Universities of Hertfordshire, Middlesex, City, East London, Surrey and University College London, among others. She is ex-Chair of the BAC Division 'RACE'. She is thesis reader, a Psychotherapist for the School of Life (London) and Patron for Mothertongue, the Multi-Ethnic Counselling and Listening Service (Reading).

**Edina Dzeko** was born and grew up in Sarajevo, Bosnia. She came to London at the age of twenty-one as a refugee, following the

outbreak of the war in her country. She later trained as a counselling psychologist and is currently working within Hertfordshire Partnership Foundation NHS Trust. Her areas of interest are trauma and refugees, and she has worked with clients who present with dissociative personalities resulting from severe childhood trauma. She also incorporates energy psychology methods in her work with clients.



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## PREFACE

About twenty years ago, as I was beginning to venture into a psychology career, I was asked to lecture at an American International University on the subject of cross-cultural psychology. The whole experience was as an eye-opener, and, after extensive research, I realized I could find only a few books on the “role” of culture in psychology and psychotherapy. It became apparent that I had to look beyond the subjects of general psychology and psychotherapy, such as sociology, social psychology, and anthropology. This became the start of the most fascinating journey in teaching, clinical and consultancy work, and, of course, my own personal development in the cross-cultural arena.

During my various trainings in psychology and psychotherapy, cross-cultural issues were generally not explored in depth, but my own background (being a Greek-Cypriot who had lived in other countries) and the fact that I had studied in Cypriot, Greek, American, and British schools provided me some significant “tools” which helped me to relate and understand my international students, colleagues, and clients. I am aware that I hold a strong belief for social justice, identify with the deprived or politically persecuted, inevitably connected to my own experience of becoming a

refugee, losing everything, and having to start from scratch—literally. This has always made it easier for me to identify with those who are not mainstream, those struggling with higher levels of frustration, anxiety, and deprivation. This has been reflected in my professional choices of working in many deprived areas of London.

I live among an extremely multi-cultural group of colleagues, family, and friends in which one can take the “mixedness” for granted. It is only when I leave multi-cultural London that I am often reminded of how different my reality is. The whole cross-cultural voyage has been a long one, and writing this book has certainly been both fulfilling and cathartic. The process has been one of drawing from inwards to the professional, alongside many clinical and teaching exchanges with clients and students from all types of backgrounds. Similar to my own process, in order for my students to really grasp cross-cultural issues, they would have to engage both academically and emotionally. Taking this on board early on, I adapted the teaching methods completely. I now strongly believe that teaching cross-cultural psychology has to be experiential and theoretical, concurrently. In my clinical practice and supervision of students’ work, I have been aware that my clients required acknowledgement of cross-cultural issues, in order to make a connection. I am now convinced that the more I was able to hear the cultural issues in my clients’ material, the more the material “flowed” and we were able to work on a much deeper level, which is more fulfilling for both parties.

The tone of the book will undoubtedly reflect my own European and Middle Eastern homes and my cross-cultural relationships. I cannot but reflect on what I have been exposed to personally and professionally through my experiences. In this book I have drawn primarily from the “stories” of my clients and students. (All of the identities of any clients and students mentioned in the text have been disguised to retain anonymity. At times, identifying characteristics have been altered, or several clients’ backgrounds have been merged to ensure anonymity. Through this writing style, I strongly believe the essential learning points on cross-cultural work remain, without compromising any personal details of any of our clients and students. The exception is Chapter Ten, where the respondents agreed to have their stories shared for learning purposes, but retain anonymity.) Despite (and inevitably) using my own socialization

influences, I hope that I can demonstrate a way of truly engaging with the differences, barriers as well as the similarities.

### *Aims of the book*

This book is a selection of readings that focus on cross-cultural relationships and examines how culture and racial factors manifest in the clinical setting. For the purposes of this book, the main focus will be the psychological journey in the background of this rich and vast cultural context. In other words, we will examine how the socio-political is made sense of within the psychological sphere. The aim is to understand the dynamic interaction between the person, the familial, and the cultural system, as well as the socio-cultural context of the therapy. These dynamics will be examined throughout the text, using case material from specific populations, stemming from the all of the authors' extensive clinical experience. Inevitably, this implies that it was beyond the scope of this book to include clients from a wider range of cultural and racial backgrounds, but it would not have done justice to them, as this area is simply too vast. My hope is that the clinical examples challenge the myth that people of different cultures do not need or use therapy, and also show that if the therapy offered is respectful of them as a person and their culture, they will engage in longer term, psychotherapeutic work.

One of the main aims of this text is to open up a discussion about how to work with both cross-cultural differentiation and integration (Pedersen, 1997). I hope the ideas presented in the book will be useful to all of us who work with people from different social contexts; such as class differences, language, sexuality, age, among many others. It is not the aim to present a new kind of theoretical model (since we have far too many already) or a "how to do it", which is fit only for those who are culturally or racially different, as this would suggest that "they need something which is different". I hope the ideas presented engage professionals belonging to any professional home and that it encourages further discussion of cross-cultural issues.

Many names have been to describe the field of cross-cultural work, such as multi-cultural counselling, intercultural therapy, but

the name mainly used in this text will be “transcultural” (see Eleftheriadou, 1994). In this context, “transcultural” is used to describe what happens when two people come together from different value systems and try to create a connection. As in my previous writings,

“cross-cultural” implies that we go across or “inter” culture in trying to understand another person. That is, we use our own reference system to understand the client’s experience rather than going beyond our own worldview. The difference between cross-cultural and transcultural is a crucial one because “trans” denotes that counsellors need to work beyond their cultural differences. [*ibid.*, p. 31]

I believe that a cross-cultural interaction can transcend barriers and be a real human meeting, although we have to work harder to understand the potential “barriers”. We need to become more culturally responsive therapists, viewing the person as a whole, and taking into account how the socio-cultural factors contribute to the formation of the self and relationships with others.

I would urge the reader to keep in mind that these writings are based within a particular time frame and context (bearing in mind, it is written from the experience of multi-culturalism [mainly] in the London/Reading, UK context as the professional base), and this book is a response to this particular point in time. As a clinician, I do not claim to overcome all barriers, but, as a result of my experience, I do hold a great deal of hope that the majority of the time we can find *enough common ground* to connect together well. Throughout the text, relevant references to theoretical and research material will be given, although the focus is primarily an applied one. This is because, as Steiner states,

theory may in fact obstruct the analyst’s capacity to open himself to the patient’s material. Perhaps such disappointment with theory is a healthy state of affairs and leaves us aware that a good theory is a fine servant but a poor master. [1996, p. 1082]

Although there is a strong psychoanalytic strand throughout the book, I do not believe this is the only framework to understand human nature or to follow as a clinician, and taking more than one

framework is, in itself, a cross-cultural exercise. There are useful ideas that I refer to, but the emphasis is a flexible framework, hence, the book includes two chapters which do not necessarily follow this theoretical school of thought. My own professional background, in a way, also reflects the travels between different theoretical frameworks, as my own training began through a psychology degree, which I believe provided me with a kind of “methodology” in my personal and professional constant search for meaning. The word “methodology” does not in any way imply a strictly scientifically rigorous way, but a structure for observing and openness for the kinds of factors that require consideration. Later, I trained in integrative, existential/phenomenological psychotherapy, and later still completed a training in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and have taken an active role in encouraging therapists to take social responsibility for their work.

I have worked with a range of backgrounds and age groups: adults, adolescents, children, and infants. The former have taught me about narratives and the way we engage and create meanings out of our life experiences. The latter groups have taught me about the power of the non-verbal, which links in to my early influences with Paddington Green Child Psychiatry. There, I was introduced to the work of one of the most creative theorists in psychoanalysis, D. W. Winnicott. Many of the ideas in the book reflect this influence.

Culture is defined in a particular way in this book, recognizing that there are cultural practices that are helpful and enriching to our clients and others that are simply power relations and inequalities enforced on the individual, on men, women, and children. Furthermore, I believe that some cultural practices and rites are simply brutal. Additionally, we can explore cultural elements in relation to our clients, but we cannot take on the whole culture, it is *only our clients' culture* that helps us to work with them and understand their meanings. There are elements we may not understand, or agree with, but we have to pace our client's exploration and not impose our western values on them. However, there may be practices that are illegal in our cultural context, and one has to have an open conversation with the client from the outset about the way forward if we are to work together, clearly outlining the legal issues. These issues are extremely delicate and sometimes unfold in rather unclear ways clinically. Although there are many different books

being published frequently in the cross-cultural psychology/therapy discipline, the aim of this book provides a way to integrate the issues into our clinical work rather than place them in a separate field.

The racial and cultural differences and bridges are emphasized, but there is also a need to hold on to the individuality of the person and ensure that this does not get lost at any cost. I strongly hope that the reader is able to apply all the theoretical and clinical ideas to working with any client. It is a way of helping us to become sensitive to the differences and the importance of the social context, cultural and racial roots, and, subsequently, the formation of our complex and ever changing psycho-social identity. At the risk of sounding rather “traditional” or even nostalgic, I really do believe that in recent times, with much global movement and change, it has become *even more* significant for people to hold on to a sense of feeling rooted. I must add that I am referring to the individual’s “comfort levels” and not prescriptive political views on how they should belong to the new culture.

In focusing on race and cultural issues, I am aware that other highly significant social factors, such as class and gender, are not explored in great detail, but feel that there are extensive writings and research on these (e.g., Altman, 1995; Wheeler, 2006), and my personal belief is that the most neglected (still) are the issues of race and culture; hence, the focus of this book. In fact, in many writings and workshops I have attended over the years, they are examined together. Here, it is the intention to study cross-cultural issues closely without diluting them with other “social” factors and influences, even if there is overlap.

Throughout the book (apart from guest authors’ chapters, where they clarify their own terminology), I will be referring to the consulting room process as “therapy” for shorthand, unless I intend to refer to the separate fields of counselling and psychotherapy. It is also important to say a word about what is psychotherapy at this stage: the whole word “psychotherapy”, comes from “psycho”, which stems from the Greek word “psyche”, or the healing of the human soul, mind, breath of life. The latter part, “therapy”, stems from “tharapeia”, meaning, finding the remedy or treatment to health problems. In the mental health profession, it is a dynamic, in-depth conscious and unconscious process that explores and

analyses the person's life, behaviours, and cognitive processes and attributed meanings. It is a relational process where therapist and client work together to "co-construct" (Stern, 2004) meanings, the therapist being a professional and expert in their profession, but not on the client's life.

Chapter One is entitled "Introduction" and provides an overview of the issues and makes the case for why another textbook in this field is necessary. It makes explicit the backdrop of my philosophy and motives for writing a cross-cultural text. The central aim is to weave the cultural/racial layer into our theoretical thinking and clinical work. The overriding belief is that learning needs to be applied, rather than merely theoretical, since we know that:

For most people, prejudice is too deeply rooted in their own belief systems, is too consistent with their day-today behavior, and receives too much support and encouragement from the people around them to be reduced by a book, a film or a radio broadcast. [Aronson, 1984, pp. 259-260]

Chapter Two is entitled "Culture, race, and identity: meanings and complexities". This chapter explores the different concepts of culture, race, and identity, and demonstrates how they are socially and politically constructed, but also how people themselves may identify with these. Every culture has implicit and explicit ideas on different age-related norms and expectations. Whether these are adhered to or are rejected at some stage, they will have an influence on how the personality or relationships are shaped. Furthermore, throughout the life cycle, there are multiple cultural and racial influences that contribute to a person's psycho-cultural and racial identity.

As Tuckwell reminds us,

Race and culture are multi-layered concepts that embrace sociological, political and psychological perspectives. Both constructs are highly significant in the interplay between outer world experiences and internalized beliefs about self and others, and in this way they have similar attributes to social organization and identity. [2006, p. 143]

Chapter Three, "Pre-transference, transference, and counter-transference" introduces these psychodynamic concepts early in the

book, as they are thought to be extremely useful in clinical work. They can inform us of the unspoken, often unconscious, aspects of the communication, which may not emerge for some time. This chapter emphasizes that this type of in-depth interaction can only take place by monitoring our own conscious and unconscious reactions to our clients.

The next chapter, Four, is entitled “Barriers to cross-cultural work”, as a way of outlining some of the most common barriers to cross-cultural communication. Our work is full of potential communication frustrations and misunderstandings, but becoming aware of them can deepen the communication and make the client feel there is hope of being understood or “emotionally met” by the therapist.

Chapter Five is entitled “Clinical assessment”, which warrants a separate chapter in order to emphasize the significance of the first contact or first meetings with the client. Taking a proper psychosocial history is essential when taking on a new client, but also, if the initial contact is successful, it gives clients hope of being understood and supported in some way.

In Chapter Six, entitled “The therapeutic relationship”, introduces concepts such as the therapeutic alliance, holding, and containment are utilized to think about how the two parties, the client and the therapist, engage in clinical work. It is perceived as an exploratory process, in that, as therapists, we have the theoretical and clinical knowledge, but we are guided by the client’s communications and emotional state as to which direction the therapy goes. This chapter demonstrates that we can keep a balance, not to retreat into the internal world or to focus on the external world and to keep in mind the potential relationship between the two.

The next chapter, Chapter Seven, is entitled “The psycho-social experiences of different immigrant groups and the multi-faceted migration journey”. The aim is to help us understand different psycho-social experiences and how they contribute to people’s thinking and conscious and unconscious behaviours. This chapter is by no means conclusive regarding what people bring, but indicates their different psycho-social needs. The migration journey is discussed at length, to illustrate that it is a long process and may take many convoluted turns. The person’s inner resources, as well as the external environment, are contributing factors in how people settle in a new country.

Chapter Eight, entitled “A working model of a community based, culturally sensitive counselling service”, is written by the Director of Mother tongue, Beverley Costa. In this chapter, we are introduced to a counselling service that successfully meets the needs of BME groups and has developed ways to reach out to the local community. The local community and the service maintain an ongoing dialogue that identifies the client needs.

In order to get to grips with cross-cultural dynamics, it is important to gather material from clinical and non-clinical populations, as the former cannot possibly be representative of Black Minority Ethnic (BME) populations in any way. All the above chapters have focused mainly on clinical populations, but the next chapter, Nine, entitled “The stories of four Bosnian women”, contributed by Edina Dzeko, is a moving account of four Bosnian women and their journey and perceptions on losing their homeland and moving to the UK. The women simply told their stories to the interviewer, without therapeutic comment and their stories are recorded here as an insight into their journeys.

Chapter Ten is entitled “Psychotherapeutic work with refugees: understanding the therapist’s countertransference”, and examines the specific unconscious reactions we may experience when working with refugees or exiles. It builds on the previous chapter, and Chapter Three, to highlight the unique dynamics in the clinical encounter when working with this particular group of clients.

Chapter Eleven is entitled “Psychodynamic considerations for diversity consultancy in organizations”, by Aileen Alleyne. Aileen writes from a consultant’s perspective of the conscious and unconscious dynamics when working with organizational groups. Whether we work in an organization or in private practice, it gives us a detailed account of some of the defences that come into play alongside racial factors.

### *Readership*

This book is aimed towards both trainee and experienced psychologists, counsellors, psychotherapists, social workers, and other mental health workers who are interested in enhancing their cross-cultural therapeutic work.