



## Cultural Competence, Cultural Trauma, and Social Justice With EMDR

A Review of

*Cultural Competence and Healing Culturally Based Trauma With EMDR Therapy: Innovative Strategies and Protocols*

by Mark Nickerson (Ed.)

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### Introduction and Background

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*Cultural Competence and Healing Culturally Based Trauma With EMDR Therapy: Innovative Strategies and Protocols*, edited by Mark Nickerson is a groundbreaking work that sets a gold standard for how therapists can approach multicultural competency and for how to do so within established eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) frameworks. The book provides guidelines, cases, and examples for looking at EMDR from three cultural competency perspectives: (1) EMDR's theoretical basis and techniques are compatible with many cultural contexts, (2) therapist cultural attunement is emphasized, and (3) a clinical model is provided for treating the harmful effects of cultural trauma. The aim of this review is to provide readers with a general conceptual overview, the key strengths and contributions, and potential areas to explore in the future.

The book's editor and contributors understand where the mental health field is moving in regards to cultural competency. This book is on the cutting edge—it shows us the vast potential of EMDR in healing culturally based traumas that persist today and the traumas that are endemic to our cultural histories. The topics targeted could not be timelier and cover a broad range, including specific cultures, gender diversity and sexual/affective orientation, disability, immigration trauma, refugees and asylum seekers, and even EMDR as an anti-oppression endeavor. The final chapter covers the overarching issue of teaching and learning EMDR in diverse cultural settings.

Few, if any, works have brought together such a rich collection of information about using EMDR in cultural context, with detailed information on how to modify the EMDR protocol and with emphasis on maintaining cultural humility and respect for the client always. Works such as *Trauma and Migration* (Schouler-Ocak, 2015) address cultural factors in the treatment of a specific population—immigrants—and there is a chapter on using EMDR. Other works, such

as *Light in the Heart of Darkness: EMDR and the Treatment of War and Terrorism Survivors* (Silver & Rogers, 2002) cover the use of EMDR in a range of settings from school violence to refugees to combat to terrorism. Few works have the scope, breadth, and depth of information and practical tools provided to extend cultural competence that we see in the Nickerson book.

## **Seamless Integration of Multiculturalism and EMDR Therapy**

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This book offers strong and meaningful multicultural considerations and contributions in treating and correcting damage inflicted by social injustices. The editor and chapter authors take the standard eight-phase protocol of EMDR and enhance it with the cultural considerations and adaptations for specific populations. Additionally, the book describes the mechanisms and theory behind the smooth integration of culture and EMDR in a highly accessible way. EMDR is client centered, uses the client's own words, is minimally verbal, integrates universal brain biology, and can be done nonverbally. We see in the various chapters how EMDR is applied to diverse populations with varying cultural traumas and narratives. Readers should know that this book is not a guide for how to conduct EMDR. The chapters assume that the audience is already well versed in its practice.

Nickerson asserts that culture, trauma, and EMDR are all intricately interwoven. Previous authors (e.g., Van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisath, 2006) have also emphasized the inherent cultural context of trauma. How a trauma is interpreted and given meaning is within a cultural context. Since culture cannot be separated from trauma, the cultural competence of the practitioner is even more important.

The inseparability of trauma and its cultural context is made clear in the current book through case examples. For instance, a chapter on learning EMDR in Uganda notes that there the concept of trauma is visualized as an attack on a communal symbol, such as a hut being destroyed by a tropical storm. The way that Ugandans best describe recovery and healing in the English language includes elements of nature, where recovery can be described as being trapped in the bush and walking out into the clear sunny field alongside the therapist.

## **Concrete Tools**

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This work can potentially break down barriers for practitioners who feel challenged by incorporating culture into their practice. The book gives concrete and simple techniques, and can take some of the guesswork out of the at times abstract and idealistic nature of social justice work. However, this book is not an introductory tool. This book elevates our thinking about culture, cultural trauma, and social identities into a seamless intervention that addresses these experiences while staying true to the client's individual uniqueness as well as the principles of EMDR therapy.

Sections and chapters that address specific cultural groups are chock full of tools and supplementary materials. These include the suggested use of genograms in elucidating intergenerational patterns and histories, the Sex/Gender/Affectional Continua Chart that delineates the nonbinary gender expressions of clients, and the use of visual stimuli for

clients with intellectual disabilities, to name a few. In a chapter on “Healing Culturally Based Trauma and Exploring Social Identities With EMDR Therapy,” Nickerson provides assessment tools for practitioners and clients like the Cultural Genogram Questionnaire or the Social Identity Wheel. Recognizing that some clients may not be used to thinking of themselves as having social identities, Nickerson provides these exploratory exercises to help the clients think about different dimensions of their identities.

## Cultural Competency Excellence

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This work uses a wide contextual lens that addresses various narratives. Included are the immigrant population; refugees and asylum seekers; those who experience transgenerational trauma; transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) populations; lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients; those with intellectual disabilities; police; those who struggle with addiction; those who have nonconforming societal appearances; the elderly; and those who have privileged identities. Furthermore, other marginalized issues like transnational adoption, fetal alcohol syndrome, and helping those who are overweight and who struggle with self-acceptance are mentioned, widening the applications for the strategies posed. Many of the chapter authors note that although they may be focusing on a particular cultural group, their findings can be applied to those in parallel and intersecting situations. For instance, an immigrant woman of color from Latin America may have parallels with an immigrant from Africa or a first-generation American person of color.

Compelling client narratives offer the reader an intimate look into how culturally relevant EMDR techniques can transform clients’ culturally based traumas and lead them toward a path of hope and healing. One powerful case example features Greg, a sensitive White transgender man who uses his “future empowered transitioned self” to help him move through a state of anger and grief for having to hide, to endorsing a positive cognition of “It’s okay to be me.” We follow his evolving sense of freedom and hope in not having to ascribe to the rigid gender binary model. Another case example is framed by the recognition that police often operate within social and group norms that do not allow for mental health-seeking behaviors. Rob, a police officer, is able to reframe mental help-seeking behavior as an inner personal strength rather than a weakness.

Another example of the exquisite cultural sensitivity of this book is the narrative of Alma, a bicultural immigrant woman who feels marginalized by both of her worlds. The therapist uses a wide holistic lens in bringing out her experiences of shame and classism in Mexico, the anxieties that come with violating gender norms in her family, and her feelings of guilt for cultivating a marriage that resembled modern Western ideals. Alma ultimately enjoyed a new integrative cultural awareness where she could be her authentic self while maintaining her cultural-racial membership, membership to the larger societal culture, and membership to the human race.

This book also brings to light vital issues for enhancing therapists’ cultural competence through terminology, and important adaptations, with rationales. For example, in a chapter on working with TGNC clients, the author provides insights for why standard history taking needs to be modified for TGNC clients. Asking these clients to visualize themselves as children might be confusing and potentially reinjurious if their gender expressions or identities are different today, for instance. There is a whole section on sexual/affectual orientation and gender diversity.

## Anti-Oppression, Addressing Client Prejudices

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Another revolutionary part of this book is a chapter on using EMDR to dismantle prejudice and to explore social privilege. The author provides a concrete EMDR protocol for targeting prejudice and negative externalized beliefs. We see the success of this protocol through short case examples. For instance, a recently retired police officer was able to recognize that he viewed “dark-skinned” people differently from Whites and felt fear and a sense of danger. He was able to clear the disturbance, took an active interest in and respect for different cultures, and began to date a Latina woman. Throughout this chapter, the key to attitudinal change was to tap into the client’s own experiences of emotional pain as it segues into recognizing the pain of others. We see deeper self-empathy and compassion translate into empathy for others.

While we know that EMDR therapists are able to help people on an individual level, it would be interesting to see the overarching social justice applications. The reprocessing of individuals who affect the systems that create barriers for certain groups could have tremendous benefits for society as a whole. It will be interesting to see how dismantling prejudice at the individual level could translate to ripple effects in a systemic perspective.

A related chapter addresses EMDR therapy as an anti-oppression endeavor. EMDR is used to help clients change the internalized oppressive thoughts that they hold for themselves. For instance, a bright undocumented Latina student lacked English skills, which led her to believe, “I am stupid.” This cognition, while irrational, is one that is often reinforced by the predominant value system. It was appropriate to label her cognition of “I am stupid” as an oppressive cognition rather than a negative cognition (in the typical EMDR protocol). This type of reframe respects the social realities of the client and also elevates clients’ level of safety since the problem does not lie within them but within society. The EMDR therapist can help clients to reprocess these societal messages as a means to heal and make meaning out of their suffering.

## Emphasis on Client Safety, Dignity, and Therapist Humility

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From the very first section of the book, Nickerson sets a precedent for cultural humility and therefore therapist humility. The contributing authors of this book implicitly inspire a sense of curiosity within the reader through the interesting narratives, findings, and concepts. Additionally, the authors provide knowledge and practical tools to better therapists’ skills in working with different populations. Some of the authors openly discuss their personal challenges with facing some of their privileged identities, as well as their role in perpetuating social barriers that harm clients. Talking openly about these issues further promotes the normalcy that comes with social blunders and therefore meaningful therapeutic interactions when they are handled with humility and compassion.

The theme of client safety and dignity permeates the chapters. This goes hand in hand with therapist humility and cultural attunement. It is obvious that the authors hold true to the tenets of social justice, as can be seen from the comprehensiveness and deep breadth of material presented. This book is highly recommended to readers interested in cultural competency and social justice, as well as readers who want real, practical tools in how to

use and modify psychological techniques to heal diverse clients and even to heal cultural trauma. This book can be used as a general reference for all practitioners who wish to illuminate their understanding of trauma and its cultural context. And finally, for EMDR practitioners, this book provides extraordinary tools and examples for altering EMDR protocols for cultural competence and social justice.

## References

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