



Understanding Race, Ethnicity and Power: The Key to Efficacy on Clinical Practice

Elaine Pinderhughes

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While practitioners in the social services and mental health professions work with people from a variety of ethnic, racial, social, and economic backgrounds, they often do not understand or feel comfortable with those whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own. Several books have addressed this problem by examining the ethnic diversity of clients, surveying the behaviors and values of various groups. Elaine Pinderhughes moves far beyond this limited client-oriented approach to reveal the pervasive influence of race, ethnicity, and power on the practitioner's own identity and in interactions with others -- peers, subordinates, and superiors, as well as clients.

Experiences related to cultural difference can cause individuals to develop negative, ambivalent, or confused perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about themselves and others. In a cross-cultural treatment encounter, these internalizations can compromise the ability of the practitioner to provide effective assistance to the client; at the same time, they may cause the client to misperceive or distort the intentions of the practitioner. To overcome these obstacles, practitioners must transcend the cultural blindness of the "melting-pot" perspective in which the white middle class is assumed to be the norm and develop a greater understanding and appreciation of differing needs and values. Pinderhughes emphasizes that the development of this cross-cultural sensitivity requires that practitioners first attain an awareness and comprehension of their own cultural background and its meaning and significance for their interactions with others. Practitioners who understand and value their own ethnicity are in a better position to value that of their clients, and to help them overcome psychological conflict and feelings of alienation resulting from experiences related to their cultural identity.

Understanding Race, Ethnicity, and Power enhances cross-cultural awareness by examining the influence of racial and ethnic identity upon the psychological and social dynamics of interactions among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Pinderhughes emphasizes the primary role of power in the dynamics of cross-cultural communication and examines how power and lack of power, which are inherent in the roles of clinician and client and in their cultural group statuses, can affect clinical processes and outcome. Through examples drawn from her clinical practice and the numerous cultural sensitivity training workshops she has conducted at universities, health facilities, agencies, and professional meetings nationwide, as well as through her review of the most current professional thinking and empirical data, Pinderhughes helps individual practitioners clarify the meaning and values implicit in their own attitudes, feelings, and behaviors, and shows how to incorporate these insights in daily clinical practice to better control, and even change, their own biases.

Elaine Pinderhughes offers a comprehensive, judicious, and insightful approach to issues that have been too long ignored. *Understanding Race, Ethnicity, and Power* is a vital new resource for all practitioners and students seeking to deepen cultural sensitivity in clinical practice and a lasting contribution to improved understanding in our pluralistic society.

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