



# CAUGHT BETWEEN

## INVISIBLE BIAS AS A

**W**hat if you were raised by someone who insisted on marching to the beat of their own drum, bucking the status quo whenever they could, throwing off the strictures of mainstream society at every opportunity? What if this person insisted that *grass* was pronounced “gross” and always used it this way in sentences: “I have to go and cut the gross,” they may say, or “On a summer day, I like to lay in the cool gross in the park.”

You would spend your formative vocabulary years learning a label for an everyday phenomenon, completely ignorant to the fact that no one else uses that same label. It wouldn't be until you used that word in conversations with others that you would start to be aware of the difference. As others laughed, made fun, or just stared at you in confusion, you would be disoriented, not understanding what was so funny. Then, when they offered their own label for the same phenomenon, you would think it was a funny-sounding word and wonder how it could ever mean the same thing.

### THINKING DIFFERENTLY

While this is a bizarre analogy, it is a dynamic we are exposed to consistently as we live in a world that is getting smaller. Every day, we have the opportunity to be exposed to people who see, hear, remember, understand, and explain things differently than we do. All of us are wed to our sensations and perceptions neurologically; it is efficient for our brains to be organized in this way. However, the brain's quest for efficient information handling often sacrifices

accuracy and effective response along the way. For counsellors and other allied professionals, this can be particularly problematic and, at times, even harmful.

Find your true self. Find your voice. Self-actualization. These are all concepts that have positive connotations, especially to those in the helping profession. They capture the essence of what so many of us do: facilitate our clients' journeys of self-discovery in the hopes that when they have accessed that wellspring of

# TWO CULTURES

## BARRIER

BY TED LEAVITT, RCC

identity, it will empower them to break the chains that have bound them. But in our enthusiasm for this process, do we ever stop to recognize how biased these goals and ideals are? This orientation toward the self is founded, many layers deep, in the cultural perspective commonly referred to as individualism.

### ME VERSUS WE

In individualism, the focus is, unsurprisingly, on the individual. Whatever he or she wants, needs, values, or is entitled to is at the forefront of all considerations. The next time you are listening to the radio or watching television, pay attention to how many times advertisers play on the theme of what you “deserve.” You deserve a vacation, a new car, a tasty meal. These things are considered rights in an individualist worldview.

In addition to material things and opportunities, individualists are encouraged to seek independence and to feel entitled to it. No one should tell you what to do, you decide for yourself what is important, you don't have to do anything you don't want to do, etc. If you do not seek independence but

are happy with dependence, then you are doing something wrong and can meet with scorn, shame, and rejection by the group. Of course, the paradox is obvious, in that, even in its most extreme forms, individualism has its own norms to which people must conform.

For many, however, individualism is not the dominant worldview. Rather, a perspective known as collectivism provides the framework or filter through which life is seen and understood. Within the collectivist framework, community needs outweigh individual needs. Being in tune with the needs of others and putting them first, helping others, and working for unity are all pillars of a collectivist worldview. According to the ideal, the individual's needs are met by the community and vice versa; this is often referred to as being interdependent.

Unsurprisingly, many who live in individualistic cultures may also verbally espouse collectivist beliefs and values, believing they are striking the perfect balance between self-centred and other-centred goals. After all, to be purely individualistic is to be narcissistic



and possibly antisocial. The importance is the degree to which a person values this orientation. In other words, individualism and collectivism can be seen as opposite ends of a spectrum.

At times, these two orientations appear to be diametrically opposed; this is to be expected, as not all are required to see things through the same lens. But what happens when a person is caught between these two perspectives, recognizing the merits and obligations of both? If it were as simple as choosing the one you like best, there wouldn't be much angst in the process. But when the individual is not only caught between opposing views but also between opposing forces, the process becomes much more complicated. This is the situation facing many second-generation immigrants as they struggle to balance the expectations and

duties inherent in collectivist cultural norms, often espoused by generations of family, with the apparent freedom from these expectations and norms that are promised by adherents to the individualist perspective.

### STUCK IN THE MIDDLE: AMAR'S CASE

Amar emigrated from a small Southeast Asian country to Canada when he was only two years old. Amar's parents spoke very little English when they arrived in Canada, so they were happy to discover a rather robust community of expatriates from their home state. Despite the economic and social hardships of emigrating, Amar's parents felt their children had the best possible chance of succeeding in life if they were living in Canada. Amar's parents both worked at jobs far below their

education because their degrees were not recognized as equivalent in Canada. As a result, both parents worked long hours and enjoyed very little social time with family.

Because Amar was so young when he arrived in Canada, he quickly picked up the English language, and it wasn't long before he spoke it fluently without even a hint of an accent. At home, his parents insisted that he speak their native language, but, despite this immersive environment, his native language skills began to erode. Amar's parents felt it was important he gain a full education to have the best chance of happiness, so they funnelled a significant portion of their income into private-school tuition. This meant most of Amar's school peers did not live in his family's neighbourhood.

Heading off to school every day,

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## Bridging the Cultural Gap

In their 2012 paper published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Anu Asnaani and Stefan Hofmann suggest several considerations when attempting to bridge a cultural gap, most of which are easily adapted to the apparent contrast between individualistic and collectivistic worldviews.

### **Conduct a thorough, culturally informed but person-specific functional assessment of the presenting problem.**

This is perhaps the most difficult element of working with people with a different cultural orientation. When we meet someone for the first time, even with obvious racial or language differences, we will likely project onto them either our own worldview or the assumed worldview of an individual from their particular culture. While we must be aware of the cultural influences in the client's situation, it is critical that we stop short of assuming that culture is the main contributing factor to their

distress. Sometimes it helps to ask curious questions about whether the presenting issues are common to their cultural background.

### **Engage in self-education about specific cultural norms and consult the literature for culture-specific treatment techniques.**

In this day and age, there is no excuse for not knowing about something so relevant to our day-to-day practice. If you have a client with a different cultural background, you can research the cultural norms and practices of that culture and be informed. Having said

Amar would see the neighbourhood kids walking together, enjoying themselves, and speaking their native language. At school, he was one of only two students with a shared ethnic background, and the other boy was several years older and had no interest in connecting with him. As such, Amar made friends with his classmates, socializing and tailoring his interests to fit group norms. However, he was not allowed to attend any social activities outside of school hours or commitments, because his parents insisted that he go above and beyond the school's expectations in order to be successful academically. Whenever Amar complained, he was called ungrateful and reminded of how much his family had sacrificed so he could have these opportunities; they hadn't come all of this way so that he could go

to birthday parties with his friends or join the volleyball team.

As time went on, his friends grew curious about why he never hung out with them outside school, why he was always so stressed about homework, and why he never talked down about his parents like everyone else. He always seemed to have a mumbled excuse or explanation, but sometimes it seemed apparent to them that he was not telling them the whole story.

To his teachers, he appeared to be the model student. He exceeded expectations in classes and was always cooperative with the adults, never getting in trouble or talking back.

At home, Amar became sullen and less communicative than usual, though he was as obedient and hardworking as ever. His parents continually pointed out ways in which he needed to work



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that, it sometimes helps to engage the client as a cultural informant, asking curious questions rather than adopting the role of expert. While it is one thing to be informed regarding cultural practices, it is quite another to be an expert.

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**Explore the client's perspective on both seeking psychological treatment and the nature of the therapeutic relationship.**

Even in an individualistic society, there is a certain level of stigma related to seeking/needing help for psychological problems. In many collectivistic cultures, the stigma is even stronger, bordering on verboten. Seeking help may be as traumatic as the situation that brought them to your office. In individualistic cultures, the client would be

more likely to voice concerns about the therapeutic process or relationship, whereas, the client with a collectivist background might defer to the perceived authority of the counsellor by default.

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**Identify and incorporate the client's culturally related strengths and resources into treatment.**

It is human nature for us to see differences as deficiencies. Of course, instinct is changeable, but we must first be aware of it in order to address it. For example, an individualistically oriented therapist may see the community-first approach of a collectivist client as restricting, oppressing, or any number of negative things. While this may be accurate in some contexts, the collectivist approach is also insulating and inoculating,

and it is less likely to leave a person feeling like they are all alone in the world. If we begin with what is making a positive contribution to the client's life from a cultural perspective, we may help the client discover that they are farther along their journey than they realized.

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**Identify and utilize technique-specific cultural modifications.**

Counsellors will often implement homework assignments, challenges, or tasks with their clients and, predictably, these tools will most likely be built around the counsellor's preferred theoretical approach. For example, a counsellor who specializes in cognitive behaviour therapy is not likely to use the Rorschach inkblot test. Similarly, these exercises may come from a culturally

biased orientation. For example, an assignment that asks the question, "Who am I?" and directs the client to answer questions about personal preferences and attitudes may be difficult for a collectivist-oriented client to complete. Similarly, a counsellor who focuses on early attachment experiences and attachment styles may find that individuals from collectivist cultures may be more likely to display an anxious attachment style. Within the individualistic culture, this is seen as maladaptive, but within a collectivistic culture, it would be seen very differently. If therapists cannot recognize this cultural difference, they may unwittingly apply pressure to a client to reject their cultural DNA, causing even more distress.

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harder and improve, which came across as constant criticism to Amar. His friends at school were involved in extracurricular activities, didn't have to push themselves quite as hard academically, and had parents that did fun things with the family. He wondered why it was different for him but was afraid to ask the question; he just didn't want to hear the sacrifice story anymore. Instead of speaking up, he withdrew.

#### **BREAKING POINT**

One day at school, Amar handed in a homework assignment he had been working on until late at night. It was challenging for him, but rather than ask for help, he pressed on and finished it. The teacher pointed out that Amar had done an admirable job on the assignment but had misunderstood a major instruction and would need to redo it. The teacher was surprised when Amar grabbed the paper and tore it up before stuffing it in his pocket, returning to his seat, and burying his

head in his hands. When the teacher tried to talk to Amar about it, Amar refused to answer or acknowledge him. When the teacher suggested he call his parents to come and get him, Amar seemed to lose control emotionally, crying loudly and panicking.

The school counsellor set up a meeting with Amar, and in their first conversation, Amar insisted that everything was fine, that the whole situation was a misunderstanding and he would do better in the future. The counsellor took the time to get a full history of Amar's family, including their emigration/immigration experience. Though the story was told through the eyes of an elementary-school-aged child, the counsellor could see certain themes emerging, such as parental pressure to achieve, loneliness, perfectionism, and what she believed was the most prominent of all: the lack of empowerment that Amar experienced as his desires were continually disregarded. The counsellor saw Amar's parents as well-meaning

but harmful in their reminders of the sacrifices they had made and determined that Amar needed to be supported in making choices that were important to him and to develop a strong identity, independent of the plans that others had for him.

#### **CULTURAL BIAS**

This is where we interrupt the narrative of Amar to reflect on the cultural bias inherent in this good-intentioned counsellor's treatment plan. After reviewing the facets of collectivistic cultural orientations, it is fairly plain to see how these deep-rooted beliefs have contributed to Amar's emotional distress. However, it is harder for us to recognize, perhaps, that the counsellor's assessment, with its clear individualistic bias, may prove equally harmful for Amar.

The issue for Amar may not be simply that he feels oppressed and forced into a role he doesn't want. It may not be that he wants his independence and the ability to make

decisions for himself and become the captain of his destiny. What Amar may be facing, more than anything, is a crisis of identity. He is caught between not only two cultures, but also two forces: the pressures and values of his family and the pressures and values of his (adopted) country. Perhaps Amar sees the value and merit in both approaches. Perhaps he has definite leanings toward his family heritage but resists fully embracing it because of how it would be misunderstood by his peers. Perhaps he really does feel oppressed and trapped under the microscope, held to a standard of success that has little value to him. What the counsellor needs to be aware of is her own bias and how it may tint her perception of what is driving Amar's emotional distress.

### IDENTIFYING YOUR OWN BELIEFS

Once, while attending a workshop, the facilitator asked us to tell the group what some of our blind spots were. I sabotaged his exercise by pointing out that I wouldn't know what my blind spots were because I couldn't see them — that's why we call them blind spots. In a sense, this is what we must do when working with cultures dissimilar to our own. We must be vigilant, self-questioning, and willing to accept that our view of the world is just that: a perspective, not an objective reality.

A very simple way to know if our beliefs are acquired or universally true and accepted is to discover whether there are any groups of people in the world who view things differently. For example, in large swaths of our society, the injustice of bullying is viewed as fundamentally immoral behaviour. If we ask the question, "Why is it wrong?" we may answer, "Because there is a

power imbalance," or "It is wrong to cause pain to another person," or "It ruins lives." Often, the best answer we can come up with is, "It just is." From my experience, this is a good indicator that we have identified a core belief. The followup question is, "Are there any groups of people with whom bullying is not only okay but also encouraged?" Of course, the answer is yes. Many cultures around the world have hierarchical organization and caste systems. In other words, the view that bullying is immoral is a learned belief, shared by a group of individuals, just as the opposite orientation is learned and shared.



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The purpose of identifying one's beliefs is not to facilitate changing those beliefs or correcting another's beliefs. The purpose is to identify bias and discover if bias is influencing our approach with clients who have a different worldview. The purpose of this article is not necessarily to

prescribe what to do when working with clients who find themselves stuck between two cultures and having to make hard choices; that is the clinical work that we engage in routinely, albeit in different packaging. The purpose is to open a dialogue wherein we are aware that we are not always aware. When we are trying to identify our own bias, the first place to start is not with our beliefs but with our behaviour and feelings. We may honestly believe we are a family-first, selfless-sacrifice kind of person, but does our behaviour support that belief? More important, do our feelings about putting others first support that belief?

Of course, in a purely client-centred approach, the counsellor's bias should have no impact on the therapeutic process or relationship, but we are humans first and counsellors second. In the real world, a raised or furrowed eyebrow, a deep sigh, or widened eyes can communicate volumes about our own position.

In Amar's case and many others like his, the baseline task of the counsellor is not unique. The counsellor's aim is to help the client make a difficult decision or to find a compromise. By listening to the client from a culturally informed position, the counsellor is more able to hear the client's actual dilemma. If the counsellor is blind to their own cultural bias, whether it be individualistic or collectivistic, they may miss the point entirely and undertake a much larger, and likely unnecessary, task. ■

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