Searching for Cultural Competence With Latin@ Clients

A review of

A Borderlands View on Latinos, Latin Americans, and Decolonization: Rethinking Mental Health
by Pilar Hernández-Wolfe
$60.00

Reviewed by
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My first full-time job as a clinical psychologist was living and working on the San Carlos Apache reservation in Arizona. Almost as quickly as I began working with clients, I discovered that my East Coast training, although from a top program, was not up to my new job. I was not prepared for the staggering mismatch between “Western” academic clinical psychology and the needs of the San Carlos Apache, a colonized sovereign nation in the state of Arizona.

There were two books, however, that, although they didn’t make me an expert (or even competent by any rigorous definition of cultural competence), did start me on a path of greater openness to differences and greater flexibility in helping others. The first of these books is mentioned by Pilar Hernández-Wolfe, which is Duran and Duran’s (1995) Native
American Postcolonial Psychology; in it, Duran and Duran offer key insights into the mental health of Native Americans by tracing intergenerational trauma back through colonization. They also offer a manageable number of vital concepts such as the soul wound and the loss of the warrior role that provide abundant day-to-day explanatory and idea-generating power in working with Native Americans.

The other book that guided me was written not by psychologists but by an anthropologist, Keith Basso (1979), and is titled Portraits of “The Whiteman.” Instead of focusing on the Apache people per se, Basso’s book catalogs Apache jokes about and imitations of White people. From the Apache perspective, a culture where social subtlety is highly prized, White people can be experienced as obvious and pushy, among other things. Although it may have smarted a bit for me as a White and Latino man to read flippant, critical impressions of my own culture from another perspective, this educational process helped me avoid a number of false starts in working with Apache people.

In preparation for providing some commentary on Hernández-Wolfe’s book A Borderlands View on Latinos, Latin Americans, and Decolonization: Rethinking Mental Health, I mention these two books because I believe that they illustrate two important facets to multicultural understanding, particularly within a mental health context. One facet is knowledge of one’s clients’ cultural history, past and present, and how this is likely to impact them psychologically, understanding, of course, that individuals vary greatly. Another important aspect is the acknowledgment of one’s own culture and history, especially where they intersect with those of clients.

With regard to these two aspects, learning about another’s culture and history and knowing one’s own culture to facilitate that process, Hernández-Wolfe’s book meets with mixed success. The book is very loosely divided into six chapters that focus on defining borderlands, colonization and decolonization, new ways of thinking of the borderlands, trauma, healing, and a final catchall chapter.

The book succeeds by bringing the reader’s attention to the vast multiplicity of Latin@ circumstances, especially when one considers the innumerable ways in which bicultural identity is lived by Latin@ people in the United States and around the world. (Latin@ is a construction that resists the gendered Spanish endings yet avoids the complexity of Latino/a.) The author calls this multifaceted bicultural existence living on the borderlands.

Hernández-Wolfe provides interesting examples of lives that are lived across lines (e.g., sexuality, class, race). For example, she tells the story of a lesbian woman who moves back and forth between Puerto Rico and the mainland. She inhabits the borderlands in many ways: She is bisexual, so she is treated as if she is not gay enough for the gay community but is ostracized by heterosexuals, even family members; she is light-skinned, so some treat her as not Puerto Rican enough, and she is treated as an immigrant by Whites and African Americans in her school.
Stories such as these are carefully connected to historical and social conditions, yet only in the broadest of terms. For example, colonization or coloniality is discussed in a variety of ways, but we are not given a careful breakdown of the ways that colonization directly affects Latin@ people psychologically, nor are we provided stories that specifically connect colonization to Latin@ individuals’ psychology. We are mostly provided examples of people’s stories followed by the author’s own conclusions about the political and historical genesis of their circumstances.

As a reader, I tend to agree with Hernández-Wolfe’s conclusions, but I didn’t find myself educated in a specific way about cultures that would give me a handle in working with Latin@ clients. In other words, I learned about broad political and social circumstances that affect people (e.g., prejudice against homosexuality in the Latin@ community), but I didn’t learn much about how I can expect these issues to affect Latin@ people psychologically, perhaps for example, with certain types of trauma-related symptoms. Nor did I finish the book with a sense that I had more tools specifically to help Latin@ people.

My understanding of the book as broad rather than specific was confirmed at the end of the coloniality chapter. Here I found that the client exemplar of decolonization-focused community intervention was strangely not Latin@, but rather African American. It is important to mention that in Hernández-Wolfe’s definition of coloniality, African Americans are a colonized people—that is, they are oppressed by Eurocentricism. However, I imagine most African Americans would describe their history in terms of being an enslaved people rather than a colonized one. Thankfully, a more useful example, this one of transformative family therapy, occurs later in the book and focuses on a Latin@ family.

Whether a book such as this is broad or specific in cultural focus, I believe it is important that it invites the reader/clinician to cultural self-consideration. I found that Hernández-Wolfe only partially succeeds in this invitation. On the one hand, we are given interesting examples of how people locate and consider their own history and culture. The author herself, for example, recounts how a supervision relationship moved beyond an impasse when she and her supervisee considered together how their different perspectives, both in terms of power and culture, were influencing their interaction. On the other hand, in overall tone, the book declares rather than invites, sounding more like a manifesto than a work written for a mental health professional: “The modernity/coloniality collective project utilizes a paradigm rooted in Latin America that runs counter to such modernist narratives as Christianity, liberalism, and Marxism” (p. 14).

At points, the tone takes on a quality of righteousness. In one section, Hernández-Wolfe recounts her response to a naïve comment from a student conference participant who denied that there are colonization issues in his Latin-American home country. The author’s reported response to the student is factually on target, yet she concludes her story by noting that the student himself did not declare his own social background. She argues that his not doing so makes his privilege invisible.
This critical comment occurs in tandem with a long, implicating description of a high-status U.S. Latino male psychologist who “cries” (p. 48) about loss of privilege in the United States. Such commentary left me wondering about her compassion for those who may occupy borderlands in a way not in line with her thinking.

Overall, the book may be of interest to those who want a broad, politicized, postmodern perspective of social circumstances that negatively impact the lives of Latin@s. Readers looking for organization, clarity, and some confidence in working with Latin@ populations may want to take a look but will want to rely upon other authors for explicit advice.

References
