

# Addressing Culture in Batterers Intervention

*The Asian Indian Community as an Illustrative Example*

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*Many of the ideas in this article are derived from the Cultural Context Model (CCM), the community development and treatment model behind the work that is being done at the Institute for Family Services in Somerset, New Jersey. The CCM approaches intervention with batterers and their families from a perspective that acknowledges a multilayered experience of culture. More specifically, the treatment approach requires accountability from batterers and supports the empowerment of victims and children at the same time as it recognizes the impact of a number of social forces related to culture and cultural differences on communities, families, and individuals. These forces include such realities as sexism, racism, and heterosexism, as well as experiences with immigration, colonization, and capitalism. Although the treatment approach is applicable cross-culturally, this article primarily focuses on examples involving families from Asian Indian-American communities.*

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*Too frequently, the impact of culture is either minimized or dangerously misunderstood by domestic violence practitioners embedded within treatment systems that are guided by dominant—that is, White-centric—theories. Minimization of the full meaning and impact of culture occurs, for example, when culture is theorized as an “added-on” characteristic. From this perspective, knowledge about cultural norms is expected to provide details helpful for a (presumably White) practitioner to consider when approaching a client from a nondominant minority. The presumption here is essentially that “those people are just like us (Whites) except for certain idiosyncratic patterns that one needs to keep in mind.” For example, when working with a South Asian-American domestic violence victim, the “culturally sensitive” practitioner might advise him- or herself to keep in mind that these women generally feel more dutifully bound to marriages and extended families. The worker might then be expecting*



to work harder to help this South Asian-American woman make the decision to create safety by leaving her marriage. *Culture* within this discourse is encoded and problematized by the practitioner and by the treatment system to mean *other* in particular ways that forecast the need for certain alterations in approach to develop the most appropriate solutions. Fundamentally conservative and racist, this paradigm of “cultural awareness” strives to meet clients from nondominant minorities where they are and then bring them to where “we” (real Whites) believe they ought to be. Within this formulation, cultural differences are construed as problems, and these problems are believed to reside somewhere within the minority group’s differences from Whites—never within the system of group power dynamics that White domination of institutional structures has created. The need for fundamental cultural change is always perceived as existing within the client’s domain.

A second and perhaps more pernicious distortion of the full meaning and impact of culture occurs when culture is allowed to account for violence. This happens, for example, when South Asian-American men are allowed to explain violence toward women and children as being culturally normative. It is unimaginable that a White male of Euro-American heritage within any batterers intervention system in the United States would receive validation from service providers when he explains his violence toward his partner as being culturally normative. The impossibility of this occurring speaks directly to the differing levels of safety our institutions afford White women versus women of color.

What is necessary to prevent these types of distortions from occurring within the assessment process is a greatly expanded perspective on the meaning and impact of culture and cultural differences. Fundamental to this expanded perspective must be an analysis of group relationships that includes an unflinching exploration of the ways in which the group that holds power over the structure of service delivery systems relates to less dominant collectives. Within this more inclusive analysis, racism and heterosexism are addressed in addition to sexism.

This article identifies culture as a multilayered experience of fundamental significance for each of us, those of us from dominant and nondominant groups alike. It attempts to dismantle the multiple meanings and impacts of culture using the lens provided

by the Cultural Context Model (CCM) and shape a framework for systemic cultural analysis. The article argues for the application of this broadened cultural analysis in therapeutic work with all men, those who choose to use violence in their homes as well as those who misuse power in less extreme ways.

### THEORIZING CULTURE

Culture, in perhaps its broadest definition, can be thought of as "group tendencies." To gain more specificity, one must focus on particular systems levels as well as other aspects of the boundaries of the group being characterized. For example, if one focuses at the societal level within a nation such as the United States, a heterogeneous society in so many aspects of its population, one might identify dominant social norms as signifiers of a national culture. Concepts that begin to capture this "national culture" might include capitalism, White supremacy, Anglo-centrism, postcolonialism, and a form of representative democracy shaped by all of these realities. Considering a still more inclusive system level, one might theorize the culture of civilization. Questions, such as "Which way of being is good and which is bad? Which is correct and which is wrong? Which is healthy and which reflects illness or perversion?" typify and sustain our way of understanding the world. Nowhere in this discourse is there the notion that differences are of equal value or that differences contribute to cumulative strength through collaboration.

Cognizance of these expanded notions of culture is essential before we can move toward more circumscribed definitions. In clinical work, it is crucial to remember the many ways that groups are presently and have been historically connected to one another, as well as the ramifications of these patterns of connection. Within this broadly inclusive level of awareness, questions arise regarding the interwoven impacts of such issues as racism, sexism, and patterns of migration. These questions begin to expand the meaning of cultural awareness, shifting practitioners away from an attempt to capture the essence of a minority group's static "otherness" and toward a more dynamic understanding of inter- and intragroup relationships. Cultural awareness of this expanded nature also causes practitioners to begin recognizing the ways

that the structures of traditional service delivery systems add to and create problems for domestic violence clients from nondominant groups (Almeida, 1993). However, problems can no longer be perceived as residing exclusively within the client's domain.

### SYSTEMIC CULTURAL ANALYSIS

In domestic violence intervention work, as well as in all therapeutic work with families, it is essential to dismantle the power dynamics connected to gender in a way that does not simultaneously obscure and thereby collaborate with related systems of institutional oppression, such as racism and heterosexism. Maintenance of a broad, inclusive, multisystems-level analysis when considering the significance of group differences provides the vehicle for identifying and challenging the entire rubric of oppressive forces acting on communities and families. At the most inclusive systems level, the practitioner needs to consider patterns of contact with extragroup, extracultural collectives. This area of inquiry includes surveying historical and contemporary patterns of invasion, occupation, colonization, and migration, as well as patterns of trade and other avenues of intergroup contact. The second level of inquiry explores the cultural group's interior community norms, including patterns of spiritual expression, community belief systems and common values. Prescribed family patterns, including family roles and rituals for life cycle transitions, constitutes a fourth area. Finally, multigenerational patterns within individual families need to be taken into consideration.

At each level of inquiry, gender role prescriptions and gendered differences in patterns of experiences need to be addressed. For example, discussions about patterns of military rape and rape during slavery, as well as gendered patterns of access to employment during times of occupation and colonization, are necessary for generating comprehensive understanding at the intergroup contact systems level.

It is important to note that these areas of inquiry are not discreet entities—for example, as prescriptions for gender roles are present within the overarching patriarchal structures of civilization and are shaped more particularly at more specific systems level. Rather than discreet layers, therefore, one might imagine each

systems level as a lens through which group tendencies are focused and clarified. At each level, one must imagine that group tendencies also reflect and refract in many directions, influencing more inclusive systems levels as well as other closely related cultural prisms, such that the overall web of impact is more circular than linear.

Fundamental within this framework for cultural understanding is the need for clarity of group definition. Any group that arguably has a common history and heritage can be identified as a cultural entity. Also complicating the act of definition is a necessary awareness that definition of group boundaries is a political act. For instance, the term *African American* can have a number of implications depending on who does the defining and toward what end. The word can be a vehicle for unification in pride, celebration of group power, and common purpose. Alternatively, used alongside a term such as *European American* in racist discourse, it might constitute a vehicle for obscuring significant differentials, such as the legacy of cultural genocide suffered by families from a multitude of African cultural heritages through forced emigration into slavery. Similarly, feminist and profeminist theorists have identified that men and women within each "cultural group" have entirely different experiences of their culture. With these realities in mind, the following section provides an illustration of systemic cultural analysis using Asian Indian-Americans as the case in point. The group is defined as the collective of families living in the United States who trace their family and cultural lineage to the Asian Indian subcontinent.

The reason for providing this example is to demonstrate a process of cultural exploration guided by the paradigm of systemic cultural analysis that we have outlined. South Asian communities, like all communities of color, have been insufficiently served by the domestic violence movement and inadequately studied within the domestic violence literature. This analysis explores some of the forms that sexism takes within the experiences and traditions of this particular cultural group and examines the group's experiences with other systemic forms of violence, such as racism and sexism. Later sections of this article will demonstrate the ways in which understandings gained through this process of cultural analysis create the foundations for domestic violence intervention. It is extremely important to note that

although the particular forms of expression may vary, the violence of sexism, racism, and heterosexism pervades all cultural groups. The authors hope that the focus they bring to South Asians will help contribute to an extending of the safety net in their direction.

### **SYSTEMIC CULTURAL ANALYSIS: ASIAN INDIAN COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES**

#### **PATTERNS OF INTERGROUP CONTACT: INVASION, OCCUPATION, AND COLONIZATION**

With a history of invasion and occupation dating back thousands of years, in addition to an even more ancient caste system based in the religious doctrine of its most populous group, India's national culture is organized strongly around social hierarchy. India's history is one of numerous invasions by the Persians and Muslims, with the most recent colonization imposed by the British, French, and Portuguese. Colonization by the British lasted for about 300 years, beginning during the 1700s and ending in 1947 (Visram, 1986). With a population of 800 million people, India is one of the largest democracies in the world. Hindus are the largest group, although many other religious communities, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims, have lived in harmony with one another. Although Hindu beliefs are quite pervasive (Almeida, 1990, 1996), tolerance and diversity are central to the nation's pluralistic culture. However, strife around religious group differences began to intensify during the struggle for independence from British occupation.

#### **MIGRATION HISTORY**

The first wave of Indian immigration to the United States, mostly made up of farmers, began in the mid-1800s with settlements on the west coast. Discrimination by the government and local White communities successfully annihilated these settlements, with most of the Indians either intermarrying with Mexicans or returning to India. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 relaxed the rules somewhat, initiating the second wave of Indian immigration to the United States in the late 1960s.

Historically, Indian immigration patterns have been motivated by needs for educational and economic resources and, more recently, political security. According to 1993 demographic data, Asian Indians now account for 11.8% of the Asian population in the United States.

Early participants in this second wave of immigration were relatively young (average age about 29 years), highly educated (about 80% had at least 4 years of college), technically trained, and affluent (with an average income of \$24,000) (Chandrasekhar, 1982). The Family Reunification Act of the 1990s, which facilitated the immigration of families of earlier immigrants, has changed this profile, including more individuals who are less highly educated and technically trained (Papademetrius, 1993). Furthermore, there is also a long history of Indians being expelled from their adopted homes, where they had been brought by colonizers, following nationalist movements that succeeded in dislodging European occupation. The movie, *Mississippi Masala* (1992), depicts the struggle for survival waged by one family following its ejection from Uganda.

The information most relevant for domestic violence practitioners to extract from this level of cultural analysis is that Asian Indian-Americans are a group that has endured an extensive history of colonization as well as significant oppression within adopted nations, including the United States. At the same time, Asian Indians come from a pluralistic society where tolerance is a social norm.

#### **COMMUNITY NORMS— CASTE, RACE, GENDER, AND FAMILY LIFE**

Unlike other Asian cultures, Indian culture is embedded within the caste system, an ancient system of social hierarchy based on Hindu beliefs regarding purity and pollution (Almeida, 1990, 1996; Hinnells & Sharpe, 1972). The caste system organizes and influences much of community and family life. Purity relates to one's ability to lead a totally spiritual life and abstain from bodily "decadence." Upper castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas), representing relative purity, aspire toward asceticism, whereas lower castes (Sudras and untouchables), considered to embody pollution, aspire toward purity. Religious doctrines

sanction this polarity, which confers an array of social privileges on higher-caste groups and a lack of entitlement on lower castes. To a large degree, current life circumstances are attributed to fate, karma (Lynch, 1969). Delegation of community roles is explained as part of one's karma or destiny within the evolution of multiple lives and deaths, evolving toward the twice-born castes, or nirvana (Almeida, 1990, 1996; Hines, Garcia-Preto, McGoldrick, Almeida, & Weltman, 1999; McGoldrick et al., 1991). Gandhi's efforts toward a movement of nonviolence implicitly included initiatives to alter the status of women and that of the Untouchables (whom he named Harijans or "Children of God"). He believed that both were part of India's cultural legacy of slavery.

During the thousands of years of colonization by lighter-skinned Persians and Aryans, caste and skin color became increasingly linked in India. Harijans (untouchables), for example, tend to be of darker skin than the Brahmins. Moreover, religious writings about the forces of lightness and darkness in the universe have been interpreted to impart meaning to skin color, with dark skin denoting evil and light skin rebirth and fairness. It is from within this belief system that Asian Indians view all darker-skinned people.

The myth of the model minority has also served to create competing experiences between Asians and other racial minorities. In their efforts to assimilate and disconnect from experiences of colonization, many Asian Indians adopt a position of silence toward racism. Furthermore, because they are less "other" in appearance than various Asian groups and have occupied mostly professional roles in this society, Asian Indians have enjoyed a quiet privilege that is fast changing (Almeida, 1998).

#### COMMON VALUES

Many Indians view suffering and sacrifice in this life as a form of self-discipline that helps one move toward a higher, more spiritual experience of being. As Hinduism is not an organized religion, worship at a temple on a regular basis is not part of the practice. In the absence of larger system supports for such practices in the immigrant context, the family takes on the complex responsibility of enforcing certain beliefs, thereby limiting the flexibility of the system in relation to acculturation and change (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988).



At this level of systems analysis, the White domestic violence practitioner is brought into an awareness of the ways that community norms largely prescribe an acceptance of their circumstances for Asian Indian family members. Social hierarchy based on gender, caste, and race are entrenched customs as well. Based on these realities, the domestic violence practitioner needs to consider the ways that dominant service delivery systems, which construct marital separation as a primary solution for abusive relationships, as well as shelters that replicate typical American household environments as a primary intervention, may be expanded to meet the needs of this particular client population.

#### **FAMILY PATTERNS**

The Indian family is an elaborate network of male-centered relationships. The household supports the male siblings and their families, unmarried sisters, and aunts from the father's side, as well as the parents. Sons bring their wives into the home of their extended family. Because men, not women, are expected to provide economic support for this entire lineage, money earned by women is thought of as belonging primarily to the husband and his family, with only a few women gaining access to family finances. Although women are held in high esteem in the scriptures, they are not valued in real life (Almeida, 1990, 1996). Marriage, childbearing, and impending status as mothers-in-law define women's identities in society. Female children are groomed for marriage, with dowries being the burden that every father and brother carry. When women marry, they typically leave their family-of-origin and move into their husband's home. There, they defer to their mothers- and older sisters-in-law, who prepare them for living in their husband's home and for childbirth. The family system is rigidly hierarchical along gender and age lines (Almeida, 1996; Hines, Garcia-Preto, McGoldrick, Almeida, & Weltman, 1992), and women are not socialized to be independent in any areas of their lives.

Motherhood affords Indian women with male children special status (Almeida, 1990; Almeida, Woods, & Messineo, 1998; Bumiller, 1990). Thus, if many daughters are born, especially to economically disadvantaged families, both the children and the mother are vulnerable to abuse by the husband's family. Families

value male children as they offer heavenly status to both parents and protect families from the prohibitive practice of dowries. Widows with children are not expected to remarry and are cared for by brothers-in-law. Although women had voting rights in India before women were allowed to vote in the United States, they are nonetheless disempowered in many different aspects of their lives. Similarly, although divorce and remarriage are part of modern life both in India and in the United States, they are not culturally approved.

Indian communication patterns tend to follow the hierarchical structure of the family. Elderly women handle family matters and men economic ones. When men and women speak of personal or family difficulties, these are usually described through stories, metaphors, and narratives and less through personal emotions. Anger is not an emotion that is permitted display. The open expression of anger indicates a person's lack of patience and tolerance. Thus, there is considerable shame attached to overtly expressed anger, as it reflects a lack of mastery over one's worldly emotions.

### LIFE CYCLE TRANSITIONS

Patriarchy in many Asian (including Muslim) cultures takes a different form than patriarchy in Western cultures. In South Asia, a code of female behavior that controls female sexuality is the foundation for male honor. This code also determines the two-stage female life cycle of marriage and childbirth. Men, on the other hand, have four life stages, which include scholarship and spirituality. Although adolescence is not a part of the life cycle for either men or women, men are afforded more of a launching experience prior to marriage.

Men often control their wives' entire families through financial requirements. This system forces the bride's family to pay large dowries, which the groom uses for educating his brothers (based on his sibling position) and caring for elderly or widowed parents and aunts. Men also use the dowries they extract for the care of their own unmarried sisters, including the promise of dowries to their sisters' grooms. Male children are discouraged from indulging their sexual impulses and instead are encouraged to meditate in preparation for higher learning and spirituality. Females are

seen as needing greater protection after they begin menstruating and are socialized to accept marriage and childbirth. Interactions with the opposite sex are discouraged, even at coeducational schools. General modesty in clothing and limited activity in sports are encouraged.

Although these customs are practiced at some level by all, they are more commonly enforced by observant Muslims in preparation for *pardah*, or veiling of menstruating and married women (Lateef, 1990; Mernissi, 1994; Papenek, 1973). As many immigrant families do not practice these rituals, education becomes a heightened and pressured experience for most Indian adolescents, serving as a symbol of protection and preparation for marriage. Consequently, this reinforces the stereotype of the model minority.

Like adolescence, the life stage of young adulthood is also absent within Asian cultures. Young adults often live in their parents' home prior to marriage and sometimes even after marriage. Many tasks connected to adolescence, such as leaving home and experimenting with intimate relationships, sexual orientation, career, and work choices, therefore, can become enormous struggles for young Asian Indians. Although marriages are arranged for the most part, nowadays, young women are enforcing more of their choice in the matter of husband selection and dowries.

Death is a particularly symbolic event among Hindus because of the belief in karma and destiny. Death is not viewed as an end to life but rather an opportunity for rebirth and eventual evolution into nirvana (McGoldrick et al., 1991). Widows are expected to perform many rituals of sacrifice glorifying the family, whereas similar rites are not imposed on widowers and other family members (McGoldrick et al., 1991).

This exploration of Asian Indian-American family patterns further reinforces the need for practitioners to generate solutions that expand beyond traditional U.S. solutions: shelter, separation, divorce, and then re-assault with a new partner by the perpetrator. More specifically, this underscores the unlikelihood of Asian Indians accommodating to the traditional U.S. solutions due to both unfamiliarity with separation and divorce as well as institutional racism that makes extracultural immersion in the U.S. cultural context uncomfortable at best and life threatening at worst.

Domestic violence practitioners need to be particularly aware of differences between dominant U.S. and Asian Indian-

American cultural notions that structure marriage and family relational patterns. Within Asian Indian cultures, for example, marriage institutionally propagates a family structure that prioritizes the bond between husband, his mother, and his extended family of origin. Women, consequently, are expected to be other-focused and to find intimacy primarily within relationships with male children and the families these male children later create. This differs markedly from contemporary U.S. cultures, which encourage men to develop their primary relationships with their work organizations, while expecting unreciprocated intimate concern, emotional support, and most family maintenance to be provided by their female partners.

Analysis at this systems level also begins to identify in greater detail some of the patriarchal customs within Asian Indian family patterns that constitute violence. These customs need to be differentiated from culture-maintaining patterns as a central part of the work of domestic violence intervention. The work of differentiating violence from cultural patterns is addressed more fully in later sections of this article.

The impact of immigration and cultural transition on multigenerational family process is central to the assessment of domestic violence. Immigrant families respond differently to the process of acculturation based on a number of factors specific to their histories, such as pre-immigration status, current immigration status, economic well-being, religious affiliation, gender representation within the family, educational level, social class, and the ways in which immigrants experience the loss of their country. There is some research support for the contention of a positive correlation between higher social class, longer duration of residence in Western countries, and weaker allegiance to traditional gender role preferences, as well as greater preference for individualistic versus collective norms (Almeida, 1997).

Despite women's status in India, education of women and exposure to women's rights and entitlements may be more threatening to male-centered families in the context of a U.S. culture that is racist and usually unfriendly to non-White immigrants. The family and community serve as insulation against racism, making it difficult for women to seek assistance even when there is violence in their lives. The domestic violence practitioner needs to be mindful of the ways that these hostile conditions within U.S.

society contribute toward escalating levels of violence within marginalized families.

Values of tolerance and passivity help Asian Indian families withstand racism in their work lives and discrimination toward their children at school. However, the domestic violence practitioner needs to be aware of how this strength can become problematic if there is no appropriate differentiation between healthy and unhealthy levels of tolerance and passivity, especially for women and children. Often focusing on differences in such areas as foods habits, body odor, dress codes, and living conditions, racist attacks are common toward Asian Indian-American children. The combined values of tolerance and passivity together with enforcing family rules of obedience and respect sometimes exacerbate negative patterns of coping (Hines et al., 1992).

Motherhood is applauded in Indian scriptures, music, poetry, and family, but in real life, power rests in the hands of men within hierarchical family structures. However, such culturally symbolic and positive reflections of women can be used to inspire the development of paths toward liberation in real life.

#### **DIFFERENTIATING CULTURE FROM VIOLENCE**

As the previous section illustrates, patterns of male dominance, which can alternately be termed patriarchal customs, vary in form across cultural groups. Furthermore, a ritual such as courtship, which is strongly punctuated by male dominance in U.S. culture and, therefore, is central to the analysis of domestic violence in dominant theories, may not even be present in other cultures. Among Asian cultures, for example, marriage in all of its pre-arranged forms replaces the ritual of courtship. The cultural practices of arranged marriage include a number of rites that privilege men's entitlement and power over women's safety and self-determination. Some examples of other such rites common to Asian Indian culture are dowries, education for the women to increase marketability as brides, and the demand for male children. Female infanticide is also a consequence of male domination.

Domestic violence practitioners need to be vigilant regarding the reality that, although cultural practices and legacies are not homogeneous, within the interior walls of all cultures exist many

oppressive practices. Therefore, there must be a distinction made between these oppressive patterns, which range from actual torture to subtle dehumanizing practices, and cultural definition of norms. Wife battering is not culture; dowries, wife burning, and female infanticide are not culture; the forced use of purdah or veiling for women in Islamic communities is not culture; foot-binding and the practice of concubines among the Chinese are not culture. These are traditional patriarchal customs that men have practiced, and women have accepted, for generations. Nonetheless, these practices cannot be considered culture.

Culture is the positive transmission of rituals, celebrations, and stories that makes familiar the general ordering of life for members of a particular group. Even in the face of varying forms of oppression by external forces, culture perpetuates connections for families via particular art forms, food, language, and religious practices. At times when external forces, which may include racism, homophobia, colonization, antisemitism, and capitalism, are intensified toward members of a particular group, cultural norms as well as customary oppressive practices within that group tend to become rigid. This is an effort to preserve group identity.

It is crucial that domestic violence service providers understand these normative processes, wherein members of a group mistake violent customs for culture-maintaining activities. Our service provision systems cannot continue to be structured in ways that do not assess and intervene effectively at the multicultural interface. The CCM offers a comprehensive approach for helping families negotiate the often harsh complexities of our multicultural society as part of their work toward freeing themselves from the tragedy of domestic violence.

### **OVERVIEW OF THE CULTURAL CONTEXT MODEL (CCM)**

The CCM (Almeida, Woods, Messineo, & Font, 1998) has been developed and has evolved at the Institute for Family Services in response to clinical dilemmas that are inadequately addressed by traditional family theory and service delivery systems. The CCM is a creative new approach that places social justice concerns

arising from differences of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation at the heart of family therapy practice. Although its origins are in domestic violence work, the model has proven to be universally applicable.

The CCM is both a theoretical paradigm and an approach to practice and interventions. It is a community development approach that offers intervention to all family members. For this reason, the prospect of isolating and focusing primarily on our work with men who have been violent presents somewhat of a challenge. In reality, we work with client families who present complaints that routinely cause families to seek therapy. We do not separate men who are identified as batterers from other men within the intervention process.

Our society abounds with social norms that support violence and oppression against women, children, and all those who are marginalized due to differences of race, class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and ability. This social milieu is the foundation of daily experiences for all members of our society, encouraging all men to misuse and abuse their powers over women and children in families. The CCM is a praxis that strives to build communities fostering the development of safe, respectful, nurturing, and empowering relationships for all participants in community and family life. The model can be described in terms of seven components. In practice, these components do not function as discreet stages in a linear progression but rather as interwoven and reciprocally impacting layers that constitute a multifaceted process of resocialization. The seven components of the CCM are:

- Sponsorship
- Socioeducation
- Men's and women's culture circles
- Couple, individual, family of origin, and family sessions
- Children's and adolescents' culture circles
- Graduation
- Community outreach

#### **ORIENTATION OF CLIENTS TO THE CULTURAL CONTEXT MODEL AND TO SPONSORSHIP**

A team of therapists acting together conducts almost every therapy session at the Institute for Family Services. The one or more

therapists present with clients in the consulting room are always observed by the rest of the team of therapists via one-way mirror or video monitoring. Communication flows from the observing team to a therapist in the consultation room via an audio earphone. Breaks—short interruptions in therapeutic sessions during which the consulting therapist meets briefly with those in the viewing room—provide for the sharing of input by the entire team. All therapeutic interventions, therefore, are the result of collaborative discussions and never the judgment of one individual therapist.

The practice is structured in this way to provide an accountability-based context for all involved. For example, as women therapists are always part of the discussion framing interventions, the team may counter the tendency of a male therapist to intervene with clients in ways that are sexist. Similarly, the team structure allows for therapists of color and queer therapists to assist straight White therapists in creating interventions that are less likely to be racist and/or homophobic.

The structure of the practice is described to clients as part of their orientation to therapy during their first session. They are also introduced to one or more members of the community of sponsors. A sponsor is a person of the same sex as the client whose role is essentially to connect the client to the collective experience of his or her gender, racial, and cultural group. The method of linking supports social accountability for men and increased empowerment for women and other oppressed groups (Almeida & Bograd, 1990). Sponsors are generally clients who are at the end of their own therapeutic journeys and are appreciative of the opportunity to “give back” to others. Sometimes, they are male volunteers from the community who have been evaluated and trained for the role (Almeida, Woods, Messineo, & Font, 1998). Some of the sponsors are involved in a similar capacity with Alcoholics Anonymous or other 12-step programs. Through their experiences with CCM, these sponsors have expanded their notion of sobriety to include not only accountability for maintaining substance abstinence but also accountability for behaving nonviolently and responsibly in all significant relationships.

Sponsorship transforms the boundary of men’s decision-making process, dismantling the privacy that guards and protects male rights to abuse and misuse power at home and substituting



instead a network offering accountability and connection. Nathu and Ashok,<sup>1</sup> for example, are two heterosexual, male, Asian-Indian sponsors. Each came into treatment years ago seeking advice around the parenting of their adolescent children. They continued the work of necessary changes within their marriages. Now attending the program primarily as sponsors, they have provided much essential assistance to men of both similar and dissimilar cultural backgrounds. For example, when one new Asian Indian male client described his absolute control over the money spent by his wife, he listened respectfully to Nathu, who spoke of his similar experiences before coming to see how this controlling behavior constituted an abuse of his power.

Sometimes, male sponsors provide an entry into conversations that would otherwise be compromised. For example, one Asian Indian woman, Meena, who attended her first therapy session on the advice of a close friend, told her story to a group of women being led by an Asian Indian therapist. Instead of emphasizing the broken bones and terror that she suffered as a result of her husband's violence, she spoke of her strong feelings of wanting to protect and help him. Meena stated that despite the violence, her husband "permits" her to study and work out of the home. The beginning of her own transition toward empowerment occurred when Nathu came into the room and joined the conversation. He described his own history of feeling entitled to control his wife before learning, through numerous conversations with other men in the program, how damaging this pattern was for all members of his family. He spoke about his current convictions, which included the need for all men to be held accountable for their violence and for men to be required to make safe and responsible choices within family life. Nathu also respectfully stated that Meena's husband had no right to abuse her, regardless of whether or not their contract included her studying and working out of the home. Meena listened attentively to Nathu and subsequently spoke of her fear and pain and of her desire for her husband to stop beating her.

Although it is essential to offer women the opportunity for empowerment within women's culture circles, it is also important to be mindful of the fact that the familial hierarchy becomes rigid when outside systems of influence intervene. Therefore, providing the gendered hierarchy familiar to the culture as one entry

point may expand the solution for women trying to survive the violence in their homes.

The structure of the initial session depends on information provided by the referral source. If the client is mandated by the courts or probation department due to his use of violence, and if it is known ahead of time that there is domestic violence, each partner is seen separately within a same-gender subgroup for the initial visit. If there is no prior indication of domestic violence and the couple is coming in voluntarily, they are seen jointly for the first part of the session to determine their definition of the problem. In the later part of the session, the couple are separated to assess the power dimensions and to assess for violence. The client is made aware that the Institute's primary treatment modality is group. The individual, couple, family-of-origin, and community issues are addressed within this context. The literal presentation of the couple together, or the family together, is not necessary to resolve issues related to couple and family process. Inclusion of family processes is important to the experience of cultural continuity for the Asian Indian community. The new client is then offered the opportunity to enter the subgroup of clients for the beginning of his socioeducation.

## **SOCIOEDUCATION**

Socioeducation is the presentation of didactic materials to clients in an effort to begin raising their consciousness and resocialize them around issues of gender, race, culture, and sexual orientation. Socioeducation is the element of the CCM that introduces therapeutic conversations and begins to dismantle stories exemplifying the cultural prescriptions and proscriptions that we all rely on to shape our pattern of choices in family and community life.

A combination of video clips, books, articles, and songs create the stimulus to activate discussion that expands the therapeutic conversation. A number of these socioeducation materials particularize the Asian Indian experience. Emotional processes that ensue as a result of these conversations are addressed simultaneously as the conversations are employed to help participants raise many culturally prescribed attitudes and beliefs out of the realm of the taken-for-granted and into the realm of choice. The

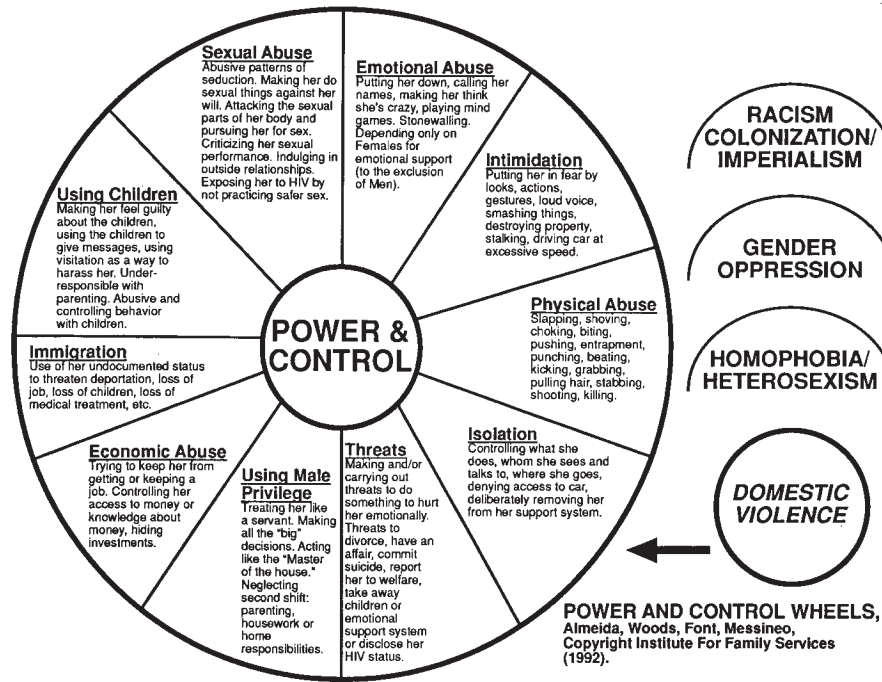
socioeducational tools are intended to create emotional distance from toxic issues. This distancing, as opposed to personalizing, creates a context for the foundation of consciousness raising. This understanding serves as a beginning point for collective responsibilities to be more clearly grasped and for one's personal choices to be understood in terms of collective responsibilities as well. Consciousness raising such as this is critically important because it serves as the foundation on which all future therapeutic interventions are made. In summary, socioeducation begins to shift clients' awareness toward a balancing of the personal and the political, the intrapsychic and the social, and from the interior experience to the exterior experience, including one's impact on others.

Consider the following examples of the socioeducation component of the CCM.

**Example 1: Sleeping With the Enemy/Straight Out of Brooklyn**

The subgroup of men is shown video clips from each of the two films and asked to refer to two power and control wheels (see Figures 1 and 2), titled *The Misuse and Abuse of Power Within Heterosexual Relationships* and *The Public Context of Misuse and Abuse of Power Toward People of Color*, respectively. They are asked to draw examples from each of the films to illustrate the descriptions on these instruments.

The first video clip depicts a White man of obvious wealth accusing his White female partner of being unfaithful to him. He brutally assaults her, punching and then kicking her once she has fallen. As she cries and clutches herself in pain, he kisses her. The second video clip depicts a working-class African American family as the father returns home for the evening and begins to berate and physically attack his wife. He shouts repeatedly about his rage and despair, focusing much of his barrage toward his teenage son: "What do you know about being Black? What are they going to teach you about the Black man in college?" In subsequent scenes, the bruised mother explains to her teenage daughter about the racial attacks that her husband suffers in response to her daughter's questions about why her father beats her mother. The clip ends with the mother being fired by her much younger White



**Figure 1: Private context: The misuse and abuse of power within heterosexual relationships**  
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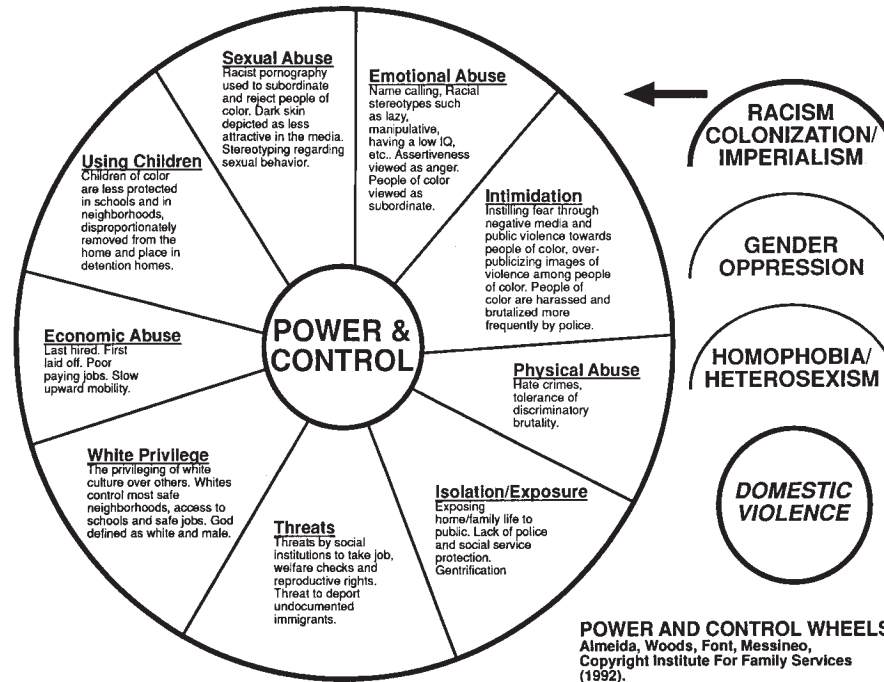


Figure 2: Public context: The misuse and abuse of power toward people of color  
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female supervisor after the supervisor urges the mother to “get help.” “I don’t need help, I need my job!” implores the mother.

Discussion participants are encouraged to identify the examples that both clips provide for the two power and control wheels. The following questions are used to shape the conversation:

- What choices did the two women have?
- How did difference of race and class affect their range of choices?
- How would it be if the police were called on the White husband as opposed to the African American husband?
- What do you think happened after the African American woman was fired from her job?
- In what ways is the African American husband abused by society?
- In *Sleeping with the Enemy*, what would have happened if one of the husband’s friends had walked in while he was attacking her?
- What would have happened if this friend had told people in the husband’s office—in what ways do you think this might have changed the husband’s behavior?
- How do you think the wife in *Sleeping with the Enemy* would have felt after other people were told and did not help her?
- Do you think it might make her feel that she is the problem and that if she just changes then everything will be OK?
- From the beginning of the relationship, do you think she was second-guessing herself due to the status, influence, and power of her husband?
- If we had your wives/partners here with us right now, what would they say about you that no one would believe?

**Example 2: Shakti: Dual Oppressions for Gays and Lesbians of Asian Indian Descent**

The subgroup of men is shown the video clip and asked to refer to both The Public Context of Misuse and Abuse of Power Toward People of Color and The Public Context of Misuse and Abuse of Power Toward Gays and Lesbians and notice the ways that the clip demonstrates how these two systems of oppression interconnect (see Figures 2 and 3).

*Shakti* is a documentary of discussions with Asian Indian gays and lesbians from the United States, England, Canada, and India. The film illustrates how racism and cultural traditions affect the “coming out” process for gays and lesbians. The clip introduces the viewer to a number of men and women. The first woman speaks specifically of the overt racism she suffered when her family moved to Canada. She explains that because she was “trying to

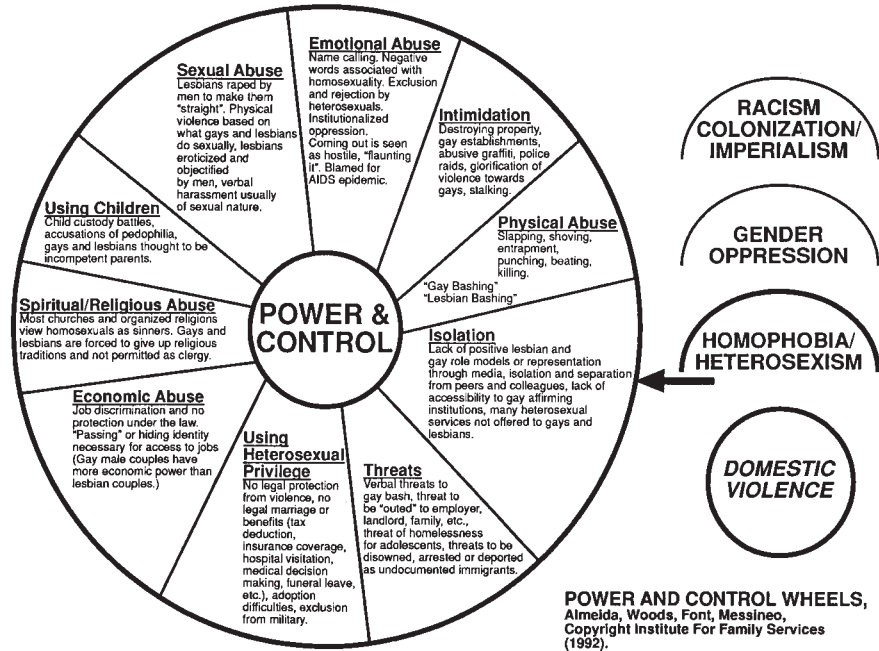


Figure 3: Public context: The misuse and abuse of power toward lesbians and gays  
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be as White as possible” to avoid racist attacks, coming out as a lesbian was something she could not do because it would endanger her further. Other individuals speak about the cultural pressure to marry and their families’ perception of homosexuality as a “White man’s disease.”

- What were some of the stories of racism that they heard?
- What did the woman mean by “playing it as White as possible?”
- Why was it important that she do this? What consequences might have befallen her had she done otherwise?
- How do you imagine the families of these young people taught them to protect themselves against the violence of racism?
- Why do families not teach similar protective strategies to their children for coping with the violence of heterosexism/homophobia?
- How does racism influence an Asian Indian family to be less accepting of gays and lesbians?
- Why might an Asian Indian gay or lesbian be more concerned about a family cutoff than a White American gay or lesbian?
- What did the woman mean when she spoke about joining the White feminist movement and feeling excluded?
- For those of you who are White, what can you do so that your presence does not silence those of color?
- For those of you who are heterosexual, what can you do so that your presence does not silence those who are lesbian and gay?

### MEN’S AND WOMEN’S CULTURE CIRCLES

Most of the work of therapy within the Cultural Context Model occurs in same-sex meetings we term *culture circles*. Borrowed from the work of Paulo Freire (1972), culture circles are where men and women, with the facilitation of a team of therapists and with the support of same-sex sponsors, work toward expanding their definitions and experiences of socially prescribed roles. Socioeducation, which helps new clients begin to expand their ideas about power and differences of gender, race, and sexual orientation, takes place for 8 to 10 weeks within same-sex culture circles. These initial sessions, which we call subgroups, provide orientation to the therapeutic process. Thereafter, clients are introduced to open-ended culture circles, where the work continues.

For example, one Muslim, dark-skinned Asian Indian father of three, who was referred for battering his partner and 12-year-old son, offered comprehensive and extremely useful analyses of



racism within his culture circle's discussions. He was challenged by his male peers, who were from many different racial, cultural, and class backgrounds, as well as various sexual orientations, to use his analysis of race to better understand their requests for him to treat his female partner and his son nonviolently. In other words, he was asked to use his comprehensive understanding of racism to begin to identify and transform the ways that he was using sexism and heterosexism to justify his misuses of power within his family.

Very generally speaking, men's culture circles support and empower members by holding them accountable for making safe and respectful choices within their relationships and for prioritizing the needs of other family members at the same level of priority they generally reserve only for their own perceived needs. Women's culture circles empower members by helping them prioritize their own needs, including their need to experience the full range of emotions (especially anger), at a level they have been taught to reserve only for the needs of others.

#### **COUPLE, INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY OF ORIGIN, AND FAMILY SESSIONS**

Sponsors are present at every therapeutic session to offer support while also holding men accountable for their misuse and abuse of power within family life. Couple, individual, and family sessions are often planned within an even broader context. For example, couple and family sessions often take place in the man's culture circle and with a number of female sponsors present as well. This structure offers support while also holding the man accountable for the historical impact of his decisions on other family members. In cases where family or couple sessions occur outside a culture circle, the session is processed during the next meeting of the culture circle. In cases where there has been domestic violence, couple sessions are scheduled at the discretion of the victim and only after the perpetrator consistently claims full responsibility for his abuses of power in the family.

Another Asian Indian professional man, Sanjay, had a history of being abusive to his wife, Hema, and two teenage daughters, Sashi and Rashmi. After a number of months of participation in his culture circle, he was claiming full responsibility for the ways

he had emotionally and economically abused his partner. Sanjay's first couple session included two Asian Indian sponsors, one Asian Indian female sponsor, Sanjay and Hema, and the team of therapists (alternately in the consulting room and as part of the team behind the one-way mirror). Following the session, Sanjay and the male sponsors reported the events of the meeting back to the man's culture circle. His peers were informed of how he had read his letter of accountability to his wife, Hema, taking responsibility with great specificity for the many abuses he had committed against her and the children. Hema and daughter Sashi, not unlike many victims of domestic violence, reported their experience of empowerment and dignity, as men and women they had never met unequivocally held the abuser accountable for his violence in a public forum. Sanjay was supported by his peers for taking the first steps toward establishing justice in his marriage. He was also given a number of ideas for continuing this work. For example, he was coached on the need to refrain from making unilateral decisions about such matters as scheduling trips to India and visits of family members to the United States and, instead, to include his partner in these matters. His peers coached him on the need to be a more active parent, in particular, to help and not undermine his partner in setting appropriate structure and limits for his daughters.

The CCM, instead of fragmenting families by sending each member to separate therapists as is done in many traditionally structured service delivery systems, embraces the entire client family under the guidance of one integrated team of therapists. This practice structure affords a significant degree of comfort to many Asian Indian families, to whom maintaining the unity and integrity of the family is of central importance.

#### **CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS' CULTURE CIRCLES**

We view the inclusion of children and adolescents as extremely relevant to the process of ending violence. Culture circles for adolescents and children explore issues of power and control, presenting didactic materials for socioeducation that reach children at their age-appropriate levels of understanding. A number of video clips from films such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Mulan*, *Charlotte's Web*,

*Radioflyer*, *Khush*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *Heaven and Earth*, provide useful beginning points for discussions about the many different behavioral prescriptions children are given within the dominant culture according to differences of gender, race, culture, class, and sexual orientation.

Fathers are often invited into culture circles for young children. These fathers are often coached very specifically about how to be more nurturing parents. For example, a father might be asked to wear the audio earphone and be given messages such as “sit down on the floor with the kids, speak more softly, and touch your child to get his attention.” These same fathers serve as sponsors to the adolescent culture circle, embracing numerous rites of passage that are nonviolent.

### GRADUATION

Graduation signifies transition from client status to other forms of connection. The work of the CCM generates profeminist men and feminist women in the tradition of Third World feminism, feminism that is linked to antiracist and multicultural work. This phase signifies expansion toward broader, community-based work. Many men choose to become sponsors or to work informally at educating coworkers and friends about norms of nonviolence in family life. Some men have become involved in the activist efforts of the National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS), a loosely organized body dedicated to supporting a number of antisexist, antiracist, gay/lesbian-affirmative community projects. Women clients often become sponsors as well, participating in a number of antiviolence community projects, and pursue new work, family, and community roles.

### COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Sponsors and former clients of the Institute for Family Services are involved in a number of both informal and institutionally based outreach efforts. Among the latter are involvement alongside Institute staff at numerous domestic violence court-based committees and educational projects. Within the Asian Indian communities, sponsors and former clients identify and challenge violence—often bringing their family members and friends in for treatment.

## CONCLUSION

More traditional approaches to intervention with abusive men and their families either minimize cultural differences, consistently deferring to dominant, White-centric theories and service delivery systems and to prescribed solutions resulting from these theories, or misinterpret cultural differences in ways that increase the level of danger for domestic violence victims from marginalized groups. This article suggests a greatly broadened systemic analysis of cultural differences as a primary means of generating more inclusive approaches for intervention. We have discussed here a framework for systemic cultural analysis that focuses on Asian Indian families. The CCM, a family therapy and community development paradigm that activates systemic cultural analysis as the core of intervention, was described, highlighting intervention with Asian Indian men.

## APPENDIX

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The following films, mentioned in text and used in our work, are available from Women Make Movies, Inc., 462 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10001.

*Beauty and the Beast*. (1991). Directors: Gary Trousdale & Kirk Wise.  
*Heaven and Earth*. (1993). Director: Oliver Stone.  
*The Joy Luck Club*. (1993). Director: Wayne Wang.  
*Khush*. (1991). Director: Pratibha Parmar.  
*The Little Mermaid*. (1989). Directors: Jon Musker & Ron Clemente.  
*Mississippi Masala*. (1992). Director: Mira Nair.  
*Morning Voices*. (1992). Director: Meena Warji  
*Straight Out of Brooklyn*. (1991). Director: Matty Rich.

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## NOTE

1. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individual participants.

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