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Session Title: Therapeutic Assessment in clinical practice—adjusting techniques to specific situations

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A Transcultural Case Study: Using his words; issues of identity in a therapeutic assessment with an African American adolescent.

This presentation explores the work between a white male assessor and an African American adolescent male illustrating both the adolescent therapeutic assessment (TA) model (Finn, 2007) and its adaptation in a transcultural context. An underlying tenant of TA assessment is to use the client’s own words to define and focus the assessment process. When working with youth, it is essential that their concerns and test data be interpreted within a developmental and family system framework. Additionally, when working with racial/ethnic minority youth, it is also essential to understand their concerns regarding individual identity as it relates to the larger societal context. Thus, the clinician needs to grapple with and acknowledge the impact of racism and oppression and the role it plays as it contributes to the client’s challenges and central questions. This case illustrates how the assessor adapted the test process and data interpretation to be able to understand and join with the client in order to give voice to his authentic experience.

Presenter: Audrey Rosenberg, Ph.D.

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It is hard to describe an entire transcultural collaborative assessment in 15 minutes. So this presentation will focus on the use of referral questions, and how the “data” was gathered through standard and unconventional methods. Then I will discuss how the referral questions were addressed and understood within the context of the assessment findings, adolescent development and the larger cultural contexts of racism. Lastly, I will discuss how the assessor broached these challenging topics with the youth. I hope that by focusing on these areas, I will describe some of the techniques, challenges and opportunities of trans-cultural therapeutic assessment.

For this case I was the supervisor and my supervisee was a Caucasian man in his early 30’s. The client, Martin (pseudonym) was a 17-year-old African American youth who was referred for an assessment by his mother. Martin was having some challenges at home and school. He was barely passing his classes and at times was yelling and acting disrespectfully towards teachers. At home he was often sullen and shut down, spending little time with his parents and most of his time devoted to writing song/rap lyrics. At the time of the assessment he was in his 3rd year of High school and previously been diagnosed with ADHD. He lived with his adoptive parents and two sisters in a neighborhood plagued by community violence.

One of the essential components of collaborative therapeutic assessment is the process of developing questions with the client that can be answered during the testing process. In collaborative assessment, the questions are developed with the parent and the youth. As outlined by Tharinger, Finn, and Gentry (2013) in adolescent TA testing, the youth is encouraged to develop their own questions and given the choice as to whether they want to have some of their questions kept in a confidential manner. This supports the youth’s growing autonomy within the family. The development of questions by the youth also places them in the role of co-collaborator. They become interested in understanding what issues are most important to them, thus facilitating an active role in thinking about themselves and their future.

An initial meeting was held between the assessor, Martin and his mother. At first Martin was shut down and barely addressed questions posed to him. In his mind he was there because he was in trouble. As the evaluator talked to him about developing questions and assured him that some of his questions could be held in confidence, Martin’s interest increased. The idea that the evaluator would go over his questions with him privately, and that the results of the evaluation would be reviewed with him first, provided him with an increased sense of power.

Martin’s main question for the assessment was: Where does my anger come from? Mom was also interested in understanding his verbal outbursts. Furthermore she wanted Martin to take more responsibility for his behavior and wanted to find out ways that the family could support him to be successful in life. Privately, Martin would later confess that he also wanted to better understand why it was hard sometimes for him to leave his house and he wondered, how he could be successful in the music business? It was easy to see both the parent’s and Martin’s questions within the context of adolescent development: His mother worried about her child’s ability to launch into adulthood, and Martin’s questions reflected a growing awareness of himself, his independence and his future.

Of course a primary purpose in all types of assessment is to address and answer the essential referral questions, which are usually diagnostic in nature (e.g. Does this person have ADHD, or Depression?). But the difference in collaborative versus traditional assessment is not only in what information is used to address these questions, but also in the role of examinee and examiner. In traditional testing, all the information is gathered through interviews and test data, in many ways the person becomes the sum of the data, but in collaborative therapeutic assessment, information is gathered through formal and informal approaches. At first Martin was somewhat wary of the testing procedure, giving very little response to direct questions, often stating, “I don’t know”. His first drawing suggests some of this when he drew a young man with his hands behind his back. The assessor asked, “What was he thinking?” Martin replied, “I don’t know”, “What was he feeling?”, “I don’t know”. This back and forth continued with few details emerging and a completed self-report behavioral checklist, which noted no clinical elevations.

This highly defended response set needed to be understood not only within the framework of adolescence, but also within the context of trans-cultural work . Not only were we asking an adolescent to answer questions posed by an adult, but also we were asking an African American youth to reveal himself to a white man. Much has been written about the impact of racism and the inherent distrust many African Americans hold towards white Americans. And it is beyond the scope of the presentation to address this fully. However, it is critical to think about how the assessor can move beyond the mistrust intensified by racial and age differences. Why should this African American urban young man, trust this older white man’s intentions?

The evaluator and I met to discuss this impasse and we talked about what he should do next. We decided to use the youth’s own words and interests to describe what was most essential and meaningful to him. So in the next session, in addition to formal tests, the evaluator asked Martin to talk about his music. Specifically, he asked Martin to bring in some songs that he wrote which were most meaningful and important to him. As he shared more about his musical interests, Martin became more invested in the testing, and began to tell stories about his biological family. His mother died early from drugs, he had never met his father who was incarcerated, and one brother was in prison for manslaughter. He also spoke about how close he was to his adopted sisters. But how he felt like his adopted parents did not understand him and that no one listened. His song lyrics described a boy who felt different from most of his peers and who was trying to find his way and make a name for himself. His songs were filled with anger and longing and showed a strong desire to channel his aggressive impulses into music rather than overt fighting. Themes of community violence also became more apparent. He spoke of witnessing shootings and the recent violent death of a friend. He talked about his desire to get out of the city and the violent neighborhood where he lived, but he also talked about his own increase in risk taking behaviors.

In order to provide a context for how his questions were to be understood, I next want to briefly review overall test findings: Martin’s performance on the WAIS-IV, Beery and Rey revealed that ADHD was impacting not only his attention to detail, but also his working memory and executive functioning. In particular, he had significant trouble in executing and following multiple steps in a plan. Furthermore, like many youth with ADHD, he had trouble with accurate self-perception. While wanting to be successful, he was impulsive and unsure what to attend to and thus his finished product often fell short of expectation. He showed little awareness of his poor work and felt like he was performing better than he actually was. The Rorschach also suggested that he took in too little information in order to solve a problem, thus leading him to miscalculations and missteps.

Despite neurocognitive and attentional challenges, Martin was a sensitive and interpersonally attuned young man. He talked to the assessor about his recent breakup with a girlfriend and how the recent loss of his aunt was hard for him. His projective stories showed sensitivity to other’s experiences, and a desire to be close to and nurtured by his mother and father. He also spoke about the responsibility he felt towards his younger biological brother who was going down a wrong path. He spoke about wanting to set a good example for him through his recent attainment of a part-time job.

The testing also found that he often felt confused by other’s negative responses to him. He struggled in schoolwork and felt like the demands were too high and that he could not meet them. He did not understand why his teachers were always getting mad at him, expecting something that he could not produce. He felt unable to get support from his parents, and confused about how to solve his problems. Things in his life just didn’t seem to go as planned. He was growing increasingly frustrated and anxious about his ability to be successful in the increasingly demanding and complex world of high school and young adulthood. In sum, Martin felt misunderstood and maligned.

This left the assessor with many questions to flesh out in the final report and personal letter to Martin. How did Martin understand his own anger? What did aggression mean when your own brother killed a man? How much of the caregivers’ fears about his aggression were warranted and how much reflected the fears that his anger would become murderous rage? Were there any safe avenues for him to express this anger? How did the exposure to community violence impact him? He told the assessor that he was afraid to leave his house for a few weeks soon after he heard of his friend’s death. And he also described a recent incident at a party were gunshots were fired. Were his outbursts signs of an increased startle response due to exposure to trauma?

One of the most powerful elements of the collaborative assessment process is the collaboration between the evaluator and the client throughout all aspects of the process including the final feedback sessions. This means that the evaluator reviews test findings with the client and asks him what he thinks about them, how he personally relates to and sees himself reflected in the data. How would the client describe his own life and struggles? There was a moment toward the end of the assessment, when the evaluator began to address Martin’s questions directly. Finn (2007) describes this as a ‘discussion session’ rather than a feedback session. The first discussion session occurred between the assessor and Martin alone where he showed him some of his results from the cognitive testing.. They discussed how on some of these tests, Martin rushed ahead, and while wanting to do well, missed easier items without noticing. They talked about how Martin tended to rush and not take the time he needed to execute a plan. They discussed how this tendency might lead to some of his academic struggles and how others might be disappointed when he, himself, thought he had performed adequately. They discussed how this mismatch might have led to his confusing feelings and why he felt frustrated and unfairly treated.

However, the question of his anger and mistreatment cannot only be understood within the context of his life story and attentional difficulties. Instead, it must be viewed within a larger cultural framework of being an African American male in U.S. society. What societal assumptions and pressures does he face? How much were his feelings of being misunderstood and maligned shared by other Black men? Franklin (1993) describes the “invisibility syndrome” for black males as a result of a preponderance of images of black men in American society portrayed as violent criminals, sports players, drug dealers, and rap stars. The sense of invisibility comes from never seeing themselves portrayed as an ordinary men, as men committed to family, to a middle class life. Thus, How much of his rage stems from being invisible and facing ongoing overt and covert discrimination?

This is clearly a challenging question to ask as a white person, but it is an essential one. Here the evaluator was a highly educated middle class white man, who carried privilege and had abundant access to economic and social resources. How does he ask a black youth about the effects of racism? The evaluator began to raise the issues slowly, and gently, but directly. It is important to note, that the evaluator did not make assumptions about the cause of Martin’s behavior, rather he opened up a dialogue with him about the ways that racism might relate to his anger and struggles. He asked about how his song lyrics reflected his sense of becoming a man. He also began to question some of his anger within the context of racism and family history. In short, his frustrations were justified. It made sense that he was confused about how to express his rage. Martin was surprised, but he accepted the information and opened up more specifically about his family’s history of violence, how it impacted him and the kind of man he wanted to be.

In conclusion, when working transculturally, it is important to challenge yourself to understand data within the context of larger cultural and societal issues and determine how and when to address these contexts directly. The collaborative model is well suited for this process. However, this work also demands self-reflection and a willingness to accept on the part of the assessor his place in the transcultural power dynamic.

References

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