

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Considerations for Hakomi

"In a fractal conception, I am a cell-sized unit of the human organism, and I have to use my life to leverage a shift in the system by how I am, as much as with the things I do."

- adrienne maree brown, "Emergent Strategy: Shaping Changes, Shaping Worlds"

Hakomi is a psychotherapeutic method that fosters deep intrapersonal change. As Hakomi practitioners, we invite people to evolve limiting beliefs that have been formed in the environments of their early life - family, community, and the larger, dominant culture.

Much of our work is centered on the deeply personal ways that individuals are wounded in their families and home life. The transformation that is possible can shift people out of characterological fragmentation and back to greater organicity. This work can be life-altering.

In addition to the somatically held beliefs formed in our early family environments, all of us have internalized views, values, and beliefs of our larger culture. The learned experiences of our early lives are held in implicit memory, encoded in nerve, muscle, thought, and feeling. As practitioners, these internalized, unconscious beliefs affect our work. As we allow ourselves to recognize this within ourselves, we also gain greater awareness of how the internalized beliefs of the dominant culture manifest in our clients and within the therapeutic relationship. Cultural humility offers a framework with which to extend the caring, individual-centered work we do in our therapy rooms into action: to address power imbalances within the dyad and societal imbalances that continue to hurt and limit people.

Cultural humility was first described by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia in 1998 as a goal distinct from that of cultural competence in multicultural education. Cultural humility has been defined as the "ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]." (Hook et al, p. 2) The practice of cultural humility is three-pronged:

- The first aspect is a ***lifelong commitment to self-evaluation***. There is no fixed endpoint of our capacity to learn and understand the unique circumstances of another's life. Since we could never possibly learn all there is to know about how others experience the world, we can instead orient toward being open, flexible, and humble, knowing that there is always more to learn. This necessitates ongoing self-assessment, willingness to understand the impact of "habits of harm" within the culture, and cultivation of the capacity to stay present with the distress generated by cultural inequities. (King, p. 8)
- The second aspect is a ***willingness to address power imbalances*** in the therapeutic dyad. Each of us holds our own inherent personal power, the power to make things happen and influence the world around us. In addition to personal power, status power is societally granted to some people based on certain traits or attributes.

Status power bestows unearned benefits and advantages. Culturally, in North America it is granted to white- and light-skinned people, men, able-bodied individuals, and people who identify as cis-gender and/or heterosexual. Individuals with status power are often unaware of the ease and advantages their status offers. (Barstow, 2015) Addressing these power inequities where they might arise in the therapeutic dyad first requires an awareness that such power imbalances exist. We need to examine not only the power we hold as practitioners due to our therapeutic *role*, but also hold ourselves accountable for any added *up-status power* we may hold. It also means that we respect the inherent personal power of each individual, safeguarding and promoting each individual's influence within the greater system.

- The third aspect is an ***engagement in cultural change work***, to actively make an effort to shift systems that perpetuate power inequities. This stems from a recognition that while individuals can create positive change, bigger change is possible when we are personally committed to lifelong learning, willing to address power imbalances in our one-on-one work, *and* willing to advocate for systemic changes in the organizations and communities of which we are a part.

Cultural humility allows us to be the experts in psychotherapeutic work while simultaneously acknowledging that our clients are the experts of their lives. It is a feature of a culturally-attuned therapeutic relationship, one that directly addresses power differentials and seeks to extend beyond the therapy room to address cultural bias in the larger community.

Cultural Humility is an Extension of Hakomi Principles:

The Unity Principle reminds us that everything in our world is connected. Each smaller part affects the whole. We are not truly separate; we are all embedded in families, communities, economy, and culture. Additionally, we are not all one and the same. The greater whole is formed not only through our interconnectedness, but also through our infinite diversity. As individuals living within political and cultural systems, the influence of these systems leaves its imprint, offering options, advantages and choices inequitably distributed based on unearned status power of race, gender, able-bodiedness, etc. Cultural inequities cannot be ignored in authentic, culturally conscious therapeutic work.

Dominant culture teaches us to see the world in dualisms - gay and straight, black and white, masculine and feminine. However, dualism obscures many nuances of people's actual lived experience. No human can be fully described by dualistic categorization. Our clients come to us as complex manifestations of an infinite variety of individual human experience, manifesting in nuanced relationship with their sexuality, gender, the color of their skin, and other aspects of identity. We honor the diversity of experience by recognizing and valuing each unique individual. In this way we are working within the Principle of Organicity.

In addition to supporting individual identity, it is both powerful and therapeutic to hold awareness of how power inequities (around race, gender, religion, sexual and gender

identity, economic disparity, and more) have been part of each client's experience. The Unity Principle reminds us that we are all parts of a whole, contributing to and connected to something larger than ourselves. Silence in the therapy room about unearned advantages culturally and institutionally granted to those in traditionally up-status positions perpetuates those inequities. An individual cannot thoroughly eliminate the personal impact of racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia in their lives and within their psychic structure while conditions in the world are still stacked against them. The Principle of Non-Violence necessitates that the therapeutic process supports emergent, life-affirming organicity while also fully addressing the reality of the lived-experiences of cultural inequity.

The Hakomi method is at its essence an application of mindfulness that opens us up to noticing the previously unquestioned biases of perception that have been perpetuating distress or dissatisfaction in life. Moshe Feldenkrais is frequently quoted as saying, "You can only do what you want when you know what you are doing!" Mindfulness awakens us to what we are doing. Through the process of self-observation we begin to disidentify from our implicitly-held habits of perception and behavior. Much of this work centers on the innermost realms of our lives, mindfulness can also promote an awakening to the harmful habits of perception and behavior within the larger culture. Ruth King, in her book *Mindful of Race*, applies mindfulness in her approach to transforming racism. She describes three important stages in this work. First, we must see and understand the "habits of harm" within the larger culture. Next, we must allow ourselves to feel the distress of racial harm. And finally, we can shift toward a culture of greater care and mutuality. As practitioners, we can do our own work to understand how we have been part of cultural habits of harm (racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of oppression) while also allowing our application of the method to support this awakening and transformation at a cultural level.

Cultural Humility applied to the Hakomi Method:

As practitioners dedicated to unraveling internalized childhood hurts of our clients, we have already embraced the healing power of empathically understanding another's experience. We use the Method as a means to revisit formative experiences from our clients' long-ago pasts with the intention of re-aligning to organicity and potential. Childhood hurts leave traces in somatically-held implicit memory, shaping an adult's perceptions and behaviors. In the same way, cultural messages leave their impact, communicating that some are valued more or less than others and will have differential access to power and influence based solely on unearned, inborn traits. Our empathic loving-kindness can and should be attentive and welcoming to the many ways that our clients have been hurt and limited.

Our work expands when we are willing to hold a lens of cultural humility and attunement to the manifestations of how the dominant culture impacts people. Our empathic, loving attention can facilitate exploration of the somatically-held pain of living in down-power status. We can use the Method with the intention and goal of shifting toward greater *individual* organicity and potential. We must also recognize that our clients' struggles are not simply the product of individual limiting beliefs. Cultural inequities continually

reinforce self-perceptions and experiences that are not aligned with their full felt organic truth. These inequities persist outside the therapy room in the form of present-day sexism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, classism, ableism, ageism, etc. They are woven into our social structure, institutions, worldviews, beliefs, knowledge, and ways of interacting with each other. For anyone in a down-power status, these inequities are omnipresent, manifesting in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Naming this and demonstrating willingness and capacity to work with it is crucial to increasing the felt-sense of safety in the therapeutic relationship.

As practitioners in charge of the therapy process, it is our responsibility not just to be willing to have these conversations, but to initiate them. How we do so depends on the specific status power differential in the therapeutic dyad. In circumstances in which the therapist holds up-power status, it can be tempting to minimize or erase the impact of status power on the therapy. This is part of the trance of status power. Those who have privilege may not recognize what they have. White people, for example, may behave as though racism doesn't exist, whereas those who experience racism directly cannot overlook it. Cis-gendered and straight people often make assumptions about issues relating to other people's sexual orientation or gender based on their own perceptions, values, and comfort level, rather than the other person's actual experience.

As culturally humble healing professionals, we can be aware that those in down-power status don't have the choice to erase the impact of the inequities in their lives. Bringing conversations about difference into the therapy room, and taking the time to address the power differentials at play, can build a more solid therapeutic relationship that can more fully explore the client's lived experience within our culture.

DEI and Cultural Considerations for Mindfulness, Accessing, and Child State Work

Early childhood wounding may include personal, familial hurts, cultural wounding, and cultural wounding transmitted through attachment figures. Each individual is not simply a separate self, but also a self in relationship - to others, to community and to the greater culture; we are all part of a larger whole. We each have our separate uniqueness and we are each a product of the world in which we live.

In addition to the exquisitely personal, intra-psychic, developmental wounding that any child might experience, children from marginalized groups absorb the wounding of living in a culture that views anyone from a non-dominant or marginalized group as problematic and "less than." In addition, cultural hurts and inequities may be transmitted through attachment figures attempting to protect and inform the child of their burden to bear as someone born into down-power status.

These cultural hurts are lodged as traumas in the nervous systems of those living in down-power status. In the U.S., racial trauma is pervasive, with its roots in an economy and social system built on slavery and ongoing violence perpetrated against black, indigenous, and people of color. The impact of racial trauma can only be addressed in therapy if there is an initial willingness to face issues of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) head on; to name

and address them within the therapeutic dyad. The importance of this cannot be overstated. In *Mindful of Race*, Ruth King writes, “POC [people of color] may tend to be more aware of racial trauma and less aware of childhood traumas, whereas whites may be more aware of childhood traumas and lack awareness of race or racial traumas.” (p.31)

When working with any client, the therapist inherently occupies an up-power role. Ethics require practitioners to be accountable for their heightened influence and power in the therapeutic relationship, and to proactively attend to the impact of status-related power differences in the treatment room. When therapists are willing to bring these issues out into the open, the burden of the cultural power differential is no longer solely held by clients. Addressing cultural wounding and status power in the therapeutic relationship may be a crucial element that unblocks access to deeper, transformative work.

Naming differences, addressing power differentials, and being willing to talk about cultural wounding are all part of culturally humble and DEI-informed Hakomi work.

Mindfulness: Unaddressed issues of the power differential make it more difficult for clients to drop into a state of inner awareness. When we invite clients into mindfulness, unspoken aspects of the power differential can interrupt the sense of trust and safety needed to access the neurally open state of mind required for applied mindfulness. Explicitly including awareness of power and status promotes the trust needed for effective mindfulness processes.

Experiments: In accessing, our experiments may take on added import to clients who are also managing a power differential. Taking-over experiments and probes may bring up not only personal, intrapsychic material, but direct feedback may arise specifically about power inequities. When we are open to naming and discussing the power differential in the room, it enables our clients to better engage this material as well. For example, size, gender, or racial differences may need to be directly explored in setting up a taking-over. Nourishing words offered as a probe can evoke evidence of not only personal, familial wounding, but also the limiting and oppressive messages of the larger culture.

Child-State Work: Unexplored power differentials can interfere with the healing potential of child-state work. The nourishing aspects of a ‘missing experience,’ if offered by a white therapist to a person of color, may not be accessible to that client. A person of color working with a white therapist may not feel safe enough to explore their core material. Addressing power differential issues forthrightly in the contact phase of the work can enhance the felt sense of safety in the therapeutic dyad, enabling more vulnerable work to be done.

For example, when doing child-state work with a trans or gender-fluid client, our assumptions about gender identity may not match up with the client’s inner experience. We will need to clarify the pronouns and gender identity of the inner child, just as we clarify the feelings, thoughts and setting of the inner experience of child state.

Consider using terms that encompass all gender expressions rather than only two (e.g., “children” instead of “boys and girls,” “siblings” instead of “brothers and sisters,” “your young self” instead of “your young girl self” or “your young boy self.”)

Similarly, in holding awareness and respect for the diversity of family constellations, we will want to clarify the structure of the parenting system rather than slipping into the heteronormative assumption of each child having a mommy and a daddy.

Cultural humility does not guarantee that we will avoid offending someone or making a mistake. But maintaining a welcoming and open attitude toward a client’s experience allows us to correct course when unintended wounding occurs. Mistakes will happen along the way. Client-centered repair processes that demonstrate self-reflection, accountability, and commitment to change strengthen the therapeutic relationship and can even be a form of missing experience for the client. Bringing a culturally humble mindset to our work is not an invitation to become overly careful, but rather to be accountable for our missteps, and open to growing our capacity to explore the full breadth of a client’s experience without the shackles of rigid preconceptions.

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