

# Introduction

Do you find yourself increasingly frustrated by research and literature that ignores, invalidates, or displaces multiraciality? Do you long for a practice approach that is unequivocally multiracial relevant? We do. So do countless others who live the increasing reality of racialized experiences that do not fit simplistic or singular categories. Yet multiraciality is far too often relegated to the margins as footnoted afterthoughts or is fully omitted from textbooks, articles, and theories used in today's classrooms across the globe. We wrote this book for all social workers and helping professionals, but it is especially in honor of those of us who personally or familially do multiraciality every day. It is our most sincere hope that this book does justice by affirming and portraying diverse ways in which people and families live multiracially.

As social workers, we wrote this book as an illustration of social work values in action, but we invite its use by a broad audience of related professions, especially those within psychology, education, marriage and family therapy, counseling, and public health. No matter how you professionally identify, this book can help you to explore ways of bringing multiracial cultural attunement to your professional practice.

## WHY THIS BOOK IS SO IMPORTANT

On August 28, 2017, Quincey, a “biracial” eight-year-old boy, was playing with a group of older boys who were known to have bullied him in the past. They badgered him into standing on a picnic table and stringing a rope around his neck. When he finally complied, the boys kicked the table away, allegedly yelling “white pride” as they ran off, leaving Quincey to hang from the tree (Glum, 2017). Kicking, he eventually dropped to the ground, but his injuries were so severe that he had to be airlifted to a nearby medical facility for treatment. His mother, Cassandra, established a GoFundMe account to support moving away. She wrote on Facebook, “It truly saddens me that even in a city so small, racism exists” (A. Stein & Dillon, 2017).

But racism does exist. And, contrary to stereotypes, multiracial kids do not just experience the best of both worlds. People and families living multiracially navigate racism daily in cities small and large across America—often outside of, or despite, the awareness of others in their families, schools, workplaces, or immediate environments. In fact, research suggests that multiracial youth experience similar or higher

rates of racism (Anderson, 2015; Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015) and higher rates of bullying (J. A. Stein, Dukes, & Warren, 2007) than their single-race-identified peers. This is in part because many children growing up multiracially live in racial isolation (S. H. Chang, 2016) in communities like Quincey’s, where there is little racial diversity and there are few other mixed-race families or people, if any (Kreider & Raleigh, 2016). We wrote this book especially in support of kids like Quincey and many others whose racial realities include “single-handedly integrating” their own families, schools, churches, and neighborhoods, often at great developmental, physical, and psychological expense (Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006). They deserve adults and communities that are attuned to and can anticipate, rather than be shocked or saddened by, the racism that comes to them often from people within their immediate social and family networks.

*Monoracism*, or racism specifically targeting individuals and families who are racially mixed, also shows up packaged as special attention to racial ambiguity, or the visibility of a family’s interraciality (Hamako, 2015). Although monoracism can also be violent and overt, it frequently takes the form of microaggressions from people with monoracial privilege (Johnston & Nadal, 2010)—as more subtle pricks and slights dressed as identity patrolling, as “compliments,” or as seemingly benign questions that invalidate or stigmatize multiraciality (Mills, 2017). If multiraciality is your lived experience, second to the hallmark question “What are you?” you likely cannot count the number of times you have also heard at least one of the following:

- “I don’t think of you as \_\_\_\_\_. I just think of you as a person [that is, as white].”
- “You’re mixed/an interracial couple?! How cool/hot/exotic!”
- “Is that *your* mother/father/child?!”
- “Oh, mixed-race babies are so cute!”
- “But you don’t look/sound/act \_\_\_\_\_?”
- “Are you really sure you’re not \_\_\_\_\_?”
- “But if you had to pick one [race], which would it be?”
- “That’s your \_\_\_\_\_ side coming out!”
- “You’re so lucky, you get the best of both worlds!”
- “Didn’t you feel confused growing up?”

For many multiracial adults who have found their way to resilience, they often must build armor that is “bulletproof” (L. Jones, 1997) and is acquired from persisting and navigating the never-ending spray of racialized bullets that most racially ambiguous people dodge and redirect throughout their lifetimes. The normative racial experience of most people and families doing multiraciality is experiencing this daily and over the course of our lifetimes. Everywhere. And it comes from anyone of any racial-ethnic identity—strangers in Target, your doctors, your babysitters, your own family, friends, classmates, colleagues, parents of friends, children,

teachers, pastors, cab drivers. Everyone. It is easy to dismiss these as anything more than harmless inquiries, but when aimed in the same place, over time, and without effective defenses, these tiny bullets can blow holes through one's self-confidence, security, sense of connection, or belonging. If multiracial people and families have challenges with their identity, it is not because they are multiracial. It is because they are constantly navigating a world and relational context that is obsessed with bringing attention to all the ways in which they are racially different and, thus, an outsider. This book is important because it will help you to tune into how these structural and relational dynamics create distinct cultural contexts of risk for the multiracial families and people with whom you work. Throughout the book, we highlight multiracial strengths and opportunities to build resilience with the multiracial people and families you serve.

Finally, this book is important in helping to disrupt the use of colorblindness (that is, claiming to not see race) as an acceptable philosophy of doing difference in families, couples, personal identities, and in your own practice. Increasingly, research emphasizes what some already know: Colorblindness is a harmful ideology that causes distance and mistrust interpersonally and familially (S. H. Chang, 2016; Holoien & Shelton, 2012; Samuels, 2009). Throughout the book, we illustrate how colorblindness causes us to not see or anticipate racism and monoracism (that is, *mono/racism*) and instead leaves those who experience oppression and stigma to battle it alone. This book is critically important because social workers increasingly interact with our nation's growing population of multiracial people and families in schools, hospitals, social service agencies, counseling, and community centers. Multiracial people and families deserve not our blindness but our clear-eyed action and partnership in navigating a highly racialized world that will pay intense attention to patrolling and inquiring about who they are; how they look, act, and identify; and who they befriend and love. We are disappointed in how slow our own profession has been in developing and elevating a rich knowledge base that promotes a racially sophisticated and culturally agile approach to work with people in all the diverse ways in which we do race and family. We hope that the complexity elevated in this book can join with others in and beyond our profession to see the multiplicity and diversity that is, and has always been, present in us all.

## WHY NOT CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

We intentionally use the language of *cultural attunement* instead of the language of *cultural competence*. Previous critiques, including our own (Jackson & Samuels, 2011), have identified varied meanings conveyed or implied, sometimes unintended, by the word "competence." We introduce a few critiques here. First, the very word "competence" implies individual mastery and expertise in another's cultural and racial-ethnic life world (that is, daily lived experience in one's environment). But

cultures are socially contested and dynamic; they change and flex across and within individuals, social identities, and contexts (Kirmayer, 2012). To claim or aspire to competence disregards these realities and is both erroneous and presumptuous.

Second, cultural competence packages discussions of people, families, and communities within flawed and often mono/racist constructions of race. Particularly within social work, culture is increasingly used instead of race as an assumed neutral or more palatable marker of difference and, thus, “deficit” (Y. Park, 2005). In general, cultural competence centers whiteness as the dominant norm and cultural ideal of personhood against which all other groups are racialized and decentered as “different” or “diverse.” Invariably, race, ethnicity, and culture become *monowashed*—engaging overly simplistic and uncritical generalizations that displace or hide the multiplicity and diversity normative within all racial-ethnic populations.

Third, the term “competence” does not offer a process to navigate or balance a practitioner’s prior knowledge about structures of oppression, power, and privilege and the actual relevance of that knowledge when applied to work with an individual or family. How these structures are experienced and expressed within the identities and meaning-making systems of actual people is only knowable after engaging a person or family. Relatedly, the very word “competence” linguistically marginalizes client contributions to working relationships. It centers and values qualities of the professional rather than qualities of the relationship. For these reasons and others, we engage a *cultural attunement* framework throughout this book but one that operationalizes its core concepts for the first time.

## WHY CULTURAL ATTUNEMENT?

The concept of attunement, and specifically empathic attunement, has been used before to accentuate relationality in clinical practice (Erskine, 1998; Rowe & Mac Isaac, 1989) and in parenting processes (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971; Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Dombrowski, Timmer, Blacker, & Urquiza, 2005; Meins, 2013). *Cultural attunement*, first coined by Hoskins (1999), rejects ideas of professional competence and mastery in doing racial-ethnic “difference” (and even a presumed sameness) in practice. Specifically, Hoskins highlighted relationality as core to, if not synonymous with, a culturally attuned practitioner. In this way, cultural attunement transcends past and present conceptualizations of cultural competence in its emphasis on relationality.

Originally, cultural attunement was described within five interrelated concepts of relationality: acknowledging the pain of oppression, engaging in acts of humility, acting with reverence, engaging in mutuality, and coming from a place of not knowing (see Hoskins, 1999). These concepts were further developed by both Elias-Juarez and Knudson-Martin (2017) and Oakes (2011). We, too, explicitly emphasize within our model the centrality of relationships by using the phrase

“in-relation” work. However, cultural attunement has previously been applied only to engagement, and it lacks conceptual integration within a larger practice model. In this book, we develop a practice model that, indeed, operationalizes these features of relationality across all phases of work. Throughout, we emphasize that the core processes of multiracial cultural attunement are located, created, and practiced within and through relationships. However, our approach to attunement also holds social workers accountable for interrupting cycles of monoracial privilege and other dynamics of power that we have all internalized and often enact interpersonally beyond the engagement phase of practice. We introduce these foundational principles of our approach to multiracial cultural attunement in the following sections.

## FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF MULTIRACIAL CULTURAL ATTUNEMENT

### 1. Critical Multiraciality

Foundational throughout this book is a critical approach in general, and to multiraciality in particular (Anderson, 2015; Hamako, 2014; J. C. Harris, 2016). Taking a critical multiracial approach explicitly means that we directly challenge ideas of race as neutral or natural facts of human existence. Instead, we situate the idea of race and “mixed race” historically, politically, and structurally in its use as a tool of colonization to establish and then protect the supremacy of whiteness and other statuses of privilege and power in society (Balestrery, 2012; Jung, 2015; Omi & Winant, 1994). A critical multiracial stance, however, also calls out the black–white binary mono/racism, essentialism, biologism, and colorism embedded within ideologies of race that affect all of us but uniquely implicate multiracial experiences of race (J. C. Harris, 2016; Samuels, 2006, 2009). Throughout the book, we engage race in ways that center and situate diverse multiracialities beyond the black–white binary historically, contemporarily, familiarly, interpersonally, and individually. We call attention to macro-, meso-, and microlevel processes of racialization and identify opportunities to disrupt, rather than perpetuate, internalized and institutionalized dominant racial ideology as core to multiracial cultural attunement.

Throughout this book, we also explore ways to see and acknowledge the presence of racialized oppression and privilege by identifying these elements within the social worker’s personal identities and systems of meaning. Because this is foundational to our abilities for attunement, critical reflexivity is the first phase of our multiracial cultural attunement model. In this way, critical multiraciality is a process of not simply acknowledging the pain of oppression (Hoskins, 1999) but also calling out its institutionalization and internalization within the fabric of our society and policies, including our theories and social work practices, as well as within our personal identities and ways of relating to one another.

## 2. Multidimensionality and Intersectionality

Throughout this book, we emphasize that multiraciality must be understood as multidimensional, in context, and in-relation to other privileged and oppressed social statuses and identities (for example, gender, age, sexuality, and class). In tuning into diverse experiences of multiraciality, we encourage you to see and affirm how other statuses and identities intensify, moderate, or redirect pathways of oppression, stigma, resilience, and strengths. Multiracial people and families are not just racialized but also socialized (and either privileged or oppressed) on the basis of gender, sexuality, class, culture, and a host of other identities and statuses (Balestrery, 2012). A multidimensional view of people enables us to see another and ourselves holistically as complex and embodying both privilege and disadvantage, strengths and vulnerabilities, and resilience paired with risk. It also allows us to understand intersecting dimensions of oppression, colonization, as well as combinations of privilege and oppression within a single life world and identity. Together, intersectionality and multidimensionality enable us to genuinely recognize that each multiracial person and family system possesses elements of resilience and vulnerability, struggle and triumph, and limitless ways of doing multiraciality that are healthy and valid.

## 3. Social Constructivism

We take a constructivist approach throughout—an understanding of knowledge as created through interactions between people and their environments. Applied to our professional relationships, it is a kind of relationality that requires you to take a stance of “not knowing” (Hoskins, 1999) and “cultural openness” (Oakes, 2011). A constructivist orientation values and centers the experiential knowledge of multiracial people and families and affirms their racialized experiences as legitimate and real. It enables a state of mind that resists overgeneralizing or feeling overconfident because of our familiarity, shared identity, or sense of superiority. This approach also elevates the critical value of both the multiracial person or family and the professional’s ways of knowing as essential to building multiracial culturally attuned relationships grounded in shared understanding (Yasui, 2015a). However, it requires ways of (inter)acting and interpreting that always remain culturally recognizable and matter to those with whom we work.

Finally, because we take a social constructivist approach, we use the terms “dominant narratives” of race and family rather than more commonly used terms like “dominant ideology” (see, for example, J. C. Harris, 2016). In this way, we call attention to the personal agency, role, and power of human beings in erecting mono/racist ideologies and embedding them within social and cultural systems of meaning within society. We also call out processes of racial conditioning and socialization that facilitate the internalization of these dominant narratives and systems of meaning that we apply to others and to understanding our own identities and life worlds.

## 4. Social Justice

Social justice is a fundamental and foundational principle within social work professional codes of ethics and values across the globe (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), yet it remains one of the most elusive principles to identify and practice interpersonally within direct or microlevel work with individuals and families. Social work and other professions have histories of intervening in ways that exacerbate oppression and are colonizing rather than emancipatory and decolonizing (Balestrery, 2012; Bhuyan, Bejan, & Jeyapal, 2017). Throughout the book, we emphasize the importance of disrupting and decentering oppressive dominant narratives of race and family as critical steps in redistributing power and privilege not just in society but also within our personal identities, statuses, systems of meaning, and the behaviors we bring into our professional relationships. Decentering enables relational spaces that see and facilitate resilience within multiracial families and people rather than impose pathologizing lenses of interpretation. This calls us to consider how our ways of relating are power enabling, decolonizing, transformative, and emancipatory. Throughout this book, you will be called not only to know more but also to know differently, critically, and to act from that place. This bridge between socially just thinking and socially just acting—*praxis*—is a resounding theme throughout the book.

Taken together, our conceptualization and core principles of multiracial cultural attunement form a critical foundation throughout our practice model and book. This means that the very notion of *culture* used in this book extends beyond just ethnicity to include the distinct cultural context of racialization and racism in the United States and how experiences of these contexts are both shared and unique across diverse multiracial populations, individuals, and family structures. This also means that we focus the reader's attention on *dominant systems of meaning*—narratives of race and family that inform the cultural contexts in which multiraciality itself is conceptualized in theory, research, dominant and nondominant cultures, and policies and practices but also manifests interpersonally, familially, and individually within multiracial families and people.

### WARNING: THIS IS PERSONAL AND LIFELONG WORK!

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish . . . who nods at them and says, "Hey boys, how's the water?" The two young fish swim on . . . eventually, one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?" (Wallace, 2009, p. 1)

It is often challenging to see and sustain a critical awareness of the basic and essential elements of our environments that, in turn, advantage and protect our literal survival. Like these young fish, when such a thing is brought to our attention, the confusion or conflict it causes can raise our defenses. And like these fish, we may

choose to ignore it and swim on with those who offer comfort to our own ways of (not) knowing. But staying within the small circle of what and who we already know by avoidance or selective blindness creates distance between ourselves and those who experience the same environment differently or even experience it as harmful to their very survival. Although remaining unaware or selectively rejecting new information is certainly one's personal prerogative as an individual, it is an unethical stance for a helping professional. Multiracial cultural attunement requires professionals who choose ways of seeing, knowing, and doing that have relevance beyond our own personal best interests, life worlds, and identities. Such choices bring both excitement and discomfort—we are warning you that tuning in to the cultural life worlds of those around us is a lifelong commitment to growth, both personal and professional. It is both deeply meaningful and hard work.

We also want you to know that the phases of practice we outline in this book are *processes*. Multiracial cultural attunement is not a fixed destination at which you arrive and then deploy your individually acquired knowledge, self-awareness, or skill onto a multiracial person or family. Multiracial cultural attunement is not about extracting knowledge from clients, research, or theory (Kirmayer, 2012). In this book, there are no practice recipes or prescriptive techniques that will magically produce or systematically guarantee your cultural attunement in the same way with all people. Cultural attunement is a team sport. It includes continued learning, focused training, reflexive supervision, and peer-driven professional communities. Perhaps while reading this book, or even while reading this introduction, you may feel an emotional reaction. We are calling on you to stay tuned in to that as an essential feedback loop, encouraging you to still continue your journey. It is our hope that this book is a support to accompany your multiracial cultural attunement work.

## BUILDING MULTIRACIAL CULTURAL ATTUNEMENT— HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is organized around six chapters, each concluding with additional readings to further your learning. Chapters 1 and 2 are overview chapters that explore the history and demographics of various multiracial populations. In chapter 1, you will learn about U.S. social constructions of race and contextualize diverse forms of multiraciality in that history. After reading this chapter, you will be more familiar with contemporary demographic and health trends about this highly diverse population, including shifts in interracial marriage and partnership in both same-sex and different-sex couples. In chapter 2, you will learn about dominant narratives of race and family that stigmatize doing family multiracially in the United States (for example, white supremacy, homogamy, biologism, monoracism, heteronormativity, and heterosexism). Drawing on contemporary research about resilient processes in multiracial families and couples, we present a model that illustrates the building blocks of racial awareness as a key element of family resilience. Taken together,

these first two chapters create a foundational knowledge base emphasizing the importance of spaces and working relationships that counter stigma and foster resistance, affirmation, and resilience in multiracial people and families.

Chapters 3 and 4 are the core conceptual chapters in this book. In chapter 3, we introduce four theoretical perspectives that each uniquely shift your attention to different but critically important dimensions of multiracial identity. This chapter takes you through the strengths and blind spots of each of these approaches and emphasizes the need to extend understandings of identity for multiracial people and families beyond biology, racial label use, and decontextualized assessments of a “healthy identity.” Throughout chapter 3, we highlight the need for theoretical pluralism. Chapter 4 presents our practice model of multiracial cultural attunement. We identify four mutually reinforcing and dynamic phases of practice: critical reflexivity, engagement, exploration, and collaborating in action. Each phase is distinguished by a philosophy of culturally attuned practice and several key objectives to consider during each phase. You will be challenged to balance the generality of these relational processes with the specific ways in which multiraciality adds layers of complexity or shapes unique opportunities for this work. Although multiracial cultural attunement is an ideal model for use with any population, we identify ways in which each phase can be uniquely relevant for use with multiracial people and families.

Chapters 5 and 6 highlight three core skills associated with each of the four phases of practice. We use cases to apply the model’s skills to potential approaches in your practice. In chapter 5, we explore how dominant narratives of race and family shape dynamics of power and privilege in critical reflexivity and engagement and identify the critical role of the social worker for taking high levels of responsibility and initiative for their preparation, tone setting, and professional growth. We draw on a case example with the Moor family; examine how you might use an ecomap; and scaffold your ongoing critical reflexivity and engagement with feedback loops, supervision, and use of client-centered systems of meaning. Chapter 6 reviews the phases of exploration and collaborating in action and demonstrates how you can leverage the strengths and resilience of multiracial people and families throughout your work. We specifically explore how to engage socially just practices and decenter stigmatizing and oppressive dominant narratives across various spheres of influence (for example, identity work, your own assessments and interpretations, and family and couple dynamics). We use two case examples to explore and discuss potential ways of deploying skills while exploring and collaborating with multiracial people and families in your work.

Additional toolkits conclude both chapters 5 and 6. These are skill-building resources that we have developed over the course of our careers in research, teaching, and training, which we have adjusted specifically for this book. We recognize that readers will not all be in the same place with regard to their levels of multiracial-relevant knowledge or awareness. We offer some guidance for adjusting these exercises to complement rudimentary and more advanced skill-building needs.

## CONCLUSION

I am new. History made me. My first language was Spanglish. I was born at the crossroads and I am whole. (Morales, 1990)

In many ways, this book is a counterspace for multiraciality in all of its forms. Counterspaces are places created by people whose existence and lived experiences are minimized, marginalized, stigmatized, or simply silenced (Case & Hunter, 2012). Counterspaces allow for the voicing of those realities to produce, if even temporarily, affirming and transformational conditions (Havlicek & Samuels, 2018). They are places of exception where identities can be expressed, observed, tried on, affirmed, or recreated. Counterspaces are also places to reimagine transformation of society; an organization; or one's self, family, and community to promote belonging and well-being. We hope, as insiders to multiraciality, that we have created one such space through this book. In turn, we hope that we have helped to support you in creating relationships that foster spaces of emancipation and transformation within your work, your classrooms, and beyond. It is our most sincere hope that this book becomes one of many practice resources and supports for social workers and helping professionals to reimagine practice processes that normalize multiplicity and pluralistic ways of knowing and being. Until such time that it is a reality, we wish you excitement, humility, and courage in your multiracial cultural attunement journey.