The Initial Interview with Diverse Populations: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract Every initial clinical interview is a unique encounter between psychotherapist and client. This unique encounter typically includes interactions designed to build the therapeutic relationship, collect assessment data, develop a case formulation, and initiate psychotherapy. As the United States population has become more diverse, conducting an effective initial interview has become more complex and challenging. To meet this challenge, it is recommended that psychotherapists make cultural adaptations by seeking self-awareness, acquiring knowledge, and learning culture-specific techniques. This special issue includes six articles designed to stretch the way psychotherapists think about the initial interview and infuse greater multicultural sensitivity and humility into psychotherapy practice.

Keywords Initial interview · Intake · Multicultural · First interview · Psychotherapy · Diverse clients · Asian Americans · Latino clients · LGBT clients · Adolescent clients · Ethics · Psychotherapy integration

There's nothing quite like the first contact in psychotherapy. Two strangers come together. There is a social/cultural expectation that these individuals will interact in ways that produce positive results for the client. But many different factors can derail the process. For example, clients

may not arrive with positive expectations and for many reasons psychotherapists may fail to initiate a helpful interpersonal process. No treatment manual exists that can give psychotherapists the expertise needed to turn a first psychotherapy contact into a collaborative experience with desirable outcomes (Overholser 2010).

The clinical interview has been referred to as the foundation of all mental health treatment (Jones 2010). Nevertheless, every initial clinical interview is a new and unique encounter that will refuse to follow an exact or standardized path. Clinical interviewing simultaneously includes therapeutic alliance-building and assessment/diagnostic information-gathering. Additionally, sometimes initial interviews include case formulation and psychological interventions (Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan 2012). Integrating all these factors into the first 50-min client contact requires an appreciation of both the art and science of psychotherapy.

The purpose of this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* is to help psychotherapists become more aware, knowledgeable, and skilled during initial psychotherapy sessions with diverse clients. This special issue stretches the ways we think about initial interviews. The proper attitude for readers of this special issue is one of openness to acculturation.

As the United States grows into a multicultural and multi-ethnic nation, we are called to expand ourselves within the overall umbrella of psychotherapy theory, research, and practice. Some writers have noted that psychotherapists who do not learn to make cultural adaptations may be engaging in cultural malpractice and consequently taking the field toward obsolescence (Fouad and Arredondo 2007). Like the initial interview itself, this special issue is a contract with ourselves to move into future psychotherapy sessions with virtuous multicultural humility and sensitivity.

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In the first article, Anderson and Handelsman shift the focus of ethics from risk management to a more proactive and positive approach. Readers are encouraged to consider how awareness of our personal, professional, and multicultural identities and values impact the intersection of ethics and the initial interview. Consider this question: Which strategy—avoiding mistakes or identifying positive and proactive ethical virtues—has a better chance of stimulating psychotherapist actualization?

The article by Sommers-Flanagan and Bequette is a map for the sometimes frightening journey of conducting initial clinical interviews with adolescent clients. But just as reading a two-dimensional map is not the same as hiking in the wilderness, the authors warn readers to recognize, in advance, that initial contacts with adolescents can include rough terrain. As a consequence, case vignettes are offered to stimulate ethical thinking, engage psychotherapist self-awareness, provide knowledge of adolescent culture, and suggest strategies for adolescent-friendly interactions during initial interviews.

Heck, Flentje, and Cochran outline an affirmative approach for interviewing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) clients. The authors suggest that psychotherapists who work with LGBT clients begin with foundational knowledge of current and historical controversies regarding homophobia and transphobia within the mental health establishment. Further, the importance of understanding the ubiquitous reality of institutionalized LGBT discrimination in “American” culture is emphasized. Therapists are encouraged to self-reflect as a method for fostering LGBT-affirmative attitudes and therapeutic behaviors. The authors conclude with important considerations for intake interviewing with each sub-population of the LGBT acronym.

Chang and O’Hara provide an overview for conducting initial interviews with Asian American clients. They leave no doubt about the intrinsic age, education, employment, financial, and language diversity within Asian populations. These insights help highlight how psychotherapy should be tailored to the unique needs of each Asian client. Additionally, the authors report psychotherapy research findings relevant for working competently with Asian American clients. Overall, this article compels readers to embrace scientific mindedness when conducting initial interviews with Asian American clients.

In his article, Gallardo describes key cultural principles relevant to the initial interview with Latina/o clients. He also reports results from a qualitative investigation where experienced Latina/o therapists articulate what factors help build

solid therapy relationships with Latina/o clients. His integrated approach—weaving together clinical lore, qualitative data, and common factors research—offers readers a Latina/o immersion experience. Readers are encouraged to think Latina/o and to consider how to integrate Latina/o value orientations (e.g., personalismo, respeto) and therapeutic skills (e.g., psychoeducation/role-induction, charlar) into initial interviews.

Zalaquett, Chatters, and Ivey present an integrative, diversity-sensitive, developmental model for the initial interview and beyond. This model is deeply integrative—combining Ivey’s developmental therapy model with the empathic relationship-story and strengths-goals-restory-action process model of clinical interviews as well as the oft-cited microskills hierarchy. Specific strategies are offered to help psychotherapists intentionally match or mis-match client developmental styles to either deepen rapport or stimulate client development.

44 years ago an article in this journal emphasized that the initial interview must be more than a unilateral fact finding mission (Sangiuliano 1969). With this special issue, the *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* remains a central force in pushing psychotherapists to expand their purpose and repertoire for conducting initial interviews. Similar to Gordon Paul’s famous (1969) statement about psychotherapy, it is no longer a matter of the general application of an initial clinical interview with all patients; instead, the appropriate question (and associated application) is: “What clinical interview procedure, by whom, is likely to be most effective with this individual client with that specific problem and under which set of circumstances?” We hope you enjoy this special issue.

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