

# Therapist *Cultural Humility* is a Crucial Component of Psychotherapy with Autistic Clients

By  
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## LAST WORD

“Cultural humility incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the patient-physician dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and nonpaternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations”

(Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p.117)

**T**he Oxford Dictionary defines *culture* as the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society. The pervasive, neurodevelopmental nature of autism means that it fundamentally impacts the way we think (Murray, Lesser, & Lawson, 2005), our customs (Bulluss & Sesterka, 2020), and way of socialising (Morrison et al., 2020; Crompton et al., 2020), creating a culture in its own right - *Autistic Culture*. While Autistic Culture is a phenomenon that is often discussed within the Autistic community, it rarely makes it into academic or clinical discussion. Instead, the pathologizing lens of the medical model has led to autism being seen as a bundle of deficits to be fixed, rather than as a defined population of people with divergent ideas, customs, and social behaviour, resulting in Autistic Culture being overlooked in conversations about the importance of cultural competency and humility for various groups of people.

Cultural competency refers to learning about a culture that we are not a part of ourselves – gathering information to build awareness and understanding of the elements of the culture that differ from our own so as to be more culturally sensitive in our interactions, and especially in the provision of psychotherapy. The history of psychotherapy for Autistic people is not one brimming with cultural competence and sensitivity, but rather one of attempting to teach Autistic people to behave in ways that fit the dominant culture. Fortunately, this is slowly shifting, and psychotherapists are increasingly working from an autism-affirming psychotherapeutic paradigm, which centres “cultural competence” at the heart of the approach. There are a range of easily accessible resources to learn about Autistic Culture, including resources cre-

ated by Autistic people that explore their lived experience, and resources created by Autistic psychotherapists to explore the junction between lived and professional experience. Social media has allowed a range of Autistic voices to have a platform. Psychotherapists simply need to seek them out and listen with an open mind.

Further, a truly autism-affirming psychotherapeutic approach recognises that we cannot possibly ever be entirely competent when it comes to working with a culture that we are not part of ourselves, and thus also includes cultural humility as a fundamental and ongoing practice in the provision of autism-affirming psychotherapy. In this context, cultural humility is a lifelong commitment to self-reflection and self-critique (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998), while seeking to learn from Autistic peo-



ple rather than taking an expert stance. Cultural humility includes acknowledging and addressing any underlying assumptions that are held as a result of being part of the dominant non-autistic culture, and frequently asking oneself during psychotherapeutic sessions, “what assumptions am I making?” rather than letting privilege render the assumptions invisible.

“... people in a majority or socially supported position, no matter how well-meaning, are often so protected in their assumptions about the world that they do not even know they are making assumptions.” (Hope, 2019, p.17)

When it comes to working with Autistic clients, assumptions can be very well camouflaged as they are tied tightly to socio-cultural norms and the core assumptions our society holds

about how to connect, how to read emotion on someone’s face, and what body language means. A fundamental part of understanding Autistic Culture is understanding that the very way we process the world differs at a neurological level and this difference in processing is not changeable, curable, or wrong. Seeking to understand each individual client’s way of experiencing themselves, others, and the world, including regularly checking in about the internal experiences the client is having rather than assuming based on their body language and facial expressions, is essential to providing psychotherapy to Autistic clients. In fact, Wampold (2015) highlights *cultural adaptation* as one of the five common factors in effective therapy, along with *alliance* and *empathy*, which are all enhanced through the practice of cultural



humility and eroded where cultural humility is lacking.

As such, it is our professional and ethical responsibility to listen to the Autistic community, to Autistic health professionals, to Autistic researchers, and – above all – to listen to our Autistic clients as an integral part of best practice of psychotherapy.

### Biography

Erin Bullus, PhD Erin is a director on the board of *Reframing Autism*, an organisation that aims to nurture Autistic identity and culture, while celebrating diversity in all its forms. She co-authors a Psychology Today blog called Insights about Autism which aims to provide information from the perspective of late-diagnosed autistic professionals. She also shares autism positive articles about research and clinical practice on the Facebook page, Autistic Wellbeing Consultancy.



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