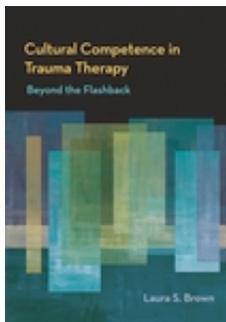


Trauma: Critical, Contemporary, Culturally Competent

A review of



Cultural Competence in Trauma Therapy: Beyond the Flashback

by Laura S. Brown

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008.

291 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-0337-6. \$59.95

Reviewed by

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Laura Brown's *Cultural Competence in Trauma Therapy: Beyond the Flashback* is a spectacular addition to our literature. It is well titled as it is so much more than an account of research and shows the effectiveness of some procedures that somewhat reduce the symptoms of trauma. In her own words,

Trauma is trauma is trauma. The texture of pain, the color of fear, and the melody of cries are all human and shared. They are all, also, uniquely configured and ordered by human identities, cultures, heritages, and networks of relationships. (p. 258)

With this book Brown has done for trauma therapy what she did for feminist therapy theory in *Subversive Dialogues* (1994). She has succeeded importantly in bringing culturalist and feminist critical thinking to trauma studies, offering broader and more comprehensive understandings that challenge single points of view.

The area of trauma studies is wide ranging and episodic. Brown traces a bit of the war-related and psychiatric history prior to the current attention to trauma originating in the military, sexual, and cultural conflicts of the 1970s. Including the rich history of crisis intervention and, more recently, of disaster work would have added to trauma's history by expanding the focus to the wide range of disciplines, professionals, and people involved in responding to overwhelming conditions. Even within the broader history, this book takes a very big step in moving trauma work forward.

Contemporary trauma therapy has its own developmental highlights. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) might be considered the classic work in the first step that brought trauma studies beyond the focus on military conflicts to the consideration of other overwhelming events unfortunately within the range of normal human experience, in her case sexual abuse. As transformative as Herman's work was, several psychologists pointed out that she had failed to consider the influence of other often traumatic experiences, such as race/ethnicity, immigration, and poverty. In the same year, Maria Root (1992) published a chapter titled "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality" in which she discussed cultural factors and defined vicarious and insidious trauma. Sensitive and explicated strategies for helping diverse, traumatized people were yet to come, however. Another step in the development of contemporary trauma therapy was the publication of empirical studies of treatment efficacy and neurobiological and cognitive research.

The third step in trauma's development is, I believe, this current text. Brown expands the conceptualization of trauma, relating it to (a) privilege and oppression; (b) being culturally literate; and (c) integrating the histories, norms, worldviews, and values of specific locations within cultures with co-occurring political forces, economic

structures, beliefs, and grand narratives into a far broader, more complex, useful, and heuristic conceptualization of trauma.

The text draws on Root's (2000) trauma and identity work and Hays's (2008) model of social locations to create a trauma therapy theory that fashions many of the current ideas into a biopsychosocial and spiritual, interactive ecological perspective. This is interfused with cultural competency. Cultural competency includes not only an understanding of the client's social locations and identities but also the therapist's knowledge of her own as well. Even the description is complex. Brown has created a work of accessible scholarship that weaves others' works (microaggression, resiliency, coping strategies, developmental impact) into her creation.

While calling for examination of therapist-expanded knowledge and conscious awareness of personal assumptions/stances, Brown also calls attention to critical, historical, and structural analysis of political, economic, and worldview factors that bring multileveled interactions into the consideration of client experience. Again and again, the text helps us to see the interactions of factors and multiplicities of social locations and identities.

For instance, Brown's discussion of the New Deal and the War Against Poverty policies, contrasted with the Republican slide into individual responsibility that covers over huge financial profits for special interests and serves to transfer funds from human needs to corporate wealth, is tied to individual poverty, with its lack of resources for coping and internalized shame. The view from "other than dominant" is consistently done, with conceptual description and illustrative, powerful clinical and personal examples.

Nor does Brown shy away from controversies in this text. For example, she discusses the current press for evidence-based treatment present generally within psychology and specifically within trauma treatment models. While she references the evidence versus empirical debates, she clearly points out that warmth and empathy within the therapeutic relationship are supported by compelling evidence, particularly when enhanced by culturally competent discussions of identities and culture. The text also addresses questions of spirituality as an important cultural factor and as a meaning-making system—

putting us on notice that just world, material accomplishments, reward for hard work, and linear causation are modern Western postindustrial assumptions.

Perhaps this text is not for therapists only. Researchers should also read this book, as should academics, because it so powerfully communicates complexity and multiplicity that are interactive, requiring one to move beyond modern assumptions of prediction and control, disease and treatment, individual and abilities, biological and psychological, single cause and single method of knowing. Brown brings to the discussion of trauma the multiple perspectives necessary to apprehend contemporary epistemology, geopolitical impact, and biopsychosocial and spiritual dimensions of individual identities and social locations.

Although the text warrants a place on our shelves of read and considered books, like all other texts it has some additional areas for development. One of these is our responsibility in the face of ignorance and injustice. Although Brown's continuing focus on awareness of and healing from trauma is excellent, the text falls short in its discussion of therapist roles in changing conditions through activism, social change, prevention, and articulating policy change. For example, setting expectations for further research and scholarship to include the interactive multiplicities and not remain silent about the politics of trauma is one clear implication of this text.

Another point for further thought is the implications for epistemology and paradigm within trauma. In this text Brown often reasons through research findings, for example, her conclusion that heterosexual orientation is a risk factor of trauma exposure through the review of physical and sexual abuse incidence literature. She equally frequently discusses intuitive meaning. At another point she suggests collaboration between clinical practitioners and researchers and holds out for empirical studies. Clearly multiplicity holds consistent in her valuing of ways of knowing.

Finally, as it often is in very good books, one wants more: More discussion of biology, somatic and body therapies, more discussion of each factor, and theoretical discussion are desired. But Brown recognizes this and sees her work as a step in the process of making

trauma therapy faithful to complexity and credible to those who might profit from it—researchers, theoreticians, target groups, clients, and clinicians alike.

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