

Culturally Competent Solution-Focused Conversations With Caribbean American Youth: A Case Example

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to expand on the ideas presented in Kim (2014) to include the Caribbean American population in the description of how cultural awareness can be important in therapy, and how—especially in solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT)—a general understanding of, or personal access to, the client's cultural context may be helpful. Cultural awareness may help to initiate joining and conversation, and often can help the therapist more easily follow the client's hints about their personal possibilities and solutions. We will describe some of the specific issues and differences from mainstream American culture that Caribbean American youth can face. We will also describe some of the strengths and protective factors that stem from this same background. To illustrate our ideas of how to hold a culturally competent SFBT conversation, we present the case example of Nadine, who sees her therapist Jamie-Lyn to get help to get back on the right track in school. When Jamie-Lyn sees her supervisor, Giselle, she gets some new ideas based on the common cultural background of her client and supervisor. Since this common background will not always be present, therapists should take notice of how Jamie-Lyn with the help of Giselle became more open and curious about her client's different life experience.

Keywords: solution-focused brief therapy, cultural competence, cultural awareness, supervision

Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) is a useful, strengths-based intervention to problems when working with students in school settings (Brasher, 2009). Interest in SFBT has grown in the past 10 years among school-based psychologists, social workers, school administrators, counselors, and teachers (Kelly, Kim, & Franklin, 2008; Metcalf, 2008; as cited in Rambo, West, Schooley, & Boyd, 2013). Metcalf (2008; as cited in Rambo et al., 2013) indicated that solution-focused work in school settings emerged in 2001 as a result of Insoo Kim Berg's work with Cynthia Franklin. Collaboratively, they partnered to introduce the SFBT approach at Garza High School, an alternative school setting in Austin, Texas. Since then, the success of utilizing SFBT techniques in schools has been well-documented. Kim and Franklin (2009) examined the most rigorous outcome studies on SFBT in school settings;

their findings suggested that "SFBT did show promise as a useful approach to working with at-risk students in school settings, specifically helping students reduce the intensity of their negative feelings, manage their conduct problems, and externalizing behavioral problems" (p. 464). Additional literature points to SFBT as an effective brief approach to utilize in school settings (Birdsall & Miller, 2002; Conoley et al., 2003; Corcoran, 1998; Dielman & Franklin, 1998; Franklin, Biever, Moore, Clemons, & Scamardo, 2001; LaFountain & Garner, 1996; Littrell, Malia, & Vanderwood, 1995; Newsome, 2005; Teall, 2000; Thompson & Littrell, 1998; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001; Young & Holdorf, 2003).

The cornerstone of SFBT work in school settings is the process of solution building. This process entails the therapist working with each student to help identify how his or her situation could be different when it is solved. By

taking a cooperative position, the therapist is able to empathize and connect with students in order to explore goals for the future, even if they may appear out of reach (Metcalf, 2008; as cited in Rambo et al., 2013). The SFBT approach is grounded in the idea of co-construction of language and attention to collaborative goal-setting between the student and therapist (Kim & Franklin, 2009). Possibilities for solution building exist in the language between student and therapist as they build a bridge between problem definitions to possible solutions (De Jong & Berg, 2008). In this article, we will discuss how curiosity and openness to unique cultural experiences can be an important part of joining, and a demonstrative case example will be presented.

SFBT With Diverse Ethnic Groups in Schools

The effectiveness of SFBT has been examined in a number of settings; however, very little attention has been given to the cultural implications of utilizing the SFBT model with minority populations. Kim (2014) pointed to the client-centered view of SFBT practices as a possible reason for why cultural groundedness is not at the forefront of conversations among SFBT authors and researchers. The model emphasizes a “not-knowing” position focusing on the client’s own descriptions and goal(s); such curiosity serves to honor the client’s experience and expand the dialogue about the client’s way of life. Clients are also invited to share their views of how life could be different in the future from the present problems they face. De Jong and Berg (2008) urged clinicians to focus on the client’s perceptions; indeed, they affirmed that

perceptions are holistic. They include a person’s thought’s feelings, behaviors, and experiences. . . . Consequently, the client’s descriptions of his or her perceptions may be productively thought of as the interplay between the client’s experiences and frame of reference. (p. 37)

The “frame of reference” that De Jong and Berg pointed to may be an implied reference to cultural context that has been left unspoken, thus making attention to specific cultural adaptations less crucial than with other models; as such, awareness is presumed to be built into the SFBT model. De Jong and Berg may have viewed the therapeutic relational process of SFBT as supportive to addressing all human diversity components. We agree that fostering curiosity enables the clinician to open many doors within the dialogue to frame an understanding of the client’s story, and also that demonstrating empathy is an essential component of cultural competency for any practitioner. However, we believe that without the practitioner giving purposeful attention to cultural differences and the critical issues faced by minority groups, these experiences may at times not receive the focus and attention needed for a successful conversation and later solutions. In fact, questions and dialogue about culture and individual life situations foster

client engagement and fit well with the essential curiosity of the SFBT approach.

Kim (2014) urged researchers to examine not only the effectiveness of SFBT practice, but also the extent to which it is effective with minority populations, noting that “very little has been written about cultural competency in SFBT” (p. 10). In his recent book, *Solution-Focused Brief Therapy: A Multicultural Approach*, Kim called for the integration of a multicultural approach when working with minorities while remaining faithful to the SFBT model. Kim encouraged clinicians to maintain a “not-knowing” position, as such curiosity flattens the hierarchical relationship in the therapeutic process. Within this framework of curiosity, Kim considered that multicultural awareness will also foster collaboration and respect, especially for minority clients who may feel that their experience has been ignored in the past. His contribution to the literature on cultural competency and SFBT practice urges clinicians to explore and increase their awareness of common cultural values and beliefs prior to working with minority populations. From this perspective, gaining knowledge of historical background, culture, values, and beliefs will enable clinicians to identify ways to instill hope and empower populations that have been marginalized by larger societal systems. Kim’s book includes several contributing authors who offered their perspectives on SFBT therapy with the following populations: Asian American and Asian immigrant, African American, Hispanic and Latino, American Indian, multicultural families,¹ LGBTQ clients, clients with disabilities, clients of lower socioeconomic status, and spiritual or religious clients.

Despite the vast number of groups discussed in the book, Kim (2014) did not provide information on clinical issues in working with Caribbean American families. We propose that because SFBT focuses on the strengths and resilience that the client brings into therapy, it is not essential to gain knowledge in advance about every possible client background. What we present instead is an example of how curiosity and respectful questioning can facilitate conversation between a therapist and a client from two different backgrounds. This example is of a therapist brought up within a mainstream American cultural context with an Anglo American background, and a young client who is a recent immigrant from the Caribbean. The lessons learned are applicable to a variety of situations.

Social Justice Issues and Teen Clients

The work setting we will discuss is one in which issues of race, culture, power, and privilege are central. The government’s emphasis on the eradication of “bad behavior” in schools has led to an increase in strong disciplinary measures against students who have committed minor infractions (Stucki, 2013). In recent years, schools

¹ Kim (2014) included a chapter entitled “Solution-Focused Approach With Multicultural Families.” *Multicultural families* is a term commonly used in the United States to describe families with diverse ethnic and racial heritages.

throughout the United States have adopted a “no tolerance” policy for behavioral infractions and the number of juvenile delinquency arrests has grown in proportion, thereby increasing the likelihood of students entering the juvenile justice system (Stucki, 2013). One example is Broward County, Florida’s public school system, the sixth largest in the United States (Broward County Public Schools, 2014). Students in this school system represent as many as 171 foreign countries and speak as many as 55 different languages and, “Just two years ago, Broward County schools funneled the state’s highest number of students into the juvenile justice system, often hauling them away in handcuffs for minor infractions” (Yi, 2013, para. 1).

In the past year, Broward County Public Schools announced new initiatives to moderate the use of harsh penalties for minor infractions following scrutiny by the NAACP for alleged discrimination. The NAACP has worked collaboratively with civil rights organizations, school officials, a state prosecutor, law enforcement, and several others to address the “schoolhouse to jailhouse pipeline,” which has disproportionately included more ethnic minorities than any other student population. The relationship between student achievement and suspensions has been examined in several studies, including Losen and Martinez (2013) and Sum, Khawwaja, McLaughlin, and Palma (2009). Also, a summary of available studies may be found in Stucki (2013). Such studies indicate a significant impact on African American high school completion rates; Sum et al. (2009), for example, noted that that “23 percent of black male dropouts aged 16–24 were institutionalized (most in prisons), compared to 1 percent of people with high-school degrees” (p. 3).

So, through the need of the Broward County School District to better assist students who had committed behavioral infractions that would ordinarily result in suspensions emerged an alternative in 2013, the collaborative intervention and prevention program called Preventing Recidivism through Opportunities, Mentoring, Interventions, Support & Education—the PROMISE program for short. Systemic work in schools is a specialized approach that focuses on major influences in the child’s life; it embraces the major tenets of family therapy, emphasizing that problems do not occur in isolation but within a much larger social context. To address behavior in the educational arena, many parties are taken into account; the family, school system, and community resources are regarded as each having an impact on student’s performance and/or behavior. Therefore, collectively, these systems are taken into consideration as a unit; targeted interventions foster an understanding of how the systems interact and may best support the needs of each child. This is a distinct shift from previous interventions that have maintained an individualistic view of undesirable behavior in students. The supervisor and therapist described below were both involved with the PROMISE program, as was the founder of the therapeutic component of the program, Anne Rambo, the second author of this paper. Thus, all professionals involved were committed to the social justice aspects of the program as well as the SFBT component.

Case Example: Cross Cultural Backgrounds

In this case example, you will meet three females—the supervisor, the therapist, and the client—from different age groups, backgrounds, and living situations. The supervisor (Giselle) and the client (Nadine) have one thing in common: They are both of Caribbean origin. The therapist (Jamie-Lyn) uses some of the experiences of Giselle to better address her client Nadine.

Giselle, the doctoral student supervisor of the case, identifies as a Caribbean American woman of mixed race. Her parents are from Trinidad and Tobago in the West Indies; her father is of African descent and her mother of East Indian descent. Like many other immigrants from the Caribbean, her parents came to the United States in search of better opportunities.

Jamie-Lyn, the therapist in the case, identifies as German American, and her family has lived in the United States for numerous generations.

Nadine, the client in this case, is a 13-year-old girl who recently immigrated to the United States from Jamaica. She lives with her mother who came to the United States some years earlier, but considers herself a recent immigrant. Nadine has much of her close family still in the Caribbean.

Supervisor Giselle’s Reflections

I (Giselle) grew up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York City, an ethnically diverse community with a strong Caribbean presence. As a young child attending public school, I distinctly remember the need to adjust to the school environment because many of my classmates came from families that had lived in the United States for generations. They had a traditional American upbringing, while I had a West Indian upbringing. Also, the majority of teachers and administrators were of different ethnic backgrounds than me. I desperately wanted to assimilate to the dominant culture—comprised of mainly European American influences—which in many ways resulted in a rejection of my own ethnic identity. This internal conflict, in which I was often at odds with my parents, embodied a desire to be more “Americanized.” By contrast, my parents had a strong sense of pride in their nationality and were unwilling to adopt a new cultural identity. For me, these internal conflicts came to the forefront in middle school when I was identified as “gifted” for high achievements, yet as I entered the sixth grade, my behavior and grades deteriorated. From the outside, the teachers made many different assumptions about the decline. Some thought that it was perhaps due to a lack of motivation, while others thought it was be a typical case of “following the wrong crowd.” Inside, I was experiencing an identity crisis. Through my own personal experience, I have learned to understand that children’s behavior in school settings can easily be misread. Furthermore, both through my personal and professional experience, I have come to value the importance of presenting opportunities for students to discuss how they define themselves culturally, as culture, power, and privilege intersect in the educational arena. Immigration to the United States presents a unique struggle for many students and I believe that there is a need to

recognize the challenges that students bring with them into educational settings. In the search for new ways to support students, there is also a need to find ways to participate in and embrace dialogues about race, culture, and ethnicity. These thoughts made me curious about the interaction between Jamie-Lyn and her client from a cultural perspective.

Therapist Jamie-Lyn's Reflections

As a beginning therapist, working with clients is always a nerve-wracking process. Constant thoughts run through your mind such as "Am I fully tracking what they are saying? Am I being empathetic? What intervention should I use?" Oftentimes you can miss parts of the bigger picture, such as culture. When working on this case, I feel I may have missed some of the bigger cultural pieces at first. I am a German American. I come from a, middle class family, with married parents and both of my parents worked. College attendance was an expectation, as was independence and learning from mistakes; children were not expected to hold parental roles. My parents were authoritative and typically held discussions to solve problems; they rarely, if ever, used physical punishment. This is very different from the Caribbean experience Giselle described above. My cultural experience and mindset significantly limited my understanding and movement in working with this client. When Giselle, as my supervisor, stepped in and offered her understanding on several aspects of Caribbean culture that I had been unaware of and joined in process, it completely changed my ability to work with the client. Changing the line of questioning from one within my own framework, to a collaborative process that looked to bridge cultural divides, created a better process for the client and for me as the therapist. That piece was huge in my learning and helped me not only with this specific client experience, but also in working with other clients thereafter.

The First Session With Nadine: A Respectful Conversation

The therapist, Jamie-Lyn, a second-year master's-level intern was being supervised by Giselle, a third-year doctoral student, in the context of the PROMISE program. Jamie-Lyn's client, Nadine,² was a soft spoken 13-year-old girl who recently immigrated to the United States from Jamaica. She had been suspended from school for 10 days and sent to the PROMISE program because she had brought a bottle of alcohol to school and shared it with three of her friends. Upon meeting Nadine, Jamie-Lyn made attempts to join with her by asking her questions about her home school. Nadine was compliant with the process and answered the assessment questions, which enabled Jamie-Lyn to complete all of the required paperwork in a question-answer format.

The scope of their conversation focused on Nadine's interests and goals; she said that she enjoyed singing and thought that one day she may want to be a teacher. When asked about whether her family would be supportive of her goals, she mentioned that she does not get to see much of

her mother, as she works a lot. Nadine stated, however, that she wished that she could spend more time with her. Jamie-Lyn explored whether Nadine had ever been in trouble before and she had not. An exploration of her grades revealed that Nadine was bright and performed well academically. Though Jamie-Lyn's attention was focused on Nadine's desire to spend more time with her mother, no questions were posed about Nadine's cultural background (e.g., where her mother was from, or the cultural context of her family's story). When Giselle (the supervisor) met with Jamie-Lyn, she engaged her in a conversation that focused on her experience in the session. Jamie-Lyn admitted to feeling "stuck" because Nadine was not particularly talkative and described feeling a "lack of connection."

Giselle asked Jamie-Lyn what she thought about Nadine allowing her to clearly be the person in authority in the conversation and about the fact that Nadine only spoke when spoken to first. Jamie-Lyn mentioned that, in her mind, there was nothing to be concerned about because many teenagers that come to the program are not very forthcoming with information. Giselle then shared her own experience with Jamie-Lyn and told her about her culture and background. As a first-generation Caribbean student in the United States, Giselle's quiet behavior as a child was often assumed to be a lack of participation, when in actuality it was because she was taught to only speak when spoken to by an adult. Culturally, the behavior of dominating a conversation or overindulging by providing more than simplistic answers would be perceived as rude; children did not interact with adults in that way. Jamie-Lyn was intrigued by the new dimension that Giselle presented and culture was now on her radar. This allowed her to become more curious about this perspective in her conversations with Nadine. Prior to having this conversation, she had inadvertently overlooked the cultural perspective and had therefore made assumptions about Nadine's succinct responses that might not have been totally accurate. Jamie-Lyn decided she would explore this perspective next time she met Nadine by expounding upon the hints about her cultural background that she had discovered from their first session. Jamie-Lyn hoped that she could learn more about Nadine's experience migrating to the United States, as well as her preferences for living here. This shift allowed Jamie-Lyn to ask more questions about those experiences, thus creating a broader context for more culturally enriched solution-building conversations. With this new perspective, Jamie-Lyn was prepared to have a new conversation with Nadine the following day.

The Second Session With Nadine: A Culturally Focused Solution-Building Dialogue

Giselle felt that it was important to support Jamie-Lyn in maintaining a position of respectful curiosity, while also building upon both the ideas of the emphasizing the potential general importance of cultural background and the information Nadine had provided in the previous session to explore her situation from a cultural perspective. De Jong and Berg (2008) recommended that clinicians listen and notice for "hints of possibility" and maintained that this skill

² Client details have been de-identified.

is one of the “key aspects of what it means to be a solution-focused practitioner” (p. 45). Giselle encouraged Jamie-Lyn to continue the solution-building conversation with Nadine by drawing upon the “hints of possibility” shared the day before. Together, they were able to draw upon details that

Nadine had felt were important to share in the first session. These details were each paired with opportunities to explore the cultural context and possibly build solutions (see Table 1). The second session began with these considerations in mind.

Table 1

Culturally Competent Solution-Building Conversation

Helpful Hints	Curious Solution-Building Questions
Nadine was born in Jamaica and recently immigrated to the United States. (experience: past and present)	What was life like in Jamaica? What did you enjoy about living there? What did you imagine life would be like in the United States? What are the expectations of teenagers in Jamaica? How are expectations different for teenagers in the United States? Make a wish ... if one thing could be different, what would it be?
Nadine does not get to spend much time with mother (preferences for the future).	How would spending more time with your mom be helpful? What are some of the things you did with family members in Jamaica? How are you able to enjoy time with your family here? What is one thing that you would like for you and your mother to do together in the future?
Nadine had never been in trouble before (evidence of exceptions).	How did you do that? What lessons in life did you bring with you from Jamaica (if any)?
Nadine performed well academically. (This presents an opportunity to compliment and explore strengths.)	What strengths have you kept with you? Who would have guessed that you would have done so well in school here in America? Is this a value for your family? How do you know?
Jamie-Lyn (Therapist): <i>Nadine, we spoke yesterday and you provided me with some very important details about what is important to you. Based on what you shared, it sounds like you wish that things could be different. Is that correct?</i> Nadine (Client): Yes. Jamie-Lyn: <i>How long have you felt this way?</i> Nadine: Ever since I came here. Jamie-Lyn: <i>When you say “here,” I just want to make sure I understand you correctly. Where exactly do you mean?</i> Nadine: To the United States. My mom sent for me this year and I wish I could have just stayed in Jamaica. I lived with my father until I was 12 and now I don’t get to see him. Jamie-Lyn: <i>How were things different in Jamaica?</i> Nadine: I lived with my mother and father until I was 3 years old; then [when] my mother came to America, she left me there.	Jamie-Lyn: <i>What did you like about living in Jamaica?</i> Nadine: I miss my father and my grandmother. We used to do a lot of things together. Now, I talk to them on the phone but not that often. Jamie-Lyn: <i>I could see how that must be tough for you; it must be difficult to go from seeing your father and grandmother all the time, and now have less contact. Yesterday, you mentioned that you do not get a chance to spend time with your mother; how do you wish for that to be different?</i> Nadine: If things were different, she would not work as hard and we could do more things together. Jamie-Lyn: <i>What kinds of things would you like to do with her?</i> Nadine: We would go shopping—maybe get our nails done together. We would laugh and have more playful moments.

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Jamie-Lyn: *Sounds like the both of you would have a lot of fun.*

Nadine: It would be . . . but she says that she needs the money to support us, so she has to work. Then, when I got into trouble with school, she yelled and threatened to send me away.

Jamie-Lyn: *What are the expectations of teenagers in Jamaica?*

Nadine: Well, you have to do good in school . . . keep your grades up . . . stuff like that. [You] Can't really spend much time with friends; you have to be in your books.

Jamie-Lyn: *Does your mom expect the same of you here?*

Nadine: Yes. She says to get good grades, but sometimes she lets me go out with my friends. My friends here have a lot more freedom and if I get into trouble with them, she says they are not good friends. Then she threatens to send me away; she says I cause too much headaches.

Jamie-Lyn: *Where would she send you? Do you have any other family members in America?*

Nadine: Well, she mentioned sending me back to Jamaica or to my aunt in Atlanta.

Jamie-Lyn: *Do you have a good relationship with your aunt?*

Nadine: Yes. We talk on the phone a lot and she is really nice. Recently, when my mom was yelling at me, I felt like I would not mind going to live with my aunt.

Jamie-Lyn: *I remember you mentioned that you have never been suspended from school before; that is pretty amazing of you to face so many challenges and still manage to do well in school. I am really impressed with how you manage it all. What keeps you going?*

Nadine: In Jamaica they are very strict; you cannot do bad in school or misbehave so I make sure that I keep trying to excel. My grandmother was very close to me in Jamaica. I miss her a lot, but she always told me to be strong and keep trying because an education is important. When times are rough, I think about her.

In the dialogue between Nadine and Jamie-Lyn, Jamie-Lyn was engaging Nadine through an exploration of what was important to her in her cultural context. The dialogue was client-centered in its focus on the hints that Nadine had shared and provided opportunities for Nadine to discuss her experience in a way that included her cultural identity. Jamie-Lyn was able to validate Nadine and reflect back on some of her statements. This allowed for further expansion on what had kept Nadine hopeful, what and who her resources were, and what she thought could be different. Jamie-Lyn also learned that there have been significant changes within the past year for Nadine. She learned that school was important to Nadine and that she was taught the value of education from her grandmother. It would thus be fair to conclude that it was partly through these strengths and resources that Nadine had been able to persevere, despite the significant life changes she had experienced in the past year. Having a culturally competent solution-building conversation not only can shift the dialogue, but

also create a more hopeful experience for both the client and the clinician.

Conclusions

The feeling of being “stuck” is common for many clinicians. Tension may occur is if there are underlying cultural differences that remain unmentioned or undiscovered. Tuason (2011) informed us of the following:

In the sessions, assumptions and expectations about each other's backgrounds are heightened and cause a lot of tension. Yet, to make things easy for the two of them, the client and counselor go along and pretend that these things are not there. (p. 210)

In concurrence with Kim (2014), we agree that the perspective of culture should be explored further in SFBT practice. This should not be done by memorizing facts or generalizations about different cultures. Instead, SFBT therapists can maintain an attitude of respectful curiosity and explore the particulars of each client's experience, rather than making broad assumptions.

In the case of Nadine, when the therapist expanded her cultural awareness, she became more open to different possibilities and questions. The conversation was enriched and it served as a pivotal point in the therapy. We propose that it is beneficial to the therapeutic conversation to explore the intersections of cultural contexts. This widens the experience and frame of reference of the conversation. Moreover, sharing experiences with other therapists, as Giselle did with Jamie-Lyn, is also an important way to open curious conversations between colleagues. We think that if clinicians take part in training aimed at having meaningful and engaging conversations about culture, this can promote the stance of respectful curiosity in the SFBT model. Culture cannot be ignored, as it serves as a frame of reference that shapes both the client's and therapist's perceptions. We hope for additional conversation in the field about ways to become aware of our own unexamined biases and frames of reference, and to expand our cultural awareness as SFBT therapists.

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