

## How to Better Understand Different Social Identities

Getting to know your client’s social identities will help you understand the discrimination and oppression they have faced. It can also position you to help your client find ways to cultivate strengths and find inspiration. You can support your client in drawing strength from their intersecting social identities, finding a unique combination of qualities and capabilities that empower them.

When seeking to better understand a client’s social identities, consider the following factors.

FACTOR TO CONSIDER	EXAMPLE
<p><b>Key historical events</b></p>	<p>What lingering damage might American Indian communities face as a result of the history of compulsory boarding schools separating American Indian children from their families?</p> <p>How might a Hmong refugee be impacted by the long history of persecution and displacement faced by members of the Hmong ethnic group?</p>
<p><b>Sociopolitical issues</b></p>	<p>For a transgender client, what is the message sent with the passage of “Bathroom Bills”?</p> <p>How might a Latinx client be affected by current changes in immigration enforcement and plans to build a wall on the border with Mexico?</p>
<p><b>Basic values and beliefs</b></p>	<p>How might values of independence and individualism, common in dominant groups in the U.S., contrast with values of collectivism and family predominant in many Asian, African, and Latin American cultures?</p> <p>What misunderstandings could arise between groups that value straightforwardness, such as the dominant U.S. cultural group, and groups that value politeness, perhaps depending more on non-verbal cues to communicate?</p>
<p><b>Cultural practices</b></p>	<p>What cultural practices common among the dominant groups in the U.S. contrast with cultural practices of other groups?</p> <p>Take personal space, for example, which is important for many Americans. What impression would an insistence on personal space give a person from a Latin American or Mediterranean culture where people prefer to stand or sit very close to others while talking?</p>

To explore cultural opportunities when engaging a client, try to link the conversation to what you know about the client’s salient social identities. Even if your client does not say much in response, you have shown them that you are willing to explore cultural issues. As you build a strong therapeutic relationship, more discussions about cultural identity may take place.

**Sources:**

Mio, J. S., Barker, L. A., & Domenech Rodriguez, M. M. (2016). *Multicultural psychology: Understanding our diverse communities* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.  
 Hook, J. N., Davis, D., Owen, J., & DeBlaere, C. (2017). *Cultural humility: Engaging diverse identities in therapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.