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Mental Health Assessment with Children and Adolescents

An Integrated Clinical, Community,
and Cultural Psychology Framework

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Dedicated to

each of the 2.2 billion children who live on this earth,
of whom many will have their lives cut short today due to conditions
we create and perpetuate.

May we work toward creating a world that is more caring, just,
courageous, liberatory, and embracing of their full humanity so each
can thrive.

In the words of James Baldwin (1980) in *Notes on the House of
Bondage*:

*“The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the
globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of
recognizing this may be incapable of morality.”*

In memory of
Fred Wetzel
beloved grandfather and deeply good person

and

Glenn A. Shuman, JD, and Louis J. Michaels, JD
both dear friends and Directors of Legal Services who actively
uplifted voices of people who were disenfranchised so they could
be heard

Preface

We write this book as psychologists, educators, family members, and community members who care deeply about the future of our fields—and even more deeply about the people who work in these fields and the people they aim to serve. This book is for people who are trying to do meaningful work in a challenging world. You may be learning how to conduct your first mental health assessment. Or you may be decades into your practice, seeking to strengthen the integration of community and cultural psychology into your clinical work. You may be looking to expand your toolkit or seeking to deepen your reflexivity. Whoever you are, wherever you are, we see you. We have been you. We are you. And we are writing to say: Your work matters. Your intention to pause, to question the status quo, to center context, to build real relationships—these are not distractions from your work. Quite the contrary: They are what make it meaningful.

As we write this preface in Spring 2025, we reflect on when we last lived near one another, a full decade ago. In April 2015, a young man, Freddie Gray, died near us in Baltimore, Maryland (United States), due to a severe spinal cord injury he apparently sustained while in police custody. Court documents stated that Freddie Gray “fled unprovoked upon noticing police presence.” Officers chased him, citing his flight as part of the probable cause to arrest him. Amid the outpouring of pain and uprising that swelled in Baltimore after his death, many people outside of Baltimore asked, “Why did Freddie Gray run?”

It is impossible for us to know for sure—he was killed before he could tell us. But take a moment to hypothesize. Why might he have run?

Usually the first ideas that come to mind, especially for those of us who have never been in a position to fear law enforcement, are at the individual level. Maybe he was guilty of something. If you thought that, you are not alone. After all, Freddie running was used as part of the rationale for arresting him. Maybe he was impulsive. Maybe he was having a bad day. All of these are possibilities. But if we limit ourselves to only these possibilities, we narrow our frame so tightly around this person that it is impossible to understand him and his behaviors. We obscure his history, communities, and conditions that shape how he moved through the world.

So let us broaden our frame. Freddie Gray grew up in Sandtown-Winchester, one of Baltimore’s most over-policed and under-resourced neighborhoods. He and his siblings suffered lead poisoning as children. He lived amid concentrated poverty and systemic disinvestment. A quarter of the neighborhood’s youth had been

arrested before they turned 18. Most Black men in the neighborhood had been arrested and incarcerated at some point in their lives; his neighborhood was sending more people to Maryland's prison system than any other community in the state. In such a context, we may wonder about the opportunities for youth to feel safe, seen, and appreciated. In his area, fleeing the police may not have been irrational defiance, but rather an attempt at self-preservation. What looks like individual risk through a narrow clinical lens may in fact be a response to contexts.

We bring up Freddie Gray's story here not because it is unique, but unfortunately because it is all too familiar for many young people, families, and communities across the United States and in other parts of the world. Even for children growing up with all of the resources, privileges, and opportunities, we adults are still more likely to ask and answer questions that point us to individual-level explanations for behaviors stripped of culture and context.

But when we assess a young person, we are not assessing them in isolation. We are encountering someone whose decisions, behaviors, and inner life have been shaped by structures far larger than themselves, forces that often remain invisible unless we make the effort to see them. To assess meaningfully, to see a person clearly, we must expand our frame to incorporate culture and context. We must resist explanations that stop at the individual and also ask: What has this young person been asked to navigate? How do they experience and interpret the world? What expectations are placed on them? And what expectations do they hold of others?

A whole-person-in-context assessment accounts not only for challenge and pain, but also for strengths, identities, and sources of support. This is an important and often-overlooked question, especially when a young person like Freddie Gray becomes known primarily through the lens of tragedy or pathology. Freddie Gray survived until he was 25 in spite of a deck of cards stacked against him. He had meaningful relationships; he was known, loved, and mourned by his community. People say that he was kind, friendly, and intelligent. He played football and had masonry skills. He had adapted to a context that gave him few safe choices, and he navigated that environment with strategies he learned from others and from his own experiences. All of these pieces of information help us begin to see Freddie Gray in his complex humanity.

This book is rooted in the belief that to develop more complete answers, we must ask better questions. These questions do not start or stop with individual deficits or strengths, but rather are directed toward understanding youth in the fullness of their lives. Grounded in clinical, cultural, and community psychology, we seek to assess meaningfully. To do so, we center collaboration and communication. We stay flexible in our methods but grounded in purpose. We think critically about the systems in play. And we always consider the nested and overlapping cultures and contexts that shape each of us. This practice is relational, ethical, and justice-oriented.

Across the globe, children and families are suffering. As we write this in spring 2025, we are witnessing profound violence, loss, and disconnection—from war and genocide, from forced migration and climate crises, and from the many quieter disasters unfolding within families, institutions, and systems that have let people

down in some way. It is easy to become overwhelmed. As psychologists in the U.S., we feel a rising tide of fear and repression. Diversity, equity, and inclusion have been turned into ‘dirty words.’ Strides toward equity and justice that have gained traction these past few decades are now being rolled back and dismantled in many institutions, including those we work in and that the families we work with must navigate. Leaders are attempting to rebury critical knowledge that has been unsurfaced. Therapists-in-training are being told, directly or indirectly, to distance themselves from critical and liberatory work for the sake of neutrality, professionalism, and survival. This book is, in part, in response to what we see as a very concerning U-turn in the developments of our fields.

In spite of this, we see our fields taking necessary and courageous steps forward. Since 2018, the American Psychological Association has been working to revise its Ethics Code, aiming to create a document that is not only aspirational, but also transformational—a code that can guide ethical decision-making in a world marked by injustice, complexity, and change. The proposed code centers civil and human rights, systemic equity, and community accountability as foundational ethical matters. It explicitly integrates attention to social justice, power dynamics, advocacy, cultural context, and collective impact into how we define and enact ethical psychological practice. The revised code contains the following proposed principles:

- **Beneficence:** Promoting the well-being of persons, peoples, animals, and the environment;
- **Human and Civil Rights:** Upholding inherent rights and protections for all people;
- **Integrity and Trustworthiness:** Practicing with honesty, transparency, and ethical consistency;
- **Justice and Social Justice:** Ensuring fairness, equity, and inclusion across individual, systemic, and societal levels;
- **Nonmaleficence:** Avoiding harm and weighing consequences in all professional actions;
- **Recognition of Social Systems and the Natural Environment:** Considering the impact of social systems and ecological contexts;
- **Respect for Persons and Peoples:** Affirming autonomy, dignity, and the rights of individuals and communities;
- **Scientific Mindedness:** Grounding work in diverse, high-quality evidence and critically examining its application.

These principles not only expand the ethical foundation of our field, but also affirm the commitments at the heart of this book: to relational practice, community accountability, cultural responsiveness, and systemic understanding. The integrated framework we propose for conducting youth mental health assessment bridges clinical, community, and cultural psychology—what we call the “3 Cs.” This framework asks us to return, again and again, to center the young person in the frame while ensuring that the frame is broad enough to include the community around them. We recognize that to assess a young person is to enter a powerful role, one

that can be used to help or to harm. We believe that good assessment must be relational, reflexive, and responsive. We must assess with care, humility, and respect. And just as ethical clarity matters, so does moral courage in practice.

In spite of uncaring we have named, we also witness care, solidarity, creativity, and resistance. Children growing into themselves. Families advocating for their young people in challenging systems. Elders passing down their wisdom. Communities creating safety, belonging, and possibility for each other. Clinicians showing up as present, attuned, and committed to building trust across differences. We see classrooms becoming spaces of collective imagination, even in difficult conditions. We see what is possible when assessment is used not only to understand an individual but also to reveal the systems that shape their world, when it becomes a tool for insight, connection, and transformation. Assessment can and routinely does unearth truths, create new meanings, empower actions, and catalyze change. This book is rooted in that possibility.

In a world that can feel unrelenting in its pain, we find ourselves returning to the quiet wisdom of Fred Rogers, a beloved educator, television host, and minister who used gentle honesty, emotional insight, and empathy to help generations of children feel seen, safe, and valued. In times of tragedy, he said his mother would tell him to “*look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.*” The goal was not to shield children from reality, but rather to help them see that even in the midst of crisis, people show up for one another—that compassion endures. Helpers are not always easy to spot; they don’t wear capes or arrive with fanfare. Often, they are the ones asking careful questions, listening deeply, bringing a calm presence, and working to understand. They build connection where others might create distance. They practice hope through their actions. We hope this book supports those who want to be helpers, not just in spite of the times we are living through, but also precisely because of them.

We dedicate this book to the youth who trust us with their stories, to the families and communities who hold them, and to the future ‘helpers’ who will carry this work forward. May you keep an open mind but not an empty head, act with courage, and never lose sight of the humanity at the center of it all.

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Acknowledgments

This book was largely written on lands of the Dena'ina and Piscataway peoples. We are thankful for their stewardship of these lands from time immemorial and sit with the discomfort of having freely moved to these stolen lands that we now call home without their permission. Although they have faced cultural genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of oppression—past and present—the Dena'ina and Piscataway are still living and thriving, as are Indigenous peoples around the globe. We encourage you to research whose lands you live on (you can start at <https://native-land.ca/>) and support local decolonization and Indigenization efforts in your area—through your time, money, advocacy, and self-work. In the words of the late Elder, first certified Tribal Doctor in Alaska, and world-renowned traditional healer, Rita Pitka Blumenstein, *“The past is not a burden, it is a scaffold which brought us to this day. We are free to be who we are—to create our own life out of our past and out of the present. We are our ancestors. When we can heal ourselves, we also heal our ancestors, our grandmothers, our grandfathers and our children. When we heal ourselves, we heal Mother Earth.”*

From Sara

There are oh so many people that shaped the creation of this book that I am sure I will not do these acknowledgements justice, but I will try. First and foremost, to the children, teens, caregivers, and family members with whom I have had the opportunity to be in therapeutic relationships, thank you. You have taught me so much about grit, healing, and wellness. To the individuals and families with whom I have had the opportunity to be in research relationships, thank you. You have taught me so much about resilience, empowerment, and the strength of sense of community through our life transitions.

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Finally and most importantly, to my dearest family and friends with whom I have been blessed to share this life, thank you. My husband, James Buckingham; my niece, Oakley Baum; my nephews, Chad and Jace Rowe; my brothers, Chris and Alex Baum; my parents, the late Paul Baum, Melinda Baum, and Don Weller; the family I gained through marriage, Linda Durkee, the late Roger Durkee, Autumn and Chad Rowe; my grandparents, Delores Wetzel and the late Fred Wetzel, Nancy

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From Jerry

Through my many years as a psychologist, I have had the opportunity to interact with many interesting people—professors, graduate students, professional colleagues, co-authors, and, of course, a diverse group of children, adolescents, and adults who have bared their souls and sought direction within our developing therapeutic relationship. All have impacted me to varying degrees in my personal growth and I owe them much credit in my continuing activities.

One such person, Sara L. Buckingham, PhD, accepted my offer to begin this project more than ten years after I had the fortune to mentor her, along with several of her colleagues, in psychological assessments at a residential treatment center near Baltimore, Maryland. As a graduate student then and now as an associate professor, Sara has always been an intelligent, caring, and focused person who views problems from a broader perspective and offers strategic solutions to help those who are themselves in transition from struggle to fulfillment.

When I first decided to become a psychologist (several years after graduating with an undergraduate degree in psychology and having moved to Miami from Tampa), I reentered school at Florida International University, where courses in child development and humanistic psychology opened my eyes to possibilities and provided me with a directional path. Next, I entered a master's degree program at Middle Tennessee State University, where I had the opportunity to develop diagnostic and testing skills at a residential program for justice-involved youth headed by exceptional clinicians, such as Jay Gorban, PhD.

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