



# UNICORNS AT THE COUNSELING CENTER:



Retention, Resourcefulness, and  
Realness of Black Therapists at College  
Counseling Centers



## Caya Plasencia, LMFT

"Own your magic, walk in your purpose,  
and rock your truth. - Beverly Bond,  
Founder of Black Girls Rock

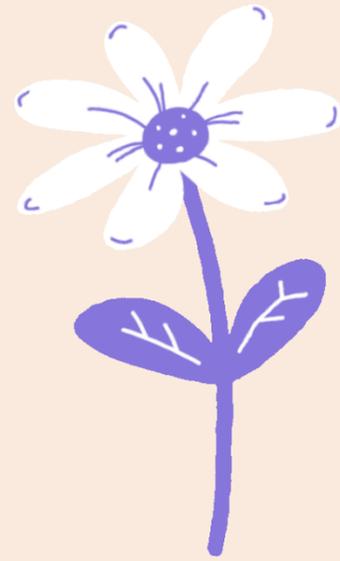
\*  
Senior Counselor at SUNY Oswego

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BS in Child and Family Studies, Syracuse University

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MA in Marriage and Family Therapy,  
Syracuse University

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AAMFT Clinical Fellow and  
Approved Supervisor Designee

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Senior counselor, clinical supervisor, coordinate groups  
and the training and development program at the  
CSC, committee member for various division-wide  
committees.



## Tekhaya Watson, LMFT

"When I dare to be powerful - to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid." - Audre Lorde

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Senior Counselor at SUNY Oswego

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BA in Psychology, Penn State University

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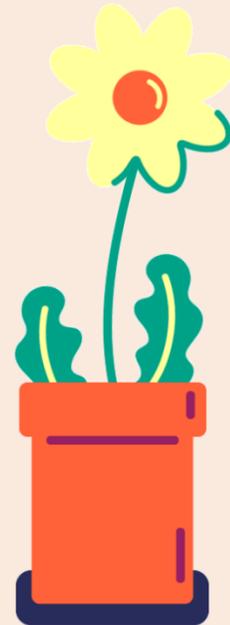
MA in Marriage and Family Therapy,  
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Individual, group, committee(s) work on campus,  
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Linzy Andre, LMHC, NCC

“Mental Strength is not the ability to stay out of the darkness; it is the ability to sit present in the darkness knowing that the light will shine again.” -unknown

Doctoral Student in Counseling & Counselor Education, Syracuse University

Sunshine Advocacy Counseling,  
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7 years counseling in colleges, hospitals,  
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MSED in Mental Health Counseling

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## Today's Learning Outcomes



1. Attendees will identify differences in the unique experiences of Black counselors who may work on a predominately White staff, and with a predominantly White student body.
2. Attendees will analyze ways to navigate boundary setting, experiencing micro/macro-aggressions from fellow-staff and clients, identifying countertransference, maintaining cultural-pride, and identifying a support network for self-care (preventing burn out).
3. Attendees will construct a plan with actionable steps to utilize acceptance and validation, as well as cultural humility to foster wellness and resilience for Black counselors in college counseling centers.





\* Why is this important? \*

As Black counselors with diverse intersectional identities, we recognize that counselors who identify as BIPOC experience challenges in predominantly white work places that warrant support, advocacy and change. We believe that we can, you can, we all can be catalysts for that change.

# Real Talk: Order of Business

1

PART 1 - PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

2

PART 2 - STATISTICS & INFORMATION

3

PART 3 - ACTIONABLE STEPS

4

PART 4 - Q&A

HAVE FUN!



\*We hope to create an and understanding by speaking our truth. The goal is for this to be a safe space where folx can ask honest questions, while respecting our vulnerability in this space.

Part 1 -  
Personal Experiences





# Cara's Experiences

Lord hammercy...

a

Graduate school -  
tokenization

b

First Professional Position -  
Labeled & silenced

c

First Clinical Job -  
Invalidation & Isolation

d

Current Position - More  
Isolation and Overwhelmed

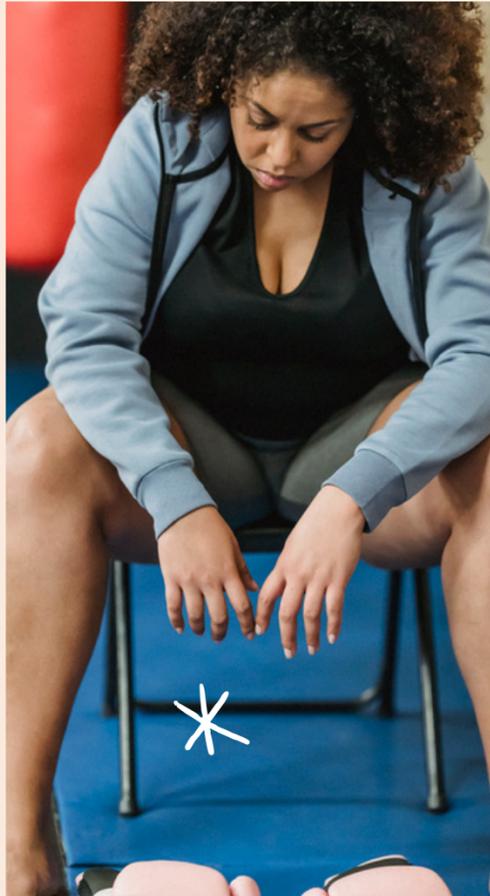
## Hold up, what???

- "This must be the sista corner!"
- "Client is mulatto" - hey that's a racial slur..."well I didnt mean it that way, so it's not racist."
- Client calls Black staff member the N-word, when processing this in supervision, supervisor says "client didn't know it was a racial slur."
- "Wow Cara, I'm darker than you!"
- "Wait, YOU'RE my therapist?!!!"
- "OMG Cara you changed your hair!!!" - every single time I change my hairstyle.
- "So wait, your hair just does THAT?"
- "What's up homegirls!"
- "Let's play the baby picture game!" - while I am the only Black person in the room.
- While dropping my son off at daycare on campus, a women said "Oh I love your hair!", then proceeded to run her fingers through it as I walked past her.

# Tekhaya's Experiences

The Struggle Is Real...

**Hol' Up. What the...???**



a

Grad School - Lonely

b

Internship Placement -  
Grad student / First Clinical  
Job - Isolation

c

Second Job - Invalidation

d

Current Job...

Me: \*Minding my business eating lunch\*

Coworker: "Why aren't you smiling? You look mad when you aren't."

"You shouldn't hang out with (other Black co-worker), she will bring you down."

"Wow... you're actually really smart!"

Client: "I just wanted you to know that I don't like Black people."

"Huh...you have really pretty hair for a Black person." \*touches hair\*

Supervisor: "Do you think you care so much because the client is Black?"

Me: "...I care because the student is of moderate risk."

# Linzzy's Experiences

Nah, they ain't have to do me like that...



## They said what?...

**Supposed Multicultural Specialist Instructor:** "You are being an angry Black woman right now"

**Coworker every day:** "GAHHHH! This is BS, I hate this MF job!"

**Supervisor following mass shooting:** "They're going to make me shoot this place up, like that guy did the baseball game"

**Me, a new hire:** "This seems outside of my purview. Can you provide a detailed description of the expectations?"

**Supervisor:** "People are saying you are angry and explosive."

"These people [Black clients], they're not like us"

"Your parents must have been pretty well off for you to be so educated"

"You change your hair so often, it gives the impression you don't know yourself"

"You can't wear your hair that way, our white clients don't want to see that"

"I tried to use my white privilege, but it didn't work"

a High school - first time I recognized Mental Health

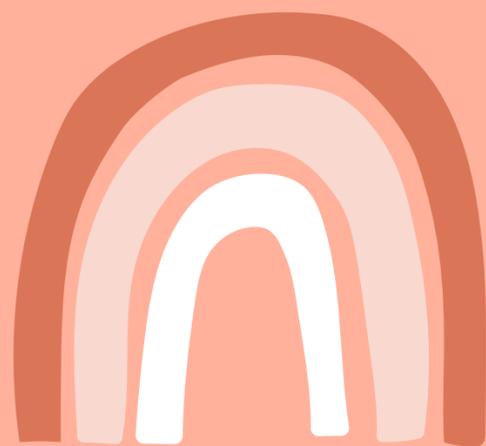
b College - seeking counseling

c Grad school - One of few, tokenized and micro-aggressed

d Working for Them - Baring witness to the problem

e Serving Clients My Way

f Returning to school - Trials and Tribulations



Part 2 -  
Statistics & Information





# The Numbers

## Race & Ethnicity

12% of the U.S. population is Black, account for nearly 19% of those affected by mental illnesses

Despite such statistics, only about 25% of Black people seek mental health care – compared to 40% of white people

**61.9% of Counselors are White (Non-Hispanic)**  
**19.4% of Counselors, Black (Non-Hispanic)**

dataUSA.io (2017)  
U.S. Census Bureau (2000 - 2019)

Black therapists are more likely in same-race dyads, to engage in a dual relationship, such as the same social space, church or a sorority-mixer; there is a need to negotiate different boundaries due to the increased chance to encounter a client outside of the therapeutic setting.

(Goode-Cross & Grim, 2014)

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Black clients preferred Black counselors and that the likelihood of taking a problem to the counseling center increased as counselor preference increased. Also, the likelihood of taking a problem to the center was significantly greater if the counselor to be seen was Black rather than White. (Thompson, R. A., & Cimboric, P., 1978)

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Black therapists practicing in counseling centers, schools, and hospitals more frequently reported that Black clients were relatively few and far between, which contributed to the therapists experiencing their work with Black clients as unique and more interesting. (Goode-Cross & Grim, 2014)

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At PWIs, Black students have increased likelihood to express preference for Black counselors; research indicates a correlation between the types of interactions Black students have with other students and their demand for representation in counseling. This contributes to burnout for Black counselors who are few and far between (Thompson & Cimboric, 1978)

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Black counselors in predominantly White spaces navigate hardships, such as the stress and adversity related to "Duelling consciousness". Duelling consciousness is the balancing act required to survive hostile spaces, in which Black counselors are aware of stereotypes and beliefs that are held about them while knowing such things are not their own lived truths (Jones, 2020)

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# The Unicorn Tax

Challenges	Short Term Effects	Long Term Effects
Microaggressions from co-workers	Feeling a lack of safety in the workplace, frustration, emotional pain	Resentment, difficulty connecting with coworkers, lack of trust with coworkers, burnout
Microaggressions from clients	Imposter syndrome, difficulty connecting with the client	Feeling inadequate as a clinician, reconsidering career choices, burnout
Being tapped with D&I initiatives	Pressure to succeed and be an "expert" despite not having specialized training in this area, feeling "type-cast", questioning motivation	Avoidance of D&I events on campus, distance from D&I work, burnout
Being sought out by SOC due to lack of diversity in the clinical team	Excitement, pride, feeling it is your duty, overwhelming caseload size	Secondary trauma, burnout
Lack of diversity/representation in the clinical team	"Am I trippin?", feeling isolated and lonely, seeing connections outside of the department	Reconsidering job location, burnout

Part 3 -  
Actionable Steps





# SO WHAT NOW?



Ways folx can take actionable steps  
towards creating a safe work environment  
for BIPOC therapists....\*



## Establishing Boundaries



Lizzy

I do not feel obligated to speak for all BIPOC or to teach non-BIPOC how to be antiracist.

I communicate about my cultural pride openly and challenge people around me to consider my Blackness when they are making decisions, speaking, etc.

Tekhara

I give myself permission to not respond to everyone wanting to check in with me because I am their "Black friend"

I will protect my energy and will be unapologetic about it.

Cara

I give myself grace during diversity discussions and don't apologize for holding silence when I need to.

I pick and choose my battles - I don't always have the capacity to have educational conversations after every microaggression, and that's ok.

# UNDERSTANDING \* MICRO/MACROAGGRESSIONS



- Process in private - you don't want to spread gossip and it's ok to seek guidance on how to handle these situations.
- Prioritize your self-care - plan time off and intentionalize spending time in places that validate your existence.
- Don't be afraid to have the conversation. You do not have to own the feelings of others, or provide education to others.
- \*Racial battle fatigue & Racial Retraumatization

# PROCESSING COUNTERTRANSFERENCE



- Seek supervision and support, no you are not trippin, but you need to work on your ish.
- Find your people - join your discipline's professional association and seek resources for support. (e.g. AAMFT Black Clinicians Collective)
- Go back to your roots - ask yourself, why did I want to do this work? Am I fulfilled in the work I am doing?
- Clients come first, it's important to maintain ethical standards in client care.



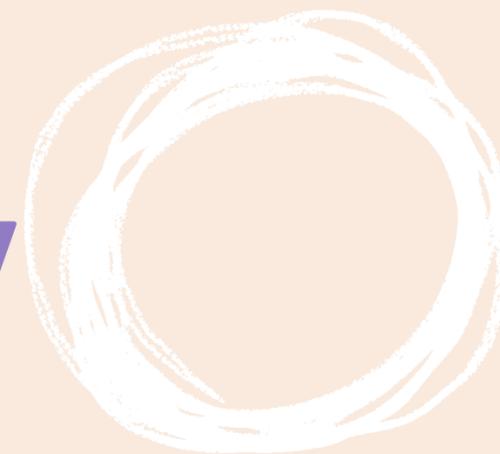
# CULTURAL PRIDE

- Maintain who you are when navigating white spaces.
- Don't be afraid to wear your hair naturally or change your hair style frequently. You can ignore invasive questions.
- Remove pressure to code switch in order to be "acceptable" or more "palatable" to a white audience.
- Wear the shirt.
- You can stay true your identity and maintain authenticity without compromising who we are.





# FINDING YOUR TRIBE/COMMUNITY



- Join division-wide and/or campus-wide committees.
- Collaborate with different campus partners to create relationships outside of your department.
- Reach out to other faculty and staff of color. If there isn't an organized support group, create one!
- It is important to have support in order to thrive in these experiences.



## Respecting Boundaries



**Respect Silence - Do not demand/expect BIPOC to speak in race/ethnicity or diversity conversations.**

**Do not touch BIPOC without their permission.**

**Understand and utilize cultural humility.**

**Do the antiracist work, and learn on your own.**

**Be aware and mindful of the implications of your "curiosity."**

**Do not label BIPOC with or use BIPOC to communicate colloquialisms.**

# CULTURAL HUMILITY

“Intrapersonally, cultural humility involves a willingness and openness to reflect on one’s own self as an embedded cultural being, having an awareness of personal limitations in understanding the cultural background and viewpoints of others; interpersonally, cultural humility involves an other-oriented stance (or openness to the other) with regard to aspects of an individual’s or group’s cultural background and identity.” – Hook & Watkins (2015)

# TIME TO PUT IT ALL INTO ACTION

*Steps TO: Utilize Acceptance & Validation  
Cultural Humility to Foster Wellness & Resilience*

- Own your biases and work on them.
- Avoid defensiveness and take responsibility for actions or words that may be hurtful. Remember: intent vs. impact.
- If feeling defensive, process this with a different co-worker/friend/therapist.
- Be willing to "do the work." - don't ask your already over-taxed co-workers to make suggestions for you - watch, read, look within. Leadership/staff must seek to understand unconscious bias, intersectionality, and microaggressions.
- Accountability - folx must be held accountable for behaviors; microaggressions are a form of harassment and contribute to creating an unsafe work environment.
- Put yourself in spaces where you will be a minority.
- Google is your best friend.
- Assess who is in your "circle." Is there diversity within your social group both in/out of work? Why or why not?
- Be willing to make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes.
- Speak up, advocate, and educate others.
- Create an action plan and act on it. - Essential Cultural Self Assessment Worksheet Collection

# Our Students Benefit...



"I loved it completely. I was very happy to see black women counselors. I know that they would understand me with my problems."



"It was great. [They] could relate to some of the things I would feel due to being a black woman."

"I'm truly honored to know all you women on different personal levels, you guys all benefited my life in such an amazing way! I will forever be grateful for you all and I will miss y'all! Continue to be amazing BLACK women! Love you guys so much and thank you for everything."

"When I first heard about the Counseling Center on campus, I knew that I needed to make it my mission to find a counselor that looks like me."



"It was amazing, I feel like I'm in a very safe space every time. A very ardent feeling."

The background is a light beige color with several decorative elements: small white and orange stars scattered throughout, three hearts (orange, pink, and yellow) in the center, and two large textured shapes (a light red rounded rectangle and a teal circle) behind the main text.

# OUR WHY...

- Finally feeling validation and understanding.
- Feedback from clients and being sought out by SOC.
- Finding our tribe and feeling supported.



Part 4 - Q & A



# WHAT QUESTIONS CAN WE ANSWER FOR YOU?



Please feel free to unmute and  
ask your question, or submit  
your question using the chat  
feature.



# References

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# ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS



1. How can I help create a safe environment for BIPOC coworkers?
2. How can counseling centers recruit and retain BIPOC therapists?
3. How can I best meet the needs of SOC as a white therapist?
4. How do you maintain a muticultural lense when working with students from different cultural backgrounds?
5. How do you manage microaggressions from clients?

# Icons Page

