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# Wired for Harmony: Cultural Neuroscience and AEDP with Asian Clients

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***Abstract*:** This article explores how cultural neuroscience research integrates with AEDP clinical practice to articulate a both/and framework for working with Asian and Asian American clients. Three main points are illustrated: First, cultural neuroscience demonstrates that individuals raised in collectivist contexts organize self and emotion through neural circuits that prioritize interdependence and social harmony, with direct implications for how safety is established, affect is regulated, and transformation unfolds in therapy. Display-rule research (Matsumoto, 2008; Matsumoto & Wilson, 2022) and neural studies of self-referential processing (Kitayama & Park, 2010; Zhu et al., 2007) reveal that expressive suppression in harmony-valuing contexts represents culturally intelligent adaptation rather than mere pathology. Second, AEDP's emphasis on moment-to-moment tracking, metatherapeutic processing, and undoing aloneness—including explicit attention to social location and cultural humility—naturally supports cross-cultural work. A detailed clinical vignette with Michael (pseudonym), a Japanese American client, demonstrates how culturally attuned AEDP interventions facilitated his movement through all four transformational states, from culturally reinforced defenses to core state experiences of ecological interconnection and calm—a low-arousal positive state consistent with East Asian preferences. Third, the paper offers eight practice guidelines for AEDP practitioners, emphasizing validation of embeddedness as strength, tracking micro-suppression cues, naming the self-versus-harmony dilemma, and honoring culturally congruent pathways to transformation. This work suggests that AEDP's healing-oriented, relationally embedded framework—with its phenomenological focus and recognition of universal human strivings—offers an unusually culturally adaptive model when informed by cultural neuroscience.

## I. Introduction

Does AEDP work for East Asian clients whose emotional expression tends to be more reserved? That's the age-old question. Asian clinicians have learned AEDP and applied the model with their Asian clients, and clinically, experientially, we know that AEDP works. Yet we've lacked the theoretical framework to articulate how and why—the cultural neuroscience and emotion theory that would bring nuanced, culturally attuned understanding to our practice. This paper represents an attempt, alongside other East Asian AEDP authors (Yeung et al., 2025; Kim & Yeung, 2025; Ye-Perman, 2025; Wei, 2025), to illuminate what makes AEDP effective for East

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Asian clients.

Globalization has brought unprecedented cultural diversity into our therapy rooms, yet most treatment models still carry the individualistic assumptions of their Western origins. AEDP—with its emphasis on attachment, emotion, and transformational experience—is uniquely positioned to address cultural nuance, provided that we as clinicians appreciate how culture shapes brain, mind, and relationship.

Cultural neuroscience demonstrates that individuals raised in collectivist contexts (e.g., Japan, Korea, China) organize self and emotion through neural circuits that prioritize interdependence and social harmony, whereas those from individualist cultures (e.g., the United States, Western Europe) recruit networks that reinforce personal distinction and self-assertion (Kitayama & Park, 2010; Han & Ma, 2014). These aren't superficial differences in communication style—they reflect fundamental differences in how safety is established, how affect is regulated, and how transformational change unfolds in therapy.

This paper weaves together three strands: current cultural neuroscience findings comparing Asian and Western samples (self-referential processing, emotion regulation, large-scale networks); a detailed clinical vignette illustrating how Michael (pseudonym), a Japanese American client, navigated the tension between harmony and authentic self-assertion within AEDP; and practice guidelines for AEDP clinicians seeking to foster both relational attunement and the emergence of core self-experience with clients from collectivist backgrounds. The aim is a both/and roadmap—one that honors culturally embedded harmony while inviting fuller emotional expression and self-definition.

## II. Literature Review: Cultural Neuroscience and the Self

To understand how AEDP can support East Asian clients whose emotional expression has been culturally shaped, I turn to cultural neuroscience—a field that reveals how culture literally shapes the brain's organization of self, emotion, and social experience.

### Interdependent vs. Independent Models of Self

Classic cultural psychology distinguishes an interdependent self, common in many East Asian contexts, from an independent self, more typical in North America and Western Europe (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Interdependence emphasizes relatedness, role obligations, and sensitivity to social context, whereas independence emphasizes personal attributes, autonomy, and self-expression. These models provide the conceptual scaffolding for cultural neuroscience research, which examines how culturally patterned experiences shape neural organization through experience-dependent plasticity (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011).

### Self–Other Representations in the Medial Prefrontal Cortex

The neuroscience reveals something profound about how culture shapes selfhood at the neural level. In a seminal fMRI study, Zhu and colleagues (2007) found that Chinese participants

recruited overlapping medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) regions when evaluating themselves and close others (e.g., mother), whereas Western participants showed more distinct neural representations of self versus other. This neural overlap isn't a cognitive style or preference—it reflects how interdependent selfhood is neurally organized, with personal identity experienced as embedded within close relationships rather than sharply bounded (Kitayama & Park, 2010).

**Network-Level Self-Processing and Cultural Organization of Experience**

More recent research extends these findings beyond single brain regions to large-scale functional organization. Using connectivity-based approaches, Luo and colleagues (2022) demonstrated that cultural context shapes how self-relevant information is integrated across distributed neural systems, not merely localized activation within a single region. Culture influences the organization and coordination of self-related processing—how personal experience is integrated with social context.

What this means clinically is that when clients socialized in interdependent cultures experience the self as relationally embedded and context-sensitive, they're not being "enmeshed" or "undifferentiated." This is how their brains have organized self-experience at a fundamental level. The self isn't a discrete, self-contained entity but rather exists in relationship.

**Emotion Regulation, Display Rules, and Cultural Moderation**

Cross-cultural research consistently shows that expressive suppression is more socially sanctioned in collectivistic contexts that prioritize harmony and relational stability. Display-rule research documents culturally learned norms for when emotion should be amplified, attenuated, masked, or qualified, depending on social context and audience (Matsumoto, 2008; Matsumoto & Wilson, 2022). These findings align closely with clinical observations: for many Asian clients, emotional restraint reflects culturally intelligent adaptation rather than avoidance or emotional deficit.

Recent synthesis work clarifies this further. In a large systematic review and meta-analysis spanning 37 countries (249 studies; approximately 150,000 participants), Chen and colleagues (2025) found that expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal were not inherently adaptive or maladaptive. Instead, their associations with mental health outcomes were systematically moderated by national cultural dimensions and developmental factors. Suppression was more strongly linked to depression and reduced well-being in cultures emphasizing emotional expressiveness and individual autonomy, whereas these associations were attenuated—or absent—in cultures that prioritize social harmony and emotional restraint. Age further moderated

these effects, with suppression showing fewer negative associations among older adults.

These findings support the both/and clinical stance I bring to this work: expressive suppression functions as culturally intelligent regulation in harmony-valuing contexts, becoming problematic primarily when it hardens into rigidity or when relational and developmental demands call for greater emotional differentiation. Meta-analytic work by Fernandes and Tone (2021) adds further nuance. They found that expressive suppression was associated with lower positive affect overall; however, culture played a significant role in this relationship. The association was

negative in Western samples but near zero in Eastern samples. This supports treating expressive suppression as a culturally normative adaptation rather than an inherently maladaptive strategy, while remaining vigilant to tracking when suppression constricts affective range, dampens vitality, or becomes rigid and costly for a particular client.

**"Ideal Affect" and Cultural Valuation of Emotional States**

Cultural shaping of emotion extends beyond regulation strategies to the valuation of emotional states themselves. Research on "ideal affect" demonstrates that European American contexts tend to value high-arousal positive states such as excitement, whereas East Asian contexts more often value low-arousal positive states such as calm, ease, and contentment (Tsai, 2007).

Neuroimaging studies indicate that these preferences are reflected in neural responses to social reward. Park and colleagues (2015) found that European American participants showed greater striatal activation in response to excited facial expressions, whereas East Asian participants showed relatively greater responsiveness to calm expressions. Importantly, these cultural differences were most pronounced in socially meaningful contexts rather than nonsocial or monetary reward. More recent work demonstrates that cultural background modulates neural responses to socially relevant reward outcomes, suggesting that what feels rewarding is shaped by culturally learned values about emotion, connection, and harmony (Blevins et al., 2023).

This has direct clinical implications: as you'll see in the clinical vignette below, Core State experiences characterized by calm, relaxation, and ecological interconnection represent fully meaningful transformation—not muted or incomplete versions of positive affect. These findings support honoring calm, settled, and relationally grounded positive states as deeply transformational, rather than treating them as insufficiently energized or incomplete.

**Cultural Flexibility and Contextual Priming**

Research on biculturalism reveals the contextual flexibility of self-processing. Bicultural individuals can shift self-construals in response to situational cues such as language, symbols, or relational context. Neuroimaging studies show that brief cultural primes can modulate activity and connectivity within self-referential networks, indicating rapid, state-like plasticity (Chiao et al., 2010).

What this means for therapy is profound: the micro-contexts we create within the therapeutic

space—through language, relational framing, and explicit and implicit permission—can meaningfully shape what emotions and self-experiences become accessible in the moment. The therapy room becomes a space where new neural possibilities can emerge.

**Clinical Synthesis: Culture, Safety, and Emotional Access**

Taken together, cultural neuroscience findings reveal something essential: belonging and having one's voice are not mutually exclusive. Affirming relational embeddedness and cultural context can reduce relational threat and increase safety, thereby allowing greater access to core affect and authentic expression.

This forms the foundation for AEDP work with East Asian clients: when therapists validate harmony-seeking as adaptive and co-create culturally congruent contexts of safety, clients can risk emotional openness without fear of relational rupture. The both/and isn't just a therapeutic stance—it's supported by the neuroscience of how culture shapes the experiencing self.

## III. Clinical Synthesis and Vignette: Michael's Journey Through the Four States

For many clients raised in collectivist contexts, emotional restraint reflects cultural wisdom rather than deficit. Harmony-seeking behaviors often preserve belonging, respect, and relational continuity, particularly in families and communities shaped by historical trauma, migration, or minority stress. At the same time, these same strategies can leave core emotional needs unspoken, especially when developmental tasks or life circumstances call for greater differentiation, voice, or self-definition.

This creates a familiar clinical dilemma. Clients may long to express anger, desire, or grief, yet hesitate to do so for fear of disrupting relational bonds or violating deeply held values. Therapists, in turn, may feel pulled between honoring harmony as adaptive and inviting fuller emotional expression—sometimes risking premature encouragement of "voice" that inadvertently reproduces the very rupture clients fear. The therapeutic task, then, is not to choose between harmony and authenticity, but to create conditions in which both can coexist.

The following vignette illustrates how AEDP can meet this challenge. Through moment-to-moment tracking, explicit relational permission, and careful attention to cultural and social context, I supported the emergence of Michael's authentic emotional experience within—rather than against—his relational embeddedness. The case demonstrates how harmony can function not as a barrier to transformation, but as a pathway through which voice, vitality, and connection deepen together.

**Dyadic social locations.** I am a Japanese immigrant who has spent most of my adult and professional life in the United States; a cisgender, heterosexual woman. Michael (pseudonym) is a third-generation Japanese American (sansei) in California, of mixed Japanese and Black heritage; his ancestors came originally from Okinawa. He is a cisgender gay man who grew up surrounded by Japanese American community. These locations informed our cultural attunement, power and privilege dynamics, and meaning-making; where relevant, implications are noted in the vignette and distilled into the practice guidelines.

**Meet the client.** Michael is soft-spoken and often emotionally reserved. In the days prior to this session, he had a breakthrough moment with a 92-year-old Japanese American woman who survived the World War II internment camps: he accompanied her into feelings she had long kept inside. In session, he reflected on his family's and community's patterns of emotional suppression and the sense of liberation he felt witnessing, and helping facilitate, her contact with core affect.

**Note.** All client/therapist language below is taken verbatim from the session transcript. Ellipses indicate omissions only where material was cut for length. Identifying details have been altered to protect confidentiality.

**Beginning: Metaprocessing Positive Experience from the Previous Session**

**Chunk 1 — Family & community norms**

CL: Yeah, I definitely think that that's the way that my dad (Japanese-American) … was with us, like, not particularly emotionally vulnerable… He didn't talk about his feelings… So that is my model… And also the other Japanese people I grew up around… we don't really… talk about our feelings.

**Chunk 2 — Internment story & emotions**

CL: At one of the…(Tai-chi) classes… there's a woman who's 92 years old… she was… in the Japanese American internment camp… she started talking a little bit about… some of her… experience… she'd like never talked about before… that has generally been my experience… the older people… who had been… in the camps… just didn't really talk about their experience… not wanting to talk about it because it's a difficult experience… combined with… the cultural thing of not talking about our feelings… she… started crying… it was like cathartic… I felt compassionate… a mixture of surprise… and also like maybe something kind of like anger… that… whatever it was had made her feel like she couldn't talk about it… and also anger that… this had happened to her and still decades later…(in calm voice) it's still carried deep within her… it's not uncommon… the old people in the community just keep inside them… and… we generally really haven't worked through.

**State 1 → State 2 transition: From culturally reinforced defense to relational permission**

Michael's opening reflections reveal culturally reinforced defenses against emotional

vulnerability, organized around harmony and filial piety. "We don't really talk about our feelings" represents what AEDP terms defenses against emotional experience (Fosha, 2000)—here, culturally syntonic suppression that preserves cohesion while constraining authentic expression and vulnerability.

What struck me was his capacity to emotionally accompany the 92-year-old survivor without minimizing or avoiding her feelings. This marked a breakthrough, likely scaffolded by his growing felt sense of safety in our work together. Notably, he spontaneously identified core affects—compassion, surprise, anger—signaling increased access to his own emotional reactions. This was new.

He then recalled a friend's interview with another camp survivor that emphasized facts over feelings, creating a contrast.

**Chunk 3 — Facts vs. feelings**

CL: A friend of mine… did an interview… with a woman… who had also been in a camp… she was… talking about… her life story… I found it interesting, but… it was almost like focusing more on the facts… rather than like, well, 'how does she feel about this?'… Without talking with you (referring to TH)… I don't know if I would previously have noticed that. (subtle

acknowledgement of the therapeutic work)

TH: I'm so impressed with you noticing the difference between just talking about the facts and exploring the feelings about the facts. (explicit affirmation of emergent capacity) …It's part of you. That's so exciting to hear about. (continued affirmation)

This noticing was a transformance glimmer: he was beginning to privilege affect. I named and followed that emergence, helping create contextual safety for what wanted to unfold.

**Chunk 4 — Context = Safety & Empowerment**

CL: There's something that makes me feel safe and empowered when… I can contextualize things… when I feel like I can contextualize myself in something larger… my relationship to feelings… and being vulnerable is… at least in the context of a larger culture and a larger community… it makes me feel safe… this is sort of a collective of experiences by many people in my life and in my community… I can be able to see it with greater… complexity… and… address it… I feel comfortable thinking about… culture and history.

TH: Oh, tell me about that. (curiosity-led exploration)

This moment clarified something crucial: the culturally informed therapeutic stance—validating context before exploring costs—was functioning as undoing aloneness at collective and intrapsychic levels (Fosha, 2000, 2013). Explicitly welcoming Michael's wish to "contextualize myself in something larger" and not seeing it as a defense signaled permission to deepen into

cultural-historical meaning. This reduced threat and opened access to core affect, consistent with cultural neuroscience findings that interdependent self-construals recruit context-first appraisal and holistic processing (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011).

**Chunk 5 — Expectation of Being "Undermined" in Therapy**

CL: I would… be suspicious of comfort… like… an assumption… of what I thought psychoanalysis was… if I'm not… thinking about myself… in a way that is… by nature like uncomfortable… he (referring to his partner who is an analytically oriented therapist) doesn't really believe… he's psychoanalyzing me… there's another layer of the unconscious… I had thought that I would be constantly undermined [in my own therapy]… my self-understandings would constantly be undermined… But that has not been my experience (with you, referring to TH)… I think you have continually sort of validated my experience… my thinking and understanding. (acknowledging the importance of validation by the therapist in contrast to his implicit assumption that he would be undermined in therapy)

TH: Okay… I didn't know that, that you had that assumption… I really want to support that experience and validate that experience… It was such an honor for me to witness the developments… cultivating the connections to your ancestors and the nature ecosystem… culture, present and past. (self-disclosure and explicit support for his experience and his connections to his ancestors, nature, culture, present and past)

CL: I think I didn't know I had that assumption either until I'm thinking about it now… (emergent awareness)

TH: Yeah, you are giving words to what has been invisible in your mind. (When relational safety is present, CL can explore what was not known even to himself)

The explicit statement "I really want to support… and validate…" exemplifies what AEDP calls going beyond mirroring—overt expressions of care, protection, and moved-ness (Fosha, 2000). This brief self-disclosure of affect fostered intersubjective resonance and consolidated a shared positive state.

Michael's prior assumption of being "undermined" in therapy reflected a pathogenic expectation likely shaped by cultural experiences with authority that can devalue subjective inner knowing. The reliably affirmative therapeutic stance disconfirmed that assumption, undid aloneness, and empowered his access to core affect and meaning.

**Chunk 6 — Permission & Core State Opening**

CL: Feeling like I have permission from you and from myself and from whatever to think about myself in ways that are comfortable… Yeah, that feels powerful and freeing… being able to think about who I am in relationship to culture and community and history… I can understand that… (Liberation Affect)

TH: It is very, very powerful. (explicit affirmation)

The pivotal ingredient here was permission—not a single "I grant you permission" move, but the

accumulation of micro-permissions delivered through moment-to-moment validation, affirmations, nonverbal gestures (e.g., nodding), and curiosity-led inquiries. Rather than positioning interdependent selfhood as something to overcome, I was co-creating a both/and field in which Michael could remain embedded in ancestral and ecological webs while feeling authorized to know, feel, and express his truth.

This is AEDP's core ethos in action: psychopathology as unwilled aloneness in the face of overwhelming emotion, and treatment as undoing aloneness through dyadic regulation to process what once felt unbearable (Fosha, 2021). For Michael, the feared "unbearable" was not emotion itself but the risk that expression would rupture belonging. The session was disconfirming that fear: assertion does not sever connection; voice can deepen connection. His statement—"Feeling like I have permission from you and from myself… that feels powerful and freeing"—marked what AEDP calls Liberation Affect (Fosha, 2025): a corrective emotional experience in which individual voice and relational belonging coexist, revising the interdependent assumption that voice necessarily threatens harmony.

**Chunk 7 — "Web or network"; Safety, Connection, Insight, Satori — Core State**

CL: A visual… a feeling of softness and a feeling of myself in a sort of web or network of… other people… Past and present… we've come here before… linked experiences between me and

my dad and my grandfather… I like that feeling… I feel safe… Connected… like I've gotten insight into something… something is clicking, but also something is opening… understanding things in a more… complete way… Zen, Satori… the kind of sudden sort of insight… This is how things are… a feeling of connectedness… I am not alone… a wider understanding of not being alone.

TH: Stay with that experience… in this brand new way. (Deepening)

Michael's imagery of a "web or network of others"—past and present—accompanied by feelings of safety, connection, and insight, reflects the characteristic phenomenology of Core State. The phrase "something is clicking, but also something is opening" beautifully captures the dual process AEDP describes in State 4: realization (the click of new meaning) and expansion (opening to new possibility). His spontaneous reference to Zen satori—"This is how things are"—parallels AEDP's account of emergent wisdom in Core State: a settled, embodied felt-rightness and broader coherence of self-in-context marked by assurance.

**Chunk 8 — Ecological Connectedness & Deep Relaxation — Core State Deepens**

CL: My mind went to nature… a lot of vines… vines connecting all of the plants… I can hear the insects… the wind… see hummingbirds and trees… an ecological feeling… (expansiveness

and connectedness to something larger) … is healing to me…

TH: How are you feeling in your body when you're… connected to the ecological world?

CL: (silence) This may be... there's no such thing like the wrong answer…(silence) But… When I tried to check in, it was as though there was… nothing to check into… couldn't grasp… what was my body as opposed to… everything else… too connected, too interconnected… I tried to… condense… where is my body… then… why don't I just… let it be the way it feels… Very relaxed… maybe… 'ecodelic'…

TH: That's profound… It's a different kind of answer… It's another universe that you are connected to… Not only mentally or emotionally, but physically.

Michael's Core State deepened into calm, clarity, expansiveness, interconnection, and a felt sense of truth (Fosha, 2009, 2013, 2017). He was actively reorganizing meaning—crafting a more cohesive autobiographical narrative that situates self, lineage, and history within a living ecological field. His description—"there was… nothing to check into… what was my body as opposed to… everything else… too connected, too interconnected"—conveyed a safe, transpersonal dissolving of boundaries: a non-fragmenting oneness with people, ancestors, and nature.

The ecological imagery (vines, wind, insects, hummingbirds) and the term "ecodelic"—which he borrowed from a book he was reading—captured the numinous quality of this experience. My recognition—"another universe… not only mentally or emotionally, but physically"—validated the embodied dimension of Core State and honored culturally congruent pathways to deep well-being.

## IV. Practice Guidelines for AEDP Therapists Working with East Asian Clients

Michael's journey illustrates how AEDP's core principles—undoing aloneness, dyadic affect regulation, moment-to-moment tracking, and metatherapeutic processing—can be adapted to honor culturally shaped ways of being while inviting emotional expansion. The following guidelines emerge from this clinical work and the cultural neuroscience literature reviewed above. They are offered not as prescriptive steps but as invitations to deepen cultural attunement within AEDP practice. Each guideline reflects a both/and stance: honoring what has been adaptive while creating space for what wants to emerge.

### 1. Explicit Cultural Inquiry & Validation

Cultural context often functions as a portal to safety rather than a barrier to overcome. When we acknowledge harmony-seeking as wisdom before exploring its costs, we communicate understanding at both implicit and explicit levels. AEDP's framework explicitly includes "acknowledgment of social location; similarities & differences in the therapeutic dyad" and "expression of therapist's cultural humility" as core interventions (AEDP Institute, 2025).

In practice, this might sound like: "How were feelings expressed in your family (or community, culture)?" followed by genuine curiosity about both the wisdom and the constraints within that cultural teaching. Rather than framing cultural context as defense, we can ask: "Tell me about what your culture/community taught you about showing feelings. What wisdom was in that? And what has been hard about it?" This invites clients to hold complexity rather than choose sides.

### 2. Track Micro-Suppression

Display-rule research demonstrates that culturally learned patterns of emotional amplification, attenuation, and masking operate at micro-levels—fleeting facial shifts, subtle changes in vocal tone, barely perceptible postural adjustments (Matsumoto & Wilson, 2022). For clients practiced in suppression, core affect may leak through these momentary cues even when explicit expression feels unsafe. AEDP's emphasis on moment-to-moment somatic and affective tracking becomes especially crucial here (Hanakawa, 2021).

This may look like pausing to gently name what we notice: "Your shoulders lifted—what happened inside just then?" or "I notice your voice softened when you mentioned your father." We pay attention to not only words but listen to what the client's face and body say (Hanakawa, 2021). Integrative tracking—weighing verbal content alongside nonverbal and somatic signals—helps us follow the thread of emerging affect even when words remain measured.

### 3. Name the Self-versus-Harmony Dilemma

The tension between individual voice and relational harmony reflects real neural organization. Cultural neuroscience shows overlapping self-other representations in individuals with interdependent self-construals (Zhu et al., 2007). Naming this dilemma normalizes the conflict rather than pathologizing either pole.

We might offer: "Let's welcome both—the part that values harmony and the part that wants to speak." This embodies AEDP's intra-relational processing approach (Lamagna & Gleiser, 2007), fostering authentic dialogue between self-states without positioning harmony-seeking as mere defense. The goal is not to resolve the tension but to create space where both voices can be heard.

**4. Couple Self-Expression with Relational Affirmation & Metaprocessing**

The interdependent self's deepest fear is often that assertion will sever belonging. When clients risk expression—making an I-statement, declining a therapist's suggestion, voicing a preference different from ours—we have an opportunity to disconfirm that fear explicitly.

This might mean pausing after such moments to affirm connection: "I appreciate you letting me

know what you need/want," followed by genuine curiosity and metaprocessing: "What's it like to ask (or turn down my request) and feel us still connected?" Then we track micro-reactions—shifts in breath, prosody, facial expression, gaze—to deepen awareness of how voice and belonging can coexist.

**5. Honor Low-Arousal Positive States**

Research on ideal affect demonstrates that many East Asian cultural contexts value calm, ease, and contentment over excitement or exuberance (Tsai, 2007; Park et al., 2020). Neuroimaging studies show differential striatal responses to calm versus excited expressions, suggesting these preferences reflect genuine differences in what feels rewarding rather than dampened affect.

Clinically, this means validating low-arousal positive states—calmness, relaxation, quiet contentment, settled connection—as fully transformational. Michael's Core State experience of "very relaxed," "ecodelic" interconnection exemplifies this. We don't need to amplify or energize such states; we can trust their depth and honor them as complete rather than treating them as insufficient or muted.

**6. Explore Gradual, Nuanced, Mindful Openness to Core Affects While Honoring Display Rules**

Suppression has often been culturally intelligent and protective, not merely defensive. We can honor this adaptive function while inviting curiosity about what might become possible with gradual opening.

This might sound like: "Holding feelings in has protected harmony and has been important for you. I'm curious—what happens when you open the door to your true feelings just a little bit in a way that feels safe right now?" The frame is expansion rather than replacement: "You can keep what has worked and add new options. How does that sound?" This both/and stance respects what has preserved belonging while creating permission for something new.

### 7. Use Contextual Framing to Downshift Threat

Cultural neuroscience demonstrates that interdependent self-construals activate context-first appraisal and holistic, field-dependent processing (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011). For Michael, contextualizing his experience within "larger culture and larger community" created safety and empowerment (Chunk 4) rather than distancing him from his feelings.

When appropriate, we can explicitly co-construct historical, familial, and community context: "Let's take a moment to understand the context—your family's history, what your grandparents experienced, the values that were passed down. This context matters." Paradoxically, grounding experience in collective field can make individual emotional experience safer to access.

### 8. Metaprocess Cultural Permission and Liberation

Making cultural permission itself an object of awareness consolidates transformational experience and integrates it into autobiographical narrative. Michael's statement "Feeling like I have permission from you and from myself" (Chunk 6) shows how explicit permission-giving opens space for new ways of being within collective context.

Permission-giving operates at multiple levels—dyadic ("What about you and I give explicit permission for you to feel this feeling coming up now?"), intra-relational ("Can you give yourself permission to feel your deep emotion that's coming up right now?"), and micro-contextual (verbal validation, affirmations, nonverbal gestures like nodding or smiling, paraverbal sounds). These accumulate to create a field in which voice and belonging strengthen each other rather than compete.

## V. Concluding Reflections: Toward a Culturally Informed AEDP Practice

I began this paper with a question that East Asian AEDP clinicians have long grappled with: Does AEDP work for Eastern Asian clients whose emotional expressions are reserved? Michael's journey—and the cultural neuroscience that illuminates it—offers a resounding yes, with an important qualification: AEDP works when we understand that cultural adaptation is not pathology to overcome but context to honor.

The neuroscience is clear: culture shapes how self, other, and emotion are organized at the neural level through experience-dependent plasticity. These are not superficial preferences but fundamental differences in neural organization. Yet this reality does not constrain clinical possibility—it expands it. When Michael said "I feel safe" in response to contextualizing himself "in something larger," he was not defending against individual experience; he was accessing the very conditions that made emotional exploration possible.

AEDP's healing-oriented framework aligns naturally with this understanding. When we track micro-suppression, name the self-versus-harmony dilemma, couple expression with relational affirmation, and metaprocess cultural permission, we are not adapting AEDP to fit culture—we

are allowing AEDP's core principles to express themselves through culturally congruent pathways.

Michael's movement from "we don't really talk about our feelings" to experiencing himself within "a Web or network of other people, past and present" illustrates the central insight: harmony and voice are not opposing forces but co-facilitating states. We are not asking clients to choose between cultural loyalty and psychological vitality. We are discovering, together with them, that their fullest emotional aliveness may emerge from rather than against their cultural grounding.

**The Karate Kiai: A Closing Metaphor**

In sessions after the one described above, Michael brought me a gift: he shared how his karate practice offers a culturally congruent pathway for voice. The kiai—that focused, resonant exhalation ("Osu!") at the threshold of engagement—gives him permission to sound himself without violating harmony. Framed by dojo etiquette and shared purpose, the kiai is both unmistakably individual and nested within collective form. It is voice within belonging.

For Michael, this became a living metaphor for our work together. He is finding sanctioned spaces where his authentic voice can emerge not against his community but on behalf of it. The kiai does not reject the dojo; it affirms commitment to the practice. Similarly, his emerging emotional voice does not reject his Japanese heritage; it honors the fullness of what his ancestors experienced and creates space for their unexpressed grief, anger, and joy to finally be witnessed.

This is what AEDP makes possible when informed by cultural neuroscience: the discovery that voice and belonging, assertion and harmony, individual truth and collective wisdom need not compete. Michael experienced himself within "a web or network of... other people... past and present" while simultaneously feeling "powerful and freeing." Both states, fully present. Both real.

Voice and belonging. Assertion and harmony. Individual truth and collective wisdom. The both/and is not just possible—it is the pathway home.

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