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

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Abstract: This article integrates cultural neuroscience research 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 assists cross-cultural work. A detailed clinical vignette with "Ken," 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, eight practice guidelines are offered 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. The paper concludes that AEDP's healing-oriented, relationally embedded framework—with its phenomenological focus and recognition of universal human strivings—provides an unusually culturally adaptive, attuned model when informed by cultural neuroscience.

I. Introduction

Does AEDP work for Eastern Asian clients whose emotional expressions are tamed? That's the age-old question! Many Asian clinicians have learned AEDP and applied the model to their

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Asian clients over years. Thus, clinically and experientially, it's abundantly clear that AEDP works for Eastern Asian clients. However, there's not been any cultural comparative studies thus far or theories that would bring nuanced, culturally attuned AEDP practice for East Asian clients. This paper is an attempt among many other East Asian authors (Yeung, 2025; Perman, 2025; xx) to elucidate what works for East Asian clients from cultural neuroscience and contemporary emotion theorists.

Globalization has brought unprecedented cultural diversity into psychotherapy rooms, yet most treatment models still carry the individualistic assumptions of their Western origins. AEDP® Psychotherapy—with its emphasis on attachment, emotion, and transformational experience—is uniquely positioned to address cultural nuance, provided that 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 differences influence how safety is established, how affect is regulated, and how transformational change unfolds in therapy.

This paper weaves together three strands: (1) current cultural-neuroscience findings comparing Asian and Western samples (self-referential processing, emotion regulation, large-scale networks); (2) a clinical vignette illustrating how a Japanese American client ("Ken," pseudonym) navigated the tension between harmony and authentic self-assertion within AEDP; and (3) 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—honoring culturally embedded harmony while inviting fuller emotional expression and self-definition.

II. Literature Review: Cultural Neuroscience and the Self

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

Foundational neuroimaging studies demonstrate cultural differences in self-referential processing. 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 aligns with interdependent models of selfhood, in which personal identity is experienced as embedded within close relationships rather than sharply bounded (Kitayama & Park, 2010).

Network-Level Self-Processing and Cultural Organization of Experience

More recent cultural neuroscience research extends these early region-specific findings by examining self-processing at the level of large-scale functional organization. Using connectivity-based approaches, Luo and colleagues (2022) demonstrated that cultural context is associated with differences in *how self-relevant information is integrated across distributed neural systems, not merely localized activation within a single region*. These findings suggest that culture shapes the *organization and coordination of self-related processing, influencing how personal experience is integrated with social context.* Clinically, this supports the observation that clients socialized in interdependent cultures often experience the self as relationally embedded and context-sensitive at a fundamental level, rather than as a discrete, self-contained entity.

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 of Asian clients, for whom emotional restraint often reflects culturally intelligent adaptation rather than avoidance or emotional deficit.

Recent cross-cultural synthesis work has moved beyond the classic East–West framing by examining how multiple national-cultural dimensions shape whether common emotion regulation strategies are adaptive. In a large systematic review and meta-analysis spanning 37 countries and regions (249 articles; approximately 150,000 participants), Chen and colleagues (2025) found that both reappraisal and expressive suppression show culturally patterned associations with mental health outcomes. Specifically, links to psychopathology and positive functioning were moderated by national cultural dimensions (e.g., indulgence, competitiveness), as well as by demographic factors such as age. These findings support a both/and clinical stance: *expressive suppression is not uniformly pathological*. Rather, it *can* become maladaptive depending on the cultural ecology in which it is embedded and the client's developmental and relational context.

Meta-analytic work further clarifies this nuance. In a systematic review and meta-analysis, Fernandes and Tone (2021) 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. These findings support treating expressive suppression as a *culturally normative adaptation* rather than an inherently maladaptive strategy, while noticing the importance of 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 further 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). Clinically, these findings support honoring calm, settled, and relationally grounded positive states as fully meaningful and transformational, rather than treating them as muted or incomplete forms of positive affect.

Cultural flexibility and contextual priming

Research on biculturalism further demonstrates 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). These findings support clinical observations that micro-contexts created within therapy—through language, relational framing, and explicit and implicit permission—can meaningfully shape what emotions and self-experiences become accessible in the moment.

Clinical synthesis: culture, safety, and emotional access

Taken together, cultural neuroscience findings suggest that belonging and having one's voice are not mutually exclusive states. Affirming relational embeddedness and cultural context can reduce relational threat and increase safety, thereby allowing greater access to core affect and authentic expression. This has direct implications for AEDP practice: when therapists validate harmony-

seeking as adaptive and co-create culturally congruent contexts of safety, clients are more likely to risk emotional openness without fear of relational rupture.

III. Clinical Synthesis and Vignette: Ken'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, the therapist supports the emergence of authentic emotional experience *within*—rather than against—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. The therapist (author) is a Japanese immigrant who has spent most of her adult and professional life in the United States; a cisgender, heterosexual woman. The client ("Ken," pseudonym) is a third-generation Japanese American (sansei) in California, of mixed Japanese and Black heritage; a cisgender gay man. These locations informed the dyad's cultural attunement, power/privilege dynamics, and meaning-making; where relevant, implications are noted in the vignette and distilled into the practice guidelines.

Meet the client. Ken 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[1].

Beginning: metaprocessing positive experience from the previous session

Vignette 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
Ken's opening reflections (Chunks 1–2) depict culturally reinforced defenses against emotional vulnerability organized around harmony and filial piety. "We don't really talk about our feelings" exemplifies what AEDP terms defenses against emotional experience (Fosha, 2000a)—here, culturally syntonic suppression that preserves cohesion while constraining authentic expression and vulnerability. His capacity to emotionally accompany the 92-year-old survivor without minimizing or avoiding her feelings marks a breakthrough, likely scaffolded by his growing felt sense of safety in therapy. Notably, he spontaneously identified core affects—compassion, surprise, anger—signaling increased access to his own emotional reactions.

[1] *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.

In contrast to this embodied, affect-forward moment, he recalled a friend's interview with another camp survivor that emphasized facts over feelings.

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 functions as a transformance glimmer: he was beginning to privilege affect; I named and followed that emergence into contextual safety.

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)*
The therapist's culturally informed stance—validating context before exploring costs—functions as undoing aloneness at a collective/intrapsychic level (Fosha, 2000a, 2013a). By explicitly welcoming Ken's wish to "contextualize myself in something larger," -and not seeing it as a defense - the therapist signals permission to deepen into cultural–historical meaning. This downshifts threat and opens 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 therapist's explicit "I really want to support… and validate…" exemplifies going beyond mirroring—overt expressions of care, protection, and moved-ness (Fosha, 2000a; AEDP Institute, 2022). This brief self-disclosure of affect fosters intersubjective resonance and consolidates a shared positive state. Chunks 5–6 (below) capture Ken's receptive affective experience as he takes in validation and care. Importantly, his prior assumption of being "undermined" in therapy reflects a pathogenic expectation shaped by cultural experiences with authority that can devalue subjective inner knowing. The therapist's reliably affirmative stance disconfirms that assumption, undoes aloneness, and empowers 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 is permission—not a single "I grant you permission" move, but the accumulation of micro-permissions delivered through moment-to-moment validation, affirmations, and curiosity-led inquiries. Rather than positioning interdependent selfhood as

something to overcome, the therapist co-creates a both/and field in which Ken can remain embedded in ancestral/ecological webs *and* feel 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 Ken, the feared "unbearable" was not emotion per se but the risk that expression would rupture belonging. The session disconfirms 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"—marks 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)*
Ken's imagery of a "Web or network" of others—past and present—accompanied by "safe," "connected," and "insight" reflects the characteristic phenomenology of Core State. The phrase "something is clicking, but also something is opening" 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,
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."
Ken's Core State deepens into calm, clarity, expansiveness, interconnection, and a felt sense of truth (Fosha, 2009a, 2013a, 2017a). He is 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"—conveys 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—capture the numinous quality of this experience. The therapist's recognition—"another universe… not only mentally or emotionally, but physically"—validates the embodied dimension of Core State and honors culturally congruent pathways to deep well-being.

IV. Practice Guidelines for AEDP therapists in working with East Asian Clients

1. Explicit cultural inquiry & validation

Rationale: Communicate safety implicitly and explicitly; acknowledge harmony as a strength before exploring costs. 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).

AEDP Move: Ask, "How were feelings expressed in your family (or community)?" Name harmony as adaptive; then invite curiosity about what it protects and what it constrains. Frame cultural context not as barrier or defense but as portal: "Tell me about what your culture/community taught you about showing feelings. What wisdom was in that? And what has been hard about it?"

2. Track micro-suppression

Display-rule research shows culturally learned amplification/attenuation/masking; fleeting facial/voice shifts may leak core affect even when suppression is normative (Matsumoto & Wilson, 2022). AEDP's emphasis on moment-to-moment tracking of somatic and affective cues - catching a tiny emotional leakage - is particularly crucial with clients practiced in suppression (Hanakawa, 2021).

AEDP Move: Pause and reflect subtle shifts: "Your shoulders lifted—what happened inside just then?" "I notice your voice softened when you mentioned your father." "We pay attention to not only words but carefully listen to what the client's face and body say" (Hanakawa, 2021, p. 128). Use *integrative tracking* to weigh verbal content and nonverbal/somatic cues.

3. Name the self-vs-harmony dilemma

Normalizes conflict given interdependent self-processing and cultural neuroscience evidence of overlapping self-other neural representations.

AEDP Move: Offer a both/and: "Let's welcome both - the part that values harmony and the part that wants to speak." This exemplifies AEDP's *intra-relational processing* approach (Lamagna & Gleiser, 2007), fostering authentic dialogue between self-states without seeing harmony seeking strategy as pathological.

4. Couple self-expression with relational affirmation & metaprocessing

Reduces fear of rupture; strengthens dyadic safety by marking connection while exploring agency. Addresses the interdependent self's core fear that voice will sever belonging.

AEDP Move: After I-statement, request, or refusal of the therapist's request, or expression of preferences different from the therapist, it would be helpful to explicitly affirm the client and/or relational connection ("I appreciate you letting me know what you need/want"), then metaprocess: "What's it like to ask (or turn down TH's request) and feel us still connected?" Track spontaneous reactions such as breath, prosody, facial expression, and gaze etc.

5. Honor low-arousal positive states

For many East Asian clients, calm connectedness is more rewarding than high-arousal excitement (Tsai, 2007; Park et al., 2020). Cultural neuroscience shows differential striatal responses to calm versus excited expressions.

AEDP Move: Honor low-arousal states such as calmness, relaxation, and contentment. Validate these experiences as deeply transformational rather than treating them as incomplete or insufficiently energized.

6. Explore gradual, nuanced, mindful openness to core affects while honoring display rules

Honors adaptive function of display rules while encouraging the client to explore gradual opening to core affects. Recognizes that suppression has been culturally intelligent and protective, not merely defensive.

AEDP Move: "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?" Frame emotional expression as expansion rather than replacement: "You can keep what has worked *and* add new options."

7. Use contextual framing to downshift threat

Cultural neuroscience shows that interdependent self-construals are associated with context-first appraisal (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011). For Ken, for example, contextualizing his experience within "larger culture and larger community" created safety and empowerment (Chunk 4).

AEDP Move: Explicitly co-construct historical, familial, and community context when appropriate. "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." This activates what Kitayama's research identifies as holistic, field-dependent processing, which can paradoxically make individual experience safer to access.

9. Metaprocess cultural permission and liberation

Rationale: Making cultural permission itself an object of awareness consolidates the transformational experience and integrates it into autobiographical narrative. Ken's statement "Feeling like I have permission from you and from myself" (Chunk 6) shows the power of permission-giving movements which leads to expansive exploration of new autobiographical narrative - the way of being - in the collective context.

AEDP Move: “What about you and I give explicit permission for you to feel this feeling coming up now?” (dyadic permission giving) “Can you give yourself permission to feel your deep emotion that’s coming up right now?” (self-permission) as well as micro-permission-giving interventions, such as verbal and non-verbal validation, affirmations, and non-verbal gestures and sounds.

V. Concluding Reflections: Toward a Culturally Informed AEDP Practice

This paper has woven cultural neuroscience, AEDP transformational theory, and clinical practice to articulate a both/and framework for working with clients from collectivist backgrounds. The

neuroscience is clear: culture shapes neural organization of self-referential processing, emotion regulation, and reward valuation through experience-dependent plasticity. These are not superficial differences in preference, but fundamental differences in how self, other, and emotion are organized at the neural level.

Yet the clinical implications need not be reductive. AEDP's healing-oriented, non-pathologizing stance positions the therapist to honor culturally embedded ways of being while simultaneously inviting expansion of the emotional experiences and expression. The framework's emphasis on undoing aloneness, dyadic affect regulation, and metatherapeutic processing of positive transformational experiences aligns well with the relational sensitivities and contextual processing characteristic of interdependent self-construct.

Taken together, the clinical material, cultural neuroscience findings, and practice guidelines converge on a central insight: harmony and having one's voice are not opposing forces, but co-facilitating states. When therapists explicitly honor relational embeddedness as a strength, attend to culturally shaped forms of emotional regulation, and create micro-contexts of permission and safety, clients can access authentic emotional experience without sacrificing belonging. In this way, we, AEDP therapists, do not ask clients to choose between cultural loyalty and psychological vitality; we support the emergence of both, simultaneously and relationally.

The karate kiai: a closing metaphor

In recent sessions, Ken shared that his karate practice offers a culturally congruent pathway for voice. The ritualized kiai—a focused, resonant exhalation ("Osu!") at the threshold of engagement—gave him permission to sound himself without violating harmony. Framed by dojo etiquette and shared purpose, kiai functioned as a both/and: an unmistakably individual expression and self-assertion, nested within collective form.

For Ken, this became a living metaphor for therapy—finding sanctioned micro-spaces where his authentic voice can emerge, not against the community, but *on behalf of it*. The kiai does not reject the dojo; it affirms commitment to the practice. Similarly, Ken's emerging emotional voice does not reject his Japanese heritage; it honors the fullness of what his ancestors endured and creates space for their unexpressed grief to finally be witnessed.

This is the transformational possibility AEDP offers when informed by cultural neuroscience: helping clients discover that voice and belonging, assertion and harmony, individual truth and collective wisdom are not mutually exclusive. In Ken's words, experiencing "a Web or network of... other people... Past and present" while simultaneously feeling "powerful and freeing" represents the integration of interdependent and independent self-states—a both/and achievement neurally, experientially, and culturally.

May we, as AEDP therapists, continue to cultivate the cultural humility, clinical attunement, and theoretical sophistication to create these both/and holding spaces for our clients.

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