

*Case Study: The Jazz Pianist*

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I am a Caucasian male social worker at a mental health agency and have occasionally felt uncomfortable with African American male clients. I do not think of myself as racist, but I believe that racial differences can negatively affect practitioners and clients who work together. Also I am clinically less comfortable in general working with men than women. I raise the issue of racial difference with new clients when it exists to see if they have concerns about it. Usually they do not express any reservations. My problem, though, is that I am reluctant to raise the issue of race again during the intervention if I perceive that it might be a barrier between the client and myself. I don't want to risk insulting the client or imply that I am preoccupied with race. Maybe I'm off base about that, but it's how I feel.

Leon was a middle-aged and unemployed single African American male who came to our agency because of depression. He had chronic job problems, conflicts with women, and a strained relationship with his domineering father. He was rather well known around town as a talented jazz pianist. When we met he raised the issue of race himself, seeming suspicious that I might not be able to understand his life experiences. It was a constructive conversation, and we both seemed to feel satisfied. Every so often, though, he would challenge me again, wondering openly if I could empathize with him. This became difficult, because I did think that in many situations he placed himself in the victim role more than the evidence warranted, so to speak, using race as an excuse. But I was not comfortable saying this to him, because I was not sure that my perceptions were valid. Anyway, Leon dropped out of treatment after about six visits. I think he felt I was naive about the African American experience. I decided afterward that I needed to learn more about managing differences with my clients.