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Filling a void

Because he grew up without doctors of color, The Chicago School alumnus Jerrod Handy-Robinson, Psy.D., decided to become one.

Matt Alderton on June 23, 2023

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"If you don't see it, be it."

That's what his parents taught him, says clinical and prescribing psychologist Jerrod Handy-Robinson, Psy.D., who has four advanced degrees from The Chicago School, including master's degrees in general and clinical psychology, a doctorate in clinical psychology, and, most recently, a master's degree in clinical psychopharmacology.

"I was literally the black sheep of my family," says Dr. Handy-Robinson, who identifies as a cisgender Black gay male. When one of his white teachers adopted him at the age of 10, he couldn't help but feel "othered" by his surroundings.

"As you can imagine, there's some cultural and environmental adjustments that come with being a black child in a white family," Dr. Handy-Robinson says. "Although they tried their best—whether it was trying to do Southern cooking, taking me down to see my biological family every once in a while, or just exposing me to more diversity outside of our immediate community—my parents recognized that there were limitations to what they could provide me. They started seeking out ways to give me more support but soon realized that there weren't doctors or therapists or counselors in our community who looked like me. I needed providers who had an inherent understanding of my lived experience as a person of color, but that need unfortunately went unmet."

When he came out as gay, he felt a similar hunger for inclusive care—and a similar absence of it. "My intersecting identity as a Black gay child really magnified for me the lack of access to providers who could relate to me," Dr. Handy-Robinson says.

When he took his first psychology class in high school, it ignited in him a passion for understanding people and behavior. And so, he decided to become for others the health care provider that he himself had lacked.

"I pursued this career to fill that gap," Dr. Handy-Robinson says. "Not only for myself, but also for others in the

Cultivating cultural competence

future.'

Despite his long-held interest in psychology, Dr. Handy-Robinson almost chose a different path. "I initially started off in college as pre-med," he says. "But I quickly realized that the medical side of care pulled me too far away from human interaction, so I pivoted back to clinical psychology."

So began a journey that culminated in fall 2022, when Dr. Handy-Robinson started his own practice in Chicago specializing in psychotherapy and psychological testing for clients of color, as well as clients who identify as LGBTQ+.

"When I started my training, I quickly realized that a lot of the information and knowledge in the field of clinical psychology is taught from a Eurocentric and patriarchal perspective that's antiquated and doesn't necessarily fit every client's background. As a result, a lot of clients from minority backgrounds end up being marginalized or stigmatized or misdiagnosed," Dr. Handy-Robinson says. "So, I've tasked myself with taking the knowledge I've accumulated about clinical psychology and contextualizing it based on my clients' uniqueness and their lived experience. That sort of cultural competence is lacking in our field, and it's the driving force in my practice."

It's a small thing that can make a big difference when it comes to a client's quality of care. "I recently was speaking to a client, and there was a moment where they made a cultural reference and paused thereafter. They were waiting for me to have a puzzled look on my face, because they expected me to be confused. But then they remembered, 'Oh yeah. Because you're a person of color, and because you're a gay male, there's an inherent understanding of what I just meant," Dr. Handy-Robinson continues. "Little moments like that remind me what it means to be who I am in the space that I occupy. It doesn't mean that I have the exact same experiences as my clients just because I'm Black or gay, but it does mean that clients who have similar intersecting identities can feel inherently safe with me and trust me to approach their therapy with the unique lens that it deserves."

Bringing lived experience to clients

In early 2023, Dr. Handy-Robinson added yet another dimension to his practice when he received his license to be a prescribing psychologist—making him only the second African American male psychologist in Illinois to obtain prescribing authority.

"It's huge," he says of his achievement. "I'm already combining my knowledge of clinical psychology with cultural

competency. Knowing that I can now bring that medicinal and pharmacological piece as well is tremendous."

Because he has previously availed himself of pharmacological interventions as a patient, Dr. Handy-Robinson knows firsthand how his prescribing credentials can make a difference. "I've had a number of clients—me included—who wait months to get access to a competent clinician. And then, when they finally get that access, they can't work with that clinician because there isn't rapport or because they don't trust that person to understand their presenting concern or their lived experience. That's a big thing for clients of a marginalized or minority background, because if clients aren't able to see someone in a timely manner, they often let their concern fall by the wayside. And that can be a major detriment to their mental health in the long run."

Overcoming adversity

Although his destination was clear—culturally competent care for underserved communities—Dr. Handy-Robinson says his journey getting there wasn't always easy.

"From childhood through high school, college, my graduate education, and even now, being a person of color in a

predominantly white environment has always been my biggest obstacle," he says. "In fact, my dissertation was about Black gay males in predominantly white institutions, because I was living that experience day after day after day."

That obstacle manifested in myriad ways. Because he had trouble financing his education, for example, he nearly had to drop out of graduate school. "I didn't qualify for certain scholarships. And because I come from an underprivileged background, I didn't have credit, which means I didn't qualify for a federal grad PLUS Loan," Dr. Handy-Robinson says.

In addition to financial barriers, there were social barriers. "While Chicago is a diverse city, I didn't run into very

many Black gay men. And even less so, Black gay therapists. That felt very alienating because I wasn't seeing myself in my day-to-day interactions. So much so that at one point I even considered changing careers and not pursuing my doctorate in psychology," Dr. Handy-Robinson says. Still, he persevered with the help of his parents' wise words: If you don't see it, be it. "My family has always been my

rock, pushing me to keep going as long as I felt passionate about what I was doing. So I said, 'You know what? If I don't see my community, I'm going to create it.' And little by little, I began to find others who were either likeminded or who identified similarly as me," Dr. Handy-Robinson says. "Along the way, I found friends and a partner now my husband—who supported me and helped me get over my biggest hurdles." His teachers and mentors at The Chicago School also were instrumental. "Its mission statement is one of the things

that drew me to The Chicago School," he says. "That's where I began to really understand that psychology doesn't have to be about rote memorization and what the book says. The faculty members at The Chicago School challenged me to say, 'Manualized treatment says one thing, but what does it mean to me and my client in the room together?' That's one of my biggest takeaways from The Chicago School: that we can challenge data and challenge preexisting knowledge. Not discard it, but incorporate it in a way that's useful for our clients and for us as clinicians given our uniqueness and our own lived experience."

A safe space for all

Although his younger self never did find the culturally competent care that he craved, Dr. Handy-Robinson says he's comforted by the opportunity he has to provide that care for others—especially now. With racial tensions boiling over across America and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment reaching a fever pitch on social media and in state legislatures, he says his clients need his services and support more than ever. "Because the bulk of my clients are racial and ethnic minorities, I unfortunately am hearing a lot of concerns right

now about racial violence. Making space to process what it means to be a person of color in this country—the intergenerational impact, the systemic impact, the institutional impact—is really important because it's impacting my clients' overall well-being," Dr. Handy-Robinson explains. "Likewise for my clients who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. How the world sees them right now is not necessarily how they see themselves, so I want to create a safe space where they can explore their unique identity and find the validation and appreciation and care that everyone deserves."

That safe space is as valuable for him as it is for his clients. "As a Black gay man in this country, I have the same concerns that my clients have. I experience the same stigma and the same bias. That's something I will never let myself forget. I have to target, treat, and manage my own feelings first, because I'm no good to others if I don't do that."

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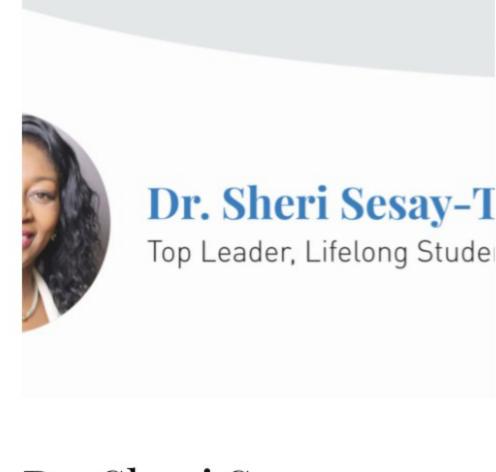
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