

The Consumer Culture, the Client, and the Clinician

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Abstract

The purpose of this keynote presentation is to explore how consumer culture shapes our clients' sense of self and their relationships with others, and how integrative psychotherapists can respond. I begin by explaining how humans evolved in villages that wired our minds for connection, and how, over the past 20,000 years, these villages have all but disappeared, leaving us to navigate life in a monolithic consumer culture. In this culture, we are set up to have our relational needs go unmet—as two parents alone can't do what an entire village once did—leading to a fragmentation within ourselves. I then describe how the culture exploits our unmet relational needs, hooking us into cycles of purchasing and achieving, and turning us into its consumers and producers. I explore the healing that psychotherapists can facilitate in their clinical work today, drawing parallels to the kind of healing that once took place within our ancestral villages. Finally, I offer a vision for how therapists can support clients, not only in coming home to themselves and building more meaningful connections with others, but also in creating communities (villages) of care. I challenge the isolating patterns of consumer culture and deliver an important take-home message: therapists can, and must, play a vital role in helping clients build nourishing communities that support and sustain the growth cultivated in therapy.

Keywords

Integrative psychotherapy, relational needs, consumer culture, cross-cultural psychology, village culture, introject, stillness, compassion, intentional communities, interpersonal process groups, group therapy

For the past three years, I've been researching and writing about consumer culture: how it distorts our sense of self and our relationships with others, how we can heal from these distortions, and how we can help our clients heal from them. (Nassar, 2024a, 2024b) Today is my first opportunity to present this research to a large audience, and I'm deeply grateful to be sharing it with all of you—many of whom I care about deeply and am honored to call friends.

Let's begin by reflecting on integrative psychotherapy. What is it that we focus on in our sessions with clients? I believe we have two primary areas of focus.

First, we focus on understanding our clients' intrapsychic worlds. We listen to what our clients share with us, observe how they behave, and explore how they feel, all in an effort to answer questions such as: What are their life scripts? What are their incomplete or secondary gestalts? By understanding our clients' inner worlds, we can understand what drives their

thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and we can support them in growing into fuller, richer versions of themselves (Erskine, 2015).

Second, we focus on understanding our clients' family of origin. We learn how these early relationships shaped our clients' internal relational systems and influenced how they engage with others. This understanding helps us guide our clients in relating to others from an Adult ego state, rather than slipping into Child or Parent ego states (Erskine, 2010).

However, there is a third dimension we often overlook in integrative psychotherapy: understanding the overarching influence of consumer culture. This culture not only shapes our clients' family systems but also directly shapes our clients' intrapsychic worlds.

If we, as integrative psychotherapists, can gain an understanding of how consumer culture has impacted our clients, we can expand our work in two essential directions: (1) helping our clients heal from the ways consumer culture has distorted their sense of self and their relationships with others, and (2) supporting our clients in creating a new, nourishing culture of care around themselves.

Let me offer an example of why addressing consumer culture's influence is so important. Imagine we're working with a handful of clients. We help these clients heal intrapsychically so they can experience a renewed sense of wholeness. We support them interpersonally so they can relate to others from a mature sense of self, communicating with clarity rather than through unconscious transferences. But if we don't address consumer culture, we end up sending our clients back out into a world that does not support the intrapsychic and interpersonal transformations they have worked so hard to cultivate in therapy—making it much harder for them to sustain these changes. I believe we can do more: we can help these clients create communities that support the transformations they have made inside our offices.

Why are Our Minds Wired for Connection? Because We Evolved in Villages.

To understand how consumer culture changes all of us—including our clients—let's travel back in time, far back, to the culture in which humanity evolved.

We *Homo sapiens* have been on this planet for around 200,000 years, and our ancestors lived here for nearly 2 million years before that. For almost all of that time, the culture that surrounded us was a village culture. We grew up and lived our lives surrounded by a small community of 40, 60, maybe 80 people (Graeber & Wengrow, 2020).

Let's take a moment to imagine what it might have been like to live life in one of our ancestral villages. Take a look at Figure 1, and imagine sitting by that warm communal fire on a cold night, with a villager on either side of you—people you've known your entire life, people you've loved your whole life, and who have loved you your whole life.

Figure 1. *An AI-generated image of villagers seated around a fire*



Note: Image generated using ChatGPT Pro with the prompt “villagers seated around fire with soft glow”

To help us imagine what this village culture may have felt like, I’d like to invite us into a brief thought experiment. Let’s imagine this together:

It’s 100,000 years ago. The sun is setting, and you’re walking toward the center of your village. As you walk, other villagers join you, quietly falling in step beside you, heading in the same direction. As you near the village center, the aromas reach you first: the rich scent of hearty stew, the smoky hint of fish roasting over the fire. You hear laughter and the sounds of excited voices drifting through the air.

When you arrive, you pull up a chair at a long wooden table, taking your place with a villager on each side of you. Without even planning to, you find yourself sharing stories from your day, letting them spill out with all the vulnerability and fragility of life. You share spontaneously because you know the people beside you will receive your stories with open, tender hearts. Their stories pour out too. They can’t help it. They know you are there to hold their stories with kind eyes and warm presence, just as they hold yours.

Children are everywhere. They dart between the adults, laughing, playing. One child jumps up onto your lap, interrupting your conversation, before leaping off and running back into the circle of play. As the evening wears on and the fire burns lower, another small child climbs onto your lap and curls against you, drifting off to sleep to the hum of your voice. You, too, feel yourself growing tired, your body relaxing into the warmth of the night and the closeness of your people.

As you look around, you feel it deeply: the sense of being home. Of belonging. You know you are exactly where you are meant to be—in a place where you are seen, valued, and known.

Now, I don’t believe this description is simply a nostalgic longing for village life. In fact, it closely resembles an account written by a psychologist after a recent visit to an African village (Weller, 2015).

Imagine generation after generation, for 200,000 years, growing up in these kinds of villages. It was there, in that circle of connection, that our minds evolved. So, it’s no wonder our

minds became wired for belonging, for relationship, for each other. It's no wonder, from the moment we enter the world, we are relationship-seeking beings (Erskine, 2011).

But, around 20,000 years ago, this way of living began to disappear. About 1,000 years ago, the pace of this disappearance quickened, and 500 years ago, it accelerated to breakneck speed. The villages of the Earth nearly vanished, and, today, they sit on the edge of extinction.

In their place, a singular, monoculture has taken hold. Over time, this monoculture has transformed into what we now know as consumer culture.

The Consumer Culture Didn't Just Take Our Villages. It Took Our Parents Too.

In today's consumer culture, when we arrive as newborns and look around, we don't see 40, 60, or 80 faces waiting to greet us. We just see two. And these two people—our parents—carry us home in their arms, bringing us into a strange new world.

Before we talk about what happens to us when we enter this strange world, we need to take a moment to talk about our parents.

Our parents, like us, did not grow up with the supportive rhythms of village life. In villages, large groups of people worked together to meet their shared needs for food, shelter, and clothing. Because all these people were working together, they only needed to spend three to four hours a day on these tasks, leaving the rest of the time for each other. (In fact, when early European settlers arrived in North America, they often described the Native Americans as lazy, unable to understand why they worked so little. But the villagers weren't lazy. They had simply met their all their external needs, and the rest of their time was free to invest in community, connection, and care.)

Our parents, however, did not inherit this way of living. Instead, they were asked to do alone what once took an entire village: to build a work life, to build a home life, to manage all the tasks of living... individually. That's a heavy burden, trying to do alone what was once done together, and it weighed our parents down.

But it wasn't just the external demands that weighed them down. There were internal burdens too. Like all of us, our parents experienced traumas and losses in childhood and adulthood. But unlike in a village, they often had no one to help carry these stories, no safe hearts to hold their pain. So they had to carry it alone, inside themselves.

And into the lives of these two people, weighted down by external demands and internal losses, we arrived—with all of our physiological needs, all of our emotional needs, and all of our relational needs.

Our parents didn't stand a chance.

In a village, these needs would have been met by many caring hands. A team of anthropologists recently visited an African village to find out how long it took for a young child's cries—cries signaling an unmet need—to be answered. What they found was striking: on average, a child was responded to within 25 seconds. How? If a parent was busy, another villager would simply step in to care for the child, because in the village, every child was the village's child (Chaudhary et al., 2024).

But our parents didn't have that support. They tried, as just two people, to meet all our needs—needs that were once met by an entire community. This is why, no matter where in the world we practice as integrative psychotherapists—whether in the UK, Slovenia, Italy, Spain, the United States, or anywhere else—we see the same essential struggles in all our clients: with minds wired for the deep connection found in village life, our clients had just one or two overwhelmed parents who, no matter how hard they try, simply couldn't meet enough of our clients' emotional and relational needs.

What Happens in a Child's Mind, in the Absences Created by Consumer Culture?

As integrative psychotherapists, we understand what happens to a child in the strange world that consumer culture creates—a world where the child is met by two parents who can't satisfy enough of their needs.

The child reaches out, seeking connection. They reach out for a hug, literally or metaphorically, hoping to have their relational need for contact met. But, too often, they find a distracted parent—one who, even if they do respond, can't offer the attuned presence the child craves.

The child tries again, doubling down: "If you won't respond to my outreached arms, maybe you'll hear my cry. And if you don't respond to my cry, then surely you'll hear my scream." But no matter how loud they get, the child's needs still, all too often, go unmet.

And what happens inside this child's young mind? We know how children think. Children are, by nature, egocentric. They believe, "Whatever is happening around me must be because of me."

For a moment, let's imagine that egocentric mind in ancestral times, when the child grows up in a village. Imagine a child whose needs are met, on average, within 25 seconds. Imagine a child surrounded by 40, 60, or even 80 people who care for them, who love them, who delight in them. In that setting, the child's egocentric mind tells them, "Wow, I must be really lovable. Look at all these people loving me." And so the child comes to believe in their worth, their value, their place in the world. This is exactly what many anthropologists noted when visiting modern-day villages: children carried an innate sense of belonging and place.

But now, take that same child and place them in the consumer culture, in a home where parents can't reliably meet their needs. That same egocentric mind now turns against them. It tells them, "I tried to fix my parents, but that didn't work. I must be the problem. I'll need to fix myself."

And with that belief, that child in the consumer culture begins to fragment. They start breaking themselves into pieces, trying to become who they think their parents want them to be. They try to hide away the "bad" parts their parents don't like, and amplify the "good" parts that get a positive response, hoping this will finally bring the love and attention they need.

But we know this doesn't work. Instead, this fragmentation comes at a high cost.

Important parts of the child's self—parts they will desperately need when the traumas and losses of life arrive—are silenced. If they've silenced their anger, they can't protest with a clear "No!" when they need to protect themselves in the face of trauma. If they've silenced their sadness, they can't release the pain of a loss that comes their way.

But what happens next to children in our consumer culture is something we rarely, if ever, discuss explicitly in integrative psychotherapy. And yet, it is essential that we address it.

The Consumer Culture Steps in and Exploits Our Unmet Relational Needs to Hook Us on Consumerism

The culture could step in as a benevolent force for good. It truly has a chance to help here.

Imagine you and I are children, four years old, and everything I've just described has happened to us. The culture could step in and extend a nurturing hand. It could reach out through a trillion-dollar public service campaign, broadcasting a message to the children of the world:

You're perfect just the way you are. Every part of you is valuable, needed, and wanted in this world.

And then the culture could continue: Just hang in there, because as soon as you start school, we're going to send in an army of teachers to help you. These teachers will guide you in very important ways—they'll teach you how to spark connection; how to turn connection into

friendship; how to ride the roller coaster of those friendships with all their ups and down; and how to gather your friends together to build a community.

Then, when we turned five and began school, our teachers could have modeled all of this for us. And they could have engaged with us in ways that prioritized connection, friendship, and community. Textbooks and academics would have been secondary to this foundation of relational learning.

But that's not what culture did. Not at all. Here's what happened instead.

Remember that imagined trillion-dollar public service campaign? Instead, the culture sends an army of two million advertisers into our young lives, armed with an annual budget of—yes—one trillion dollars.

These advertisers arrive like the Evil Queen in Snow White. In the 1937 Disney classic, the Evil Queen disguises herself as an elder, offers an enchanted apple, and says, “One bite, and all your dreams will come true.” Advertisers do the same, promising, “Look at this enchanted product—one purchase, and all your dreams will come true.”

Take a look at the advertisement in Figure 2, for example. What is this ad really selling? Look at that mom. Look at that dad. They are involved, engaged, attuned. Look at those kids. They are seen, heard, loved. This ad makes a promise: All you have to do—to have all this—is go to McDonald's.

“It's so easy,” the advertisers tell us, “to finally have your relational needs met.”

Figure 2. *McDonald's advertisement 1977, showing a family eating a meal together at their restaurant*



Note: Image displayed under fair use for commentary purposes. Image retrieved from https://www.flickr.com/photos/sa_steve/2555453690/

And children aren't seeing just a handful of these ads in a year. In the 1990s, the average child saw 40,000 ads like this every single year. Twenty-five times an hour, 30 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, images like the one in Figure 2 were placed before them.

And as children, we believe these ads.

Young children can't see the deception in advertising. They trust advertisers in the same way they trust their parents and teachers. That's why, the first time I went to McDonald's with my parents, I made them wait for an hour after we finished the meal. Why? I was waiting for the image in Figure 2 to appear in real life. It never did.

It doesn't take long for children to start believing that the way to get their emotional and relational needs met is through purchasing. "If I just have enough stuff, if I just have the right stuff, then my needs can be satisfied."

But it's not just the advertisers. Our teachers, coaches, and parents also, unintentionally, share another consumer culture message.

Take a look at Figure 3 and imagine this: Yesterday, you came home and reached up for a hug, but you were met with a distracted response. But today, you come home with a report card full of As. And look what happens now! Look at that dad in the picture! We are celebrated! And after the celebration, there's a trip to the ice cream shop to pick out our favorite flavor.

And as children, we internalize the message: "If I achieve in the way my teachers want, in the way my coaches want, in the way my parents want... they notice me! Maybe, now, they'll start to meet my relational needs."

Figure 3. *Parent celebrating a child's performance*



Note: Image by Miljan Zivkovic. Image retrieved from <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/happy-and-satisfied-little-boy-show-his-father-good-grade-on-his-test-gm2223851203-640025778?searchscope=image%2Cfilm>

So we begin to shape ourselves around achievement, striving to earn the attention and connection we long for from the teachers, coaches, and parents in our lives. And what happens now?

Between the explicit cultural messages from advertisers and the unspoken cultural messages from the adults around us, we get swept up in purchasing and achieving. We hope these efforts will finally bring us the attention we crave and get others to meet our relational needs.

Does it work? Of course not. All it really does is keep us busy. And that busyness pulls us further away from the relationships we long for.

And, in the end, what has consumer culture done? It has taken our desire to have our relational needs met and used this desire for its own benefit—turning us into its consumers and its producers.

The Healing Journey Begins in Therapy, Resembling “A Return to the Village”

As we grow into adulthood, the sorrows and losses of modern life accumulate, weighting heavier and heavier on us. Eventually, the emotional task of carrying all of these alone becomes too much. And if we're lucky, we find our way into Sally's office, or Gregor's office, or the office of one of the many skilled therapists in this room.

Let's take a moment to look at what we do as integrative psychotherapists through the lens of culture—through the lens of village culture and consumer culture.

To begin, let me share a few thoughts about integrative psychotherapy. It is integrative in many ways, including the way it brings together different relationally oriented counseling theories: Fritz Perls's Gestalt therapy (Perls et al., 1951), Eric Berne's (1961) transactional analysis, Carl Rogers's (1951) person-centered therapy, and many psychologists' versions of object relations theory.

When we crack all these theories open and examine the methods they use, we can ask: What do they have in common? What are the common factors that make them effective?

Researchers discovered that there are only two common factors that make all these methods shine: stillness and compassion (Wampold & Imel, 2015; Žvelc & Žvelc, 2020).

In other words, the core of what makes all these counseling theories work is the clinician's capacity to be still with their client and to bring compassion to their client. By stillness, I mean the ability to simply be in the moment with the client, just as it is, free from expectations of what it should be. And by compassion, I mean the ability to keep one's heart open in the face of the clients' suffering.

When clinicians are still and compassionate, inquiry, attunement, and involvement naturally flow from this space.

Now, let's place this within the context of culture.

Being still and compassionate is a profoundly countercultural act in our consumer culture. Why? Because consumer culture constantly tells us there's somewhere else we should be, another deadline to meet, something more to purchase. And this creates two challenges: first, it keeps us in a constant state of hurry, making stillness very difficult, and, second, it trains us to prioritize efficiency over empathy, trampling compassion in the process.

But do you know what culture being still and compassionate resembles? It looks a lot like a village culture. Imagine you and I live in an ancestral village and have suffered a profound loss. Word spreads among the villagers. What do they do? It's not so much what they do, but what they stop doing. They put down their tasks and come join us. They sit with us—sometimes for hours, sometimes for days.

As we sit together, we see in their eyes that they are expecting nothing from us. They don't need us to do anything with our grief. They are not asking, “What are you going to do about this?” or “How will you get over it?” They simply stay with us, and as we look around the circle, we feel their silent message, “I see the weight of what you are carrying, and I do not want you to carry it alone. I will carry it with you.”

That is exactly what we do in our therapy offices. I believe we, as therapists, recreate the essence of village culture for our clients.

And in these still, compassionate spaces—whether in an ancestral village or in one of our therapy offices—the miracle of memory reconciliation can happen. The miracle of bringing the fragmented parts of ourselves home can happen. And our clients can come to see that their traumas and losses are not an end, but a turning point. Yes, the life they once knew is gone, but there is a new life waiting for them, and now they can turn toward it.

The Healing Journey in Therapy Continues: Welcoming Home the Cultural Introject and Seeing Others as Fellow Villagers

As our clients' fragments return home, some of the parts that come back are introjects—both the introjects we typically think of in integrative psychotherapy and the cultural introjects. We usually think of introjects as the internalization of our parents' critical voices—voices that become our own inner critic. But there's also the cultural introject to consider. Consumer culture speaks to us constantly as we grow up—in our classrooms, in our homes, on our televisions, and through social media, to name just a few channels. These many voices merge into a single message within us, a cultural introject that says: "If you want to be valuable, you need to buy enough stuff, and the right stuff. If you want to be valuable, you need to accomplish on other people's terms." In other words, "If you want to feel your value, you have to earn it."

But as we meet these cultural introjects with stillness and compassion, something begins to shift for our clients. They see the good intentions behind the cultural introject's message: "It just wants me to feel valued." And they also begin to see the madness in the introject's method: "I'm never going arrive at a true sense of value through what I accomplish or what I purchase. The only way I will truly experience my value is through my relationships with other people."

This is the moment when, as integrative psychotherapists, we have the opportunity to help our clients heal their relationships with the people around them. We can help our clients shift away from the stance consumer culture teaches us to take with others, the stance that says, "What can I do for you? What can you do for me?"

Now, when we say to our clients, "I want you to take a more human stance," they can truly hear us. We can encourage them to look at another person and say, "I see you as a person. I want you to see me as a person. I care about you as a person. I want you to care about me as a person." As we help our clients embrace this position, we invite them to see others as fellow villagers.

I would love to say more about this process, but I will pause here, because I want to make sure I have time for one more idea before our time together comes to an end.

Building Villages to Advance Our Clients' Healing Journey

We've recreated a village culture within our therapy offices and helped our clients come home to themselves. And we've encouraged our clients to engage with others in a more human way, relating to those around them as fellow villagers. Often, this is where we stop. But I believe that as our clients reconnect with themselves and build meaningful relationships with others, most are ready—and even longing—to be part of a group of people who put relationship first.

So, there is one more step for us, as integrative psychotherapists: to help our clients recreate the village in their lives.

What follows is my working theory on how we might do this. You may walk away thinking I'm a little crazy, that this is too much. But my hope is, instead, that you'll find something in it you like, something you'll embrace, take home, try out, and return to tell me how it went.

I propose a three-stage process for creating villages for our clients, unfolding over three years.

Year one: We begin by forming an interpersonal process group. We carefully handpick clients we believe are open to social learning, and we invite them in by sharing our group's clear intention: We all long to be seen and heard in all of who we are, and we all long for honest, compassionate feedback that lets us learn and grow from others. This group is built with that simple intention in mind.

We gather six to 12 people, for two to three hours a week. We engage in what these groups do best: truth-telling, honest feedback, conflict that is caring rather than cutting, and confrontation that is rooted in compassion. Together, we grow, becoming a group of people who have the freedom to be fully ourselves with one another.

Year two: We build on this foundation. We say, "We've spent a year looking at each other. Now, what if we begin to look to each other for help?" We invite the group to form subgroups, stepping out into the world to support one another practically. This will bring up feelings—of unfairness, of being left out, of fear—and we invite all of it back into our weekly process group, using what happens outside of group as grist for the mill within the group.

Year three: Now, after two years, we have intimacy within our office walls. We have support outside of them. In year three, we "lose our minds," telling our clients about community.

We share stories of the villages that once covered the globe, and we tell them that today, there are about 300,000 people living in intentional communities: groups of people who choose to live together, recreating a village life with less reliance on individual wealth and more reliance in the security that comes from mutual care.

We share what research has shown: people living in intentional communities consistently report Satisfaction with Life ratings among the highest ever recorded (Grinde et al., 2018). Researchers conclude that these communities "seem better able to satisfy our basic human need for belonging, connection, and a space that is truly ours."

And then we say to our group: "Look, here's an idea. Let's explore this together. We've spent time together in this room. We spent time supporting each other outside of it. What if we explored the possibility of coming home to each other? What if we explored living in close proximity, building a shared life of mutual support?"

We form subgroups to explore what this might look like, what it might mean, what it could become. And we trust what comes from these explorations.

We care about our clients enough to help them grow internally, and we care enough about our clients to help them build meaningful connections with the people around them. And I believe we can also care enough to help them build a community of care surrounding them—so they're not simply sent back out into a consumer culture that runs counter to everything we practice with them in our offices.

And now you have my idea on how we can do that. But more importantly, I believe it is vital that we, as clinicians, begin to create these kinds of ideas together, so that we're not telling our clients they're valuable and then throwing them back into a world that insists they must earn their value. Instead, we help them build a community that can nourish and sustain them, supporting the transformations we nurtured together.

Carl R. Nassar has worked as a psychotherapist for over 25 years and is a certified international integrative psychotherapy trainer and supervisor. He writes a column for *Psychology Today* and contributes regularly to a variety of professional journals and trusted magazine and news outlets. Carl is currently working on a new book exploring how consumer culture shapes human development, and how we can begin to recreate the village cultures that meet our deepest human

needs. Carl is married to Gretchen and they have a daughter, Kaila. They live together in Colorado, USA.

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