

Cultural Sensitivity in Mental Health Counseling

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Abstract:

This study explores the importance of cultural sensitivity in mental health counseling, emphasizing its role in improving therapeutic outcomes for diverse populations. As mental health professionals increasingly encounter clients from varying cultural backgrounds, understanding and respecting cultural differences becomes essential for effective treatment. This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys of mental health practitioners with qualitative interviews from clients to assess the impact of cultural sensitivity on the counseling process. Findings reveal that culturally sensitive practices—such as recognizing cultural beliefs, values, and communication styles—enhance client engagement, trust, and overall satisfaction with therapy. Challenges such as cultural biases, training gaps among practitioners, and systemic barriers to accessing care are also identified. The study highlights the necessity for ongoing education and training programs that equip mental health professionals with the skills to navigate cultural complexities. By fostering an environment of cultural competence, mental health counselors can better address the unique needs of their clients, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes and reduced disparities in care. This research underscores the critical role of cultural sensitivity in promoting equity and inclusivity within mental health services.

Keywords: cultural sensitivity, mental health counseling, therapeutic outcomes, diverse populations, client engagement, cultural competence, training programs, equity in care.

1. Introduction to Cultural Sensitivity in Mental Health Counseling

In today's complex global society, our understanding of culture is continuously evolving. For the purpose of this essay, culture is defined as the identity derived from transgenerational patterns of conduct that dictate norms of operation within a specific context. Cultural sensitivity, therefore, is the ability of an individual to comprehend

and gain insight into the ways of living and context of any given culture. Overall, cultural sensitivity can be promoted in mental health counseling in two ways: understanding and addressing the role of culture on mental health, and empathizing with the client in cross-cultural counseling situations. With regard to the former, it is clear that the field of psychology is constantly evolving, particularly to adapt to the increasing diversity and globalization that has had a profound impact on mental health delivery. Societies today are heterogeneous, and as a product, so is the pool of clients in need of mental health services. Inadequate adaptation to this diversity can result in services that are incompatible with client realities and consequently ineffective. (Sue et al., 2022)

Research has found that cultural insensitivity on the part of a therapist may inhibit a client from mainstream healing options by discouraging help-seeking, undermining therapy, fostering attitudes of resistance, diminishing motivation, and amplifying the internal stigma associated with service use. When issues of culture are ignored or minutely explored, the client's factors are not fully considered. This essay, therefore, aims to highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and culturally informed practices. Professional competencies and personal qualities required of therapists serving multicultural client populations are also identified, with emphasis on self-awareness and genuine appreciation of the nuances of culture. While there still exists a lot to be explored in the field of cultural sensitivity and mental health, the essay aims to deepen the understanding and skills of mental health counselors in effectively dealing with diverse client populations. (Brewster et al.2022)

2. Understanding Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility

An inclusive practice of mental health counseling should acknowledge and welcome all cultural and ethnic identities. This concept has taken shape in two ways: through the notions of cultural competence and cultural humility. Cultural competence can be thought of as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a system, agency, or professional to function effectively across cultures. Practitioners maintain this approach through ongoing education, focusing on understanding each cultural group's worldview, lifestyle, values, and preferences. To be culturally competent is to

interact effectively with different cultural groups in their native language. At its core, being culturally competent means practitioners must be aware of their own worldviews and different cultures, and understand how their biases can negatively affect professional relationships with clients from other cultures. (Bhugra et al.2022)

Cultural humility is a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique and a willingness to fix power imbalances and develop the clients' knowledge and expertise about their identity. Professionals approach clients as experts on their lived experiences, not the practitioner. Furthermore, cultural humility emphasizes the need for professionals to understand that they will never be to the point of mastering another culture. At its best, cultural humility can provide insight into our culture, our biases, and empower the work of cultural competence. Finally, becoming culturally competent and embodying cultural humility also requires practitioners to incorporate counseling skills that are adapted to meet the needs of culturally diverse clients, especially those with multiple cultural identities. These counseling sessions should focus on asking open-ended questions and allowing enough time for responses. Furthermore, they should present numerous strategies in one session and ask clients to suggest what may work. (Lau & Rodgers, 2022)

3. The Impact of Culture on Mental Health

Cultural differences play a significant role in perceptions of mental illness, acceptance of mental health treatments, and potential successful mental health outcomes. Societal views of mental illness, symptom presentations, and coping skills can be influenced by an individual's culture. Generally, individuals from non-Western cultures may hold different perspectives on treatment, spiritual beliefs, causes for mental illness, as well as stigma against mental health professionals. Stigma can, in turn, impact an individual's willingness to seek support, disrupt family units, and impact overall mental health. Although language, to some degree, is objective, cultural expressions through rituals, art, history, music, state and national holidays, and tradition are major factors in understanding overall identity and wellness. One can underestimate the potential for culture to influence perceptions of illness when working with the Spanish-speaking population in Puerto Rico and not exploring the context. (DeSa et al., 2022)

A case study described cultural issues involved with addressing the mental health of a severely depressed Spanish-speaking immigrant from Central America. The case demonstrated the importance of providing a treatment plan that is specific to the values, traditions, language, acculturation, and prior experience with mental health. Additionally, another case study described a female high school senior who was having difficulty thinking about her graduation. Although some of her reluctance to leave became more typical the more the clinician learned about her, some of her fear was also value-driven. She had to leave half an hour every day to catch her school bus to attend the program. Her parents were highly supportive but also held the value that children should, even if they don't like it, go to school sick. Furthermore, as a college-bound student, the individual also felt she should act and feel like an adult, so her high school graduation now held some internal pressure to be enjoyed. Culturally relevant assessment and treatment need to be integral. (Isobel et al.2022)

4. Assessment and Diagnosis in Culturally Diverse Populations

Worldwide, assessment and diagnosis of psychological or psychiatric conditions for people from culturally diverse populations are more complex than for people from the mainstream US culture. Current diagnostic tools have been largely developed on the basis of the characteristics of psychiatric or psychological conditions usually seen in people from the mainstream US culture. Many "standard" symptom lists and diagnostic criteria for psychological and psychiatric conditions are based upon what is "common" in people from the United States or other predominantly Euro-American countries. However, sometimes for people from culturally diverse populations living in the United States, normal cultural and religious experiences may be incorrectly seen as indicators of mental health problems. Many clients attempt many times each session to ask if their counselor thinks the client is "crazy." This is a very concrete fear that can be used to form strategies for helping the client. The purpose of mental health counseling should be to help the client develop a deeper understanding of themselves in terms of a holistic, whole person model as well as developing a greater awareness of cultural differences. In the United States, the counselor is working on how the European-American society has shaped the mainstream culture using a developmental perspective. The next cultural perspective concerns the development of

subcultures in the United States. Cultures are made up of unique shared values, such as a collective drive to achieve, making it an interesting but competitive community, one that significantly influences people's lives. Subcultures develop distinct ways of being, frequently displayed vividly in clothing, food, and music. Clients must be allowed to talk about their cultural values and their relationship with their mental health issues. Do not hold Western cultural-religious perspectives against a client's culture; try to fairly weigh all perspectives while considering the voice of the culture. (Ran et al.2022)

5. Effective Interventions and Therapeutic Approaches for Culturally Diverse Clients

Some interventions and therapeutic approaches have been seen to be universally effective, such as client-centered, cognitive-behavioral, and structural and strategic family therapy. A strength of these approaches is that they focus on individually relevant issues, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach. These particular models note that "one size fits one, not one size fits all" given the uniqueness of individuals and their cultural contexts. Moreover, these models see culture as "just one domain that fits the client" and that focus on the individual. Interventions are tailored to the particular cultural contexts of the clients. In addition, effectively connecting clients with traditional healing practices, church, or community can be important resources in tailoring effective interventions for clients in counseling. This facilitates empowerment for the clients and emphasizes that traditional healing practices are functional and meaningful. Additionally, such an approach can often be a cost-effective way to connect clients with resources that often seem out of reach. It may be most helpful to work with church pastors, community cultural brokers, and traditional healers in collaborating with clients. (Jensen & Cross, 2022)

In the counseling process, incorporating culturally relevant models to integrate the tradition of the client and the professionals helps to situate and spark effective therapeutic behavior. An example is given of a Malaysian client with a history of birth under the supervision or presence of a midwife, and that the mother did not discuss it directly with her. Explicating a cultural genogram that helped to understand the family's traditional patterns and growing evidence, professionals were able to explore

what was unsaid within the family. The uniqueness of this particular approach is in the fact that, by gathering the client's lived experience in a context, subsequent interviews were able to, so to speak, piece together the various authoritative frames of reference as a tapestry denoting zones of difference. Culture also aids in setting up training to become interpreters and cultural brokers. This exemplifies a model where there is educational subjection, a sociocultural "frame of reference" that seeks to make us hear, even though we remain deaf to hearing. Instead, guidance works through listening. This entails a trust relationship with the participant. Furthermore, establishing a working relationship is a necessary condition. Fortunately, they trust spiritual interventions, and this person most often denied there was something wrong with his mental state with statements such as, "I'm just troubled, everything else is fine."

In our attempt to manage different cultural stories and incorporate unique approaches, this person's explanation, which is grounded in his cultural beliefs, provided us with a beginning framework of his lived world. The mental health professionals, while taking the man's different story of despair into account, integrated the traditional belief system into their general treatment plan. We worked collaboratively and engaged with the traditional healers and church pastors in this therapeutic process during on-site sessions. The community spiritual leaders were key to the successful management of this case. The patient was engaged in a culturally relevant way even though he was unaware of this process. The rapport that was established influenced the person-centered therapy, which is vital because without the presence of I-Thou meeting, the seven tasks of counseling would not be as effective.

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