



Diversity and Intercultural Work in Family Counseling

Chapter 3

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Diversity and Intercultural Work

Introduction

- Families exist in various cultural contexts in a variety of structures, including single-parent, same-sex, blended, and extended families.
- The expanding trend toward urbanization has brought people from various groups and cultures into closer proximity.
- The increase in intercultural interaction presents challenges for family counselors who are routinely called upon to work with clients from different cultural backgrounds.



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Introduction

- In the early years of family counseling theory and practice development, considerations of culture were largely absent from the narrative of working with couples and families.
- Now family counselors recognize the critical importance of possessing knowledge and skills necessary to provide an ethical and competent standard of care to clients regardless of cultural affiliation or identity of the client.



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Introduction

- Regardless of the reasons, persons from various cultural backgrounds increasingly find themselves living in an area that is culturally different from that of their culture of origin. Such relocations present challenges for the first generation of relocated adults, as well as their children and subsequent generations, who often find themselves challenged in making adjustments to a new community that differs from their cultural points of reference.



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Introduction

- The concepts presented in this chapter approach intercultural family counseling from a conceptual framework of applied cybernetics, emphasizing the interrelationship between the “family counselor” and “client family” as the primary catalyst for bringing about desired changes.



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Goals

- Professional counseling associations recognize the importance of cultural understanding and competency when working with clients. These considerations apply to all clients, but are of particular importance when the client and family counselor hold different cultural identities.
- In addition to issues of language, cultural considerations require that counselors have a grasp of the nuances of communication styles that may differ between cultural groups.



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Goals

- An awareness of a counselor's ethical responsibilities to promote client welfare is important—particularly in a family context where the sometimes competing needs of multiple people often emerges— ensuring that clients are not unintentionally harmed due to cultural generalizations, historical prejudices, or cultural differences that might lead to counselor bias and substandard care.



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Background

- Humans share many common attributes and life experiences, but may also differ in many respects. Some of those differences may be merely incidental, while others may hold profound significance in the formation and maintenance of cultural identity.



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Background

- Depending upon the meaning attributed to similarities and differences, one may initially feel closer to some people, and more distant toward others. Obvious similarities and differences often shape the initial impressions a person has of others. This exists in almost all human relationships, including the counselor-client relationship.



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Major Constructs

- A challenge for the family counselor is to identify and utilize a conceptual model and therapeutic approach to family counseling that maximizes the likelihood for helping the client, and minimizes potential risk.
- For a family to “invite” a family counselor—an outsider - into their relational system is often an immense barrier for members of some cultural groups in their desire to receive help.



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Major Constructs

- Applied cybernetics provides a useful conceptual framework for working with clients, regardless of cultural identity.
- At the core of cybernetic theory and its application to the family counseling process is the recognition that human relationships— “couples,” “families,” “groups,” “extended families,” or “therapeutic systems” —are mutually defined and constructed by members of that relationship system.



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Major Constructs

- Central to this perspective is a recognition that all human roles and relationships are interactive, recursive, and self-sustaining in nature.
- In understanding role complementarity, it is helpful to recognize that one role does not necessarily create its logical role complement.
- However, a logical complement must exist in order to establish and maintain any relational role.



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Major Constructs

- An approach that utilizes the concepts of applied cybernetics holds that the world view and cultural attributes of the family counselor are inextricably interconnected to those of the client family.
- While family members are interacting and engaging in self-maintaining complementary roles, the family counselor “joins” the family system and participates in a “complementary” role to the client family.



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Major Constructs

- From this perspective, recognizing the co-constructed nature of family relationships, as well as the family counseling relationship, is often useful in understanding how each member of the family system contributes to bringing about desired change.
- The recursive nature of the relationship between the client family and family counselor serves to “co-create” a narrative about the reasons and issues that prompted the family to seek help, as well as an understanding about problem formation, maintenance, and amelioration.



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What Constitutes Family Cultural Identity?

- For the culturally sensitive family counselor, the salient question may not be identifying someone's race, ethnicity, or cultural identity — as if such labels hold some inherent and immutable meaning — but rather exploring the meaning a person attributes to such identity.



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Defining Culture

- “Culture” refers to the institutions, traditions, and rituals by which collective knowledge is maintained and conveyed to subsequent generations.
- A client’s “cultural identity” —however defined — often provides a sense of community with others who share similar values, beliefs, or attributes.
- “Cultural identity” is also by its nature exclusionary, creating a sense of separateness and division between people from “different” cultural groups or backgrounds.



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Defining Culture

- Common criteria often employed to identify members of a particular culture include common language, national origin, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, occupational status, education level, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, political affiliation, sexual orientation, and ability/disability.
- These demographic variables, in and of themselves, have no meaning beyond what a person attributes to them.



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Defining Culture

- A family counselor should respect the basic client right to self-identify in terms of cultural identity and resist the temptation to label a client based on seemingly apparent factors that some may attribute to cultural identity.



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Cultural Values and Intercultural Counseling

- Though beliefs, values, ideas, and attitudes may evolve over the course of life due to education, life experiences, and exposure to new ideas, our initial cultural belief system provides a reference point by which subsequent life experiences, concepts, and ideas are compared.
- While a person can change a belief, one can never fully escape the profound influence of the cultural identity of one's cultural family of origin.



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Cultural Values and Intercultural Counseling

- All people possess a set of “core beliefs” —notions about “how things are,” or at least “how things should be.”
- Beginning in childhood, a client’s worldview is informed from cultural customs.
- Conflict can occur when a person of one cultural group interacts with a person of a different cultural group, particularly when cultural values greatly differ. The more different or oppositional the worldviews, the greater the potential for conflict or misunderstanding.



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Cultural Values and Intercultural Counseling

- The term “intercultural” differs from the term “multicultural” in that it emphasizes the interactive parity between individuals of different cultural groups.
- Such interaction is the essence of a collaborative family counseling relationship.
- Ethically, family counselors refrain from attempting to impose, either directly or indirectly, their personal values and beliefs upon their client.



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Techniques

- Essential to a successful counseling outcome is the ability for the family counselor and client family to form a collaborative relationship.
- Establishing this collaborative relationship requires the family counselor to identify and accomplish certain tasks.
- While these tasks can be viewed in a sequential order, many of these counselor tasks are ongoing throughout the family counseling process and may be accomplished concurrently.



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Techniques

1. Making a Connection: Use “socio-metric” techniques for gathering information while simultaneously building a connection with the client based on areas of common interest or experience.



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Techniques

2. Alignment and Support of Family Members: It is necessary that the family counselor address and overcome any perceptual differences that may precede the counseling relationship or that may emerge during the course of the counseling process. One strategy is for the counselor to directly address any possible concerns about cultural differences.



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Techniques

3. Establishing the Purpose and Goals of Family Counseling: It is common when working with a couples or families that various family members have differing— sometimes conflicting— priorities as to what is a desired goal or outcome.



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Techniques

4. Defining and Clarifying the Role of the “Helper”: Since members of various cultural groups may hold divergent notions as to the appropriate and proper role of the family counselor, it is essential that the role of the family counselor be discussed and clarified. Intercultural family counseling emphasizes the collaborative nature of the counseling relationship in which the client and family counselor work as a team to address identified areas of concern and mutually agreed upon goals.



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Techniques

5. Conveying Interest and Curiosity: A useful position for the family counselor to hold when working with any client—but particularly with a client who is culturally different from the family counselor —is one of “curiosity and inquiry.”



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Techniques

6. Working with the Family to Accomplish Goals:

The role of the family counselor is as a knowledgeable resource— an ally who joins the family system and works actively with family members to recognize dysfunctional behavioral patterns and problematic family roles and structure, and to create circumstances to bring about desired changes.



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Limitations

- In a family counseling setting, there is the potential that one or more family members believe in the potential for counseling to be useful and helpful, but other family member may be highly skeptical.
- Family counseling as an outpatient intervention is contraindicated when the level of functioning of one or more family members presents a clear or immediate danger to human life.