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# Multiculturalism in counseling and therapy: Marriage and family issues

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The world is changing very fast toward cultural pluralism. It is predicted that most of the societies will be more diverse in 21st century. Cultural differences denied for centuries in therapeutic interventions are no more acceptable. Multicultural counseling and therapy are in fact a strong trend in response to this urgent need. That is the reason for multiculturalism to be considered the fourth force in psychology. All counseling and therapy issues and interventions are somewhat cross-cultural. How a client views the world is important insofar as it contrasts with the counselor's. Many Eastern and Western cultures are considered different according to different perspectives. Family as a powerful social institution is the matrix of cultural identity of its members. In recent years, culture turned to occupy a key position in family therapy. Couples have learned to identify with cultural values and biases of their own families throughout their childhood. Family counselors and therapists as well as all their counterparts need to develop activities and intervention techniques to counteract these biases. Development of multiculturalism transformed how many therapists think and work with families. This article deals with cultural issues and dementions of counseling and therapy East and West, with more emphasis on couples and families.

**Key words:** Multiculturalism, Counseling, Marriage and Family Issues.

## INTRODUCTION

The world is changing very fast toward cultural pluralism. Even countries such as US are no longer considered a "melting pot" of many cultures. It is predicted that most of the societies will be more diverse in 21st century (Gibson and Mitchell, 2004). Immigration continues to be an important source of demographic growth in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), among the 300 million people living in the United States, more than 37 million are foreign born, representing 12.4% of the total U.S. population (Kissil et al., 2015). Indeed, this results in facing various cultures in the field

of counseling and therapy., "Culture" is defined as sets of shared and socially transmitted ideas and meanings used by groups to interpret and guide their lives. Culture is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the "collective reality" from which all attitudes, behaviors, and values are formed and reinforced by people. It is culture that leads the behavior, rituals, expectations and world-view of its members (Beels, 2002). Cultural differences denied for centuries in therapeutic interventions are no more acceptable.

Counselors and therapists should be mindful that

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diversity exists within every racial and cultural population. Cross-cultural perspectives have always been useful for understanding behavior (Laszloffy and Hardy, 2000).

Increased attention to needs and issues of multicultural counseling has occurred over the past thirty years. Multicultural counseling and therapy are in fact a strong trend in response to this urgent need. That is the reason for multiculturalism to be considered the fourth force in psychology (Christiansen et al., 2011).

Today's counselors know that they are functioning in a global village. Counselors should be multicultural in theory and practice. Talking about culture does not mean just the minorities. It means a variety of entire people (Akyil, 2011; Dupree et al., 2013).

Counselors and therapists face the challenge of preventing clients (children, couples, etc.) from developing attitudes of (racial, gender, etc.) prejudice that may last through their lives. Counselors' fighting cultural discrimination and prejudice should start during early years of children's life at elementary schools. Counseling and therapy programs should include cultural awareness, cross-cultural encounter and training, and human relations skills training. Failure to do so, will help perpetuation of cultural biases (Gibson and Mitchell, 2004; Vargas and Wilson, 2011).

It is believed that all counseling and therapy issues and interventions are somewhat multicultural or cross-cultural in nature. How a client views the world is important insofar as it contrasts with the counselor's. Multiculturally-oriented counselors arrive at a higher level of functioning (Kissil et al., 2013).

Worth and dignity of man, individual uniqueness, right to self-actualization, equal opportunities for all, and so forth are our philosophical beliefs in working with our clients, regardless of their cultural, gender, ethnic, religious and social background. These kinds of worldviews are not much acceptable in east cultures (Bitar et al., 2014).

Many Eastern and Western cultures are considered different according to different perspectives. Some of the major differences are in the areas of power, individualism, masculinity/femininity, time, being, relationships and so forth. Multicultural clients all over the world have been victims of malfunction in diagnosis, staff assignment, treatment duration, treatment methods, etc (Lettenberger-Klein et al., 2013).

This Western bias indicates that Japanese-American families are evaluated as less competent and less healthy. Caucasian families have been rated higher on a variety of measures including expressiveness, invasiveness, clarity, closeness, and overall health-pathology than Japanese-American (Wilson and Cottone, 2013; Laszloffy and Jardy, 2000).

Western-based assumptions about normative and healthy behaviors lead to biased interpretations in which other cultures are evaluated negatively. Principles of attachment and family systems based on Western

assumptions and research do not necessarily apply in cultures with different values and experiences (Mirecki and Chou, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to provide initial guidelines and recommendations for working with families and couples based on a multicultural viewpoint which acknowledge the importance of culturally competencies for couple and family counselors.

### **Cultural issues in family living**

Definition of family differs more or less in different cultures. In other words, family definition is culture-oriented. American definition focuses on intact nuclear family, whereas the focus of family definition for African-Americans is on much wider network of kinship. For Italians, there is no "nuclear" family. To them family means a strong, tightly knit, almost four generational network which includes godfathers and old friends as well. Chinese family includes all ancestors and all descendants, which reflects a sense of time different from what is held in the West (Laszloffy and Jardy, 2000).

Family as a powerful social institution is the matrix of cultural identity of its members. Each person's cultural identity comprises multiple forms of belonging, participation, and identification, including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, occupation, and social class. Family therapy seems to be suffering an identity crisis. In recent years, culture turned to occupy a key position in family therapy. Development of multiculturalism transformed how many therapists think and work with families (Kerr and Bowen, 1988).

There are cultural differences in the patterns of marital and family relationships. Here, American and Japanese families are compared as an example of two industrial, developed countries, East and West. In the West, marital relationships are seen as secure when they are based on romance, verbal intimacy, and sexuality. While in Japan, close marital relationships are based on mutual accommodation, absence of conflict, and enduring loyalty, not on romance, verbal intimacy, and sexuality (Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994).

Romance is expected to decrease and stop after marriage and children. When the first child is born, husbands and wives refer to each other as "father" and "mother", showing the primacy parental roles. Partners' roles and responsibilities focus on the extended family, rather than the marital dyad. In fact, the "core relationship" in the family is not that of the couple, but that between the parent and the child; same is true almost about some of other Eastern families such as Chinese and Caucasians (McGoldrick et al., 2005; Siegel, 2016).

In Japan, mothers experience their intimacy in relationship with their children rather than with their husband. And fathers put their time and energy into their

jobs; a family relations pattern that is viewed as mal-adaptive, if not pathological in US and the West (Marvin and Stewart, 1990).

Women prefer unqualified closeness, commitment, and affection, and tend to idealize their husbands. Japanese mothers more likely consult with friends (42%) than with husbands (18%) when concerned about childrearing (Ishii-Kuntz, 1993).

Close mother-child relationship and an unromantic marriage with little verbal communication, and a distant father may function very effectively in other cultures (Kerr and Bowen, 1988).

From an East Asian perspective, independence in the Western sense is devalued, because an assertive, autonomous person is considered immature and uncultivated" (Gilbert et al., 1998). Japanese theorists believe that children's dependence, acceptance, commitment, and desire for union are common, but associated with competence. Japanese believe that close mother-child ties are adaptive, and that children experience less adverse effects from such relationships than do children in the West (Marvin and Stewart, 1990; Yasui and Wakschlag, 2015).

American mothers largely intend to provide a secure base that promotes their children's exploration, assertion of personal desires and autonomous efforts to satisfy their own needs. Children's explicit, verbal sharing of emotions is less likely a desirable quality in Japan than in US. Parents keep hostile feelings to themselves, express feelings indirectly, and encouraging their children to do likewise (Yasui and Wakschlag, 2015).

Mother's wish is that the father stays well, but away from home. Demand for husband's help at home with chores and childrearing depends on the demands of his work. 93% of Japanese divorcing couples, but only 39% of Americans believe that they should stay married just for the sake of children. Majority of Japanese fathers spend 54 hours a week at work, as contrasted with 42 hours in the US. They seem to think that their hard work is appreciated by their family, and therefore worth their absences from home. Father's distance is a vehicle for maintaining his authority at home. Therefore, fathers' distance has a less negative meaning in Japan than in the US (Ishii-Kuntz, 1993).

Intermarriage is growing very fast since 1970s. More than 50% of Americans are marrying out of their ethnic and cultural groups. Intermarriage complicates couples' issues faced by partners. As the cultural difference of the couples' increase, so do their troubles in adjusting to the marriage. Awareness of cultural differences is very helpful to partners of cross-cultural marriages. When marital stress and conflict rises, the intermarriage couples' tolerance for differences decreases (Ishii-Kuntz, 1993).

A major cultural difference is that marital conflict in the West as compared to East and Japan is far more common. Also, open conflict in the family is not common, low levels of conflict are less accepted, and direct

communication is avoided because it leads to open conflict. Open conflict is not considered healthy, even if not extreme. 90% of Japanese report just once a month argument their spouse. As a result, it is less likely that Japanese children experience the problems of high-conflict families (Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015; Rober and Haene, 2014).

A secure model of the parents' relationship is likely to vary across culture. Children with secure histories seem to believe that they can get their needs met. While children with anxious histories seem to believe that they must rely on others to satisfy their needs (McDowell et al., 2012).

Marital discord leads to a variety of child adjustment problems, but overt conflict has the most damaging and deleterious effects. Parents' negative conflict mannerism predicts children's negative representations of the parents-child triad. It means that spouses in negative marital dyads satisfy their needs for closeness through triangulating their children. Quality of the parent-child relationship is poor in such cases (Epstein et al., 2014).

Couples learn to identify with cultural values and biases of their own families throughout their childhood. Family counselors and therapists as well as all their counterparts need to develop activities and intervention techniques to counteract these biases (Dias et al., 2011).

Some of the traditional characteristics of counseling and therapy process may oppose our effectiveness with clients of some cultures. Some of these Western counseling norms are openness, emotional expression, individualism, etc. For example, unconditional love and self-sacrifice of Japanese parents for their children nourishes children's sense of loyalty to family; and this intergenerational, authoritative, dependent family relationship, unlike the Western culture norms, foster achievement-oriented personality younger generations. Japanese are referred to as a culture that values "togetherness", that is, conformity to social norms, whereas Americans as a culture emphasizes "individuality" (Lazsloffy and Hardy, 2000).

### **Problematic behaviors**

Behaviors considered problematic have roots in cultural norms and traits. Thus, different behaviors are considered problem or abnormal in different cultures. Behaviors maladaptive in one culture may be accepted in another culture. Now a day, a distinguished issue is homosexuality. Gay and lesbianism is considered normal in almost all Western cultures, while it is absolutely unacceptable in Middle Eastern Islamic countries (Kissil et al., 2015).

"Dependency" and "emotionality" may concern the English. Italians may be concerned about disloyalty to the family; Jews about their children not being successful; Porto Ricans and Arabs about children not showing

respect to their parents; Arabs about their daughters' virginity (Gibson and Mitchell, 2004).

In regard to marriage and family, superiority of husbands over their wives is a religious demand in Islamic societies. There is a verse in Koran which says "men take care of women". This verse indicates some kind of hierarchy in marital relationships. Therefore, disobeying this Islamic value is unacceptable and opposed to cultural expectations of the whole society (Gilbert et al., 1998).

In regard to children, they should also respect their parents, and even elderly. Younger children are expected to respect their elder siblings. According to the above mentioned verse of Koran, male siblings are expected to take care of their female siblings. This hierarchy of superiority or respect in a Muslim family should be considered in therapy and counseling practice with them (Dupree et al., 2013).

Polygamy as another Islamic value is practiced more or less in Islamic countries; and it sure has its repercussions in family atmosphere and children's reactions and behaviors. For Japanese, mutual attraction, and intimacy of partners are not the most important criteria for preserving a marriage. Preoccupied (persuing) and dismissing (distancing) behaviors in the West are more common and less maladaptive in Japan; and children view such relationships as more secure (Kissil et al., 2013).

Different from American family relations pattern, overinvolved mother with the child and distance couples is common in Japan, but its meaning and consequences are different, because it is socially approved. Japanese mothers may appear overinvolved and intrusive by US standards. Mother-child boundary seems to be blurred. Close bodily contact between Japanese parents and young children have no sexual element to it. The Japanese extremely close relationships and lack of boundary between self and other, is considered as a sign of maturity, while it is considered pathological in the West (Gibson and Mitchell, 2004).

### **Family therapy considerations**

Therapy does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, it happens in social and cultural contexts and encounters. Formal practices of therapy are not in monopoly of the Western world (Pedersen, 1985). In many societies, psychological helps in form of traditional therapies with its own apparatus or rituals and sequence of operations for providing relief or facilitating desired change. Therapeutic aims and interventions reflect the regional culture. Treatment systems must define cultural norms for the client. Western psychotherapy rooted in supernaturalism and possession by Satan gradually shifted to mysticism, naturalism, and finally to empirically based psychology of today (Seltzer, Seltzer, Wencke, Homb, Midtstigen & Vik, 2000).

On the other side, Taoism teaches human inner harmony with the universe. Eastern views support acceptance of reality, and losing of oneself in the totality of the cosmos (Dupree et al., 2013).

Cultural awareness is a special lens that the family therapist uses to view the client's reality as well as his or her own. Culturally responsive counseling must include an understanding of the role of family dynamics in mental health and well-being. In recent years, "culture" has occupied a major position in family therapy. This development transformed the way many therapists think and work with families. Cultural and related anthropological perspectives have been part of family therapy since its beginnings. Many of family therapy's pioneers, such as Gregory Bateson, John Weakland, and Jay Haley, had received professional training in anthropology. It was believed that cultures as codes and systems could be discovered by observing and participating in the lifeways of groups (Minuchin, 2002).

Proponents of some approaches in family therapy devote little attention to material dimensions of culture, such as ritualized practices. Ideational and associated orientations to family therapy obscure power imbalances and other oppressive mechanisms, like routine violence, found in the signifying practices of families and societies (Siegel, 2016).

While exploring key cultural dimensions can help draw out similarities and differences between client and therapist perspectives, allowing the therapist to more fully understand clients' complex personal and family meaning systems (Kerr and Bowen, 1988).

When a minority client is caught in the web of larger system agencies and is mandated to family therapy, systemic family therapy, which incorporates multiple lenses and attends to the context of social background, may provide a better understanding of the client's reality (Christensen, Thomas, Kafescioglu, Lowe, Smith & Wittenborn, 2011).

Interracial couples are on the rise in North America and west world, and the number of mixed race couples has doubled every decade since 1960 (Siegel, 2016). One of the main assumptions of (Western) psychotherapy is that "talk" is good and therapeutic. Anna O., Freud's famous patient called his psychoanalytic work, "talk therapy". But different cultures place different values on "talk". Chinese families may communicate many issues through food rather than words. Italians often use words to demonstrate emotional intensity of their expression. The Irish use words not to tell the truth, but to make reality more tolerable. In Sioux Indian culture, it is not norm to "talk" in certain family relationships, such as between father-in-laws and daughter-in-laws, but there seems to be a mutual sense of intimacy between them. Such an intimacy is incomprehensible in Western culture. Family counselors and therapists as well as all their counterparts need to develop activities and intervention techniques to counteract these biases.

## Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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