

TRAUMA MATTERS

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Adopting a Broader View of Culture

Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, symbols, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving (Samovar and Porter, 1994).

While culturally competent trauma treatment and practices are increasingly recognized as a necessity for quality care in mental health and substance abuse treatment; there remains a gap in understanding the effects of trauma exposure among diverse cultural groups. Culture can be one of the most overlooked aspects in assessing trauma – yet it is crucial to understanding its effects on survivors. In an effort to deliver behavioral health services that are culturally competent, we must be cognizant of the differences among culture, race and ethnicity rather than lump people into a group based on the color of their skin. Though the three intersect, they are distinctly different and do not mean the same thing e.g. you meet a person with dark brown skin and the immediate assumption may be that they are African-American. The person could in fact be African, Caribbean, Canadian, French, British, or from another ethnic group and may not speak English as a primary language, and may not identify racially as anything.

Over time, it is often expected that the minority group will adapt to the host/dominant culture which impacts psychological functioning of the individual, including assumptions, values, relationships, identity, distress, trauma and coping responses. This acculturation process can often be a source of trauma for clients who are seeking treatment especially if their cultural norms are seen as abnormal by the majority group. Understanding and accepting that different cultural groups think, feel, and act differently is crucial to deliver-

ing culturally sensitive services. There is no scientific standard for considering one group as intrinsically superior or inferior to another. Studying differences in culture among groups and societies presupposes a position of cultural relativism. It does not imply normalcy for a specific group, or their society.

The concept of "privilege" for those in the majority, often relegates individuals who belong to minority groups to a state of "oppression" that breeds mistrust of the "system" and those in positions of authority and power. When clients miss appointments, are late or not as cooperative as we think they should be, their actions are often viewed as noncompliance or resistance to treatment –when in fact there may be underlying reasons such as past trauma based on a system of privilege that negates their sense of being.

The next few issues of Trauma Matters will be devoted to different aspects of culture; particularly how culture impacts individual or group experience of trauma. We begin with an article by Dr. Kenneth V. Hardy that first ran in summer 2005 issue of Trauma Matters. In this article, Dr. Hardy outlines the invisible wounds of those who are marginalized in society and the traumatic effects of socio-cultural oppression that leaves these invisible wounds. The article serves as a backdrop for current and future articles on White Privilege and cultural trauma relating to groups identified as minorities. We hope you enjoy exploring these topics with us and that they expand your view of culture and competence in dealing with clients.

Carol Huckaby, MACP
Eileen Russo, LADC, MA

Dimensions of Cultural Trauma

Trauma is the by-product of any event or circumstance that emotionally, psychologically, and/or physically devastates one's being while it simultaneously overwhelms, destroys, or neutralizes one's strategies for coping. The emotional impact of trauma is generally sustained, intense, and pervasive. There are multiple sources and manifestations of trauma. Thus, a broad view of trauma is necessary.

Socio-cultural oppression is a sustained, intensive, and lifelong experience; its effects are often persistent and contribute significantly to a variety of hidden wounds of trauma. These are the invisible but powerful effects of trauma that are devastating but have been disconnected from the original traumatizing event.

Cultural Issues and Trauma

- Culture is a broad based multidimensional concept that shapes our attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.
- Culture, rather than the singular simplistic concept that many of us often consider is complex, multi-layered and comprised of numerous dimensions. Race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, sexual orientations are but a few examples of dimensions of culture that profoundly impact on our lives.
- The relationship that culture has to trauma is as follows:
 - It can be a source of trauma as in the case of gender oppression and sexism; and/or
 - It can have a significant impact on what one considers traumatic, and the specific strategies that one might employ to facilitate coping and recovery.

Culture as a Source of Trauma

- Culture obviously does not cause trauma. However, depending on what one's background is regarding certain dimensions of culture, oppression, and ultimately trauma can be an integral component of one's cultural background.
- Any individual who has membership in a group that is marginalized (e.g., people of color, the poor, women, gay and lesbians, etc) in society is predisposed to experiences with trauma associated with culture. Thus, whether trauma is associated with culture is ultimately determined by whether or not a particular dimension of culture that characterizes one background locates them in a social position of subjugation or privilege.

Cultural Issues in Trauma

- Just as culture can be implicated as a source of trauma, it can also be a powerful meaning system for individuals experiencing trauma. This again speaks to the multifaceted and complex nature of culture.
- Culture should virtually always be an important consideration when attempting to understand the impact of trauma on the life of an individual or group. Often the meaning or frame of reference that one uses to understand the anatomy of trauma is sharply informed by culture (and its various dimensions).
- One's response to trauma, coping mechanisms employed or decried, and definitions of resiliency are all sanctioned by culture in one way or another.
- *There are several salient factors associated with cultural issues in trauma. Many of these factors constitute major organizing principles—that is, basic constructs that shape our beliefs and actions in times of trauma.*
- *The following is an illustrative list of common culturally based organizing principles that often shape one's response and efforts to cope with trauma:*

<i>Faith and spirituality,</i> <i>Tolerance for pain, suffering, and discomfort,</i> <i>Legacies and loyalties,</i> <i>Recovery-response time.</i>	<i>Locus of Control,</i> <i>Coping strategies employed,</i> <i>The type of help sought, and from whom, when, etc.,</i>
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Addressing Cultural Issues in Trauma

1. *It is essential that we expand our notions of trauma to include the hidden effects of trauma associated with culture.*
2. *It is seldom a question as whether culture plays a role in trauma BUT how. Thus, it is imperative to disentangle and comprehend the ways in which culture is often inextricably tied to experiences with trauma—either as a source of trauma and/or as a frame of reference.*
3. *It is important to remain cognizant that for those who are traumatized (by virtue of a situational circumstance) and who also hold membership in groups that are socially marginalized are often doubly traumatized. Our intervention efforts must acknowledge both.*
4. *It is important to openly and extensively explore the multitudinous ways in which the response to a traumatizing event, the coping strategies employed, as well as the meaning system that is used “to make sense out of what happened” are all shaped by the nuances of culture.*

*Ken Hardy, PhD
Drexel University*

Trauma: Cultural Perspectives and Clinical Considerations

Culture is the means for sharing wisdom and skills that are necessary to the survival of the community, the individual, the family, and humanity. Therefore, culture shapes how we identify and interpret traumatic events and how we manifest our distress in response to these events. It is quite important as clinicians responding to traumatic events and crisis, that we understand our cultural identity and worldview as we reach to serve others.

Cultural interpretation:

Culture influences what type of threat is perceived as traumatic and how we create meaning of that event. Culture also influences how individuals and communities express traumatic reactions. While reactions to trauma seem to be common throughout all cultures and based in the physiology of human beings, manifestations of responses may differ significantly. Culture forms a context through which the traumatized individuals or community view and judge their own response. If people think that society around them will not accept them as individuals or victims, there is a tendency to withdraw and be silent. This is a critical issue for many people who are victims. Their own culture or the culture in which they exist may reject or stigmatize them. In addition, this may be perceived as an additional injury. Culture may help define healthy pathways to new lives after trauma. The routines and cultural traditions may aid survivors of a tragedy in feeling re-oriented or rendering life predictable.

Trauma and culture are particularly complicated today. Multiple identifications require complex reasoning for negotiating the environment. With an increase in life stress and a decrease in the capacity to screen and moderate the impact of a trauma, cultural traumas can be transmitted across time and generation as a bond for survival. For American Indian people, African origin and Latinos historical unresolved grief and their inability to practice native healing rituals created traumatic losses that for many became unresolved pain impairing psychosocial functioning (Brave Heart, 1999).

Integrating culture:

Before engaging in cross-cultural trauma work with any disenfranchised group or Latinos, we must learn and consider elements of, oppression and the culture's routines, traditions, values, and impact of family relationship. Clinicians must be prepared to accommodate and integrate cultural standards into their work. For example, attention should be given to;

1. History of the culture
2. Language of the culture
3. Routines and rituals of the culture, and
4. Behavioral codes, believed concepts of the culture, and family structure

Interventions:

Significant variables in understanding an intervention are:

- Understand cultural rituals and spiritual experiences.
- Express an appreciation and respect for the culture's strengths in coping with trauma. Every culture has means to deal with trauma and can explain those means, listening to their understanding of their trauma and its implications are inherent in their eventual integration of a tragedy into their lives.
- Acknowledge your limitations and differences. These may include language, confusion over certain rituals, customs, or spiritual understanding.
- Build confianza/ trust.
- Establish your competence in understanding trauma.
- Assist individuals to focus on something tangible that they can accomplish over the next few days.
- Seek supervision.

As a clinical intervention, trauma work must be considered as a method for eliminating health disparities. Clinicians must consider interventions that are relevant and competent to the needs of diverse populations and as an alternative to dominant culture approaches that failed to understand the culturally different client.

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CULTURAL TRAUMA RESOURCES

Trauma Resource Institute

- www.traumaresourceinstitute.com

Center for Trauma response Recovery and Preparedness

www.ctrp.org/resources_cultural_comp.htm

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

- www.nctsn.com/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr_top_srcv_resource
- http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/Organizational_Competence_Brief.pdf
- http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/promising_practices/MMTT_Culture_6-25-07.pdf

SAMSHA

- <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cre/toc.asp>
- <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA00-3457/default.asp>
- http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/dtac/cultural_competence.asp

Addiction Technology Transfer Center of New England

- <http://www.attc-ne.org/pubs/ccsat.pdf>

Getting into Trauma Matters

- You can access an electronic version of the "Trauma Matters" Newsletter at www.traumamatters.org; www.dmhas.state.ct.us; or www.womensconsortium.org
- Do you want to be placed on our mailing list or is there an event or topic you would like covered in this newsletter? Please call "Trauma Matters" editor Carol Huckaby at 203.498.4184, x25 or e-mail her at chuckaby@womensconsortium.org.

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